

SEXUALITY in LITERATURE – 19th Century

OVERVIEW

Tracking the *development* of erotic literature is no easy chore, for such literature plays its part on many levels of literary development, from the highest—think of Aristophanes or Chaucer—to the rawest, to the porn which already in the 19th century was beginning to industrialize in England and Western Europe, and which has by our own day in the United States (for example) become a multi-billion dollar industry. On each of these levels the erotic drive has a different curve. So hard is the general picture of a period's sexual literature to gauge, that the character of nineteenth-century sexuality, as lived and as portrayed in literature, is extremely difficult to evaluate. Faced with the complexly transitional character of nineteenth century culture, we will limit ourselves to the briefest of preface, snatching an example from the most fastidious (and erotic) of texts, *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert (1856), the decadent poems of Charles Baudelaire, and from *My Secret Life*, a private document of Victorian underbelly sexuality, anonymously published from the late 1880's, and arguably considered 'one of the longest erotic autobiographies ever written' (publisher's preface to the 1966 Grove Press edition.) These three samples may open a small window onto this complex century, about the sexualities of which opinions have varied dramatically; from, say, the conventional wisdom that the century of Queen Victoria was afraid of sex and unwilling to discuss it, to the view of Michel Foucault, that the nineteenth century was the seed bed for fervent discussion of sexuality.

Mme. Bovary, arduously revised and remodeled by Gustave **Flaubert**, one of modern literature's most fastidious craftsmen and incisive social/cultural critics, is the tale of a marriage dead in the water, but dependent on nothing less than death itself for its resolution. Mme. Bovary herself is an attractive country woman, drawn by rumors of the 'grand monde' but herself unprepared to evaluate it. Before developing fully as a person, she is circumstantially steered into a marriage with a flatulent country doctor, who is totally unprepared to meet either her needs or dreams. Inevitably a handsome and citified country gentleman appears on Mme. Bovary's scene, she is swept up into country balls and fetes, she gets laid, and ultimately she commits suicide as the only way out. The finesse with which this classic theme is handled is profound and subtle, and though—as you might expect—the mood is deeply erotic, plunged into Emma's physical longings, her bodily needs for glamour and style, both the act itself and the body parts commissioned for it, and characterized indirectly and in the fascinated glow of seduction, against the darker background of social dysfunction and despair.

Charles **Baudelaire's** *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), 1855, is an aggressive slap in the face to the complacent bourgeois of the new middle class in France. Baudelaire excoriates the dull new surface happiness of his fellow citizens, and accuses them of gross hypocrisy, for their plastering over of their real feelings—which for Baudelaire include, inevitably, a whole list of repressed and forbidden sexual preoccupations—to rape, to hurt, to be hurt, to try out the whole human sexual potential. Baudelaire's powerful and often scornful lyrics invite his readers to take a strong trip through the dark sides of their sexualities.

The Dance of Death

*Carrying bouquet, and handkerchief, and gloves,
Proud of her height as when she lived, she moves
With all the careless and high-stepping grace,
And the extravagant courtesan's thin face.*

*Was slimmer waist e'er in a ball-room wooed?
Her floating robe, in royal amplitude,
Palls in deep folds around a dry foot, shod*

With a bright flower-like shoe that gems the sod.

*The swarms that hum about her collar-bones
As the lascivious streams caress the stones,
Conceal from every scornful jest that flies,
Her gloomy beauty; and her fathomless eyes*

*Are made of shade and void; with flowery sprays
Her skull is wreathed artistically, and sways,
Feeble and weak, on her frail vertebræ.
O charm of nothing decked in folly! they*

*Who laugh and name you a Caricature,
They see not, they whom flesh and blood allure,
The nameless grace of every bleached, bare bone
That is most dear to me, tall skeleton!*

The Victorian document, *My Secret Life*, is the blow by blow account of the sexual encounters of an upper class gentleman, for whom screwing—and variations on it—was the most important event in life. This is the perfect document to counteract the adage that Victorian England was loath to engage in discourse about sex, for in this volume there is nothing else. In the eleven volumes which the author of this text devoted, to recounting the details of his sex life, there is little else than the report of fucking, and looking for it, and revving up for the next event. The fact is, in fact, that there is so much of the narrator's fucking that the repetition of it begins to seem like a liturgical chant, half grave, half comic.

