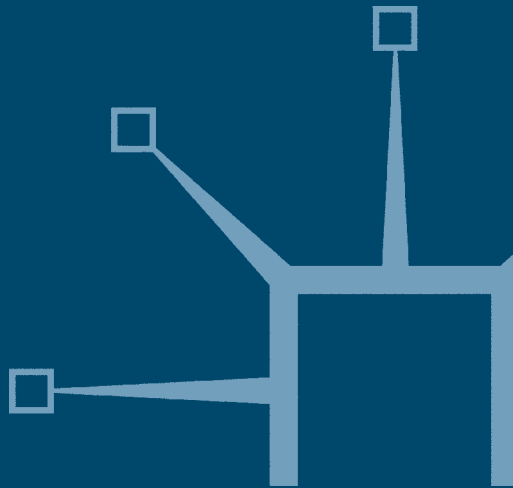


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Modernist Eroticisms

European Literature after Sexology

Edited by
Anna Katharina Schaffner and
Shane Weller



Modernist Eroticisms

Palgrave Studies in Modern European Literature

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MODERNIST ECROTICISMS

European Literature After Sexology

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Series Editors' Preface

Many of the most significant European writers and literary movements in the modern period have traversed national, linguistic and disciplinary borders. The principal aim of the Palgrave Studies in Modern European Literature series is to create a forum for work that takes account of these border crossings, and that engages with individual writers, genres, topoi and literary movements in a manner that does justice to their location within European artistic, political and philosophical contexts. Of course, the title of this series immediately raises a number of questions, at once historical, geo-political and literary-philosophical: What are the parameters of the modern? What is to be understood as European, both politically and culturally? And what distinguishes literature within these historical and geo-political limits from other forms of discourse?

These three questions are interrelated. Not only does the very idea of the modern vary depending on the European national tradition within which its definition is attempted, but the concept of literature in the modern sense is also intimately connected to the emergence and consolidation of the European nation-states, to increasing secularization, urbanization, industrialization and bureaucratization, to the Enlightenment project and its promise of emancipation from nature through reason and science, to capitalism and imperialism, to the liberal-democratic model of government, to the separation of the private and public spheres, to the new form taken by the university, and to changing conceptions of both space and time as a result of technological innovations in the fields of travel and communication.

Taking first the question of when the modern may be said to commence within a European context, if one looks to a certain Germanic tradition shaped by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), then it begins as early as the first 'theoretical man', namely Socrates. According to this view, the modern would include everything that comes after the pre-Socratics and the first two great Attic tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles, with Euripides being the first modern writer. A rather more limited sense of the modern, also derived from the Germanic world, sees the *Neuzeit* as originating in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Jakob Burckhardt, Nietzsche's

colleague at the University of Basel, identified the states of Renaissance Italy as prototypes for both modern European politics and modern European cultural production. However, Italian literary modernity might also be seen as having started two hundred years earlier, with the programmatic adoption of the vernacular by its foremost representatives, Dante and Petrarch.

In France, the modern might either be seen as beginning at the turn of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, with the so-called 'Querelle des anciens et des modernes' in the 1690s, or later still, with the French Revolution of 1789, while the Romantic generation of the 1830s might equally be identified as an origin, given that Chateaubriand is often credited with having coined the term *modernité* in 1833. Across the Channel, meanwhile, the origins of literary modernity might seem different again. With the Renaissance being seen as 'Early Modern', everything thereafter might seem to fall within the category of the modern, although in fact the term 'modern' within a literary context is generally reserved for the literature that comes after mid-nineteenth-century European realism. This latter sense of the modern is also present in the early work of Roland Barthes, who in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) asserts that modern literature commences in the 1850s, when the literary becomes explicitly self-reflexive, not only addressing its own status as literature but also concerning itself with the nature of language and the possibilities of representation.

