

Peter Schwenger

The Flesh Made Word

Much of contemporary literary theory fulfills Nietzsche's desire to combine philology and physiology, the linguistic and the libidinal. Sexual metaphors abound: Barthes' textual *jouissance*, Lacan's phallic signifier, Derrida's hymeneal page. At the same time we are being made increasingly aware of the ways in which sexuality itself is shaped and called into being by language. Foucault, for instance, has launched his study of how language creates the sexuality of each age; and neo-Freudians adopt the same perspective to sexual differences as they do to the artificial differences of a language system. The mandarins of literary theory, however, are only reflecting a phenomenon which may also be noted at a popular level, at the level of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and little books in sealed plastic wrappers. Our sexual lives are turning into literary artifacts, in a process akin to the slow deposition of minerals which ends up by petrifying wood. I would like to explore this phenomenon specifically in the arena of fantasy, since fantasy is the most marked point of interface between the sexual and the literary.

The neo-Freudians, of course, would disagree that there is such a point of interface, for the simple reason that there cannot be two such disparate realms. For them, the sexual *is* the literary: we have vastly underestimated what Lacan has termed "the agency of the letter in the unconscious." Sanction for this extreme view is given by Freud's own questioning of the idea that sexuality is innate rather than acquired. "We have been in the habit of regarding the connection between the sexual drive and the sexual object as more intimate than it in fact is," he says. "It seems probable that the sexual drive is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object's attractions." (Freud, 136) Sexuality acquires an object, and consequently its particular form, through a process of displacement. Infant sexuality, for instance, focuses on the breast because it is already associated with pleasure of a different sort: the satisfaction of hunger.

Thus for the neo-Freudian Jean Laplanche sexuality in the infant is “a movement which deflects the instinct, metaphorizes its aim, displaces and internalizes its object, and concentrates its source on what is ultimately a minimal zone, the erotogenic zone.” (11-12) What is significant here is not just the idea of sexuality as something evolved rather than innate. Implicit in Laplanche’s terminology is the further idea that the mechanisms by which sexuality evolves are in some way literary ones: sexuality “metaphorizes” its aim. Even real objects, insofar as they are sexual, have been charged with a meaning they did not originally possess, in what is essentially an imaginative transference. The sexual object is then, according to Laplanche a “fantasmatic” object; and sexual excitation manifests the presence of what Laplanche refers to as an “alien internal entity” made up of parental fantasies and above all maternal fantasies. The last step remains to be taken by a literary critic, Jane Gallop. “If we understand fantasies as a form of literature,” she comments, “then sexual excitation, for Laplanche, is the alien presence of literature.” And she concludes that in this way “literature inhabits the very heart of sexuality.” (799-803).

When dealing with sexuality so close to its origins, our ability to analyze its nature must obviously remain in the realm of speculation. We may not be convinced by speculations like Laplanche’s, but they remind us that literature may affect sexuality at the most radical level. So we are encouraged to consider anew the ways in which literature intrudes into adult sexuality. If infant sexuality is evolved by displacement, there is no reason to assume that further displacements may not occur later in life, especially when a whole society is saturated in a sexual literature, as ours is.

When considering sexuality at the level of society rather than of the psyche, Foucault becomes our best authority. And there are interesting consonances between his view of sexuality and that of Laplanche. In the introductory volume of his ambitious *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues against the common expectation that such a history would be one of repression, of the restraints imposed by society on a natural force. Sexuality is not nearly so natural as it is supposed, he claims. Indeed, it is precisely those “constraints” that determine the nature of sexuality in any age, give it form and definition. An instance is the confessional, which Foucault views as “a scheme for transforming sex into discourse.”(20) The scheme has been wholly successful: “the obligation to confess is now relayed to us through so many different points, is so deeply engrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of power that restrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that the truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in

place, the violence of a power weighs it down.”(60) But of course this common view of sexuality is itself the product of another kind of constraint, the demand to tell all, so that one’s sexual experiences become first and foremost a collection of words.

