‘Sexual Poverty,’ or, The Price of Love for Old Men

La misère d’un vieillard n’intéresse personne.

Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*[1]

The elaborate analogy that runs through the opening pages of Marcel Proust’s *Sodome et Gomorrhe*—readers will recall a rare orchid, an equally rare bee by which it may be pollinated, and much marvelling by the narrator at the providential ordering of things that brings the two together—works, essentially, to set up what seems a lot like a gay in-joke. The necessary but improbable encounter of bee and orchid parallels the hook-up between the baron de Charlus and Jupien espied by the narrator in this scene, and whose success depends on what the narrator assures us are Jupien’s special sexual tastes. For in him, Charlus has found:

> la bonne fortune réservée aux hommes du genre du baron par un de ces êtres qui peuvent même être, on le verra, infiniment plus jeunes que Jupien et plus beaux, l’homme prédestiné pour que ceux-ci aient leur part de volupté sur cette terre : l’homme qui n’aime que les vieux messieurs.[2]

This moment of uncharacteristic optimism (uncharacteristic for Proust) about the possibility of reciprocal desire introduces my theme in at least two ways. First, Proust’s joke turns on the notion that, while sexual taste is not always easily accounted for, there exist in any given culture or subculture hierarchies of desirability wherein different ‘types’ of person are more or less likely to be found, in some general way, sexually desirable—the phenomenon that sociologists call ‘sexual stratification’.[3] If, then, *l’homme qui n’aime que les vieux messieurs*

[1] Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, ed. by Henri Scepi (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 1020.
[2] Marcel Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), vol. 3, 9.
[3] See John Levi Martin and Matt George, “Theories of Sexual Stratification: Toward an Analytics of the Sexual Field and a Theory of Sexual Capital,” *Sociological Theory*, 24 (2006), 107-32; and Adam Isaiah Green, *Sexual Fields: Toward a Sociology of Collective Sexual Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

is presented as being, on the one hand, a curious feature of an exotic sexual ecosystem (the homosexual subculture), and, on the other, a joke, this is because in the real world—meaning the heterosexual world of the narrator and his presumed reader—elderly men are precisely and obviously emblematic of those who will *not* receive their share—"leur part"—when it comes to sex. According to nineteenth-century conventional wisdom, as we shall see, men upon entering old age begin to suffer from a modified version of the invert's curse as Proust elaborates it so insistently elsewhere: though their libido persists undimmed, their physical attractiveness plummets catastrophically, locking them out of the sexual 'marketplace.' In this view, the old man may all too easily be the subject, but never the object, of desire.

Second, I am intrigued by Proust's throwaway reference to a providentially allocated 'share' of sexual pleasure, which recalls, I think, the contested notion of 'sexual poverty'. Even to use this phrase is to court controversy. To be sure, the notion finds a certain imprimatur within nineteenth-century French studies in the work of Alain Corbin, who used the expression (*misère sexuelle*) in the subtitle of his 1978 study of prostitution in the early Third Republic.[4] Corbin's thesis is that the massive expansion of the unmarried male population of Paris in the first half of the century generated a proportionate demand for low-cost sex for money; and that, over the rest of the century, the expansion of the middle classes shifted this demand towards new modes of sex work offering "érotisme et [...] intimité" (Corbin 275). This seems plausible enough. But in describing the earlier situation, Corbin's use of the phase "misère sexuelle" is curiously unexamined; he speaks interchangeably of "la demande prostitutionnelle," of urban men's "besoins sexuels [...] élémentaires," of their "misère sexuelle" (e.g. Corbin 275-76). The sense that many crucial questions are elided by such moves—about the nature of sexual desire, about whether or not it should be considered a 'need' at all, and if so, about what precisely it is a need *for*—and the concept's close

[4] Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de noce: misère sexuelle et prostitution au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982 [1978]).

association with the justification or naturalization of sex work have made 'sexual poverty' an object of deep suspicion for feminism. The phrase does indeed often function to equate sex workers and their clients, blur important distinctions between sexual and affective 'needs', and sentimentalize the sexual demands of (mostly) men.[5] The concept is popular within so-called 'incel' culture, where it goes hand-in-hand with resentment of women for 'withholding' sex from 'needy' men. And when 'sexual poverty' is attached to the figure of the old man specifically, readers of 2024 may well become even more skeptical: the past deacdes, from Strauss-Kahn to Weinstein via the 'Shitty Media Men' list, have crystallized the image of a powerful, predatory older man more than capable of getting what he wants sexually, usually from younger and less powerful women.

