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SEXUALITY in LITERATURE

ANCIENT LITERATURE (Greco-Roman; Mesopotamian; Egyptian)

i

Ancient **Greek Literature** expresses the human sexual condition; eros is deified, the erotic is a driver—for pain or pleasure—at every turn, and, depending on the era, pornography and sexual transgression are given play. As we know from Greek classical sculpture, the human body and its beauty are joyful sights for (at least the) Athenian male of all periods. In the palaistra, on the running track, or simply at ease in the gym, few sights so delight that male as do naked and beardless young men. These social dispositions—entirely male, to be sure, for proper women stayed home and knitted—reflect themselves from the earliest epic, Homer's in the eighth century B.C., through many fragments of sexual passion in Greek lyric—from the 7th to the 5th centuries--to bawdy themes in Greek comic drama, thence to Hellenistic mimes and to a vast collection of erotica from papyrus and sherds recovered in modern times from the sands of Egypt.

In Homer, both mortals and gods can be dazed, and rendered senseless, by *eros*—the power of physical love. The mover for the *Iliad* is the blind love of Paris for Helen, and their world shaking elopement to Troy. Homer depicts the gods as libidinous: when Hera wants to lure her husband, Zeus, away from the battlefield, she dresses in her sexiest, and adds a love potion acquired from Aphrodite. Odysseus and Penelope 'long for one another' repeatedly in the *Odyssey,* the climax of which is their reunion. Greek lyric poetry, which flourished for more than two centuries, from 750 B.C., begins and ends with erotically charged poetry. Sappho writes from inside a women's coterie in 6th century Lesbos. Her Lesbian love is hot and elegant, carved into pure form, from intense feeling. Addressing her *beloved*, she wishes simply that she might be seated where her lover's interlocutor is seated, basking in the beloved one's radiance. The Parian poet, Archilochos, who was also a mercenary soldier, vividly describes the power of *pothos*, longing, the mind-boggling confusion of sexual desire, and the overwhelming ease and weakness that follow physical love. The Greek comic poet, Aristophanes, excels in deploying burlesque scenes which center on sexual desire. His *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.) still fires up audiences. The women of Athens, disgusted with their menfolk's preoccupation with war, refuse sex until the men will agree on a peace treaty. The play revolves around the two sexes' sufferings, longings, cheatings, and eventually resolution. In deeper and more archaic themes—as in The *Thesmophoriazusae* (411 B.C.) or the *Ecclesiazusae* (391 B.C.)—Aristophanes tracks the (slapstick but dangerous) fate of a cross dressing male who hides out in a secret women's festival, or the fates of men 'captured and violated' by old women, in an Athenian versions of Sadie Hawkins day. These latter plays bridge away from the more agonizingly heterosexual, toward the more complex, reflective, and perverse dimensions of love.

With the literature of the Hellenistic period—especially Herondas (in his mimes; 3rd cent. B.C.)—Greek literature begins to dote on new themes we might call sado-masochistic, say genre playlets in which lustful and bad tempered mistresses punish naughty servants. We are en route toward such off genre sexual fantasties as *Lucius or the Ass* (2d century A. D.), in which we are treated to elaborate descriptions of animal human intercourse. The male fantasy world opens out, in Lucian of Samosata, perhaps the author of the above Lucius, to reveal 'low-life female stereotypes like old madams, mannish lesbians, and naïve call-girls.' (p. 587, EEL). From such cross-sexual phantasmagoria we have come a good millennium from the open hearted laughter of the Homeric gods, at the sexual peccadillos of their fellow immortals.

Discussion Questions

To what would you attribute the change in character, of ancient Hellenic erotic literature, from the time of Homeric epic to that of the Second Sophistic (2d and 3rd centuries A.D.)? How would you describe that change? Do the sexual values of current western culture vary with the era in question?

Is the prevailing sexual climate of an age a deep indicator of the character of that age? Or would there be ages in which prevailing sexual practice and taste would be independent of the broader culture of the time? Examples?

Does literature seem an art form in which the sexual climate of an age will display itself? How does literature compare, in that regard, to sculpture or music? Does contemporary music, in the western countries, reflect the sexual climate of those countries?

The literature of ancient Greece arguably lasts for a millennium, and is thus traversed by two other cultures—Roman and Christian. Were those intersections significant for the nature of Greek erotic culture? Or is there a noticeable unbroken continuity, from beginning to end in Greek culture?

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, vol. I, New York, 2006.
Austin, Norman, *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom: Myth and Poetics*, Ithaca, l994.
Calame, Claude, *The Poetics of Eros in Ancient Greece*, Princeton, l999
Davidson, James, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens,* New York, l998.
Thornton, Bruce S., *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*, Boulder, l997.
Zeitlin, Froma, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, Chicago, l996.

ii

Ancient **Roman erotic literature** makes its appearance in the dramas of Plautus (250-184 B.C.) and Terence (comedies produced in the l60's B.C.), whose works are the first significant imaginative writing in Latin, and bears many stamps of Greek culture within them. Plautus writes a bawdy theater, with many salacious jokes spoken by rustic characters, and picked up from the rougher earlier stages of Latin language development. The tenor of sexuality in his work is evident in the highly staged 'rapes' that fascinated audiences: a young man knocks up a young lady during a nocturnal banquet, but then, remorseful, falls in love with her and marries her. Like Plautus, his contemporary Terence, while sensitive to women's worlds, joins the spirit of his time in viewing women as cultural and social inferiors. An equally significant poet of the pre-Christian era, Lucretius (97-55 B.C.), writes in his epic *On the Nature of Things* a vision of life from the standpoint of the Epicurean philosophy: one should avoid the emotional uproar that accompanies sex excitement, thus avoid marriage and lust, and remain self-controlled.

Catullus (84-54 B.C.) and Horace (65-8 B.C.) write from a more open society than the earlier Latin poets: either sophisticates by class (Catullus) or members of the new post-Augustan Imperial society, with its patrons and coteries. Catullus led a licentious life full of passionate loves, such as that for one Clodia (aka Lesbia, in Catullus's poems, following the name of Sappho's homeland); his love poems set a new standard for unbridled sexual experiment, controlled only by a splendid prosody which almost never falters. Horace, while praising the beauties of the rustic life, grows most fervent when celebrating, in perfectly turned elegiac verse, the beauty of still beardless young naked men. The same erotic motif preoccupies the verse of Horace's contemporary, Propertius (50-15 B.C.). Overriding all these lyricists, in his full hearted concern for the erotic, is Ovid (43 B.C.-17 A.D.), in whose splendidly crafted iambs we rehearse the gamut of attitudes toward sexuality. In his early work, the *Amores,* as well as in the later *Ars Amatoria*, *The Art of Love*, Ovid lays out a rule book and game plan for lovers, teaching them the

wiles of getting the loved one in your bed. In his late semi epic excursion, *The Metamorphoses,* Ovid delights in retelling cynical tales of the sexual life of the gods.

Roman prose erotica surpass even the Roman lyric in sexual directness. We think most of Petronius' *Satyricon* (1st century A.D.) and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*) mid-second century A.D. Petronius digs into the late Greek novella, pederastic lore from Greece, and various satires on Homeric epic, to come up with his outrageous farrago of catamites, whores, well hung slaves, and worn out priestesses who claim to cure impotence. Apuleius' tale, likewise plundered in part from Greek legend, highlights a young man, turned into an ass, who falls deep into witchcraft, fornication and human sacrifice. Lust runs rampant through the hero's wanderings, until at last he regains human form. As with Petronius, Apuleius runs deep erotic threads through a tale made up for him, in large part, by equally scatological Greek predecessors.

