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The History of Sexuality and Poetics

LIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF PROBLEMS

Eroticism, Georges Bataille says in the most philosophically incisive study of the subject to date, is "the problem of problems. In that he is an erotic animal, man is a problem for himself. Eroticism is the problematic part of ourselves. . . . Of all problems eroticism is the most mysterious, the most general and the least straightforward." Pornography, for better or worse the aesthetic configuration of eroticism, is one measure of the problem's social dimension. And if we take the commercial printing press as a demarcation of modernity, pornography is coextensive with modern life and its vexations. In 1524, some fifty years after the introduction of the press to Italy, Pietro Aretino punctuated Giulio Romano's erotic drawings, called *Posizioni*, with pornographic sonnets. The publication was promptly suppressed by the Church; its engraver-printer in Rome was jailed, and Aretino avoided the same fate by skipping town. When he returned, a Vatican hit man wounded him in an assassination attempt. Aretino left Rome and settled in Venice, which in the spirit of variable community standards had something of a free-press tradition already. Thus Aretino, the first modern pornographer,

presented Renaissance society with problems that nag us still.

Aretino was also among the first professional writers, one who wrote for pay as distinct from patronage. He produced verse, plays, satire, political and religious tracts, and libels. In fact, so thriving was the latter business that for a price he would *refrain* from writing libels, thereby inventing the "kill fee" and possibly the model for what later became the English common law concept of obscene libel. From the start, pornography was integral to both the professional writers' arsenal and popular literature. Especially the *Positions*, as his sonnets quickly became known in England, were read throughout Europe. He spawned a school of imitators, the self-styled "Aretines." Others attacked him even as they exploited his example. That his imitators had a certain success of their own confirms that the master, whose *Positions* and *Dialogues* are notorious even now, pioneered a genre that from the beginning had a broad appeal.

Moreover, as David O. Frantz argues (*Festum Voluptatis*), Aretino was distinctly a part of the great humanistic enterprise of his epoch. Renaissance humanism had two strains, the mainline scholarly one recovering pre-Christian classicism and the popular one exploring and exploiting human nature. Modern pornography is prefigured in the former and explicitly realized in the latter. The one produced a tradition of learned erotica developing out of Italy's academies. After hours the eggheads got together over *vino* and regaled one another with dirty jokes and tales. For example, Poggio's famous *Facetiae* is a compendium of these. But pornography per se got its start in the less rarefied atmosphere of politics and commerce, where Aretino hung out.

Frantz demonstrates that pornography was rather more central to Renaissance concerns than scholars have let on, not only in the writing of Aretino and the Aretines but also in the graphic arts, where among others such artists as Perino del Vaga and Agostino Carracci rivaled Romano's explicitness.

Humanism included rather than transcended the varieties of sexual imagination, and this means pornography, not just the erotica or bawdry with which it is usually lumped and trivialized as a whimsical distraction from the period's prime humanistic business. Aretino's *sonetti lussuriosi*, the *Positions*, are unequivocal: "Put a finger in my asshole, dear old man, and push the cock in little by little, lift up this leg, and make a good game. . . ." While the recreational spirit of these sonnets does not advance the verse form, it is a part of the form's history.

Frantz further makes the intriguing claim that the sonnets served another aesthetic function. They subverted two centuries of Petrarchan tradition and helped establish an anti-Petrarchan one. Aretino's women are not neo-Platonic ideas on a pedestal, they are down and dirty and enjoying it. That attitude informs an epistemological function today in

certain lines of feminist pornography. Aretino was no feminist ("What wrong is there," he writes in a letter, "in beholding a man possess a woman?"), but he was on to something. Similarly with his *Dialogues*, which by volume are about one part pornography to seven parts satire on the Church and the situation of women vis-à-vis wiving and whoring, and which even include some rudimentary class analysis. Aretino's reputation and works survive primarily because he brought sexuality within the purview of the humanism of his age. What's more, his satirical posture foreshadows the deconstructivist spirit characteristic of such successors in the pornographic tradition as the Marquis de Sade, Bataille, and Jean Genet.

That modern pornography developed along with the commercial press, a professional as distinct from a patronized literati, increasing general literacy, and popular forms of prose fiction indicates its general human appeal. That suppression accompanied its development indicates how problematic its appeal is. Indeed, Bataille contends that taboo is imperative to its existence. To those who would remove restrictions, he scoffs that one might as well eliminate the hygienic axiom that you don't shit where you eat: Pornography is as atavistic as sexuality itself, and both require mediation. Negotiating eroticism's magnetic field of appeal, taboo, and their mediation is precisely what makes the problem of problems problematic.

Western civilization has had a long problematic history with eroticism, pornography, and obscenity. Today the discourse is as polarized as ever, although the conservative view has been complicated by a feminist perspective. Two such contrasting approaches to the problem as Wayland Young's *Eros Denied* and Susan Griffin's *Pornography and Silence* are illustrative. Young, reflecting a rationalist liberalism, argues that the hypocritical suppression of candid sexual expression in Western culture has produced false and unhealthy sexual attitudes and practices in both men and women. Griffin, reflecting a feminist conservatism, challenges liberalism's laissez-faire expressionism by charging that the whole history of the West reveals the "pornographic ideology" of patriarchy, the consequence of which is suppression of women. As we shall see, these positions are not necessarily gender specific. The irony of their collision is that Griffin's feminism is as much a product of Western liberalism as is Young's latitudinarianism. I will return in a later chapter to the matter of gender, but I want here to explore the conundrum of liberalism and how it has brought us to this point by helping cultivate a poetics of obscenity to mediate between the traditional taboos and the aggressive emergence of eroticism's appeal.

