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SEXUAL PERSONAE

ART AND DECADENCE FROM  
NEFERTITI TO EMILY DICKINSON

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fertilization."<sup>1</sup> Werther-style suicide had an aggressive autoeroticism, glamorizing an act that the Church condemns as the gravest sin. Werther's Rousseaust emotionalism is self-dissolving: "My powers of expression are weak and everything is so hazy in my mind that all contours seem to elude me."<sup>2</sup> The Enlightenment's sharp Apollonian lines disappear in Dionysian mist. Werther is like Shakespeare's suicidal Antony, whose identity shifts like clouds. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* demonstrates how Rousseaust sensibility acted as an alchemic bath, hermaphroditizing the European male persona in emotional fluidity. Like Rousseau, Werther worships the earth mother, in whose lap he dies. His suicide is strongly nihilist: the pistols must pass through the daemoning hands of Lotte, a pleasant maiden whom Werther turns into a Romantic femme fatale. Goethe said the novel came from "the decision to let my inner self rule me at will" and to let outside events "penetrate."<sup>3</sup> In Romantic creativity, the male waits in spiritual passivity, acted upon by internal and external forces. The feminized inner self is the Muse who becomes increasingly ferocious as Romanticism goes on. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796) is a tangle of sexual problems of education, the story of a young man's development, modelled on Rousseau's *Confessions*. A feminized male is the center of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, but *Wilhelm Meister* is dominated by masculine women. The novel opens with transvestism: an actress steps offstage in male military dress, with sword. She refuses to change clothes, since she has a rendezvous with Wilhelm Meister, whom Goethe called his "dramatic likeness." Like Balzac's Sarrasine and Wilde's Dorian Gray, Wilhelm has fallen in love with a stage persona, whose red uniform he clasps with fetishistic "rapture."<sup>4</sup> Female transvestism is everywhere in *Wilhelm Meister*, from Tasso's warrior Clorinda to women disguising themselves as pages and hunter-boys.

The novel has a mysterious "Amazon" who finds Wilhelm lying wounded by bandits. The shape of the radiant "angel" is concealed by a man's white great coat, which she ritualistically lays upon him. This light-shedding Apollonian androgyne, suddenly appearing in a forest, resembles Spenser's Amazon huntress Belpheobe, whose roots are in Ariosto and Tasso. Wilhelm becomes obsessed with her, replaying her epiphany in his dreams. When she becomes a real and intelligent person at novel's end, the Amazon loses her glamour. This pattern of declension is common in works with sexually ambiguous themes, like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Mrs. Dalloway. The Amazon's magnetism comes only from her mystical androgyne. *Wilhelm Meister's* transvestism is so

## Amazons, Mothers, Ghosts

### Goethe to Gothic

The young Goethe, a disciple of Rousseau, begins German literary self-consciousness in a welter of sexual ambiguities. Like Sade, Goethe is a transitional figure, half classic, half Romantic. A new Renaissance man, he sought mastery of all arts and sciences. By the end of his long life he was the cultural leader of Europe, as Voltaire had been in the eighteenth century. Biography long ago established Goethe's sexual eccentricities and amoral titanism of will. But too much of the vast scholarship on Goethe's poems, plays, and novels is stultifyingly dull, paralyzed by reverence. No other writer of this rank suffers so gaping a rift between biography and criticism.

Goethe's novella *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) gave the Sturm und Drang school, with its Rousseaust sensibility, an international impact. Werther, to whom Goethe gives his own birthday, is Rousseau's emotional feminized male, pale, melancholy, tearful. He is the moody double-sexed adolescent first documented by Shakespeare. Romantic adolescence has spiritual superiority. For Werther, childhood is beautiful and pure, while masculine adulthood is sordid and debased; so refusing to grow up is noble. Werther clings to his feminine mood-states to defeat time and gender.

*The Sorrows of Young Werther* ends in the hero's suicide, which started a vogue for real suicides throughout Europe. This was the first salvo of Romantic youth-cult, to return in our own frenetic 1960s. I attribute these suicides to the shift in sexual personae at the close of the eighteenth century. Theodore Faithfull says in another context, "Dreams of self-destruction, and probably many cases of suicide, are desires or attempts on the part of narcissistic individuals to give themselves a new birth by sexually attacking themselves and thus bringing about self-

pronounced that the hero mistakes a real soldier for a woman. Another actress carries a dagger, the "faithful friend" which is her totemic male self. She kisses it and tucks it in her bosom or whips it around, cutting Wilhelm. Wilhelm Meister is not as feminine as Werther, but Goethe swamps him sexually by surrounding him with viragos and transvestites. Wilhelm speaks for his creator in saying that "the novel-hero" must suffer, while the dramatic hero should act and achieve.<sup>5</sup> Even in action, like Werther's suicide, Goethe's novel-heroes seek self-subordination. Goethe hastens the evolution of Rousseauist sensibility into Romantic masochism. → Goethe: *romantisch* was *schicklich* we

The star transvestite of *Wilhelm Meister* is Mignon, whom Georg Lukács calls "the very embodiment of the romantic spirit" and Victor Lange the "most exquisite embodiment of Romantic lyricism."<sup>6</sup> When Wilhelm first sees her, the adolescent Mignon is in male dress, and he cannot guess her gender. She is an "enigma" with a magical fascination for him. Her name has erotic associations: the French "mignon," whence our "minion," means "favorite" or "darling" in female prostitution and male homosexuality. Although she is in the novel's earliest manuscript, Mignon resembles a boyish Venetian acrobat whom Goethe saw in Italy in 1790. "Neither male nor female." Mignon is fanatical about her transvestism. She passionately rejects female clothing: "I am a boy, I will be no girl!"<sup>7</sup> After playing an angel in a pageant, she refuses to surrender her seraph's robe. Two dozen pages later, she is dead, after becoming more and more attenuated and etherialized as a character: she loses vital energy when she abandons male clothing. At the funeral, her body is laid out in her winged angel's costume. The service is a masque, with recitations by boys in Apollonian azure and silver.

Mignon conforms to two categories of the androgyne. She is the beautiful boy, the Apollonian angel, but she is also a negative or afflicted Mercurius, the volatile shape-shifter. Mignon's early death is foreshadowed in her unnatural excitement. When Wilhelm meets her, she "darted like lightning through the door": "She never walked up or down the stairs, but jumped. She would spring along by the railing, and before you were aware, would be sitting quietly above upon the landing." She dances "lightly, nimbly, quickly." Mignon sounds like Shakespeare's antic Ariel, but there is something disturbingly pathological in her energy. She has palpitations and fits, a worsening "spasmodic vacuity" or "restless stillness." She constantly twists or chews thread, napkins, paper, as if to drain "some inward violent commotion." She is alarmingly "frantic with gayety"; hair flying, she raves and capers like a

romantisch  
novelle-  
welt  
→ hielde  
#  
dramatisch  
welt  
→ monde &  
opéra

"Maenad."<sup>8</sup> Mignon finally falls dead from a heart spasm. The Dionysian Mercurius dances herself to death.

