On the Sapphic Motif in Modern French Literature

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A number of us, male readers and critics, disgruntled about the present state of imaginative literature in French, English, American, Italian, have become convinced that other means of expression (the film, the ballet, architecture, among others) and social studies, psychology, molecular biology, nuclear physics, computer science, administration and law have drawn the majority of those gifted men who, in earlier ages, might have attempted literary creation. Yet our conviction remains unshakable that fiction, drama and poetry are still the most illuminating medium through which human beings may learn how to understand, perhaps even how to amend, themselves. Our hope, as we enter the last decades of the twentieth century, is that women, renovating or recreating our language and the technique of fiction as well as their own vision, will step in where their male companions, or longtime oppressors, apparently fear to tread.

The portrayal of women — as mothers, as wives, as dreaded rivals or as treacherously idealized goddesses, and, more bluntly, as sexual objects or partners — would seem to have been up to now left to male novelists: such is certainly the case in Russian, Spanish, Italian, German letters and even (with all due honor paid to the sudden and probably dangerous, because uncritical, vogue which has lately hailed George Sand, after Simone de Beauvoir) in the literature of France. Yet no hypocritical and prudish restraints today should paralyze the countrywomen of Colette, of Albertine Sarrasin, of Violette Leduc and of Monique Wittig, the ambitious and fearless author of *Le Corps lesbien.* On many a university campus, in America and in Western Europe, courses on feminine literature (taken to be limited to literature written by women) have proliferated. They may incite female students to muster up audacity and to give us, at last, the deep, stark, true picture of autonomous (and lovable) women whom, it must be owned, neither Willa Cather nor Carson McCullers, neither Simone de Beauvoir, Sylvia Plath nor Iris Murdoch has as yet offered us.

Among the themes that poetry composed by women or novels written by them might renovate is one which they long felt constrained to treat only with prudent ambiguity and almost stealthily: the "well of loneliness" motive. Marguerite Yourcenar herself (or Mrs. de Crayencourt, the Belgian lady who writes under that almost anagrammatic pseudonym) has chosen to conjure up figures of a Roman homosexual emperor, of a young man bearing a name, Alexis, drawn from Virgil's second Eclogue, and to comment on, or translate, Pindar and Kavafis, both devotees of male beauty; but she has kept shy of Lesbian loves. French female novelists might conceivably have been deterred from attempting the imaginative treatment of such a theme by the immense place Proust granted it in the second half of his long saga novel, particularly so in that most searching volume of his whole series, *La Prisonnière*. And yet, however relentless and ferociously self-torturing Marcel's suspicions of Albertine's "vice" may be, the motives for such obsessive jealousy, the original or, at the very least, the different characteristics of that love of woman for woman are never made clear to the reader. Albertine occupies more space in the novel, and in Marcel's anguished martyrdom, than any other woman in the work — even more than Odette does in Swann's infatuation. Whatever or whoever the model for Albertine may have been in Proust's own affection, she lives in the novel as a woman, behaves as one when coveting Fortuny's Venetian gowns or arousing the growling mutterings of the maid Françoise. She helps her jailer probe into his own self more devastatingly through her Lesbian leanings and then, negligently discarded once no longer present, she serves as the tool through which he will discover his vocation as a creator. But the beauty, the mystery, the sufferings or the ecstasies which Albertine may have owed to her Lesbian loves remain a closed secret to the reader. Proust cared little to allow us into the penetralia of that accursed city of Gomorrha. The most poetical and yet the most destructive portrayer of love in modern letters remained content to focus the light of his infernally lucid glance on himself, not on the woman.

Painters, in the age of Impressionism which was also the age of modernity in art (Courbet, Manet, Renoir), had found gracefulness and delicacy in the "motif" of Lesbian love treated with discreet if suggestive restraint. It is a mystery why novelists consistently failed to do likewise. *La Fille aux yeux d'or* offers a colorful and lurid picture of Paris and a thrilling tale of

subterranean alleys, of eunuchs, of savagely selfish primitive creatures, and of a bloodthirsty woman tyrant ready to murder her Lesbian girl friend rather than to let her be the possession of a brutal male (who turns out to be the imperious mistress's half-brother). Still, the poetry which Balzac had woven around the male attraction of Vautrin for Lucien de Rubempré and the former convict's rêverie (called by Swann, as reported in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* by Charlus, "la Tristesse d'Olympio de la pédérastie" when the Rastignac castle was pointed out to him) is lacking in Balzac's tale of "tribadian" passion. Nor is there much romance or much glamor to the occasionally female loves of Zola's *Nana* or the more remote suggestion that Daudet's promiscuous Sapho, nicknamed as in Hugo's title "Toute la Lyre", had, in such embraces, found respite from her many and more brutal adventures with male artists. Colette herself, when reminiscing on "those pleasures, lightly called physical" in her volume of 1934 entitled *Ces Plaisirs,* insists upon stripping them of all pagan delight and sane sensuousness.

Nor were the Greeks themselves as truly "pagan" in that respect as we would expect from the fame of Sappho as a poet and from the wealth of legends about the misfortunes of her love life and her leap to death from what Swinburne, invoking Baudelaire, called "that Leucadian grave/Which hides too deep the supreme head of song". From the Homeric epics to Pindar, to the fifth century lyricists and the Platonic dialogues, Greek writers eulogized male homosexuality, and pederasty even more, as the higher form of loving companionship. But even the women who in the comedies of Aristophanes tried to bring men to submission through enforced continence, or the prattling Syracusan housewives of Theocritus, failed to indulge, still less to glorify, a form of physical and sentimental union limited to their own sex. Sappho herself was traditionally honored as "the female Homer", "the tenth Muse". Moderns like Swinburne have repeated with conviction, on the strength of a very few scattered lines surviving from her work, that she was "the very greatest poet that ever lived". But the legend would have it that she had loved a male, Phaon, the ferryman who plied between the island of Lesbos and the mainland. Neglected or jilted by that man whom Aphrodite had provided with a potent and magic love unguent, she had leaped into the sea from the Leucadian cliff. Ovid, in one of the more facile of his epistles by forsaken women entitled *Heroids,* was responsible for spreading those absurd

legends; he had the poetess implore Phaon to answer her complaints lest she jump to her death. Before him, Catullus had rendered into Latin verse Sappho's ode to Anactoria, which Swinburne was to expand into a long, almost hysterical declamation. In that poem, the famed singer was lamenting the loss of her female friend, Anactoria, who had eloped to Sardis with a soldier. A modern admirer and champion of Sappho, David M. Robinson, went so far as to praise that ode as "perhaps the most convincing love poem ever written. It breathes veracity". The same Greek scholar, in his enthusiasm, contended that Sappho could not possibly have been "a bad woman"; with rather humorless reasoning, he explained that "a bad woman might love roses, a bad woman does not love the small and hidden wild flowers of the fields, the dainty anthryse and the cloves, as Sappho did".[1]

It is unfortunate that, when the character of Sappho again became a favorite one with poets in the age of romanticism, she was usually presented as one of love's martyrs, but in the manner preferred by male writers: as forsaken by a male lover. She became a sister of Racine's Hermione and of the Portuguese nun. Lamartine for a time entertained the thought of composing the libretto of an opera on her. He, fortunately, limited himself to a declamatory elegy, composed in 1813 and inserted in the *Nouvelles Méditations* (1823), in which the woman poet laments Phaon's cruel indifference in conventional lines addressed to the virgins of Lesbos. Grillparzer likewise, in a tragedy presented in April 1818 in Vienna depicted her melodramatically as disappointed in love. In 1822, Leopardi, in his solitary retreat of Recanati, penned a seventy line poem, "Ultimo Canto di Saffo". In that sombre dramatic monologue, the woman, on the brink of her fatal leap, voiced the "infelicità" of a sensitive and ardent soul to whom the gods have denied fulfillment in love. Carducci, much later, was to upbraid his Italian predecessor for lending his obsession with misfortune as decreed by the gods or by fate to a woman poet whom he would himself have preferred imagining as "Satanic".

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the theme of Sappho, or rather her Hellenico-Asiatic figure, became a favorite one with French painters and sculptors. Gleyre, one of the followers of Ingres, and other painters who specialized in emasculated Greek motives; Pradier, the sculptor whom Gautier, Flaubert and their

circle, in all due seriousness, took for a Phidias (they gave him that nickname), Clésinger, whose erotic bronze of Mme Sabatier, Baudelaire's "white Venus", won a "succès de scandale", others still selected Sappho as the impersonator of a tragic female lover. Literature, however, could even more dramatically attempt a portrayal of the legendary woman from Lesbos, torn between two kinds of love and indoctrinating the virgins of her island in the arcana of a passion preserved from male brutality.

