The New Criterion

Features March 1990

In the footsteps of Sade

by *Roger Kimball*

On Sexual Personae by Camille Paglia.

Is there a pessimism of strength? An intellectual predilection for the hard, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence, prompted by well-being, by overflowing, by the fullness *of existence?*
—Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

On the dust jacket of Sexual Personae, which is modestly subtitled "Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson," the well-known literary critic Harold Bloom informs readers that the book they are holding will be "an enormous sensation." Even Professor Bloom must occasionally be right, and it takes only a brief perusal of this long and ambitious first book by his former student to convince one that his prediction will be fulfilled. (Whether he is also correct that the book "compels us to rethink the question of the literary representation of human sexuality" is another question.)

Sexual Personae will be a sensation partly because of its message and subject matter. It is anti-feminist and anti-liberal—things sure to raise hackles—but also disturbingly anti-humanistic and obsessed with sexual exotica. Those acquainted with Professor Bloom's Freudian-inspired theory of literary influence will see much evidence of *his* literary influence in this book; one might, in fact, be tempted to see *Sexual Personae* as an unusually extended illustration of his principle that the most profound reading is creative misreading.

Unlike Professor Bloom, however, Camille Paglia, who is currently an associate professor of the humanities at Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts, is a gifted stylist. She writes sharp, epigrammatic prose—what she would no doubt appreciate being told is *masculine* prose. In large doses, *Sexual Personae*—and Professor Paglia has given us a very large dose here—betrays a self-conscious straining for effect that borders on the melodramatic. This is not surprising, perhaps, in light of Professor Paglia's confession in her preface that her method is "a form of sensationalism." Nonetheless, for a scholarly work, the book possesses unusual literary flair, and this, too, will help make it a sensation.

Professor Paglia's thesis is that man's cultural self-expression—taking the term broadly to embrace everything from ritual and religion to art, fashion, and Hollywood movies—has been a vast panoply of shifting sexual personae that are constructed to deal with the fearsome realities of human existence. She pursues this idea through twenty-four chapters and some seven hundred closely-printed pages. A long introductory manifesto entitled "Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art" sets forth Professor Paglia's grim theory of sexuality and includes *obiter dicta* about politics, capitalism, the teaching of literature, pop culture, and other subjects. Her saga proper begins with a discussion of the Venus of Willendorf, a stone cult image ca. 30,000 b.c. (the bust of the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti), and other ancient artifacts. "Hierarchy and eroticism fused in Egypt," we are told, "making a pagan unity the west has never thrown off." *Sexual Personae* follows the thread of this alleged unity through a smorgasbord of Western cultural highlights, concluding with chapters on nineteenth-century American literature.

Along the way, we are invited to contemplate sexual and aggressive obsessions in an astonishing range of likely and unlikely figures including Spenser and Shakespeare, Botticelli and Donatello, Rousseau and the Marquis de Sade, Blake, Shelley, Keats, and Byron, Baudelaire, Huysmans, Swinburne, Pater, and Oscar Wilde. There are some surprising conclusions. For example, Professor Paglia informs us that "The Faerie Queene is the most extended and extensive meditation on sex in the history of poetry." She confides that the *Mona Lisa*, "the premiere sexual persona of western art," is the image of a "dominatrix." And she discovers that "literature's most influential male heroine [sic] is the protagonist of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*." Then there is William Blake's poem *The Mental Traveller*, which turns out to be "a Sadean critique of love and sex." Nor has Blake's influence waned, for his poem "has renewed life in one of rock's major lyrics, a song it surely influenced, the Rolling Stones' 'Jumpin' Jack Flash.'" The book ends with a chapter entitled "Amherst's Madame de Sade: Emily Dickinson," in which we are told that "the brutality of this belle of Amherst would stop a truck."

That takes care of the first volume of *Sexual Personae*. A promised second volume "will show how movies, television, sports, and rock music embody all the pagan themes of classical antiquity."

Despite the diversity of topics it treats, there is something unsettlingly monomaniacal about this long book. Professor Paglia's basic presupposition is the familiar idea that there exists an indissoluble opposition between nature and culture. Following Nietzsche, she tends to describe this as an opposition between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. The Dionysian—which, borrowing a term from the Edwardian classicist Jane Harrison, she also calls the chthonic—is that anonymous, primevally generative impulse out of which life endlessly arises and back into which it ineluctably sinks; the Apollonian is the principle of order, individuation, and reason that is responsible for all art, culture, and science.