For all these reasons, I don't propose to use 'sexual poverty' as an analytic concept in this article. Rather, my focus will be the concept of sexual poverty as a cultural object circulating in various forms in a number of male-authored nineteenth-century French texts, where, I shall argue, it was intimately connected with the figure of *le vieillard*. Indeed, I want to show that through this association with what—as my epigraph from *Les Misérables* suggests—appears as an oddly unsympathetic character in this period, these male authors' treatment of the 'sexual poverty' idea in fact suggests some of the same critiques that we might want to make of the concept from a contemporary feminist point of view; and that, at the very least, it avoids the sentimentalism that characterizes the worst contemporary deployments of the concept. For the nineteenth-century French treatment of the sexual poverty of old men is deeply ambivalent: always heavily marked by irony, it is also perpetually on the brink of ridicule. If nineteenth-century French literature cares about old men, it does so, as we shall see, only with a certain cruelty.

[5] For only two recent versions of these arguments, see Maïa Mazaurette, 'La Misère sexuelle, un argument si pratique', *Le Monde* (online), 15 December 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/m-perso/article/2019/12/15/la-misere-sexuelle-un-argument-si-pratique_6022911_4497916.html; and Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 40-43.

The solitude of desire

The posthumously published fragments by François-René de Chateaubriand known as "Amour et vieillesse" and "Un vieux René" date to 1829, when Chateaubriand was sixty-one, and 1834, when he was sixty-six. The former is addressed to an unnamed woman, but the addressee has been identified as Léontine de Villeneuve, with whom Chateaubriand formed a close attachment in 1829, when she was 26; the latter has the confessional tone of the author's earliest *romans personnels*. "Amour et vieillesse" is composed as a rhetorical rejection of a sexual (or at least amorous) advance that the woman addressed has evidently *not* made; the point seems to be that even if she offered, Chateaubriand would have to say no —on account of his age. The text gives bitter expression to the false position of one who has outlived himself as a plausible object of sexual desire. The man once known as *l'Enchanteur* describes himself as:

> vieilli sur la terre sans avoir rien perdu de ses rêves, de ses folies, de ses vagues tristesses, [...] et joignant à ses anciens maux les désenchantements de l'expérience, la solitude des désirs, l'ennui du cœur et la disgrâce des années.[6]

Such it would seem is the doom of an old man to whom no Proustian providence has thought to send a geezer-fancying Jupien. The irony is that Chateaubriand's relationship with Léontine, whatever it involved, suggests that the sexagenarian Chateaubriand had *not* lost his power to charm and attract, at least platonically. But this is evidently not enough; the missing sexual dimension torments him. But even if that element *were* present, the situation would still be impossible:

> Et le monde, en supporterais-tu les jugements et les railleries? Si j'étais riche, il dirait que je t'achète et que tu te vends, ne pouvant admettre que tu puisses m'aimer. Si

[6] François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, ed. by Maurice Levaillant and George Moulinier, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), vol. 2, 1137.

> j'étais pauvre, on se moquerait de ton amour, on en rendrait l'objet ridicule à tes propres yeux, on te rendrait honteuse de ton choix. Et moi, on me ferait un crime d'avoir abusé de ta simplicité. (Chateaubriand 2: 1134)

What Chateaubriand identifies here through reference to "le monde" is the *social* phenomenon of sexual stratification, specifically its sharp end, which we might call—though this phrase is also contentious, for reasons I'll explain shortly—sexual *exclusion*. In thinking about this problem, Chateaubriand gives voice to a number of apparent axioms, the ambient conventional wisdom of his century—though perhaps, the reader may have remarked, not only of his century. Old men are unattractive; desire *for* them is inconceivable; their desire for others is absurd at best, and unwelcome at worse; their 'share of pleasure' will only ever be purchased for cash, or ill-gotten through coercion. Chateaubriand treats the latter idea as utterly common knowledge; 'love' for old men necessarily has a price.