Discussion Questions

Have the examples we chose from Roman erotic literature a broadly different character from those we chose from Greek erotic literature? What differences do you note?

You will observe that the Roman erotic writers we highlight cluster around the first century B.C. and the two following centuries. Can you note the developments of Rome, as a cosmopolitan city, which seem to play into this outburst of brilliant erotic literature?

How do you evaluate the prominence of homoerotic themes in Greek and Roman literature? Was the homoerotic viewed as a transgressive act, in these literatures, or as a natural stage in human development?

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Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, Vol. I, New York, 2006.
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Godwin, J., *Lucretius,* 2004.
Perry, B.E., *The Ancient Romances*, Berkeley, l967.
Walsh, P.G., *The Roman Novel*, London, l995.
White, P., *Promised Verse: Poets in the Society of Augustan Rome*, l993.

Example

I'll fuck you up the ass and down the throat,
Anal Aurelius and facial Furius,
For deeming me indecent and effete,
A pansy author writing small soft verses.
A goodly poet's life must needs be pious,
But it's unnecessary in his verses.
Lines lie unspiced, unwanton and unwitty
Until they get indecent, with small, soft
Ticklings enough to stoke the nether needs
Not in young boys, but aged and bushy-backed
Men with arthritis of the crotch. You read
The thousand kisses from one woman packed
In my tight lines, and call me girl? Take note:
I'll fuck you up the ass and down the throat.

The Original:

Pēdīcābō ego vōs et irrumābō
Aurelī pathice et cinaede Fūrī.

quī mē ex versiculīs meīs putāstīs
quod sunt molliculī parum pudīcum.
nam castum esse decet pium poētam
ipsum, versiculōs nihil necesse est
quī tum dēnique habent salem ac lepōrem
Sī sint molliculī ac parum pudīcī
et quod prūriat incitāre possint
nōn dīcō puerīs sed hīs pilōsīs
quī dūrōs nequeunt movēre lumbōs
Vōs quod mīlia multa bāsiōrum
lēgistis male mē marem putātis.
Pēdīcābō ego vōs et irrumābō.

This poem, no. 16 in the Carmina of Catullus, is addressed to two members of Catullus' friendship coterie. He falls out with them because they mock his poem *da mihi milia basia* (Carmina, #5) with the suggestion that he is slack and effeminate. Catullus slashes back, as in the present poem, to mock the two old gents, and to impute, to each of them, that they are passive sex-recipients. For the Romans and Greeks homoerotic love was acceptable, sometimes marvelous, but to be the passive partner, to get it up your anus, was widely viewed as contemptible. Catullus gives it to these two guys both in the face and in the ass.

iii

Mesopotamian, Akkadian, and Sumerian literatures are rich in erotica—reaching back into deeper cultural strata than the Greco-Roman—and yet present a problem less present in the classical: religion and erotica are far more deeply intertwined in the Middle Eastern religions, than in those of the Western Mediterranean. It is as though the sexual drama which generates organic life on earth was foreshadowed by the powerful phallic and vaginal forces that were the first gods. *An example may suffice*. The most procreative god in Sumerian erotic cosmology is Enki, whose phallus waters the reeds and inseminates the river valleys. From such premises the erotic imagination runs wild. Enki's wife gives birth to another goddess, with whom—his daughter—Enki generates another goddess, until the cycle has generated four daughters. Whereupon Enki's original wife complains that his love making is 'purely mechanical,' so Enki gently caresses his beloved before sex, and enables her to collect his sperm and grow plants from it. When Enki observes these plants he consumes them, making himself pregnant, and ill. The goddess Ninhursaga puts Enki in her vagina, and on his behalf gives birth to four gods and four goddesses, who set about healing the wounds of Enki. What more could one want, in the blending of the erotic and the cosmic, a blending which, in Sumerian culture, is the central act of creation.

To repeat, the erotic imagination of such literature is worlds away from the Greco Roman. For a parallel, one would have to go to Hesiod's *Theogony* (7th cent. B.C.), which touches archaic religious senses more deeply even than Homer. We are reminded there that Eros—one of the four original gods in Hesiod—functions as a companion to Aphrodite, the 'goddess of erotic desire,' who was herself born from the seafoam swirling with the severed genitals of the God of the Sky, Ouranos. One comes close, in such archaic Near Eastern memories from Hesiod, to the sensibility of the Sumerian myth maker. One is also reminded, again, of the distance between the largely out in the open style of the Greek classics, and the profoundly psycho-archaic strata of the Mesopotamian mythmaker.

Discussion Questions

What essential difference do you see, between the erotic cosmology of the Middle East, and that of the Western Mediterranean—Greco-Roman? Are the erotic traits of the Classical tradition colored by the relative 'rationalism' of the Homeric Hesiodic predecessors? How does ancient Hebrew cosmology compare to that of the Ancient Middle East?

Can you see, in this primal Mid Eastern religious-erotic material, sources for the exploration of the deep dynamics of the human mind? Much to read here; if you don't it, look into Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*, l959.

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, Vol. 2, New York, 2006.
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Kramer and Maier, *Myths of Enki, The Crafty God*, Oxford and New York, l989.
Leick, Gwendolyn, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature*, London, l994.
Livingstone, Alisdair, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*, Helsinki, 1989.

iv

Ancient Egyptian love poetry differs from Mesopotamian (and from most Greco- Roman) poetry, for its discretion, and subtlety of sensuality. This poetry, which dates largely from the period between 1300-1150 B.C., reaches us largely as part of four papyrus collections, one large sherd, and a variety of smaller fragmentary pieces of writing. The poems themselves are hieroglyphic, which means that their sound and concrete sensual meaning can be difficult to recapture, but we see that their stock in trade is innuendo, sensuous longing, indirect statement. (None of which applies to the robust and often cantankerous cosmic/orgiastic poetries of ancient Mesopotamia.) The poems themselves, as we see from their content, not only speak person to person, but are frequently pieces chanted en route to festivals, invoking the aid of gods in love matters, or begging for love as a cure for the lover's disease (love.) There is almost no sexually explicit love poetry among this Egyptian material. Rather, to rephrase the above, the tenor is sensuous and indirect: 'my sister's mansion, her door is in the midst of her home. Her doors are open, the bolt is unlocked…Oh that I were made the doorkeeper!' Or 'I am yours like an acre planted with flowers for me, and with every kind of sweet-smelling herb.'

Discussion Questions

Whereas Greco Roman literature was written in a phonetic alphabet, the literatures of the ancient Middle East and Egypt were written in scripts which obscure their phonetic base. What do you suppose is the effect on the language products we inherit from these two different cultural zones?

Do you see a broadly different imagination behind Egyptian lyric poetry, and the cosmogonic poetry of the ancient Middle East? To what would you attribute that difference? To social and historical setting? To 'race'?

How does Egyptian love poetry differ from post-Romantic love poetry in the West? Think of the romantic lyrics of Elizabeth or Robert Browning, of Edna St. Vincent Millay, or Paul Eluard. Would the ancient Egyptians have valued the sentiments being expressed in those bodies of poetry?

