

Sex and Modern Fiction¹

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by Bernard Bergonzi

The novel has always told us about the world, not by offering verifiable case-histories, or presenting statistical analyses of behaviour, but by showing us the typical in the individual, the general in the specific. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* might be narrowly and unsympathetically described as an account of adultery among a small restricted segment of upper-class Russian society about a hundred years ago. As crude description this is not incorrect; yet it conveys nothing whatever of the actual quality of the book. Although remote from us in time and setting, *Anna Karenina* is still a great and moving account of the human condition, is still valid for us here and now. Anna is both a particular woman in a particular society and a representative figure whose tragedy one can immediately apprehend and respond to. By living through her situation one understands one's own more fully. This extension of human sympathy gives a particular importance to literary experience; in some fine words of C. S. Lewis, 'it heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality'. It also offends the tidy-minded by emphasizing the essential messiness and complexity of the human condition. It not only shows us, but lets us feel with all our senses, the dilemmas and tensions of a nature that is both fallen and created by God, which is in Pope's words:

Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole Judge of truth, in endless error hurled;
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

Moralists have often regarded literature as subversive for seeming to make out a case for sexual passion, for being on the side of Paola and Francesca, or Eloise and Abelard, or Anthony and Cleopatra, or Phèdre. Even if, as Christians, we feel the triumph of passion as a tragic error in the perspective of ultimate and transcendent truth, there is still a human grandeur in its triumph, and the sense of an unresolvable paradox and mystery. Or compare the categorical neatness in the account of 'adultery' in a traditional text-book of moral theology with the richness of Tolstoy's treatment of Anna, where nothing is condoned—for Tolstoy remained a strict moralist—but where everything is illuminated.

Anna Karenina is, by common consent, one of the supremely great novels in European literature, and is, more particularly, a great example of fictional realism. It embodies the 'concrete universal' by showing us what often happens, or a least what one can easily imagine happening. When we look forward into the twentieth

¹A revised version of a talk given to a conference on human sexuality at the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, May 1971.

century a number of new factors have to be considered. On the one hand the tradition of realism is developed towards an obsessive naturalism, which tries to include *all* aspects of human life within the novel, with a particular unflinching stress on those features which traditionally-minded readers might find sordid, squalid or frankly repulsive. On the other hand there has been a growing readiness to show the inner life of fictional characters, and to push the novel itself beyond realism towards the modes of myth, fantasy, and allegory. In such works the treatment of sexuality may seem bizarre and distorted and 'unnatural', but it may also express the deeper desires and dilemmas of many people in society. The influence of Freud has been crucial, and some critics have located the essence of fictional narrative in a sustained flow of fantasy with immediate affinities with dreams and, perhaps, a comparable occult significance. One of the great modern novels, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, can be seen as representative. Joyce shows us, with scrupulous realism, Leopold Bloom engaging in activities which, however common, had seldom been depicted before in fiction, like going to the lavatory or masturbating. And at the same time we have constant access to Bloom's private thoughts and daydreams. The element of fantasy in the book culminates in the long and quite non-realistic 'Nighttown' or 'Circe' section, in which many of Bloom's masochistic sexual daydreams are acted out in forms that are often repellent but often very funny too.

Ulysses is an extraordinarily intricate work of fiction that has not been fundamentally surpassed fifty years after its publication, and many of the possibilities that Joyce indicated are still being exploited by novelists. Joyce does not seem to have been directly influenced by Freud, but in his awareness of the importance of the subconscious and the conventionally suppressed elements of fantasy he had similar insights. Later fiction also inherits a further Freudian legacy, since it is inclined to undermine the assumption of every-day common sense—and of traditional morality—that there is a normal kind of human sexuality that is immediately recognisable as such. In much modern fiction we are invited to engage in explorations of human sexuality of a more extreme and less evidently typical kind than that apparent in the traditional realistic novel. This development partakes both of the changed nature and possibilities of the fictional form, and of the changes in sexual *mores* in twentieth-century western society. I should perhaps add that although it is generally acknowledged that fiction—like literature in general—has greatly changed in the present century, there is no agreement that this change can be meaningfully called an improvement. Literature and art are not like technology, in that nothing is ever superseded, however much styles change, and a work like *Anna Karenina* remains as great as it ever was.