No nineteenth-century writer showed a more finely tuned awareness of this phenomenon than Honoré de Balzac, and my title is a bland translation of the much more stylish title given by Balzac to the section of *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1838-47) dealing with the relationship between the baron de Nucingen and the courtesan Esther: "A combien l'amour revient aux vieillards."[7] Nucingen, that "Géronte moderne" (Balzac 6: 427), is sixty-six years old in this section, coincidentally the same age as our "vieux René" Chateaubriand; his ferocious sexual desire for the stunningly beautiful Esther contrasts with his own almost incredible lack of sex appeal, and the title of the section reflects 'people's' assumptions as imagined by Chateaubriand—that old men simply *cannot* obtain 'love' without paying for it. Two exchanges between the baron and Esther's grotesque procuress Asie make this abundantly clear. The first comes as Nucingen is introduced to Esther as a potential 'suitor,' a meeting in anticipation of which he has taken a double dose of

[7] Honoré de Balzac, *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, in *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), vol. 6.

aphrodisiac pills. He's already agreed to lay out a whopping one hundred thousand francs for unfettered access to Esther. Asie makes the introduction thus: "Ma petite, monsieur est raisonnable, [...] il sait bien qu'il a soixante-six ans passés, et il sera bien indulgent. Enfin, mon bel ange, c'est un père que je t'ai trouvé…" (Balzac 6: 575). Indeed, this is something of a twist. Though Nucingen might have assumed that the money he's paid entitles him to some fixed sexual service, it now seems that there's a sliding price-list in force in which the customer's age is a factor. Forty pages later, Esther and Asie are *still* stringing Nucingen along, determined to wring every possible franc out of him before granting him anything in return. Asie explains to the Baron:

> Enfin, elle ne veut pas être votre maîtresse, elle a de la répugnance. [....] Quand on n'a connu que de charmants jeunes gens, on se soucie peu d'un vieillard… Vous n'êtes pas beau, vous êtes gros comme Louis XVIII [...]. (Balzac 6: 608)

While there's no doubt that the baron lacks sexual capital, we might suppose that as a multimillionaire he should at least be able to buy whatever he wants in the literal 'sexual marketplace' that is the world of prostitution. In practice, however, his low sexual capital follows him into the cash marketplace, too, where it shapes Asie's sense of his demand: a desperate old man constitutes a highly motivated buyer, so the price of 'love' for him climbs ever higher, eventually reaching this comically astronomical figure of six hundred thousand francs. The section may open with Nucingen planning to "marchander la livraison" of Esther (Balzac 6: 571), but subsequent episodes suggest that the sexual stratification at work in this marketplace leaves him with almost no bargaining power at all.

What's happening here? To be sure, this doesn't seem like a very accurate representation of how prostitution works—but no doubt Balzac is up to something more symbolic. Nucingen is a monster of runaway capitalism, a parasitic financier of the sort whose fortunes, as Balzac makes clear in a chapter entitled "Profits et pertes," depend on the