Obviously Aretino did not invent that appeal, but he did give it momentum, with the assistance of printing. His own appeal lasted into the

seventeenth century and received a peculiar boost from the post-Reformation division of taste between puritan censoriousness and high church wit. John Donne, for example, satirizes the Aretino vogue in *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611). Aretino was erotically uninventive, Donne chides playfully, because he was ignorant of the licentious "treasure of Antiquitie." What's worse, Aretino deflects the curiosity of youth, who think this *ignoramus* is an authority on the subject.

But, notwithstanding occasional works by such writers as Thomas Nashe, the Earl of Rochester, or even John Cleland, eroticism was essentially a bauble until the late eighteenth century. By then the novel had become a popular form, and materialism had sufficiently influenced science and philosophy, including aesthetics, to question idealism and provide a preliminary basis for a poetics of obscenity. All of this was concomitant with developing liberalism, the modern milestone of which in England might be dated from 1695 with the expiration of the Licensing Act.

Obscene poetics, a functional rather than gratuitous linking of art and obscenity, were catalyzed in an atmosphere profoundly informed by increasingly assertive materialism, the Enlightenment, and the French and American revolutions, and the prologue to capitalist liberalism. If Sade was the first to synthesize the components of obscene poetics, there were nonetheless others probing them more circumspectly. But it will be useful to get at those developments from the perspective of "the end of history," announced two centuries later in 1989 by Francis Fukuyama, a policy planner for the United States State Department. He thereby launched a debate about whether *glasnost*, *perestroika*, and the collapse of Communism signified this dénouement. Representatives of both the political left and right for rather different reasons insisted that Communism and history still lived. But Fukuyama adroitly evoked Hegelian semantics in declaring that Marx's long end run around Hegel had gone for no gain and the Marxist totalitarians had had to punt. The capitalist liberals now had the ball, and the lead, and would run out the clock. In short, the ideological game was all but over, liberalism could claim the egalitarian trophy instituted by the American and French revolutions and was therefore the culmination of Hegelian history. Daniel Bell, author of *The End of Ideology*, in the *New York Times* dismissed the whole affair as a "farce." Possibly so, but then Marx, the Dadaists, and Charlie Chaplin have not been alone in suggesting that farce is the most salient form of modern times.

It was certainly a peculiar extension of that end point in history when Czechoslovakian playwright Vaclav Havel addressed a joint session of the United States Congress in February 1990. Of the scribbling tribe, only a white-haired Carl Sandburg had been accorded this forum, and that predictably to croon Lincoln glory. Havel spoke as the new democratic pres-

ident of his country, and he had no elegiac intentions. Whether or not he had been aware of the "end of history" debate, he brought the weight of his status down on the side of Fukuyama. Capital was so obviously his objective that he didn't have to mention it. He was, though, apprehensive that Americans might not recognize their moment of historic destiny, and of course the corollary function of liberal capital. He lectured them from the sober perspective of one who had survived Communism and appealed to them on the high ground of ontological homily. So grim was the "nightmare" of Communism that it had given Havel, the age of uncertainty notwithstanding, "one great certainty: Consciousness precedes Being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim."

Oddly, his analysis of the world situation seemed to demonstrate the reverse. Capitalists and Communists alike, he said, persist in rendering the natural, political and cultural environments dysfunctional. "From time to time," he scolded both East and West, "we say that the anonymous megamachinery we have created for ourselves no longer serves us, but rather has enslaved us, yet we still fail to do anything about it." Neither, he emphasized, has moral conscience prompted responsibility in the face of macrodisaster. In short, he described being as holding consciousness in thrall. And although he appealed to a quasi-religious higher "order of Being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged," this did not seem to change the material circumstances, as the Marxists might say.

The very intensity of Havel's cheerleading for consciousness to assert itself qualified his "one great certainty." Indeed, even Havel's own plays, where the state, society, the work place, dominate consciousness are a measure of his posture's desperation. Economically, politically, and aesthetically, Havel would seem to illuminate the same situation, where being determines consciousness. Why, then, would he express such certainty that it is otherwise? Could it be his own material circumstances, a writer turned politician who had just emerged battered from under the hammy fist of Communism but apprehensive about putting himself and his country under the prosperously gloved but distinctly meaty paw of capitalism? And what of his invocation of the Big Recorder in the sky—was that just residual theism or a shrewd pitch to the schizophrenic conscience of a high-rolling nation whose currency proclaims its trust in God? Given the end of one sort of materialist ideology, did he hope to induce consciousness of Judgment Day in a capitalism whose ideology is notorious for its own version of materialism? Did he wonder, after all, about liberal capitalism's blithe equation of the free market with the free spirit?

Whether or not political economy has reached the end of history and therefore the beginning of ideological consensus, President-playwright Havel's uneasy posture is a paradigm at once historical and contemporary.

His phenomenological project of urging allegiance to both the world's body and its idea is emblematic of the long dialogue between the philosophies of idealism and materialism. And if liberal capitalism has now made the world safe for Havel's idealist *cri de couer*, so has it made the world safe for obscenity and pornography. Pornography has always flourished under the entrepreneurship of capital, for liberalism is not merely secular, it is downright profane.

In the progress of liberalism it is no coincidence that modern pornography developed out of the Renaissance, when the Roman Church began to lose its theocratic grip, when humanism, science and technology began their offensive, when navigation got more able, the world got round, and commerce went global, when commercial printing induced a more demotic literature, when the vernacular validated itself and induced increasingly more popular literacy, when, in short, the Western world view began to be more material, various, and liberal.

