

Messengers of Eros

Messengers of Eros:
Representations of Sex in Australian Writing

By

Xavier Pons

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P U B L I S H I N G

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‘Writing is like having an affair.’
—Françoise Sagan

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INTRODUCTION

COMINGS AND GOINGS

In the late 1960s and early 70s sex was officially pronounced to be enjoyable, and books were written to prove it—witness Alex Comfort’s prototypical *The Joy of Sex*¹, which was followed by titles such as *The Joy of Gay Sex*,² *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*,³ *The Joy of Solo Sex*⁴ and, more recently of course, *The Joy of Cybersex*.⁵ There was just no escaping the joy, including the joy of writing sex.⁶

Men and women alike were supposed to take pleasure in sex. In fact, it became pretty much compulsory—anyone announcing that sex did nothing for them would have been greeted by shock and horror. Conversely, film and fiction became much freer to depict sex in explicit ways as censorship lost most of its grip—and depict it they did, sometimes *ad nauseam*.

But, from the mid-80s on, a kind of revulsion seems to have taken place. The appearance of AIDS put paid to the joys of promiscuity, of which Western cultures appeared to have had a surfeit. Monogamy and even chastity were in again.⁷ Not that sex was actually demonized in these cultures—only some kinds of it, whether unprotected, adulterous or paedophilic. The genie had not been returned to its bottle—it had been consigned to a bigger bottle where it could exercise itself a bit, but not to Clintonian excess.

The wowseryism that had characterized Australian culture for so many decades was back in action, though in somewhat different guise, as *The Age* recalled in 2004:

Remember those days in the ‘70s when bright young bohemian things thought nothing of shedding their clothes—and inhibitions—to dance nude in a park?

Well, wake up Australia. If today’s youth were to try something like that, they would be more likely to be arrested, said sociologist Gail Hawkes, who bemoans in the book *Perspectives in Human Sexuality*, that the nation is becoming ‘nannified’ in matters of sexuality [...] ‘Our society does not have a problem with the biological or mechanical aspect of sex but pleasure associated with it is still considered quite disruptive,’ she said.⁸

When I turn to a number of novels or stories to look at the way they present the pleasures and pains of sex, I don't mean to suggest that fiction merely mirrors the evolution of society and serves to confirm the assertions or findings of sociological analysis. Clearly, there is more to literature than being a mirror carried along the road, as French novelist Stendhal would have it, and I hope this will become apparent in the course of this book. Nor do I want to suggest that some twenty years ago there was a sudden reversal in the literary treatment of sex, and that all the positives at one fell swoop turned into negatives. There is an obvious continuity between Norman Lindsay's advice, through his character Mr Bandparts, to 'Get all the fun you can out of booze and women'⁹ and Linda Jaivin's assertion that 'sex is funny'¹⁰ even though the difference between 'fun' and 'funny' might be worth analysing and Lindsay's male chauvinism has become quite unacceptable.

There are different ways in which sex can be pleasurable. It can be seen as an expression of love, and this gives it a very positive value. After stating that his parents disagreed on almost everything, the narrator in Peter Goldsworthy's *Maestro* adds: 'Something bound them together—some deeper language held in common. The sweet, sticky glue of sex perhaps...'¹¹ Sex, then, would seem to be the basic underpinning of the conjugal relationship, and it is sex which makes the relationship durable. People form a couple, not because they share the same view of the world or have invested in the relationship (an investment which can take the form of children or property) but because they enjoy having sex together. This is tantamount to ascribing almost magical properties to sex, and it is an opinion that may have a lot to do with the teenage narrator's own discovery of sex, even if it is only in the form of fantasies about a girl from school.¹²

It is far more common to see sex presented as distinct from love, though not unrelated to it, two sides of the same coin perhaps, each of which enhances the other, as is the case for Catherine in John A. Scott's *What I Have Written*.¹³

Sex is the necessary though not sufficient condition for a durable and pleasurable relationship. Few writers, however, will praise it for its sake alone, and in this respect Linda Jaivin seems to be an exception. In *Eat Me* in particular, she presents sex as a truly delightful sensual experience, frequently expressed through food metaphors. Jaivin's characters have a great time in bed, 'a long and luscious fuck,' as she candidly puts it. Sex is undoubtedly a source of great sensual delights. But these are seldom

unalloyed—sex is a source of pain as well as pleasure. It is not just that diseases such as AIDS can turn it into a life-threatening occupation—this is by far the most dramatic downside to sex but there are other and less spectacular ones.

Sex can be boring—a conjugal duty that is performed unwillingly and brings absolutely no satisfaction, as between Isobel and Michael in Amy Witting's *I for Isobel*: 'It was a bit sad, really, the approach that was half joke and half quarrel, then working and moaning and gasping together in the dark (and one of them putting on an act, at that), avoiding all signs of love, and what they had in common, the map of the mind and dislike of their bodies, not to be spoken of.'¹⁴ Even unmarried partners can succumb to the sexual boredom induced by lack of variety, like the protagonist in Fiona McGregor's 'Committed': 'Max is going into stoned detail about how bored she gets having sex with the same person.'¹⁵ Completely divorced from passion, this kind of sex presumably provides relief or release of a kind to the male partner, but even that is rather pathetic. The joylessness of those encounters brings into question the patriarchal order which underpins it, forcing women into a submissive posture. Sex becomes a form of exploitation. This is particularly evident when it comes to prostitution, especially when the victims are Asian women exploited both by their own men and their white customers, as described in Gerard Lee's *Tropo Man*, where the rat-faced Bali pimp tries to tempt Matt:

He came back to the window, and pulled up from behind him a woman in her mid-thirties wearing a Garfield T-shirt and a red-spangled headband.

