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The Idyll of Unreproved Pleasures Free

by JOHN ILLO

The symmetrical world of the eighteenth century English mind was a frame and a reflection of the style of the time. Because real worlds are unclean and irregular, the eighteenth century's construct was more obviously a fabrication than most others, and its style is ideal and deductive, Latinate and artificially balanced as no other in our literature. In such an age, in such a literature, ideas are translated better than feelings, and so eighteenth century prose is more successful than verse, ratiocinative verse more successful than lyrical.

But was that century's prose of ideas more successful than its prose of emotion? A paperback catalogue will disclose that, whatever contemporary opinions were, eighteenth century fiction is more enduringly pleasing than eighteenth century essay, the prose of sensation and action more enjoyable than the prose of cerebration. The reason for this apparent inversion of taste and accomplishment is not obscure: middle eighteenth century fiction is engaging because of the counterpoint between its language and its content, between the world deduced and the world perceived and lived. The prose of Richardson and Fielding and Smollett, like the prose of Johnson and Warburton, is fashioned for cerebration, abstraction, qualification; but the activities of those healthy country heroes and heroines, anything but cerebral and abstract, is fitted into the same balance of relative clauses and the same Latinate vocabulary as the essays and treatises. So, Cleland's Fanny, describing the most bodily of actions, uses a diction much the same as in the elaborated platitudes of Rasselas, and Fanny's syntax is, if not as adroit, as complex as Pekuah's:

As soon, then, as he had made a short pause, waking, as

it were, out of the trance of pleasure (in which every sense seem'd lost for a while, whilst, with his eyes shut, and short quick breathing, he had yielded down his maiden tribute), he still kept his post, yet unsated with enjoyment, and solacing in these so new delights; till his stiffness, which had scarce perceptibly remitted, being thoroughly recovered to him, who had not once unsheath'd, he proceeded afresh to cleave and open to himself an entire entry into me, which was not a little made easy to him by the balsamic injection, with which he had just plentifully moisten'd the whole internals of the passage.

(*Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p. 88.)

Cleland had a special problem, "the extreme difficulty of continuing so long in one strain, in a mean temper'd with taste, between the revoltingness of gross, rank and vulgar expressions, and the ridicule of mincing metaphors and affected circumlocutions"; and he purposed to solve it in the direction of metaphor, for his "subject . . . is . . . properly the province of poetry, nay, is poetry itself, pregnant with every flower of imagination and loving metaphors, even were not the natural expressions, for respects of fashion and sound, necessarily forbid it."

Fanny's solution is really a compromise. Her words, when used not in simile but in direct description, are sometimes metaphoric and Latinate ("instrument" or "machine" for the penis), sometimes literal and Latinate ("digitation"); sometimes metaphoric and native ("weapon" rather than "instrument"), and sometimes literal and native ("lips" for the vulvar labia). In undertaking the problem of representing foreplay and coitus in complex and generally Latinate literary prose, neither too low nor too poetically figured, nor, of course, in a medical vocabulary, Cleland attempted something more difficult and advanced than Johnson attempted. If the normally lubricious and candid reader will admit that Fanny is more entertaining than the Princess Nekayah, the unprejudiced student may have to observe that Cleland's book, as novel, is also more interesting.

It may be objected that neither novel is a novel in the sense

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in which the books of Fielding and Smollett are novels, and that each novel is obviously a device for communicating something other than story or character. The uncowed undergraduate protests that *Rasselas* is only an extended *Oriental Rambler*, or a set of connected *Ramblers* spread over slender and factitious Oriental scenery. *Fanny Hill*, too, is only a frame. Its complications are simple, conventional, few. Fanny spends little time out of bed or out of her other *scènes de combat*, and nearly two thirds of the pages contain only the kind of thing cited in New York State Supreme Court.

Cleland's narrative, a frame not for moral essays but not for pornography either, is as useful to his book's thesis as Johnson's narrative was for his demonstration of the vanity of hope. The purpose of Cleland's narrative is to provide a varied set of occasions for displaying and celebrating the supreme human happiness of sexuality—not "licit" or "normal," but sensuously attractive sexuality, and, especially, wholesome heterosexuality.

