The negation, and defense of pleasures :
Introduction to Volume 2 of *The History of
Sexuality* by Michel Foucault.

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Introduction : strange words of a strange love

In *Jane Eyre*, an example of the 19th c. so-called ‘feminine’ novel, though one that comes in great transgression of it also needless to say¹, the struggles of Jane – severe abuse as a young girl, continued abuse and austerity as an adolescent, and homelessness as a young adult – are given to us plain, laid bare for everyone to see.

Her inner life however remains closed us off to us : the deepest of layers of it, in which she cannot be hurt, layers upon layers.

But, the people found in this for the most part in fact realist novel are of even greater mystery, and source of attraction, to us, beginning with Helen.

I saw a girl sitting on a stone bench near; she was bent over a book, on the perusal of which she seemed intent: from where I stood I could see the title – it was ‘Rasselas;’ a name that struck me as strange, and consequently attractive. In turning a leaf she happened to look up, and I said to her directly: – ‘Is your book interesting?’ I had already formed the intention of asking her to lend it to me some day.²

Her body soon rendered childlike by fever and disease, abstract her from any of themes of ‘sexuality’, let alone sex.

By dying young, I shall escape great sufferings.³

This of course has not hindered Jane and Helen from being made into ‘subjects of sexuality’, and ‘desire’, in various readings. Their friendship is an island of happiness.

¹“In telling the tale of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte was quite conscious, as she informed her publisher, that she was not telling a moral tale. Jane is not bound by orthodoxy, though superficially she is a creature of her time and place.” writes a commentator.

²p. 41. (2001 Norton critical edition.)

³p. 69.

but as to Helen Burns, I was struck with wonder. The refreshing meal, the brilliant fire, the presence and kindness of her beloved instructress, or, perhaps, more than all these, something in her own unique mind, had roused her powers within her. They woke, they kindled: first, they glowed in the bright tint of her cheek, which till this hour I had never seen but pale and bloodless; then they shone in the liquid luster of her eyes, which had suddenly acquired a beauty more singular than that of Miss Temple's⁴

And, later, when it is too late :

I *must* see Helen, – I must embrace her before she died, – I must give her one last kiss, exchange with her one last word.⁵

Miss Temple, even for the fact of marrying a man, plays a role akin to that of an older, young lesbian woman.

"Because gay youth usually come from straight families, gay cultural, political histories, and norms aren't passed along from one generation to the next in the same way that cultural norms, religion, and the like are passed along from one generation to the next." wrote Thomas Baudinette accurately.

In this novel, where parents are absent, as they sometimes are in the lives of queer people, a cross-generational transfer is doubly impossible.

But, Miss Temple's study, her room, her office, even her bedroom – all are the same? – have played that role; if one were to opt for such reading.

Miss Temple embraced us both, saying, as she drew us to her heart:
– 'God bless you, my children!'⁶

And, then there's St. John : courtship, control over passions, Christianity, dominant, and dominated, husband and wife, 'love of the senses' vs. 'true love', and all of the other themes that are of importance in this *History of Sexuality*.

"Strange words of a strange love!" exclaims Jane at some point :

St. John was a good man; but I began to feel he had spoken truth of himself when he said he was hard and cold. The humanities and amenities of life had no attraction for him its peaceful enjoyments no charm. Literally, he lived only to aspire after what was good and great, certainly; but still he would never rest; nor approve of others resting round him. (...) I comprehended all at once that he would hardly make a good husband: that it would be a trying thing to be his wife. I understood, as by inspiration, the nature of his love for Miss Oliver; I agreed with him that it was but a love of the senses. I comprehended how he should despise himself

⁴p. 62.

⁵p. 68.

⁶p. 62.

for the feverish influence it exercised over him; how he should wish to stifle and destroy it; how he should mistrust its ever conducting permanently to his happiness, or hers. I saw he was of the material from which nature hews her heroes – Christian and Pagan”⁷

St. John, like Helen, one will note, share the same detachment from life, the same renunciation, and negation; the one finds escape in novels, the other in the words of god.

They both go to their death, willingly and happily, recognizing that there no place for people like them in a world such as ours.

Both are impossible loves for Jane : a practical woman, we write this with no other meaning, but on the contrary much love and admiration.

She survived life, and found love in her way; and, on our own terms most importantly.

—
A different time, a different medium, but the same preoccupations, with life, and love, and the soul :

In 'Angelene', PJ Harvey sings :

My first name Angelene
Prettiest mess you've ever seen
Love for money is my sin
Any man calls I'll let him in
Rose is my color and white
Pretty mouth, and green my eyes
I see men come and go
But there will be one who will collect my soul

– who in another song says she has liberated herself from work, and her family, and all the other confining responsibilities of adulthood, finally free, and all alone.

