



Sex in the Cities

Hans-Jürgen Döpp

**Sex in the Cities.
Volume 1. Amsterdam**

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Amsterdam is not only famous for its canals, nor for its impressive collections of paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Van Gogh, but also for its museum dedicated to Venus, which welcomes more than 500,000 visitors per year. Travelers come from the world over, rushing to enter this unusual building next to the train station, called “The Temple of Venus”. Gathered since 1985 by Monique Van Marle and her father, this collection of erotic art work is exceptional in the quality of the objects, prints, and very old photographs. Disregarding voyeurism, this museum aims to be a privileged place exhibiting eroticism’s artistic history. The author leads us on a guided tour, supported by a rich and varied iconography.

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Alberto Vargas, plaque design for The Sex Museum, Amsterdam, c. 1990.

The Temple of Venus: The Sex Museum, Amsterdam

Nobody thought it would make any money when the Sex Museum opened its doors in 1985. For the first few weeks, admission was actually free. Today, however, over 500,000 visitors to Amsterdam enter the museum every year.

Perhaps it was a good omen when two ancient objects of an erotic nature turned up in the soil during excavation for the building of the museum. One of them was a cracked tile on which a card-playing man was depicted sporting an evident erection – maybe betraying the excitement of a winner. The other was a small statuette of the Greek god Hermes with a giant tumescence, probably imported from the Mediterranean centuries ago by a Dutch merchant. In their time, such figurines were not only fertility icons but also good luck charms.

At the opening of the Museum, Monique van Marle may well have been the youngest museum director in Europe – young enough still to depend on the support and advice of her father. The museum's contents were not particularly numerous. All that could be taken for granted in the enterprise was public interest in the erotic, whether for historical, artistic or other reasons.

Museums are meant to reflect every aspect of life and culture in Europe, yet this clearly crucial part of life remains under-represented, despite the fact that artists of cultures from all over the world have created outstanding works on the subject. Simply asking a curator where the erotic art may be found in an art museum is often met with a negative response. And in any case, erotic works tend to hit museums' moral blind spot – so that they might, for example, on the one hand display the borrowed *Landscape with Stagecoach* by Thomas Rowlandson, a master of erotic caricature, while showing nothing else characteristic of his work; and on the other hand, they might hide any erotic work that formed part of their own inventory away in a secluded basement. "Unsuitable for listing in inventory" was the label on a suitcase of art works found in the cellar of one renowned German museum.

Public morality in matters of sex has moved more slowly over the past thirty years than other aspects of modern culture – with the result that the Sex Museum has had to be established through private initiative.

The reactions of the Museum's first visitors confirmed the proprietors' hopes: the public not only accepted the Museum as a museum, but – regardless of age or gender – were intrigued. The listed contents increased in number and variety as the museum itself gained attention and success. After sixteen years of apprenticeship, Monique was able to assess all of the objects that came into the Museum's possession with reverence and expertise, as well as an idea of how to display them appropriately.

The scope of the collection was initially, perhaps, rather too wide. Today, the focus is on being more eclectic. (The author is both sad and glad to see some of his own collected pieces on display in the cases.) As the collection expanded, so it became necessary to extend the accommodation within the building – a fairly old house in Amsterdam. The result is a somewhat labyrinthine tour of the exhibits, but with new and surprising insights at every twist and turn.

As a woman, Monique has made sure that the choice and style of exhibits in the Museum are not specifically male-oriented. Another objective of the Museum is to point out that sex and the erotic are not just inventions of modern times. What is sometimes described as 'the most natural thing in the world' is of course also one of the most historically well-represented things in the world, depicted and expressed in thousands of ways and forms. It is Monique's opinion that 'many women do not know why men are so interested in sex'. It would equally seem that many men know little of eroticism.

Certainly, curious as they may be, they won't find in the Temple what much of the rest of Amsterdam seems to be advertising. No vulgar expectations are to be met here. Red light

presumptions must be left where they belong – outside the Museum. Nonetheless, what the world once considered forbidden, sinful, even pornographic, is here presented cheerfully and without a hint of shame.



French plates decorated with an erotic motif, late 19th century. Porcelain.



French plates decorated with an erotic motif, late 19th century. Porcelain.



Japanese *shunga* watercolour, c. 1900.



Japanese *shunga* watercolour, c. 1900.



Erotic scene on an Ancient Greek vase.

After all, is there really such a thing as pornography? Images and objects currently admired as works of art might well have been considered unspeakably rude when they were first created.