Literature is both affirmative and subversive in its treatment of sexuality. It affirms the essential worth of the sexual aspect of human

existence, whilst subverting most conventional assumptions about it by indicating the problematical, even contradictory and painful aspects of sex. In relation to the cut-and-dried formulations of the traditional moralists the literature of passion was clearly subversive. And in a quite different way modern literature can subvert the positivistic, pseudo-scientific treatment of sexuality that is now prevalent by recalling how sex is an aspect of the whole man or woman, a matter of personality and emotion and often quite unpredictable depths of feeling, and not merely of the efficient meshing of the machinery of sex. This point was well made nearly twenty-five years ago by the distinguished American critic, Lionel Trilling, in a review of the first Kinsey Report.¹ He was not a zoologist or a medical expert but he found it quite appropriate as a literary critic to discuss a big book about life in modern America which was exciting a great many people, just as a new novel might. Trilling admired the scientific achievement of the work but in the end he pointed out, firmly and quietly, the inadequacy of Kinsey's reductive and mechanistic treatment of sexual behaviour as something quite apart from the larger human context. Trilling made his protest on behalf of the whole man, not as a Christian, but as an agnostic with a profound literary education.

Usually the literary act of subversion and affirmation is not made in so rational and balanced a fashion. Some of the greatest modern authors have been at odds with most established standards and codes of behaviour, whether conventionally conservative or conventionally progressive, and have given a peculiar emphasis to sexuality that reflects a remarkable development in twentieth-century sensibility. Traditionally the literature of passion fed on frustration and the lack of fulfilment, in ways made familiar by Denis de Rougemont in *Passion and Society*. Now sexual consummation tends to be central in modern literature, but it is no longer a matter of indulgence, of an illicit but real pleasure, which might be attacked by the moralist and defended by the free-lover. The emphasis is rather on sex as a deeply serious activity, with an almost religious significance. D. H. Lawrence is the great exemplar of this new sensibility, and he was a man equally at odds with bourgeois sexual morality, and with the relaxed 'healthy' attitudes of the modern progressive. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is by no means Lawrence's best novel but it is highly representative of the attitudes I am trying to define. Once it was regarded as no more than a notorious dirty book, obtainable only on the Continent. Then, after the famous trial of 1960 which established the book's legal right to appear, it was seen by some as almost a Christian tract on the sanctity of marriage. The truth, however, is more complex, and the defence witnesses at the Old Bailey gave, through no fault of their own, a misleading account of the novel. Its basic story is simple

¹In Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*.

enough. It is set soon after the First World War: Connie Chatterley is married to Sir Clifford, who is maimed and impotent because of a war injury, and has to go around in a bath-chair. In his way he leads a full and active life; he is an industrialist and a coal-owner, and takes the business very seriously, but he is also an intellectual man with literary tastes, and writes and publishes short stories. All this activity, though, is purely cerebral, 'in the head'; as far as the physical life goes Sir Clifford is necessarily dead. Connie is a healthy, straightforward girl, though already sexually sophisticated, having had one or two affairs just before the war. Despite his impotence Sir Clifford is convinced that their marriage is meaningful, as a union of personalities, and if Connie wants a child he has no objection to her discreetly arranging it with another man, very much in the 'emancipated' spirit of the nineteen-twenties. She does in fact sleep with a friend of Clifford, a playwright called Michaelis, and Lawrence leaves us in no doubt that this relationship was not merely unsatisfactory but, in terms of his scheme of values, wrong. Not, indeed, because it was adulterous, but because it was inauthentic and sensuous in a merely shallow way, and did not involve Connie at the right degree of depth.