A good example of this can be found in Milan Kundera, one of the most perceptive observers of contemporary sexual mores. His Don Juan figure—a sadly diminished one—is a Dr. Havel, who appears in several of the stories in *Laughable Loves*. Addressing a neophyte seducer, Havel stresses that “the pleasures of the body left undiscussed are tiresomely similar And take it from me, my friend, only a word uttered at this most banal of moments is capable of illuminating it in such a way that it becomes unforgettable. They say of me that I’m a collector of women. In reality, I’m far more a collector of words.”(202) This statement could be taken in a number of ways. Perhaps Dr. Havel is a connoisseur of sighs and whispers, of amorous declarations. Far more he is a collector of erotic anecdotes. The act is undertaken for the sake of the anecdote. Nor is the anecdote necessarily something that comes after the fact, after the act. The words may come first: they may be there from the beginning, calling into existence Don Juan’s sexuality.

Historically, Foucault says, there have been two ways of doing this, “two great procedures for producing the truth of sex”—the *ars erotica* and the *scientia sexualis*.(57) Both of these, of course, are literary. Somewhat later he suggests that the line between these is not always clearly drawn. The science of sex may *be* an *ars erotica*. This seems to be true of much sexual literature of our own day—typified, for instance, by the Hite reports. But there is yet more of an overlap. If the science of sex spills over into the *ars erotica*, the *ars erotica* spills over into the erotic pure and simple, and into the domain of pornographic literature. This is the case with Nancy Friday’s *Men in Love*, a study of men’s sexual fantasies. Its scientific framework is minimal, as are Friday’s perceptions. For instance; convinced that men’s fantasies represent, as the book’s subtitle puts it, “The Triumph of Love over Rage” Friday thinks of masochism as simply “the most gallant act of all.”(15) Her book is in fact, if not in intent, a collection of homemade pornography, conveniently arranged by sexual specialities (there is, of course, a long tradition of pornographic literature put forward under the guise of scientific investigation). In Friday’s collection we can begin to assess the effect of fantasy on adult sexuality—an effect which is literary, if Gallop is correct in viewing fantasy as a literary residue in the psyche.

Let us consider fantasy first through the words of Jacques Lacan, who reminds us that “there is something mysterious about the fantasy;

indeed it's ambiguous and paradoxical. It is on the one hand the end-term of desire, and on the other hand, if we approach it from one of its aspects, it's actually located in the conscious: ambiguous indeed." ("Desire and Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," 14) The ambiguity here seems to arise from fantasy's existence on the interface of the conscious and the unconscious. The commonly held view is that fantasy gives conscious expression to unconscious desires and thus represents a movement towards greater self-knowledge. I would suggest, however, that we consider fantasy as if this movement were reversed, as if the conscious verbal formulations of fantasy could affect their makers in ways of which they are unaware. After all, for Lacan as well as Freud, "the object is the object of desire only by virtue of being the end-term of the fantasy." (15)

Always preceding the sexual act (perhaps in some cases precluding it) is a conventional language, whether the conventions are those of the locker room, contemporary film or nineteenth-century erotic literature. If this language is tailored to fit its user, it is nevertheless a ready-made garment. There are consequently no wholly individual fantasies in *Men in Love*. The best that any man can do is a kind of *bricolage*, an arranging of standard elements into a sequence that will suit his own needs. Within that sequence, an illusion of novelty is conveyed by reshaping standard elements; and the number of permutations and combinations is limited. To the jaded reader, after a while, it may no longer make that much difference if one's sexual partner accommodates a carrot, as in Henry Miller, or a zucchini, as in Philip Roth. Perhaps not even a Great Dane or a hunchback will do the trick. The outrages of pornography have become conventions; desire, it seems, has been codified.

