1

EVERYDAY EXPERIMENTS, RELATIONSHIPS, SEXUALITY

In his novel Before She Met Me, Julian Barnes discusses the fate of one Graham Hendrick, an academic historian, who has left his wife and begun a relationship with another woman. When the novel opens, Graham is in his late thirties, has been married fifteen years and, 'halfway through life', he can 'feel the downhill slope already'. At an otherwise run-of-the-mill party he meets Ann, who once was a small-time film actress and has since become a fashion buyer. For some reason their encounter stirs in him barely remembered feelings of hope and excitement. He feels 'as if some long-broken line of communication to a self of twenty years ago had suddenly been restored' and is 'once more capable of folly and idealism'.

After a series of clandestine meetings, which turn into a full-blown affair, Graham leaves his wife and child and sets up house with Ann. Once his divorce comes through the two marry. The core of the novel concerns Graham's progressive discovery of the lovers in Ann's life before he entered it. She hides little, but volunteers no information unless he asks for it directly. Graham gradually becomes obsessed with a need to uncover the sexual details of Ann's past. He watches and rewatches the cameo parts Ann has played on the screen, trying to glimpse an exchange of glances, or other signs, that would indicate that she and a particular

man with whom she appeared had been lovers. Sometimes she admits there have been sexual liaisons, mostly she insists not.

The ultimate development of the story is savage, its conclusion almost completely subverting the style of dead-pan humour in which most of the book is written. By dint of assiduous research, Graham discovers that his best friend, Jack – to whom he had been confiding his problems about Ann's life 'before she met me' – himself had a sexual involvement with Ann several years before. Graham arranges to see his friend as if to continue his discussions. But he takes with him a knife, a 'six-inch blade tapering from a breadth of an inch to a sharp point'. When Jack turns his back on him at one point, to busy himself with a minor task, Graham stabs him. As Jack turns round in bewilderment, Graham slips the knife in repeatedly, 'between the heart and the genitals'. After putting a plaster on his finger where he has cut it during the course of the murder, he settles down in a chair with the remnants of a cup of coffee that Jack had made for him.

In the meantime, increasingly worried by Graham's absence, which has stretched across the night, and having telephoned the police and local hospitals in a fruitless endeavour to discover his whereabouts, Ann starts searching through Graham's desk. There she unearths documents bearing witness to Graham's compulsive enquiries into her past – and finds that he knows of her affair with Jack (the one sexual encounter which she has actively concealed from Graham). She goes over to Jack's flat and finds Graham there, together with Jack's bloodstained body. Without understanding why, she lets Graham calm her down and tie her arms together with a few yards of washing-line. Graham calculates that this procedure will give him enough time to accomplish his objective, before she can dash to the phone to get help. 'No curtain lines; no melodrama': picking up the knife, Graham cuts deeply into each side of his throat.

About Ann – 'he loved Ann, there wasn't any doubt about that' – he has miscalculated. Ann dives headfirst through the glass of a window, screaming loudly. By the time the police arrive, the armchair is irretrievably soaked with blood and Graham is dead. The implication of the concluding paragraphs of the novel is that Ann has killed herself also – inadvertently or otherwise we do not know.

Before She *Met Me* is not primarily a novel about jealousy. While reading through the materials that Graham has accumulated about her, Ann recognises that jealous 'was a word she wouldn't use of him'. The important thing was that 'he couldn't handle her past'.' The ending is violent – incongruously so given the half-comic tone of the rest of the book – but cool. Graham's violence is a frustrated attempt at mastery. Its origins are left quite opaque by the novelist, something which reflects their obscurity to Graham himself. The secrets Graham seeks to discover in Ann's sexual history are bound up with her non-conformity to what he expects of a woman – her past is incompatible with his ideals. The problem is an emotional one; he recognises how absurd it is to suppose that Ann should have organised her former life in anticipation of meeting him. Yet her sexual independence, even when he did not 'exist' for her, is unacceptable, to such a degree that the end-result is a violent destructiveness. To his credit, Graham tries to shield Ann from the violence she has provoked in him; but of course she becomes caught up in it anyhow.

The events described in the novel are distinctly contemporary; as a discussion of the lives of ordinary people, the novel could not have been set, say, a century ago. For it presumes a significant degree of sexual equality and, specifically, depends upon the fact that today it is commonplace for a woman to have multiple lovers prior to entering (and even during, as well as after leaving) a 'serious' sexual involvement. Of course, there have always been a minority of women for whom sexual variety, and also a measure of

equality, were possible. But for the most part women have been divided into the virtuous and the loose, and 'loose women' have existed only on the margins of respectable society. 'Virtue' has long been defined in terms of a woman's refusal to succumb to sexual temptation, a refusal bolstered by various institutional protections, such as chaperoned courting, shotgun marriages and so forth.

Men, on the other hand, have traditionally been regarded – and not only by themselves – as requiring sexual variety for their physical health. It has generally been thought acceptable for men to engage in multiple sexual encounters before marriage, and the double standard after marriage was a very real phenomenon. As Lawrence Stone says in his study of the history of divorce in England, until quite recently a rigid dual standard existed about the sexual experience of men and women. A single act of adultery by a wife was 'an unpardonable breach of the law of property and the idea of hereditary descent' and discovery brought into play highly punitive measures. Adultery on the part of husbands, by contrast, was widely 'regarded as a regrettable but understandable foible'.[2]

In a world of increasing sexual equality – even if such equality is far from complete – both sexes are called upon to make fundamental changes in their outlooks on, and behaviour towards, one another. The adjustments demanded of women are considerable but, perhaps because the novelist is male, these are neither fully represented, nor portrayed with much sympathy, in the book. Barbara, Graham's first wife, is depicted as a shrill, demanding creature, whose attitudes he finds baffling; while he feels a consistent love for Ann, his understanding of her views and actions is hardly any deeper. One could even say that, in spite of the intensive research work which he carries out on Ann's prior life, he does not really come to know her at all.

Graham tends to dismiss the behaviour of Barbara and Ann in a traditional way: women are emotional, whimsical

beings, whose thought-processes do not move along rational lines. Yet he has compassion for both of them, particularly, at the time of the story, Ann. His new wife is not a 'loose woman', nor has he any right to treat her as such. When she goes to see Jack, after having married Graham, she firmly rejects the advances Jack makes to her. Yet Graham cannot shake from his mind the threat he feels from activities which occurred before he was 'in control' of her.

The novelist conveys very well the tentative, open-ended nature of Graham's second marriage, which differs substantially from his first. Graham's earlier marriage, it is made clear, was more of a 'naturally given' phenomenon, based on the conventional division between housewife and male breadwinner. With Barbara, marriage was a state of affairs, a not particularly rewarding part of life, like having a job that one does not especially appreciate, but dutifully carries on. Marriage to Ann, by contrast, is a complex series of interactions that have to be constantly negotiated and 'worked through'.[3] In his second marriage, Graham has entered a new world that was only barely emerging at the time of his youth. It is a world of sexual negotiation, of 'relationships', in which new terminologies of 'commitment' and 'intimacy' have come to the fore.

Before She Met Me is a novel about male disquiet, and male violence, in a social world undergoing profound transformations. Women no longer go along with male sexual dominance, and both sexes must deal with the implications of this phenomenon. Personal life has become an open project, creating new demands and anxieties. Our interpersonal existence is being thoroughly transfigured, involving us all in what I shall call everyday social experiments, with which wider social changes more or less oblige us to engage. Let us give some more sociological flesh to these changes, which are to do with marriage and the family as well as with sexuality directly.

Social change and sexual behaviour

Lillian Rubin studied the sexual histories of almost a thousand heterosexual people in the US aged between eighteen and forty-eight in 1989. In so doing, she produced evidence revealing 'a tale of change of almost staggering proportions in relations between men and women' over the past few decades.[4] The early sexual lives of respondents over forty contrasted dramatically with those reported by younger age-groups. The author prefaces her report on what things were like for the older generation with her own testimony, as a member of that generation herself. She was a virgin at the time of her marriage during World War II, a girl who 'followed all the rules of her day', and would never have 'gone all the way'. She wasn't alone in drawing clear boundaries to mark out the limits of sexual exploration, but shared codes of conduct common to her friends. Her prospective husband was an active participant in ensuring that those codes were complied with; his sense of sexual 'rights and wrongs' matched her own.