Fanny, at a lovely fifteen, is introduced to sexuality by a Sapphic encounter, not normal, perhaps, but not ugly, like male homosexuality, which is the only reprehended sexual behavior in the book. She is spared the disaster of losing her maidenhead to a repulsive old lecher with "a breath like a jakes." She encounters, in the very establishment whose greedy proprietress would sell a maidenhead to such a satyr, a beautiful youth of eighteen, a gentleman, whose skin, like Tom Jones' or Humphrey Clinker's, is "whiter than a drift of snow." With Charles she escapes from that house perilous to beautiful sexuality where the old dowdy Mrs. Brown must pay her own stallion for the only visually unattractive heterosexual intercourse in the book. And to Charles, her only true love, Fanny sacrifices her maidenhead, painfully but happily. And, after losing him to parental intrigue, she recovers him by marvellous chance, bears him her only children, and always finds his embraces more physically satisfying than those of any other of her remarkable partners.

The man who keeps her after Charles' exportation, if not another Charles, is far from unhandsome:

he made me fully sensible of the virtues of his firm texture of limbs, his square shoulders, broad chest, compact hard muscles, in short a system of manliness, that might pass for no bad image of our ancient study barons, when they wielded the battle-ax: whose race is now so thoroughly refin'd and frittered away into the more delicate and modern-built frame

of our pap-nerv'd softlings, who are as pale, as pretty, and almost as masculine as their sisters.

(Memoirs pp. 75-6)

She does for a while live with one of the softlings, but he is piteous, not repellent; and even the adipose sadist-masochist has the face of an austere Bacchus and buttocks that are described endearingly. Wonderfully, designedly, Cleland's Fanny, a fortunate whore, never has carnal commerce with ugliness.

The house of her most remarkable exploits is "a little family of love," with a benevolent madam, four girls, each, in her own way, superbly beautiful, and four gallant swains. And when love has fixed on a single object, honorable marriage is the happy conclusion for Fanny's colleagues; and honorable retirement is the reward for philanthropic Mrs. Coles. Fanny has as husband the man she met in her first employment, her only lover; and she provides security for their little elysium by the inheritance bequeathed her by her last patron—out of gratitude, we cannot doubt, for the happiness of body and so of spirit with which she blessed his last eight months.

The fable, the persons, the language, all compose Fanny's sweet idyll of the orgasm. No ugliness is permitted to disturb the thesis. The women are all lovely, except, for good reason, old Mrs. Brown; and even Fanny's maid has thighs "tolerable white." There are no enlarged pores, none of Chrysostom's, or Burton's, "snot and snivel": the man who depreciated women and the man who studied melancholy were celibates. Fanny's men, except, for good reason, Mrs. Brown's revolting old lecher, are all at least handsome.

In the novel, even the sexual organs and the secondary sexual characteristics are enchanting. Freud observed that those parts, though they are the basis of sexual attraction, are never in themselves regarded as beautiful. Freud's observation is true, and the shameful members are unlovely—except in the excitement of foreplay. Fanny's memoirs, written in the cool of matronhood, are really evocations of the sensibility of her youthful high sexual excitement, in which the *labia majora* are roseate, the penis is a tower of ivory, and even the pubic hairs are mossy black tendrils against snow white skin. Cleland did not lose artistic control and inadvertently allow Fanny to lapse into unreality; by casting her sensibility back into the time of her ecstatic adventures, he established the condition for his thesis.

And neither clumsiness nor sensationalism is the reason why many of the adventures are brilliantly lighted—the tourna-mer at Mrs. Coles' "enliven'd by a profuse illumination" of candle and the pastoral, Renoir-like outing on the river, in bright and wholesome sunlight. In Cleland's thesis, eroticism is too beautiful for shadows.

As a continual display and celebration of sweet, joyous sexuality, *Fanny Hill* is a rarity in Western literature. We might suppose equivalents in the India where Cleland lived in the twenties. But a work like the *Kama Sutra* belongs to a culture hardly comparable to Johnson's England: even if it had the movement of a narrative, it is less real, hearty, vivid—and less clear. We might find an equivalent in Malinowski's Trobrianders, whose Bachelors' Houses are like Mrs. Coles' establishment, though a good deal less elegant and a good deal more restrained; and those happy savages copulate in a manner which, not usual to Europeans and Americans, was enjoyed by Fanny and her lover. But Malinowski's Trobrianders can not write Ciceronian prose.

(Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (New York: Halcyon House [1941]), pp. 69-75, 336-7.)

Searching for resemblances, we look beyond the Swiftian and Restoration erotic-satiric epistles and lyrics, which, nascent with four-letter words, are simply antithetic to Fanny's idyllic. The nearest English antecedents of *Fanny*, the intoxicating topographic foreplay elegies of Herrick, Carew, and Donne, oblivious of Christian reservations, are models for Cleland's language.