In adopting a view of the modern as it pertains to literature that is more or less in line with Barthes's periodization, while also acknowledging that this periodization is liable to exceptions and limitations, the present series does not wish to conflate the modern with, nor to limit it to, modernism and postmodernism. Rather, the aim is to encourage work that highlights differences in the conception of the modern – differences that emerge out of distinct linguistic, national and cultural spheres within Europe – and to prompt further reflection on why it should be that the concept of the modern has become such a critical issue in 'modern' European culture, be it aligned with Enlightenment progress, with the critique of Enlightenment thinking, with decadence, with radical renewal, or with a sense of belatedness.

Turning to the question of the European, the very idea of modern literature arises in conjunction with the establishment of the European nation-states. When European literatures are studied at university, they are generally taught within national and linguistic parameters: English, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian, Slavic and Eastern European, and Spanish literature. Even if such disciplinary distinctions have their

pedagogical justifications, they render more difficult an appreciation of the ways in which modern European literature is shaped in no small part by intellectual and artistic traffic across national and linguistic borders: to grasp the nature of the European avant-gardes or of high modernism, for instance, one has to consider the relationship between distinct national or linguistic traditions. While not limiting itself to one methodological approach, the present series is designed precisely to encourage the study of individual writers and literary movements within their European context. Furthermore, it seeks to promote research that engages with the very definition of the European in its relation to literature, including changing conceptions of centre and periphery, of Eastern and Western Europe, and how these might bear upon questions of literary translation, dissemination and reception.

As for the third key term in the series title – literature – the formation of this concept is intimately related both to the European and to the modern. While Sir Philip Sidney in the late sixteenth century, Martin Opitz in the seventeenth, and Shelley in the early nineteenth produce their apologies for, or defences of, 'poetry', it is within the general category of 'literature' that the genres of poetry, drama and prose fiction have come to be contained in the modern period. Since the Humboldtian reconfiguration of the university in the nineteenth century, the fate of literature has been closely bound up with that particular institution, as well as with emerging ideas of the canon and tradition. However one defines it, modernity has both propagated and problematized the historical legacy of the Western literary tradition. While, as Jacques Derrida argues, it may be that in all European languages the history and theorization of the literary necessarily emerges out of a common Latinate legacy – the very word 'literature' deriving from the Latin *littera* (letter) – it is nonetheless the case that within a modern European context the literary has taken on an extraordinarily diverse range of forms. Traditional modes of representation have been subverted through parody and pastiche, or abandoned altogether; genres have been mixed; the limits of language have been tested; indeed, the concept of literature itself has been placed in question.

With all of the above in mind, the present series wishes to promote work that engages with any aspect of modern European literature (be it a literary movement, an individual writer, a genre, a particular topos) within its European context, that addresses questions of translation, dissemination and reception (both within Europe and beyond), that considers the relations between modern European literature and the other arts, that analyses the impact of other discourses (philosophical,

political, scientific) upon that literature, and, above all, that takes each of those three terms – modern, European and literature – not as givens, but as invitations, even provocations, to further reflection.

Thomas Baldwin
Ben Hutchinson
Anna Katharina Schaffner
Shane Weller

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Introduction

Anna Katharina Schaffner and Shane Weller

Sexology, psychoanalysis and the reconceptualization of sexual deviance

In the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the conception of human sexuality underwent radical transformation. Within the rapidly expanding field of sexology, and in line with the increasing secularization of modernity, forms of sexual behaviour that deviated from the perceived norm – heterosexual genital intercourse in the service of procreation – came to be conceived in biological and psychological rather than ethico-religious terms; that is, as pathological rather than immoral. Those who were adjudged to exhibit the symptoms of so-called sexual ‘perversion’ – including homosexuality (or ‘inversion’), sadism, masochism, fetishism, voyeurism and necrophilia – became medicalized subjects whose morbid conditions could be scientifically identified, analysed and, according to some sexologists, even cured.