Virginity on the part of girls prior to marriage was prized by both sexes. Few girls disclosed the fact if they allowed a boyfriend to have full sexual intercourse – and many were only likely to permit such an act to happen once formally engaged to the boy in question. More sexually active girls were disparaged by the others, as well as by the very males who sought to 'take advantage' of them. Just as the social reputation of the girls rested upon their ability to resist, or contain, sexual advances, that of the boys depended upon the sexual conquests they could achieve. Most boys gained such conquests only by, as one 45-year-old respondent put it, 'fooling around with one of those girls, the sluts'.

When we look at teenage sexual activity today, the good girl/bad girl distinction still applies to some degree, as does the ethic of male conquest. But other attitudes, on the part

of many teenage girls in particular, have changed quite radically. Girls feel they have an entitlement to engage in sexual activity, including sexual intercourse, at whatever age seems appropriate to them. In Rubin's survey, virtually no teenage girls talk of 'saving themselves' for an anticipated engagement and marriage. Instead, they speak a language of romance and commitment which acknowledges the potentially finite nature of their early sexual involvements. Thus, in response to a question from Rubin about her sexual activities with her boyfriend, one sixteen-year-old interviewee remarked, 'We love each other, so there's no reason why we shouldn't be making love.' Rubin then asked to what extent she envisaged a long-term tie with her partner. Her reply was: 'Do you mean are we going to get married? The answer is no. Or will we be together next year? I don't know about that; that's a long time from now. Most kids don't stay together for such a long time. But we won't date anybody else as long as we're together. That's a commitment, isn't it?'[5]

In previous generations, the conventional practice was for the sexually active teenage girl to play the part of innocent. This relation is today usually reversed: innocence, where necessary, plays the role of sophisticate. According to Rubin's findings, changes in the sexual behaviour and attitudes of girls have been much more pronounced than among boys. She did talk to some boys who were sensitive about connections between sex and commitment, and who resisted the equation of sexual success and male prowess. Most, however, spoke admiringly of male friends who went with lots of girls, while condemning girls who did the same. A few girls in Rubin's sample emulated traditional male sexual behaviour, did so openly and with some defiance; faced with such actions, the majority of boys responded with a sense of outrage. They still wanted innocence, at least of a sort. Several young women whom Rubin interviewed, on the point of getting married, found it necessary

to lie to their future spouses about the range of their earlier sexual experiences.

One of the most striking findings of Rubin's research, which is echoed by other surveys and applies across all age-groups, is the expanded variety of sexual activities in which most people either engage or deem it appropriate for others to participate in if they so wish. Thus among the women and men over forty, fewer than one in ten had engaged in oral sex during adolescence; for each successive generation, the proportion increases. Among the current generation of teenagers, although not universally practised, oral sex is regarded as a normal part of sexual behaviour. Every adult Rubin interviewed now had at least some experience with it – this in a society where oral sex is still described as 'sodomy' in statute books and is actually illegal in twenty-four states.

Men mostly welcome the fact that women have become more sexually available, and claim that in any longer-term sexual tie they want a partner who is intellectually and economically their equal. Yet, according to Rubin's findings, they show obvious and deep-seated unease when faced with the implications of such preferences. They say that women have 'lost the capacity for kindness', that they 'don't know how to compromise any more' and that 'women today don't want to be wives, they want wives'. Men declare they want equality, but many also make statements suggesting that they either reject, or are nervous about, what it means for them. 'How would you contribute to raising the children?' Rubin asked Jason, a man who, in his own words, has 'no problem with strong aggressive women'. His answer: 'I'm certainly willing to do all I can. I don't expect to be an absent father, but someone has to take the larger share of responsibility . . . And I won't say I can do that, because I can't. I have my career, and it's very important to me, what I've worked for all my life.'[6]

Most people, women and men, now come to marriage bringing with them a substantial fund of sexual experience

and knowledge. Not for them the abrupt transition between furtive fumblings or illicit encounters and the more secure, yet also often more demanding, sexuality of the marriage bed. Newly wed marriage partners today are for the most part sexually experienced, and there is no period of sexual apprenticeship in the early stages of the marriage, even when the individuals involved have not lived with one another previously.

Yet far more is anticipated sexually of marriage, Rubin shows, by both women and men, than was normally the case in earlier generations. Women expect to receive, as well as provide, sexual pleasure, and many have come to see a rewarding sex life as a key requirement for a satisfactory marriage. The proportion of women married for more than five years who have had extramarital sexual encounters is today virtually the same as that of men. The double standard still exists, but women are no longer tolerant of the view that, while men need variety and can be expected to engage in extramarital adventures, they should not behave likewise.

How much can we glean about generic social changes from such a piece of research, carried out with limited numbers of people, in a single country? We can learn, I think, essentially what we need to know for the purposes of this study. It is beyond dispute that, broadly speaking, developments of the sort charted by Rubin are happening throughout most Western societies – and to some extent in other parts of the world as well. Of course, there are significant divergencies between different countries, sub-cultures and socio-economic strata. Certain groups, for example, stand apart from the sort of changes described, or actively attempt to resist them. Some societies have a longer history of sexual tolerance than others and the changes which they are experiencing are perhaps not quite as radical as in the US. In many, however, such transitions are happening against the backdrop of more constraining sexual values than were characteristic of American society several

decades ago. For people living in these contexts, particularly women, the transformations now occurring are dramatic and shattering.

Heterosexuality, homosexuality

Rubin's research deals only with heterosexual activities. Her decision to exclude homosexual experiences is odd, given the fact, already revealed by Kinsey, that a very high proportion of men, as well as a substantial proportion of women, have taken part in homosexual acts at some time in their lives. Kinsey found that only about 50 per cent of all American men were, in his terms, 'exclusively heterosexual' – that is, had neither participated in homosexual activities, nor felt homosexual desires. Eighteen per cent were either exclusively homosexual or persistently bisexual. Among women, 2 per cent were wholly homosexual, 13 per cent of others had engaged in some form of homosexual activity, while a further 15 per cent reported having had homosexual urges without having acted on them.[7]

Kinsey's findings shocked a disbelieving public at the time. Over the past quarter of a century, however, homosexuality has been affected by changes as great as those influencing heterosexual conduct. Even at the date when the Kinsey volumes appeared, homosexuality was still seen in much of the clinical literature as a pathology, a form of psychosexual disturbance along with a whole range of others – fetishism, voyeurism, transvestism, satyriasis, nymphomania and so forth. It continues to be regarded as a perversion by many heterosexuals – that is, as specifically unnatural and to be morally condemned. Yet the term 'perversion' itself has now more or less completely disappeared from clinical psychiatry, and the aversion felt by

many towards homosexuality no longer receives substantial support from the medical profession.

The 'coming out' of homosexuality is a very real process, with major consequences for sexual life in general. It was signalled by the popularising of the self-description 'gay', an example of that reflexive process whereby a social phenomenon can be appropriated and transformed through collective engagement. 'Gay', of course, suggests colourfulness, openness and legitimacy, a far cry from the image of homosexuality once held by many practising homosexuals as well as by the majority of heterosexual individuals. The gay cultural communities that came into being in American cities, as in many urban areas in Europe, provided a new public face for homosexuality. On a more personal level, however, the term 'gay' also brought with it an increasingly widespread reference to sexuality as a quality or property of the self. A person 'has' a sexuality, gay or otherwise, which can be reflexively grasped, interrogated and developed.

Sexuality thereby becomes free-floating; at the same time as 'gay' is something one can 'be', and 'discover oneself to be', sexuality opens itself up to many objects. Thus The Kinsey lnstitute *New* Report on Sex, published in 1990, describes a case of a 65-year-old man whose wife died following a happy marriage lasting for forty-five years. Within a year of his wife's death, he fell in love with a man. According to his own testimony, he had never before been sexually attracted to a man or fantasised about homosexual acts. Such an individual now follows his altered sexual orientation quite openly, although he has had to face the problem of 'what to tell the children'.[8] Would he even a few years ago have conceived of the possibility that he might transform his 'sexuality' in this way? He has entered a new world in much the same way as Graham did.