In her emotional purity and intensity, Mignon is an early version of *Faust's* Euphorion, the symbol of poetry modelled on Byron. Euphorion too is agitated and volatile, but Mignon is more feverish and hysterical. I call her Goethe's Euphoria, after the uncontrollable "up" phase of manic-depression. Shakespeare's Rosalind is the perfected Mercurius of mercurial wit and multiple personae. The afflicted Mercurius is like Byron's mistress, Lady Caroline Lamb. Sometimes appearing in page-boy or other male dress, Lady Caroline was notorious for her mad nervous energy and exhibitionistic pranks. She smashed china in her rages; she was publicly self-destructive, as when, jealous of Byron, she shattered a wineglass in her hands. Byron called her "Little Mania." Dangerous to herself and others, she died prematurely, like Mignon. Lady Caroline was androgynous in her willfulness, transvestism, and adolescent body-type. Her excessive thinness went against contemporary fashion: besieged by her after his ardor had cooled, Byron declared, "I am haunted by a skeleton."

Though Mignon is more innocent than the calculating Lady Caroline Lamb, the two have the same hyperactivity and spasmodic tension. In her mobile charm, Mignon is like Tolstoy's mischievous Natasha, who appears once in *War and Peace* in a mustache. In Rosalind as Mercurius, language is developed to its maximum. But Mignon is a Mercurius of silence: "Often for the whole day she was mute."<sup>9</sup> Even from childhood, "she could not express herself" with words. This muteness is Mignon's Apollonian side, which she shares with Spenser's Belphoebe, with her broken sentences, Melville's stammering Billy Budd, and Thomas Mann's dreamy Tadzio. Another afflicted Mercurius: Edie Sedgwick, the short-lived blonde socialite and Andy Warhol superstar who, like Lady Caroline, was childish, boyish, angelic, monstrous, and self-destructive, constantly dancing or setting her bed and hotel afire. Next, the affected aspiring actress Gloria (Barbara Steele) in *Fellini's* *8½*, wearing out her aging lover by her madcap dancing, poetic raptures, and hysterical mood-swings.

Not until the end of *Wilhelm Meister* do we learn that Mignon was born of the incest of brother and sister. Incest, defended here, is to become the paradigm of Romantic sexuality. Mignon's parents mentally deteriorate. An "Apparition" appears, "a beautiful boy standing at the foot of their bed and holding a bare knife."<sup>10</sup> This avenging angel of the guilt-ridden unconscious prefigures the doomed transvestite Mig-

incest  
↓  
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Sexualität

non. Stationed at the bed of sin, the boy-spirit is like Rosalind's double, Hymen, the hovering marriage-idea. Mignon's death is analogous to the Amazon's loss of glamour when she regains her social identity. Like *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, *Wilhelm Meister* consigns the romance of transvestism to spiritual adolescence. Wilhelm enters maturity by renouncing the theater, arena of impersonations. For Wilhelm to advance from apprentice to master of life, the novel must sacrifice his inseparable companion, Mignon. She is an externalization of his double-sexed adolescence. Her death is equivalent to Rosalind and Viola killing Wilhelm's new concern for the transvestite heroines' male alter egos. Goethe's neoclassic side. Wilhelm becomes "father" and "citizen." Like Empress Plotina, he rejects multiple personae for the stable, unitary persona that is the basis of civic order. Like Shakespeare's transvestite comedies (surely Goethe's inspiration), *Wilhelm Meister* ends with the setting aside of masquerades and the rediverting of psychic energy into society.

Goethe's Mignon had a long and unacknowledged influence on nineteenth-century literature. I think she is the source, ultimately forgotten, of a series of Romantic and Late Romantic androgynes. An untranslated and now obscure work, Henri de Latouche's *Frageletta* (1829), takes up *Wilhelm Meister's* motif of female transvestism and transmits it to two writers strongly influenced by la Touche, Balzac and Gautier. Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, inspired by *Frageletta*, becomes the first bible of the French and English Decadence. In the manuscript of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, found early this century, Mignon's sexual ambiguity went beyond transvestism. Goethe calls her sometimes "she," sometimes "he," a witty subtlety suppressed in earlier editions (including Thomas Carlyle's still-sold translation) because it was thought an error. In the sequel, *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, Goethe calls Mignon "boy-girl" and "pseudo-boy." Mignon should be credited to Shakespeare's enduring continental influence. Gautier rejoins the female transvestite to her source in *As You Like It*, performed by his characters as a mime of their own gender confusion.

In the *Venetian Epigrams*, ancestor of Mann's *Death in Venice*, Goethe celebrates the Mignon-like acrobat, Bettina. He accepts as his own his novel-heroes' fascination with the perverse. Goethe sees Bettina as an incarnation of the beautiful boys or "cherubim" of Italian Renaissance painting (Epigram 36). He compares her to Ganymede, whom he as king of the gods covets (38). Performing, Bettina plunges the admiring observer into dreamlike uncertainty and doubt: "Everything hovers in

space in unstable form. / So Bettina confuses us, twisting her beautiful limbs" (41).<sup>11</sup> Bettina is sexually and morphologically ambiguous. Her acrobatic dexterity makes Goethe question her species: she is mollusk, fish, reptile, bird, human, angel (37). Mobile Bettina represents both Apollonian ideal beauty and Dionysian metamorphosis. She violates all categories.

One of the *Venetian Epigrams* suppressed because of their frank sexual content is about Bettina: "What worries me most is that Bettina grows always more skillful, / Always more supple becomes every joint in her frame; / At last she'll bring her little tongue into her dainty slit; / She'll play with her charming self, lose all interest in men" (34).<sup>12</sup> Goethe the voyeur imagines Bettina acrobatically masturbating, like Catullus' autofellating sleazebag, Gellius. Bettina becomes a Romantic circle of incest and narcissism. She is the uroboros devouring itself or the Egyptian sky goddess arching backwards. She is sexually complete and self-embowered, like Blake's autoerotic "Sick Rose." Visually, she resembles Blake's engravings of solipsistically contorted figures. Goethe invents an autonomous, rapacious female sexuality. He is merely a spectator at a pagan ritual. Man is on the periphery, woman at the center. In the next epigram, Goethe predicts Bettina's first lover will find her acrobatics have torn her hymen. She has, in other words, the masculine power to deflower herself. Bettina is harder and uncannier than Mignon. Her serpentine limbs slink into and bind Goethe's strange sexual imagination. In her flaunting exhibitionism, she is like baby mother nature at play.

