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The Intellectual Situation

Foreign Report: French Sex Novel

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Cher Ami,

I am depressed. Things are worse here than I thought. It's a mess and what's more it's a provincial mess. But let me go back.

A brief history of 20th-century French fiction:

in the aughts and teens it was Catholicism, Conservatism, Dreyfus

in the twenties it was the Unconscious and Communism

in the thirties it was Anthropology and Communism

in the forties well, we don't talk much about the forties, but it was a hard time to be a novelist and you can understand that one must make compromises

in the fifties it was language as structure

in the sixties it was language as destructure

in the seventies it was sex, sex, sex, and feminine writing

in the eighties it was still sex with some regrets and gay sex

in the nineties it was the free market, and some sex.

There are exceptions to this schematic, actually the canon of great 20th-century fiction is largely exceptional: Gide, Proust, Bernanos, Camus, Blanchot, Colette. In the second rank, though, form holds. Go through the library shelves for literature (roughly by decade and alphabetically) and you'll find authors who fit oh so snugly. The French are classicizers and everything they touch becomes classicism, even pornography.

There are oddballs and Louis Calaferte's *Septentrion* is one. He was a little ahead of the curve on sex. *Septentrion* is published in 1962: "Au début était le sexe" (In the beginning was sex) is its opening line. Almost its last, "le sexe est la mort et la resurrection" (sex is the resurrection and the death). In between, you'd expect a lot of sex, at least as much as Henry Miller. In this respect, it's disappointing. *Septentrion* is a bildungsroman, the story of how a nameless working-class boy fails to become a writer in two hundred numbing pages. I haven't read them all, but I challenge anyone to do so when they have better things to

do. And I don't. But still. There's a twenty-page encomium to reading in public toilets and the joys of shitting. For a while it looks like autodidacticism will triumph over sex, but, no, sex wins in the end. The grand discovery of the working-class writer: the bourgeoisie are too uptight, and while they may write novels, they miss out on life.

"Writing is a tomb," our narrator declares. The novel is confessional and the French confessional tradition is dangerous. Rousseau is an obvious model and still the best. Chateaubriand is a purer stylist, but he's obsessed with religion and death. For French purposes, he invents the idea that writing is a kind of living death and that one writes when you've nothing better to do and suicide is not an option. However, I challenge anyone to read Chateaubriand's *Memoires d'outre-tombe* and not be weepingly bored. *Septentrion* is very late French romantic, style Chateaubriand. Somehow the novel is too late and too early. Its main contribution to the tradition seems to have been its conversational tone, colloquial and also a mix of low and high.

It's not until the '70s that sex takes over completely and becomes the model for "pure writing." The case of Pierre Guyotat is instructive. Son of Catholic resisters, Pierre deserts during his military service at the height of the Algerian war and is imprisoned and probably tortured. He emerges in Paris in the late '60s as a left-wing idol. Then his second novel, *Eden, Eden, Eden* (1971), becomes the first banned book since Baudelaire. It's a porno extravaganza. Written without punctuation, it's a litany of rapes and S&M in a nameless war zone that resembles French Algeria in the '50s. Guyotat, person, is anti-violence and despairs of the world as anything but a place where the powerful fuck the powerless. His visions are, in some way, probably very close to the truth of what it's like to be in Algeria, or Bosnia, or Colombia. It's a bit like *Road Warrior* without the satisfactions of the revenge plot—just 500 pages of serial rapes. Guyotat, writer, is championed by Tel Quel as the "real thing." Pure writing at its impurest. All writing is control, rape, manipulation, the great doors of the unconscious have been fucked wide open. Guyotat believes his press, talks about writing while masturbating. Insists he only writes while masturbating.

There were clues. His first book, *Tombeau pour cinq cents mille soldats* (1967). It's the same thing with a bit more narrative structure (revenge is suggested, and then coolly denied) and lots of vampirism and raw meat. Of note, the "enemy country" taking over the world is called "Septentrion" and in the title we hear the warnings of Calaferte's narrator about writing and entombment. Is this irony? Coincidence? Critique? Next to Guyotat, Calaferte and Henry Miller are prudes. I'll tell you that I find all this sex and violence disgusting. That's the point. I'm properly bourgeois, *bien sûr*. But I'm amazed that Guyotat, who ought to have been treated as a polemical savage, was instead crowned as a liberatory genius. It's his bad luck that he believed it. It's as though French intellectuals discovered Darwinism late and erected biology into destiny and the replacement for dogmatic Catholicism, celebrating it as freedom and deploring it as tyranny at the same time.