The idea of the 'relationship' emerges as strongly in gay sub-cultures as among the more heterosexual population. Male homosexuals commonly have a diversity of sexual

partners, contact with whom may be only fleeting – as epitomised in the bath-house culture before the advent of AIDS led to its virtual disappearance. In a study undertaken in the late 1970s, some six hundred male homosexuals in the US were asked how many sexual partners they had had; about 40 per cent stated the number at five hundred or

It might seem as though we find here a social universe of male sexuality run rampant, where one-night stands have become random ten-minute couplings. In fact, a high proportion of gay men, and the majority of lesbian women, are at any one time in a live-in relation with a partner. The same studies just quoted found that most people contacted had been in a relationship with one main partner at least once for a period of two years or more. Research undertaken by the Kinsey Institute in the early 1980s, based upon interviews with several hundred homosexual men, found that virtually all were at one point or another in a steady relationship for at least a year.[10] Gay women and men have preceded most heterosexuals in developing relationships, in the sense that term has come to assume today when applied to personal life. For they have had to 'get along' without traditionally established frameworks of marriage, in conditions of relative equality between partners.

'Sexuality' today has been discovered, opened up and made accessible to the development of varying life-styles. It is something each of us 'has', or cultivates, no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs. Somehow, in a way that has to be investigated, sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms.

Such changes are nowhere better demonstrated than in the case of masturbation, once the dread symbol of Failed sexuality. Masturbation has 'come out' as openly as homosexuality. The Kinsey Report found that 90 per cent of men,

and 40 per cent of women, had at some time in their lives engaged in masturbation. Figures from more recent surveys have upped these proportions to almost 100 per cent in the case of men and around 70 per cent for women. Equally important: masturbation is widely recommended as a major source of sexual pleasure, and actively encouraged as a mode of improving sexual responsiveness on the part of both sexes.[11]

In what ways do the changes just discussed interact with transformations in personal life more generally? How do the changes of the past few decades connect to more protracted influences upon sexual conduct? To answer these questions means investigating how 'sexuality' originated, what it is and how it has come to be something that individuals 'possess'. These problems will be my concern in the book as a whole. But one particular work has dominated thinking about these issues in recent years, and we can make an initial approach to them through a brief critical appraisal of it: Michel Foucault's account of the history of sexuality.

To forestall possible misunderstandings, let me emphasise that a full-scaleencounter with Foucault's thought would be out of place in this study, and 1 do not attempt such a thing. Foucault's brilliant innovations pose certain key issues in ways which no one had thought to do before. In my view, however, his writings are also deeply flawed, in respect both of the philosophical standpoint that he elaborates and some of the more historical claims he makes or implies. Admirers of Foucault will be unhappy: I don't justify these claims in any detail. My differences from Foucault, nevertheless, emerge clearly enough in the substance of the arguments I develop; I use his work mainly as a foil against which to clarify those arguments.

NOTES

1 All quotations are from Julian Barnes: Before She Met Me, London: Picador, 1986.
2 Lawrence Stone: The Road to Divorce. England *1530–1987*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 7.
3 Barnes: Before She Met Me, pp. 55ff.
4 Lillian Rubin: Erotic Wars, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990, p. 8.
5 Ibid., p. 61.
6 Ibid., p. 146.
7 Alfred C. Kinsey et al.: Sexual *Behaviour* in the Human Male, Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948; Sexual *Behaviour* in the Human Female, Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953.
8 June M. Reinisch and Ruth Beasley: The *Kinsey* Institute New Report on Sex, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p. 143.
9 Ibid., p. 144.
10 Ibid., p. 145.
11 W. H. Masters and V. E. Johnson: Human Sexual Response, Boston: Little, Brown, 1966.

2

FOUCAULT ON SEXUALITY

In The History of Sexuality, Foucault sets out to attack what, in a celebrated phrase, he calls 'the repressive hypothesis'.' According to such a view, modern institutions compel us to pay a price – increasing repression – for the benefits they offer. Civilisation means discipline, and discipline in turn implies control of inner drives, control that to be effective has to be internal. Who says modernity says super-ego. Foucault himself seemed to accept something of a similar view in his earlier writings, seeing modern social life as intrinsically bound up with the rise of 'disciplinary power', characteristic of the prison and the asylum, but also of other organisations, such as business firms, schools or hospitals. Disciplinary power supposedly produced 'docile bodies', controlled and regulated in their activities rather than able spontaneously to act on the promptings of desire.

Power here appeared above all as a constraining force. Yet as Foucault came to appreciate, power is a mobilising phenomenon, not just one which sets limits; and those who are subject to disciplinary power are not at all necessarily docile in their reactions to it. Power, therefore, can be an instrument for the production of pleasure: it does not only stand opposed to it. 'Sexuality' should not be understood only as a drive which social forces have to contain. Rather, it is 'an especially dense transfer point for relations of

power', something which can be harnessed as a focus of social control through the very energy which, infused with power, it generates.

Sex is not driven underground in modem civilisation. On the contrary, it comes to be continually discussed and investigated. It has become part of 'a great sermon', replacing the more ancient tradition of theological preaching. Statements about sexual repression and the sermon of transcendence mutually reinforce one another; the struggle for sexual liberation is part of the self-same apparatus of power that it denounces. Has any other social order, Foucault asks rhetorically, been so persistently and pervasively preoccupied with sex?

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are Foucault's main concern in his encounter with the repressive hypothesis. During this period, sexuality and power became intertwined in several distinct ways. Sexuality was developed as a secret, which then had to be endlessly tracked down as well as guarded against. Take the case of masturbation. Whole campaigns were mounted by doctors and educators to lay siege to this dangerous phenomenon and make clear its consequences. So much attention was given to it, however, that we may suspect that the objective was not its elimination; the point was to organise the individual's development, bodily and mentally.

Such was also the case, Foucault continues, with the numerous perversions catalogued by psychiatrists, doctors and others. These diverse forms of aberrant sexuality were both opened to public display and made into principles of classification of individual conduct, personality and self-identity. The effect was not to suppress perversions, but to give them 'an analytical, visible, and permanent reality'; they were 'implanted in bodies, slipped in beneath modes of conduct'. Thus in pre-modem law, sodomy was defined as a prohibited act, but was not a quality or behaviour pattern of an individual. The nineteenth-century homosexual,

however, became 'a personage, a past, a case history' as well as 'a type of life, a life form, a morphology'. 'We must not imagine', in Foucault's words,

> that all these things that were formerly tolerated attracted notice and received a pejorative designation when the time came to give a regulative role to the one type of sexuality that was capable of reproducing labour power and the form of the family . . . It is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct.[2]

Many traditional cultures and civilisations have fostered arts of erotic sensibility; but only modern Western society has developed a science of sexuality. This has come about, in Foucault's view, through the conjoining of the principle of the confession to the accumulation of knowledge about sex.

Sex becomes in fact the focal point of a modern confessional. The Catholic confessional, Foucault points out, was always a means of regulating the sexual life of believers. It covered far more than only sexual indiscretions, and owning up to such misdemeanours was interpreted by priest and penitent alike in terms of a broad ethical framework. As part of the Counter-Reformation, the Church became more insistent upon regular confession, and the whole process was intensified. Not only acts, but thoughts, reveries and all details concerning sex were to be brought to view and scrutinised. The 'flesh' to which we are heir in Christian doctrine, which comes to include soul and body combined, was the proximate origin of that characteristic modern sexual preoccupation: sexual desire.

Somewhere in the late eighteenth century, confession as penitence became confession as interrogation. It was channelled into diverse discourses – from the case-history and

scientific treatise to scandalous tracts such as the anonymous *My Secret Life*. Sex is a 'secret' created by texts which abjure as well as those which celebrate it. Access to this secret is believed to disclose 'truth': sexuality is fundamental to the 'regime of truth' characteristic of modernity. Confession in its modern sense 'is all those procedures by which the subject is incited to produce a discourse of truth about his sexuality which is capable of having effects on the subject himself'.[3]

Teams of experts, sexologists and assorted specialists thence stand ready to delve into the secret they have helped to create. Sex is endowed with vast causal powers, and seems to have an influence over many diverse actions.[4] The very effort poured into investigation turns sex into something clandestine, ever resistant to easy observation. Like madness, sexuality is not a phenomenon which already exists, awaiting rational analysis and therapeutic correction. Erotic pleasure becomes 'sexuality' as its investigation produces texts, manuals and surveys which distinguish 'normal sexuality' from its pathological domains. The truth and the secret of sex were each established by the pursuit and the making available of such 'findings'.