For Lawrence casual and superficial sex is to be condemned, while the right kind of truly authentic and life-giving sexual relationship is hard to achieve. When Connie meets and falls in love with the gamekeeper Mellors she sets out on an exacting path. She and Mellors pass through several stages of sexual union, which are described in what was once notorious detail though always, I think, with a degree of tact and sensibility on the author's part. And these stages indicate a kind of mystical progression, with part of the initiation into carnal beatitude proceeding via anal intercourse, a preoccupation of Lawrence in this book that now seems apparent, but which no one mentioned at the Old Bailey trial. In reacting against both bourgeois conventionality and progressive emancipation Lawrence gave sexuality a religious quality that was previously unparalleled in the novel, for *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is far removed from the fantasies of pornography. Lawrence himself was not altogether consistent and may well have been uneasy about the peculiarly sacred way in which he wished to see sexuality. The inconsistency and ambiguity comes out in the treatment of the famous four-letter words. As Professor Ian Gregor has shown, one may indeed want to 'redeem' the four-letter words, to make them seem everyday and normal, as part of taking the dirtiness out of sex, and letting people see it as an ordinary human function. But this was not consistent with Lawrence's emphasis on sex as a rare and high destiny of a uniquely numinous kind: the everyday and the sacral are necessarily in conflict.

All error is an exaggeration of a particular truth. And so it proves with Lawrence's treatment of sex, where the effort to affirm its real

importance makes him give it an unreal importance, of a quasi-mystical kind, and which takes it far beyond familiar human behaviour and psychology. Yet Lawrence established a pattern for the literary treatment of sexuality that is still very much part of our culture. In many serious modern novels—by which I mean novels that are written because the author genuinely has something to say in that literary form, as opposed to producing a standard commercial article—sexuality exists as a strange autonomous force, and a self-validating mode of value. The underlying assumption seems to be that in a dehumanizing technological society most of the traditional forms of human contact have been made meaningless, that speech itself has become trivial and empty, and that only in sexual union can true contact be established. Lawrence, I imagine, would have rejected this particular development, and it would be false to see it as simply deriving from his own view of the sacredness of sex. Yet there is a similar portentousness both in Lawrence and the work of many distinguished recent writers. Sex in fact has become a metaphor for human contact itself, in a way that makes no attempt at psychological plausibility. Often in recent novels (and plays and films) the most unlikely people come together sexually because this is the only authentic mode of making contact. Two people who scarcely know each other will suddenly engage in sexual intercourse; lifelong heterosexuals will instantly and inexplicably act in a homosexual way, or vice versa, and the taboo against incest will be readily broken. The novels of Iris Murdoch are full of this sort of activity. No doubt so-called 'ordinary' people can do the most strange things, and more often than we imagine, as the records of sexual pathology make clear; nevertheless, here we are faced with a form of literary code or convention that is quite other than what can be considered as in any sense psychologically likely.

In some contemporary avant-garde literature, notably the writings of William Burroughs, one finds a strange nightmare world, where the people are scarcely people any more, where sexual organs become disjunctive, and sexuality is a terrible destructive force that can consume human beings in a cannibalistic fashion. If I were writing a straightforward essay in literary criticism I would want to make some quite severe judgments on these novels, as indeed I would on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. But on this occasion I am not so much concerned to make judgments as to outline certain prevalent attitudes. To repeat, error is a truth taken to an unacceptable extreme. And sexual fantasy may well be a thrusting into consciousness of a truth we would rather forget. What the Christian may learn from modern fiction is, perhaps, the essentially problematical nature of sex, whether in the sufferings of an Anna Karenina or in the sick fantasies of Burroughs, and the way in which it can subvert rationality and predictability. This may look like a very traditional, even old-fashioned emphasis, but still necessary, for in our reaction against the

anti-sexuality of the old scholastic manuals of moral theology, in our eagerness to emphasise the rightness and naturalness of sex, we may be forgetting its potentially explosive power. I would like to conclude with some paragraphs from an essay on pornography by the American critic and novelist Susan Sontag, a writer with whom I am very seldom in agreement or sympathy, but who seems here to be saying things which may not all be true but which are worth pondering, however provocative the manner of delivery:¹