Is it the elapsing of time over decades that lends these objects some sort of respectability? Does history outweigh the pressures of contemporary morality? Can we only be pleased with these things when they are old enough?

Certainly, pleasure is evident in the faces and voices of the visitors to these rooms, whether they come in groups, in pairs, or solo. The atmosphere is always cheery.

Monique tells how a woman once undressed completely at the cash desk on the way in. She wanted to go round the Museum 'in her natural state'. Isn't that splendidly appropriate? Isn't it appropriately splendid?

Following the successful opening of the Amsterdam Sex Museum, various other erotic museums have popped up in imitation – in Hamburg, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Berlin, and Paris, for example. The motivation behind some of them was undoubtedly the prospect of a fast buck.

But that meant the quality of the exhibits took a back seat. Monique will tell you, though, that it is just not enough to put a few curiosities of fair to middling value on public display, to switch on the lights and the heating in the morning, and count the money in the till in the evening.

For a museum to be lively and inspiring, it has to be filled with life and inspiration – wherever it is, even without the unique connotations inherent in the location of the Amsterdam Museum.

Monique proudly opened her safe to show me some new exhibits she had acquired at auction in Paris four weeks previously. I was fascinated. No matter how many times I come to the Museum, there is always something new and exciting to see.

When you visit the place, perhaps you will walk past a young woman wearing an elegant sweater. She may be sweeping out a corner in order to put a new display-cabinet there. That'll be Monique, the Museum director. It is her museum. Her life's work.



Cesar, Dish of phalluses, c. 1970.
Bronze. The Sex Museum, Amsterdam.



Balinese fertility demon.



Felicien Rops, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1878.
73.8 × 54.3 cm. Bibliothèque royale de Belgique,
Cabinet des Estampes, Bruxelles.

A Ribald Reading

*“The real letter is all-powerful; it’s the true magic wand.”
Friedrich Schlegel, Lucinde and the Fragments*

The subject of this essay is not how the erotic is depicted in literature and art but rather the use of words in a specific language to suggest the erotic.

The connoisseur and collector of erotic art is well aware that literary and visual depictions very often result in turning an erotic book into something that has its own libidinous properties – into a sexual object that evokes lust or sustains it. In this sense, might the genitalia themselves be nothing more than the executive organs of literary imagination?

Citing and quoting erotic books in erotic art and literature is partly a gesture of self-consciousness. Whilst entertaining the intellect, it is also “name-dropping” – showing the author’s wide knowledge, but also acknowledging the worth of previous works. Illustrations in such a book allow for the expression of unrestrained imaginations. And the fact that they are illustrations, specifically referred or referring to the text, ensures that the reader perceives it all as a duality – the printed page of text and the printed image – so that it can never be forgotten that erotic literature is first and foremost literature and not an immediate portrayal of reality.

During the 19th century especially, the sexually explicit and the erotic were removed from the open view of formal society. They were relegated to where imagination was allowed to roam freely, exiled to the less-available field of erotic literature and art. Anybody researching the history of literature and art and scouring the archives of museums and libraries will discover how precarious an aesthetic existence such exiled spheres implied. If these literary asylum-seekers could expect no public response, it is hardly surprising that they at least developed a subterranean communications network with one another.

Just as potatoes propagate through the subterranean tuber, erotic literature seems to propagate through quoting and citing other erotic works. It thus comprises its own excellent reference system within the scope of a closed society.

Books are usually regarded as symbols of cultural development. Their underlying power to undermine culture, however, is not apparent until made evident in an erotic book. What has been banned from public view may then be seen in a sublime form to entice and call for revolt against the bane of the civilisation process: corporeal desire. And of course such desire finds expression also in pictorial images. But with pictures, although sensuality may be more immediate, it remains at an unbridgeable distance because of the depicting medium.

The image, after all, solicits the most abstract of all sense organs – the eye. Smell and sound are senses for close proximity; the eye, on the other hand, is a remote sense. The gap between the requirements of cultural development and the primary desires of the physical body can be bridged only in a voyeuristic way. For an image to refer to the text, or for an erotic text to quote from another erotic text, reinforces that apparent hiatus between body and intellect.

What was shut away from the public gaze and kept hidden following human society’s intellectual decision to adopt a language- and book-oriented culture can now only return in a form of literature and art regarded as “under-the-counter” and libertine.

Western thought shies away from bodily connotations. Intellectual pursuits demand the control and suppression of physical urges. The body is virtually unmentionable. Yet now “libertine” literature has become more widely available, the erotic is no longer banned from intellectual understanding. Books may now openly talk about the processes and needs of the body. Words may once again become the magic wand of desire.