The study of sex and the creation of discourses about it led in the nineteenth century to the development of various contexts of power-knowledge. One concerned women. Female sexuality was recognised and immediately crushed – treated as the pathological origin of hysteria. Another was to do with children; the 'finding' that children are sexually active was tied to the declaration that the sexuality of children was 'contrary to nature'. A further context concerned marriage and the family. Sex in marriage was to be responsible and self-regulated; not just confined to marriage, but ordered in distinct and specific ways. Contraception was discouraged. Control of family size was supposed to emerge spontaneously from the disciplined pursuit of

pleasure. Finally, a catalogue of perversions was introduced and modes of treatment for them described.

The invention of sexuality, for Foucault, was part of certain distinct processes involved in the formation and consolidation of modern social institutions. Modern states, and modern organisations, depend upon the meticulous control of populations across time and space. Such control was generated by the development of an 'anatamo-politics of the human body' – technologies of bodily management aimed at regulating, but also optimising, the capabilities of the body. 'Anatamo-politics' is in turn one focus of a more broadly based realm of biopower.[5]

The study of sex, Foucault remarks in an interview, is boring. After all, why spin out yet another discourse to add to the multiplicity which already exist? What is interesting is the emergence of an 'apparatus of sexuality', a 'positive economy of the body and pleasure'.[6] Foucault came to concentrate more and more upon this 'apparatus' in relation to the self and his studies of sex in the Classical world help illuminate the issue as he sees it.[7] The Greeks were concerned to foster the 'care of the self', but in a way that was 'diametrically opposed to the development of the self in the modern social order, which in its extreme guise he sometimes labels the 'Californian cult of the self'. In between these two, again, was the influence of Christianity. In the Ancient world, among the upper class at least, the care of the self was integrated into an ethics of the cultivated, aesthetic existence. To the Greeks, Foucault tells us, food and diet were much more important than sex. Christianity substituted for the Classical view the idea of a self which has to be renounced: the self is something to be deciphered, its truth identified. In the 'Californian cult of the self', 'one is supposed to discover one's true self, to separate it from what might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science'.[8]

Sexuality and institutional change

'Sexuality', as Foucault says, is indeed a term which appears for the first time in the nineteenth century. The word existed in the technical jargon of biology and zoology as early as 1800, but only towards the end of the century did it come to be used widely in something close to the meaning it has for us today – as what the *Oxford English Dictionary* refers to as 'the quality of being sexual or having sex'. The word appears in this sense in a book published in 1889 that was concerned with why women are prone to various illnesses from which men are exempt – something accounted for by women's 'sexuality'.[9] That it was originally connected with attempts to keep feminine sexual activity in check is amply demonstrated in the literature of the era. Sexuality emerged as a source of worry, needing solutions; women who crave sexual pleasure are specifically unnatural. As one medical specialist wrote, 'what is the habitual condition of the man [sexual excitation] is the exception with the woman'.[10]

Sexuality is a social construct, operating within fields of power, not merely a set of biological promptings which either do or do not find direct release. Yet we cannot accept Foucault's thesis that there is more or less a straightforward path of development from a Victorian 'fascination' with sexuality through to more recent times.[11] There are major contrasts between sexuality as disclosed through Victorian medical literature, and effectively marginalised there, and sexuality as an everyday phenomenon of thousands of books, articles and other descriptive sources today. Moreover, the repressions of the Victorian era and after were in some respects all too real, as generations of women above all can attest.[12]

It is difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of these issues if we stay within the overall theoretical position that Foucault developed, in which the only moving forces are

power, discourse and the body. Power moves in mysterious ways in Foucault's writings, and history, as the actively made achievement of human subjects, scarcely exists. Let us therefore accept his arguments about the social origins of sexuality but set them in a different interpretative framework. Foucault puts too much emphasis upon sexuality at the expense of gender. He is silent about the connections of sexuality with romantic love, a phenomenon closely bound up with changes in the family. Moreover, his discussion of the nature of sexuality largely remains at the level of discourse – and rather specific forms of discourse at that. Finally, one must place in question his conception of the self in relation to modernity.

Foucault argues that sexuality in Victorian times was a secret, but an open secret, ceaselessly discussed in different texts and medical sources. The phenomenon of variegated medical debate is important, much for the reasons he gives. Yet it would plainly be a mistake to suppose that sex was widely represented, analysed or surveyed in sources available to the mass of the public. Medical journals and other semi-official publications were accessible only to very few; and until the latter part of the nineteenth century most of the population were not even literate. The confining of sexuality to technical arenas of discussion was a mode of de facto censorship; this literature was not available to the majority, even of the educated population. Such censorship tangibly affected women more than men. Many women married having virtually no knowledge about sex at all, save that it was to do with the undesirable urges of men, and had to be endured. A mother famously thus says to her daughter, 'After your wedding my dear, unpleasant things will happen to you but take no notice of them, I never did.'[13]

Here is Amber Hollibaugh, a lesbian activist, calling in the 1980s for a 'speak out' for women that will publicly reveal yearnings not yet fully articulated:

> Where are all the women who don't come gently and don't want to; don't know what they like but intend to find out; are the lovers of butch or feminine women; who like fucking men; practise consensual S/M; feel more like faggots than dykes; love dildos, penetration, costumes; like to sweat, talk dirty, see expression of need sweep across their lovers' faces; are confused and need to experiment with their own tentative ideas of passion; think gay male pash is hot?[14]

The fascination with sex that Foucault notes is plainly there in Hollibaugh's ecstatic exhortation; but, on the face of things at least, could anything be more different from the tedious, male-authored medical texts he describes? How have we got from one point to the other over a period of little more than a century?

If we followed Foucault, the answers to these questions would seem rather easy. The Victorian obsession with sex, it could be argued, was eventually brought to a culmination by Freud, who, beginning from a puzzlement about hysterical women, came to see sexuality as the core of all human experience. At about the same juncture, Havelock Ellis and the other sexologists set to work, declaring the pursuit of sexual pleasure on the part of both sexes to be desirable and necessary. From there it is just a few short steps via Kinsey, and Masters and Johnson, to a work such as Treat Yourself to Sex, in which the reader is compared sexually to a radio receiver: 'Ask yourself why you have stopped fiddling with the reception. How often have you enjoyed an unexpected programme which you came upon by chance when playing with the knobs?'[15]

Yet things are not so simple. To explain how such changes have come about, we have to move away from an overwhelming emphasis on discourse, and look to factors largely absent from Foucault's analysis. Some concern quite long-term influences, while others are confined to a more recent period.

The long-term trends I shall indicate only briefly, although their overall importance is fundamental since they set the stage for those affecting the later phase. During the nineteenth century, the formation of marriage ties, for most groups in the population, became based on considerations other than judgements of economic value. Notions of romantic love, first of all having their main hold over bourgeois groups, were diffused through much of the social order. 'Romancing' became a synonym for courting, and 'romances' were the first form of literature to reach a mass population. The spread of ideals of romantic love was one factor tending to disentangle the marital bond from wider kinship ties and give it an especial significance. Husbands and wives increasingly became seen as collaborators in a joint emotional enterprise, this having primacy even over their obligations towards their children. The 'home' came into being as a distinct environment set off from work; and, at least in principle, became a place where individuals could expect emotional support, as contrasted with the instrumental character of the work setting. Particularly important for its implications for sexuality, pressures to have large families, characteristic of virtually all pre-modern cultures, gave way to a tendency to limit family size in a rigorous way. Such practice, seemingly an innocent demographic statistic, placed a finger on the historical trigger so far as sexuality was concerned. For the first time, for a mass population of women, sexuality could become separated from a chronic round of pregnancy and childbirth.

The contraction in family size was historically a condition as much as a consequence of the introduction of modern methods of contraception. Birth control, of course, long had its advocates, most of them women, but the family planning movement did not have a widespread influence in most countries until after World War I. A change in official opinion in the UK, until that date often vehemently hostile, was signalled when Lord Dawson, physician to the King,

reluctantly declared in a speech to the Church in 1921: 'Birth control is here to stay. It is an established fact and, for good or evil, has to be accepted . . . No denunciations will abolish it.' His view still upset many. The *Sunday Express* declared in response, 'Lord Dawson must go!'[16]

Effective contraception meant more than an increased capability of limiting pregnancy. In combination with the other influences affecting family size noted above, it signalled a deep transition in personal life. For women – and, in a partly different sense, for men also – sexuality became malleable, open to being shaped in diverse ways, and a potential 'property' of the individual.