'OK, you look, please.'

Their eyes met; hers were matter-of-fact, almost bored. She'd been asleep. Matt looked away.

'Fucky, fucky?' the Rat was saying. 'She like. She like wid you.'

Matt couldn't look at her again.'¹⁶

Sex here becomes not just the exploitation of women by men, but also the exploitation of Asians by Europeans (with some Asian complicity), sexism merging with colonialism. The Australian character at least has the decency of being ashamed.

To J.M. Coetzee—or rather his one-legged narrator Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*—the beauty or otherwise of sex is predicated on the beauty (or otherwise) of the lovers. The desire a person inspires is proportionate to his or her physical attractiveness:

Eros. Why does the sight of the beautiful call eros into life? Why does the spectacle of the hideous strangle desire? Does intercourse with the

beautiful elevate us, make better people of us, or is it by embracing the diseased, the mutilated, the repulsive that we improve ourselves?¹⁷

It is true that sex can be ugly, ludicrous or downright repulsive. But Paul's view is superficial and mistaken, driven by his painful awareness of how physically diminished he is himself. Physical beauty has in fact little to do with desire—the Venus of Milo, for all its perfection, is not especially erotic. And, if one is so inclined, one can find ugliness or even hideousness in any partner, in any manifestation of sexuality. Like beauty itself, erotic attraction is mostly in the eye of the beholder—whatever floats your boat. The things that Paul deplores about sex—‘the underside of sex: stains, smells’¹⁸—have nothing to do with how physically perfect or imperfect the lovers are.

Sex mirrors the power relations in the wider society. The loss of control over one's body when it is offered up for sex to someone who is not desired, whether a stranger or a husband, is a very significant expression of social impotence. In this sense sex, particularly as far as women (and children) are concerned, is apt to become an instrument of oppression. The pleasure experienced by one of the partners is the counterpart of the other's humiliation. This is the power conception of sex, which denies reciprocity and equality. It appears in a good many Australian works of fiction featuring heterosexual as well as homosexual characters. But many female characters seem resigned to its joylessness, like Maurilia Meehan's Djuna in ‘A Grand Passion’:

She had had a few escorts to dances, a few quick gropes in the back of a panel van which had taken care of her virginity and had made her associate intimacy with depression... She had never been what *New Idea* called ‘involved’ with a man. A few flings, a few exploratory nights spent with hurried lovers, left her feeling that books were more satisfying than lovemaking.¹⁹

Women are not the only victims of sex, however. Gordon, the protagonist of Andrew McGahan's *Praise*, also finds sex depressing: ‘I was beginning to suspect that Cynthia's orgasms came not so much from anything *I* did, as from her ability to turn herself on to things, to anything, and anyone. I could've *been* anyone. Maybe that was the way it would always be with sex, and maybe there was nothing so surprising about it, but I felt the need to do something more. I had to prove my existence. I needed power.’²⁰ Like Meehan's female characters, he feels disempowered and alienated by sex.

So we return to the notion of power, which seems inseparable from that of sex, as a term such as ‘impotence’ shows, and we must take into

account the related notion of transgression. Even in Linda Jaivin's *Eat Me*, with its emphasis on how fun it is to have sex, the power motif is unmistakable. Her characters enjoy power games—thus Chantal 'felt powerful and attractive and slutty, a truly wonderful combination.'²¹ They enjoy sex because they have it mostly on their own terms, and feel thoroughly in charge.

Through the *topos* of sex, Australian fiction is able to explore a variety of power relationships and to confirm Michel Foucault's contention that 'power relationships are not in a position of externality in respect of other relationships such as economic processes, knowledge relationships or sexual relationships—they are immanent in them.'²²

Much of the dispirited sex one finds in so-called 'grunge' fiction has to do with the characters' sense that, for whatever reason—psychological, social, political—they are not in control of their lives, like the heroine of Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia*, who says: 'I looked at my life and hated it, hated everything and immediately burst into tears.'²³ Feeling disenfranchised, they seek comfort in sex but only find further alienation.

If pleasurable sex is sex that produces a feeling of empowerment, it means it has a lot to do with transgression—the breaking of rules or norms which gives the transgressor a sense of being above the law or of being more daring than the common run, thus producing a sense of power which translates into pleasure—what John A. Scott calls 'the exhilaration of sin.'²⁴ A sense of well-being and freedom results from transgression, much as Roland Barthes contended that 'perversion *makes one happy*; or, to be more accurate, it produces a *plus*.'²⁵

What might this plus be? In some cases it is an awareness that one is different from the norm and thus part of a kind of transgressive aristocracy: the gay narrator in Moorhouse's *Everlasting Secret Family* speaks of 'years of feeling privately superior'²⁶. It is equally the result of being at one with oneself, true to one's nature, of having slipped the shackles with which society attempts to restrain those people whose inclinations it disapproves of.