And where the beauteous region doth divide
 Into two milky ways, my lips shall slide
 Down those smooth alleys, wearing as I go
 A tract of lovers on the printed snow;
 Thence climbing o'er the swelling Apennine,
 Retire into thy grove of eglantine
 Now in more subtle wreath I will entwine
 My sinewy thighs, my legs and arms with thine;
 Thou like a sea of milk shalt lie display'd,
 Whilst I the smooth calm ocean invade
 With such a tempest, as when Jove of old
 Fell down on Danae in a storm of gold;

Yet my tall pine shall in the Cyprian strait
 Ride safe at anchor, and unlade her freight;
 My rudder with thy bold hand, like a tri'd
 And skilful pilot, thou shalt steer, and guide
 My bark into love's channel, where it shall
 Dance, as the bounding waves do rise or fall. . . .

(Carew, "The Rapture")

In Cleland the metaphors are reduced or moderated and the mythology is retrenched. But *Fanny Hill* may be accurately described as a series of such elegies turned into prose and set in an English picaresque, urban-plebian but pre-industrial narrative, after Defoe and before Dickens.

Such is the difficulty of untrammelled eroticism that even the Italian humanist predecessors of the English poets do not attain Fanny's wholesomeness and integrity of joy. Pontanus and Beccadelli, though humanists and Italians, are apparently Christians. Their abandoned eroticism, in neo-Latin elegiacs, is forced, obtrusive, contrived, really pornographic, and as factitious in comparison to Fanny's as television anguish is to the grief of an emergency ward:

Quum mea vult futui superincubat Ursa Priapo;
 Ipse suas partes substineo, illa meas.

Si juvat, Ursa, vehi, moveas cluneque, femurque
 Parcius, aut inguen non tolerabit onus;

Deinde cave reduci repetas ne podice penem,
 Quamvis, Ursa velis, non mea virga volet.

(Antonio Beccadelli, *Hermaphroditus*, I, "De Ursa superincubante," in *Quinque Illustrium Poetarum Lusus in Venerem*, Paris, 1791, pp. 2-3.)

(Of Ursa lying atop:

When Ursa wants to ——— she lies atop,
 And each the other's members we sustain;

But bid thy thighs and rump their wriggling stop:
 I fear Priapus may not stand the strain;

Nor seek, I warn, my love to entertain
 Within the other, backward-sloping slot:

That, Ursa, though thou wouldst, my want would not.)

In the posthumous confession of Beccadelli's Nichina we hear perhaps the words and surely the tonality of regret, as though she were both Christian and calculating—and maybe frigid

. . . Rapta viris, tremula figebam lingua,
Post etiam coitus oscula multa dabam.

Lectus erat multo et niveo centone refertus,
Tergebat nervos officiosa manus . . .

Dulcis, amoena fui, multis mea facta placebant;
Sed praeter pretium, nil mihi dulce fuit.

(*Hermaphroditus*, II, "Epitaphium Nichinae
Flandrensis scorti egregii, *loc. cit.*, pp. 38-9

(Epitaph of Nichina of Flanders, an outstanding harlot:
Embracing close my men, I fixed with trembling tongue
My kisses, and even after coupling gave
Sweet mouthings; my bed was piled with many a
snowy quilt;
My careful hand stroked their sensitive sinews;
Sweet and delightful was I, my labors were pleasing
to many;
But only my price, nought else to me was sweet.)

Not thus languid were Fanny's enjoyments, for whom the major prize was her own orgasm.

Cleland resembles the Italians in his literal and close descriptions. But he is nearer in tone to the originals of the humanists, the Roman lyricists and epigrammatists, Martial, Ovid, Propertius, Catullus. Fanny's memoirs, though the work of a Christian in a Christian century, are clear reflections of the Ovidian *Amores*, especially the lovely fifth elegy. In both we hear of tearful enjoyment of sexual love, the glory of experience, the supreme gift of the gods, an enjoyment which, without doubt without scruples or complexities, rises to exaltation and exhilaration, then subsides into the deep calm and total happiness of satisfaction of the perfectly fulfilled orgasm. Such is the mysticism of appetite, which was a more substantial part of the *doctus stil* than our ancestors imagined or our contemporary medievalists admit. *Fanny Hill* skipped over centuries of sublimation and artifice, and reasserted, rationally, honestly, ornately but not pretentiously, the proper seat of our common human ecstasy.