Arguing against this view is Susan Sontag, in her essay on "The Pornographic Imagination." In pornography, she claims, the manifestation of an individual sensibility would interfere with its single-minded task of sexual arousal; there would be less room for reader response. If pornography is single-minded, however, desire is not. Any episode of desire is the sum of numerous factors which lie outside the scope of pornography: a certain slant of light; an individual, unconscious inflection of the voice; a series of quotidian acts which by some surprising logic evoke the sexual. The logic is of course literary: these factors too are metaphors, but subtler ones, and unique. The shapes and shadings of desire, then, are inexhaustible: no experience need ever be "tiresomely similar" to another, unless the metaphor-making mind tires of its own activity.

For this notion of desire presupposes that one is willing to make metaphors, rather than be made by them. In Friday's book this is never

the case. Men, and the women they make love to, are wholly contained in language. The saddest fantasies in Friday's collection are those which men recite to themselves and their partners while making love. Their climax, it seems, is in conformity with the shape of the story rather than with the shape of their own lovemaking. Indeed, it can hardly be said that their own lovemaking exists; it has been almost entirely displaced by words. It seems almost as if grammar has turned the tables and is now parsing people: resolving, for these men, the philosophical dilemma of subject and object, delineating the modifiers of their circumstances, the faulty agreement of their relationships, and their proudly dangling participles.

What emerges from such a language is not an object that is "the end-term of the fantasy." Rather the fantasy *is* the end-term, is itself the object aspired to. Objects (including people) may indeed be pursued and manipulated by the fantasist, but they are only the means to his end, which is the fantasy he began with. To "live out" his fantasy is often the expressed hope of the fantasist, but one cannot help wondering what this will accomplish. Probably it will do little more than to facilitate a shift from anticipatory fantasy to retrospective anecdote. There are a few cases in *Men in Love* in which we may be dealing with fact rather than fantasy: there is no real difference in their mode. Friday mentions several times her difficulty in deciding whether a contribution sent to her was fantasy or fact, a difficulty which is occasionally shared by her informants ("I don't know whether this is a true memory or a fantasy that my head has made up"). Freud realized as early as 1897 that the unconscious makes no distinction between reality and emotionally charged fiction. Consequently a "true" (that is, lived) sexual act is unlikely to be different in its psychological *essence* from the fantasy that was its origin. In *degree*, it is more than likely to fall short.

Friday's contributors represent an extreme of the displacement process, one which can be found as well in the advisory columns of publications like *Forum* and *Penthouse*. They are often made up not of requests for technical information but of long and detailed accounts of improbable sexual adventures in the fantasy mode. These are concluded by appealing to usefulness ("This may be of interest to your readers if they ever find themselves in a similar situation.") or else by attempting a clever wrap-up line ("I never thought I'd find such a hot number in the frozen foods section!"). The chances are, admittedly, that some of these letters are written by the editors. But when readers do write letters, or construct their private fantasies, these will be modelled on what they have already been exposed to: one of Kundera's characters has the feeling that "the whole of my polygamous life is a

consequence of nothing but my imitation of other men." (112) Moreover, such unbelievable anecdotes have the effect of undermining a man's capacity for belief in his own sexual perceptions, as Susan Griffin suggests was the case with the entire German populace: "If Hitler could manipulate language so that *they could not believe their ears*, they would cease to trust their own sensual knowledge and therefore their own ability to distinguish truth from lie." (194) This is what has happened to the men who write to such advisory columns, and who read them. They seek not advice but endorsement; for the ultimate realization of their experiences is through words. Don Juan, after all, does not merely collect anecdotes, he creates them. And this is the only sense in which such a person's sexuality is creative. He lives on Fantasy Island, cut off from genuine negotiation with otherness—of people, of things, of the multitudinous shapes of experience.

It may be argued that fantasy is a mode of the imagination, and as such must be respected as a force for personal change. Through the "joys of fantasy" we are assured that we will be more uninhibited, more in touch with our real selves. This may be true insofar as changes in our selves often begin in the mind, and are acted out at first only in the theatrical sense of "acting"—until "as if" turns into "is". However, fantasy is more often not the tool of change, but the means to avoid change. Rather than opening up the self to new possibilities, fantasy usually expresses the self in its present state. *All* the actors in a sexual fantasy are aspects of the fantasist's self; and they enact tensions which are, properly speaking, not erotic but pornographic.