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Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, Vol. I, New York, 2006
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MEDIAEVAL LITERATURE

I

Roman literature, passed into and through the filter of Christianity, provides the raw material for the major pageants of erotic literature in the Western Middle Ages, ca. 500-1500 A.D. Three chief historical panels open here. There is the rough hewn tale, in French the mediaeval *fabliau* (1150-1400 A.D), which has its antecedents in the romantic novels of late antiquity. There is the tragic tale of a love triangle, in the fashion of *Tristan and Iseut* (12th century) or *The Roman de la Rose* (13th century). This kind of tale is created as adulterously sinful and ends with death. Then there is the highly subtle literary presentation of eros and love by Chaucer (1343-1400 A.D.), in The Wife of Bath's Tale, from *The Canterbury Tales.* These three diverse strands belong to a widespread 'interiorization' of culture, which relates to the geopolitical expansion of the mediaeval world--dwarfing as it does the smaller polities of pre-Christian Culture--as well as to growing 'urbanization,' individualization, and 'self-consciousness.' Accordingly these three historical panels are simply hints toward the multiple social-cultural developments dividing late antiquity from the Renaissance.

Fabliaux are short comic narratives, chiefly composed (and for the most part in northern France) between the mid twelfth and mid fourteenth centuries. (We see some fabliaux even in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.)* There remain some 150 of these tales, whose intended audience, apparently, largely overlapped with that of the courtly poetry of the time; gritty, human, but frequently culminating in a moral. In fact, although fabliaux are regularly erotic, it is with the aim of laughter, not of sexual arousal. To wit: a summary of a run of the mill *Tale of the Butcher*, by Eustache d'Amiens, l3th century. A butcher went to market, and on returning, finding it late, had to stop in a village. He asked for lodging, and was sent to the priest's house. The priest rebuffed him as a crude country yokel, and sent him packing. The butcher goes back to town, but stops when he sees a flock of sheep, learns that they belong to the priest, and then returns to steal one of the sheep, which he takes back to the priest as a gift, then selling it to him—to the priest's delight, at acquiring the fine animal. The priest wants the animal slaughtered and dressed, but being unable to do so himself, retires to his bedroom (and sweetheart) leaving the butcher to make the preparations—which he does. A fine meal is prepared, which the butcher enjoys. Then, when the priest has left for mass, the next morning, the butcher enters the priest's bedroom and makes out with the priest's girl, finally making her a present of the fine remaining sheepskin. On his way out, the butcher gifts the downstairs servant made with the same sheepskin, screws her, and heads home. The priest's reflection:

He has well tricked and deceived me,
And screwed my whole household;
He sold me my own sheepskin!
'He has wiped my nose with my own sleeve';
I was born in an evil hour.

This level of bawdiness is picked up in English by Chaucer—in the Miller's Tale, and inThe Tale of the Wife of Bath--as well as in the tales of Boccaccio.

Opposite in character and outcome is the **classical mediaeval epic romance**—*Tristan and Isolde* (in many versions, the classic from the mid 12th century); formal verse romance, valued on the highest literary/courtly level. Depending on the version, the theme of this literary genre is coercive and tragic, and is in every version saturated with the erotic power inherent to its situation. The basic theme is lustful and fateful. A Cornish king—but the location could be anywhere—wishes to invite an Irish princess, Isolde, to be his bride—and to be his bridge toward a unification of the two kingdoms. The kind sends Tristan, his emissary, to instruct and bring back Isolde, but on their return they accidentally drink a love potion which make them fall deeply in love with one another. Adultery, a crime in mediaeval Christendom, follows, as does horrible dream-born remorse, which staggers the two lovers. Nonetheless, the original marriage is carried through, bringing with it the full consciousness, of all three partners, of the dreadful secret that has poisoned them. (The excruciating sexual knowledge, which joins the three participants, is

never anatomized, but is left fuming over the heads of the fallen. Nightmares haunt each member of the trio.) Finally Mark decides to have the adulterous pair put to death. At this point though—and depending on the version—the lovers agree to separate permanently, and Tristan marries another woman. The crisis of adultery eventually dissipates, but nothing can eradicate the stain of sexual sin that marks the memory of this tragic trio.

The **third** strand, in this diverse set of hints toward the complexity of mediaeval erotics, can be taken from **Chaucer's work in *The Canterbury Tales***. This work, first conceived in 1386, envisages, from a highly transformed literary standpoint, the real life situation of religious pilgrims on their way to the shrine of the martyr St. Thomas à Beckett, who was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in ll70. Chaucer initially imagined well over a hundred stories, to be told going and returning by pilgrims who stop at the Tabard Inn, and though in the end he completed only twenty-two tales, offered up by a wide variety of pilgrims—a knight, a squire, a franklin, a nun, a widow of five husbands (The Wife of Bath), and several others—he achieves a panoramic fresco of the three estates of late mediaeval England. Among the most memorable of the tales, that of the Wife of Bath stands out for her exceptional immersion in the intersection between love and sexuality. In her prologue (ll. 1-862) she takes us on a roller coaster ride, describing her five marriages—to younger than her, older than her, from good in bed to lousy—and at the same time taking us on a tour of her own rich moods—self-defensive, braggardly, lustful—her experience, she says, indicates that genitals are not just for urination--controlling (of husbands), humiliating (of husbands), happy with husbands providing, always providing, she is the one in control of the marriage.

> Lo, here, the wise King, old Solomon,
> I think he had more wives than one!
> As would to God it were permitted me
> To be refreshed half so oft as he!
> A gift of God had he of all those wives!
> No man has such that's in this world alive.
> God knows, that noble king, as I see it,
> The first night had many a merry fit
> With each of them, so happy was his life!
> Blessed be God, that I have wedded five,
> And they I picked out from all the best,
> Both for their nether purse and their chest.

In the 'tale' to which she proceeds, after recounting her sexual history, she moves discourse back into King Arthur's time, a time of faeries and elves…and moral tales. Her protagonist is a fine young knight who rapes a lovely girl, and is given one chance to escape the death penalty: he has a year to come up with an answer to the question: what do women want? The answer he comes up with, and which saves his life, is 'women want to rule over the people they love,' a correct response he gets on the last day of his reprieve, from the world's ugliest woman, who confirms her own answer, when persuading the knight to marry her, by becoming the most beautiful and sexy woman in the world.

Discussion Questions

Is the Wife of Bath telling a story about herself, in her tale about the Ugly Old Woman, who turns into the most beautiful woman in the world?

Is there a theme of lust running through the stories and tales of the later Middle Ages? What was the prevailing view of human carnality, during that period? Did the teachings of the Christian Church militate against the pleasures of the body?

There was a strong anti-feminist tradition in the early centuries of the Christian Church. Do you find traces of that tradition in the erotic literature of the time?

What connection do you see between the eroticism of The Wife of Bath's Tale and that of the story of the Butcher and the Priest?

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, Vols. I and II, New York, 2006.
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Payer, Pierre, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Latter Middle Ages*, Toronto, l984.