ruination of the humbler and less lucky (Balzac 6: 1380).[8] Balzac rather erroneously imagines the global economy as essentially stagnant and finite ("On verse très-peu de nouvelles valeurs dans le trésor commun du globe," the narrator claims; Balzac 6: 590) and therefore subject to a rigorous principle of scarcity. This means that life is a zero-sum game in which "tout accaparement nouveau représente une nouvelle inégalité dans la répartition générale" (590). Nucingen, then, is an *accapareur*, that is, one of history's (and especially the French Revolution's) most hated villains, who choke the supply of goods to drive up prices artificially; the anti-Semitic overtones of this are clear, for Nucingen is a converted Jew whose Alsatian patois Balzac rather laboriously insists on transcribing phonetically in all of his dialogue. In this sense, Esther—who, not coincidentally, is also of Jewish descent—is the Baron's nemesis, sent by an anti-capitalist Providence to be his undoing: "une fortune se fond," we are told, "entre les mains de ces créatures; après tout, leur fonction sociale [...] est peut-être de réparer les malheurs de l'Avarice et de la Cupidité" (617). Earlier, Asie's impudent overfamiliarity with Nucingen is described as "le premier impôt que ces sortes de femmes prélèvent" on their customers (572). Sex, it seems, has the power to undo the capitalist order, or rather to reverse it: in a letter to Esther, Nucingen upends his entire worldview as he describes himself as a "pauvre vieillard qui se regarde comme votre débiteur quand vous lui faites l'honneur d'accepter quoi que ce soit" (602).

And yet this symbolic reversal, this bit of poetic justice, ultimately duplicates the rules of the capitalism it is supposed to overturn, and applies them to the market for 'love.' In this market as in the larger one, there is not enough to go around: it too is founded on a rigorous scarcity; it too has its great concentrations of capital, and its broke losers—only now, Nucingen is one of the latter. "A combien l'amour revient aux vieillards" opens with an allusion to "les atroces débats entre le Luxe et la Faim" (571) that is the background noise of Paris; Nucingen, who is repeatedly referred to as a "loup-cervier," is supposed to belong to

[8] The *feuilleton* chapter titles are omitted in the Pléiade text but included in the notes.

the carnivorous class for whom the latter is unknown. But consider the full version of the quotation I gave a moment ago: Asie's familiarity with Nucingen is, we are told, "le premier impôt que ces sortes de femmes prélèvent sur les passions effrénées ou sur les misères" of men like him (572). This inversion of capitalism, or rather, this application of the logic of capitalism to sexuality, somehow turns a sexual passion into a desperate need, and a multimillionaire into a victim of poverty—a victim, precisely, of a *sexual* poverty.

Needs and wants

Is sex a need? Writing in 1981, Ellen Willis, one of the founders of sex-positive feminism, boldly claimed that it is: "I believe we can't understand sex as an emotional, moral, or social issue, let alone formulate a politics of sexual liberation, without some recourse to the idea of sexual satisfaction as a biological need."[9] To be sure, such a claim needn't give rise to any notion of "sexual poverty." Yet the concept of "need" resonates within—and often, as here in *Splendeurs*, seems to summon—an economic conceptual vocabulary of scarcity and the distribution of resources, in which 'unmet needs' typically strike us as moral problems; and in the sexual domain, this path swiftly becomes thorny. "Talk of people who are unjustly sexually marginalised or excluded," Amia Srinivasan notes, "can pave the way to the thought that these people have a *right* to sex, a right that is being violated by those who refuse to have sex with them."[10] These paths of thought, the far ends of which lie as Srinivasan notes deep in online inceldom, may well originate in the nineteenth century. They are semi-present, indeed, in Chateaubriand's unsent letter to Léontine. Suppose, the author muses, that they did sleep together, but that Léontine later left him—as she surely would—for a younger man. Why then, Chateaubriand would feel compelled to violent vengeance, some unspecified "crime"; he continues: "Et pourtant, quoi de plus injuste ? Si tu m'avais donné quelques moments de

[9] Ellen Willis, *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 21.
[10] Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 86.

bonheur, me les devais-tu ? étais-tu obligée de de donner toute ta jeunesse?" (Chateaubriand 2: 1135). There's something intriguingly equivocal about these rhetorical questions. Clearly, they have an obvious answer, the one required by the context as well as by decency: no. Yet the simple asking of them, preceded by that "et pourtant," points in the opposite direction, towards an alternative "logic" whereby Chateaubriand—or rather, the hypothetical, violent version of himself he imagines here—just might feel in some pre-rational way that she *is* under some obligation, that she does have some sexual 'duty' towards him. The fragment doesn't ultimately endorse the idea of sexual entitlement, but it does somehow *contain* it.