Sexuality came into being as part of a progressive differentiation of sex from the exigencies of reproduction. With the further elaboration of reproductive technologies, that differentiation has today become complete. Now that conception can be artificially produced, rather than only artificially inhibited, sexuality is at last fully autonomous. Reproduction can occur in the absence of sexual activity; this is a final 'liberation' for sexuality, which thence can become wholly a quality of individuals and their transactions with one another.

The creation of *plastic sexuality*, severed from its age-old integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations, was the precondition of the sexual revolution of the past several decades. For most women, in most cultures, and throughout most periods of history, sexual pleasure, where possible, was intrinsically bound up with fear – of repetitive pregnancies, and therefore of death, given the substantial proportion of women who perished in childbirth and the very high rates of infant mortality which prevailed. The breaking of these connections was thus a phenomenon with truly radical implications. AIDS, one might say, has reintroduced the connection of sexuality to death, but this is not a reversion to the old situation, because AIDS does not distinguish between the sexes.

The 'sexual revolution' of the past thirty or forty years is not just, or even primarily, a gender-neutral advance in sexual permissiveness. It involves two basic elements. One is a revolution in female sexual autonomy – concentrated in that period, but having antecedents stretching back to the nineteenth century.[17] Its consequences for male sexuality are profound and it is very much of an unfinished revolution. The second element is the flourishing of homosexuality, male and female. Homosexuals of both sexes have staked out new sexual ground well in advance of the more sexually 'orthodox'. Each of these developments has something to do with the sexual libertarianism proclaimed by the social movements of the 1960s, but the contribution of such libertarianism to the emergence of plastic sexuality was neither necessary nor particularly direct. We are dealing here with much more deep-lying, and irreversible, changes than were brought about by such movements, important although they were in facilitating more unfettered discussion of sexuality than previously was possible.

Institutional reflexivity and sexuality

In analysing sexual development, Foucault is surely right to argue that discourse becomes constitutive of the social reality it portrays. Once there is a new terminology for understanding sexuality, ideas, concepts and theories couched in these terms seep into social life itself, and help reorder it. For Foucault, however, this process appears as a fixed and one-way intrusion of 'power-knowledge' into social organisation. Without denying its connectedness to power, we should see the phenomenon rather as one of *institutional reflexivity* and as constantly in motion. It is institutional, because it is a basic structuring element of social activity in modern settings. It is reflexive in the sense

that terms introduced to describe social life routinely enter and transform it – not as a mechanical process, nor necessarily in a controlled way, but because they become part of the frames of action which individuals or groups adopt.

An expansion of institutional reflexivity is a distinctive characteristic of modern societies in the relatively recent period. Increased geographical mobility, the mass media and a host of other factors have undercut elements of tradition in social life which long resisted – or became adapted to – modernity. The continual reflexive incorporation of knowledge not only steps into the breach; it provides precisely a basic impetus to the changes which sweep through personal, as well as global, contexts of action. In the area of sexual discourse, more far-reaching in their effects than the openly propagandist texts advising on the search for sexual pleasure are those reporting on, analysing and commenting about sexuality in practice. The Kinsey Reports, like others following on, aimed to analyse what was going on in a particular region of social activity, as all social research seeks to do. Yet as they disclosed, they also influenced, initiating cycles of debate, reinvestigation and further debate. These debates became part of a wide public domain, but also served to alter lay views of sexual actions and involvements themselves. No doubt the 'scientific' cast of such investigations helps neutralise moral uneasiness about the propriety of particular sexual practices. Far more importantly, however, the rise of such researches signals, and contributes to, an accelerating reflexivity on the level of ordinary, everyday sexual practices.

In my opinion, all this has little to do with the confessional, even in the very general sense of that term used by Foucault. Foucault's discussion of this topic, thought-provoking though it is, simply seems mistaken. Therapy and counselling, including psychoanalysis, we may agree, become increasingly prominent with the maturation of modern societies. Their centrality, though, is not a result of

the fact that, as Foucault puts it, they provide 'regulated procedures for the confession of sex'.[18] Even if we consider only psychoanalysis, comparison with the confessional is too forced to be convincing. In the confessional it is assumed that the individual is readily able to provide the information required. Psychoanalysis, however, supposes that emotional blockages, deriving from the past, inhibit an individual's self-understanding and autonomy of action.[19]

Foucault's interpretation of the development of the self in modern societies should also be placed in question in a rather basic way. Instead of seeing the self as constructed by a specific 'technology', we should recognise that self-identity becomes particularly problematic in modern social life, particularly in the very recent era. Fundamental features of a society of high reflexivity are the 'open' character of self-identity and the reflexive nature of the body. For women struggling to break free from pre-existing gender roles, the question 'Who am I?' – which Betty Frieden labelled 'the problem that has no name'[20] – comes to the surface with particular intensity. Much the same is true for homosexuals, male and female, who contest dominant heterosexual stereotypes. The question is one of sexual identity, but not only this. The self today is for everyone a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future.[21] It is a project carried on amid a profusion of reflexive resources: therapy and self-help manuals of all kinds, television programmes and magazine articles.

Against this backdrop, we can interpret Freud's contribution to modern culture in a different light from Foucault. The importance of Freud was not that he gave the modern preoccupation with sex its most cogent formulation. Rather, Freud disclosed the connections between sexuality and self-identity when they were still entirely obscure and at the same time showed those connections to be problematic. Psychoanalysis has its origins in the medical treatment of

behaviour pathologies, and was seen by Freud as a method of combating neurosis. It is understood in this light by many of its practitioners to this day, as are most other forms of therapy it has helped to inspire. Psychoanalysis may cure neuroses – although its success in this respect is debatable. Its specific significance, however, is that it provides a setting, and a rich fund of theoretical and conceptual resources, for the creation of a reflexively ordered narrative of self. In a therapeutic situation, whether of a classical psychoanalytic type or not, individuals are able (in principle) to bring their past 'into line' with exigencies of the present, consolidating an emotional story-line with which they feel relatively content.

What applies to self applies to body. The body, plainly enough, is in some sense – yet to be determined – the domain of sexuality. Like sexuality, and the self, it is today heavily infused with reflexivity. The body has always been adorned, cosseted and, sometimes, in the pursuit of higher ideals, mutilated or starved. What explains, however, our distinctive concerns with bodily appearance and control today, which differ in certain obvious ways from those more traditional preoccupations? Foucault has an answer, and it is one which brings in sexuality. Modem societies, he says, in specific contrast to the pre-modern world, depend upon the generating of biopower. Yet this is at most a half-truth. The body becomes a focus of administrative power, to be sure. But, more than this, it becomes a visible carrier of self-identity and is increasingly integrated into life-style decisions which an individual makes.

The reflexivity of the body accelerates in a fundamental way with the invention of diet in its modem meaning – different, of course, from the Ancient one – something that, as a mass phenomenon, dates from no earlier than several decades ago. Diet is linked to the introduction of a 'science' of nutrition, and thus to administrative power in Foucault's sense; but it also places responsibility for the development

and appearance of the body squarely in the hands of its possessor. What an individual eats, even among the more materially deprived, becomes a reflexively infused question of dietary selection. *Everyone* today in the developed countries, apart from the very poor, is 'on a diet'. With the increased efficiency of global markets, not only is food abundant, but a diversity of foodstuffs is available for the consumer all year round. In these circumstances, what one eats is a life-style choice, influenced by, and constructed through, vast numbers of cookbooks, popular medical tracts, nutritional guides and so forth. Is it any wonder that eating disorders have replaced hysteria as the pathologies of our age? Is it any wonder that such disorders mostly affect women, particularly young women? For diet connects physical appearance, self-identity and sexuality in the context of social changes with which individuals struggle to cope. Emaciated bodies today no longer bear witness to ecstatic devotion, but to the intensity of this secular battle.