To the intellectual, a book represents the body in a verbal form. “Libertine” literature uses the intellect as a medium to emphasise the opposite. Words and sentences are used to reveal the body and its desires, to lay bare and unclothed all its physical needs and propensities.



Seven women apparently wrestling for a penis, 17th century.

Oil painting. Netherlands School. This is a Freudian concept which is extraordinary for its date and (comparatively puritanical) cultural background.



A mendicant friar, featuring his supposed preoccupation, c. 1900. Vienna. Bronze.



Woman who lifts from her skirt to reveal nudity from the hips down, Meiji period (1868–1912), c. 1880. Satsuma porcelain.



Tibetan sculpture, 17th-18th century. Gilded metal.
Under the death goddess, there is a demon couple making love.

Still, however, words and sentences can only present a form of reality and not the reality itself. Words can only be words. And that is why the wide scope of “libertine” literature has the depiction in words of what is essentially indescribable as its aim. In contrast to the utter reality of the real world, the vocabulary of the physical body employed by “libertine” literature remains inevitably that of the imagination.

Once-banned corporeality has indeed regained a position for its depictions of bodily urges in literature, then, but it does not break free of the unreality of literary fiction. Literature is not a substitute for action; rather it is an arena for virtual action.

The subject of this book – effectively a “book about books in books” – is to some extent the equally esoteric overlap of book-collecting (involving the private collection of rare texts) and the collecting of erotic works. The book focuses on select erotic texts of the 18th to the 20th centuries. These are texts that have their own significance within an erotic context, and the book thus constitutes either a mode of defence – as in the motif of *The Temptation of St Anthony*, which leads to the reappearance of what has been rejected – or a direct vehicle into the imaginary world that is the erotic.

The sections of quotations within this book – arranged in chronological order – feature many excerpts from works of erotic literature in which other erotic works are cited. They comprise a colourful medley of quotations from erotic literature of the 18th to the 20th centuries, listing references where erotic literature mentioned in erotic literature has special significance.

This means that the author has in fact directed his research in the opposite way from the usual. When he was young he might have looked for erotic passages in books; now he is looking for literary passages, literary references, in erotic books.

To me, the erotic as a literary phenomenon requires understanding in a particular way. The requirements of reality in literature and literary depiction meant that those subjects of imagination and fantasy that no longer fit in with such requirements were banished to their own realm – a realm in which literature might freely depict a life filled with sensuality.

It is also a realm in which a reference to an erotic work may thus be an intellectual side-step taken with full consciousness, and outside all elements of sexuality, even in the midst of a description of a sexual exchange. This represents a heightened notion of the unrealisable: that which is possible in reality may still be surpassed by an imagined, fantastical unreality. Yet literary dreams – like daydreams – represent a form of wish fulfilment, taking on impossible forms and nonetheless blending with reality via our imaginations.



Julian Mandel, early postcard of Kiki de Montparnasse, c. 1925. 14 × 9 cm.



Lehnert & Landrock, Arabian female nude, c. 1910.
Vintage sepia-toned matte gelatin silver print on structured paper, 24 × 18 cm.

The Erotic as a Literary Phenomenon

The relationship between the power of the imagination and the erotic is, then, the subject under examination in this book. What cultural conditions foster the development of the imagination as an individual area of a person's psychology? What share does rationality – the ability to reason, central to the philosophy of enlightenment – have in the development of erotic imagination? What is the function of what is then imagined? Moreover, to what extent do the forces of acculturation to a mode of life in which the erotic remains unexpressed affect the powers of the imagination?

1665/1666: Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies

Another type of people has corrupted girls severely; those are their teachers who have to teach them in the liberal arts, and if they want to be bad they will be: anybody can imagine what type of comforts they are granted when they are teaching, alone in a chamber or when studying; anybody can think of the types of stories, fables, and histories they sometimes teach the girls to arouse their imagination and once they see this excitement and desire in these girls, how they know how to take advantage of the situation.

I once knew a girl who came from a very good and prosperous family, I tell you, who came to ruin and made herself into a whore because her teacher told her the story, or actually fable, of Tiresias who, after having tried both sexes, was asked by Jupiter and Juno to settle the dispute of who enjoys the most pleasure when copulating, man or woman? He replied, contrary to Juno's opinion, that this would be the woman.