Professor Paglia identifies the Dionysian with reality, the Apollonian with the compensating artifice, illusion, and ingenuity that enable humanity to thrive in the midst of a hostile or at least indifferent nature. She also identifies the Dionysian as the province of woman, the Apollonian as

the province of man. And it is this opposition that gives rise to the drama she proposes to chronicle. As the stage upon which humanity plays out its existence, human sexuality has the unhappy task of nudging these eternally warring principles into some sort of unity.

I say "unhappy" because for Professor Paglia, eroticism is fraught with anxiety, aggression, violence, and other distasteful things.

I say "unhappy" because for Professor Paglia, eroticism is fraught with anxiety, aggression, violence, and other distasteful things. There is not much talk of joy or affection or respect in this book about the representation of sexuality; love is dismissed as a "perverse fascination," necessary to continue the species, perhaps, but ultimately an illusion. Not only does Professor Paglia believe, with Freud and others, that "the element of free will in sex and emotion is slight," she also believes that "a perfectly humane eroticism may be impossible." Most of us might settle for a reasonably humane eroticism. But for Professor Paglia, the dark side of sexuality (she ignores any other) means that "somewhere in every family romance is hostility and aggression, the homicidal wishes of the unconscious."

Moreover, it is precisely this murky realm of eroticism that gives birth to distinctively human personalities, the "personae" that form the subject of this book. Sexual personae find their most imaginative expression in art and literature, but Professor Paglia does not seem to believe that they are mere literary constructs. "I reaffirm and celebrate woman's ancient mystery and glamour. I see the mother as an overwhelming force who condemns men to lifelong sexual anxiety, from which they escape through rationalism and physical achievement."

Professor Paglia is eager to acquaint us with the (largely unpleasant) "facts about chthonian nature." "This book shows," she writes,

> how much in culture goes against our best wishes. Integration of man's body and mind is a profound problem that is not about to be solved by recreational sex or an expansion of women's civil rights. Incarnation, the limitation of mind by matter, is an outrage to imagination. Equally outrageous is gender, which we have not chosen but which nature has imposed upon us. Our physicality is torment . . . . What the west represses in its view of nature is the chthonian . . . the blind grinding of subterranean force, the long slow suck, the murk and ooze. It is the dehumanizing brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed, the squalor and rot we must block from consciousness to retain our Apollonian integrity as persons.

Professor Paglia does not mention Schopenhauer, but her book is saturated with the gloomy, pessimistic view of humanity and nature that characterizes Schopenhauer's philosophy. Yet—again in a way that recalls Schopenhauer's peculiar zeal for pessimism—even as she enthusiastically details the multitudinous ways we are slaves to the uncaring chthonic forces in nature and (especially) in our own nature, Professor Paglia also encourages us to pledge our allegiance to Apollonian order against Dionysian chaos. In this sense, at least, she offers her book as a defense of Western culture against those who would criticize it as patriarchal, rationalistic,

domineering, arrogant, and self-centered. Yes, she would reply, Western culture is all those things and more—and that is precisely why it is so valuable. “Most western culture is a distortion of reality,” she readily admits. “But reality should be distorted.”

According to Professor Paglia, women especially should be grateful for the achievements of the West, patriarchy and all. After all, she asks, which system, east or west, has benefited women more? “Western science and industry have freed women from drudgery and danger. Machines do housework. The pill neutralizes fertility. Giving birth is no longer fatal. And the Apollonian line of western rationality has produced the modern aggressive woman who can think like a man and write obnoxious books.”

In some respects, Professor Paglia is deeply at odds with the ethos of the academic establishment.

In some respects, Professor Paglia is deeply at odds with the ethos of the academic establishment. Her insistence on the biological basis of differences between the sexes will be counted a rank heresy at a time when the proposition that gender is a “social construction” is touted as gospel in humanities departments from Yale to Stanford. Then, too, the strong anti-feminist streak in her position is certain to spark enormous hostility from an academic establishment almost completely in thrall to feminist ideology. “The very language and logic modern woman uses to assail patriarchal culture were the invention of men,” Professor Paglia writes early on in her first chapter—adding for good measure the observation that “all the genres of philosophy, science, high art, athletics, and politics were invented by men.”