Modern pornography, among other things, was the beneficiary of incipient liberalism's tolerance for the materialist encroachment on prevailing idealism. By the end of the eighteenth century, the dialectic between idealism and materialism had sharpened sufficiently to pose metaphysical and epistemological problems for poetics. Skepticism had challenged idealist ontology, and empiricism gathered credibility. This also helped deconstruct conceptions of nature, which could no longer be the univocal icon of fixed and permanent forms. Neither could art, claiming an epistemological function, be the mere mirror of nature but must assume the interior role of illumination. Correspondingly, this compounded the much-worried neoclassical and Romantic concern with distinguishing the universal natural truths from aberrations, the essential from the accidental. In short, the skeptical materialization of ideas precipitated a crisis of the idea that undermined the theoretical foundations of the beautiful itself, to say nothing of taste.

A convenient index of the evolution of this aesthetic problem is in Sir Joshua Reynolds' annual *Discourses* to the Royal Academy of Arts between 1769 and 1790. In the early discourses, Reynolds is unequivocal in his insistence that only the universal is the source of beauty, but by the last discourses he feels obliged to acknowledge that the aberrant, too, may be a source. That is, in the course of about twenty years the "official" premises of beauty had shifted implicitly from univocal idealism to materialist relativity. This was crucial to the development of obscene poetics. The aberrant, or unnatural, was associated with the obscene. So its aesthetic validation implied new artistic possibilities. Except for William Blake and Sade, these implications were slow to be realized. Meanwhile, they perturbed the univocal idea of nature, suggesting the erasure of distinction between the natural and the unnatural.

THE COVERT HISTORY OF POETICS

Writers and artists confronted the "crisis of the idea" in various ways. Some neoclassicists, like Dr. Johnson, temporized in the face of it, emphasizing reason and common sense as if they were immune to the virus of materialist implications. Others, like Reynolds, accommodated without really engaging the problem. Both sorts simply lived with the contradictions, for example those inherent in the coincidence of the beautiful—implying God, order and coherence—and the sublime—implying the thrill of wildness, terror, and pain. But such evasions wouldn't do for long. When Friedrich Schiller divided the poetic house between classical naivete and modern sentimentalism, it was a demarcation too exclusive for coexistence. And when he characterized the latter as a sick man seeking the health of the former, he put his finger on the dialectical key—the nostalgic appeal of vestigial idealism in the face of decentering materialism.

Schiller's own response to the crisis, though, was at least as heroic as it was nostalgic. Given the modern difficulties of a univocally idealist nature, he posited a dialectically binary nature. Physical nature constituted a kind of bondage against which intelligent nature had to assert itself. The resistance to suffering bondage was the function of reason and was a manifestation of the beautiful. The existential resolution of nature's dialectic was the transformation of suffering via rational action, which asserts freedom and thus the sublime. This theoretical process is worked out programmatically in *William Tell*, for example. The Swiss Tell first suffers the oppression of the Austrian interloper; his resistance is in one sense reasonable but in a larger sense petulant, individualistic and ineffective; his suffering is transformed only when he finally takes the more rational action of joining collectively with his fellow Swiss to overthrow the oppressor. Schiller's dialectic solves several problems. By shifting the imperative from universality to freedom he avoids idealist sticking points. If freedom is an idea, it is one materially validated by the American and French revolutions. At the same time he is able to restore idealist reason in the context of an acknowledged materialist situation. In his scheme beauty and the sublime complement rather than contradict one another. But after all it would seem that Schiller had co-opted materialism into latent idealism, where the material world was heroically transcended by an ideal action. In that sense Schiller was his own sick man yearning for pre-lapsarian health.

Schiller's project of accounting materialist implications yet keeping them subordinate to the synthesizing utility of idealism was similar to that of the mainstream of English Romantics. For them, too, the epistemological was the most absorbing problem posed by the crisis of the idea. Given a dialectical rather than univocal nature, the character and reliabil-

ity of poetic knowledge was necessarily in question. Schiller's paradigm connected poetic knowledge to the sublime, achieved in the final phase of transforming the pathetic bondage of material nature into intellectual freedom from it. In making epistemological authority rational, this was consistent with revisionist Platonism, which was also the English model. But if the English poets were preoccupied with the imagination as the locus of authority, they too recognized the need to take materialism into account in order to sustain idealism.

Coleridge had perhaps the most profound agon with the problem and lent his considerable intelligence to making Platonic method not only user-friendly to science but in fact the very basis of scientific method. His key to knowledge was the Platonic principle of unity, i.e., of synthesizing ideas. The problem of knowledge was that of discovering law, the master or universal idea. Ideas necessarily preceded observation and experimentation, and therefore the latter were validated only by their methodological reliability in confirming the idea. Whatever problems there are in this subordination of the empirical to the ideal (e.g., whether our idea of electricity does in fact precede our observation of it) are resolved idealistically. They are negotiated by imagination—that highest exemplastic power of mind—the arbiter for transforming empirical observation and experiment into law, i.e., idealist knowledge. Indeed, imagination itself is idealistically constituted. Association is its material basis but is too mechanistic; association is not a direct product of consciousness interacting with the world, it is rather an immaterial “disposition” to associate. That is, association is the idea of associating. If there are slippages in this theory derived from the Platonic “principle of unity,” we need only recall the yearning in modern science for a unified field theory to see how elusive yet appealing that idea is.