Attempts to categorize the various forms of sexual deviance peaked in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as evidenced by a proliferation of predominantly German and French studies in the field of *scientia sexualis*, most notably Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).¹ As Michel Foucault argues in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (1976), however, this project backfired spectacularly: rather than containing the spread of perversion and thus preventing what was seen as the possible corruption not just of the individual human body but also of the body politic, works such as Krafft-Ebing’s, by naming and classifying the various forms of sexual deviance, in fact facilitated their discursive proliferation.² Furthermore, as Foucault argues, by imposing labels such as ‘invert’, ‘masochist’ or ‘fetishist’ on the subjects in

question, the sexologists transformed what had previously been mere behaviours into sexual identities. In effect, the sexologists invented the homosexual, the masochist, the fetishist and a host of other perverse types who, significantly, would soon go on to populate in ever greater numbers naturalist, decadent and, above all, modernist literature. The discursive traffic was, however, far from being simply one-way. Just as sexological and psychoanalytic works impacted on the literary imagination, so literary examples of perversion influenced the sexologists. Krafft-Ebing, for instance, drew on a wide range of literary texts to support his arguments, the works (and the reputation) of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1869) playing particularly important roles in sexological concept-formation. As is well known, Freud, too, drew extensively on the literary, not least for the naming of his core concept: the Oedipus complex.³

Most of the early sexological studies either embraced biological (or what might now be seen as biopolitical) models, positing degeneration and the inheritance of contaminated genetic material as the origin of sexual perversion, or else argued that the particular cultural conditions of modernity, and the adverse effects of a decadent culture in rapid decline, were responsible for the perversions that they encountered and sought to classify. In the case of the latter interpretation, Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892–3) proved to be a powerful influence. It was only with the publication in 1905 of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that a theory transcending the innate–acquired binary emerged. Undoubtedly the single most influential work ever written on the subject of the perversions, and drawing substantially on earlier works in the field of sexology, Freud's *Three Essays* rejected both the notion of biological determinism and the degeneration paradigm, shifting the emphasis onto the terrain of Oedipal struggles in childhood and arrested psycho-sexual development.

In the first of the *Three Essays*, on 'The Sexual Aberrations', Freud sets out to redefine homosexuality, sadism, masochism, fetishism, voyeurism and exhibitionism as deviations of the sexual drive from its natural object, namely 'the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation'.⁴ At the time, the most contentious aspect to Freud's theorization of the perversions was his sexualization of the child. No less important was his infantilization of the pervert: for Freud, sexual perversion is essentially a form of arrested development. Arguably his most radical move, however, was to present sexual perversion as common to all human beings at a certain stage in their ontogenetic development. At the outset, according to Freud, the sexual drive consists

of polymorphously perverse partial drives. If all human beings have to pass through a perverse phase, then perversion is in effect normalized. To be sure, Freud aims to maintain a clear distinction between normal and abnormal sexual activity; and yet his argument nonetheless weakens this very distinction. Perversion, then, becomes very much part of who we are, no longer something that can be assigned to some 'other' who has, for one reason or another, simply deviated from the path of healthy psychological development. Furthermore, by identifying neuroses such as hysteria, obsessive-compulsive tendencies and phobias as the consequence of repressed desires, Freud radically expands the domain of perversion within the adult population. Lastly, by introducing the notion of sublimation, Freud insists upon a direct connection between perversion and all forms of cultural achievement, not least art and literature: in his 1908 essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming', Freud presents the artist as a figure who has the power to render his or her own perverse desires of interest – which is to say, a source of libidinal pleasure – to others.