Not all transgressions are empowering. Thus, both male and female homosexuality are still widely regarded as 'filthy,' 'unnatural' or an 'abomination,' and social disapproval can take away much of the potential joy of the experience. Maureen, the lesbian narrator in Elizabeth Riley's *All That False Instruction*, is painfully aware of society's condemnation of women like herself:

The word—the awful slimy word, lesbian—was a continuous discord at the back of my mind... Two highly intelligent young women gingering in total darkness. Both of us needing desperately a physical warmth which

seemed to have nothing to do with such a loaded and nasty idea as lesbianism. Yet the label pushed itself forward. We knew we had to hide though no-one had ever told either of us. Unspoken rules overshadowed the present and drew doubt on the tangible affection between us. How unnatural that neither of us could trust her own feelings.²⁷

Society instils a sense of disgrace and guilt into these women and condemns them to ‘a secretive subterranean existence—underpinned by [their] unremitting shame of the body itself,’ as Maureen puts it.²⁸

Gay men face very similar problems. The discovery of his homosexual inclinations can be extremely disturbing for a teenager and lead to feelings of shame and self-loathing, as in the case of the fifteen-year-old narrator of Kate Walker’s *Peter*.²⁹ The greater permissiveness of society today has failed to legitimize homosexuality, which continues to attract bitter reprobation—as was evidenced in 2008 by the rantings of an Anglican priest against Justice Michael Kirby’s ‘sin’ and ‘wrongdoing’ in being gay.³⁰

The practices that society frowns upon are often labelled perversions. There is something both exhilarating and constrictive about them—the exhilaration of being at once different and true to one’s nature, and the constriction that comes from the risk of being found out and of paying the price for one’s transgressions. At bottom, it is perhaps this delicate balance between gratification and apprehension that is enjoyable.

What Australian novelists seem to be saying when they write about sex is that its pleasures have less to do with the factors which usually come to mind, such as love, tenderness or, at the other extreme, physical performance and release, and more with a sense of being in control of one’s desires, free of domination and compulsion. This is a very appropriate perspective in a postcolonial culture. While power struggles between the sexes and between the classes occur in all societies, a postcolonial, multiethnic nation such as Australia is characterized among other things by unequal relationships between its various ethnic communities, and more particularly by the historical white dominance³¹ as well as its continuing contestation by minorities, notably the Aborigines. Inevitably, Aboriginal and multicultural writers address the power/sex nexus in terms that reflect their communities’ condition within Australian society, and from a different point of view to that of mainstream, white, Anglo writers. Not that the latter are indifferent to their preoccupations, as witness K.S. Prichard or Xavier Herbert, but their very whiteness amounts to blinkers that simply cannot be put aside.

To write about sex, then, is to address a host of issues—social, psychological and literary—which together pretty much define a culture.

While it may result in mere titillation and levity, more often than not it takes us to the heart, not just the genitals, of the human condition.

Representing sex in writing may sound easy—after all, pornographers are a dime a dozen. But representing it with any literary merit is something else again. The writer must guard against the twin pitfalls of a graphic explicitness that is apt to become tedious and clichéd through repetition, and of an allusiveness that will appear to be mere bashfulness (unless it is intended to protect the writer against the censor's ire). In walking this tightrope, he or she will perforce resort to an array of rhetorical devices. Literary representations of any subject require a staging, a *mise en scène*, in order to be effective—just trying to copy reality will never do: after all, as Murray Bail recalled, 'the word "dog" doesn't bite.'³² Art does not reproduce reality—the artist's imagination stimulates and expands our own, giving us to see a new reality, one that is invented yet compelling. Maybe Picasso put it best when he said 'Some painters transform the sun into a yellow spot, others transform a yellow spot into the sun.' This transformation is where the merit of literary sex lies, and this is what the critic should never lose sight of.

Authors also represent sex in a somewhat different sense—by acting out their own sex in their writing. Although a language is the common property of all who speak it,³³ its practice, especially through writing, is not a gender-free activity, conducted in exactly the same manner by men and women,³⁴ by heterosexuals and homosexuals. Something of the author's gender and sexual orientation will appear in their very writing, which is an extension of their own self, flesh turned into ink. I'm not suggesting that there can't be any ambiguity in this respect, nor do I propose to focus systematically on this complex and controversial issue. But it is worth keeping it in mind and bringing it to the fore as the case may require.

This book makes no attempt to be comprehensive—it is no encyclopaedia. Its aim is to shine a light on some perhaps neglected corners of that vast construction site that is Australian literature rather than explore its full extent. The first few chapters seek to clarify such concepts as desire, transgression, perversion, obscenity, etc., as well as the conundrum that is the representation of sex in literature. They approach those notions through references to a variety of mostly contemporary Australian authors. In the next chapters the focus shifts to one, or two or at most three specific authors to review their approach to specific sexual themes. The last two chapters return to a broader focus to examine the way

multicultural and indigenous writers tackle questions of ethnic identity by way of its sexual dimension and, in the process, deploy original literary strategies.

Notes

¹ Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex*, Ringwood : Penguin, 1975.

² Charles Silverstein, *The Joy of Gay Sex*, New York : Crown Publishers, 1977.

³ Emily L. Sisley & Bertha Harris, *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*, New York : Crown Publishers, 1977.