Example: From Chaucer, *The Miller's Tale*

The parish clerk, the amorous Absolon,
Who was for love all woebegone,
Upon the Monday had been at Oseneye
With company to disport and play,
And asked a cloisterer by chance
What he knew about John the carpenter;
And the cloisterer took him away from the church,
And said, "I don't know. I haven't seen him working
Since Saturday; I believe he has gone
For timber. Our abbot sent him;
For he often goes for timber,
And lives at the barn a day or two;
If not there, he is certainly at his house.
Where he is, I cannot certainly say.

Absolon was jolly and light of heart,
And thought, "now is time to stay awake all night;
For surely I have not seen him stirring
About his door since the break of day.
So may I thrive. I shall, at cock's crow
Secretly knock at his window
That stands low there by his bedroom.
Then to Alisoun I will tell all
My love-longing. I can't fail
To at the very least get a kiss.
Some manner of comfort I shall have, in faith.
My mouth has itched all this long day;
That is a sign of kissing at the least.
Also, all night I dreamed I was at a feast.
Therefore, I will go sleep an hour or two,
And all the night then will I wake and play."
When the first cock had crowed, then
Up rose this jolly lover Absolon
And arrayed himself beautifully, to perfection.
But first, even before he had combed his hair,
He chewed grain and licorice
So he would smell sweet.
Under his tongue an herb he bore,
For thereby he thought to be gracious.

He roamed to the carpenter's house,
And still he stood under the window--
Unto his breast it reached, it was so low--
And softly he coughed with a quiet voice--
"What are you doing, honey-comb, sweet Alisoun,
My fair bird, my sweet cinnamon?
Awake, my love, and speak to me!
Very little do you think on my woe,
That I sweat for your love wherever I go.
No wonder is it, though, that I faint and sweat;
I moon like a lamb after the teat.
Indeed, lover, I have such a love-longing,
That like a true turtledove is my mourning.
I cannot eat as much as a maid."
"Get away from that window, Jack fool," she said;
"So help me god, it will not be 'come kiss me.'
I love another--else I would be to blame--
Another much better than you, by Jesus, Absolon.
Get on your way, or I will throw a stone,
And let me sleep, in the Devil's name!"
"Alas," said Absolon, and "welladay,
That true love was ever so ill used!
Then kiss me, since it can be no better,
For the love of Jesus, and for the love of me."
"Will you go away then?" said she.
"Yes, certainly, lover," said Absolon.
"Then get ready," said she, "I'm coming."
And to Nicholas she said quietly,
“Now hush, and you shall laugh your fill."
Absolon got down on his knees
And said, "I am a lord of all ranks;
For after this I hope there comes more.
Lover, your grace, and sweet bird, your favor!"
She opened the window in haste.
"Get on with it," said she, "come on, and get on with it
Or the neighbors might see you."
Absolon wiped his mouth dry.
The night was as dark as pitch, or as coal,
And out the window she stuck her hole,
And Absolon it befell no better or worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse,
Savoring it before he knew what it was.
Back he jumped and thought it was strange,
For well he knew a woman has no beard.
He felt a thing all rough and long haired
And said, "Fie! Alas! what have I done?"
"Tee hee!" said she, and slammed the window shut.
Absolon went forth on his sorrowful route.

The Miller's Tale is essentially a fabliau, built out by Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales,* into a ribald and exaggerated plot. The essence is simple: An elderly carpenter is married to a sexy twenty year old, who collects admirers like flies. One of them, a lodger in the Carpenter's house, devises a trick to get temporarily rid of the Carpenter, and to spend the night in bed with Alison. While they are making love a second aspirant to Alison arrives, singing love lyrics at her low-off-the-ground privy trap door. Rebuffed by the lovely lady, he begs for at least a kiss, and she obliges, in the fashion sketched above.

EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

The political-cultural distance between the world of Chaucer and Boccaccio and that of Early Modern Europe surpasses the simple marker of calendar years, or even centuries. Early Modern will mean not only the period of the 16 th century Renaissance, in which classical literary and art forms again found their readers, and classical secular passions again found their voice, but the period during which the practices of science overturned the citizen's world picture—Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton recharted the heavens, and, in a broader sense, the foundations were laid for the making of a modern man, who would exceed in self-awareness, social insight, and artistic daring the great exemplars of the past. The question facing us, in this course, is: does the course of erotic literature change and evolve at the same pace and in the same way as culture in general. We will not answer that question but we will raise various facets of it.

Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality* (1978), takes one measure of the evolution of modern sexuality by considering the changes in Catholic penitential practice throughout the first fifteen centuries of the Christian era. What he finds, as he tracks the major Church Councils—Lateran (12th century), Trent (1550)—is at first a greater emphasis on the confession of specific sins, then, at The Council of Trent in the midst of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, an increasing invitation from priests for individual penitents to confess—to put into discourse the details of their sexual inclinations, moods, indiscretions, shames, unspeakable longings. This very broad observation, of one of many themes in the development of 'modern sexuality,' gives us a hint of the kind of diversification of both sexual discourse and sexual practice, which makes itself noticed from Early Modern to our own times. Which is to say, in Foucault's terms, that despite our vaunted period of Victorianism in the West, and despite what we have learned from Freud about the necessary connection between sex and repression, we seem in the modern centuries to be on a course of steeply ascending interest in the sexual. It will be no surprise, to the inhabitant of contemporary western—should we say global?—culture to know that in our own time some kind of crisis of sexual fascination holds us in its grip.' We talk about nothing else, unless it's terrorism!

We will try here to illustrate not only the tenor of literary sexuality in the Pre Modern period, but to choose **three texts**—Clément Marot's Le Beau Tétin (1545-6), Christopher Marlowe's 'Hero and Leander' (pub. 1598), and John Donne's 'The Extasie' (1620?)—which suggest moves of Early Modern Poetry beyond what we have so far associated with the Mediaeval and Ancient Periods.

Marot's poem, 'Le Beau Tetin,' 'The Beautiful Breast,' is part of the tradition of the b*lason* poem, which flourished from the l530's to the 1550's in France, and which involved a celebration, part by part, of the beloved's body. 'A 'blason' traditionally focused on the body parts of the female beloved: eyes, eyebrows, nose, ears, tongue, hair, chest, stomach, navel, buttocks, hand, thigh, knee, foot, as well as the breast, where many, including Marot, often made their last port of call.

The Breast

A little ball of ivory
In the middle of which sits
A strawberry or a cherry…

When one sees you, many men feel
The desire within their hands
To touch you and to hold you.
But one must satisfy oneself
With being near you for my life!
Or another desire will come.

For every reason, happy is he
Who will fill you with milk,
Turning the virgin's breast into

The breast of a beautiful, complete woman.

The list of beauties, of the idealized woman, is a piece out of traditional literatures—Catullus' *Da mi basia milia* or Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, in which the poet addresses the sequence of ways in which his mistress surpasses a summer's day. However, the glossy play, with increasingly sensitive and rarely fully listed, body parts is part of stock Renaissance tease, and adumbrates increasingly intricate writer-reader relationships.