An episode from childhood is representative:

She felt me several times afterwards. When my mother brought me the arrowroot, she having an idea, that I liked her to do so, I would not take it, saying it was too hot. She said, "I can't wait, Wattie, while it cools." "Don't care, mamma, I don't want it." "But you must take it." "Put it down then." "Well, don't go to sleep, and I'll send Betsy up with it in a few minutes." Up Betsy would come, and quickly and voluptuously kissing, keeping her lips on mine for two or three minutes at a time, she would glide her hand down and feel my cock, whilst my fingers were on her motte, her thighs closed, then she would glide out of the room. I never got my hand between her thighs, I am sure.

Discussion Questions

Complex though the issue is, do you begin to see a difference among the literary-sexual expressions of the sequence of time periods we have been considering? Sex is often considered a static element in human behavior. Would you agree with that idea? Or is there progress in sexual behaviors?

It is a widespread contemporary view, that sexuality is a social construction, based on biological gender but determined and shaped by social values. Do you feel that this critique applies to the character of the author of *My Secret Life*?

Would the author of *My Secret Life* understand Baudelaire's viewpoint in wallowing in the dark side of sexuality. Or is there no 'dark side' for the author of *My Secret Life*?

What would Flaubert think of the two other texts we are reviewing here? Might they seem to him to be crude misrepresentations of the subtle and devastating role of sex in society?

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, New York, 2006.

Bersani, Leo, *Baudelaire and Freud*, Berkeley, 1977.

Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour, ed. Steegmuller, London, 1996.

Hyde, H. Montgomery, *A History of Pornography*, New York, 1965.
Marcus, Steven, *The Other Victorians*, New York, 1964.
Orr, Mary, *Writing the Masculine*, Oxford, 2000.
Ward Jouve, Nicole, *Baudelaire: A Fire to Conquer Darkness*, London, 1990.

Example

Beauty

*Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,
Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,
Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour
Eternel et muet ainsi que la matière.
Je trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx incompris;
J'unis un cœur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;
Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,
Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.*

*I am lovely, O mortals, like a dream of stone;
And my breast, where everyone is bruised in his turn,
Has been made to awaken in poets a love
That is eternal and as silent as matter.
I am throned in blue sky like a sphinx unbeknown;
My heart of snow is wed to the whiteness of swans;
I detest any movement displacing still lines,
And never do I weep and never laugh.*

Baudelaire is careful to expunge, from his portrait of beauty, any traits of warmth or affection. This marble severity is echt Baudelaire, and lies at the basis of his pervasive hatred of the Romantic—in which the beautiful is always the *seductive* or at least the *attractive*. Sex, like beauty, is for Baudelaire fraught with cruelty and self-destruction, and seldom appears in its robust procreative forms. It is not that Baudelaire seeks the pain of the gutter, when he courts sex, but that he refuses the whole social-cultural world in which the sexual is Romantically idealized, the world of Love Cards and Birthday greetings, as well as of the Romantic Movement.

MAJOR FIGURE

Leopold Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895) was an Austrian playwright, historian, novelist, and journalist, whose reputation in nineteenth century Europe, was as one of the continent's most distinguished authors and literary figures. By our time, however, his literary work has been almost totally forgotten, with the exception of a single text, *Venus im Pelz*, *Venus in Furs*, (1870), a novella which appeared as part of the first volume of a large narrative sequence on the history and background of human conflict—especially of the war between the sexes. It was the sexologist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who gave the name 'masochism' to the *Venus in Furs* text, which is marked by the desire of the text's male lead, to be the enslaved prisoner of the woman, the Venus, and by the pleasure he feels in any pain she can inflict on him.

The novel itself opens with the narrator falling asleep over a book, and waking in dream to find himself hosting the goddess Venus, who is clothed only in a sumptuous fur. In the midst of this dream he is awakened by his valet, who reminds him that they are expected at tea at the home of his friend, Herr Severin. Arriving at his friend's house, Masoch at once notices a painting, on the wall, depicting Venus as she had appeared in Masoch's dream; and upon inquiring of his friend, the meaning of this consequence, he learns that Severin had himself dreamed the dream in question, and that the painting, which resembled a classic by Titian, was close to the friend, who thereupon invited Masoch to sit and read a novel of confessions by Severin. The putative novella, *Severin's Confessions of a Suprasensual Man*, is what has become the classic text of Masochism.