In *Jane Eyre*, in keeping with not only the literary traditions of the time, but also the social boundaries that offered to women only so many choices, the narration finds an acceptable resolution in Jane marrying a well-to-do, though flawed, and humane husband.

And, even though there are worlds between that novel and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, whose entire story has as perhaps biggest danger a faux-pas committed at a dinner, or party; poor conversation; or lack of education in one of the noble arts (of the noble woman);

This remains perhaps the part of *Jane Eyre* that strikes most odd in this 21st century; because, it has so much else to offer.

⁷pp.334-335.

When do we lose our dignity, or sense of self? What number of partners, exactly?

2? 10? 20? 50? 100? 1000? 10,000? Where does the final limit of our moral values lie? And, of our bodies? And, what about all at once?

And, do these questions even make sense : where do they come from, and from where exactly do they draw their peculiar ‘sense’, or logic?

It is to all of these questions – so urgent they are not made explicit – that Michel Foucault turns :

questions that played no doubt a role other than that of the mere abstract for this profoundly original thinker, tireless worker of uncertain archives.

A mode of inquiry other than the one adopted by our professors; who read him, having lived none of his experiences, and add a layer of abstraction – result only of their abstract minds – on top of what were presumably only lived experiences once, at one point or another.

Their minds : truly a mystery to us. “*We are not from the same planet*” writes Michel Foucault in an endearing passage, that will hopefully remain, as it was then, a slap to their faces – as ours are punches to their stomachs.

These anachronistic scholars remind us of many things :

The Swedish Marxist sociologists with yachts, and summer houses in the suburbs of Stockholm. A fact so absurd, it cannot be invented – nothing has been so far.

The offspring of the upper-middle classes – some of whom we have taught – who preferred Austen over Bronte during their rosy, romantic adolescences; and *Pride and Prejudice* over *Jane Eyre*. We know why. “*The more I see of the world, the less I want to see of it*” said Austen, who we cannot blame, and had erased it from her books, and perhaps her mind too. Just like our professors, but without the merits. Everyone wanted to be Lizzy – she made us dream, and gave us a temporary, if false refuge – but we know Jane, sans ending, to be far closer to our real lives.

In our reading – and in our lives sometimes too – Jane died on the side of the road, like Marsha P. Johnson, on the side of a river.

And, finally : the fashionable *mademoiselles* who insist on “they”, coming often from places of incredible privileges, while comfortably escaping the real, lived experiences of everyday dangers and difficulties of those whose identities and causes they have adopted, to not say robed – the poor black trans-women and poor white trans-women, and rural trans-men, those who don’t ‘pass’ even after everything, and those who truly don’t fit anywhere –, in their search for a Bourgeois ‘rebel cause’.

In previous generations, the same went to Africa, in the fashion typical of their class, like St. John went to India.

Questions that are now more important than ever in eras of “sex positive” attitudes; in which “techniques of the self” have made an unexpected return and taken on a perhaps unprecedented turn, dimension; and apps;

and new gender identities, and understandings of them; and the new sexualities, experiences that have come out of them, but also the new meanings and values, ‘problematics’, that have been attached to them.

The model, the contested model of the “homosexual transexual”, in the category of one psychologist, i.e. a heterosexual woman, opposed to that of the “heterosexual lesbian”, to mean this time a homosexual woman;

categories in which everything is inversed, and inverted, categories that could only make sense inside the peculiar logic of this strange profession of a nefarious history.

It should be no mystery to anyone why these gentlemen and gentlewomen were drawn to their discipline, and profession in the first place : their problems were so great that when they theorize, and operate on others, they only continue to operate on themselves;

and complete their own interviews, and diagnoses.

But, not even ten years were enough to complete all the pieces during medical school, and no books, and no libraries could help them. And, so they, instead, carve out pieces out of others.

Their minds of psychologists and psychiatrists are like wells : at the bottom of which, these scary places, once and if they finally reach them, they are confronted with the truth of finding themselves and many corpses.

When we see them in their fine clothes – tweed costumes or women’s suits – we cross over to the other side of the street. Georges Canguilhem, and Michel Foucault thought no less, and perhaps worse.

Acknowledgements

To my friends, whose lives, and attitudes towards life, and sex, were so vastly different from mine. This is a celebration, but not a defense of them.

A defense they do not need : *we don't give a fuck about what you think.*