*Faust*, Goethe's contribution to world literature, joins the Renaissance to Romanticism. Not since *Hamlet*, which influenced this play, had there been so searching an analysis of the moral and sexual ambiguities of western consciousness. The historical Doctor Faustus was an unscrupulous magician denounced by his contemporary, Martin Luther. The first *Faustbook* (1587), condemning Faust for his intellectual hybris, shows Protestantism awakened against the dangers of Renaissance paganism. Goethe expands the sexual commentary in the *Faust* story. The western mind is seen as sex and power, striving against God and nature. Don Juan and Faust are the most characteristic myths of the postclassical west. They represent dominance, aggression, the will-to-power, all the imperial ambitions of paganism that Christianity has never been able to defeat.

Faust is Goethe, the artist as magus, just as Mephistopheles is Goethe, the artist as enemy of God. As a Renaissance alchemist, Faust seeks

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the secrets of nature. What Goethe has added to the story is the seduction theme, borrowed from Don Juan and Casanova. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1593), Helen of Troy, summoned for Faustus's delectation, is a majestic love goddess. Goethe's Ophelia-like Gretchen, on the other hand, is the humble handmaiden in a saga of lust, violation, guilt, and remorse. Goethe makes an analogy between the exploitation of women by men and the exploitation of nature by the self-infatuated western mind. Here Goethe parallels Blake, who is the first to protest against the industrial corruption and pollution of green England.

*Faust* shows sex as a mode of western knowledge and control. Gretchen, the lamblike feminine innocent, is physically and morally ruined, ending in infanticide. Her illicit intercourse with Faust implants her with western aggression. Seduction is an intellectual game. It is the invasion of one hierarchy by another. By creating sacred spaces apart from nature, the west invites their despoilment. Like Spenser's Florimell, Gretchen induces destruction by her own passivity and defenselessness. Goethe exalts the feminine principle and makes Gretchen a redeemed martyr, but like all great artists he is ambivalent toward his own moral constructions. Faust in league with Mephistopheles is Goethe yielding to his own cannibal impulses.

The west's will-to-power has created our perverse dynamics of willing. The rapist says, she wanted it, she asked for it. This conviction is produced by the separation and tension between sexual personae. She who may or may not ask for it is a real person, with a sharp identity. The defeat of her will is part of the thrill of seduction or rape. Coercion requires free will, in both homosexual and heterosexual acts. Faust's seduction of Gretchen is intrusion, trespass, criminal entry into posted space. This is one of the west's premiere sexual tropes, intensified by our categorizations and hierarchic rankings. In classical antiquity, immoderate lust was priapism, which was, like drunkenness, the fault of fools and satyrs. Christianity's animus against sex and its stark polarity of good versus evil intellectualized lust and raised its significance. Lust is a crossing of the gap between western sexual personae. Lust sharpens the aggressive, predatory western eye, making it prelude and coda of touch. Faust and Mephistopheles, watching, are voyeurs at Gretchen's stalking, capture, soiling, and imprisonment.

*Faust*, a play with an alchemist hero, has a diffuse alchemical form. It has two parts, a multitude of episodes, and a crowd of minor characters. It combines classical with Christian culture. It mixes tragedy with comedy, epic with lyric, ideal beauty with the grotesque and obscene. Gretchen is naive sentiment, Mephistopheles cynical sophistication.

Faust is caught in the middle, like all mankind. *Faust* has a variety of sexual personae, more than any other work of major literature. Goethe inserts Romantic androgynes into the traditional Faust story. Faust's acquisitive western intellect is invaded by hybrid sexual forms, bursting out of the alchemic unconscious. All of *Faust* is a *Walpurgisnacht*, a return of the occult. The witch-revel episode, Goethe's addition, is a pagan encroachment upon a Christian drama. Goethe identified imagination with the daemonic; he repeatedly spoke of daemonic assaults upon gifted men. *Faust* is structurally amorphous because it is daemonic-haunted. The play itself suffers Dionysian fluctuations: metamorphosis was the master principle of Goethe's speculations in science and art. Critics comment on his inability or refusal to finish anything. All Goethe's stories, even *Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister*, were to continue in sequels. As a drama, *Faust* breaks Aristotle's and Racine's Apollonian rules. It is restless, volatile, glutted with magic epiphanies and contradictory emotional textures.

The two characters in *Faust* symbolizing poetry are double-sexed. The girlish Boy Charioteer is fancily decked out with jewels and tinsel. Euphorion, Faust and Helen's son, is a classic beautiful boy, part Apollo, part Icarus. He wears feminine adornments of Asiatic opulence. Like Homer's Athena, he is the androgyne as symbol of human intelligence. Poetry, Goethe implies, attains universality by a fusion of genders. To be transsexual in appeal, art must be bisexual in origin. Euphorion is short-lived because he represents Romantic lyricism, which burns hot and fast. Goethe joins the vermalinity of the Greek beautiful boy to the true facts of English Romanticism, whose second generation of poets died glamorously young.

The Adonis-like Paris is a maturer Euphorion. Goethe's Paris is even more effeminate than Homer's. Goethe suggests that femininity in a male alienates men but arouses women. Thus the unmanly Paris won the most beautiful woman in the world. Other examples of the languid boudoir manner are Byron's Don Juan and George Hamilton, Hollywood's most popular escort of famous women. The man discreetly attending women becomes a misty mirror of their femininity.

There are two sex changes in *Faust*. Mephistopheles slips into the shape of female Phorkyas. Now a smooth courtier, Mephistopheles can call on chthonian metamorphosis at will—the realm he came from when he began his interventionist career as a serpent trailing after a Scythian woman. The second example occurs at a carnival, where the Scraggy One, a parodic Teiresias, identifies himself as a miser whose sex has waned from female to male. Like Dante and Spenser, Goethe identifies

Faust  
→ the  
secrets  
of  
nature

+  
seduction  
theme

→

cannibal

sexwell  
trope

blending  
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the female principle with emotional generosity. The Scraggy One is a gargyle, spiritually contracted, the androgyne as moral monstrosity.

An alchemical experiment is performed in the second part of *Faust*. Homunculus, a fabricated being, hovers in its glass retort, a self-propelled bubble. Goethe considered giving Homunculus a Homuncula as a mate, but his efforts to bring them together failed. Presumably Homunculus, as double-sexed as the alchemic *rebis*, rebuffed a wife as redundant. *Faust* shows the creative process as alchemic. The glass jar is the lucid self-contained world of art, harboring both beauty and deformity. As a creative symbol, Homunculus is goblin-twin to Euphroion and the Boy Charioteer. As a specimen of bioengineering, Homunculus anticipates Mary Shelley's creature in *Frankenstein* and her husband's Hermaphrodite in *The Witch of Atlas*. Manufacture becomes a metaphor for the aggressions of Romantic imagination.