The novella itself acquires its punch from the complexities of its protagonist's relation to Venus, in furs, and, to the extent we want to reach into Masoch's own life, from the author's subtle interweaving of his private experience with his literary strategies. In 'real life,' which traversed both marriages and girlfriends, Masoch was in search of a vigorous and lasting relationship, which would honor both parties' interests, joining them in a common 'higher interest,' such as that which would be provided by—as it plays out in Masoch's fictions—the seemingly asymmetrical (but in fact) harmonious interrelation of two individuals sharing a master-servant relationship. The illustrative tale he tells, in the form of Severin's *Confessions*, opens on a conversation in which a prospective lover and beloved come to agreement that even a ripe and happy culture like the Hellenic can only be happy if it is supported by *slaves*—as of course classical Greek culture was. (One notes here a theme intersecting with the contemporary thought of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, for both of whom the images of bourgeois equalities were loathsome.) From there it is not far to Severin's beloved's desire, to make the narrator her plaything, or to his desire, to be an abject subject. Despite his efforts to put his soul at peace, in the contractual despot-slave arrangement, Severin is tortured by fear that his dominatrix will leave him—for actually he has little inner support or strength. In the ongoing drama, by which the beloved alternately tortures the narrator, punishing him with hard labor or taking on lovers right in his face, and by which the narrator alternately considers suicide and the delights of being whipped, the narrative prances through complex and ever changing psycho-social relations between Severin and his lady. In the end, one of the major achievements of this text is the light it throws onto the ever self-transforming plays of power between lovers.

Venus in Furs begs comparison with *The Story of O* (1954) another classic of masochism—or should we say sado-masochism, as both texts honor the reciprocity of domination with submission—for in both texts self-enslavement is taken as one path to sexual/social happiness. O herself hardly wills her enslavement, for she is eminently passive, while the narrator of *Venus in Furs* veers between life-choices and vegetable giving way to fate. It cannot be said that either text travels the road of happiness, for in the end the explorers, of the regions of enslavement, are still laboring to work out some *modus vivendi* for a 'happy life.'

Discussion Questions

In the introduction to *The Story of O*, Jean Paulhan describes a counter-intuitive event from Caribbean history, in which a colony of enslaved Africans, by and large satisfied with their enslaved condition, petition their slave owners not to free them. What do you think of the argument that—historically or personally—enslavement has its own pleasures and rewards?

Does Severin's story provide a useful manual, for the discovery of sexual happiness in the year 2015?

Do sadism and masochism necessarily imply one another? What do you think of the power-play analysis by Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*? Does he argue convincingly, that power valences are in the end the very tissue of human relationships?:

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, New York, 2006.

Cleugh, James, *The First Masochist: A Biography of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch*, London, 1967.

Deleuze, Gilles, 'Coldness and Cruelty,' in *Masochism*, New York, 1991.

Niekirk, Carl, and Finke, Michael, eds., *One Hundred Years of Masochism: Literary Texts, Social and Cultural Contexts*, Amsterdam, 2000.

Thompson, Clara, *On Women*, New York, 1964.

Example

"Do I please you?" She stepped before the mirror, and looked at herself with proud satisfaction.

"I shall become mad!"

Her lower lip twitched derisively, and she looked at me mockingly from behind half-closed lids.

"Give me the whip."

I looked about the room.

"No," she exclaimed, "stay as you are, kneeling." She went over to the fire-place, took the whip from the mantle-piece, and, watching me with a smile, let it hiss through the air; then she slowly rolled up the sleeve of her fur-jacket.

"Marvellous woman!" I exclaimed.

"Silence, slave!" She suddenly scowled, looked savage, and struck me with the whip. A moment later she threw her arm tenderly about me, and pityingly bent down to me. "Did I hurt you?" she asked, half-shyly, half-timidly.

"No," I replied, "and even if you had, pains that come through you are a joy. Strike again, if it gives you pleasure."

"But it doesn't give me pleasure."

Again I was seized with that strange intoxication.

Wanda swung the whip, and hit me twice. "Are you satisfied now?"

"No."

Masoch's text refuses to fall into the category of pornography—if that term implies flat recital of sexual events. The fact is that sexual events always envisage some kind of resolution, even of 'pleasure,' which sets in as a reaction to tension and pain. The narrator of Severin's story, however, is unable to accept his willed 'punishment' with the acquiescence that would lead to satisfaction. He is tortured by the sense that his mistress might in fact leave him—which she does, for prolonged sessions she devotes to other lovers—and he is maddened by his own inability to find peace on those occasions when his dominatrix sleeps with him and expresses her love for him.