A young friend of Banville and of Baudelaire, Philoxène Boyer, then barely twenty, had the audacity to offer a poetic drama, *Sapho,* to the second French national theater. It was accepted, and performed on the stage of the Odéon on November 13, 1850. The young author, raised in the Greek classics by his father, passed among his friends for a prodigious reader. He later transferred his passion from Hellenic antiquity to Shakespeare and interpreted the Bard all the more enthusiastically, according to his Parisian Bohemian friends, for hardly knowing the language. (Berlioz and Hugo had a similar claim to fame.) He was to die young, in his mid-thirties, from too much reading. Banville left us sketches of that attractive companion of his youth in his anecdotic volume, *Mes Souvenirs* (1882). In a review of the play collected in another volume, *Critiques.*[2] Banville donned the mantle of a moralist, denouncing Lesbianism as the malady of the mid-century, and lamenting that Boyer's modern Sapho no longer enjoyed the glory of struggling against a goddess' wrath but "proceeded to the Leucadian cliff like a sheep to the slaughter house, resigned and in stupor, while Phaon, who spurned her exalted declarations, stood for modern man.

That was hardly a faithful presentation of the young poet's drama. Disregarding chronology and verisimilitude, Boyer acknowledged in a postface to his published play that his sole intent had been to write "the poem of unsated desire and to describe the disease which afflicts all our hearts". He meant, presumably, the romantic malady diagnosed in Baudelaire's poems and in Flaubert's heroine, of never finding, in commonplace, deceptive reality the fulfilment of their lofty anticipations. In that verse drama, Anacreon, holding a golden cup, was surrounded by Erinna and other maidens from Lesbos. Phaon was a Don Juan in love with love, pursuing through city after city and in woman after woman "the idle dreams of an unsatiated heart". Through and beyond the body, he was ever seeking a soul, and failing to find it; he cursed Sappho who offered to him

in vain her unrequited love. He called her "a weird androgyne" and mocked her for being twice the age of Erinna, who insolently flaunted her sixteen years to draw Phaon away from mature Sappho. The muse of Lesbos, desolate, holding her lyre in her arms, then leapt from the fatal cliff, while Anacreon compared her fate to that of Orpheus.

The same Banville who had indulged in some pompous generalizing on Sappho's evil as "the furious madness" of modern women, and who doomed devotees of Lesbos as being beyond salvation, had himself felt attracted to the subject in his early collection of verse. He had, after all, first discovered the world of poetry when Henri de Latouche's *Fragoletta* (1829) and Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) had made a big stir. The latter, with its provocative preface, was proving to be one of the most influential novels of the century: Swinburne, Wilde, and a number of other British rebels, after 1860, proudly invoked the book and, later on, *A Rebours,* as their gospel. Banville himself counts among those *minores* endowed with charm, flair and facility who fascinated their contemporaries. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé all praised him unstintingly, as they did Gautier. His plasticity and his sensitiveness to literary vogues enabled him to juxtapose contradictions without remorse. In 1861, six years before Philoxène Boyer died at 37 years and, as Banville put it, "from old age", and while Baudelaire was preparing the publication of the two poems on Lesbos and Lesbians which the judges had enjoined him to excise from *Les Fleurs du Mal,* Banville was dedicating to Philoxène Boyer a poem in praise of Sapphic love; it has been collected in his best, and most Hellenic, volume of verse, *Les Exilés* (1867). "Erinna" is the title, and in her "white breast" there lives again, declares the poet at the outset, "Le grand œur de Sappho, pâture des chimères". She leads a group of young girls who aspire to be poets and she bids them maintain their souls untainted by the impurity of matter, which apparently designates male embraces. "Celle qui n'ose pas mépriser la nature" — she who cowardly yields to earthly desires and lacks the courage to contemplate the abyss yawning at her feet — deserves her unheroic fate: she spurns solitary tears and the unquenchable fire of Lesbian passion and may well accept a husband, dutifully stay at home and spin wool: probably an allusion to the bourgeois submissiveness of Roman matrons which had been lauded in Ponsard's *Lucrèce* (1843). "Abandoned to her virile sadness", Erinna, imparts her message, worthy of an

Amazon, to her retinue of Lesbos virgins:

> Et qu'il n'est pas de flot pour rafraîchir l'amante
> Dont la bouche brûlante a goûté l'ambroisie!

Exactly as for Baudelaire's poet upon whom an ironical "bénédiction" is bestowed in the opening piece of *Les Fleurs du Mal,* sorrow is the sole nobility to which those maidens from Lesbos may aspire.

Young Baudelaire appears to have struck up a lifelong friendship with both Gautier and Banville as early as 1843-44, when he was for a time living at the Hôtel Pimodan in the Ile Saint-Louis. He was then already interested in the form of love which Diderot had depicted in *La Religieuse:* he alludes to the heroine of "that obscene and sorrowful story" in a verse epistle which he sent, probably late in 1844, to Sainte-Beuve, whose *Volupté* had profoundly moved him.[3] In 1846, the volume of poems announced as almost ready to appear (on the cover of Baudelaire's 1846 "Salon") was to bear the title "Les Lesbiennes". Only in 1848 was the tentative and provoking title given up for that of "Les Limbes". In 1855, when the first version of the volume was almost completed, the definitive *Les Fleurs du Mal* was suggested (apparently by a friend Hippolyte Babou) and adopted.

The title was criticized, by Vigny among others of Baudelaire's contemporaries, then by Albert Thibaudet, as "ridiculous and rococo".[4] Thibaudet thought that "Limbes", designating the fourth of the regions where the dead may dwell away from the damned, from the residents of Purgatory and from the blessed, remote both from God and from the Devil — would have made a more fitting and less vulgar title than the one finally adopted. After all, the section of the volume grouped under the subtitle "Fleurs du Mal" counts only nine pieces, hardly more than the sections on death and wine; the lack of balance is striking for a poet who boasted of having sedulously worked out the architecture of his book. The title "Les Lesbiennes", if it had been maintained, would have aroused even more protests in the France of Napoleon III than the one finally decided upon. If the poet seriously intended in 1846 or 47 to bring out a volume thus designated under the more tolerant regime of Louis-Philippe, he could hardly have had in mind anything but a thin brochure of half a dozen poems. Among those, only three actually and specifically deal with Lesbians. One, "Lesbos", appeared in July

1850 in an anthology, *Les Poètes de l'Amour,* arranged by Julien Lemer; despite that previous publication which had failed to cause any scandal, it was "condemned" and withdrawn from the complete volume in 1857. The shorter "Femmes Damnées", beginning "Comme un bétail pensif", was allowed by the magistrates to stay in the volume, while the longer poem of the same title (and the most austerely moral) on Delphine and Hippolyte was held to be dangerous and placed among the six "flowers of evil" to be banned.

Baudelairians have speculated on the motives that may have induced the poet to take such an interest in Lesbian women. It was part of a time-honored literary tradition which had been revived by Gautier and the younger romantic generation, charged as early as 1843 by conservative critics with being addicted to decadence. The theme was certain to irk the triumphant and complacent middle class, and that was the purpose of the young literary Bohemia. Baudelaire, whose love poetry is that of a voyeur rather than of a conqueror of women and who repeatedly voices his fear of the vampirism of the other sex, may well have been drawn to watching some ladies "disporting themselves" amorously in the kind of houses where Marcel observed Charlus through a dormer window. Woman in general appeared to him, in his angry or impotent moods, as "natural" and the very opposite of the dandy, a creature of instinct, eager to prey on the vigor and the intellectual power of the male. Lesbians, at any rate, dared rebel against so-called "nature" and instinct, certainly against the maternal and procreative instinct. The same Baudelaire who asked himself why women were deficient in spirituality and what kind of dialogue they could ever hold with God, was relieved to hail Lesbianism as "a depravation of the sense for the infinite", which implied at least the existence of that sense or yearning. He, and Verlaine later, and Mallarmé even more, hailed the metallic resplendence of "la froide majesté de la femme stérile" likened to a snake ("Avec ses vêtements . . ."). One theme is uniformly lacking in those poems on Lesbian lovers: they stand at the opposite of "A celle qui est trop gaie" whom the poet wanted to chastise. There is no joy, no peace for them, no gracefulness even in their poses. They are brutally compared to a pensive herd, "comme un bétail pensif", and to victims of a tragic fatality.