*Faust's* most imposing androgynes occupy an eerie netherworld beyond space and time. Mephistopheles, uneasy, calls them "the Mothers." They are blind goddesses in a murky barren zone lit by a glowing Delphic tripod. The Mothers are Greek Fates combined with Plato's eternal forms: "Formation, Transformation, / Eternal Mind's eternal recreation."<sup>15</sup> Mephistopheles takes Faust to the omphalos of the universe, a female heart of darkness. The Mothers are nature's brute force of metamorphosis. Their creative solipsism is a daemonized version of Bettina's autoerotic circularity. *Faust's* descent to the underworld shows past, present, and future. The realm of the Mothers is repressed pagan nature, which Enlightenment science failed to illuminate. Romanticism reverses the moral values of day and night. Mephistopheles himself hails from "Mother Night," Clytemnestra's home.

Certain Cretan nymphs were called "the mothers," mentioned by Diodorus Siculus as "the Cretan nurses of Zeus."<sup>14</sup> Goethe's familiarity with classical arcana is shown by his use of the name Baubo for one of *Faust's* witches: Baubo is an ancient totem of ritual exhibitionism, raising her skirt to show her genitals. Goethe's goddesses are the Great Mother cloning herself, as profuse as the many breasts of Ephesian Artemis or the thousand names of Isis. The Mothers' multiplicity is sinister and suffocating. They flock like Sirens or Harpies, but they are far vaster in power. Goethe's maternal limbo is unparalleled, though it takes its tone from the witch scenes of *Macbeth*. In modern times, even when the Great Mother is treated sympathetically, as she is by Joyce and Woolf, she controls only green nature, not this gloomy Stygian cavern with which western myth associates swarthy male hierarchs. Emptiness and barrenness are usually produced by a flight from the maternal, as in

"the Mothers"  
→ blonde goddesses  
→ Fates  
Plato's eternal forms  
↓ nature's brute force of metamorphosis  
→ repressed pagan nature

the refusal to mourn the dead mother in Camus' *The Stranger* or in the horror of the mucoid object-world in Sartre's *Nausea*. Wasteland vision denies or suppresses the mother. In *Faust*, however, barrenness and fertility are creepily simultaneous. Goethe honors female power, but he sees it blocking everything. All roads lead to maternal darkness.

The Mothers appear in *Faust* when the hero tries to materialize the spirit of Helen. Adult love is overshadowed by maternal claims to priority. The male struggles through his sexual stages, returning to the mother even when he thinks himself most free of her. Faust finds his way to the Mothers with a key that phallically swells. When key and tripod touch, they stick. Now Faust is able to conjure up alluring Helen. If the mother-realm is the unconscious, key and vulval tripod are the self-fecundation of imagination. The Mothers as eternal forms ("Ge-stalten") are the archetypes tapped by the artist in his quest for ideal beauty, the elusive Helen. The male artist descending to the Mothers makes a journey to *terra incognita*, his own repressed feminine side, where his mother still dwells.

In key drawn to tripod, Goethe shows the ambivalent compulsions of sexual intercourse. Every male copulating with a woman returns to his origins in the womb. Goethe postponed intercourse until he was forty. This must be related to his self-imposed distance from his forceful mother. [To refuse phallic penetration is to refuse surrender to the female matrix. Goethe was at least seventy-two when he wrote the Mothers episode. Therefore it represents a confrontation and perhaps reconciliation with a mode of experience he had cast out of his youthful imaginative life. Faust shudders at the Mothers' name. They are uncanny, archaic, and inescapable. Freud says that the uncanny (*unheimlich*) is really the familiar, the homely (*heimlich*) which one cannot bear to recognize.] The strangeness of Goethe's Mothers comes from their perpetual proximity. We live with them. The simplistic sexual pattern of Part One of *Faust*, where the virile hero feeds upon the fragile femininity of Gretchen, is an evasion of the grosser truths faced by Part Two in the Mothers. Faust has an appetite for quivering Gretchen. But the Mothers have an appetite for quivering Faust. He is Everyman frozen before his maker.

*Faust's* angelic and infernal androgynes were produced by an imagination both fascinated and repelled by the mystery of sex. In his study of biological morphology, Goethe says the scientist must remain "just as mobile and pliant" as nature herself. Goethe counsels receptivity and subordination but finds them intolerable. After a sickly childhood, he undertook a vigorous exercise program to increase his strength: he

Camus' -  
L'Étranger  
Waste-land  
vision  
denies the mother  
(≠ Faust)

un-heimlich

seized masculinity by force of will. Goethe's energy in old age was legendary. Deceased contemporaries were the subject of condescending remarks. Goethe seemed to feel he had a superhuman power to hold death at bay. Thomas Mann says there was something "brutal" and "heathenish" in "the arrogant way Goethe sometimes boasted of his vitality, his indestructibility."<sup>15</sup> Goethe turned his vulnerability to mother and nature into imperious mastery of knowledge and other men. His principal relationship was with his sister Cornelia, a year younger and his only real childhood friend. His imaginative connection to her was like Tennessee Williams' to his mad sister, Rose. In his memoirs, Goethe speaks of Cornelia as his twin. She was his Romantic alter ego, what Jung would call his *anima*, a sister-Muse. Cornelia died at twenty-six, soon after her marriage. Did she fail after separation from her twin? Goethe's sister-fixation is evident throughout his love affairs. In letters and poems he uses the word "sister" for lover or wife. Goethe's many androgynes may represent a condensed incestuous twinship.

A sister is a woman who is not the mother. Goethe would not allow his mother's name to be spoken in his presence. He avoided her. He refused to answer questions about the episode of the Mothers. Goethe's mother was too strong a personality. He feared to come near her lest he be reabsorbed into her gravitational field and returned to childhood dependency. Goethe's biographer says, "Most of his relations with women ended in sexual renunciation."<sup>16</sup> Heterosexuality for men will always carry the danger of loss of identity. Goethe, unlike Antaeus, gained strength by not touching mother earth.

Wilhelm Meister's transvestism echoes an incident just before Goethe began *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The source of this story is his own mother. Goethe invited her and her friends to watch him skate on a frozen river. His mother wore a long red fur cloak trimmed with gold. Goethe demanded the garment, put it on, and skated away—leaving her astonished and bewildered. Old engravings of the scene appear in popular articles about Goethe. K. R. Eissler says: "It is most remarkable that the greatest German poet, one week before he set out to write his greatest novel, felt the impulse on the spur of the moment to exhibit himself to his mother and a large crowd dressed in a conspicuous piece of female clothing."<sup>17</sup> Theft and expropriation. Artists take what they want and need. Goethe plays rude Baubo with the Great Mother. He makes aggression and mockery an open-air pagan theater.