The distinction is commonly blurred, but it is crucial for the argument here. In *Pornography and Silence* Susan Griffin has shown that most pornography is based on the sado-masochistic dilemma. Pornography's predominant image, of course, is that of woman being humiliated, in ways that range from merely psychological dominance through bondage, beating, and torture, to the "snuff." But the woman in such images, psychology tells us, is only a projection of certain aspects of the sado-masochist's mind. She represents that which is emotional, open, vulnerable, and mortal; she represents eroticism itself insofar as it partakes of those qualities. The pornographic mind is attracted to what is after all a vital part of itself. At the same time it fears this attraction, as it fears any loss of control. Consequently we have those images in which the erotic is manifested and at the same time disciplined and punished, for no other crime than its nature. When those images are reversed—as in, say, Ilse the She-Wolf of the S.S.—it is only the other side of exactly the same coin. Pornography is thus based on a psychological paradox, but can do nothing to resolve it. The pornographic fantasy, because of the terms in which it finds

expression, cannot encourage genuine change: the only change is acceleration and intensification of the fantasy itself.

The *cul-de-sac* of pornographic fantasy has recently been rendered in a novel by Robert Coover which both arises out of the pornographic tradition and turns upon it. *Spanking the Maid* (1982) is a metaphor of man's relationship to God; and it may have something to say, too, about the writer as handmaiden to the (male) muse. But aside from its rich metaphorical resonances, Coover's novel tells us much about the pornographic mind; the vehicle is illuminated as much as the tenor. Just one incident takes place over and over again, with variations: the maid enters the master's room to clean it, commits a blunder, and is disciplined for it. Maid and master alike hope every time that this time will be different, but the differences are only those of detail. Locked together in their repetitive drama, both cannot help wondering about the meaning of such terms as "change" and "condition"; and above all they wonder about "genesis." Where did it all begin? Two answers are suggested, though neither is a final one.

When making the bed, the maid almost always finds in it, or under it, some object: "Things that oughtn't to be there, like old razor blades, broken bottles, banana skins, bloody pessaries, crumbs and ants, leather thongs, mirrors, empty books, old toys, dark stains." (28) This detritus of dream is the visible counterpart of the master's groping attempts, each day, to recall the dream from which he has just awakened: "something about utility, or futility, and a teacher he once had who, when he whipped his students, called it his 'civil service.'" (11) Not only does the content of the dreams echo waking actions, or *vice versa*; typically, the dreams are constructed by the rules of verbal play. Dreams, like puns, may express in a single image contradictory meanings. The puns and paradoxes of dream here reflect the fundamental bind of the pornographer, one of whose selves is disciplining eroticism out of the other—which paradoxically has an erotic effect. Caught in this bind, there can be for the pornographer no resolution, no change, no progression—only the obsessive repetition of a pattern with its source in his own unconscious.

The other source of pornographic fantasy is pornography itself, which displaces sexuality with its own artifact. The master has read all the manuals, as he calls them, and he knows just what ought to be done and how. While wielding the rod, he recites: " 'Sometimes the operation is begun a little above the garter—' whishSNAP!, 'and ascending the pearly inverted cones—' hissWHACK! 'is carried by degrees to the dimpled promontories—' THWOCK! '—which are vulgarly called the buttocks!' " At the end of a session, the maid's backside "is well cut, he knows, and so aglow one might cook little birds over it or roast

chestnuts, as the manuals suggest.” (86,71) Of course the language of the “manuals” is parodic, but it nevertheless prompts action, as rendered in the sound effects. And action’s relation to language may itself be a species of parody—an inescapable one at that: “Is not parody,” Kundera speculates, “the eternal lot of man?” (*Life is Elsewhere*, 281)

Man models himself on other and incomplete models. Nature itself eludes him, frightens him even. In *Spanking the Maid*, the master never ventures into the garden outside his bedroom. Its humming bees and singing birds are “strangely alien to him, sounds of natural confusion and disorder from a world without precept or invention.” (22) What he wants, in the words of the subtitle to *Pornography and Silence*, is “culture’s revenge against nature.” His is the rage for order, for perfect control. Because of the paradoxical nature of his situation, however, he can only accelerate into absurdity. Coover renders both obsession and absurdity by a single technique (“paradox too has its techniques,” says a figure in the master’s dream). The same words and phrases are used again and again, but reshuffled and displaced into new contexts. Increasingly surreal effects are thus obtained without ever moving outside the economy of obsession.