Juno was so upset about being told he was wrong that Juno blinded the poor judge, taking his eyesight. It is no wonder that this story tempted the girl because she had heard from other women how crazy men were about sex and that they enjoyed it so much but considering the judgement made by Tiresias, women can enjoy it even more and thus it should be tried, they say. Really, girls should be spared such lessons! Are there no others?

Their teachers, however, are apt to say that they want to know everything and, since the girls are already studying, the passages and stories requiring an explanation (or those that are self-explanatory) have to be explained and told without skipping that page; and if they do skip the page, the girls will ask them why and if they answer that they skipped the page because it would corrupt the girls they are then so much more eager to learn about that passage, and they start pestering their teachers to such a degree that they have no choice but to explain it to them, because it is the nature of girls to want what is forbidden to them.

How many female students were corrupted by reading these types of stories, as well as with those including Byblis, Caunus, and many others written in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, up to the book *Ars Amandi*, which he also wrote.

In addition, there are many other risqué fables and lecherous speeches published here: French, Latin, as well as Greek, Italian, and Spanish. The Spanish saying goes: 'Dear God, keep us from a horse that speaks and a girl that talks Latin'. God only knows if their teachers want to be bad and teach their pupils such types of lesson, how they can corrupt and dirty them so that even the most decent and chaste among them will fall.

Is it not true that the holy Augustine was gripped by pity and pain when he read the fourth book of *Aeneis*, which contains the affairs and the death of Dido?

I would like to have as many hundreds of coins as there have been girls, worldly as well as pious, who have become excited, dirtied, and lost their virginity when reading *Amadis de Gaule*. Anybody can see the damage Greek, Latin, and other books can cause when their teachers, these cunning and corrupted foxes, these miserable good-for-nothings with their secret chambers and cabinets in the midst of their laziness, comment on and interpret these types of stories.



Fish as a mobile or pendant, with an erotic scene inside, c. 1930. China. Porcelain.



Vincenzo Galdi, Female nude, c. 1900. Photograph, 16.4 × 22.5 cm.



Franz von Bayros, lesbian scene, 1907.

Illustration for *Die Bonbonniere*, by Choisy le Conin (Pseud. for Franz von Bayros), plate VII. Etching.



John Collier, *Lilith*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 194 × 104 cm.
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection, Southport.

Ulysses: The Song of the Sirens

“To be able to say anything and everything!” is Sade’s motto. But today the body can say nothing of itself. It is the subject and object of silence.

According to Kamper, the margins of official histories over the last 500 years contain evidence of a secret battle being fought over the nature of society and morality. That battle has left the body out in the cold.

“The opponents in that battle may be dimly identified as the body and the intellect in their separate and apparently opposed realities – the body as basis of power and mobility, the intellect as its tools, as the ruler of rationality, and currently as the ruler too (and the subduer and the denier) of the body. The body is therefore no longer perceived.”

So, erotic imagination falls on the dark side of the history of civilisation. As the rationalisation process continues and rewrites history on its own behalf, an “underground” history develops which – suppressed and also liable to be rewritten – is perceived (when perceived at all) as the antithesis of enlightenment.

“Humanity had to do some terrible things to itself,” state Horkheimer and Adorno in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “until the Self – the personal, purposefully-directed male character – was created, and some of those terrible things are repeated in every childhood.” Failures and mistakes, the repression of imagination and spontaneity, the lowering of expectations of joy – this is the price of developing an identity. It is the sacrifice of nothing less than life itself.

Adorno and Horkheimer search *The Odyssey* (the story of the adventures of Ulysses) episode by episode for the price the experienced Ulysses has to pay for emerging from each adventure with his ego (the thinking, feeling, acting self) unscathed. The tales tell of risks, cunning ploys, and escapes – and of self-imposed denial —, which makes it possible for the ego to overcome the dangers and to achieve its own identity. They tell also of saying farewell to the joy of the archaic unity with nature: a unity that was internal as well as external.

The song of the Sirens, to which Ulysses succumbs as one who knows that he already has been captivated, is reminiscent of a joy once bestowed by the “fluctuating interconnection with nature”.

The power of man over himself, which is the basis of his Self, virtually always implies the destruction of the subject in whose service it is carried out, since what is ruled, suppressed, and dissolved in the cause of self-preservation is nothing more or less than life itself, nothing more or less than its function to solely determine its capacity for self-preservation and exactly what it is that should be preserved.

The history of civilisation is marked by constant abstraction and formalisation.

The history of civilisation is the history of the introversion of the victim; in other words, the history of renunciation. Individuals engaged in renunciation surrender more of their lives than is returned to them, more than the lives they are defending.