In a later and analytic age, prose must drop into the ugly, gross, excrementitious for its priapism, as in Henry Miller.

it is spoiled by religion, or by psychology, or by philosophizing, or by post-Christian uncertainty. Beside Fanny, Constance Chatterly is in shrouds; beside Fanny's friend Louise, Lolita is clumsy and backward; and beside Louise's seducer, Humbert is stupidly slow, paralyzed by pretentiously self-analysis, academically daring.

Fanny Hill is at once ancient and more modern than *Rasselas* or *Tom Jones*, for it asserts the absolute value of a good which our age has tried to posit as the foundation of spiritual health. But *Fanny Hill* is more modern than modern, or beyond the modern, for it embraces sexuality as even a post-Christian world cannot. Contemplating vicarious foreplay, in action, in color, and thirty feet high, how could we be so free in our lovemaking as Cleland's lovers? With sex manuals in which physicians and doctors of philosophy instruct us how to do what Fanny learned by joyous instinct, with mass aphrodisiasms devised and distributed with all the cunning of capitalist technology, how can we be so easy or so humanly satisfied in our sexuality as Fanny and her friends?

Even with "God is Love" over bright new suburban altars, and a bright new moral theology that allows total freedom in foreplay, we seem to feel shadows of scrupulosity and to hear the chilling monition of Luther about animal sadness. Heirs of a dark psychology, we enter a love affair as though it were a case history. Our lovers, alternately stimulated and narcotized, average two couplings a week. Fanny (and James Boswell) enjoyed as many in an hour. Hipsters and their quasi-academic sycophants must whine for "a little better orgasm" as the desideratum of a culture so disappointed in its sexuality that it must hunt for and rationalize chemically induced hallucinations. Could Fanny and Charles have survived a better orgasm, and would not they have found psychedelism tame?

The idyllic sexuality of *Fanny Hill* is John Cleland's artifice, perhaps conceived in the Orient of his young manhood. But the brave human hopelessness of *Rasselas* is artifice, and every novel shapes reality to an ideal thesis. Cleland's ideal sexuality may not be dishonestly remote from the real sexuality of his age, and the real Fanny may have enjoyed an eroticism more wholesome and satisfying than the institutionalized eroticism of our culture. Her higher protein diet was free of beneficent preservatives, her air relatively free of smog and radiation. In her dress, rich stuffs and glittering ornament were a foil to artful nakedness: the

topless gown was, in some entirely honorable circumstances, a blushless reality. Her generation was not oppressed by romantic intensity or revolutionary seriousness. It took its Christianity without question and without pain: Wesleyism was a reform movement, and one that suffered vast popular antagonism. Fanny's religion promised an eternity of happiness for no great spiritual investment, and the happiness may have been a kind of perpetual orgasm, like Montesquieu's Persian heaven. Fanny's eroticism is happier even than Ovid's or Catullus' with their occasional whisperings of the *nox perpetua*. It is happier than the eroticism of Melanesians, for, rational in its wantonness, it is free of their absurd and sometimes grisly tabus. It is certainly happier than ours with its whimperings of guilt and doubt, the rewards of a psychology that wounds in the measure it heals. And we cannot escape what Fanny could not imagine any need to escape, the iron gate of mortalism, which Dr. Leary's four-hour nirvana could make us forget only if it were extended through a lifetime. It is a gloomy arithmetic, even when the unconscious keeps the account, to subtract each orgasm from a finite number.

Perhaps the human person is properly not allowed such sustained natural happiness, and Fanny's idyll is only a dream. Perhaps our vision of the soul is true and hers was not, and our age sees, as hers could not, a tragedy in the human condition that forever will infect what she enjoyed with such freedom and integrity of personality. Perhaps we know obscurely and by the empiricism of disease what Christianity once taught clearly, dogmatically, but what Fanny seemed not to know, that sexuality is a limited gift, too nearly paradisaic for absolute, sinless enjoyment, even in marriage, by fallen man. Whether we are wiser or only sadder, we can not easily recover the hearty yet delicate sexuality of Fanny's age, even with such helps as her memoirs, a book restored to readership as an aphrodisiac by a commercialism posing as an heir of Enlightenment. But Fanny's idyll can only show our culture its own incompleteness or overmaturity or sickliness, and her carefree health.

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