⁴ Harold Litten, *The Joy of Solo Sex*, Mobile, AL : Factor Press, 1993.

⁵ Deb Levine, *The Joy of Cybersex*, New York : Ballantine Books, 1998.

⁶ cf. Elizabeth Benedict, *The Joy of Writing Sex*, Cincinnati, Ohio : Story Press, 1996.

⁷ cf. the popularity of the puritanical ideology of figures such as Jerry Falwell and the so-called Moral Majority.

⁸ F. Farouque, 'Nude's now too rude,' *The Age*, 21 December 2004.

⁹ Norman Lindsay, *Redheap*, Sydney : Humorbooks, 1966 [1930], p.310.

¹⁰ Linda Jaivin, *Confessions of an S&M Virgin*, Melbourne : Text Publishing, 1997, p.66.

¹¹ Peter Goldsworthy, *Maestro*, Sydney : Angus & Robertson, 1989, p.16.

¹² 'It was the feel of her soft, thick hair that woke me one late May morning, hard and pulsing below the waist, the bedsheets sticky with a strange pale honey, the first I'd seen.

The glow of that first coming stayed with me all morning, carrying me through long hours of Maths and Physics and Modern History. I was lost to the world of ideas—lifted to some high hormonal plateau, feeling manly, invulnerable, immensely content' (ibid., p.32).

¹³ John A. Scott, *What I Have Written*, Melbourne : McPhee Gribble, 1993, p.86.

¹⁴ Amy Witting, *I for Isobel*, Ringwood : Penguin, 1989, p.133.

¹⁵ Fiona McGregor, *Suck My Toes*, Ringwood : McPhee Gribble, 1994, p. 91.

¹⁶ in Robin Gerster (ed), *Hotel Asia*, Ringwood : Penguin, 1995, p.421.

¹⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Slow Man*, London : Secker & Warburg, 2005, p.108.

¹⁸ ibid. p.125.

¹⁹ Maurilia Meehan, *Performances*, pp.12-14.

²⁰ Andrew McGahan, *Praise*, Sydney : Allen & Unwin, 1992, p.45.

²¹ Linda Jaivin, *Eat Me*, p.84.

²² Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1 : *La volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, pp.123-24.

²³ Justine Ettler, *The River Ophelia*, Sydney, Picador, 1995, p.40.

²⁴ John A. Scott, *What I Have Written*, p.114.

²⁵ *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris : Le Seuil, 'Ecrivains de Toujours,' 1975, p.68.

²⁶ Frank Moorhouse, *The Everlasting Secret Family* (1980), quoted in Robert Dessaix, *Gay and Lesbian Writing—An Anthology*, Melbourne : OUP, 1993, p.146.

²⁷ in R. Dessaix (ed) *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing*, p.36.

²⁸ E. Riley, *All that False Instruction*, in R. Dessaix, op. cit., p.37.

²⁹ cf. R. Dessaix, op. cit., p.93.

³⁰ cf. Linda Morris, 'Admit your sins to the Lord, priest tells gay judge,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 2008.

³¹ cf. Ghassan Hage, *White nation: fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, Sydney : Pluto Press, 1998.

³² Murray Bail, 'A, B, C...' in *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories*, London : Faber & Faber, 1986, p. 136.

³³ which is not the same as to say, with Chomsky, that all native speakers of a language have an innate competence in it.

³⁴ A study of the top 300 words used by prep to grade 2 students confirms it. Cf. Bridie Smith, 'Want a word ? Here are 307 of the best, according to youngsters,' *The Age*, 1 May 2008:

Researchers found social, geographic and gender differences began to emerge after the top 100 words. The word 'boy' made the girls' list but 'girl' did not make the boys' list.

'The boys are more egocentric than the girls,' Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, chair of language and literacy education at Melbourne University, said.

'The use words filled with danger and heroism (such as monster, snake, scary and shark).' Girls also tend to use words that suggest relationships or connections with other people (mum, aunty, sister), while boys are fans of possessive pronouns (mine, his).

CHAPTER ONE

RESERVOIRS OF DESIRE

The Greek god Eros (or, for that matter, his Roman counterpart Cupid)—the plump, winged, smiling infant with his bow and arrows—is an unlikely icon of the forces of desire. His sweet mischievousness seems impossibly remote from the furious passion which springs almost eternal in the loins of men and women, impelling them to explore, pleasure or hurt each other's bodies (and their own) in order to reach ecstasy and satisfy cravings which they barely understand, much less control. Linda Jaivin wrote of 'the defiant lawlessness of Eros,'¹ while in Finola Moorhead's novel *Still Murder Steve* suggests a more appropriate deity, and says:

For me the great god of the Greek pantheon is Dionysus. For me the sixties were Dionysian, when peace, love, flowers in the hair, romping naked near the streams, getting ecstatic in the hills, proclaimed days of sexual liberation... Dionysus's mother was struck by lightning and he was sewn into his father's thigh where he incubated until nine months were up and he was born. And he was born to dance and lead the ecstatic women out into the wild and make them happy and free with his satyrs and sileni and phallic symbols. He sent women mad.²

Happiness, freedom and madness—is this what the erotic experience is all about, then, whatever Greek deity is invoked? There is so much that is subjective about it that there may very well be as many definitions of the erotic as there are individuals. Anything that, whether intentionally or not, turns anyone on and arouses one's libido, can be described as erotic. It may be worth emphasizing here that one is dealing, not with a subaltern aspect of human nature—one which might profitably be ignored because it is inherently 'dirty' or 'sinful'—but with a true fundamental.