The Romantic struggle to contain creeping materialism is also evident in Coleridge's debate with Wordsworth about the law of rusticity. The irony of this dispute is that Wordsworth seems to have supposed he was on safe Platonic ground when he proposed that, because nature was the source of the “beautiful and permanent forms,” the rustic or natural man was the “most philosophical,” i.e., the essence of human nature. But Coleridge perceived that Wordsworth had inadvertently fused a materialistically tainted nature with the forms. So hybrid a conception implied very dubious quality control; Wordsworth's idiosyncratic designation of the “rustic” was an example. So far from being “philosophical” the “rustic” was ignorant, inarticulate, and unimaginative. He may be quaint, but that appeal was purely accidental and not a law of human nature. Such exceptions as there were, Coleridge argued, were either educated as with Swiss mountaineers, or were edited of their quaintness and grossness. Nature, particularly the hybrid Wordsworth ver-

sion, did not in itself produce the master idea of human being. If for Wordsworth "The Idiot Boy" was a natural phenomenon, for Coleridge he was not only an aberration but a violation of epistemological law. Coleridge was trying to hold a line that even Reynolds had abandoned, and not without reason. If idiots were a product of natural law, what was to preclude sadistic "monsters" of the sort Sade was even then inventing? And if, then, art were to imitate nature . . . ? No, monsters could not be natural, and art's business was to illuminate distinctions, not merely reflect deceiving appearances. If Coleridge was perhaps deficient in negative capability, he was also more attentive to philosophical history than his colleagues. And he was acutely aware of the cadence in the dialogue of idealism and materialism. He noted that metaphysics were in recession by the late Renaissance and that Thomas Hobbes and David Hartley signified the materialist boom of the post-Renaissance, especially of the eighteenth century. And he was anxious lest materialism negate the coherence provided by idealism.

In general the English Romantics responded to the crisis of the idea by co-opting materialism as the valet of idealist epistemology. The acme was Shelley's *Defence*. While Coleridge may have been the most laborious with philosophical implications, they were all more or less attuned to the same discourse. This was an approach altogether too pedestrian for William Blake, however. Contemptuous of philosophy, whether idealist or materialist, Blake had no patience with reasoning one's way to truth. Contradictions? Of course. His visionary epistemology married them and presented co-equal partners. "Without contraries is no progression." Innocence needs experience; beauty, the ugly; love, hate; good, evil; reason, energy; soul, the body. The cosmos is in motion and contraries are its impetus. In terms of poetics Blake simply erased trivial distinctions en route to a dialectic of dynamics between energy and reason, the ugly and the beautiful. His sense of nature was coextensive with Creation's sublime energy, featuring a Creator who made both the tiger and the lamb, and pronounced it fitting. For Blake the problem of aberration was no problem; it was subsumed in the contrariety of Creation. Moreover, in the tussle of energy and reason, sexuality was not only unleashed, it had a precociously naturalistic importance. Blake did not write pornography, but it was not outside at least his theoretical ken:

Abstinence sows sand all over
 The ruddy limbs & flaming hair,
 But Desire Gratified
 Plants fruits of life & beauty there.

In a wife I would desire
What in whores is always found,
The lineaments of Gratified desire.

What is it men in women do require?
The lineaments of Gratified Desire.
What is it women in men require?
The lineaments of Gratified Desire.

Then, too, there is "A Divine Image":

Cruelty has a Human Heart
And Jealousy a Human Face,
Terror the Human Form Divine
And Secrecy the Human Dress.

The Human Dress is forged Iron,
The Human Form a fiery Forge,
The Human Face a Furnace sealed,
The Human Heart its hungry Gorge.

This is the verse incarnation of Edmund Burke's "sublime," and it is thoroughly compatible, as is Burke (and others who are of the "Devil's Party" without knowing it), with the Marquis de Sade's diabolical conception of nature.

If Blake had written pornography it is conceivable that it would have had affinities with that of Sade. Blake's obsessions were rather different than Sade's, but both were convinced of a sublime nature that was essentially energy, more tainted with materialism and embracing more aberrations than Reynolds or Coleridge or Wordsworth or even Shelley ever dreamed on. Their respective poetics were consequently in some senses idiosyncratic, but in another sense they are logical, if impatient, products of the idealist/materialist dialectic. As Sade's psychology would have it, he pursued the obscenity/pornography axis and produced the pertinent models. I will return to Sade later, but here it suffices to note that the correspondence between two such different writers suggests that an obscene poetics evolved quite organically out of the philosophical preoccupations of the eighteenth century.

Madame de Staël, whose attention to the relation of social institutions and literature at the turn of the nineteenth century helped establish preliminary terms for a materialist criticism, contended that the courtly

and stylish traditions of French society produced a "genius" for comic literature (e.g., Moliere), while the democratic yeoman traditions of England produced a genius for the "sublime" (e.g., Richardson, Shakespeare). Among other things this meant that English literature was the more likely to transcend the limitations of mere "taste." Ironically, even as she was writing these assessments, her countryman Sade was making a calculated assault on taste and its implications at every conceivable level, surely the single most relentless such assault in the history of Western literature. Sade, too, admired the English sublime, most especially its manifestations in Richardson. Making a somewhat perverse use of his model, Sade confronted French taste with nature's combustible sublimity and did it with a quite literal vengeance.

If Madame de Staël was accurate about pre-revolutionary French literature, the post-revolutionary situation was about to change dramatically. Since Sade, it has been the French rather more than the English who have led the attack on taste, quite likely in reaction to the condition Madame de Staël described. A lineage runs from Sade through Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Zola, Jarry, Apollinaire, Breton, and the Surrealists to Bataille, Pauline Réage, and Genet. All of them have targeted conventional taste as an idol of the mind. All, possibly excepting Zola and Réage, have shared variations on or extensions of Sade's contrapuntal sense of nature's sublimity. All have made significant use of pornography and/or obscenity. It is along this line that obscene poetics have most self-consciously developed. And that development is an index of materialism's corollary swelling of the idealist mainstream.