Socialisation is undertaken as a process carried out against nature depersonalised as IT. Yet erotic imagination resurrects the sound of the distant Sirens against which mankind had to steel itself. The animal powers of imagination that find expression in erotic art associate it with the dark world of the physical body. It is the origin, the Prime Mover, in the archaeology of human nature.

In Sade’s obscene-philosophical novels, which present the sensual in an intellectualised format, the split between body and intellect both comes to a peak and simultaneously goes over the top. Frenzied rationality attempts to transcend its limitations and to once again possess the body in every one of its aspects.

The body returns from its ostracism – in writing. “Try an intellectual crime,” is the advice Juliette gives to Clairwil, “write.”



Edouard de Beaumont,
The Temptation of Saint Anthony, c. 1855. Lithograph.



Chinese anatomical doll used in medical diagnoses, early 20th century. Ivory.
The larger the breasts are on these figures, the more recent they are.
Old anatomical dolls are almost flat-chested.



Bedrich Benes, *Ex libris*, c. 1925.

1861: Wilhelmine Schroeder-Devrient, Memoirs of a Singer

My eye returned immediately to the gap in the wall. Marguerite was focused intently on reading the book and its content must have been fascinating because her cheeks acquired a blush and her eyes shone, her bosom heaved with excitement.

Suddenly, she reached under her skirt with her right hand, placed one foot up on the bed and now seemed even more intent on reading and gaining more enjoyment from the text.

Of course, I was unable to see what her hand was doing underneath the skirt since it still covered her, but I had a good enough idea. Sometimes she seemed to play only with her hair using nothing but her fingertips. Then afterwards, she pressed her thighs together and moved her hips back and forth.

* * *

I omitted to tell you that Marguerite presented me with the book she had read that evening when I spied on her.

It was a very delightfully-written erotic work called *Felicia ou Mes Fredaines*, and contained many colourful copperplate engravings, which would have taught me all about the vagaries central to human life if I had not known about them already. Reading this book was very enjoyable.

But I allowed myself to read it only once a week, specifically on Saturdays when I took my hot bath.

While I was in the bath, my aunt was not allowed to disturb me. The bathroom was away from the rest of the house and had only one door, over which I draped a blanket, although that was quite unnecessary. There was no gap or crack anywhere through which anyone could spy on me! I felt very secure.

While I took my bath, I read this book and felt it have the same effect on me that I had observed with Marguerite. Who could ever have read such red-hot descriptions without being aroused?



Carl Kauba, *A Treasure Seeker*, c. 1900. Bronze, 19.5 cm. Private collection.
A young man digs into the ground where the treasure lies hidden.
When opened, the treasure is discovered to be a nude woman.



Carl Kauba, *A Treasure Seeker*, c. 1900. Bronze, 19.5 cm. Private collection.



Volupté (voluptuous woman), 19th century. Photograph.

* * *

That is why it is so extraordinarily dangerous for a young girl to read indecent or licentious books! Later, when by chance I had access to a large collection of such books and pictures, I was able to experience for myself the effect they can have on a reader. *The Peculiarities of Mr H.*, the abotts' *Gallantries*, *Conspiracy in Berlin*, Althing's *Small Collection of Stories*, the extremely lewd Priapus novels which I read in German, *The Gatekeeper of the Carthusians*, *Faublas*, *Félicia ou Mes Fredaines*, *Les Confessions Erotiques de l'Abbé Pineraide*, and others which I read in French, are absolutely lethal to unmarried women.

They all describe the act itself using the most sensuous, exciting forms of expression – but they never speak of the consequences, never mention what a girl risks when she gives herself to a man without thinking and without restraint. None of these books describes the regret, the shame, the loss of her good name, or even the physical pain a girl might suffer afterwards. That is why marriage is such an excellent institution beyond adequate praise and honour. That is why every sensible person must do everything possible to uphold this institution, to preserve it with every respect and safeguard. Without it, sensuality would turn people into wild animals.

* * *

Do you know whom he had to thank for this terrible end? A corrupt person who called himself his friend and who gave him the most shameless book ever written – the book *Justine* – together with *Juliette*, or *The Dangers of Virtue and the Delights of Vice* by Marquis de Sade. It is said that the author went insane as a result of his excesses, and died in an insane asylum. Monsieur Duvalin, my husband's friend – the one who gave him that damned book to read – insisted that Sade did not go mad but instead joined the Jesuits to find even more pleasure in a monastery near Paris in Noisy-le-Sec.