It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of Freud's theory of the perversions on modernist literature. He placed Eros at the very heart of human experience, positing it as the force behind civilization itself, and writers in the early decades of the twentieth century could scarcely simply ignore his reconceptualization of human sexuality – even if, like D. H. Lawrence, they did not necessarily accept his arguments. Of course, Freud was not working in a cultural vacuum; he drew heavily on the work of predecessors in the sexological field. Moreover, if he influenced literary modernism, Freud may be considered a modernist in his own right, committed as he was to establishing psychoanalysis as a discourse that could make sense of an increasingly disenchanted modernity.⁵ The various transformations in the conception of human sexuality, and thus of the erotic, that occurred in both sexology and psychoanalysis at this time were closely related to specifically modern socio-cultural developments, including secularization, industrialization and urbanization, capitalism, the advent of scientism and positivism, and rapid technological advances, not least in the field of communication. Like that of other modernists, Freud's relation to modernity was ambiguous: on the one hand, his reconceptualization of human sexuality, and in particular of sexual deviance, was very much part of the Enlightenment project out of which modernity had sprung; on the other hand, his vision of modernity was, like that of many of the European literary modernists, far from unremittingly positive.

When conceptions of sexuality change, literary representations of the erotic will tend to reflect these changes, either by embracing them or by engaging critically with them. This is certainly the case with modernism, in which sexuality and erotic experience play a central role, and in which the heritage of sexology and psychoanalysis is very much in evidence. Diverse forms of sexual desire are at the heart of many of the major avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, especially expressionism, Dada and surrealism, and they are no less present in the work of the major European modernists, including Guillaume Apollinaire, Djuna Barnes, Georges Bataille, André Gide, Radclyffe Hall, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, D. H. Lawrence, Michel Leiris, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Marcel Proust, Rainer Maria Rilke, Arthur Schnitzler, Paul Valéry and Frank Wedekind. While there are numerous important differences in the ways in which the erotic is explored in the work of each of the above writers, there are also a number of important shared characteristics that permit the theorization of a specifically modernist writing of the erotic.

The specificities of modernist literary eroticism

It is possible to identify at least five principal characteristics specific to European modernist literary engagements with the erotic. While not all of these characteristics will necessarily pertain to a given literary work or *œuvre*, or be shared by all modernist writers, they nonetheless offer a general framework within which the particularities of a given writer or work might be located. In European modernism: (1) the erotic tends to be privileged as a realm of existential significance; (2) the emphasis is primarily on deviant sexual desires and the so-called sexual perversions, with the distinction between 'pathological' and 'normal' forms of sexuality frequently being challenged; (3) representations of the erotic tend to be more explicit than in romantic, realist and naturalist works, with the difference between the erotic and the obscene often being deliberately blurred; (4) the attitude taken towards the erotic is often ambivalent, and on occasion results in ambiguities at the level of representation; and (5) the erotic is apparent not only at the level of content, but also, and no less importantly, at that of literary form or style.

Underlying each of these characteristics is a concern with the relation between mind and body, materiality and immateriality, the biological and the psychological. In the modernist literary engagement with the erotic, one encounters a sustained attempt not merely to challenge the Cartesian division between mind and body, but to achieve

a reconciliation of the two. For many of the modernists, it is not enough simply to privilege the erotic at the bodily or psychological level; rather, it is this very separation of spheres that has to be overcome. T. S. Eliot's conception of a 'dissociation of sensibility' is but one version of the modernist diagnosis out of which this attempted reconciliation emerges.⁶ In the work of certain modernists – Thomas Mann, for instance – the attempt to achieve such a reconciliation in the sphere of erotic experience is presented not only with a strong dose of scepticism, but even in the tragic mode; other modernists – James Joyce among them – are considerably more optimistic in their assessment of the possibilities of overcoming the mind/body split, and consequently adopt a more comic mode.