The pornographic mind, then, is a slave to its own desire for mastery; but it does win a kind of pyrrhic victory over nature. Reality is displaced—in fact determined—by fantasy. And, as I have been saying all along, fantasy’s power is literary; it is the power, in Jacques Lacan’s terms, of the signifier: “The signifier has an active function in determining certain effects in which the signifiable appears as submitting to its mark, by becoming through that passion the signified.” (“The Signification of the Phallus,” 284) The very vocabulary here (“submitting,” “mark,” “passion”) has sadistic overtones: this is *The Story of O* transposed into literary theory.

But current literary theory may also be seen as a transposition of sadism in another way: now it is words we tear at, rather than flesh. Increasingly aware of our bondage to language, we strip its layers away without ever arriving at fulfillment or rest. The questions being asked by critics are those of Coover’s maid: they are about “condition,” “change” and “genesis.” At the same time contemporary literature begins consciously to mirror the concerns of the critics—especially in the area of sexuality. Coover’s novel is one example, in which the pornographic artifice is both constructed and deconstructed. Another is Kundera’s most recent novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Towards the end of that novel Tomas, a compulsive Don Juan who is deeply in love with his wife, thinks about sex in terms reminiscent of Laplanche’s theories of sexuality as metaphor:

He thought: In the clockwork of the head, two cogwheels turn opposite each other. On the one, images; on the other, the body's reactions. The cog carrying the image of a naked woman meshes with the corresponding erection—command cog. But when, for one reason or another, the wheels go out of phase and the excitement cog meshes with a cog bearing the image of a swallow in flight, the penis rises at the sight of a swallow He was suddenly certain that he had just discovered the solution to all riddles, the key to all mysteries, a new utopia, a paradise: a world where man is excited by seeing a swallow and Tomas can love Teresa without being disturbed by the aggressive stupidity of sex. (236-237)

Tomas talks as if sexuality were a troublesome metaphor which could somehow, he hopes, be rewritten in the brain, leaving him free to love his wife as he "naturally" would. He is unaware, however, that his love for Teresa is also a product of metaphor. When she impulsively follows him to Prague bearing a heavy suitcase with her whole life packed into it, he is reminded of the common mythological image of the abandoned child, Oedipus or Moses. This is, of course, a metaphor; and, the narrator observes, "Tomas did not realize at the time that metaphors are dangerous. Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love." (22) For each of the main characters, then, a metaphor is the source of their love and defines its nature; the dissonances between those metaphors are at the bottom of the lover's difficulties. The most interesting metaphor is Sabina's, because she is the character who above all wants "lightness": pure sexuality and freedom from the heaviness of love. Sabina's metaphor is bowler hat.

It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning, and all the meanings flowed through the bowler hat like water through a riverbed . . . the bowler hat was a bed through which each time Sabina saw another river flow, another *semantic river*: each time the same object would give rise to a new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like a parade of echoes) together with the new one. (88)

So we first encounter the bowler as a prop in Sabina's erotic games with Tomas. As they stand before the mirror where Tomas habitually orders her to "Strip!" he puts the bowler on her head. Her recognition that this is a pornographic humiliation only excites Sabina to a greater sexual frenzy. Years later, when she meets Tomas in a hotel room she wears the hat again.

But then something she had not reckoned with happened: the hat, no longer jaunty or sexy, turned into a monument to time past. They were both touched. They made love as they never had before. This was no occasion for obscene games. (87-88)