When I hurled accusations at Duvalin, calling him the murderer of my husband, he simply shrugged his shoulders and said that it had certainly not been his intention to destroy my husband, but to cure him of his tendency to indulge in excesses. That his method had failed was unfortunate but no fault of his.

“What would you rather, Madame?” he concluded. “I too was plagued by the demon of the flesh, but I was cured by this book – cured of all those unnatural urges which dragged your husband down even deeper. I don't mean to say that I have become an ascetic, but I am not one of those obscene Epicureans who turn sexual pleasure into a cesspit. I was brought to my senses by revulsion at it: he was attracted by it. Who is to blame for that?”

My love for my husband was unbounded. The type of death I chose for myself was to be the same as his, and thus much more painful than sati [the practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre]. I wanted to study animal lust in theory in order then to experience it in practice.

My husband had given me a few books with an appropriate content, namely *The Memoirs of Fanny Hill*, *Petites Fredaines*, *The Story of Dom Bougres*, the *Cabinet d'Amour et de Venus*, *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*, *Pucelle* by Voltaire, and the *Adventures of a Cauchoise*.

Some of these he had read to me, with the idea that it would get us both in the mood for pleasure. He was not unsuccessful in this, for he found me ready and willing for all kinds of delightful activities we enjoyed with one another.

Only the book by Sade he kept back because he thought it too dangerous for me – and only after his death did I find it carefully hidden in a closet with a false bottom.

* * *

Arpad confessed to me that he had bought the book – the *Peculiarities of Mr H.* – in a Frankfurt bookstore specialising in old books. It gave him theoretical experience of the pleasures of love.

He added that he was very lucky I had come to Hungary because he had considered ejaculating into a whore several times, but had been deterred by his fear of infection.

One of his friends he knew to have caught a shameful disease in a house where the most unclean sacrifices are made to the goddess Venus, and then to have been unable to rid himself of the disease.



Rojan, illustration for *Vers libres*, (Free Verses), by Radiguet, 1936.



Felicien Rops, illustration for *Le Doigt dedans*, (The Finger Inside), by Theodore Hannon, c. 1850.



William Lockeridge, *Woman on a Swing*, 1993. Terracotta.



The Candle, late 19th century. Watercolour from an English sketchbook.

Marquis de Sade: Imagination Triumphs over Reason

The epicentre of the earthquake that is sexual desire bubbling away within mankind is located in the head.

“‘The thoughts you inspire in me, Juliette,’ said Belmor to me one day, ‘are what I find tantalising about you. No one could have a more lascivious... richer... more liberal [imagination] than yours. And you must have noticed that my most pleasurable alliances with you are those that develop when our imagination runs away with us and leads us on to innovatively sensual ideas that, alas, are impossible to realise or fulfil.’”

It is rare that purely imaginary scenes unfold in erotic literature, which is not always a creative genre. It is even rarer for imagination itself to be the object of reflection. The imagination is nonetheless the source of desire and of enjoyment for the Marquis de Sade, whose works are intended mainly to enlighten. To Sade, intellectual thought neutralises sensuality. The limitations of reality may be cast off by means of the sheer scope of the imagination, which grants potential existence to notions that far surpass reality. A passionate frenzy for release from the constraints of reality takes hold of the conscious mind. (During the French Revolution it actually burst through into reality as well.)

The works of Sade – whose concept of reality was physically limited for many years by the walls of a prison – should be read as the extreme expressions of a completely liberated imagination, as a dream of freedom for a prisoner, and not as the notional diary of a sadist. Isn't it perhaps exactly this conscious distancing of self from reality that makes it possible for erotic imagination to develop fantasies of megalomaniac proportions?

“Oh Juliette, how exquisite are the joys of the mind!” says Lamettrie. “Should we not embark on all the roads to sensual pleasure lit up by its fireworks?... During such exquisite moments the entire world is ours – there is nothing that can deny us. Everything holds out joy to the heightened senses our fervid imaginations have prepared to receive it. We can lay waste to the earth... we can repopulate it with new creatures – which we can then kill again if we feel like it.”

What a combination of notions of dominance, self-importance, and destructiveness!

“Happy, a hundred times happy,” goes on Lamettrie, “are those whose lively, sensual imagination always keeps available to the senses a foretaste of the joys to come. In truth, Juliette, I wouldn't like to say whether reality is equal to the imaginary – whether indulging in pleasures one does not actually possess is not a hundred times more enervating than indulging in those one really can possess.”

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