1 The existential significance of the erotic

In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957), Georg Lukács criticizes what he sees as the unhealthy obsession with psychopathology in modernist literature, which he considers a symptom of a politically suspect withdrawal into the realm of the personal, a 'surrender to subjectivity' and thus a loss of the objectivity characteristic of nineteenth-century realism.⁷ Rather than seeking to represent the human subject as a social being within an historical context, the modernists offer the reader visions of individuals exhibiting various forms of sexual deviance that are both partial cause and symptom of a deeper socio-political alienation. In short, by focusing on deviance rather than on the norm, the modernists give us a perverted vision of the human. According to Lukács, Kafka, Joyce and Beckett are all guilty of such distortions, while, ironically, given the major role that homosexuality plays in his oeuvre, Thomas Mann is not. On the one hand, Lukács is no doubt right to emphasize the centrality of deviance – not least sexual deviance – in the work of the major modernists. On the other hand, these very writers are inheritors, in their different ways, of that revolution in thought that placed sexuality at the existential heart of the human subject. Furthermore, far from taking various forms of deviant sexuality to be signs of decadence, many modernists see them as potential cures for the perceived ills of modernity: Georges Bataille, André Breton and D. H. Lawrence, as well as Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich, for instance, all deem it necessary for there to be a reconnection with our 'authentic' sexual desires, this reconnection being a precondition not only of individual but also of a more general cultural renewal. It is no coincidence that James Joyce should have described 'Penelope', the final episode in

Ulysses (1922), as the key to the entire novel. As Joyce explained in a letter of 16 August 1921 to Frank Budgen, the 'four cardinal points' in this episode are 'the female breasts, arse, womb and cunt', and Molly Bloom herself serves, for Joyce, as the 'perfectly sane' affirmation of the flesh, countering the Mephistophelean spirit of negation.⁸ The stakes here go far beyond the fate of a single family, as Joyce would go on to show in *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Joyce's affirmation of the flesh is nothing less than a revalorization of forms of erotic life that he saw as absolutely central not only to art but to society as a whole.

Many of the European modernists, then, share a sense that the erotic is a sphere of existential importance, reaching far beyond questions of personal pleasure or predilection. This is not to say that they always see the erotic as an entirely positive force. In Kafka and Thomas Mann, for instance, homosexuality seems, on the one hand, to promise salvation, while also being associated with failure, suffering and death. Even Freud, the most prominent advocate for the centrality of sexuality within the human psyche, embraces a vision of the erotic that is deeply pessimistic. In his 1912 essay 'On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love II)', for instance, Freud claims that 'something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable to the realization of complete satisfaction'.⁹ This profoundly negative view of sexual desire is also to be found in modernist literature, nowhere more obviously than in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), shaped as that poem is by the profound sense that, in the words of Ecclesiastes, 'desire shall fail'.¹⁰ Ironically, Eliot's poem takes up the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King, whose kingdom will be renewed only when his own sexual potency has been restored by the touch of the spear that wounded him. For all their differences, Eliot shares with D. H. Lawrence a sense that the modern erotic landscape is largely a depressing, violent and even nihilistic affair – think of the 'young man carbuncular' assaulting the weary typist in *The Waste Land*, or the sado-masochistic relationship between Gerald and Gudrun in Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920). In Eliot's poem, it is precisely *because* Eros is failing – and, one might argue, always already doomed to fail – that there can be no hope of renewal. If Eliot's diagnosis of modernity's malaise bears similarities to Lawrence's, he takes his distance from the latter when it comes to the nature of the cure: *The Waste Land* ultimately gestures towards Buddhist and Schopenhauerian notions of the need to negate desire, and thus to the dream of a state of being from which Eros will have

been expunged in favour of Agape. Of course, even such a deeply negative vision of Eros can arise only when erotic experience is taken to be of existential importance.

2 Deviant desire and the problematization of the distinction between the normal and the pathological

One of the most striking aspects to the modernist engagement with the erotic is its concern with the various forms of sexual 'perversion', as identified in the sexological works of the late nineteenth century and the psychoanalytical works of the early twentieth. Homosexuality plays a major role in the work of Barnes, Gide, Hall, Kafka, Thomas Mann and Proust;¹¹ sado-masochism is explored in Kafka, Lawrence and Proust; there is heterosexual anal sex in Bataille, Joyce and Lawrence; exhibitionism lies at the heart of Michel Leiris's *Manhood* (1939); necrophilia takes centre stage in Bataille, Hans Henny Jahnn and Schnitzler. Explorations of incest, paedophilia and fetishism also abound in modernist literature, art and film.