To be sure, materialism was in continuous dialogue with idealism, but increasingly it gained an equal footing, and its perceptions were catalytic for poetics. Sade's categorically materialist determinism was of course extravagant, but that made his volcanic sense of nature all the more portable. Increasingly, too, the problem of poetics was not to co-opt materialism in the service of idealism but to harmonize the two as equal contraries. Baudelaire, in his simultaneous attraction to heaven and hell, body and soul, was "spiritualist and materialist all in one," as Marcel Raymond observes. The poetic problem was to negotiate the space or whatever it was between the two realms, to discover and articulate *les correspondances*, "the raptures of the spirit and the senses." The goal of poetry was "superior beauty," the signs and symbols of which were the sensuous images of nature but the comprehension of which could only be spiritual. Baudelaire is a slightly more neurotic and slightly less idiosyncratic version of Blake, both of them admirers of Swedenborgian syncretism.

Similarly, for Breton later on the dream was equally a material phenomenon in the Freudian sense and a noumenous revelation of spiritual

being. He simultaneously embraced the magical and irrational power of mind to make (sur)reality and Marxian historical materialism. Surrealist poetics could neither quite realize nor survive the programmatic attempt to harmonize contraries, as the instances of Louis Aragon and Salvador Dali suggest. Aragon forfeited the dream to cast his lot with Marxism. Marxism was never much of a temptation for Dali, who redefined the surrealist dream as a "paranoiac" idealism and exploited it so adroitly that Breton came to call him Avida Dollar.

But even before that the materialist/idealist dialogue had flipped the crisis of the idea into the crisis of reality, signified by the more or less complementary emergences of Einsteinian relativity, Heisenbergian indeterminacy, and the Surrealist "crisis of the object." For the symbolists, materialism had been associated with utility, and, following Baudelaire, they cast the dialectic in terms of pedestrian utility and mystical beauty. Mallarmé's famous "struggle with the ideal," for example, was an attempt to make a "divine transposition of the fact into the ideal." Utility warped the beauty of primordial being, and his impatience with utility, even more than Baudelaire's, matched Blake's. But Mallarmé's preoccupation with the primordial was looking backward, and the modern quest for reality, in the face of the machine age and quantum physics, could not indulge atavistic nostalgia. Later, with Bataille, atavism would shed nostalgia and take on the hard edge of ontological materialism. Meanwhile, at the skeptical turn of the twentieth century, humor and caprice seemed the best antidote for either spiritualism or positivism. For Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire, positive reality hovered somewhere between menace and nuisance. Jarry's "pataphysics," the "neo-scientific" investigation of "the laws that govern exceptions and . . . explain the universe that supplements this one," parody both scientism and metaphysics. Similarly with his Ubu plays, where social reality and its power premises are reduced to absurdity, to say nothing of obscenity. The *ubu* image, in fact, seems literally to evoke the medieval *saccus stercorum* homily, the world as a sack of shit.

Apollinaire's interrogation of reality was directed more toward problems of poetics, both graphic and literary: "The art of the modern painters takes the infinite universe for its ideal, and it is to the fourth dimension alone that we owe this new measure of perfection which enables the artist to endow objects with proportions in conformity with the degree of plasticity he wishes to give them." Having predicated this fourth-dimensional function, Apollinaire appropriately coined the term *surrealiste*. His literary caprice manifested itself both in "concretist" typography and more profoundly in imagistic conception, where he infused symbolist technique with his peculiarly chancy juxtapositions:

A stammerer with two jets of flame on his forehead
 Went by, leading a sickly people for the pride
 Of eating quail and manna every day
 And of having seen the sea open like an eye.

Here reality is given the plasticity of Apollinaire's fourth dimension, the challenge to conventional perception achieved by the chop-logic conjunction of disparate imagistic components. Breton, in formulating a surrealist poetics, specifically adopted humor and caprice as principal weapons for his revolution of reality. To him realism was the villain for its monadist commitment to the illusion of the object. He could embrace materialism because of its dialectic between the object and the mystery of its implications, most conspicuously in the situation of the dream. Surrealism constituted a kind of *Summa Poetica* for the crisis of the idea. Materialism had been assimilated, and idealism's focus shifted from determining fixed reality to exploring the cosmic mystery. In surrealist hands the idealist function had become, via a combination of Freudian dream research and Baudelaire's *correspondances*, a scientific interrogation of reality. It was not only the age of relativity and indeterminacy, but also of the Oedipus complex and archetypes.

If such works as Lautréamont's *Les Chants des Maldoror* and Zola's *Nana* had confirmed aberrance and obscenity on the docket of French poetics, pornography per se had been marking time since Sade. Apollinaire left off speculations on the fourth dimension long enough to reclaim the genre. His complex legacy includes two pornographic novels and considerable bibliographic attention to pornography. His novel, *The Debauched Hospodar*, is especially pertinent here because it revived Sade, along with touches of Sacher-Masoch.