The seventy-five line poem, "Lesbos", is the most labored and the least dramatic of the three Baudelairian pieces devoted to

Lesbian love. It is a skilful exercise, probably the earliest attempted by Baudelaire, in the manipulation of the ample and majestic stanza of five alexandrines, in which the last line repeats the first. "Le Balcon", "Moêsta et Errabunda", built along the same pattern, are endowed with a more mysterious and haunting music. The poem is an invocation to Sappho's island, with the name of "Lesbos" recurring insistently in the first five stanzas and again in the last one, less as a joyous ritual than as a mournful knell. The rhythm is slow and grave; traditional devices of rhetoric are resorted to in that classical (or, as some would say, neo-classical) piece: comparisons ("comme", "à l'égal de") dearer to Baudelaire than more startling metaphors; antitheses ("chauds", "frais" applied to kisses in line 3); old-fashioned inversions ("les filles. . ., de leur corps amoureuses", line 18; "le vieil Océan de sa fille enchanté", line 64), a none-too-felicitous allusion to Aphrodite, born from Poseidon, who is pleased with her radiating and healthy beauty, contrasting with Sappho's anguished pallor. The fifth stanza is not devoid of awkwardness, with the mistaken allusion to Plato with which Marcel Proust was later to take issue: "Laisse du vieux Platon se froncer l'oeil austère;" for Plato might have blamed excess in love as in all else, but did not affect the austere frowning of a Puritan in his dialogues on love and certainly did not condemn male, or female, homosexuality. The line which follows (line 22) is even less euphonious ("Tu tires ton pardon . . ." with its "t" sound repeated) and the poet's implication that the island of Lesbos needs to be forgiven. It atones for its aberrations through "an eternal martyrdom" (line 26), which contrasts with the opening stanzas in which the mother of Greek voluptuous delights was hailed.

Indeed the island of multitudes of kisses, showered night and day by female lips on feminine bodies, becomes, as the hymn unfolds, the home of wearying caresses, of Narcissistic maids in love with their own figures (line 18), of sterility. The love practised and worshipped there, under the aegis of Sappho, appears to be a cerebral one since, in a rhetorical question, Baudelaire challenges any of the gods to dare judge and condemn Lesbos' "front pâli dans les travaux." The devotees of that harassing intellectual love have been punished amply enough through the streams of tears which their eyes have shed. The rejection of the conventional laws governing what is just and what is unjust is timid and half-hearted in its show of arrogance.

Sappho drowning from the Lesbian promontory apparently begs forgiveness (line 53), probably for having forsaken the Lesbian cult which she should have observed, and for having blasphemed in pursuing a man with her mad implorations. The tone of the poem remains grave and gloomy to the end. The deserted shores of Lesbos echo nightly with desolate cries rising to the skies. One wonders what peril for the French maidens of 1857 the magistrates sniffed in that most singular "apology" for Lesbian practices!

There rings a more personal note of awe and pity in the brighter of the two "Femmes damnées." There is less recourse to the conventional devices of rhetoric: elaborate comparisons introduced by "comme," repetitions, amplifications. Some of the rhymes (such as "mers-amers") are the banal ones which Baudelaire used too readily. But the seven stanzas of four regular alexandrines rhyming abab make up a stately composition climaxing in a pathetic invocation to Lesbian women done in the first person singular.

The setting is strikingly suggested in the opening lines. Those women are not in some bedroom, surrounded by the décor familiar to the readers of "L'Invitation au Voyage" or "La Mort des Amants". They are wandering, in pairs or in small groups, some on a beach from which they gaze at the "infinite" of the sea, often sung by the poet. They are haunted by desire or, in languid passiveness, animal-like in their indolent postures and with their weary, vacant eyes. At once, the scenery is that of a painting, more in the tone of what Puvis de Chavannes or Gauguin were later to do than like the libertine pictures of Lesbians which contemporaries of Baudelaire, Courbet or Manet attempted.

Four different groups of such mournful women are then depicted, and interpreted, in the four stanzas which constitute the central section of the poem. Among groves reminiscent of Virgilian Elysian fields watered by babbling rills, sentimental, girlishly naive maidens whisper to each other tenderly or engrave their monograms on the bark of trees; others, filled with sisterly tenderness, walk among rocks reminiscent of a painting of St. Anthony watching "naked and pink breasts" weirdly compared to volcanic lava. A third group is melodramatically envisioned by the poet as sheltered in some old pagan cave, lit by pine torches, soothing their burning fever with "Bacchus." The boldest picture conjured up is, however, the fourth one: in the recesses of some dark grove, during their solitary nights, they whip themselves

and, in the most graphic line of the poem, they blend "l'écume du plaisir aux larmes des tourments."

Four substantives, dear to the poet's diction, appear to designate the four groups thus presented in the central stanzas: virgins, demons such as St Anthony imagined as his tormentors, monsters (a somewhat excessive and conventional term for those who, in their dark caves, profess the cult of Bacchus) and self-flagellating martyrs. In the two final stanzas in which he addresses them, Baudelaire hints at the reasons for which those unfortunate victims fascinate him. Victims indeed they are: all of them scorn reality, that is, nature and the conditions which limit life. Shrieking or crying, they yearn for the infinite and they have ended in hell. There the poet's soul pursues them with pity and love. The concluding image is of dubious value if taken literally, for hearts cannot exactly be "filled with urns," but with the fluid content of the urns. Taken symbolically however, the line is one of the most grandiose in *Les Fleurs du Mal:* "Et les urnes d'amour dont vos grands œurs sont pleins."

The other "Femmes damnées" ranks, next to "Le Voyage", as the longest poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal.* The poet may have composed part of it, or an earlier version of it, in the mid-eighteen forties, when he thought of entitling his volume "Les Lesbiennes." His friend Asselineau reported that Baudelaire read or recited the piece around 1852 or 53. The text may have undergone many a change through those ten years and the austere finale, whose tone of moral reprobation hardly fits the rest of the poem, was probably an afterthought, perhaps designed to disarm those who indicted the book as immoral in 1856-57. The moral strain was ever present in Baudelaire behind his affected flaunting of vices; and Sartre has upbraided him harshly for the timidity of his rebellion against organized society. But the need to moralize became stronger as he reached the threshold of middle age and recoiled, in describing "artificial paradises", before any attempt to unbalance one's normalcy.

The classical regularity of the rhythm and of the caesurae, the restraint in the choice of epithets ("frêle", "vaine", "infinie," "sublime", "terrible", "étrange"), the scarcity of striking imagery and the precedence given to comparisons introduced by "comme" (ten times) and "ainsi que" (four times), the marked nobility of the diction and of the tone enhance the total effect produced by "Femmes damnées." It is far less audacious (or insolent in the eyes of the timorous reader) than "Une Martyre"

or "A Celle qui est trop gaie". Several commentators, M.Chérix in particular, have stressed how apt would be a comparison of that dramatic poem of 104 lines with a Racinian tragedy. The image of a curtain being lifted from the naive and candid eyes of the younger of the two partners (line 4) or (line 8) screening the two lovers from the glaring light of the outside world calls to mind a lurid or sacred rite being enacted. The setting of the first act is revealed in the first two lines: a pale, fading light in a room with "deep pillows" similar to the "divans profonds" of "La Mort des Amants", all impregnated with fragrance like the nude slaves dreamt of in "La Vie antérieure". The younger of the two women, purposely given a name valid for either sex, Hippolyte, has just undergone the full revelation of Lesbian caresses. Two words point to the extent of her loss: candor and naivety. She has forsaken the land of innocence and, like the traveller who has irrevocably left a landscape which he can now only regret, she looks back nostalgically and vainly. All is frailty about her. The physical description is limited to one or two, vaguely suggested, traits: her arms, which attempted to keep off the domineering embraces, and mostly her eyes, blurred by the inner storm from which she has lately emerged, left as dead by the mental shock ("amortis", boldly used in its original Latin sense), from which "lazy tears" glide down. Next to her, stretched at the feet of the mournful young girl, Delphine, whose name faintly recalls a joyful dolphin and will, later suggest Delphi and its prophetess, radiates with the pride of a conqueror. Baudelaire likens her to an animal watching ravenously the prey it has already bitten. She exults in her triumphant pride; in a splendid line abounding in "u" sounds and ending in a long adverb, she is evoked:

> Superbe, elle humait voluptueusement
> Le vin de son triomphe . . .

She expects gratitude from her partner, whom the poet calls her victim, and an almost religious expression in one who has been initiated into a holy mystery. The last stanza of the exposition counts among the most felicitous in the whole of *Les Fleurs du Mal:*

> Elle cherchait dans l'œil de sa pâle victime
> Le cantique muet que chante le plaisir,
> Et cette gratitude infinie et sublime
> Qui sort de la paupière ainsi qu'un long soupir.