Freud thinks the fetishist's fur and velvet are symbolic substitutes for the mother's pubic hair.<sup>18</sup> Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870) seems to support this. Goethe lures his mother into an arena of hierarchic as-

Sister

Masoch

sault. The frozen river is his own unnatural coldness to her: this ice is Dante's pit, where fathers eat their children. Generations are at war, striving for dominance. Like Prometheus, Goethe steals the red flame of the old order. He wrests the vaic mantle from his mother, claiming for himself the Delphic power to give birth to *Werther*. Harold Bloom says, "A strong poet . . . must divine or invent himself, and so attempt the impossibility of *originating himself*."<sup>19</sup> Goethe forces a public ritual of self-origination. Jesus' career begins at Cana, where he harshly tells Mary, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come" (John 2:4). Goethe on the frozen river says to his mother, my hour is come, and I take from you what I need to give birth to myself. The midwives stand gaping on the banks, spurned and useless. Remus, leaping his brother Romulus' wall, meant to break its magic, as by rape. Plutarch reports that Julius Caesar, the night before he crossed the Rubicon, dreamed he had sexual relations with his mother. Goethe too crosses a river and rapes his motherland. Attack and retreat: a declaration of imaginative independence. Henceforth, Goethe will be defiantly separate from his formidable mother. He steals the Palladium, the cultic Athena, which brings down Troy. Formerly under his mother's aegis, he now wears it. He is transvestite son to a vanquished Amazon goddess. For another artist, turning from the mother might mean a withering of feeling, a creative stunting. But Goethe instinctively re-oriented himself toward his sister-spirit, borrowing her purified femininity. Together they would rule his new inner world, twin Ptolemies of self-orphaning Romanticism.

Goethe used transsexual analogies to describe his creative process, referring to himself as a pregnant woman. He spoke of being "suddenly overwhelmed" by his poems, which forced themselves upon him fully formed. Artistically, he felt feminine and passive toward a superior power, an idea we will find in Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats. Recollections of Goethe often use sexually ambiguous terminology. Schiller, for example, said, "I look on him as a haughty prudish woman whom one wants to get with child." Goethe called his intimacy with Karl August, Duke of Weimar a "marriage." The two even slept in the same room. In the period of his Bettina poetry, Goethe admits to homosexual feelings. A suppressed Venetian epigram declares, "I'm fairly fond of boys, but my preference is girls; / When I have enough of a girl, she serves me still as a boy" (40).<sup>20</sup> Sodomy unexpectedly rears its head at the end of *Faust*, when the hero's soul escapes because Mephistopheles is distracted by the angels' physical attractions. Are *Wilhelm Meister's* female transvestites and girl-boy Mignon sexually transformed males?

H. Bloom

Som  
en  
ground  
divine

Sodomy

Goethe, who repeatedly compared himself to Voltaire's Mambre, eunuch philosopher to Pharaoh, was a castrate priest declining to worship his goddess. The ice upon which he tauntingly skated hardened and externalized the chthonian swampiness of sex and mother love. Late in life he said, "The sexual act destroys beauty, but nothing is more beautiful than what precedes this moment. Only in ancient art is eternal youth captured and depicted. And what does eternal youth mean other than never to have known a man or a woman."<sup>21</sup> Sex destroys beauty: Dionysus subverts the Apollonian eye. Romantic Goethe continually seduced classical Goethe. In the Winckelmann way, Goethe thought the male body more beautiful than the female. There may be less homosexuality in this than Apollonian idealization, the high articulation of the eye, often accompanied by chastity. Goethe was heroically self-contained and self-sufficient. Like Beethoven, he married himself.

Goethe's androgynes are fitting symbols for his life work, with its titanic all-inclusiveness. Sex for Goethe is a gathering in, not a dissemination. He claimed there was no vice or crime of which he could not find a trace in himself. Romantic art is self-exploratory, self-arousing, self-maiming. Goethe said, "Geniuses experience a second adolescence, whereas other people are only young once." Goethe retained his access to both sexes by renewing and prolonging puberty, in which gender fluctuates. Romanticism once seemed to make large simple gestures of rebellion. But we barely begin to understand its charged sexual complexities and archaic pagan ritualism.

Decadence is inherent in Romanticism. Sadomasochism, we have seen, is already present in Romantic eroticism from its first formulation by Rousseau. As the historical rhythm of Romanticism moves forward, the organic logic of artistic style takes over. The late phase of Romantic style is luridly Hellenistic or Mannerist: distortion of form, sadomasochistic fantasy, and psychological closure. Our first example is Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811), a poet of the late phase of German Romanticism. What Goethe dreamed about through Werther, Kleist put into action. Kleist obsessively meditated upon and ritualistically planned his suicide, which he succeeded in at age thirty-four. Goethe had made suicide poetic and erotic. Kleist, the perfect masochist, allowed dominant Goethe to write a grisly life-poem through him.

Kleist's play, *Penthesilea* (1808), illustrates the daemonic sensationalism of German Late Romanticism. It reverses the hierarchy of sexual personae in the Greek legend of Achilles and *Penthesilea*. Instead of Achilles killing the Amazon queen, she kills him. Kleist's militant Ama-

zons have tremendous chthonian ferocity. Epic similes compare *Penthesilea* to a she-wolf, a raging torrent, a storm wind, a thunderbolt. When the normally Apollonian Amazon enters drama, there is an eruption of Dionysian violence. Spenser defeats the surly Amazon *Radi-gund*, but Kleist exalts her. In Romanticism, nature, not society rules. In *Penthesilea* woman, as conduit of the natural, obliterates manhood and history.

The design of Kleist's play is [sadomasochistic oscillation.] Achilles and *Penthesilea* try to dominate each other physically and psychologically. Each surge of assertion is followed by relapse, a hypnotic longing for sexual submission. Achilles and *Penthesilea* manage to capture each other a ludicrous number of times: Kleist's anarchic plot line reflects the ambiguities and contradictions in heterosexuality. Sadistic *Penthesilea* is aroused by masochistic fantasies in which her dead body is battered, degraded, and discarded. I hear the influence of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* here, as also in Kleist's images of land submerged in water, the public persona drowned in erotic obsession.

Kleist's Achilles, unlike Homer's, wants to lose. Three times he casts away sword and shield. He walks to his death in somnambulist trance, seeking enslavement to *Penthesilea*, who falls upon him with her dogs. The play suddenly ascribes a feminine softness to Achilles. As he turns his neck, it is pierced by *Penthesilea*'s arrow. Neck-turning or neck-exposing is a classically feminine gesture, with parallels of animal surrender. I find it in Michelangelo's *Giuliano de' Medici*, portraits of Byron, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and George Eliot's vain *Rosamond Lydgate*. In Kleist, Achilles' feminine neck is his Achilles' heel, phallically penetrated by the Amazon. She and her dogs go into chthonian furor, savagely ripping off Achilles' armour and sinking their teeth into his chest. *Penthesilea* locks onto his left breast, blood dripping from her mouth. Later she laments she "ravaged" Achilles by breaking through the "snow-white alabaster wall" of his breast.<sup>22</sup> Her assault is masculine violation of feminine virginity. The rape focuses on breasts rather than genitals. Achilles seems to give suck to his beloved and her dogs, his breasts flowing with gore rather than milk. Kleist invents a gruesome version of the androgyne I call *Teiresias*, the nurturant male. He is injecting Sade's nature into Rousseau's tender mother-relations.