The decline of perversion

What, though, should we make of the decline of 'perversion'? How can it be that sexual actions that once were so severely condemned, and sometimes remain formally illegal, are now very widely practised, and in many circles actively fostered? Once more, it is fairly easy to trace out the surface story. The sexologists, as well as Freud and at least some of his more heterodox followers, largely subverted the moral overtones of the notion of perversion. Freud's much-debated *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, first published in 1905, sought to demonstrate that the sexual traits associated with perversions, far from being restricted to small categories of abnormal people, are qualities common to the sexuality of everyone. Hence, Freud concluded, it is

'inappropriate to use the word perversion as a term of reproach'.[22] Havelock Ellis similarly declared the term unacceptable, substituting for it 'sexual deviation'.

At a subsequent date, it might be argued, interest groups and movements began actively claiming social acceptance and legal legitimacy for homosexuality, contesting even the terminology of deviation. Thus, for example, in the US groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis were set up as the high tide of McCarthyism receded. The subsequent creation of large gay communities provided for an efflorescence of new groups and associations, many promoting minority sexual tastes. The battle to secure public tolerance for homosexuality led other organisations concerned with promoting sexual pluralism to 'come out'. As Jeffrey Weeks puts it:

> There no longer appears to be a great continent of normality surrounded by small islands of disorder. Instead we can now witness clusters of islands, great and small . . . New categories and erotic minorities have emerged. Older ones have experienced a process of subdivision as specialised tastes, specific aptitudes and needs become the basis for proliferating sexual identities.[23]

Expressed in another way, sexual diversity, although still regarded by many hostile groups as perversion, has moved out of Freud's case-history notebooks into the everyday social world.

Seen in these terms, the decline of perversion can be understood as a partly successful battle over rights of self-expression in the context of the liberal democratic state. Victories have been won, but the confrontations continue, and freedoms that have been achieved could still plausibly be swept away on a reactionary tide. Homosexuals still face deeply entrenched prejudice and, quite commonly, open violence. Their emancipatory struggles

encounter resistances perhaps as deep as those that continue to obstruct women's access to social and economic equality.

There is no reason to doubt such an interpretation. Yet there is again another way of looking at things, which suggests that the incipient replacement of perversion by pluralism is part of a broad-based set of changes integral to the expansion of modernity. Modernity is associated with the socialisation of the natural world – the progressive replacement of structures and events that were external parameters of human activity by socially organised processes. Not only social life itself, but what used to be 'nature' becomes dominated by socially organised systems.[24] Reproduction was once part of nature, and heterosexual activity was inevitably its focal point. Once sexuality has become an 'integral' component of social relations, as a result of changes already discussed, heterosexuality is no longer a standard by which everything else is judged. We have not yet reached a stage in which heterosexuality is accepted as only one taste among others, but such is the implication of the socialisation of reproduction.

This view of the decline of perversion is not inconsistent with the other view, for tolerance always has to be fought for in the public domain. It provides, however, a more structural interpretation of the phenomenon, an interpretation in which the emergence of plastic sexuality has a prime place. I shall have a good deal more to say about plastic sexuality in what follows. But first of all I turn to what Foucault specifically neglects: the nature of love and, in particular, the rise of ideals of romantic love. The transmutation of love is as much a phenomenon of modernity as is the emergence of sexuality; and it connects in an immediate way with issues of reflexivity and self-identity.

NOTES

1 *The History of Sexuality* is in three volumes, of which vol. 1: *An Introduction,* Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1981, is by far the most relevant here.
2 Ibid., pp. 47–8.
3 Michel Foucault: 'The confession of the flesh', in Colin Gordon: *Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge,* Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1980, pp. 215–16.
4 Michel Foucault: 'Technologies of the self', in Luther H. Martin et al.: *Technologies of the Self,* London: Tavistock, 1988. 'Unlike other interdictions, sexual interdictions are constantly connected with the obligation to tell the truth about oneself' (p. 16).
5 Foucault: *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 1, p. 142.
6 Foucault: 'The confession of the flesh'.
7 Michel Foucault: Preface to *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure,* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987.
8 Michel Foucault: 'On the genealogy of ethics: an overview of work in progress', in Paul Rabinow: *The Foucault Reader,* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, p. 362. For the best secondary discussion of Foucault and the self, see Lois McNay: *Foucault and Feminism,* Cambridge: Polity, 1992.
9 Stephen Heath: *The Sexual Fix,* London: Macmillan, 1982, pp. 7–16.
10 Quoted in ibid., p. 17.
11 For one version of such a view, see Heath, *The Sexual Fix.*
12 Lawrence Stone: 'Passionate attachments in the West in historical perspective', in William Gaylin and Ethel Person: *Passionate Attachments,* New York: Free Press, 1988. There have been many discussions of the 'repressive hypothesis'. See, for example, Peter Gay: *The Bourgeois Experience,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, vol. 1, 1984; vol. 2, 1986. Cf. also James MaHood and Kristine Wenburg: *The Mosher Survey,* New York: Arno, 1980, which concerns a study of forty-five Victorian women, carried out by Celia Mosher. Thirty-four per cent of her respondents said they 'always' or 'usually' experienced orgasm in sexual relations, a rate which compares favourably with the Kinsey Report on women. The extraordinary work by Ronald Hyam: *Empire and Sexuality,* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, demonstrates

that 'Victorianism' cannot be understood if limited to Britain. 'Repression' at home went along with widespread sexual licence in the imperial domains – on the part of the male colonisers.

13 Quoted in Carol Adams: *Ordinary Lives,* London: Virago, **1982,** p. **129.**

14 Amber Hollibaugh: 'Desire for the future: radical hope in passion and pleasure', in Carole S. Vance: *Pleasure and Danger. Exploring Female Sexuality,* London: Routledge, **1984,** p. **403.**

15 Paul Brown and Carolyn Faulder: *Treat Yourself to Sex,* Harmondsworth: Penguin, **1979,** p. **35.**

16 Quoted in Adams: *Ordinary Lives,* p. **138.**

17 This point is developed in some detail in Barbara Ehrenreich et al.: *Re-making Love,* London: Fontana, **1987.**

18 Foucault: 'The confession of the flesh'.

19 Jacques-Alain Miller, contribution to Foucault: 'The confession of the flesh'. See also Mark Cousins and Athar Hussain: *Michel Foucault,* London: Macmillan, **1984,** pp. **212–15.**

20 Betty Frieden: *The Feminine Mystique,* Harmondsworth: Penguin, **1965.**

21 Anthony Giddens: *Modernity and Self-Identity,* Cambridge: Polity, **1991.**

22 Sigmund Freud: 'The sexual aberrations', in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* Standard Edition, London: Hogarth, **1953,** p. **160.**

23 Jeffrey Weeks: *Sexuality,* London: Tavistock, **1986,** ch. 4.

24 Giddens: *Modernity and Self-Identity.*

3

ROMANTIC LOVE AND OTHER ATTACHMENTS

'Love', Bronislaw Malinowski observes in his study of the Trobriand Islanders, 'is a passion to the Melanesian as to the European, and torments mind and body to a greater or lesser extent; it leads to many an *impasse,* scandal, or tragedy; more rarely, it illuminates life and makes the heart expand and overflow with joy.'[1] Numerous examples of love poetry survive among the relics of Ancient Egypt, some dating back from more than 1000 BC. Love is there portrayed as overwhelming the ego, and thus akin to a kind of sickness, although also having healing powers:

> The sight of her makes me well!
> When she opens her eyes my body is young,
> Her speaking makes me strong;
> Embracing her expels my malady –
> Seven days since she went from me![2]

While the secular use of the word 'passion' – as distinct from its older usage, meaning religious passion – is relatively modern, it makes sense to regard passionate love, *amour passion,*[3] as expressing a generic connection between love and sexual attachment. Passionate love is marked by an urgency which sets it apart from the routines of everyday life with which, indeed, it tends to come into conflict. The

emotional involvement with the other is pervasive – so strong that it may lead the individual, or both individuals, to ignore their ordinary obligations. Passionate love has a quality of enchantment which can be religious in its fervour. Everything in the world seems suddenly fresh, yet perhaps at the same time fails to capture the individual's interest, which is so strongly bound up with the love object. On the level of personal relations, passionate love is specifically disruptive in a similar sense to charisma; it uproots the individual from the mundane and generates a preparedness to consider radical options as well as sacrifices[4] For this reason, seen from the point of view of social order and duty, it is dangerous. It is hardly surprising that passionate love has nowhere been recognised as either a necessary or sufficient basis for marriage, and in most cultures has been seen as refractory to it.