After the sixth stanza, the poet, having set his two characters in their décor and painted their attitudes and moods, lets them

express themselves. Delphine first questions her young lover, or rather warns her against the brutal embraces of men which might still entice her away. In another act of the tragic dialogue, Hippolyte, bewildered and torn, replies. The two of them, then, in the fourth section of the anguished drama, engage in a dialogue which climaxes in an appeal to death. Delphine's invitation to her young friend to spurn the ugly, destructive voraciousness of male lovers is the most passionate as well as the most tender declaration in Baudelaire's poetry. Hippolyte neither repents nor apologizes: she is aghast at what has just happened, terrified at thus feeling a captive of her senses, ruled out of the community of normal lovers, yet invincibly drawn to the one whom she both dreads as her initiator to some infernal rite and loves as a sister whose caresses she yearns for. After conventional lines reminiscent of the more vampirical *Fleurs du Mal* ("Et de noirs bataillons de fantômes épars"), the poet forsakes the implacable regularity of his classical alexandrines: lines 50-51 are halting, more natural in their diction, closer to prose than the series of grave and abstract adjectives of which Baudelaire is fond. Line 52, with its three segments, the pause dividing them, the motion animating the last four words, is a grandiose avowal of desire:

Et cependant je sens ma bouche aller vers toi.

Stung to the quick by the moral hesitation in her partner, Delphine recovers the violence of her animal nature: she shakes her hair as if it were a "tragic mane", moves convulsively like a Pythia, concentrates all her wrath on a despotic lesson of liberated ethics. She curses the foolish moralists who insisted on mixing notions of honesty with love. The problem,[5] Baudelaire states in rather portentous terms, is "insoluble and barren". The two loves cannot be reconciled: Hippolyte could only return from the caresses of a — by definition — stupid male lover, obsessed with remorse, her breasts branded with stigmata, forever marked by the wilting scar of Christianity. Young Hippolyte utters romantic strains in reply, and even invokes the classical Eumenid inflaming her heart, that gaping abyss. Torn between her conflicting impulses, she implores a soothing death on her friend's breast.

The last five stanzas are not a dénouement, but a grave and even self-righteous indictment of the Lesbians. They have often been called Dantesque and they are indeed, although Baudelaire is more prone to pity than was Dante for the homosexuals whom

he doomed to hell (including his former master Bruneto Latini) and even for Paolo and Francesca. The lust of those female friends is a rage that can never be allayed. All was dark and unhealthy about their loves. Their thirst will never be quenched. Their sterile and deceptive delight only dooms their flesh to premature desiccation and their skin to roughness. They forever will wander like forlorn shades in inferno — "fleeing the infinite which they carry within them," adds the last line of the poem. Even if the final indictment was, in part, an opportunist move on the part of the poet then suspected of immorality, it still is in tune with the rest of the poem. Baudelaire was fascinated by barren loves, but always convinced that they represented a violation of some divine, if not natural, order; perhaps even an arrogant assumption by woman of outrageous independence. Christ may stand for the "useless dreamer" blamed in the poem from introducing morality into love, but the poem is that of a man endowed, or afflicted, with a deeply Christian sensibility. T. S. Eliot called him "a Christian born out of his time" and another Englishman, Aldous Huxley, less approvingly, termed him "a Puritanical Jansenist", a foe of Lesbos and its lovers, "a Christian inside out, the photographic image in negative of a Father of the Church."

If Baudelaire envisaged the theme of Lesbian women as a haughty moralist, secretly identifying himself with those creatures damned for the tragic form which original sin assumed in them, Verlaine chose to compose a few, would-be provocative and mildly erotic pieces on the subject. The six sonnets (two in alexandrines, two in decasyllabics, and the riskiest ones in sprightly octosyllabic lines) are grouped under the title "Les Amies". They are among the earliest of Verlaine's compositions and probably date from the years 1866-67. 1866 was the date of publication of *Les Poèmes saturniens* and of the first *Parnasse.* In September 1867, Verlaine attended the funeral of Baudelaire; soon after, he was to compose most of his *Fêtes galantes,* which appeared in July 1869. Baudelaire's publisher brought out *Les Amies* (with the unambiguous subtitle "Scènes d'amour saphique") in Brussels in December 1867. The author was supposed to be a Spanish "bachelor": Pablo-Maria de Herlanes, a clear enough disguise of the poet's Christian and family names. The thin brochure was condemned by the French Court of Lille and banned. The verses were reprinted later, in 1884, in *La Revue Indépendante,* then included in 1889 in the frankly cynical volume

Parallèlement, where they preceded coarser, and hardly more successful, poems on "normal" and less delicate women, "Filles".

Verlaine had read the Lesbian pieces originally incorporated in *Les Fleurs du Mal* and remembered them: a few words and phrases recall his predecessor. The last sonnet, "Sappho," which had appeared separately in August 1867 in *Le Hanneton,* a little review run by a friend of Verlaine, is closer to the Parnassian poets with its mythological names ("la Moire", "la pâle Séléné"), its resounding finale and its picture of Sappho tearing her hair over Phaon's scorn, nostalgic for the purer loves of poetical maidens and leaping to her death. No suggestion of hell or of sin, no punishment and no moral lesson: the very young girls exchange caresses more or less intimate and indiscreet, swoon into false "deaths" in each other's arms, mingle their dishevelled hair. The poet bids them love to their heart's content, pretending to admire the languid (Verlaine was fond of the word "langueur"), half-melancholy pleasures of those "strange couples taking pity on other couples." An erotic suggestion is provided by the sight of the disorderly, fragrant bed:

> Emphatique comme un trône de mélodrames.

Verlaine's Lesbian pieces evince undeniable metric skill and, when contrasted with the coarser poems entitled "Hombres" which are excluded from most standard editions of Verlaine, they appear not devoid of grace. The poet assumes the role of a youthful, leering voyeur and infringes upon all the conventions of good taste. Serious critics have generally dismissed these youthful exercises as hardly worthy of their attention. Yet what male reader has not been a voyeur at times? And should literature necessarily abide by the orthodox advice dispensed in sex manuals, which present orgasmic fulfillment as the sole banal purpose of all loves?

It is disappointing to go over the anthologies of Symbolist literature and to discover how extremely rare were the women writers of that era in France and Belgium. Once more, the delineation of women, the dreams about them, the idealizations of the eternal feminine or the Laforguian mockery of it, the clichés about "sister souls" were, for better or for worse, the product of more or less virile males: the young Gide of *André Walter,* the young Maeterlinck, short-lived Samain or Rodenbach. Except for

the early poems of Mallarmé and Rimbaud, very few of the Symbolist works bear the imprint of a marked Baudelairian influence. In their few critical pronouncements on him, Laforgue, and later Apollinaire and Valéry treated the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* severely.[7] None, not even the Mallarmé of "Une négresse châtiée" or of the eclogue on the Faun, appears to have been tempted to pursue the theme of the damned women. The authentic successor of Baudelaire as a poet, if not as a moralist, on Sapphism was an Englishman steeped in French literature, Algernon Charles Swinburne. Even on a Baudelairian like him, the impact of Théophile Gautier's *Maupin* was deeper than anything he read in Baudelaire; and when he quoted Baudelaire's prose, it was mostly the "Nouvelles Notes sur Edgar Poe" which are derived from the American writer. For Swinburne as for other members of the Preraphaelite Brotherhood, and later for Wilde, Gautier's novel was "the holy writ of beauty", as his British admirer called it in a sonnet on that flamboyant book.

Having heard a rumor that Baudelaire had drowned while at Honfleur, early in 1867, Swinburne composed, before the actual death of the poet, a long elegy in original eleven line stanzas, "Ave atque vale." There are facile amplifications in the 198 lines, too much delight in cascades of adjectives and in sumptuous alliterations. Still, it ranks not far from *Lycidas* and *Adonais* as one of the most moving and fraternal tributes by a poet to a departed brother poet. Inevitably, the ghost of Sappho haunts some of the stanzas, the second in particular, in which the Lesbian promontories are alluded to:

> The barren kiss of piteous wave to wave
> That knows not where is that Leucadian grave
> Which hides too deep the supreme head of song.

After Baudelaire's death, his English brother, as he called himself, published in 1871 an enthusiastic notice on "Femmes damnées". Earlier, with a discerning boldness never lacking in Swinburne, who was a far greater critic than he is often taken to be, he had singled out for praise "Une Martyre" and "A une Madone" at a time when the French admirers of the poet were more impressed by "L'Homme et la mer", "Don Juan aux enfers", "Tristesses de la lune" and the least original and most innocuous *Fleurs du Mal*. He even embarrassed Baudelaire by praising such pieces for their great moral beauty. Baudelaire, answering him on October 10, 1863, denied having entertained

any moral intent in his poetry or being so exclusively a moralist.