*Penthesilea*, a Romantic vampire, drains her victim, body and soul. Is Achilles' pierced breast an example of Freud's "displacement upwards" from the genitals? So *Penthesilea* castrates. The rape-like devouring of a penis disguised as a breast appears in Bob Dylan's brilliant invective, "Ballad of a Thin Man," where a sadistic voice attacks the naive Mr.



Jones with the homosexual demand, "You're a cow! Give me some milk or else go home!" Kleist's Achilles and Dylan's Mr. Jones enter and misread a menacing sexual scene. Both are punished for their misreading by compulsory feminization. Teiresias too turns female after stum-bling on a chthonian scene. Voracious Penthesilea sinks to the level of her dogs. Dogs suckling a human breast reverse the image of Romulus and Remus nursed by the she-wolf (for which Eliade finds parallels in Central Asia). Multiple nursing is usually animalistic, an exception being Daumier's allegorical *The Republic*. Achilles' death is a primitive, barbaric spectacle. Michelangelo's Giuliano similarly combines a feminine neck with sadistically pierced breasts. In Kleist, however, there is a thrashing violence, Hellenistic storm and stress. Amazon and dogs in feeding frenzy fuse with and hybridize Achilles' body, a horrific mutilation-through-accretion recalling the grotesque deaths of Euripides' *Medea*, where princess and king stick and burn like tar. Late-phase art disfigures the human form.

Phallus as breast: one explanation, as we saw, for the penile or canine breasts of the Ephesian Artemis was that Amazons hung the idol with gift strings of their amputated breasts. Attacking Achilles' chest, Penthesilea is not only desexing him but *making him an Amazon*, a version of herself. She is a sadistic erotic mastectomist. All Romantic femmes fatales are avatars of daemonic mother nature. Kleist's Amazon is a hermaphrodite deity rewriting Genesis. She hurls Adam's rib back through his Adam's apple, then mutilates his rib cage without healing it. Like Jehovah, she makes man in her own image. The dying Achilles is now her twin, her Romantic sister-spirit.

Kleist dwells on the Amazons' amputated breasts throughout the play. Greek artists, we saw, never showed the Amazon's body as maimed. The Late Romantic Kleist, on the other hand, makes the detail central. Nowhere else in literature or art, not even in Sade, is so much made of breast amputation. Kleist's hero is fetishistically aroused by a woman's mutilating masculinization. He presses his face to Penthesilea's breast with a rush of endearments. Decadence is a style of excess and extravagance which approaches self-parody. It operates by overliterarizing. Hence one laughs even when shocked or repelled, as in Sade. Kleist's stage directions are also parodic. This one, for example, rivals Shakespeare's "Exit, pursued by a bear": "Penthesilea looks round as if for a chair. The Amazons roll up a stone."<sup>23</sup> It was presumably the decadent elements in *Penthesilea* that led Goethe to condemn it as "unplayable." As a classical saga of the erotic destruction of male by female, *Penthesilea* prefigures Swinburne's verse-play *Atalanta in Calydon*. Kleist

and Swinburne identify kissing with biting, sex with appetite and cannibalism. Achilles' macabre murder resembles the narrated climax of Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*, where the epicene Sebastian Venable is torn to pieces and eaten by a mob of boys he has solicited. Penthesilea's maniacal ecstasy comes from Euripides' Agave, who dismembers her son in the *Bacchae*. Penthesilea raves, foams at the mouth, hurls boulders, tears Achilles' body limb from limb. She longs to root up sky and planets, to drag down the sun "by his flaming golden hair," to pile mountain on mountain. Dionysian vision is disordering and anti-hierarchical. In "Voodoo Child," Jimi Hendrix aspires with drug-induced titanism: "I stand up next to a mountain, and I chop it down with the edge of my hand." Shamanistic peaking is aggressive and self-destructive. Space is traversed, transcended, exploded. Penthesilea's expansion of self through the influx of primeval force is so overwhelming that she begins to devour all other selves. Kleist reshapes classical legend into a parable of Romantic solipsism. *Penthesilea*'s ritualistic oscillations between sadism and masochism are unique in Romanticism. In Poe, for example, the sadomasochistic relations of male and female personae are relatively stable and mappable. But *Penthesilea* is a swirling vortex of sadomasochistic passions, each savagely devouring the next. Welcome to Late Romantic nature, created by Rousseau's benign overidealizations. *Penthesilea* can be read allegorically, as a descent into the poet's unconscious, where two parts of the psyche, masculine and feminine, fight for supremacy.

The play's sexual personae have indeterminate boundaries, which are corrected and hardened by emotional, physical, and sexual assault. Penthesilea's dangerous expansion of self has historical causes. The failure of traditional hierarchies in the late eighteenth century removed social and philosophical limitations essential for happiness, security, and self-knowledge. Without external restrictions, there can be no self-definition. The dissolution of hierarchical orders permitted personality to expand so suddenly that it went into a free fall of anxiety. Hence the self had to be chastened, its boundaries redefined, even by pain. The self must be *reduced in size*. This is the ultimate meaning of *Penthesilea*'s erotics of mastectomy. Romanticism, swelling, contracts itself in Decadence. Mutilations and amputations belong to an aesthetics of subtrac-tion, a pathological metaphysic in which the imagination reorients itself to the world by a surgical reduction of self. Sadomasochism will always appear in the freest times, in imperial Rome or the late twentieth century. It is a pagan ritual of riddance, stilling anxiety and fear. Kleist's Achilles, lying in streams of blood under a pack of dogs, is

glamorous with masochistic ecstasy. Dying, he touches Penthesilea's cheek: "O my bride, is this / The festival of roses that you promised?" (To which she should reply, if she could get her teeth out of his chest, "I never promised you a rose garden.") Late Romantics love the climactic pieta, starring what I call the male heroine. Woman cradles the victim, but only after she has batted him down and crushed him. The romance of the male heroine is a dream of disordered receptivity, in which there is a transsexual impulse. I find a parallel symbolism in a fringe-group homosexual practice that appeared in the 1970s: "fist-fucking," whose devotees crave anal penetration by a male arm, greased by Crisco, up to the elbow. Proctologists warned about internal damage they were repairing, first sign of the cycle of excess that led to AIDS. Ten years ago, I was deeply impressed by an early pornographic film I saw of these activities. It had the solemnity and gloom of a pagan ritual, like the tableaux of Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries. Sex as crucifixion and torture. Fist-fucking, in its starkly depersonalized conflation of voluntary rape and primitive exploratory surgery, dramatizes the daemonism of the sexual imagination, untouched by five thousand years of civilization. My amazement never ceases at the biological conceptualism in male sexuality. What woman could invent such compulsive structures? What woman, unpaid, would live and love in so hellish an underworld?