In modernism, what the sexologists saw as pathological perversions are often presented not as signs of the perceived sickness of modernity, but rather as forms of desire that promise individual and even cultural renewal. Indeed, numerous modernists respond either directly or indirectly to developments in sexology and psychoanalysis, often engaging critically with normative scientific conceptions. They frequently problematize the distinction between normal and pathological forms of desire – this is evident in, for instance, the work of Barnes, Bataille, Gide, Jahnn, Kafka, Mann and Proust, and to some extent also in that of Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, all of these writers being familiar with sexological studies and Freudian psychoanalysis. One also encounters modernists seeking to break with the masculine/feminine binary through the valorization of the unisex – this tendency is apparent in, for instance, the photographs of the French surrealist Claude Cahun.

In its challenging of the distinction between the normal and the pathological in the realm of erotic experience, and in its troubling of sex and gender binaries, modernism not only takes its critical distance from the sexological discourses on which it draws, but also renders possible the shift from conceptions of sexual deviance to those of sexual difference, and from fixed to fluid (or even dissolved) sexual identities. In the post-Second World War era, the legacy of the modernist writing of the erotic is to be seen not least in the work of writers such as Jean Genet and Monique Wittig, and theorists such as Judith Butler.

3 The explicit nature of modernist eroticisms and the question of obscenity

In *The Fantastic* (1970), Tzvetan Todorov argues that the genre of the fantastic, which emerged in the eighteenth and peaked in the later nineteenth century, enabled writers to explore deviant forms of sexual desire such as homosexuality, incest, necrophilia and paedophilia in covert form, thereby evading censorship. The works of Edgar Allan Poe and Théophile Gautier would be cases in point. According to Todorov, with the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis, which drew latent sexual content to the surface, the justification for the fantastic disappeared.¹² Certainly, both sexology and psychoanalysis are explicit about the erotic life in a manner not to be found in romantic, realist or naturalist literature. Furthermore, in 1904 the German sexologist Iwan Bloch published the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, the manuscript of which was until then thought to have been destroyed, and, in 1909, Guillaume Apollinaire published an edition of Sade's works.¹³ Although the real impact of Sade's oeuvre would only be felt in the 1930s and later, with the republication of his works in editions by Maurice Heine,¹⁴ Bloch's edition of *The 120 Days of Sodom* heralded an era in which the erotic life would be treated in a far more explicit manner than it had been in the literature of the nineteenth century. That said, even the majority of sexologists of the later nineteenth century felt the need to remain discreet when discussing deviant forms of sexual desire, as is evidenced by Krafft-Ebing's reliance upon Latin rather than German when describing particularly explicit sexual acts in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and by both Krafft-Ebing's and Freud's reluctance to discuss necrophilia in any detail.

With the more explicit nature of the sexological and psychoanalytic discourses rendering unnecessary the strategies deployed in the literature of the fantastic, modernist literature certainly took up the challenge of the explicit in its writing of the erotic. Many of the modernists, and above all the more radically transgressive avant-garde movements such as Dada and surrealism, raise to a new level the 'épater la bourgeoisie' project initiated by decadent writers in the late nineteenth century such as Octave Mirbeau – author of *The Torture Garden* (1899) and *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1900) – and Oscar Wilde, in the play *Salomé* (1891).¹⁵ Works such as Wedekind's play *Spring Awakening* (written in 1890–1, first performed in 1906), Guillaume Apollinaire's Sade-inspired novel *Les Onze Mille Verges* (*The Eleven Thousand Rods*, 1907),¹⁶ Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Jahnn's play *Medea* (1926), Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928), Louis Aragon's

