

Editor's Note: This text is taken from *SubStance*, vol. 6/7, no. 20, Autumn 1978, pp. 5-8.

At the end of the nineteenth century an unknown Englishman wrote an immense work, a dozen copies of which were printed. It was never put on sale, and it ended in the hands of a few collectors or in rare bookshops. One of the least known books, it is called *My Secret Life*. The author undertakes a meticulous narrative of a life which was essentially devoted to sexual pleasure. Night after night, day after day, he recounts, without ostentation or rhetoric, the least of his experiences, in the sole hope of expressing what occurred, how it came about, and with what intensity and quality of sensation.

Was this his only concern? Perhaps. For he often speaks of this task of writing the mundane details of his pleasure as a pure obligation. It is as if there were a secret and somewhat enigmatic obligation to which he could not avoid submitting: it is necessary to say everything. And yet there is something else; for this stubborn Englishman it is a question in this "play-work" of correctly combining pleasure, true discourse on pleasure and the pleasure particular to the utterance of this truth; it is a matter of involving the diary — whether he reads it aloud or writes it concurrently — in the course of new sexual experiences, in accordance with the rules of certain strange pleasures in which "reading and writing" play a specific role.

Stephen Marcus has devoted some remarkable pages to this obscure contemporary of Queen Victoria.¹ For my part, I am not particularly inclined to treat him as a person of the shadows, situated on some "other side" in an age of prudishness. Is it indeed a discrete and sneering revenge against the prudishness of the epoch? Above all, he seems to me to be situated at the point of convergence of three, scarcely secret, evolutionary lines in our society. The most recent is that which led medicine and psychiatry to a quasi-entomological interest in sexual practices, their variations, and all their disparity; Krafft-Ebing is in this lineage.² The second is older; it is what has inclined erotic literature, since Rétif and Sade, to seek its effects not only in the intensity or the rarity of the scenes which it imagined, but also in the relentless search for a certain truth of pleasure. An erotics of truth, a relationship of the true to the intense is characteristic of the "new libertinage" inaugurated at the end of the 18th century. The third line is the oldest; it runs through the entire Christian West since the Middle Ages. It is the strict obligation for everyone, through penitence and the examination of one's conscience, to comb the depths of one's heart for even the most imperceptible traces of concupiscence. The quasi-clandestineness of *My Secret Life* must not delude us; the relation of true discourse to sexual pleasure has been one of the most consistent concerns of Western society for centuries.

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What has not been said about this hypocritical, prudish bourgeois society, miserly with its pleasures, obstinate in its refusal to either recognise or name them? What has not been said about this most burdensome heritage received from Christianity — the sin of sex? And, what has not been said about the manner in which the 19th century made use of this heritage for economic ends: work rather than pleasure, the reproduction of forces rather than the pure discharge of energies?

But what if this were not the issue? What if there [were] quite different mechanisms at the centre of "sexual politics"? What if there were not a rejection and an occultation (mystification), but an incitement? What if the essential function of power were not to say no, to forbid, and to censor, but rather to bind coercion, pleasure, and truth according to some indefinite spiral?

The Obligation to Confess

Think only of the zealotry with which, for several centuries now, our societies have multiplied all the institutions which are destined to extort the truth from sex, and which, thereby, produce a specific pleasure. Consider the enormous obligation to confess, and the ambiguous pleasures which simultaneously make it disturbing and desirable: confession, education, the relations between parents and children, between doctors and the sick, between psychiatrists and hysterics, between psychoanalysts and patients. It has been said that the West has never been capable of inventing a single new pleasure. Does the sensual delight in dredging, hunting down, in interpreting, in short, the "analytic pleasure" count for nothing?

¹ A historian and author of *The Other Victorians*, a work about the hidden side of Puritan British society.

² German sexologist, author of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).

Rather than as a society committed to the repression of sex, I see our society as dedicated to its “expression,” if I may be forgiven this devalued word. I see the West as bent on extracting the truth from sex. The silences, the barriers, the evasions should not be underestimated; but they could only have formed and produced their considerable effects on the basis of a will to knowledge which runs through our entire relationship to sex. A will to knowledge which is so imperious, and in which we are so enveloped, that we not only seek the truth of sex, but seek, through it, the truth about ourselves. We expect it to tell us about ourselves. From Gerson to Freud, an entire logic of sex has been constructed, a logic which organises the science of the subject.