The life of Heinrich von Kleist reveals the sexual conflicts that inspired *Penthesilea*. Kleist's failure to follow family military tradition was severely censured. Literature was an unsuitable and unserious vocation. Kleist's suicide, by pistol in the mouth (like Hemingway's shotgun), expresses his martyrdom to Teutonic masculinity. Guns in the mouth may also suggest something not immediately apparent in *Penthesilea*: repressed and therefore destructive homosexual desire. Kleist tried to persuade his friends to a double suicide pact, and one finally agreed. Kleist spoke erotically of the anticipated event as "the most glorious and sensual of deaths."<sup>24</sup>

A Romantic solipsist is in inevitable intimacy with a sister, in this case Kleist's half-sister Ulrike, who he said had "nothing of her sex but the hips." He longed to live with her, in Romantic union. Is she the model for *Penthesilea*? Many scholars note the recurrence of ideas, images, and phraseology in Kleist's work. Walter Silz says, "Kleist is the most persistent self-plagiarist in German literature."<sup>25</sup> Self-plagiarism is incest and autoeroticism, the uroboros of Goethe's Bettina. It is the self-devouring style of the sadomasochistic *Penthesilea*. Kleist's turn toward his sister was toward his missing sexual component, but he was feminine and she masculine. She was the *he* which he needed. Kleist's

Romantic family romance produced the defiant Amazon manifesto of *Penthesilea*, which rings with modernity. Women have rarely spoken so boldly for themselves as Kleist speaks for them here.

Sade's reaction against Rousseau was sweeping and systematic, but it was censored and thus not absorbed into French literature until long afterward. The English reaction against Rousseau took assimilable form: the Gothic novel. Because English literature had the archetypal precedents of *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, English Romanticism from the start had a daemonic intensity that French Romanticism took forty more years to acquire. English Gothicism of the 1790s is equivalent to the medieval alchemy and occultism of the which Goethe was working on at the time. Gothic darkness and roughness oppose the Apollonian Enlightenment's light, contour, and symmetry. Protestant rationalism is defeated by Gothic's return to the ritualism and mysticism of medieval Catholicism, with its residual paganism. Art withdraws into caverns, castles, prison-cells, tombs, coffins. Gothic is a style of claustrophobic sensuality. Its closed spaces are daemonic wombs. The Gothic novel is sexually archaic: it withdraws into chthonian darkness, the realm of Goethe's Mothers. Mother night pervades Romanticism, from Coleridge and Keats to Poe and Chopin with his brooding nocturnes. The ghosts released by Gothic will stalk through the nineteenth century as spiritualism, whose séances continue today in Great Britain.

The Gothic tradition was begun by Ann Radcliffe, a rare example of a woman creating an artistic style. The Gothic novel with the greatest impact on Romanticism, however, was Matthew G. Lewis' *The Monk* (1796). Lewis, a friend of Byron, influenced all the English Romantic poets as well as Hoffmann, Scott, Poe, Hawthorne, and Emily Brontë. *The Monk's* medieval monastery is a sequestered Christian space which Lewis, like Sade, defiles with pagan eroticism. As we saw in Spenser, illicitness increases the pleasure of sexual transgression. Reviewing *The Monk*, Coleridge praised its "libidinous minuteness."<sup>26</sup> Lewis' hero, the abbot Ambrosio, discovers his fellow monk Rosario is actually Matilda, a woman in disguise. Lewis withholds Matilda's identity in the Spenserian manner, speaking of her up to this point as "he." Matilda tears open her habit and rests a dagger on her left breast, lit by moonbeams. Fin-de-siècle Gothic has a decadent sensationalism. Lewis' erotic chiaroscuro juxtaposes lust with chastity, exhibitionism with voyeurism. Does Matilda point with the dagger to inflame or mutilate herself? to direct and sharpen our aggressive western eye? Her transvestism is the

mildest of her perversities. Only Coleridge's *Christabel* surpasses *The Monk* in its pornographic exploitation of Christian moralism.

Matilda is sexually divided. She insists on retaining her male name as an erotic aid. After she seduces the monk, she oddly becomes more masculine instead of more feminine. She seems to grow in mental power, prefiguring Poe's Ligeia. Lewis implies Matilda's gender is in flux: a self-adjusting mechanism maintains her hermaphroditism, like water seeking its own level. Ambrosio's homoerotic longing for the vanished Rosario shows his preference for a feminine pseudo-male over a sexually available masculine woman. But the startling last pages of *The Monk* force us to reread. Lucifer, come to claim Ambrosio's soul, reveals Matilda is a male demon sent to corrupt him. This is from Spenser: a male spirit masques as the False Florimell. Matilda's post-coital "manliness" is therefore the flaunting sashaying of a triumphant drag-queen demon. Our first and psychologically primary reading of the novel has been in complete error. The meltingly delicious sex between Ambrosio and Matilda—all pantings, twinnings, and obscure refinements—has been homosexual and daemonic, not heterosexual. Our own sexual perceptions have been seduced. Sensuality aglow in Gothic gloom: surely Keats has normalized Lewis' carnal scene for *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, with its bedchamber show of lush sweetmeats.

Matilda's male identity is not the only surprise at the end of *The Monk*. Lucifer reveals that Ambrosio has unwittingly committed incest and matricide: "Antonia and Elvira perished by your hand. That Antonia whom you violated, was your sister! that Elvira whom you murdered, gave you birth!"<sup>27</sup> Here again is the riddling sound of impacted sexual psychodrama, which I found in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*. *The Monk* turns out to be a festering family romance. Lucifer's incantation, unlike Rosalind's, looks toward the past. It is like a curtain drawn back from a Mannerist panorama, where we see the sweeping diagonal of Ambrosio's spiritual history in a glare of lurid light. Ambrosio is the first haunted hero of Romantic sex-crime. *As You Like It* ends with the reknitting of Renaissance community, but *The Monk* ends in terrible primeval isolation. Lucifer drops Ambrosio onto a rocky nightmare landscape, like *Mona Lisa's* lunar lawn. He is "bruised and mangled," his limbs "broken and dislocated." The sun scorches him, insects devour him, eagles tear his flesh and dig out his eyeballs: Lewis, like Sade, has a Darwinian vision of amoral apocalyptic nature. The Gothic novel rebuts Rousseau: *The Monk* redaemonizes sex, linking it to sin, suffering, and natural brutality. Ambrosio's incest demonstrates the occult compulsiveness of sex. He is magnetically

drawn to his unknown mother and sister by unconscious fatality. I suspect Balzac borrowed this detail for *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*. The Romantic prestige of incest springs from its reversal of history and its collapsing of psychic energies into the overenlarged self. Incest is part of the sexually archaic material released into society whenever hierarchies weaken.