Predictably, in the context of Apollinaire's humor and caprice, the novel is a parody of Sade. Where Sade pursues a pleasure-pain-power nexus relentlessly as a demonstration of nature's sublime indifference and inexplicability, Apollinaire approaches the motif as cavalierly as he did what he called "the game of verse," to say nothing of his life itself. Although the novel's protagonist indulges pretty much the complete catalogue of Sadistic manias, it is as if the reader were watching Sadean narrative sped up to 64 frames per second. The caricature is further heightened by Apollinaire's deletion of anything like Sade's extended philosophic and pseudo-philosophic apologetics. Perhaps anticipating Bataille's later impatience with Sade's apologists, Apollinaire was determined simply to evoke Sadistic images in the face of contemporary community standards. The execution of his protagonist (one of Sade's tongue-in-cheek self-defenses was that vice was always punished in his works, a claim notably contradicted by *Justine*, which he

did not acknowledge publicly) is an instance of how Apollinaire baits several dispositions, including his own, with Sadism:

At the 2,000th blow, Mony gave up the ghost. The sun was radiant. The songs of the Manchurian birds made the spring morning even more gay. The sentence was executed and the last soldiers struck their blows on a mere formless tatter, a sort of pork mincemeat in which one could no longer distinguish anything except for the face which had been carefully respected and whose wide open glassy eyes seemed to contemplate the divine majesty of the world beyond.

Here he parodies, in order, the benign idealization of nature, the body itself, and by implication materialist positivism, the symbolist romance of death, and simultaneously his own post-symbolist project of the fourth dimension. In the process of satirizing competing ideologies, Apollinaire put Sade back on the poetic agenda. It certainly was a reminder to Breton, for whom Sade was to be a surrealist touchstone.

If Louis Aragon was indeed the author of *Irène*, a pornographic novel with touches of both Lautréamont and Sade, it would confirm the Surrealist link in the pornographic chain. But Bataille, whose novel *Story of the Eye* was published in the same year, 1928, will more than suffice to indicate the connection. I will discuss his work in detail in a later chapter, but I want here to note its historical context in the progress of a poetics of obscenity. Bataille was connected to both surrealist and existentialist sensibilities, and brought Breton's "convulsive beauty" together with existentialist ontology. Convulsive beauty was an analogue of orgasm and served the emancipation of sexual desire. Bataille extended its Sadean implications and provided it an erotic metaphysics. In that form he passed the pornographic baton on to Genet and Réage. Bataille's is arguably the single most profound synthesis of sexual theory, in *Eroticism*, and pornographic practice in his fiction. He takes Sade well beyond reductivist obsessions to a highly sophisticated philosophy and poetics. In fact, his seems to be the only comprehensive formulation of a poetics of pornography or, in his vocabulary, eroticism. Still, it is distinguished by its erotic exclusiveness and features a whole ontology built upon a theory of sexuality. Perhaps it is this extravagance that led Bataille's colleague Roland Barthes to observe that Bataille achieves a "subtle subversion" of conventional discourse whereby he "eludes the idealist term by an *unexpected* materialism in which we find vice, devotion, play, impossible eroticism, etc.; thus Bataille does not counter modesty with sexual freedom but . . . with *laughter*." If Bataille's mode is laughter, it is a rather different laughter than that of his predecessor Apollinaire or of his contemporary Henry Miller or of such successors as William Burroughs or the recent writers of *Ladies' Home Erotica*. Bataille's extremity raises a distinction important to the development of obscene poetics.

In general, serious, as distinct from genre, writers incorporate pornography into a diffuse poetics where pornography has the complementary function of configuring the obscene. D. H. Lawrence and Anaïs Nin would be conservative examples, that is, writers who had to resist the idea of pornography in order to subdue it to their other purposes. Henry Miller would be a liberal example, that is one who rather casually and organically fused pornography into his practice. Bataille, of course, is a radical example, that is one for whom pornography is prior even to obscenity and is a philosophical imperative. The French pornographic tradition (e.g., Genet, Réage) inclines to the radical, whereas the British tradition (e.g., Beardsley, Joyce) inclines to the conservative, and the American (e.g., William Faulkner, Philip Roth) to the liberal. The measure is the degree to which pornography per se has philosophical necessity and the degree to which it is organically compatible with a writer's other aesthetic assumptions. Philosophy is somewhat elastic in this context. The American Alix Kates Shulman, in *On the Stroll* for example, is concerned not with philosophy as such but with a feminist sociology. Similarly with several lesbian S/M writers, whose work may have an implicit ontology but who more directly are polemical. Or Pauline Réage's *Story of O*, which explores a female psychology of love. So in this context philosophy is meant to be broad enough to include something as general as the intellectual perspective that informs the work. Obscenity is the key to the distinction. In Bataille's *Story of the Eye* sexuality insists on its obscenity, indicating a radically obscene poetic. Lawrence, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, wants to recuperate sexuality from obscenity, indicating a conservative obscene poetic. These polar positions tend to have theoretical dispositions toward sexuality and/or obscenity. The centrist liberal posture has little or no theoretical inclination. In Henry Miller's work sexuality has a pragmatic quotidian function, in itself neither obscene nor otherwise. It is integrated with other human activities, and its ethical implications are better or worse according to situation. In a liberal spirit, I make no theoretical claim for these distinctions, which of course have exceptions and overlappings, but they are useful in understanding the range and aesthetic dynamics of obscene poetics.

Just as English history has no equivalent of the French Revolution, so the English pornographic line has no equivalent of Sade. Until the twentieth century obscene poetics as such had no particular appeal for British writing. It was characterized by the robust sexual comedy, masculine in the most conventional sense, of Thomas Nashe, the Earl of Rochester, and John Cleland. And this was essentially the sort of bawdy amusement later produced by "the other Victorians." Cleland had made an overture to a female persona, but *Fanny Hill* is more a convenient caricature than a character. It was Samuel Richardson's more imaginative, howevermuch

stereotyped, address to female sensibility that inspired Sade and ironically set the pornographic agenda. In Richardson there is an anxiety about the menace of eroticism that simultaneously evokes and suppresses its potency. And, as *Clarissa* is the homiletic tragedy of unbridled eroticism, *Pamela* is the comedy of eroticism brought to heel, facilitating domestic order by harmonizing aristocratic class structure with upward mobility. Henry Fielding—whose common-sense natural treatment of sexual hypocrisy, e.g. in *Tom Jones*, also influenced Sade—was contemptuous of Richardson's commercialization of virtue, but he was an old-fashioned man, a rational classicist. Richardson, a sentimentalist, anticipated the psychic potency of commerce and put his finger on the extended social dynamics of erotic power that so fascinated Sade.