There are for us humans two life-enhancing forces, and perhaps two only: love, and the imagination. In a way, they are two sides of the same coin, for love implies the ability to project oneself outside oneself and empathize with others, which can only be achieved with a degree of imagination. Love in fact creates the loved one through the imagination³—the Juliet that Romeo loves is not the one she experienced herself to be,

the one her parents or friends knew before Romeo fell in love with her; it is a Juliet that Romeo created as his loved one and this makes her an entirely specific Juliet who simply did not exist before Romeo, through his love and his imagination, brought her into being. When love (or desire) and the imagination combine with sufficient force, the result is an erotic experience.

Freud used the term libido to designate the energy which underpins the sexual drive, and Jung extended the meaning of the word to include all aspects of psychic energy. Even in its more limited Freudian sense, it became synonymous with the postulated life instinct which impels all living organisms to preserve the coherence of the living substance and create new units so as to perpetuate themselves. Libido is a force that must be gratified if one is to survive (though its unbridled gratification can lead to disaster and ultimately death—as AIDS has sadly reminded everyone). It makes human beings embark on a ceaseless quest for gratification which, when achieved, is a source of pleasure but is not without its negative points since it tends to result in satiation. As George Bernard Shaw observed, ‘as long as I have a want, I have a reason for living. Satisfaction is death.’ Gratification can be obtained, not just through sexual intercourse, but through all the senses as well as through the imagination. Fortunately perhaps, its effects tend to be short-lived, and the sense of satisfaction wears off after a while, allowing desire to assert itself again. It is libido which lies at the heart of the interest we take in the world around us, and the beautiful or not so beautiful people in it. When libido declines—through old age, illness or drugs—one loses one’s interest in the world, and in life. Depression often sets in, and easeful death—which has been described as a state of being without desire—beckons.

If pleasure, or even ecstasy, is the expected outcome of the erotic quest, then desire is what powers the quest along, supplying the required energy and targeting the object likely to deliver. ‘Desire is the essence of man,’ Spinoza argued. This is so because humans are by nature not self-sufficient, and therefore in search of what might fill the void in their hearts. Our material wants—for food, shelter or warmth—can easily be satisfied, given the right conditions. But desire is something else again.⁴ It is not about material needs but about that extra-material dimension, the intangible plus which we crave to consummate our humanity and feel complete at last. In David Malouf’s *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, Michael Adair, who is going to hang Carney the next morning, muses on the effects of desire:

... he felt a fierce throb of desire that came from nowhere ; but wasn’t it always like that ?—the urge, the yearning, so sudden and inappropriate,

cutting in across a man's every attempt to be rational or serious ; out of some vision caught in a fugitive way in the street, and which only the blood recalls, of a bit of women's clothing hung out on a line and seductively shifting; an episode from the body's anarchic other-life, desires, lusts that a man has incessantly to beat down in a world where there is no place for such wayward stirrings, or only such crude ones as fill him afterwards with the shame of unrestraint and loss... Such common delights—why the denial ?⁵

Adair's conception, or perhaps Malouf's, highlights the features which make desire fascinating to experience, and in particular the fact that it is something like a second self, which asserts its presence out of the blue, with great energy, and wrestles with our rational self for control. Where this rational self is serious and disciplined, the desiring self, linked to the body or 'the blood,' is irresponsible, imperious and demanding. It wants satisfaction, and it wants it now. It disturbs the normal course of our lives by setting up its own agenda regardless of what purpose we may have been pursuing. French authors Jean-Paul Aron and Roger Kempf describe it by resorting to a revealing animal metaphor: desire is 'the beast lurking in us, wild, ever ready to pounce and devour.'⁶

Desire has often been celebrated as the embodiment of the life force. Adair sees it as something constructive, which makes life worth living: 'desire [...] was, after all, what kept the world itself in existence, or all the part of it, at least, that was human ; kept humanity, in all its irrepressible millions, breathing and pushing for place, for a little light and air, a little dignity too, before it was crushed back into the dust...'⁷ This underlines one of the many paradoxes of desire: although it springs from the animal, instinctual part of men and women, and stands in opposition to reason, it is what makes them living and breathing human beings. Where instinct and need can be tamed and harnessed to socially useful purposes, desire is always a rebel, disdainful of any purpose but its own, that is gratification. To experience it is to feel oneself alive, to have an appetite for living.

For all that, the expression of desire often finds itself repressed. Sometimes repression, in the form of censorship, comes from the outside—from society at large, or from particular social groups—because of desire's subversive nature, because it is a force which, given a free rein, would threaten the higher purpose which a given society assigns to other (and usually ideological) forces: this is exemplified in Islamic fundamentalism by the repression of female sexuality, which is seen by males as a danger to their authority: any public hint of desire on the part of a woman (the use of make-up, the display of hair or bare skin, dancing or listening to non-religious music—in brief whatever sign could be

interpreted as expressing or stimulating desire) is severely repressed so that the ideological and political status quo should continue to prevail. It is not really that political and racial clashes are subsumed under the moral conflict between vice and virtue, but erotic desire does throw a spanner in their works, skewing the battle lines and complicating the perspective. Desire is usually regarded as the enemy of reason, and since in our civilization reason passes for the most reliable instrument to achieve progress and promote good, desire becomes well-nigh synonymous with evil and anarchy. To this, the many pejorative synonyms of the word abundantly testify: 'prurience,' 'cupidity,' 'lust,' 'greed,' 'covetousness,' 'rapacity,' 'rage,' 'mania,' etc.⁸ It is clearly a signifier of ill-repute, whose signified should certainly not be encouraged.