Guyotat is still alive, he's only 64, but he hasn't really done anything of note since the '70s. It seems like he's working on a 3-part enormous book that someone could someday fail to read. He's also become a campaigner for prostitutes' rights. This a long way of saying this is not my taste in fiction.

How can I like Houellebecq then? Houellebecq is a model of positive restraint compared to what came before. He's so much more open-minded than the absolutist '68ers, especially Sollers. Houellebecq at least offers characters who are capable of dissent from dominant models in sex, politics, economics, and aesthetics. I tell you to read Houellebecq! *The Elementary Particles* offers two possible responses to the problem of sex and late capitalism—each developed through character, rather than style. Bruno finds love

and tragedy, he couldn't have known a degenerative illness meant all the spectacular S&M would break Christiane's back. Michel stands on a gray cliff, scientifically eradicates the sexes through genetic engineering. And Houellebecq wants tragedy and utopia at once. Do you know what he says about Huxley? "Everyone says *Brave New World* is supposed to be a totalitarian nightmare, but that's hypocritical bullshit. *Brave New World* is our idea of heaven: genetic manipulation, sexual liberation, the war against aging, the leisure society." Have you read Huxley lately? OK, it's for kids, but still.

So coming from America, Houellebecq looks like the next great novelist *a thèse*. Approaching him from France, people find him an impure stylist, a bad writer, a popular hack. Do they see what's right under their noses? Of course it would help if he wrote another masterpiece. Or stayed sober during interviews. Or does he just put that on for Americans, when he passes out in his soup?

I will keep looking, my friend. In the meantime, I embrace you . . . Yours, etc.

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ALL THAT SEX, to so little profit. We were just going to hop on the subway. But an embossed card is right next to the train pass. How long has it been there? We consider its message, again:

APPLICANTS NEEDED. ADVANCED DEGREES (PHD, MA). MEN AD WOMEN AGE 18-32. HEALTHY PAY.

In this world, only one place believes an intellectual is worth his or her weight in gold. And that's the sperm and egg bank.

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AN HOUR LATER, we're in the waiting room. Well, why not? Here they have cut flowers. Comfy chairs, reading lamps. And the latest issue of the *London Review of Books*.

Perhaps some infertile couple needs a child with bad eyesight, a tendency to melancholy, and a habit of reading? All our gametes did sit through lectures with us. If that's what a banker and a lawyer want for their kid—are we going to stand in the way of happiness?

This may be the only way to keep the mutation alive. Intellectuals: reproduce! Honest means not required. Suddenly, we conceive a vision. Not one, two, or ten tykes, identical to us, but a hundred, a thousand! So adorable—if only we could see their faces—but they've all got their noses buried in books. It's the Children's Crusade. It's the New York Public Library, Bibliothèque Nationale, and Bodleian Reading Room taken over by dwarves. But those dwarves are us! A million of us! We will singlehandedly keep Sartre in print! We will put the NYRB Classics on the bestseller list!

The nurse appears, the music swells. Immortality awaits. +

The Novel: The Way Out Is In

On the psychological novel

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The Editors

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THE EXTERIORIZING OF LITERATURE (in public performances, readings, photographs) may be a necessary promotional means by which publishers, increasingly uncertain about what will sell, try to perplex the judgment of readers with extraneous selling points. The truly dangerous thing is when writers take these values up for themselves and internalize them.

Writers always read work to their friends. Kafka read aloud to Max Brod and pals in the cafes of Prague, laughing all the way through *The Trial*; and Flaubert's two best friends, after a marathon reading of several days, told him not to publish the first *Temptation of St. Anthony*, because it sucked.

The peril of current practices is that a guild mentality emerges. This is distinct from literary friendship, and it's no friend to literature. As soon as you hear behind the bookish chatter, "We're all writers here, what's to disagree about?" you know we're sunk, intellectually. Everybody thinks, but there's no consensus among thinkers; everybody can write, so why should there be a vocational solidarity among writers? The essence of writing is that it's expressive of ideas and technique—and the primary truth about other people's ideas and other people's art is that mostly they will be distinct from and opposed to your own. The guild mentality reinforces a sense that writers don't do anything threatening, either to the general public or one another. Already guildishness has nearly strangled poetry, and its hands are at fiction's neck. PEN exists to make sure nobody is being tortured or imprisoned for writing; that's all the solidarity that's good for literature.