Christopher **Marlowe**'s 'Hero and Leander' is an incomplete (it seems) version of the ancient tale of two lovers, one (Hero) a priestess of Sestos (the Turkish side of the Hellespont), the other (Leander) a handsome young man from Abydos (the opposite side of the Hellespont). The tragic tale involving the two is foreshortened, by Marlowe, into brilliant cameos of meeting and love at first sight. The excerpt below encases Marlowe's rich imagination of the power of attraction, and, while not cutting into bodilness as such, brilliantly anatomizes the power of sight to include the body in all its passion

And in the midst a silver altar stood:
There Hero, sacrificing turtles' blood,
Vail'd to the ground, veiling her eyelids close;
And modestly they opened as she rose.
Thence flew Love's arrow with the golden head;
And thus Leander was enamoured.
Stone-still he stood, and evermore he gazed,
Till with the fire that from his count'nance blazed
Relenting Hero's gentle heart was strook:
Such force and virtue hath an amorous look.

It lies not in our power to love or hate,
For will in us is over-rul'd by fate.
When two are stript, long ere the course begin,
We wish that one should lose, the other win;
And one especially do we affect
Of two gold ingots, like in each respect:
The reason no man knows, let it suffice,
What we behold is censur'd by our eyes.
Where both deliberate, the love is slight:
Who ever lov'd, that lov'd not at first sight?

John **Donne**'s 'Extasie,' while virtually contemporary with the poems discussed above, may portend a future more difficult to anticipate that that promised to the work of Marot and Marlowe. Rapidly forgotten after publication, the work of Donne—like that of his contemporaries Marvell and Herbert—was only 'rediscovered' in the 20th century, and that by poets, like W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, for whom these 'metaphysicals' represented a fresh brilliance, ironic and passionate both, which was needed in a literary world too softened up by the Romantic Movement.

WHERE, like a pillow on a bed,
A Pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest
The violets reclining head,
Sat we two, one anothers best.
Our hands were firmely cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred
Our eyes, upon one double string;
So to'entergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the meanes to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get

Was all our propagation.
As 'twixt two equall Armies, Fate
Suspends uncertaine victorie,
Our soules, (which to advance their state,
Were gone out,) hung 'twixt her, and mee.
And whil'st our soules negotiate there,
Wee like sepulchrall statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And wee said nothing, all the while.

The interwoven intimacies of body—sight, touch, desire—could hardly be more sensuously depicted. A new poetry, risking an eroticism which is both spiritual and physical at the same time, is in the making here.

Discussion Questions

Marot's breast poem is part of a hot poetic tradition, which forced its way onto the French Renaissance scene in the mid-16th century. Is this kind of body-part listing a fertile device for poetic imagination?

Marlowe introduces the theme of love at first sight. How does his use of sight/vision compare to that of Donne, in his intertwining of two lovers by their eyes?

Is the carnality of the sex act evident or only implicit in the three samples of early Modern Poetry presented here? How would the Wife of Bath have read the three poets presented here? Would she have thought them 'too precious'?

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, New York, 2006.
Carey, J., *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, London, 1981.
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Saunders, Alison, *The Sixteenth Century Blason Poetique*, Bern, 1981.
Tromley, Fred, *Playing with Desire: Christopher Marlowe and the Art of Tantalization*, Toronto, 1998.
Yalom, Marilyn, *A History of the Breast*, New York, 1997.

Example

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;
How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim Soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;
And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

This is a translation of one of the most brilliant Renaissance French poems, which was written by Pierre Ronsard (1524-1586), and here appears in a translation by the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). The example suggests the character of Early Modern Poetry which—think of

the Marot, Marlowe and Donne examples—is above all created in intricate and self-conscious language—just think of the rhetoric of the highly stylized *blason* poems. The difficulty of translation, even for a great modern poet like Yeats, comes out in the above effort, which misses much of the sexual innuendo of the original. The original addresses the 'you,' Ronsard's old lover, as she sits weaving at her loom, and performing activities of spinning and weaving, the French words for which explicitly connote sexual behaviors—which are at the heart of the poem, for Ronsard is recalling the joy of sex, that was the hallmark of his knowing this lady.

ENLIGHTENMENT LITERATURE

Prose fiction, more than poetry, becomes the banner vehicle for the main themes of Enlightenment Literature. The novel emerges as the preferred reading of the developing urban middle class In Western Europe, and flourishes in a climate of ever increasing literacy and economic energy. It is not that religious thought had been absent from the great literatures of Renaissance western Europe, for from Spencer and Shakespeare to Milton, and very much including Donne, there had been major testimonies to 'religious sensibility.' It is that the weight of scientific world views, Protestant assaults on classic Christian tradition, and the economically buoyed new individualism of society, have combined to shift the balance of prevailing values in Europe. Among the by-products of this shift is anticlericalism, while another is the growth of an industry of pornography and obscenity. We will briefly address three texts from this broiling atmosphere of eighteenth century thought.

Choderlos de **Laclos**' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (pub. 1782) is both an assault on the morals of a corrupt aristocracy, not long before Revolution turned the French government upside down, but a brilliant study of the uses of sexuality for power play and personal amusement. The initiators of the novel's complex plot—which turns entirely around corruption, seduction, and humiliation—are two aristocrats with time and desire on their hands—the Vicome de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil. Old and experienced lovers they use one another as pawns in their own perverse projects—to seduce an 'unavailable court lady' who is 'incorruptible' and thus a worthy challenge; to win over a young man who would normally not buy an older woman's wiles. The corrupt lady and gent, who mastermind the elaborately evolving sex plays, and occasionally satisfied love matches, live in an atmosphere of sexuality which, if heterosexual, has been entirely disengaged from the purposes of procreation. We can say, with Foucault, that carnality, even perversity, have here been traded in for intrigue and desire, which are the showpieces of aristocratic erotics.

The **Marquis de Sade** published largely—plays and novels and reports—but remains familiar to us for four pornographic works—*The 120 Days of Sodom*, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, *Justine*, and *Juliette*, in which he deploys his desire to say all, where sex is concerned, and thus to give play to the thought of those two contemporary philosophers—La Mettrie and the Baron d'Holbach—on which de Sade's own thinking fed. Those thinkers' materialism, determinism, and value free subscription to nature itself all played into Sade's fictions about the ultimate search for sexual pleasure, the orgasm being nature at its most delicious, and life at its most realized. In T*he 120 Days of Sodom* the almost infinitely diverse means for reaching orgasm are narrated and delectated by four wealthy libertines, who have holed themselves up in a remote castle where they can devote 120 days to tale telling and enacted pleasure. The anything-goes canvas is enriched by profligate delights coverings all positions, all orifices, all members, and including the special pleasures of coprophilia and urolagnia.

The Monk (1796), by Matthew Gregory **Lewis**, is a work of Gothic fiction, which turns the power of horror directly into sexuality. The central figure is a fictive mediaeval monk who, though considered incorruptible, is taken by the power of Lucifer, and led into committing every sort of crime: the rape and murder of a beautiful virgin; a headlong lustful affair with a lady—in fact his sister--who has disguised herself as a novice master in the monastery; the sexual murder of the mother of the virgin he has killed. Any number of sexual scenes, drowned in horror rather than genitalia, are paraded through this shocker, which exemplifies the ardor of literary sexuality as it

is thrown onto the screen of popular reading, and into the fire of contemporary anticlericalism and anti-aristocracy.