As a matter of historical record, this is probably true; but admitting it is not the sort of thing calculated to win friends in the academy. Professor Paglia reverts to this impolite idea again and again. Without the male metaphors of concentration and projection, she argues, “woman would long ago have absorbed all creation into herself. There would be no culture, no system, no pyramiding of one hierarchy upon another.” More bluntly still: “If civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts.” This alone is probably grounds for the revocation of tenure.

In a deeper sense, though, Sexual Personae appears as the very model of the contemporary academic literary study. Professor Paglia complains that “the amorality, aggression, sadism, voyeurism, and pornography in great art have been ignored or glossed over by most academic critics.” But the truth is that the humanities departments of our colleges and universities are obsessed with questions of gender, sex, and power today. If one adds the trusty categories of class and race, it seems that little else is being taught or written about in literature departments. The identification of sex and power (“sex *is* power,” Professor Paglia assures us early on in her book) as well as a fascination with the kinkier and more violent domains of sexuality form the chief topic of interest for many academic courses and publications. “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” “Desublimating the Male Sublime: Auto-erotics, Anal Erotics, and Corporeal Violence in Melville and William Burroughs”: these were among the delightful presentations one could have attended

at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in December of 1989. They are no more extreme than much of what appears in *Sexual Personae*.

In the end, we see that Professor Paglia's book belongs to that large and popular genre that specializes in a debunking cynicism. She is at her best when pointing out the limitations of the shallow rationalism that underlies much modern liberalism and progressive social thought. Indeed, she waxes eloquent on the subject. "Modern liberalism suffers unresolved contradictions," she argues.

> It exalts individualism and freedom and, on its radical wing, condemns social orders as oppressive. On the other hand, it expects government to provide materially for all, a feat manageable only by an expansion of authority and a swollen bureaucracy. In other words, liberalism defines government as tyrant father but demands it behave as nurturant mother. Feminism has inherited these contradictions. It sees every hierarchy as repressive, a social fiction; every negative about woman is a male lie designed to keep her in her place. . . .
>
> Sexual freedom, sexual liberation. A modern delusion. We are hierarchical animals. Sweep one hierarchy away, and another will take its place, perhaps less palatable that the first. There are hierarchies in nature and alternative hierarchies in society. In nature, brute force is the law, a survival of the fittest. In society, there are protections for the weak. Society is our frail barrier against nature. When the prestige of state and religion is low, men are free, but they find new ways to enslave themselves, through drugs or depression. My theory is that whenever sexual freedom is sought or achieved, sadomasochism will not be far behind. Romanticism always turns into decadence. Nature is a hard taskmaster. It is the hammer and the anvil, crushing individuality.

But while Professor Paglia is expert at pointing out the contradictions of a too-cheery liberalism, she neglects the contradictions that threaten her own argument. She declares that "civilized life requires a state of illusion." It is clear, however, that she does not regard all illusions as equal. She rails against against the "fog of hopeful sentiment" that she identifies with liberalism, but seems quite willing to accept other, perhaps less attractive, sorts of fog. She cautions us against the shallowness of modern humanism with its optimistic, rose-tinted view of sex, nature, and human relations, but she doesn't mind presenting us with a view that is at least as distorted so long as it is tinted a deeper shade of red.

Sexual Personae is also riddled with overstatements, provocations, and even, alas, absurdities.

Sexual Personae is also riddled with overstatements, provocations, and even, alas, absurdities. To employ a term that Professor Paglia borrows from her mentor Harold Bloom and greatly favors, her argument has a tendency to *swerve*—to skid suddenly from the measured to the outrageous, from the reasonable and well supported to the utterly fantastic. On page thirteen, for example, we read that "eroticism *is* mystique; that is, the aura of emotion and imagination around sex." Well, all right. But then a bit further down the page we are told that "physical and spiritual castration is the danger every man runs in intercourse with a woman. Love is the spell by which he puts his sexual

fear to sleep. Woman's latent vampirism is not a social aberration but a development of her maternal function, for which nature has equipped her with tiresome thoroughness." Castration! Sexual fear? Vampirism? Not even Professor Paglia's erudition and taut, aphoristic style cannot salvage this (if one may put it so) flaccid Freudian gambit.