Passionate love is a more or less universal phenomenon. It should be differentiated, I shall argue, from romantic love, which is much more culturally specific. In what follows I shall try to identify certain distinctive features of romantic love and pursue their implications. My purpose is primarily analytic; I am not concerned to write a history of romantic love, even in miniature. However, to begin with, a very brief historical interpretation is needed.

Marriage, sexuality and romantic love

In pre-modern Europe, most marriages were contracted, not on the basis of mutual sexual attraction, but economic circumstance. Among the poor marriage was a means of organising agrarian labour. A life characterised by unremitting hard labour was unlikely to be conducive to sexual passion. It has been claimed that among the peasantry in seventeenth-century France and Germany, kissing, caressing and other forms of physical affection associated with sex were rare among married couples. Opportunities for men to engage in extramarital liaisons, however, were often quite numerous.[5]

Only among aristocratic groups was sexual licence openly permitted among 'respectable' women. Sexual freedom follows power and is an expression of it; at certain times and places, in aristocratic strata, women were sufficiently liberated from the demands of reproduction, and from routine work, to be able to pursue their independent sexual pleasure. Of course, this was virtually never connected with marriage. Most civilisations seem to have created stories and myths which drive home the message that those who seek to create permanent attachments through passionate love are doomed.

The differentiation drawn between the 'chaste' sexuality of marriage and the erotic or passionate character of extramarital affairs was quite common among other aristocracies besides those of Europe. Specific to Europe was the emergence of ideals of love closely connected to the moral values of Christianity.[6] The precept that one should devote oneself to God in order to know him, and that through this process self-knowledge is achieved, became part of a mystical unity between man and woman. The temporary idealisation of the other typical of passionate love here was joined to a more permanent involvement with the love object; and a certain reflexivity was already present even at an early date.[7]

Romantic love, which began to make its presence felt from the late eighteenth century onwards, drew upon such ideals and incorporated elements of amour passion, while nevertheless becoming distinct from both. Romantic love introduced the idea of a narrative into an individual's life – a formula which radically extended the reflexivity of sublime love. The telling of a story is one of the meanings of 'romance', but this story now became individualised, inserting self and

other into a personal narrative which had no particular reference to wider social processes. The rise of romantic love more or less coincided with the emergence of the novel: the connection was one of newly discovered narrative form.

The complex of ideas associated with romantic love for the first time associated love with freedom, both being seen as normatively desirable states. Passionate love has always been liberating, but only in the sense of generating a break with routine and duty. It was precisely this quality of ***amour passion*** which set it apart from existing institutions. Ideals of romantic love, by contrast, inserted themselves directly into the emergent ties between freedom and self-realisation.

In romantic love attachments, the element of sublime love tends to predominate over that of sexual ardour. The importance of this point can hardly be overstressed. The romantic love complex is in this respect as historically unusual as traits Max Weber found combined in the protestant ethic.[8] Love breaks with sexuality while embracing it; 'virtue' begins to take on a new sense for both sexes, no longer meaning only innocence but qualities of character which pick out the other person as 'special'.

Romantic love is often thought of as implying instantaneous attraction – 'love at first sight'. In so far as immediate attraction is part of romantic love, however, it has to be separated quite sharply from the sexual/erotic compulsions of passionate love. The 'first glance' is a communicative gesture, an intuitive grasp of qualities of the other. It is a process of attraction to someone who can make one's life, as it is said, 'complete'.

The idea of 'romance', in the sense which the term came to assume in the nineteenth century, both expressed and contributed to secular changes affecting social life as a whole.[9] Modernity is inseparable from the ascendancy of reason, in the sense that rational understanding of physical and social processes is supposed to replace the arbitrary rule of mysticism and dogma. Reason has no place for emotion,

which simply lies outside its domain; but in fact emotional life became reordered in the changing conditions of day-to-day activities. Up to the threshold of the modern age, love charms, philtres and aphrodisiacs were the stock in trade of 'cunning' men and women, who could be turned to in order to help control the vagaries of sexual involvements. Alternatively, the priest could be consulted. The fate of the individual, however, in personal attachments as in other spheres, was tied to a broader cosmic order. 'Romance', as understood from the eighteenth century onwards, still had resonances of prior conceptions of cosmic fate, but mixed these with an attitude that looked to an open future. A romance was no longer, as it generally had been before, a specifically unreal conjuring of possibilities in a realm of fiction. Instead, it became a potential avenue for controlling the future, as well as a form of psychological security (in principle) for those whose lives were touched by it.

Gender and love

Some have said that romantic love was a plot engineered by men against women, in order to fill their minds with idle and impossible dreams. Yet such a view cannot explain the appeal of romantic literature, or the fact that women played a large part in its diffusion. 'There is scarce a young lady in the kingdom', a writer in ***The Lady's Magazine*** observed, with some hyperbole, in 1773, 'who has not read with avidity a great number of romances and novels.' These publications, the writer went on to add sourly, 'tend to vitiate the taste'.[10] An increasing tide of romantic novels and stories, which has not abated to this day – many written by women – flooded the bookstores from the early nineteenth century onwards.

The rise of the romantic love complex has to be understood in relation to several sets of influences which affected

women from about the late eighteenth century onwards. One was the creation of the home, already referred to. A second was the changing relations between parents and children; a third was what some have termed the 'invention of motherhood'. So far as the status of women was concerned, all of these were quite closely integrated."

Whether or not childhood itself is a creation of the relatively recent past, as Aries has so famously claimed, it is beyond dispute that patterns of parent-child interaction altered substantially, for all classes, during the 'repressive' Victorian period. The strictness of the Victorian father is legendary. Yet in some respects patriarchal power in the domestic milieu was on the wane by the latter part of the nineteenth century. For the direct rule of the male over the household, comprehensive in nature when it was still the centre of a production system, became weakened with the separation of the home and the workplace. The husband held ultimate power, to be sure, but a growing emphasis upon the importance of emotional warmth between parents and children frequently softened his use of it. Women's control over child-rearing grew as families became smaller and children came to be identified as vulnerable and in need of long-term emotional training. As Mary Ryan has put it, the centre of the household moved 'from patriarchal authority to maternal affection'.[12]

Idealisation of the mother was one strand in the modern construction of motherhood, and undoubtedly fed directly into some of the values propagated about romantic love. The image of 'wife and mother' reinforced a 'two sex' model of activities and feelings. Women were recognised by men to be different, unknowable – concerned with a particular domain alien to men. The idea that each sex is a mystery to the other is an old one, and has been represented in various ways in different cultures. The distinctively novel element here was the association of motherhood with femininity as qualities of the personality – qualities which certainly

infused widely held conceptions of female sexuality. As an article on marriage published in 1839 observed, 'the man bears rule over his wife's person and conduct. She bears the rule of his inclinations: he governs by law; she by persuasion . . . The empire of the woman is an empire of softness . . . her commands are caresses, her menaces are tears.'[13]

Romantic love was essentially feminised love. As Francesca Cancian has shown, prior to the late eighteenth century, if love was spoken about at all in relation to marriage, it was as companionate love, linked to the mutual responsibility of husbands and wives for running the household or farm. Thus in The Well-Ordered Family, which appeared just after the turn of the century, Benjamin Wadsworth wrote of the married couple that 'the duty of love is mutual, it should be performed by each to each'.[14] With the division of spheres, however, the fostering of love became predominantly the task of women. Ideas about romantic love were plainly allied to women's subordination in the home, and her relative separation from the outside world. But the development of such ideas was also an expression of women's power, a contradictory assertion of autonomy in the face of deprivation.