We willingly imagine ourselves under a “Victorian” regime. It seems to me instead that our kingdom is the one imagined by Diderot in *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*; a certain, nearly invisible mechanism makes sex speak in a virtually inexhaustible chatter. We are in a society of speaking sex.

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We might also, perhaps, have to question a society about the way in which the relations of power, truth, and pleasure are organised. It seems to me that we can distinguish two principal systems of organisation. One is that of erotic art. Its truth is drawn from pleasure itself, collected as experience, analysed according to its quality, pursued throughout its reverberations in the body and the soul. This quintessential knowledge is transmitted by magisterial initiation, with the stamp of secrecy, to those who have shown themselves to be worthy of it, and who would make use of it at the very level of their pleasure, to intensify it, and to make it more acute and fulfilling.

For several centuries, Western civilisation had nearly no erotic art; it established the relations of power, pleasure, and truth in an entirely different mode — that of a “science of sex.” A type of knowledge in which what is analysed is not so much pleasure as desire; where the function of the master is not initiation, but interrogation, listening, and deciphering; where the end of that long process was not an increase in pleasure, but a modification of the subject (who, in this way, was pardoned or reconciled, cured or liberated).

Locating the Strategies

The relations between this art and this science are too numerous for us to be able to find here the demarcation line between two types of societies. Whether in the direction of conscience or in the psychoanalytic cure, the knowledge of sex brings with it secret imperatives, a particular relation to the master, and a whole game of promises which still relate it to erotic art. How could one believe that without these confused relations someone would purchase so dearly the bi-weekly right to laboriously formulate the truth of their desire, and to wait patiently for the benefits of the interpretation?

My project would be to trace the genealogy of this “science of sex.” I realise that this is not a novel enterprise; many today are devoted to it, showing how many denials, occultations, fears, and systematic misunderstandings have held back for so long the eventual knowledge of sex. I would like, however, to undertake this genealogy in positive terms, beginning with the incitements, the sources, the techniques and procedures which have made the formation of this knowledge possible. Starting from the Christian problem of the flesh, I wish to follow all the mechanisms which have given rise to a discourse on the truth of sex, and have organised around it a mixed regime of pleasure and power. Recognising the impossibility of globally following this genesis, I will try, in separate studies, to locate some of its most important strategies concerning children, women, perversions, and birth control.

The question which has traditionally been asked is this: why has the West censured sex for so long; and, on the basis of this refusal, or this fear, how have we come, with all reticence, to ask the question of its truth? Why and how, since the end of the 19th century, have we undertaken — with a difficulty which Freud's courage still attests to — to expose a part of the great secret?

A New Guilt

I wish to undertake an entirely different interrogation: why has the West so continuously questioned the truth of sex and required that everyone formulate this truth for himself? Why has the West so obstinately wanted our relation to ourselves to pass through this truth? It is therefore astonishing that at the beginning of the 20th century we were gripped by a great new guilt; that we began to undergo a sort of historical remorse which led us to believe that for centuries we had been wrong about sex.

It seems to me that what has been misunderstood about this systematically new guilt which we seem to crave is precisely that vast configuration of knowledge which the West has ceaselessly organised around sex, through religious, medical, or social techniques.

I suppose that many would agree with me on this point. But I will immediately be asked: "Hasn't this great uproar about sex, this constant concern, had only one objective: to forbid the free utilisation of sex?" Certainly the role of prohibitions has been important. But, from the start and above all, has sex been prohibited? Or, rather, aren't the prohibitions only snares within a complex and positive strategy?

Here we touch on a more general problem which we will have to treat thoroughly in counterpoint to this history of sexuality — the problem of power. When we speak of power, it is spontaneously conceived of as law, as interdiction, as prohibition and repression; and we are quite disarmed when we follow it in its mechanisms and in its positive effects. A certain juridical model weighs heavily on the analyses of power, giving an absolute privilege to the form of the law. We must write a history of sexuality which is not guided by the idea of a repressive power, nor of a censorial power, but by the idea of an inciting power, of a knowing power. We must strive to locate the regime of coercion, of pleasure, and of discourse which is not inhibitive but constitutive of the complex domain of sexuality.

I hope that this fragmentary history of "the science of sex" would also be of value as an outline of an analytic of power.