It must also be pointed out that behind Professor Paglia's understanding of the opposition between the Apollonian and Dionysian, male and female, thought and body, there is a positively medieval horror of the flesh and organic processes. "We cannot escape our life in these fascist bodies," she declares in one typical passage. The facts of female biology and metabolism seem especially repugnant to her. "Woman's body is a sea acted upon by the month's lunar wave-motion. Sluggish and dormant, her fatty tissues are gorged with water, then suddenly cleansed at hormonal high tide. Edema is our mammalian relapse into the vegetable. . . . Every month for women is a new defeat of the will." In short, "the mature female body [is] ... a prisoner of gender," she concludes, lamenting especially "edema, water retention, that female curse." One wonders whether the word *edema* has ever occurred more frequently outside the annals of pathology.

Professor Paglia's animus toward nature leads us to what is undoubtedly the most disturbing aspect of *Sexual Personae*: a deep anti-humanism that borders on nihilism. This shows itself most blatantly in Professor Paglia's celebration of the writings of the Marquis de Sade and the link she draws between Sade's teachings and homosexuality. If nature everywhere threatens to enthrall humanity, she reasons, then let humanity defy nature. And who has more thoroughly defied nature than the Marquis de Sade? "Sade detests procreative women," she notes with approval, adding elsewhere that

> I agree with Sade that we have the right to thwart nature's procreative compulsions, through sodomy or abortion. Male homosexuality may be the most valorous of attempts to evade the femme fatal and to defeat nature. By turning away from the Medusan mother, whether in honor or detestation, the male homosexual is one of the great forgers of absolutist western identity.

In fact, Professor Paglia wants to have it both ways. "Happy are those periods when marriage and religion are strong," she writes. "System and order shelter us against sex and nature." But if this is true—and I am convinced that it is true—then those periods under the sway of the Marquis de Sade are unhappy indeed, for Sade provides not for an inoculation against the cruelties of sex and nature but for their exploitation and abasement.

Professor Paglia claims that Sade is "the most unread major writer in western literature." But I am afraid this is untrue on both counts. For the Marquis de Sade is neither unread nor is he a major writer. Already in 1952, in an essay titled "The Vogue of the Marquis de Sade," Edmund Wilson noted that interest in Sade had been "steadily increasing in Europe ever since 1909" to the point where "the subject is in danger of becoming a bore." Nowadays, Sade is all over the academy. You'll find that his writings figure prominently in many college literature courses, academic

conferences, and trendy scholarly journals. The influential quarterly *October*, for example, might well be mistaken for Sade's publicity organ, so often and so flatteringly do references to his ideas appear in its pages. And in the new history of French literature that was published by Harvard University Press last year, more pages are devoted to Sade than to Balzac. No, we unfortunately do not have to worry about Sade being an unduly neglected figure.

I say "unfortunately" because the idea that Sade is "a great writer and philosopher," as Professor Paglia assures us, that "no education in the western tradition is complete without Sade," is preposterous. Even allowing for her deliberate "sensationalism," I am surprised that so accomplished a writer as she could claim to find anything to admire in his literary style. If one is able to get beyond the graphically rebarbative content of Sade's books—admittedly a large task—one discovers that he is an uncommonly pedestrian and repetitious writer; he depends almost entirely on shocking his readers to hold their interest. And his "philosophy" is hardly more than a virulent atheism combined with a pathological hatred of nature and contempt for humanity. "What is man?" Sade asks. "What difference is there between him and other plants, between him and all the other animals? None, obviously." At bottom, the philosophy of the Marquis de Sade bespeaks a destructive infantile rage at humanity's ultimate impotence and mortality. As Wilson noted, "he tends only toward annihilation." Why should we look to him for instruction?"To be sexually aroused by something eccentric, insignificant, or disgusting is a victory of imagination," Professor Paglia writes. It is not clear whether she is asserting this as a truth in its own right or merely describing Sade's philosophy. "Remember," she cautions, "these are ideas, not acts." But aren't they? Were they not acts for the grisly Marquis himself? What we should really remember is that Sade spent nearly thirty of his seventy-four years incarcerated, first in prison then in an asylum, precisely for acting out some of the murderous fantasies that are rehearsed in such clinical detail in his books. There is a reason that the Marquis de Sade has given his name to an entire genre of sexual perversion.

It is clear that Professor Paglia wants to see herself as a kind of Nietzschean rebel, bravely facing up to difficult truths about "the hard, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence." But in the end, *Sexual Personae* does not face up to evil and the chthonic powers of life so much as it flirts with them. And that, as Professor Paglia's researches will surely have told her, is a dangerous game.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from* The New Criterion *at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 8 Number 7 , on page 7

https://newcriterion.com/issues/1990/3/in-the-footsteps-of-sade