Early in his career, Swinburne (he was born in 1837) had been obsessed in his own life with unorthodox sexual or erotic practices. His writings often revert to hermaphrodites and Lesbians. Few writers have been such devotees of Sade and so intent on finding aching pain in the midst of pleasure, and suffering in the very enjoyment of beauty. In 1863, he composed "In the Louvre Museum" a piece with the specific subtitle "Hermaphroditus." "Being sexless, wilt thou be/Maiden or boy?" and another one, "Fragoletta", a title which evokes Latouche's risky novel. The same year, in a 300 line poem, "Anactoria" (the woman lover of Sappho who was said to have eloped with a soldier), in which Sappho, with far more prolixity than her Greek poetry ever evinced, tirelessly pours out reproaches, complaints, cries of self-pity and ravenous desire.

I feel thy blood against my blood; my pain
Pains thee, and lips bruise lips, and vein stings vein. . .
Why wilt thou follow lesser loves? are thine
Too weak to bear these hands and lips of mine?. . . .
Ah! That my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed
To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast! . . . .

If the original Sappho had been thus unrestrained, our sympathy would indeed have gone to Erinna and Atthis who, like Racinian heroines, recoiled from such constraining passion. The characteristic Racinian adjective "cruel" used by deserted lovers is a favorite one with Swinburne. In the same "Anactoria" where raving Sappho threatens to die from her lover's pain and from her own delight, she formulates the poet's usual assertion:

Cruel? but love makes all that love him well
As wise as heaven and crueller than hell.

Those poems, along with "Sapphics", in Sapphic stanzas and therefore more restrained in their evocation of "fruitless women" kissing

Mouth to mouth and hand upon hand, her chosen
Fairer than all men,

appeared in 1866 in the explosive *Poems and Ballads* which unleashed a storm in Victorian Britain. About the same time, Swinburne was composing a long novel in prose, which appeared in print only after his death.[7] *Lesbia Brandon* is a farrago of narrative, of snatches of poetry, critical observations, reminiscences from Sade, Balzac's *La Fille aux Yeux d'or* and *Maupin*. The

hero, Herbert, introduces himself to Lesbia wearing girl's clothes and thus seduces a female. She herself is half male, as Swinburne calls her, and plays the male's part in her loves. But she is a rabid hemaphrodite after a fashion, never fulfilled in passion, a projection of Swinburne himself and at bottom averse to consenting to the love of a man. The novel was never completed or organized, but it contains occasional striking passages.

A woman poet who died the same year as he did (1909), but was born in London in 1877, long after Swinburne had given up frontally assaulting Victorian conventionality, was an admiring reader of his Sapphic poetry. Her real name was Pauline Tarn; her father was English, her mother an American from Michigan. She learned Greek in order to read Sappho, whom she translated in 1903 with a fair degree of literalness, also adding developments on the concise text in French verse and often quoting the English approximations to the original by Swinburne. It is impossible to render the dense, pregnant lines of Sappho which have come down to us without amplifying. The adjectives which Renée Vivien (for Pauline Tarn wrote only under that pen name) uses are too abstract and, in the French sense, "moral": "splendid", "immutable" "haughty", "confused". The two or three line fragments of the original are diluted into 8 or 10. Still, Renée Vivien finds occasionally felicitous phrasing to celebrate the pride of remaining obstinately virginal and of spurning "the supreme defilement," — "l'horreur sanglante de l'étreinte, du baiser qui mord."

Renée Vivien was a poet in her own right, in French only. She was wealthy and lived a solitary, capricious existence of which Colette has afforded a glimpse in one or two chapters of her book of reminiscences, *Ces Plaisirs* (1934). She suffered from often loving in vain, or from pursuing women lovers who eluded her or betrayed her: she imagined that her Lesbianism brought social obloquy upon her, even in her adopted Paris. She certainly impressed Parisians as a strange person who insisted upon reliving Sappho's existence, to the extent of settling for a time in Mytilene in a rented villa. She lived her loves ardently, and died from a cultivated anorexis, starving herself as, for other reasons, Simone Weil was to do during the Second World War. According to Colette, she was seized *in extremis* with fear of the Christian hell. Having clamored her paganism all her life, she seems to have turned remorseful and to have converted.

The inspiration of her verse was Parnassian, and so was her

diction, with adjectives and nouns then fashionable and now as faintly "passés" as the language of Proust's Bloch: "Olympian, chryselephantine, myrrh, peplos", and appeals to ancient Lesbos and to Sappho called, as the Greek poet apparently had called herself, "Psappha."

"Lesbos aux flancs dorés, rends-nous notre âme antique." The evocations are seldom lascivious, or even concrete; the ecstasies alluded to seem cool. The imagery is pallid and the music limps awkwardly:

> . . . Et tu laisses glisser à tes pieds nus tes voiles . . .
> Ton corps m'apparut, plus noble sous les étoiles . . .
> C'était l'apaisement, le repos, le retour . . . .
> Et je te dis: "Voici le comble de l'amour".

There is a surfeit of the words "virgin" and "virginity", an obsessive boast of the superiority of Lesbian loves over the brutal possessiveness of male desires, occasionally a rejection of Christ and of the code of ethics attributed to Christianity: "Et j'aimai cette femme, au mépris de tes lois." Her later collections of verse are bolder and less encumbered with processions of virgins wearing their veils "fragrant with virginal hair", and offering it to Aphrodite or to Sappho. But a tone of despair and of appeal to death resounds more frequently and the music of the poetry seems even more hesitant and slower to take to flight. In the literary production of the last century in France, Renée Vivien occupies only a very modest niche, between Mme Desbordes-Valmore, a purer poet, and the impetuous Anna de Noailles. The woman poet who might have established Lesbianism triumphantly as a tragic or elegiac theme had not yet appeared when the twentieth century came into its own, in 1909, when Renée Vivien died and Gide, Proust, Cocteau granted male homosexuality a conspicuous place in the literature of France.

One poet, a friend of Gide and of Valéry and one whose gifts in the last decade of the nineteenth century seemed to promise an achievement equal to theirs came near to writing the poetical masterpiece on Sapphic themes. Pierre Louÿs was born in 1870, one year after Gide, whose schoolmate he was at the Paris "Ecole Alsacienne," and one year before Proust and Valéry; the latter refrained from giving to his "Jeune Parque" the title of *Psyche* originally selected, because Louÿs had preempted it for a novel written around 1906-7 but left unfinished when its author died in 1925. Louÿs has been strangely neglected by scholars and critics.

They seem to have wanted to punish him for having too soon (in 1896) scored a resounding success with his novel *Aphrodite* and for having indulged in his perilous facility. The decline of his immense talent after his thirtieth year offers one of those melancholy sights of the tragic collapse of a superior nature on which Nietzsche pondered, in premonition of his own failure at forty-five. Many readers profess to frown upon the real merits of *Aphrodite,* as if they were ashamed of having liked the erotic (and, in truth, singularly cool) pages of that novel in their adolescent years. Allusions to marriageable virgins in love with each other (and allowed in Ephesus, it is reported, to marry) occur passingly in that Alexandrian story pleading for the rehabilitation of the flesh.

But it is in his earlier (1894) *Chansons de Bilitis* that, with uncommon skill, the young author had composed variations, uneven and repetitious but occasionally brilliantly successful, on the theme of Lesbian love. The legend, resting on a measure of truth, has it that eminent Greek scholars in Europe were taken in by the author's presentation of those songs as authentically Greek and searched for the original text of Bilitis. Louÿs had, in all seriousness and with an impressive knowledge of Hellenic and Alexandrian poetry, offered the songs, each of them composed of four stanzas rendered in poetic prose, as those of a sixth century B.C. poetess from Asia Minor, daughter of a Greek and of a Phoenician mother. She had lived the life of a shepherdess, reminiscent of Chloe in the late pastoral tale of Longus, then moved to the island of Lesbos: there she fell under the spell of Sappho, learned from her the art of poetry, struck up a tender friendship with another maiden, Mnasidika; when the jealous suspicions of Bilitis broke up that affair, she migrated to Cyprus where she might have become a courtesan practising the cult of Aphrodite. Louÿs even imagined that some German archeologist had dug up her subterranean tomb and found a picture of Bilitis on the lid of her coffin, next to empty bottles of perfume, a silver mirror and a tiny chiselled figure of Astarte.