The guild mentality may start as a defense against a brutal economy trading in celebrity and publicity. Finally it collaborates with these exteriorizing trends. The eagerness to be liked, the need to be noticed, the meretricious desire for gasps and chuckles, gradually infect the writing itself.

It's natural that writers think in terms of celebrity and notoriety—they belong to our society, they can't help it. But what can justify that flourishing parasitism, the historical celebrity novel? Bad enough that our coevals write about frontier America, the belle Époque, and the old-fashioned freak show, since all historical fiction deprives the author of his sole expertise: the contemporary. But what's really disgraceful is the novel about Lewis and Clark, or Henry James, or Chang and Eng. (Several years ago there were twin novels about these Siamese twins.) The strong novel creates and releases Anna Karenina or Alexander Portnoy, nonexistent persons who deserve surpassing fame. The weak novel clamps its mouth to the

already famous and ekes out a life from borrowed blood. The dizzy publisher encourages this because he knows that Fatty Arbuckle or Fyodor Dostoevsky have already got a fan base.

The novel's anxiety to have a ready-made public makes it less and less deserving of one. The novel needs to get over the 19th century. For about a hundred years it was the dominant art form of bourgeois civilization. Since then, as if unwilling to resign its old position, it's tried to contend with the movies and TV, not to mention long nonfiction articles in the *New Yorker*. Now it tries to rival the stand-up routine and, in novel-memoir, the daytime talk show. How absurd was the effort of Robbe-Grillet to make writing into a kind of film! How silly of Tom Wolfe to think the novel should compete with journalism on the one ground—information-gathering—where it can't! Someone should tell the novel that it is not and never was dying; those death throes were just the feeling of a monopoly ending, the shortness of breath that comes with loss of market share. Let the comedians, the lip-gloss models, the movie directors, the journalists and historians be. Their work may be inferior to the novelist's, but they do it better than he does.

The novel is unexcelled at one thing only: the creation of interiority, or inwardness. How does life look and sound from the inside, where no public observes it and not even a friend listens in? No better instrument than prose fiction was ever developed for answering this question. Beside the novel at its best, even Wallace Stevens is a stumbling simile-monger and Tarkovsky a crude footage-purveyor. That's not the half of it, you say, that's just rococo phenomenology, that's pantheistic camera work. You want "the one bright book of life," as Lawrence called it. Lawrence had the novelist's proper arrogance: "I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of man alive, but never get the whole hog."

But to deliver up the whole interior hog, the writer needs to forget even the small sympathetic public seated attentively on gray metal folding chairs. The writer fails if he tries to become a useful tool, a hot commodity, even an objet d'art. He has to be something more like a set of passive measuring devices: perceptual calipers, emotional wristwatch, barometer of manners, historical astrolabe, social Richter scale. The measuring device never thinks about how it comes across—the question is absurd. What comes into the mind, what comes through the living person? Answer these questions with precision, and actual art has a chance.

It would be tragic to think of inwardness as an artifact of modernism, a trip that started in Flaubert's Yonville, passed through Musil's Kakania and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, and came to an end in Beckett's glass jar. Inwardness does not confine itself to Axel's castle or reside exclusively in the long-winded periods of Proust. The sharp sigh you hear in one of Fitzgerald's disappointed aperçus is as interior a thing as Proust's most byzantine reminiscence. Fitzgerald, come to think of it, was as corrupt as any of us: vain, covetous, in need of fame. But he possessed the vital discipline of seeing what happens when you're alone. A novelist who isn't truly alone when he writes will never provide a reader worthwhile company.

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BORED, DISTRACTED, we pick a book off the table and find a seat in the corner. Hm, this thing's called *And Now You Shall Go Wheeeeeee!!*

God, why have we been reading this stuff? We are missing so much life—and so many other books. Also our butt hurts.

In fact, there's something positively digging into us. We lean forward a bit—oh, ha! Our friend's letter from France, it's folded in our back pocket. We forgot all about it. He left New York a year ago in disgust, he thought true literature couldn't happen here, what with beers and cigarettes costing so much. Paris was the place, he said. Does he still think so? +