‘The prevailing view—an amalgam of Rousseauist, Freudian and liberal social thought—estimates the phenomenon of sex as a perfectly intelligible although uniquely precious source of emotional and physical pleasure. What difficulties there are come from the long deformation of the sexual impulses administered by Western Christianity, whose ugly wounds scarcely anyone in this culture escapes. First, guilt and anxiety. Then, the reduction of sexual capacities leading if not to virtual impotence or frigidity, at least to the depletion of erotic energy and the repression of many natural elements of sexual appetite (the “perversions”). Then the spill-over into public dishonesties in which people tend to respond to news of the sexual pleasures of others with envy, fascination, revulsion and spiteful indignation. It’s from this pollution of the sexual health of the culture that a phenomenon like pornography is derived.

‘Now, what’s decisive in the complex of views held by most educated members of the community is the assumption that human sexual appetite is, if untampered with, a natural pleasant function; and that “the obscene” is a convention, the fiction imposed upon nature by a society convinced that there is something vile about the sexual functions, and by extension, about sexual pleasure. It’s just these assumptions that are challenged by the French tradition represented by Sade, La Fontaine, Bataille and the authors of *Story of O* and *The Image*. Their assumption seems to be that “the obscene” is a primal notion of human consciousness, something much more profound than the backwash of a sick society’s aversion to the body. Human sexuality is, quite apart from Christian repressions, etc., a highly questionable phenomenon, and belongs, at least potentially, among the extreme rather than the ordinary experiences of humanity. Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness—pushing us at intervals close to taboo and dangerous desires, which range from the impulse to commit sudden arbitrary violence upon another person to the voluptuous yearning for the extinction of one’s consciousness, for death itself. Even on the level of simple physical sensation and mood, making love surely resembles having an epileptic fit at least as much, if not more, than it does eating a meal or conversing with someone. Everyone has felt (at least in fantasy) the erotic glamor of physical cruelty and an erotic lure in things which are vile and repulsive. These phenomena are part of the genuine spectrum of sexuality, and if they are not to

¹From Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*.

be written off as mere neurotic aberrations, the picture may look different from the one promoted by enlightened public opinion, and less simple.

It almost seems as if it's for good reason that most people's whole capacity for sexual ecstasy is inaccessible to them, given that each person's sexuality is something, like nuclear energy, that may prove amenable to domestication through scruple, but then again, it may not. That most people do not regularly, or perhaps ever, experience their sexual capacities at this unsettling pitch doesn't mean that the extreme isn't authentic, or that the possibility of it doesn't haunt them anyway. (Religion is probably, after sex, the second oldest resource which human beings have available to them for blowing their minds. Yet among the multitudes of the pious, the number who have ventured very far with that state of consciousness must be fairly small, too.) There is, demonstrably, something incorrectly designed and potentially disorienting in the human sexual capacity—at least in the capacities of man-in-civilization. Man, the sick animal, bears within him an appetite which can drive him mad. And it's that understanding of sexuality as something beyond good and evil, beyond love, beyond sanity, sexuality as a resource for ordeal and for breaking through limits of consciousness, that informs the French books which I've been talking about.'

When Miss Sontag talks about 'something incorrectly designed' in the human sexual capacity, she is in fact referring to something which would once have been instantly understood: namely, the disorder in man's nature that followed the Fall. The point may now seem unfashionable, but we need to recover it, and perhaps to find a new terminology in which to express it. We may use Miss Sontag's words to make the point that sexuality is indeed, as we like to say, a God-given gift, but not simple or unambiguous: nuclear power rather than a clear rippling brook. Imaginative writers often say things and express attitudes that can seem extraordinarily silly. But they do have a unique sense of the dramatic contradictions in this divinely created yet fallen world, of which human sexuality is so splendid and unpredictable a part.