The loves described in the poems are not exclusively those of girls for girls. Males visit those graceful shepherdesses, ravish them from their companions seduce them with promises and with the eloquence of their desires. But the prettiest pieces, in book II in particular, celebrate the loves of the female sex, gentle caresses of hands and legs, hymns to their breasts by women in front of their mirrors, maiden's bodies lying next to each other

and admiring the curves of their napes or the softness of their skins. Experienced women dispense advice to the teenagers praising "the honey of feminine caresses" and repeating: "Man is violent and lazy . . . . Hate him. His chest is flat, his skin harsh, his hair short, his arms hairy. But women are all beautiful. Women only know how to love . . ." ("Les Conseils"). Over one hundred and fifty poems, however short (12 to 16 lines of prose each), pall on the reader in spite of Louÿs' inventiveness and skill in varying the names of flowers and springs, the pastoral settings and the invocations to Aphrodite, Persephone and other intercessors among the goddesses and the nymphs. Lesbian loves, like others, breed monotony and dullness when feeding solely on themselves. There can be a surfeit of roses and myrtle and honey, of maenads and nymphs, even of firm, pink breasts. A few of the *Chansons de Bilitis* as set to music by Debussy or included in an anthology of love poetry are enough for most readers of either sex. Repetitious eulogies of paganism and nostalgic wishes to erase eighteen centuries of ugly and occasionally ascetic Christianity may grate on the nerves of the sophisticated modern reader. He yearns for more tragedy and even for the excitement of sin and damnation after too big a dose of gentle Sapphic love.

In his unfinished, often artificial, even clumsy novel, *Psyche,* published only after his death in 1926 (and in English in the *Complete Works* of Louÿs translated by Mitchell S. Buck) the suggestions of Lesbian love are few and minimal. Two women, one a "pagan" girl from Eastern lands, undemanding and submissive, the other, Psyche, over-civilized, complicated, self-tormenting are loved by the protagonist, Aymery. He betrays them, ever driven to new conquests. Psyche, a pale, anguished and over-allegorical figure, wants to relive the perfect moment of love fleetingly enjoyed with Aymery in a solitary Breton castle. In vain. She finds the gates locked when she returns to the place where she had been happy, foolishly imagining that such unique ecstasies could be duplicated. She wanders forlorn in the snow and dies. In a tentative version of an ending for which Pierre Louÿs unsuccessfully groped, she had, as in the ancient myth told by Apuleius and adorned by Keats in rich imagery, entered Aymery's deserted room, her lamp in her hand, and found a sheet with a poem "Psyche". The poem (poorly and inaccurately rendered by James E. Richardson in the American edition of Louÿs' collected works) had appeared earlier as "The Apogee"

and is addressed in its opening line to "Psyché, ma sœur . . . ." It is, in our opinion, the greatest poem of happy, tender Lesbian love in the French language and one regrets not to see it included in recent anthologies of symbolist poetry such as that by Bernard Delvaille.[9] One of the lovers addresses the other, using now "tu", now "vous", calling her "ma sœur" with Baudelairian undertones, and delicately recalling a privileged moment of fully shared love. She universalizes her partner as "ma beauté" and as a woman perhaps destined to know other loves one day, "des nuits étrangères" with "others, jealous of my first name", hers being of course a feminine one. Let the hour of apogee, the unique moment of fully shared bliss be recalled through the poetry which attempts to wrest it from ephemeral time. The last two stanzas are a touching appeal for time not to stop as in naive romantic addresses to implacable fate, but to live on in the lovers' memories.

Rappelez-vous qu'un soir nous vécûmes ensemble
L'heure unique où les dieux accordent, un instant,
A la tête qui penche, à l'épaule qui tremble,
L'esprit pur de la vie en fuite avec le temps.

Rappelez-vous qu'un soir, couchés sur notre couche
Et caressant nos doigts frémissant de s'unir,
Nous avons échangé de la bouche à la bouche
La perle impérissable où dort le Souvenir.

With the end of the symbolist movement and the passing of the nineteenth century, women ceased to be regarded as meek creatures coyly and gracefully taking occasional refuge in female friendship, allegedly less brutally disturbing than heterosexual ones. The theme of Lesbian loves apparently left poets of the male sex unconcerned. Surrealists proclaimed the cult of woman as intercessor between themselves and the mysteries of the unconscious; their leader even frowned on male homosexuality. Valéry, Supervielle, Char, Bonnefoy evinced no interest in such themes. On the stage, especially after the publication of the middle sections of Proust's saga novel on Gomorrha and on Albertine, a willing captive in Marcel's apartment, and his lurid portrayal of the jealousy of female loves, the subject appeared for a time fertile with dramatic possibilities. Edouard Bourdet scored some success with his drama entitled *La Prisonnière* and, on the American stage, *The Captive.* (It was ably produced by Gilbert Miller and published in English in 1926 by Brentano.) Prudent

precautions were taken so as not to shock Puritan susceptibilities not yet moribund among the public. One of the leading dramatic critics of the day, Brooks Atkinson, prefaced the published play and presented it as a restrained, almost severe "illumination of human character." In the play, a young lady of twenty-five, belonging to the affluent circles of French society, has stubbornly been refusing suitors without giving any reasons to her father. She finally attempts to free herself from her bondage, a passionate love for a married woman, through accepting a husband who is a male friend of hers whom she has known since childhood. She only succeeds in making him miserable and returns eventually to her Lesbian lover. No suggestion of physical caresses or of purely sensual attachment is hinted. The specific character of a Lesbian liaison is nowhere analyzed. Indeed, the play does not succeed in bringing the issue to a tragic pitch. In spite of some moderate skill, the author fails to convey a sense of fatality and to move the audience or the reader. The Lesbian heroine who might be compared to Medea, Antigone, Lady Macbeth or Phèdre has not yet appeared on the stage.

Several of the novels which attempted a portrayal of Lesbian loves take place in girls' schools and deal with the clandestine discovery of tender affection and adolescent caresses between teenagers or with their crush on one of the women teachers. The most exaggerated and feeblest is no doubt *Thérèse et Isabelle,* by a self-confessed Lesbian whom Simone de Beauvoir praised warmly for her autobiography, *La Bâtarde* (1964). She admired the author for courageously accepting her own ugliness and refusing to please or to charm. Violette Leduc's own half-fictional autobiography reads like a curious document on the war years and as a demonstration of Narcissism driven to its utmost. It is written with vigor and humor. However her other "récit" of two girls hysterically palpating and tickling each other's "lower parts" in the school bathroom and dormitory never rises above childishness. "Let us die while you are I and I am you" is about the one would-be sentimental cry they utter while, as they put it, "entering into the partner's mouth as one enters into a war." Far greater depth of emotion and more analytical insight were displayed in another "récit" by an English friend of Gide and Martin du Gard, Dorothy Bussy. *Olivia* was published between the First and the Second World Wars in English and in French (New York, William Sloane; Paris, Stock, 1949). Expertly, and in restrained language laden with emotion, the author (then married

and a mother) recalled the year she spent in a French girls' school at the age of sixteen. That year brought to her the first discovery of herself as well as that of love and death. She had a crush on one of the two headmistresses, one of whom eventually poisoned herself. Nothing but a few warm kisses was exchanged; the love was never even expressed, except through sobs and anxiety. It was but one of those "strange fits of passion" through which teenagers of the female sex pass before they can accept the feared, and wished for, embrace of a male. But it is depicted with emotion and truthfulness, as becomes the sister of Lytton Strachey.

With the advent of the joint sexual and feminine liberation in the decades that followed World War II, a new type of triumphant Lesbian literature departed from the mild, girlish pose which the delineation of that love had long assumed in literature. The most vocal mouthpiece of that sexual explosion is the French novelist Monique Wittig, whose paeans in honor of Lesbian ecstasies are sung in unbridled hyperbolic language. Cataracts of words rush through the pages of two of her books, fiery with hatred of the male and burning with revenge for centuries of submission to women's erstwhile oppressors. *Les Guerillières,* first published by the Editions de Minuit in 1971, was soon translated into English and appeared in London, at Peter Owen's, in 1971. Those modern two breasted Amazons urge their guerrilla against the males with venomous rage. Even if and when they cease to be my enemies, shouts one of the warriors, I would not cease to speak with violence against them. They reject all the familiar allegations attributed to the males who consider them capable only of intuitive and illogical thinking. In romantic deluges of words they clamor their pride in their genitals, vulval ring and other feminine attributes. The lyrical poem, fearlessly challenging monotony and boredom, is in truth a hymn to the vulva, exclusively reserved for the female touch. Monique Wittig's next book *Le Corps Lesbien* celebrates even more defiantly, and boringly, than its predecessor, the anatomical and physiological allurements of the erstwhile secret "pudenda" of the female body. Initiates may read into it allusions to the dismemberment and resurrection of Osiris. Isis, however, had proved kinder to her brother-husband in recovering and putting together again his "membra disjecta" than those modern Bacchae. Mary McCarthy praised Monique Wittig's earlier volume as a hymn to "the female principle". The word "principle" is a flattering euphemism for a femininity limited to

the vibrations and sudations of the major and minor "labia" and of the clitoris. The sixteenth century "Blason du corps féminin" repeatedly sung by male chauvinist poets was less rapturously and less tediously written. Narcissism would seem to be the Nemesis of much Lesbian literature written by women.