Irene's Cunt (1928), Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) test the limits of the distinction between the erotic and the obscene. On the other hand, writers such as Djuna Barnes and Virginia Woolf engage with the erotic in more covert ways, often relying on highly figurative language. In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), for instance, the erotic is explored in a language that would leave the censor untroubled: we read, for example, of 'a match burning in a crocus' and 'a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up'.¹⁷

This testing of the distinction between the erotic and what at the time was considered obscene led to censorship and to a number of modernists having to seek alternatives to the major publishing houses in order to disseminate their work. Among the works charged with obscenity under the British Obscene Publications Act of 1857 were Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1897), Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Five hundred copies of *Ulysses*, published by the Paris-based Shakespeare and Company, were confiscated and burned by customs officers in New York in 1923, and it was only a decade later that publication and distribution of the book were ruled permissible in the United States.¹⁸

Definitions of pornography and obscenity are, of course, fraught with legal, ethical and aesthetic consequences. Moreover, as is amply demonstrated by the history of censorship, the 'pornographic' and the 'obscene' are historically variable categories. In her seminal essay 'The Pornographic Imagination' (1967), Susan Sontag seeks to rehabilitate a range of literary works that she classifies as pornographic, including Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928) and *Madame Edwarda* (1941), and Pauline Réage's *The Story of O* (1954).¹⁹ While insisting on the pornography label for these texts, Sontag aims to show that the charges usually levelled against pornography do not apply in these particular cases. These charges include the claim that the intention to arouse the reader sexually is antithetical to the complex function of literature, that pornographic works are episodic, that they make use of language in a purely instrumental manner, and that they eschew psychologically complex characters in favour of types that facilitate the emotional projections of the reader.²⁰ Sontag argues that an author such as Bataille aims to achieve the objective of all great art, namely to explore extreme forms of experience, this resulting in a horizon-extending and cathartic 'disorientation' or 'psychic dislocation'.²¹ Sontag casts Bataille as the author of an 'erotics of agony', seeing his literary works as primarily

intellectual projects exploring the limits of transgression, or as tragic quest narratives in which the object of desire is not sex but death.²² She defines *The Story of O* as 'meta-pornography',²³ since she deems the narrative to be more concerned with the 'use' of erotic material than with its 'expression'.²⁴ This is a crucial point, as arguably it undermines Sontag's own classification of the texts she discusses as pornographic. To take up pornographic elements and devices for purposes that go beyond the sexual titillation of the reader is very different from the uncritical reproduction of pornographic stereotypes in a generically unadventurous way.

Ultimately, then, it is perplexing why Sontag should insist on describing works, the aesthetic and philosophical merits of which she praises, as pornography, rather than arguing that these texts subvert classical pornographic conventions for purposes that are in line with those of modernist art more generally.²⁵ The exploration of the erotic in modernist literature is distinguished in part precisely by its rendering questionable of the very categories of the obscene and the pornographic: while D. H. Lawrence, for instance, in his 1929 pamphlet *Pornography and Obscenity*, seeks to define and then deploy these categories within a discourse on Western culture in general, his literary works, like those of other modernists, tend to blur the conceptual boundaries upon which legal determinations of the obscene rely. It is in no small degree owing to the modernist engagement with the erotic that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries should have witnessed a shift in the conception of the obscene, the failed prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act of Penguin Books for its publication of the unexpurgated text of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960 constituting a watershed in this respect.