For men the tensions between romantic love and amour passion were dealt with by separating the comfort of the domestic environment from the sexuality of the mistress or whore. Male cynicism towards romantic love was readily bolstered by this division, which none the less implicitly accepted the feminisation of 'respectable' love. The prevalence of the double standard gave women no such outlet. Yet the fusion of ideals of romantic love and motherhood did allow women to develop new domains of intimacy. During the Victorian period, male friendship lost much of the quality of mutual involvement that comrades held for one another. Feelings of male comradeship were largely relegated to marginal activities, like sport or other leisure pursuits, or participation in war. For many women, things

moved in the opposite direction. As specialists of the heart, women met each other on a basis of personal and social equality, within the broad spectra of class divisions. Friendships between women helped mitigate the disappointments of marriage, but also proved rewarding in their own right. Women spoke of friendships, as men often did, in terms of love; and they found there a true confessional.[15]

Avid consumption of romantic novels and stories was in one sense a testimony to passivity. The individual sought in fantasy what was denied in the ordinary world. The unreality of romantic stories from this angle was an expression of weakness, an inability to come to terms with frustrated self-identity in actual social life. Yet romantic literature was also (and is today) a literature of hope, a sort of refusal. It often rejected the idea of settled domesticity as the only salient ideal. In many romantic stories, after a flirtation with other types of men, the heroine discovers the' virtues of the solid, reliable individual who makes a dependable husband. At least as often, however, the true hero is a flamboyant adventurer, distinguished by his exotic characteristics, who ignores convention in the pursuit of an errant life.

Let me sum up to this point. Romantic love became distinct from amour passion, although at the same time had residues of it. Amour passion was never a generic social force in the way in which romantic love has been from somewhere in the late eighteenth century up to relatively recent times. Together with other social changes, the spread of notions of romantic love was deeply involved with momentous transitions affecting marriage as well as other contexts of personal life. Romantic love presumes some degree of self-interrogation. How do I feel about the other? How does the other feel about me? Are our feelings 'profound' enough to support a long-term involvement? Unlike amour passion, which uproots erratically, romantic love detaches individuals from wider social circumstances in a different way. It

provides for a long-term life trajectory, oriented to an anticipated yet malleable future; and it creates a 'shared history' that helps separate out the marital relationship from other aspects of family organisation and give it a special primacy.

From its earliest origins, romantic love raises the question of intimacy. It is incompatible with lust, and with earthy sexuality, not so much because the loved one is idealised – although this is part of the story – but because it presumes a psychic communication, a meeting of souls which is reparative in character. The other, by being who he or she is, answers a lack which the individual does not even necessarily recognise – until the love relation is initiated. And this lack is directly to do with self-identity: in some sense, the flawed individual is made whole.

Romantic love made of amour passion a specific cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to transcendence; romantic love may end in tragedy, and feed upon transgression, but it also produces triumph, a conquest of mundane prescriptions and compromises. Such love projects in two senses: it fastens upon and idealises another, and it projects a course of future development. Although most authors have concentrated on the first of these traits, the second is at least equally as important and in a sense underlies it. The dream-like, fantasy character of romance, as described in the popular literature of the nineteenth century, drew scorn from rationalist critics, male and female, who saw in it an absurd or pathetic escapism. In the view suggested here, however, romance is the counterfactual thinking of the deprived – and in the nineteenth century and thereafter participated in a major reworking of the conditions of personal life.

In romantic love, the absorption by the other typical of amour passion is integrated into the characteristic orientation of 'the quest'. The quest is an odyssey, in which self-identity awaits its validation from the discovery of the other. It has

an active character, and in this respect modern romance contrasts with medieval romantic tales, in which the heroine usually is relatively passive. The women in modern romantic novels are mostly independent and spirited, and have consistently been portrayed in this way.[16] The conquest motif in these stories is not like the male version of sexual conquest: the heroine meets and melts the heart of a man who is initially indifferent to and aloof from her, or openly hostile. The heroine thus actively produces love. Her love causes her to become loved in return, dissolves the indifference of the other and replaces antagonism with devotion.

If the ethos of romantic love is simply understood as the means whereby a woman meets Mr Right, it appears shallow indeed. Yet although in literature, as in life, it is sometimes represented in this way, the capturing of the heart of the other is in fact a process of the creation of a mutual narrative biography. The heroine tames, softens and alters the seemingly intractable masculinity of her love object, making it possible for mutual affection to become the main guiding-line of their lives together.

The intrinsically subversive character of the romantic love complex was for a long while held in check by the association of love with marriage and motherhood; and by the idea that true love, once found, is for ever. When marriage, for many of the population, effectively *was* for ever, the structural congruence between romantic love and sexual partnership was clear-cut. The result may often have been years of unhappiness, given the tenuous connection between love as a formula for marriage and the demands of getting on later. Yet an effective, if not particularly rewarding, marriage could be sustained by a division of labour between the sexes, with the domain of the husband that of paid work and the wife that of the home. We can see in this regard how important the confining of female sexuality to marriage was as a mark of the 'respectable' woman. For this at the same time allowed men to maintain their distance from the

burgeoning realm of intimacy and kept the state of being married as a primary aim of women.

NOTES

1 Bronislaw Malinowski: *The Sexual Life of Savages,* London: Routledge, 1929, p. 69.
2 Quoted in Martin S. Bergmann: *The Anatomy of Loving,* New York: Columbia, 1987, p. 4.
3 The term is Stendhal's, but I do not follow his meaning of it, or the classification of types of love that he offered. One might note in parenthesis that, in the early period of its development, social science was closely intertwined with speculation about the nature of love, and also about the divisions between the sexes. Stendhal was strongly influenced by Destutt de Tracy and referred to his work on love as 'a book of ideology'. He meant by this a 'discourse on ideas', but it also takes the form of a social investigation. Comte's fascination with love is documented in his later writings and evidenced by his association with Clothilde de Vaux. By the 'classic' period of the formation of modern sociology, however, these influences had become submerged. Durkheim, for example, who drew extensively on Comte in other respects, had little time for Comte's later work and referred to it with some scorn.
4 Francesco Alberoni: *Falling in Love,* New York: Random House, 1983.
5 Michael Mitterauer and Reinhard Sieder: *The European Family,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1982, pp. 126–9. These claims are controversial among historians, however.
6 This is discussed in a particularly subtle way in Niklas Luhmann: *Love as Passion,* Cambridge: Polity, 1986, ch. 5.
7 Beatrice Gottlieb: 'The meaning of clandestine marriage', in Robert Wheaton and Tamara K. Hareven: *Family and Sexuality in French History,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.
8 Max Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* London: Allen and Unwin, 1976.
9 Lawrence Stone: *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England* 1500–1800, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1982, pp. 189ff.

10 **Ibid., p. 189.**
11 **Ann Dally:** *Inventing Motherhood,* **London: Burnett, 1982. See also Elizabeth Badinter:** *Myth of Motherhood,* **London: Souvenir, 1981.**
12 **Mary Ryan:** *The Cradle of the Middle Class,* **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 102.**
13 **Francesca M. Cancian:** *Love in America,* **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 21.**
14 **Quoted in ibid., p. 15.**
15 **Nancy Cott:** *The Bonds of Womanhood,* **New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977; Janice Raymond:** *A Passion for Friends,* **London: Women's Press, 1986.**
16 **JaniceA. Radway:** *Reading the Romance,* **Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.**

4

LOVE, COMMITMENT AND THE PURE RELATIONSHIP

In the late 1980s, Sharon Thompson carried out an investigation of the attitudes, values and sexual behaviour of 150 American teenagers from different class and ethnic backgrounds.' She found major differences between the ways in which the boys discussed sex (they did not often speak of love) in the course of her lengthy interviews with them and the responses of the girls. The boys appeared unable to talk about sex in a narrative form, as a connection to an envisaged future.[2] They spoke mainly about sporadic sexual episodes, such as early heterosexual play or diverse sexual conquests. When she questioned the girls, on the other hand, Thompson found that almost every individual she talked to, with little prompting, could produce lengthy stories 'imbued with the discoveries, anguish, and elation of intimate relations'.[3] The girls, she says, had something approaching the skills of professional novelists in their ability to recount a detailed and complex tale; many talked for several hours with little contribution needed from the interviewer.

The fluent nature of these narratives of self, Thompson argues, derived in large part from the fact that they had been rehearsed. They were the result of the many hours of conversations teenage girls have with one another, during the course of which feelings and hopes are discussed and

THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTIMACY

Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies

Anthony Giddens

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California
1992

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

Originating publisher: Polity Press, Cambridge, in association with
Blackwell Publishers, Oxford
First published in the U.S.A. by Stanford University Press, 1992
Printed in Great Britain
ISBN 0-8047-2090-8
LC 92-80406

This book is printed on acid-free paper

CONTENTS