The two most gifted women writers of France in the twentieth century regrettably missed the opportunity to give us the books on Lesbian love that might have ranked as the equals of the novels which, from Balzac to Gide and Proust, have dealt with male homosexuality. Colette touched upon the theme only passingly, first at Willy's instigation when he controlled his young wife's writing and made her spice it up with a few touches of naughtiness (the French word "polissonnerie" is more evocative). After the adventures of Claudine at school, she composed her own fictional autobiographies as a music hall performer with *Mes Apprentissages* (1936). The woman who was Claudine accepts the tender advances of another girl, Rézi, while she is more or less in love with a man who is given the name of Renaud. She delicately suggests that two women may have in common, in such an intimate relationship, much that men misinterpret or fail to understand. "The close resemblance reassures voluptuous pleasure itself."

In 1941, when she had become the George Sand of the twentieth century, an official great Lady of literature admired in a brotherly way by the most eminent male writers and political figures, she altered, or purified, the volume which, in 1932, she had devoted to Lesbian loves and then called *Ces Plaisirs;* it became *Le Pur et l'Impur.*[10] Discreetly and delicately, with no combative declamation and no claim to any superiority for Lesbian love, Colette conjured up the seductiveness which a woman's fragrance, her skin, her clothing, her need for understanding and for affection, may hold for another woman. The male lover or husband foolishly prefers to sneer at it. She writes:

> Two women in each other's arms will never be, to the male, anything but a naughty couple, and not the touching and melancholy image of two weaknesses, who took refuge in that embrace in order to sleep, to cry there, often to flee away from the cruel male and to savor, far more than any pleasure, the bitter love of feeling similar, very small, and forgotten.

Elsewhere she asks that a distinction be drawn between the

provocative Sapphos encountered in dancing halls or on the boulevards, and the more touching, pitiful and tender ones. The spasms of intense pleasure may not be banished from the latter, but the sensuousness of such female affection may be satisfied with exchanges of loving looks, the touch of fragrant hair and skins, with the security of habit and of fidelity. It is not exacting or brutal. The unique flower of such a love is a subtle awareness of each other's presence which heterosexual love may not understand or account for, but simply envy. The reader of Colette's stories cannot help feeling that, with her three husbands and not a few other men in her life, that deft portrayer of animals and nature never portrayed a male character in whom men might watch a revealing reflection of themselves. They would gladly give *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri* and the male who "conquers", as the old fashioned verb puts it, in *L'Ingénue libertine,* for the true and greater book which Colette might have written with Lesbian characters.

Simone de Beauvoir was, at the time she wrote *L'Invitée* (1943), obsessed with the theme of the trio in love affairs. She and Sartre had made a pact that each of them would feel free to enjoy amorous experiences on his and on her own without falling into the antiquated bourgeois reaction of feeling jealous. The protagonist of *L'Invitée,* however, did experience the pangs of jealousy and exasperation, to the point of plotting the death of the other female member of the trio. In her autobiographical volume, *La Force de l'âge,* and later in her declarations to Francis Jeanson,[11] she admitted that, in their naive broadmindedness, they had failed to take into account the feelings of resentment which might corrode the third, presumably younger occasional member of the trio. Xavière, in *L'Invitée,* failed to rest content with the philosophical serenity of the two high-minded existentialists with whom she consorted; nor is she depicted as particularly lovable by the author.

In her autobiographical volumes, Simone de Beavoir repeatedly boasts of uniting in herself "a woman's heart and a man's brain", a surprising admission that a man's brain might be different from, perhaps even superior to, a female one. She contends that, while "denouncing the scandal of the feminine condition", she never denied or renounced her own femininity. None of her women characters succeeds, or even attempts, to be intellectually and sentimentally independent from the males. The love affair of Anne in *Les Mandarins,* when she is swept off her feet by the

Chicago novelist, offers one of the most pathetic stories of humiliating infatuation in literature. Nor was Simone herself, the champion of the second and persecuted sex, ever able to sever her thought from that of Sartre. She apparently did not bring to him any insight into the feminine psyche if one may judge from his failure to create or to depict any credible woman character in the whole range of his plays and longer fiction.[12] Critics have often pointed out Sartre's marked preference for women with virile features, and how he recoils from physical love in his written works like a medieval monk or a Jansenist. The chapter entitled "the Lesbian" in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (II, xv), which quotes at length from psychoanalysts, sexologists and women writers such as Colette and Renée Vivien, hardly affords any insight into the psychology of Lesbian women. To repeat *ad nauseam* that "the feminine" is a perfidious and selfish invention of the male and a product of culture, not of nature, is hardly enlightening. Nor is the commonplace distinction between clitoridian and vaginal women, the first being more inclined to Sapphic love. It may be regretted that, in the place of the farrago of crude, and soon outdated, clinical and psychoanalytical information on woman and the contention that the feminine revolution is only one aspect of the devoutly wished for social and political revolution[13], Simone de Beauvoir should not have written an imaginative work of fiction in which she would have frontally approached the theme of Lesbian loves in their tragic beauty.

One woman novelist, whom Simone de Beavoir mentions only passingly and slightingly, had attempted it in England and, in a less intensely concerned and less anguished way; a male writer in France had also treated the subject in the decade that followed World War I. The French novel is *La Bonifas* (1925) by Jacques de Lacretelle, then thirty-seven years old, a friend of Marcel Proust for a time and — through his name, his family background, and the polished quality of his work — already then an author heading straight for the French Academy. His election to that venerable company aged, or sterilized, his talent prematurely, as it has done for many others. But *La Bonifas* was a powerful story of a girl of masculine features and tastes, the daughter of a soured and solitary army officer, whom his wife, a vulgar and promiscuous dancing girl, has deserted.[14] The heroine is a strongly built woman, fond of horse riding, of country life, and of tenderly protecting young girls whom she prevents from being courted by males. She becomes an outcast in the provincial city

north of Paris where she lives. She is derided, slandered, hated by the narrow-minded community, until the day when, in August 1914, the German army occupies the place and threatens to destroy the city. Then with quiet courage and a patriotism reminiscent of Maupassant's *Boule de Suif,* she turns into a heroine. She threatens, frightens the German officers, secures the salvation of the city. When the Germans retreat in haste after the Battle of the Marne, she is hailed as a savior and publicly honored. The second half of the book, where the valiant old maid is transfigured into a heroine, is less convincing than the first, in which Lacretelle deftly analyzed the torment of a young, over-masculine girl, excommunicated by conventional society. As a study of a mocked, persecuted single woman, the novel does not rank far below the superb, but far more satirical or at least more comic, portrait of Balzac's *La Vieille Fille.*

The English novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) aroused a scandal in its day. It was turned down by one after another of the American publishers at a time when *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were still considered as too heady a wine for Americans in the era of prohibition. The author, Radclyffe Hall, was a notorious female homosexual, a gifted writer in verse and in prose, whose masterpiece was an appeal for sympathy for persons of her kind. She was wealthy, endowed with superior intellectual gifts, strong-willed, and convinced that she was a congenital invert. She always felt remote from her mother, a self-centred and quarrelsome woman uninterested in her daughter, since she had all along hoped to have a boy instead. Her father, in the fictional work which incorporates many elements of her own life, had guessed the source of his daughter's strange behavior, but was killed in an accident before he could help her accept herself. The girl contracted passionate attachments for several maids or governesses who trained her, then for married ladies in the near-by town; at last during World War I she found the young person, Marie — poor, submissive — on whom she could pour her tyrannical affection.