The future was to be an age of ascendancy for both Britain and capital, and the domestication of erotic power served the purposes of banking, industrialism, and imperialism, the great pillars of British hegemony and stability throughout the nineteenth century. Queen Victoria, the long-lived symbol of potency discreetly skirted, presided over that econo-erotic code for most of the century. Occasionally the erotic component would rear its literary head. It threatened disruption in the passion of Heathcliffe and Catherine in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, for example. But then that novel is a requiem for libido, not a paean. Thackeray's Becky Sharp was more enterprising. She is a shrewd and calculating variation on Richardson's Pamela, who uses sex to co-opt and corrupt both her class superiors and the commercial ethos itself. Thackeray clearly targeted the code but kept Becky's erotic carryings-on off the page.

The French, in the wake of Sade and their revolution, with its contrapuntal reverberations through the nineteenth century, were more disposed to an aggressive obscenity. Where the British, in their social stability, seemed to want either to criticize or aestheticize the world, the French, in the throes of a disruptive environment, seemed more focused on aesthetic revolution, the de- and reconstruction of perception itself. Obscenity had a distinct function, as Baudelaire, Lautréamont, and Zola demonstrated directly, Gautier, Huysmans, and Rimbaud more obliquely. In this regard the French obscene agenda was on the table, while the British was underneath and camouflaged by skirted legs. But even in that demimonde, as Steven Marcus adroitly examined it, when the British got obscene, they merely got smutty. They did not mix their covert amusements with their poetic business, although the implications occasionally emerged in such works as Aubrey Beardsley's *Under the Hill*. Beardsley demonstrated pornography's aesthetic nexus, as we shall see, but then literature was not really Beardsley's art, and the more complex issues of obscene poetics were left dangling until James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence addressed them. That they both denied the aesthetic validity of pornography as they

defined it, even as their practice counterpointed their theory, is less a semantic problem than an index of the modernist engagement with the crisis of reality.

The British modernists were rather more disconcerted by materialism than were the French. Like Pound's Mauberly, trying to peer through a cinematic flicker back to the chiseled sculpture of rhyme, their reaction to the corporate industrial manifestations of materialism was profoundly conservative. Joyce, for example, deliberately invoked an archaic Thomistic aesthetic rooted in classical idealism. While this effectively informed his sense of artistic mission, it did not sit so lightly atop his fictive inclinations. That is, it is one thing to profess Thomistic *claritas* as aesthetic model, rather another to produce Molly Bloom's "smellrump lickshit" as an instance of it. Joyce's poetic formula of pressing forth beauty from the gross earth implies a material cause quite different from the understandings of either Aristotle or Aquinas. His grafting of medieval vocabulary onto materialist implications—e.g., his positivist interest in psychoanalysis and dream phenomena and interpretation, notwithstanding his distrust of Freudianism—was a willful attempt to invest a material perspective with a dignity and truth otherwise debased by modern, especially Irish, culture. Joyce's aesthetic seems to have been at least as much a product of his antagonism to atrophied religiosity and cultural nationalism as it was of a working poetics. His project was similar to that of the Romantics, co-opting materialism in the service of idealism.

Lawrence's approach to the critical problem was less cohesive than Joyce's, largely because it was more modern. His idealist connection was his Jungian sense of the psyche, which he saw in a dialectical relationship with mechanistic industrialism. The human problem was achieving a holistic synthesis of *anima* and *animus* in the face of the culture's insentient machinations. The poetic problem was to represent the dialectical dynamics and their for the most part destructive effects. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, especially, the opposition is between an idealist nature and the machine's implacable progress. Given Lawrence's relentless attentions to the situation of eros and psyche, it was logical that he would address sexuality per se in this context. The poetic problem here was evoking sexuality without succumbing to its mechanistic physicality. Philosophically he solved the problem by equating sex with the sentient potency of an idealist, even Wordsworthian, nature, on the one hand, while making problematic its prospects for survival vis-à-vis cultural determinism, on the other. Imagistically, he solved the problem by garnishing sex and its organs with ceremonial flora and personification so that a sexual spectacle evoked Dionysian cult rather than materialist libido.

Lawrence tended to hedge the philosophical bet with his use of archetypes, but his critical perspective was based on a cultural materialism,

an analysis of cultural dynamics and their mechanization of human spirit. His idealist disposition induced the mythic costume with which he dressed the anatomy of sex. Joyce's representation of sex, conversely, was naturalistic. Molly Bloom is a highly sentient being, but she is also a lusty one who has little patience for metaphysics and is more at home in her knowledge and meditation of eroticism's nitty-gritty. Similarly with Leopold, whose cerebral character is punctuated by a moment of unmediated masturbation. Joyce's aesthetic is more self-consciously idealist than Lawrence's, but both are characteristically modernist in their adaptation to the pressures and appeals of materialism. They are also another index of how obscene poetics were, and are, not some perverse quantum jump, but rather evolved from the general matrix of culture and aesthetics. The dialogue of idealism and materialism continues, of course. It is in Genet's peculiar iconography of crime, to say nothing of Sartre's encomium, *Saint Genet*. It is in the feminist debates about pornography, both those about pornography's feminist validity in general and those about lesbian S/M in particular. Even William Burroughs, whose ontology seems to be at least as ruthlessly materialist as Sade's, postulates the function of control addicts like Dr. Benway to be the eradication of "other-level experience," a concept implying that consciousness left to its own devices might well be prior to the situation of being.