Satan is the severe pagan god of *The Monk*. At the end, Lucifer shows his true chthonian form: "blasted limbs," taloned hands and feet, snaky Medusan hair. But his first appearance is as an Apollonian angel, meant to dupe the homosexual-tending Ambrosio. Lucifer is a dazzling naked ephebe with fiery long hair and crimson wings. He wears a star on his forehead and diamond bracelets on his arms and ankles. He carries a silver myrtle branch. Romanticism returns to the Renaissance style of epiphany sexual personae. In art, self-display is meaning, more than criticism has understood. I have shown this iconicism going back to Egypt and Greece. Lewis' Lucifer aestheticizes and sexualizes a Biblical seraph, a Babylonian not a Hebraic style. He may be influenced by Spenser's Byzantine Belphoebe, who also halts narrative action. Lewis' Lucifer is again the "light-bearer," but he is hard and crystalline. His silver branch is a golden bough, the wand with which art freezes and transcends vegetative nature. Appearing in a rose-colored cloud, Lucifer fills the monk's "cavern" with air and light. Nietzsche sees the German mind in "clouds and everything that is unclear." Spengler identifies occult Magian experience with the "world-cavern."<sup>28</sup> The Apollonianism of Lewis' androgynous propels sunlit Mediterranean formalism into the daemonic murk of the Gothic novel. His seraph may be in *Faust's* Euphorion, in Balzac's Seraphita, and in the ghost of Bloom's son in Joyce's *Ulysses*, a "fairy boy" whose diamond and ruby buttons and violet colors recall the seraph's diamonds and rose light.

There is latent eroticism in the entire tradition of the "novel of terror," which began in late eighteenth-century Gothicism and became the modern horror film. Freud says "the sexually exciting influence of some painful affects, such as fear, shuddering, and horror, . . . explains why so many seek opportunities to experience such sensations" in books or the theater.<sup>29</sup> The thrill of terror is passive, masochistic, and implicitly feminine. It is imaginative submission to an overwhelming superior force. The vast audience of the Gothic novel was and is female. Men who cultivate the novel or film of terror seek sex-crossing sensations. Horror films are most popular among adolescents, whose screams are Dionysian signals of sexual awakening. Re-

Freud:

late  
erotic  
is  
sexually  
exciting  
fear  
horror

viewers often wonder why the packed audiences of bloody slasher films are sedate couples on weekend dates. Shared fear is a physically stimulating sexual transaction. Freud's use of the word "shuddering" shows the common area between fear and orgasmic pleasure. In Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," the "shudder in the loins" is both the rapist's climax and the victim's fright.

Violent horror films, of the splattering kind now so common, seem to me a most pedestrian taste. A classy genre of vampire film follows a style I call psychological high Gothic. It begins in Coleridge's medieval *Christabel* and its descendants, Poe's *Ligeia* and James's *The Turn of the Screw*. A good example is *Daughters of Darkness* (1971), starring Delphine Seyrig as an elegant lesbian vampire. High Gothic is abstract and ceremonious. Evil has become world-weary, hierarchical glamour. There is no bestiality. The theme is eroticized western power, the burden of history. *The Hunger* (1983) comes close to being a masterpiece of this genre but is ruined by horrendous errors, as when the regal Catherine Deneuve is made to crawl around on all fours, slaying over cut-throats. Butchery is not the point of vampirism. Sex—domination and submission—is. Gothic horror must be moderated by Apollonian discipline, or it turns into gross buffoonery. The run-of-the-mill horror film is anti-aesthetic and anti-idealizing. Its theme is sparagmos, the form-pulverizing energies of Dionysus. Horror films unleash the forces repressed by Christianity—evil and the barbarism of nature. Horror films are rituals of pagan worship. There western man obsessively confronts what Christianity has never been able to bury or explain away. Horror stories ending in the victory of good are no more numerous than those ending in the threat of evil's return. Nature, like the vampire, will not stay in its grave.

Vulgar horror films awash in red slop or grungy decay reflect a Northern European sensibility, the self-soiling of too-clean Protestantism. Undignified abuse of the body is analogous to medieval gargoyles or fairy tales' dwarves and trolls, whom I find impossible to take seriously, even in Wagner. The Mediterranean rightly identifies chthonian deformations with impressive female monsters, like Scylla. Northern European male trolls are an evasion of the harsh reality of female nature. Horror films dwell on Dionysian mutilations of or encrustations upon the human figure—scabs, scars, swellings. Movie monsters seem covered with moss or fungus. They are as gnarled and lumpy as tree stumps. G. Wilson Knight says, "Much of our horror at death is, at bottom, a physical repulsion."<sup>50</sup> The horror film uses rot as a primary material, part of the Christian west's secret craving for Dionysian truths.

Delphine Seyrig

vampirism  
→ sex  
→ domination  
↳ submission  
(≠ butchery)

troll

The horror film blunders about, seeking without realizing it, the chthonian swamp of generation, the female matrix. There is dissolution in nature, but there is also fecundity and cosmic grandeur. The horror film is philosophically incomplete, because Christianity is incomplete. Classical paganism had a far more comprehensive view of sex and nature. Like Fifties science-fiction films, Seventies disaster films, such as *The Towering Inferno*, have been blamed on international political tensions and anxieties. I disagree. Dreams of disaster will always appear when benevolent Rousseauism is in the air. The liberal Sixties, identifying sex and nature with love and peace, produced the Sadean counterreaction of Seventies catastrophism. The present preoccupation with nuclear apocalypse is also crypto-religious. Fear of world holocaust is another self-haunting, a way to subordinate the self to the cosmos in an era of easy, all-forgiving therapies and faiths.

The eighteenth-century novel of terror inherited the emotional complex of sublimity. The idea of the sublime came to the Augustans from Roman Longinus and culminated in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke sees "a mode of terror, or of pain" as the cause of the sublime. Burke anticipates Freud's idea of the sexual excitation in fear: "Terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close."<sup>51</sup> Lionel Trilling wrongly connects Burke's sublime with masculinity: "The experience of terror stimulates an energy of aggression and dominance."<sup>52</sup> But Burke's locutions clearly demonstrate the passive self-subordination of male devotees of the sublime. In Shelley's "Mont Blanc," nature overwhelms male imagination with chilling fascistic force. The sexual element is already apparent in early theories of the sublime. John Dennis' essay on Longinus (1704) says the sublime "ravishes and transports us." It is "an invincible Force, which commits a pleasing Rape upon the very Soul of the Reader." Schiller too, following Burke, sees a "paroxysm" or "shudder" in the sublime, a joy turning to "rapture."<sup>53</sup> The sublime, a mode of pagan vision, is one of the first historical signs of the Romantic withdrawal from masculine action. In sublimity and Gothic terror, western emotion opens itself directly to nature, with its ghostly flood of archaic night.

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sv