The couple settled in Paris, met other Lesbian pairs in bars and shady parties, made friends with Natalie Barney (Rémy de Gourmont's famous "Amazon") called Valerie Seymour in the novel, an almost legendary Lesbian figure in Parisian society for decades. But quietude and happiness soon eluded the lovers. In the novel, the younger girl, Marie, finally deserted the older one for a man who fell in love with her. In Radclyffe Hall's own life,

she herself fell in love with a Russian born nurse whom she had engaged to take care of her ailing friend. Suspicion, jealousy, constant fear of losing her female partner to a man who might arouse her yearning for the conventional life of a wife and a mother, harass the older, less feminine partner. In the novel, heroically, masochistically, Radclyffe Hall laid open the sordid aspects of a Lesbian relationship, the incessant threats posed to it by society and perhaps by the very nature of that love which Baudelaire called "sterile." She ended the long and pathetic story with an admission of defeat and a vain prayer to God: "Rise up and defend us! Acknowledge us, O God, before the whole world. Give us also the rights to our existence!"

Will the subject of homosexual loves, male or female, lose whatever appeal it has had for literature in the last two hundred years now that moral reprobation has ceased to be a potent force in our Western societies? Incest for a while, then flagellation, refined forms of physical torture rivalling any in Sade's fiction, displaced the banality of adultery and homosexual liaisons in the imagination of novelists: Pauline Réage or whoever wrote *Histoire d'O* and Jean de Berg in *L'Image.* In the latter, a girl is enslaved and beaten by her female lover, while a man watches and becomes sexually aroused by the sight of "the martyred buttocks" of the consenting victim. Those French women novelists and their equally liberated French-Canadian and American sisters, have lost little time in exploring the most unusual forms of love relationships. With old prejudices now shattered and most prohibitions gone, the time might be ripe for a more intelligent admission of the legitimacy, perhaps of the superiority, of androgyny. Simone de Beauvoir and her critic, Suzanne Lilar, are both agreed that there are elements of bisexuality in all of us and that, as Coleridge long ago maintained, "a great mind must be androgynous." *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* is the title of a well-known book published in 1973 by a professor at Columbia, Carolyn C. Heilbrun.[16] The childish fear, in men, of impotence, in women, of frigidity, has been artifically exaggerated through the vast and often cheap literature on sex that has cluttered booksellers' shelves over these last decades. "Can I find out the woman's part in me?", as Posthumus exclaims in the second act of *Cymbeline* in a fit of foolish anger, he wants to eradicate whatever may be feminine in him (by which he means lying, flattering, deceiving). We would rather regret, as Lytton Strachey

did in a letter to Clive Bell, that "one can't now and then change sexes".

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FOOTNOTES

1. David N. Robinson, *Sappho and her Influence,* Boston, Marshall Jones, 1924, p. 45.
2. Théodore de Banville, *Mes Souvenirs,* Charpentier, 1882, pp. 351-365. Id., *Critiques,* Charpentier, 1917 (pp. 22-30, on Boyer's *Sapho.)*
3. See Georges May, "On Baudelaire's Debt to Diderot", *Modern Language Notes,* LXV, June 1950, pp. 395-9.
4. Albert Thibaudet, *Histoire de la littérature française depuis 1789,* Stock, 1936, p. 325.
5. Rémy de Gourmont, in *La Culture des Idées,* lending too generously perhaps some of his knowledge of Renaissance Latin to Baudelaire, surmised that the poet might have paraphrased a sentence from the seventh colloquium by Johannes Meursius, 1579-1639: "Honestatem qui quaerit in voluptate, tenebras et quaerat in luce. Libidini nihil inhonestum". The Latin work which was represented as being translated into Latin from the Spanish of Meursius was in fact by a Frenchman from Grenoble, Nicolas Chorier.
6. Aldous Huxley, "Baudelaire", *Do what you Will.* London, Chatto and Windus, 1929.
7. We have discussed them in an article, "Remarques sur le peu d'influence de Baudelaire", *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France,* 67e année, No 2, (April-June 1967), 424-436.
8. Swinburne, *Lesbia Brandon,* published with notes by Randolph Hughes, London, The Falcon Press, 1952, pp. 584. A long and perceptive commentary of the novel, replete with digressions on literary matters, on Balzac, etc., was made by Georges Lafourcade in *La Jeunesse de Swinburne,* Belles Lettres, 1928, vol. 2.
9. Bernard Delvaille, *La Poésie symboliste,* Seghers, 1971. English anthologies of modern French poetry, as a rule expertly done (by Alan Boase, Cecil Hackett, J. Chiari, Anthony Hartley) likewise fail to find room for Pierre Louÿs, while they include Henri de Régnier, Francis Vielé-Griffin and others. Yet several of the early poems by Louÿs, Parnassian (Louÿs had been Heredia's son-in-law) or dreamily symbolist, are not inferior to many of the pieces in Valéry's *Album de vers anciens.*
10. The section on Renée Vivien had been printed earlier for private circulation in 1928 in the series "Les Amis d'Edouard". *Le Pur et l'Impur* is part of the ninth volume of Colette's*Œuvres complètes* brought out by Flammarion. The most detailed biographical study of Renée Vivien to date is by Paul Lorenz: *Sapho 1900,* Julliard, 1977. On the Lesbian theme, see Jane Rule, *Lesbian Images,* London, Peter Davies, 1976. The author is hard on Colette. She also deplores the scarcity of humor in the fiction about Lesbians.
11. Francis Jeanson, *Simone de Beauvoir ou l'expérience de vivre* (Seuil, 1966). See also on the related themes of Simone de Beauvoir's treatment of the subjects of love and feminism Suzanne Lilar, *Le Malentendu du deuxième sexe,* P. U. F., 1969 and Jean Leighton, *Simone de Beauvoir on Women,* Rutherford, N. J., Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1975.

12. The only exception would be girls in the short story "Intimité" and the submissive wife in "La Chambre", both in the volume *Le Mur*. None of those women evinces the slightest inclination to revolt against their feminine condition.
13. Several valuable articles on "Simone de Beauvoir et la lutte des femmes" were collected in number 61 of *L'Arc* (Aix-en-Provence) 1975. In one of the articles, Simone herself interrogated and upbraided Sartre on his lack of enthusiasm for the feminine cause. The leading American feminist, Betty Friedan, expressed her disappointment with Simone de Beauvoir's later attitude on the question of women's liberation in *The Saturday Review*, June 14, 1975, pp. 15-17. She found her so concerned with espousing the supposedly Maoist approach in French politics, as advocated by Sartre, that "she did not seem to identify with ordinary women; . . . her authority had become sterile, cold, an abstraction."
14. The novel was translated into English by Winifred Stephens Whale and published in London and New York in 1927 by G. P. Putnam's Sons. An exhaustive study of Lacretelle by Douglas Alden appeared at the Rutgers University Press in 1958.
15. Radclyffe Hall, born in 1880, died in 1943. One of her scandalous love affairs was with Una Troubridge, the wife of a British naval officer who eventually became an admiral. She was admired by men, kindly treated by her baffled husband, but unable to enjoy and accept the role of wife and of mother. She deserted her husband to live with her woman lover. Much information is provided in a book by Lovat Dickson, *Radclyffe Hall at the Well of Loneliness*, New York, Scribners, 1975.
16. Michel Butor, in a lengthy, ingenious but, to this reader, not wholly convincing volume, translated under the title *Histoire extraordinaire. Essay on a Dream of Baudelaire* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1969) attempted to systematize three phases in Baudelairian inspiration, corresponding to the three titles which successively tempted the poet: "Lesbiennes" under the aegis of Jeanne Duval; "Les Limbes", alluding to "Les Foules" and referring to Fourier's Socialist utopia; the final title, *Les Fleurs du mal*, closer to Poe. The paradoxical thesis argued by Butor is that the legal guardianship imposed upon Baudelaire in 1844 was resented by him as a slur on his virility and that, hereafter, he felt as a woman. If he slept with a woman, he himself was a Lesbian desiring another female. The novelist greatly overstates, in our opinion, Baudelaire's devotion to Jeanne Duval and the alleged sense of guilt and responsibility which, supposedly, afflicted him for having contaminated his mulatto companion with syphilis.

    The myth of the androgyne has inspired a huge amount of writing, religious, anthropological, philosophical, sociological, and many a novel, especially by the French in the nineteenth century. For the ancient times, the most convenient, and very learned, book is that of Marie Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite: Mythes et rites de la Bisexualité dans l'Antiquité classique*, Presses Universitaires, 1958. For a very full and suggestive survey of more modern interpretations, see A. J. L. Busst, "The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century", in Ian Fletcher, editor, *Romantic Mythologies*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, pp. 1-95. June Singer, in *Androgyny: Toward a New Theory of Sexuality* (Doubleday, 1978) contends, along Jungian lines, that the human psyche contains an archetype which is both masculine and feminine. A detailed and expert biography of Pierre Louÿs, by H. P. Clive, appeared at the Clarendon Press in 1978.