But of course consciousness is never left to its own devices, which brings us back to Vaclav Havel and the poet in the world, a world in dialectical tension. His Pyrrhic declaration of mind's pre-eminence is plaintive because the failure of Communism is after all the failure of its idea in the face of material demands. And he rightly fears that the ideas of democracy and its current corollary, capitalism, are merely playing roles in a masque where the plot is driven by the material circumstances of productivity and distribution. His one great certainty whistles in the dusk of the skeptical trope of our time, indeterminacy. Like Havel, we all continue to live in the crisis of reality. We test our hypotheses and then test the tests. At present, wherever that may be in world-historical terms, we apparently now have the one hypothesis of liberal capitalism. If history is a measure—and if capitalism stays liberal—that should continue to expand the prospects for obscene poetics.

Since at least the time of Aretino pornography has been an international commodity, as has prostitution, at least for a certain stratum. Already the new Soviet liberalism has induced a significantly higher incidence of prostitution than previously. Many of its practitioners acknowledge that their objective is to snag a presumably rich foreigner and become a matrimonial ex-patriot. As the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service testifies, this is not an unusual arrangement in other parts of the world as well. Since the Vietnam War, especially, the practice has been

democratized a bit. Asian brides are advertised to American men at affordable rates. American brides on lease to Asian men are somewhat more pricey, but that market is probably skewed by the vexatious situation of Hong Kong. Whatever the progress of liberalism over the past two hundred years, it has not managed to leave all that far behind the conditions that inspired Richardson or Sade or Zola. And if I have discussed obscene poetics as a product of ontological and aesthetic discourse, I have not meant to obscure their obvious derivation from life as well.

THE PROLIFERATION OF PERVERSITIES

Still, in *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argues that sexuality is not so much a biological, sensual or even emotional fact of life as it is a formulation of discourse. Although it tends to operate behind a facade of data, it is essentially a rhetorical articulation of sexual assumptions serving the purposes of the cultural power matrix that produces it. He contends that sex is so wrapped in the discourse of sexuality that in itself it has no being as such. Rather, "the imaginary element that is 'sex'" has been created as a "deployment" enforcing historical power dynamics. Foucault accordingly deconstructs the liberal perception of power; as with sex, power is not what it seems. It is not simply a matter of hierarchical oppression. It is a complex insinuation of cultural interests, i.e., not one power but several, and those generally competing. With regard to abortion or pornography in the United States, for example, there are competing powers within and between the executive and judicial branches of government, within and among political parties, religions, genders, even feminists. Similarly, he deconstructs the liberal humanist assumption that sexuality has been repressed and that sexual freedom is a liberation from power's oppression. Power being what it is, it is not so simply relieved. And so far from being repressed, sexuality has in fact been created by the supposed oppressor, namely the Church. What is true, however, is "that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation and modification of desire itself." So sexuality is a kind of behavior modification. In the process, Foucault says, it has functioned as an *ars erotica*, and an *ars erotica* is not all that far from an *ars poetica*.

Foucault's historical analysis suggests intriguing parallels between the progress of sexuality and that of obscene poetics. It is not surprising, for example, that the development of sexuality parallels an ascendant

materialism. Sexuality emerged from religious preoccupations with the flesh, and by the seventeenth century had found a form in pastoral instructions for dealing with the subject in the confessional. These established the form of discourse that is still with us: they directed pastoral attentions meticulously to interrogation about not only the act itself, e.g. postures, but also about the stimulus of desire; they were also concerned, of course, with the flesh as the root of sin, which influenced conceptions of the natural and unnatural. By the late eighteenth century sexuality was becoming secularized, and developed a technology along the lines of pedagogy (e.g., child sexuality), medicine (e.g., the physiology of women and “nervous disorders”), and economics (e.g., demography and birth control). In the nineteenth century the medical model was dominant and induced an elaborate pathology of sex, culminating in the psychoanalytic approach. Normalizing sexuality, its *ars erotica* function, was an abiding interest but found especially fertile ground in medicine, where perversions and aberrations were particularly compelling. Normalization has continued into the twentieth century but has been modified to accommodate the more elaborated diversity of the cultural power matrix—e.g. sciences and scientists, feminists, gays and lesbians, racial groups, etc. Thus sexuality in this century has been characterized by a proliferation of “polymorphous perversities,” where the moral connotations of perversity and aberrance have all but disappeared.

Throughout this history the sex-pleasure nexus has been troublesome, primarily but not exclusively in regard to women. Pleasure is an index of the corresponding development of sexuality and materialism. The history of sexuality suggests the gradual materialization of pleasure, which is to say that pleasure gradually gained an existential independence from traditional morality. In the theocratic phase pleasures of the flesh were equated with sin and were essentially a theological violation. They were proscribed by the procreative function. In the scientific phase the moral imperative remained but was masked by a shift of attention from first principles to empirical validation, from the model of God to the model of nature. Nature was still a unified idea (as much for Einstein as it had been for Coleridge) and procreation its sexual standard. But deviation became not so much a sin as a disease, implying diagnostics. The diagnostic framework made the sex-pleasure nexus the subject of proliferating material analyses—pathology, physiology, sociology, political economy. In fact the positivist standard for scientific method and the pathological preoccupations of medicine posed particular problems for an epistemology of pleasure.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing, whose *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1882 was a pioneering study, is an instance. He gathered an impressive volume of case history data on sexual behaviors but put it exclusively in the cate-