Repression may also come from the inside, via the internalization of censorship, so that the individual denies his/her own desire in a desperate attempt to conform, even at the price of a symbolical mutilation. More subtly perhaps, desire is sometimes feared by the individual as a force alien to his/her true self which would leave him/her vulnerable to rejection or domination, and would result in loss of freedom. Many philosophies teach that one should practise self-control, and this has often resulted in a sort of denigration of desire: the secret of happiness, it is sometimes said, consists in limiting desire to attainable objects. In the Buddhist conception, the highest happiness and the wise person's goal is nirvana, 'the perfect peace of the mind that is free from craving, anger and other afflictive states [when] the root causes of craving and aversion have been extinguished.'⁹

Neither do all Western commentators agree that desire is a positive, liberating force. John Kinsella has written of

Sharing a cell with lust
In the prison of desire.¹⁰

Desire, then, can be experienced as alienation, as enslavement. Because it is a force that escapes the control of reason, a second self which will not obey our consciousness, it makes us do things that rationality or ethics might disapprove of, almost against our will. When people resort to the lame excuse 'the devil made me do it' they in fact blame the desire that overcame them and impelled them to do whatever it is that is being held against them. To some, desire is indeed the devil incarnate. Giving oneself up to desire may feel like the surrender of the higher self to the lower. Hence a wish to be free of desire, as Sue Woolfe expresses it: 'The desire on one hand to go on and on, to lean towards infinity. On the other hand,

to be caught, completed, with no more yearning.¹¹ There are many sides to this negative view of desire.

Sexual desire in particular can be seen in derogatory terms because it is an expression of our animal side, and thus makes us less human, according to the narrator in Rod Jones's *Nightpictures*, who refers to 'The onset of desire when a man becomes all meat. This is the moment when we are most vulnerable.'¹² Desire, sweeping aside all rational considerations, puts one at the mercy of its object. The desiring subject can be taken advantage of, manipulated like a puppet. His or her freedom is in this sense limited by the experience of desire.

And of course the desiring subject lays him/herself open to rejection, which can hurt even more. 'I need things that don't need me—this is love, this is desire,' as Jacques Derrida put it.¹³ To experience desire is to run the risk of ending up frustrated. Hence the reaction of Frank Moorhouse's narrator in *Forty-seventeen* when he meets his ex-girlfriend again: 'He had tried during the meeting so far to push this physical desire for her away, to safeguard against desiring the unobtainable...'¹⁴ Even when there does not appear to be any risk in surrendering to one's desire, the very intensity of desire can be frightening because it foregrounds the stranger who lives in every one of us, over whom we have very little control and whose taking over is experienced as a type of alienation.

Hence a basic ambiguity about desire, which is perceived as both desirable and undesirable. Moorhouse's forty-year-old narrator is torn between his desire to experience desire, because the latter is an expression of vitality, energy—in a word, youth—and his nagging sense that he'd have greater peace of mind if he didn't: 'He found too that he desired to feel desire as much as he wanted to have sex; to feel the full juices of desire, to be restless with appetite would please him now... Or was he in fact better off without it?'¹⁵

Not only is the desiring subject enslaved by his desire, but this desire—the wild beast ever ready to pounce and devour—threatens to destroy its object: 'When we desire another person like that, we're doing them a kind of harm,' Rod Jones contends.¹⁶ This harm has little to do with the subject's intentions: desire is by nature selfish and imperialistic; it inevitably seeks to take complete control of its object, who may not unnaturally feel threatened by this tyrannical force. Hence the fear experienced by Richard Flanagan's Aijaz when faced by the desire Couta Ho has for him:

He had never been desired in this way, so overtly and so sexually. It frightened him. He had dreamt of such things and fantasized about such

things, but when confronted with the reality he felt an unease so great that he thought nothing good could come of it.¹⁷

It takes great fortitude, or self-confidence, to face and accept both one's desire for other people and that of other people for oneself. Like all experiences which can make a real difference to our lives, desire frightens the weak-hearted.

However, denying one's desire can turn out to be no less alienating than surrendering to it. As Jonathan Swift put it, 'the stoical scheme of supplying our wants by lopping off our desires is like cutting off our feet when we want shoes.'¹⁸ Desire, then, is denied at one's own peril, and one of the merits of erotic literature is precisely its confrontation of desire, as Justine Ettler acknowledged when she described her novel *The River Ophelia* as an 'excursion into uncharted waters of female desire.'¹⁹

For all the pain it causes sometimes, desire is the essential ingredient in a satisfying relationship. This is underlined by Catherine in John Scott's *What I Have Written*: 'One of the reasons I walked out on my marriage (which in many ways was a good one) was that the desire had gone. I said, I want to wait for my lover like a child waits for Christmas Day—with that same excitement and anticipation. And when he is five minutes late it is unbearable.'²⁰ If desire causes the heart to ache when fulfilment is delayed or out of reach, it is also a source of intense pleasure—not just the pleasure which comes of satisfying it, but also the pleasure of anticipating that satisfaction, of experiencing it in advance through the imagination.