The Enlightenment, often dated from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (first volume published in 1751), is marked by a widespread curiosity about history, the natural world, and the physical/social setting of human beings. The literature of the period is permeated with open interest in sexuality, and above we have mentioned three kinds of literary-sexual intersections: Laclos' cynical dismemberment of the sexual addictions and strategic moves, within a privileged aristocratic coterie; the Marquis de Sade's daring exploration of the body's wide range of possible pleasures, excluding none, up to the very shrine of shit-eating: Matthew Lewis' gothic tales of sexual plunder, addiction, gory murder, none of which seems more than the hyperbole or Daily News version of sexuality, but which was in fact material of great interest and titillation, for the growing, but still widely unsophisticated, reading public of the time.

Discussion Questions

Does the coming to the fore of prose fiction, as a new voracious appetite in European societies, open the way to new kinds of interest in sexuality in literature? With this development, have we entered a new freedom of discourse, about the sexual, which was not available in, say, our earlier examples of mediaeval literature?

Does de Sade's philosophy of unreserved sexual exploration seem to you founded on the work of the philosophers La Mettrie and d'Holbach? Do you see a substantive link between Sade's eroticism, and l8th century French materialism? What is this link?

Laclos portrays a sexually wired upper class in which amusement—and resultant pain--is the chief driver of the erotic. There is no mention of body parts, genitalia, or the sex act in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Can the climate of social sexuality be adequately characterized, without 'naming the body'?

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Example

She retreated for a moment; Then gazing upon him with unutterable delight; 'Yes!' She exclaimed, 'My Bridegroom! My destined Bridegroom!' She said, and hastened to throw herself into his arms; But before He had time to receive her, an Unknown rushed between them. His form was gigantic; His complexion was swarthy, His eyes fierce and terrible; his Mouth breathed out volumes of fire; and on his forehead was written in legible characters—'Pride! Lust! Inhumanity!'

Antonia shrieked. The Monster clasped her in his arms, and springing with her upon the Altar, tortured her with his odious caresses. She endeavoured in vain to escape from his embrace. Lorenzo flew to her succour, but ere He had time to reach her, a loud burst of thunder was heard. Instantly the Cathedral seemed crumbling into pieces; The Monks betook themselves to flight, shrieking fearfully; The Lamps were extinguished, the Altar sank down, and in its place appeared an abyss vomiting forth clouds of flame. Uttering a loud and terrible cry the Monster plunged into the Gulph, and in his fall attempted to drag Antonia with him. He strove in vain. Animated by supernatural powers She disengaged herself from his embrace; But her white Robe was left in his possession. Instantly a wing of brilliant splendour spread itself from either of Antonia's arms.

The above scene of violence, in which Lewis' Monk intervenes for his own sexual purposes, onto a sacred wedding forthcoming in his own Cathedral, is the first appearance we see of this 'monstrous figure.' No attempt is made, by the author, to move slowly into the firestorm of the Monk's attack; that abruptness, and rawness, is part of the Gothic manner. We are forwarned that the Monk will prove to be a rape-minded fancier of the female, at no matter what stage of life, including marriage preparations. Bodies do not touch in this Gothic world, for its pace is too frenzied, and its passions too broad and general. But the sexuality of rape is everywhere here.

MAJOR FIGURE

The **Marquis de Sade** (1740-1814) was (by inheritance) a French aristocrat whom, though it is only part of the picture, we automatically associate with 'sadism,' the sexual perversion that involves taking sexual pleasure in the unwilling pain of others. Environing this principle, which was the governing formula of Sade's four best known works of (erotic) literature, the four 'libertine' novels composed over a twelve year period (1785-1797), lies a personal background of pain and family discord, hatred of his mother, numerous imprisonments for sexual offences, and then, when finally he is freed from prison on the eve of the Revolution, the discovery that that Revolution has been fought not for the poor but for middle class property owners.

The four works of erotic literature, for which Sade is best known, are: The *120 Days of Sodom* (begun while Sade was imprisoned in the Bastille in 1785), *Philosophy in* the *Boudoir* (pub. 1795), *Justine* (the first of the three versions of which was begun in 1787, and completed in two weeks), and *The Story of Juliette* (pub. between 1798-1801). Among the perspectives to which we can turn, for understanding these three quite different fictions, is the materialist/nihilist philosophy to which de Sade adhered, and which supported his atheism, his sense that Nature is cruel and without purpose, and his evident conviction that
sexual/physical pleasure is our highest experience. (The French philosophers d'Holbach and La Mettrie subscribed to a strict Lucretian materialism, and to the notion that man is essentially a material machine—-a perspective that seems undermined by the very philosophical effort that goes into formulating it.) There is also, as part of the frame for these fictions, Sade's lifelong commitment to freedom, the kind of *liberté* he felt promised by the Revolution, which was boiling around him as he composed his fictions. During the thirty-two years of life that de Sade passed incarcerated—either in prison or in mental institutions—he had ample opportunity to reflect on the terrorism of dictatorship, perfectly exemplified by the State Guillotine, just outside his prison window, from which he could study the savage governance of Robespierre's Reign of Terror.

The kind of literature de Sade generates, from within his reckless creativity and his deep social dysfunction, is arguably at its most powerful in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, which was composed in the Bastille and—though it was temporarily lost during the Revolution—became the foundation for his three subsequent libertine fictions. The tale is familiar from a literary genius like Boccaccio, but battens on the extravagance of de Sade. Four gentlemen who control four young ladies—either as their daughters or as collateral sex possessions—and who are quite happy with the rules of incest, enlarge their empire of pleasures by deciding to conscript willing (and venial) youngsters, of differing ages, but of a common attractiveness, youth, and sexuality, and agree to occupy a mountainous hideout in which they can play out the game of pleasure at their leisure. (It need hardly be said that these four gentlemen, of whom one is a priest, have adequate money and power at their disposal, to make their ultimate sexual dreams practicable.)

In a remote chateau, in the Black Forest, play out the sexual dramas which over an extensive period of time engage these sexual afficionados and the sex subjects they vet and eventually hire. Precise contracts are set up, between the four seigneurs and their hired playmates, who are at various stages of sexual development. Tales are then told from within the group, on the basis of which the reader, a surrogate fly on the wall, can know the culture that has been developed among the group. What we and the participants learn, of course, is that every kind of sex play deviance can afford its pleasure, to the appropriate audience: indeed there is not a throat, in this sexually lurid assembly, that has not choked and vomited with an abundance of semen or a load

of crap, not a coprophiliac trick that has not been turned by one of the four pleasure masters, and no debasement of sex subalterns that has not become daily practice in this community. In terms of the texts in this course, we might say that neither *My Secret Life* nor *The Story of O* can begin to rival the sexual ingenuity brought into play by the actors of *The 120 Days of Sodom.*

Discussion Questions

Does de Sade'e erotic fiction seem to you to fit together with his views of nature and society? Is he a consistent thinker?

Sade was a prolific writer. What kind of work did he create outside of his four libertine novels? What made his libertine novels so popular and read in his own time?

What kind of connections do you see, among the erotic works of Pauline Reage. John Cleland (author *of Fanny Hill*) and the Marquis de Sade. Does de Sade seem to you to push the envelope, in certain regards, more daringly than the other two authors?

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Thoughts from the Marquis

'Sex' is as important as eating or drinking and we ought to allow the one appetite to be satisfied with as little restraint or false modesty as the other. Sade's belief in freedom is unbounded, although he is a master study of the pleasures of bondage.