4 Ambivalence/ambiguity

While many of the modernists undertake a revalorization of various forms of erotic activity, challenging the sexological attitude to perversion, this revalorization is frequently qualified by reservations, resulting in ambivalence and in some cases in radical ambiguity. Far from simply championing non-normative forms of the erotic, modernist works often present them as, on the one hand, a means of transcending a negatively conceived modernity, and, on the other hand, as a symptom of that very modernity. In the work of Thomas Mann, for instance, homosexuality is repeatedly associated with intellectual and, particularly, with artistic refinement, while at the same time being aligned with decadence and sickness. In Kafka, homosocial relations are generally presented far

more positively than are heterosexual ones, but the eroticization of the homosocial brings with it a sado-masochistic dynamic. While Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* may seem to be unambiguous in its celebration of a particular form of heterosexual anal eroticism, matters are considerably more nuanced in *Women in Love*, in which there are 'two kinds of love', the novel ending with Birkin telling Ursula after Gerald's death: "'Having you, I can live all my life without anybody else, any other sheer intimacy. But to make it complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with a man too: another kind of love [...]'"²⁶ Even a writer such as Bataille may be seen to commit himself to ambiguity through his insistence upon the need to retain the very taboos on all forms of non-normative sexual activity that render possible the transgressions upon which he takes the erotic charge to depend.

If, more generally, the modernist writing of the erotic tends to vacillate between viewing sexual deviance as, on the one hand, a symptom of a sick modernity and, on the other, a cure for it, it is precisely this ambivalence that locates the modernist engagement with the erotic historically, coming, as it does, after the pathologization of non-normative sexuality in the sexological discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and before the affirmation of sexual difference beyond the normal/abnormal binary in the post-Second World War era, especially in queer studies.

5 The erotics of style

In her essay 'The Pornographic Imagination', Sontag is concerned principally with the erotic at the level of literary content. Far from being limited to content, however, the modernist writing of the erotic also has a formal or stylistic dimension. Indeed, this engagement with the erotic at the level of literary style is arguably no less important than is the tendency to render the erotic in more explicit forms. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Roland Barthes seeks to liberate the textual erotic entirely from the level of content: in his view, the textual erotic does not even require the representation of erotic scenes; rather, it lies in a writing that is characterized by a play of 'significance' (*signifiante*) – that is, 'meaning, *insofar as it is sensually produced*'.²⁷ For Barthes, the writing of the erotic is achieved through a literary style characterized by gaps, intermittence and semantic slippage:

Is not the most erotic portion of a body *where the garment gapes*? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no 'erogenous zones' (a foolish expression, besides); it is intermittence, as

psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.²⁸

Simply to endorse Barthes's sidelining of the erotic at the level of representation in favour of its manifestation at the level of style would be to miss an essential dimension to the modernist writing of the erotic. That said, his attempt to identify a style of writing that may be described as erotic is certainly relevant for a consideration of the engagement with the erotic in modernist literature precisely because the relationship between form and meaning is particularly close in modernist prose and poetry. The erotic dimension in modernist literature is often manifest not just on the level of representation, but also in a certain linguistic performativity: in teasing rhythms, seductive sound combinations and erotically charged textual flows.²⁹ The prose of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) enacts the very yearning (*Sehnsucht*) experienced by Gustav von Aschenbach. Molly Bloom's monologue in Joyce's *Ulysses* is striking for its combination of the most explicit erotic content and a style designed to match that content. Similarly, while Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1921–2) explores homosexuality at the level of content, it may also be seen to exemplify the kind of play at the level of *signifiante* that Barthes sees as erotic. While it would obviously be wrong to claim that only in modernism does one find a particularly close relation between form and meaning – this intimacy arguably being the distinctive feature of the aesthetic as such – one of the specificities of the modernist writing of the erotic is precisely an attention to this relation when erotic themes are taken up.

Towards a comparative analysis of eroticism in European modernism

The principal aim of the present volume is to explore the impact of the scientific and cultural changes in the conception of sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries upon European literary modernism by investigating representations of the erotic in the work of a number of major European modernist writers, as well as in that of some less well-known figures of the period. While, for obvious reasons, this volume cannot claim to be comprehensive, it nonetheless seeks to provide readers with a sense of the engagement with the erotic