Desire is selfish, but its selfishness is necessary, if not to the individual's survival, certainly to his or her fulfilment, and Norman Lindsay referred to 'the Nemesis of those who abnegate their own desires in a world of terrified submission to the demands of others.'²¹ The erotic encounter pits one's person desire against the other's, as in a contest of wills, and yielding to the other's desire is always fraught with risk—the risk of being instrumentalized, perhaps even devoured and destroyed by that raging force. In Scott's novel, Catherine muses about a life in which 'I would be desired by men and have to survive that desire.'²² The construction of desire as a threat to women is common in feminine fiction of the early 20th century, as Susan Sheridan has shown:

In the 'romance of experience,' sexual desire presents a new kind of problem for the heroine: even when a suitable object is found and reciprocates, there remains the danger that to succumb to desire is to lose, not her respectability but her individuality. This sexual danger is explained in a variety of ways, ranging from the inevitable conflict between marriage and independence to ideas such as the power of 'the race' working through

the hapless bodies of women (*Poppies of the Night*, p. 77) or the 'male instinct' acting 'unconsciously to destroy what it loves—that is, the free affinity of man and woman (*A Vagabond Soul*, p. 166). This construction of female desire as the thief of woman's individuality had begun to emerge in British New Woman novels of the 1890s, but in some of these romantic novels we also find expression of the view that passionate love is incompatible with a woman's autonomy.²³

Desire is a mystery. Because of its wholly irrational nature, there is no way of accounting for it or its workings. Speaking of one of the characters in *Redheap*, Lindsay referred to 'the mysterious tide of desire that flowed from her body to his own, fusing them both in an amalgam of spirit which imperatively demanded its completed gesture in the flesh.'²⁴ Desire, because it has a will of its own, can take over at any time, anywhere, as Jane discovers in Fiona McGregor's *Suck My Toes*: 'Lust strikes her at only the most inconvenient moments, like when she's at the back of a smoke-filled room and he [boyfriend Ron]'s on stage replacing a bass string, fag hanging out of his mouth, the beginnings of a beer belly sagging over his Texaco belt buckle.'²⁵ And as it is in the nature of desire to wither away when it is satisfied, one must take steps to keep it alive, like John Scott's Catherine: 'Perhaps I have this fear of boredom, so I find myself playing complicated games in order to keep desire alive.'²⁶ For all its wildness, desire is a fragile and delicate thing, and the very satisfaction it craves destroys it, so that only frustration can sustain it. To some, the whole point of desire is that it must not be satisfied if it is to remain a source of energy. This is what Norman Lindsay asserted: 'Desire is given man in order that he may *not* realise it. It is his eternal stimulus to renew life; and his inability to realise it is the whole basis of his effort to realise it. It exists as a means, not as an end; as a spur to action, which is kept alive by never being gratified.'²⁷ As a result, desire is both a source of pleasure and of agony, as Catherine points out when she compares desire to 'a fire that burns you, and keeps you on the edge in what is almost a state of agony, because the longing is so intense.'²⁸ But the longing is the thing, not its satisfaction.

But why does desire die? Before addressing this question, it may be as well to ask what arouses it, for it is an occasional rather than a permanent feature of our lives. If desire is indeed this wild beast lurking in us, just what is it that brings it out now and then? As Malouf suggested, almost anything can do the trick, such as 'some vision caught in a fugitive way in the street, and which only the blood recalls, of a bit of women's clothing hung out on a line and seductively shifting...' or again Linda Jaivin's

notion of the ‘total fuckability’ of this or that person, an elusive and general quality which cannot be rationally analysed or even understood and does not truly relate to the person’s good looks, intelligence, manners, or whatever. Desire is not located in its object, and is not a predictable response to its objective desirability. It is more like a spark almost randomly produced by the encounter of subject and object. As Montaigne said to account for his deep friendship with La Boétie, which was a form of desire, it happened ‘because it was him, because it was me.’ This kind of chemistry takes place in a realm that is way beyond reason, and its operations cannot be accounted for. It can be sparked off by almost anything and yet it remains unexpected. In this sense, it is very much like the creation of life from a non-religious point of view: a momentous event which is known to require certain ingredients, plus certain external circumstances, but is nonetheless essentially mysterious and impossible to reproduce under controlled conditions. This is an important factor in the fascination which attaches to desire: like life itself, it is all the more precious for being accidental and unpredictable.

The onset of desire announces a new stage in our lives, a new adventure, some kind of renewal—a new lease of life. The promise is not necessarily kept, which may result in frustration, but this is almost beside the point, which is to feel one’s heart racing and to experience the dizziness which comes of being hooked on another person. Indeed, desire can become an addiction, and persuade one it’s the only thing worth living for. Although the experience of desire tells you you’re alive, and holds out the promise of some unimaginable bliss—not just now but somewhere down the line—it can also be very disturbing by suddenly revealing how much you depend on the object of desire. Here is Justine, in Ettler’s *The River Ophelia*, kissing Sade for the first time, an innocent enough gesture given the rather weird kind of sex they’ll engage in at a later stage: ‘I didn’t want to stop kissing Sade. When I finally stepped back I was overwhelmed by sickening waves of anxiety.’²⁹ As soon as the kissing is over she’s on cold turkey. Her very desire makes her vulnerable to rejection or separation, whether imagined or real; instead of making her life fuller it reinforces her neuroses and leaves her miserable.