No lover, if he be of good faith, and sincere, will deny he would prefer to see his mistress dead than unfaithful. Infidelity, even to de Sade, seems the ultimate threat to the self-confidence of its victims.

There is no more lively sensation than that of pain; its impressions are certain and dependable, they never deceive as may those of the pleasure women perpetually feign and almost never experience. The bedrock perception of sadism is here, in this brute analysis of pain.

Never lose sight of the fact that all human felicity lies in man's imagination, and that he cannot think to attain it unless he heeds all his caprices. The most fortunate of persons is he who has the most means to satisfy his vagaries. Fantasy is where pleasure settles; remain open to all your sexual fantasy options.

It is always by way of pain one arrives at pleasure. *Aus schmerzen wird die neue Welt geboren;* from sufferings will the new world be born, says the German poet Novalis.

Your body is the church where Nature asks to be reverenced. Remember the church nave, in 120 Days of Sodom, which is set aside as a public latrine?

Are not laws dangerous which inhibit the passions? Compare the centuries of anarchy with those of the strongest legalism in any country you like and you will see that it is only when the laws are

silent that the greatest actions appear. The laws are ways of battening down the hatches, anticipating and precluding recklessness. Bravo, Marquis!

The imagination is the spur of delights... all depends upon it, it is the mainspring of everything; now, is it not by means of the imagination one knows joy? Is it not of the imagination that the sharpest pleasures arise? Masturbation is the product of imagination, as is nothing else. It is pure conjury, and can strike out at the moment's intrusion.

My manner of thinking, so you say, cannot be approved. Do you suppose I care? A poor fool indeed is he who adopts a manner of thinking for others! The Marquis is bold, in a French tradition which includes Larochefoucauld and Pascal: sharp, searing, and to the point. May I mention Charlie Hebdo?

NINETEENTH CENTURY LITERATURE

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 l9th 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 l966 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?

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Ward Jouve, Nicole, *Baudelaire: A Fire to Conquer Darkness*, London, l990.

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 ierityn 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 inquring 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?:

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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 satisfation. 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.

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

We have tracked the presentation of sexuality in literature, through a combination of generalities and biopsies of specific texts. From a great distance, looking back from our early twenty-first century, we can see in the older literatures a very broad difference from the tone of our time. The difference begins to make itself heard in, say, our samples from the Renaissance. There we heard--in Marot, Donne, and Marlowe--a kind of personal tone, an individualistic author voice, which we did not hear in, say, our samples (Chaucer, Tristan and Iseut, the butcher fabliau) from the Middle Ages, or, far more obviously, in Horace, Catullus, Sappho, Egyptian love lyric, or Aristophanes. The point is broad and general, and when it comes to contrasts between, say, Catullus and Baudelaire, we would need to parse differences carefully and closely—but parse them we could, and with the result that we would hear, in the more modern excerpts, a personal tone which is typically muted by style, by narrator 'attitude,' or by the kinds of claim made on the 'audience'---claims that with the 'modern period' grow increasingly intimate.

Swamped by the richness of our own moment, in which we are bombarded with evidence with which to try to characterize ourselves, we will settle for three examples, of highly diverse positions within literary sexuality. Our brief mention will be directed to James Joyce (1882-1941), Radclyffe Hall (1880-1943), and Georges Bataille (1897-1962). We can do little more than to hear our own voices echoing back from these relative contemporaries.

Baudelaire, Flaubert, and even *My Secret Life* will have readied us to appreciate a concrete sociological awareness of the place of sexuality in our contemporary lives. By many writers of the twentieth century we feel ourselves forced into newly exploratory corners of our condition.

Between l914-1922, **James Joyce** created his masterwork, *Ulysses,* which straddles the First World War, the growing cultural awareness of sex in society, and the modern urban voice no longer content with the kinds of shock literature Baudelaire or *My Secret Life* offer us. Joyce's novel concentrates on the events of a single day—June l6, l904—in Dublin. The main figures are Stephen Dedalus, a brilliant young man, Leopold Bloom, a moderately successful advertising agent, and Bloom's wife, Molly, who is on that day waiting at home for a sexual liaison with Blazes Boylan, her source of sexual satisfaction. The liaison which follows—Molly Bloom's soliloquy—ends with words

"...I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish Wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes "…

of passionate yielding, and conclude a many pages long soliloquy in which Molly Bloom, saying yes to the world of sex and love, outs passions which were rarely to be heard expressed in James Joyce's Ireland. This is not the only passage in the long stream of consciousness novel, which lets sexual desire out into unexampled freedom, but the above passage attracted exceptional attention in its time and place, post WW I Ireland and Europe, and was published in Europe as early as 1922, though it was not allowed into the United States until 1933, having been held up in the courts on grounds of alleged pornography.

The work of **Georges Bataille**, though bizarrely erotic and existentially threatening, suffered not from legal constraints but from the difficult darkness with which it typically confronted the erotic individual. A characteristic Bataille plot juxtaposes sex with death in a fashion that does little to comfort us as readers. *The Story of the Eye* (1928) catches the tone. Two young lovers, with a

taste for 'evil,' find one another, and contrive to corrupt, then desecrate, a pure young girl of their acquaintance. Once launched on a career of existential violence, the two lovers make their way to Spain, where they fall under the spell of a wealthy Englishman. They attend a bullfight, at the end of which Sir Edmund offers Simone a plate of bulls' balls; one of which she inserts into her vagina, at just the time when the bullfighter is struck by a bull, and one of his eyes knocked out of its socket. Proceeding further into Spain, the young lady, Simone, presents herself to a priest in the confessional, where she masturbates while confessing, then goes on to abuse the priest himself, Finally, after profaning the body of the priest, and cutting out one of his eyes, which Simone attempts to insert into her anus, the fugitive pair make their way further, before setting sail from Gibraltar. Can we say, then, that for Bataille the sexual intersects violently—sometimes comically, sometimes surreally—with death, mutilation, and existential pain?

Radclyffe Hall, to pick a third, and totally different kind of example, writes as a bold pathbreaker into the world of Lesbianism, which was at her moment a nearly taboo subject for examination. (She is in other words almost a social scientist experimenter in fiction.) For her bold excursions into Lesbianism, its pleasures and loneliness, her work suffered periodic banning by her society, her most famous book, *The Well of Loneliness* (first pub. 1928) being cleared of obscenity charges only in l959, in her home country. The sexual effects of this novel are achieved largely through its exemplification of cases of sexual inversion linked to gender inversion. In other words, the femaile lovers in this text are deeply masculinized, and sport muscular/masculine bodies which are the delight of their feminine lovers. Bourgeois role play outs of this sort made Radclyffe Hall a feared, banned, and seemingly daring pioneer of new sexual frontiers.

Discussion Questions

Do you see any unifying tone among the literary-sexual texts of our century—our few examples—which set them apart from even the work of our three nineteenth-century examples?

Please re-read Molly Bloom's soliloquy, which until the mid-twentieth century was widely considered daring. Does it seem so today? Is there an element of frankness, in Molly's speech, which persuades you, and wins you into her voice?

Bataille lives his sexuality onto the page, as part of the drama of the tension between life and death. Is he a writer of literature, or a voice emerging from an individual struggling from inside the human condition?

Does the issue of gender inversion, as part of the Lesbian experience, carry any shock value today? Is the butch/dyke issue still a live topic? For that matter, is the Lesbian experience a live topic, at least in the industrialized West?