Is male desire different from female desire? The Victorian tradition held that women had little or no sexual desire³⁰—they were far too refined or ethereal creatures to experience the gross emotions that men are subject to. This patriarchal view has long been exploded, and contemporary fiction makes no bones about women wanting sex. In Marian Eldridge’s *Springfield*, Gita speaks her desire in the bluntest of terms: ‘Shit, I needed a screw last night!’³¹ But this is not to say men and women do not

experience desire in significantly different though equally strong fashions—it is precisely the difference that brings satisfaction. Women want a man who makes love like man, as the protagonist of Tracy Ryan's *Vamp* finds when she goes out with a gentle vegan boy:

He made love like a woman, I think now: no end to it and no beginning, like one constant fusion [...] I wondered if there wasn't something reassuring about the fifteen-minute boys who did what they had to and then rolled over, or smoked a cigarette and left.³²

For all its selfishness, sexual desire is a desire of the other, a lifeline to the outside world, and above all a desire to be desired, even if it's only for a short time. To be desired is a source of narcissistic gratification, since it means one is attractive and love- (or sex-) worthy in the eyes of other people. This validates one's sometimes precarious sense that there is a point to one's existence.

Eroticism is a particular manifestation of the life force that is desire, one that is closely connected with sexual drives but can be sublimated into more socially acceptable forms. Eroticism comes in all shapes and colours. Whether fulfilled or frustrated, straight, gay or kinky, black, yellow or white, it offers a bewildering variety of aspects, and its protean nature goes a long way towards explaining its enormous influence on human behaviour. Rather than waste one's time in attempting a comprehensive definition, it might be more rewarding to examine two major aspects of eroticism, which could be described, in a nutshell, as a dark side and a bright side.

The former would seem to predominate in the modern conception. As Georges Bataille put it, 'Eroticism has, fundamentally, the sense of death.'³³ It is an experience of the tragic sort, one of Bataille's commentators asserts,³⁴ one that leads to dehumanization and horror. One only has to think of such writers as Sade or Choderlos de Laclos (author of *Dangerous Liaisons*) to see that he has a point. The association of sex with death is taken up, but in enigmatic and absurdist fashion, by Peter Carey in his story 'Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion,' where the narrator is convinced that every time he makes love to his girl friend it somehow causes a horse to drown.³⁵ Not too many Australian writers, however, have chosen to go down Bataille's path.

But what about the other side, sometimes contemptuously described as 'mild,' 'flabby' and 'soft'?³⁶ What about the kind of sunny eroticism which is 'first of all the freedom of gratified flesh [...] a paradise in which

one finds pleasure, not sin³⁷ and which, for Stefan Zweig, was embodied by Casanova, this sensual glutton, a joyful seducer and man of pleasure? Is the 'hard' version intrinsically superior to the 'soft' one?

In a Western cultural context at least, there is almost inevitably an element of transgression to eroticism: in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, Ellen and her brother-in-law Garnet flout the conventional morality of their class and become adulterers—keeping it in the family does not make adultery more acceptable. Adultery, of course, is a classic ingredient of eroticism—and of the novel: where conjugal relations are often described as dull, deprived of passion or freshness by repetition, made insipid by the very fact that they are legitimate, extra-conjugal relations (the forbidden fruit) seem to promise greater excitement. It is small wonder that Ellen should experience far more sexual satisfaction from the near rape to which she is subjected by villainous Garnet, since even then 'she was the one in control,'³⁸ than from the thin-blooded and far-between goings-on in the marital bed. Men and women can find sexual satisfaction even within holy matrimony, but this is a kind of transgression too, since the point of married sex, religious authorities have often emphasized, is procreation rather than pleasure. As French poet Georges Brassens wrote ironically, 'une femme honnête n'a pas de plaisir' (a respectable woman does not climax). Austin Roxburgh would have concurred, since he discouraged any expression of passion on Ellen's part: 'She herself had only once responded with a natural ardour, but discovered on her husband's face an expression of having tasted something bitter, or of looking too deep. So she replaced the mask which evidently she was expected to wear.'³⁹ Although there is nothing Australian about Austin—apart from the first few letters of his name—his puritanism exemplifies the repressive atmosphere which pervaded the country where sexual matters were concerned. Ellen will experience transgression—and pleasure—again with the convict Jack Chance, betraying both the dead husband whose memory she sought to honour by hanging on to her wedding-band and the class into which she has married. Ellen's erotic experience with Jack highlights the fact that there is far more to it than simple animal lust:

She wanted to be loved. She longed for the vast emptiness of darkness to be filled as she encouraged him to enter her body and pressed her mouth into his, against what she only momentarily remembered as a grille of broken, stained teeth.

What she offered was in some measure, surely, a requital of all he had suffered, as well as remission of her own sins? Of deceit, and lust, and faithlessness. She hoped that if they could prolong their journey to