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Example *Excerpt from Molly Bloom's soliloquy*

…an old Lion would O well I suppose its because they were so plump and tempting in my short petticoat he couldnt resist they excite myself sometimes its well for men all the amount of pleasure they get off a womans body were so round and white for them always I wished I was one myself for a change just to try with that thing they have swelling up on you so hard and at the

same time so soft when you touch it my uncle John has a thing long I heard those cornerboys saying passing the comer of Marrowbone lane my aunt Mary has a thing hairy because it was dark and they knew a girl was passing it didnt make me blush why should it either its only nature and he puts his thing long into my aunt Marys hairy etcetera and turns out to be you put the handle in a sweepingbrush men again all over they can pick and choose what they please a married woman or a fast widow or a girl for their different tastes like those houses round behind Irish street no but were to be always chained up theyre not going to be chaining me up no damn fear once I start I tell you for their stupid husbands…

These lines from Molly's soliloquy pour forth without punctuation, in a breathless stream of consciousness. Molly lets herself go back over her love life with Mr. Bloom—-fourteen years before they had still had sex—and lets herself reflect on how sex is for guys. While we can no longer pretend shock at the issues raised in this pages long confessional, we cannot read through it without feeling the honesty, clear thought, and deep humanity of Molly—whom it would be hard to characterize without a flood of words and feelings. Equally remarkable, from the literary standpoint, is the discipline and skill with which Joyce controls the apparently random flow of speech, which is in fact logical and coherent.

MAJOR FIGURE

With the exception of a small number of his novels, the 'leadership' novels published between l922-26, **D. H. Lawrence** (1885-1930) devoted his intense writing career to issues of personal development, or conflict, that was essentially sexual. Sexual, in Lawrence's case, means typically phallic, though with a seasoning of what was at the time easily called perversity--homosexuality or, say, anal sex between men and woman. Much of Lawrence's world view turned around issues of sexual expression and self-discovery, and, given the great power of his fictional imagination, it can well be said that he was a shaping figure for the sexual self-awareness of the 'new man' developing through the twentieth century. Though he died three decades before the greening of America, and Woodstock, it is a safe guess that the imprint of Lawrence's work was at play among the young Americans who fully acted out their impatience with the staid sexual climate they inherited in middle America. Lawrence, to put it another way, will have been part of that sexually empowering discourse which Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, sees emerging from the Enlightenment, and proceeding vigorously to our moment, right over the top of Victorianism.

The Rainbow (l915), *Women in Love* (1920), and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (first published in l928, but first granted publication in the United States in l959) can be taken as Lawrence's deepest statements on sexuality, and on the modern world in terms of which modern sexuality has to be understood. In each of these novels it is sexual relations through which the individual typically finds his or her vehicle of self-discovery (or self-despair). It is in the first of these three novels that Lawrence embeds his insights into sexuality in the social/historical setting where they belong. The novel spans roughly seventy-five years, three generations of the Brangwen family from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century; and thus takes a look at the evolution of sexual behavior during the period of accelerating industrialization, in fact of the kind of clanging and hissing 'modernity' Lawrence hated. The first generation of the family's development snags on the protagonist's inability to both love and care sexually for the same woman, an Oedipal problem deriving from his idealization of his mother. Ultimately an aristocratic foreign lady does the trick, for in her Tom Brangwen is able to love and desire both. The daughter of that marriage, Lydia, finally reaches, with her husband—another Brangwen—the condition of free loving, the deep dark anal included, and is able to enjoy rewardingly total sex. Lydia's husband finds a path to 'the secret shameful things' which are 'most terribly beautiful.' The third generation of the family confronts modernity is all its refusals. Ursula, daughter of the second generation, is an educated contemporary woman, searching tirelessly for an answer in love: however the man she marries, a military man, though loving her has the center of his existence in his career, while her quests with a Lesbian lover, or a couple of guys—a taxicab driver, a waiter—who do not mean much to her,

leave her trapped in her 'beakish,' clitoral longing, far from the erotic power sources her being longs for.

Women in Love works with a pair of sisters and the men they try to love, and to find themselves in. The more satisfying of the two quests is that between Ursula—a slight modification of the Ursula we have met—and Birkin, an anti-modern and self-directing self-examiner whose dislike of his own time makes us think constantly of Lawrence himself. The efforts of both couples to find salvation in one another, are doomed, but the industrial power-drive of Gerald, who marries Ursula's sister, alienates him past even his natural withdrawal. (It is striking that, in a 'prologue' attached to *Women in Love,* the narrator of the text declares that he needs the heat of male love, that 'lightning flash which passes through the blood of both individuals…a thunder of sensation…'

The most powerful, and the most controversial of Lawrence's novels *is Lady Chatterley's Lover,* long kept under wraps by disapproving censors, and to our day still a symbol of dangerously freed sexuality. The glory of this novel is that it brings together seamlessly the need for sexual freedom, especially woman's freedom, with a constant critique of that modern temper which has made middle class mediocrities of us all. Lady Chatterley ultimately finds her passions opened, and in her paralyzed husband's gamekeeper discovers a virile and independent masculine, whom she in turn is able to open, into a place where he had previously been closed to himself. While the gamekeeper loves the Lady's anus as well as her front material, and she loses herself totally in his phallus, the two strong individuals grow constantly into deeper persons, as they discover the paradise below their waists.

Discussion Questions

Michel Foucault hails the opening up of sexual discourse, which in part he dates to the liberation of awarenesses during several periods of renovation of practice in the Catholic confessional. Whatever the contributing causes, it is clear that by the l8th and l9th centuries there is a great increase in sexual exploration, variations on the male/female phallic. In that regard, does Lawrence not seem relatively conservative? Why were his sexual novels, created in the l920s, viewed as so daring and subversive?

What role does homosexuality play in the phallic dramas of Lawrence's novels? Is Lawrence's conception of heterosexual intercourse sufficiently generalized that it can only with difficulty be distinguished from homosexual intercourse?

How do you relate Lawrence's sense of political power, as he unfolds it in 'leadership novels' like *Aaron's Rod* (1922) or *Kangaroo* (1923), to the phallic orgasmic theme in Lawrence's philosophy of sexuality?

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Example

Snake

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.
In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
I came down the steps with my pitcher
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the edge of the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,
And stooped and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.
The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him? Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him? Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid, But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,
Seeming to lick his lips,
And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,

Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther,
A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that horrid black hole,
Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,
Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
I picked up a clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in undignified haste.
Writhed like lightning, and was gone
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

And I thought of the albatross
And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.
And I have something to expiate:
A pettiness.

Lawrence is a fine poet and even painter, as well as a novelist. Is it his inner voice, the way he talks to himself, that assures the consistent tone to all he does? (Can't you just hear the voice within this poem working its way through a commentary within *Lady Chatterley's Lover?*) In the present poem we hear Lawrence's voice, but also see the reappearance, in another genre, of the general perspective that dominates his sexual novels. That perspective is grounded in respect for nature, in the quieting of consciousness, and in attention to the pulse of the blood. Some, to be sure, still view Lawrence's fictive sexuality crude, and tiresomely phallic, but whatever your view you should want to agree that Lawrence opened up sexuality to a new role as a central definer of the human enterprise, an essential part of the way we need to define ourselves as humans.