A much more explicit nineteenth-century formulation of these ideas, noted also by Srinivasan, is to be found in Charles Fourier's notebook *Le Nouveau Monde amoureux*, composed around 1817 but published (like Chateaubriand's "Amour et vieillesse") only posthumously, against the backdrop of the events of May 1968. The notebook provides a sort of blueprint—though Joan W. Scott suggests that the work should not be read literally in this respect—for the sexual culture of the non-repressive future society Fourier called "Harmony."[11] Fourier explicitly argues that there exists a "besoin de jouissance sexuelle," which he equates repeatedly with the need for food.[12] Balzac is already in this vicinity when he evokes "la Faim" in connection with Nucingen's lustful "misères"; the association of sex with food is indeed a common move in much "sexual poverty" thinking and a favored trope of the worst incel discourse.[13] Unlike contemporary incels, Fourier insists, no doubt sincerely, that this need is unisex: "*le besoin en ce genre chez les hommes et femmes, peut être poussé jusqu'à l'urgente nécessité aussi bien que celui de nourriture*," he notes, with insistent italics (Fourier 440). Nevertheless, the figure he repeatedly chooses to illustrate sexual poverty and exclusion is a predictable one: "la jeunesse [...] tourne en ridicule tout ce qui ne flatte pas ses

[11] For a recent, optimistic rereading of Fourier's erotic theories, see Joan W. Scott, "Charles Fourier, Professor of Desire," *Raritan* 42 (2022), 65.
[12] Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau Monde amoureux*, ed. by Simone Debout Oleszkiewicz (Paris: Stock, 1999), 442.
[13] On this, see Srinivasan, 86-88.

sens," he writes earlier in the manuscript, "de là vient que les vieillards [...] sont si fort en butte aux [missing word—one assumes "mockery"] de la jeunesse qui ne voit en eux aucune pâture pour les sens" (Fourier 109). And while Fourier insists that "du moment où le régime d'harmonie aura élevé les corps à la vigueur possible, il y aura [...] peu de vieillards" (109), he acknowledges that sexual need will still exist in his future utopia. For this reason, Fourier suggests, Harmony will guarantee to all its citizens what he calls a "Minimum," or, as Srinivasan updates it, a "guaranteed basic income" in sex (Srinivasan 87).

This is a bit more complicated than it seems. In Fourier's system, a need gives rise not so much to a *right*—for this is the favored language of liberal capitalism, and of no interest to Fourier. Rather, a need gives rise to what he calls a *passion*, in the sense of, a spontaneous inclination somewhere in the social body to *meet the need*. In Fourier's providentialist conception of the world, the variety of human passions (which he likes to enumerate in a delirious, and for Scott "playful, teasing" calculus; Scott 72) means that there exist individuals instinctually predisposed to the fulfilment of every social purpose. While in "Civilization," Fourier's dismissive name for his society (and ours), these instincts or passions are repressed and mortified, the well-structured society of Harmony will at last align each individual's social role with their driving passion. This arrangement handily obviates what is otherwise the fundamental objection to all notions of sexual entitlement: the issue of consent. In Harmony, the sexual minimum will be delivered by an elite class of sacred prostitutes, men and women Fourier imagines as being at once priests, aristocrats, and celebrities famed for their beauty and sexual prowess. And they will, crucially, be acting *charitably*, out of "générosité," dispensing an "philanthropie amoureuse" or "charité amoureuse" (Fourier 109-10). The social glory attaching to these acts of sexual benevolence will be such that the logic of sexual scarcity will be inverted: the challenge will not be finding enough sexual partners to service the needy *vieillards*, but finding enough *vieillards* for its

sexual aristocrats to service. The latter are, Fourier insists, likely to find themselves in a "lutte" (Fourier 110) with each other as they seek out deserving candidates for their attentions.

There is, as they say, a lot to unpack here, but I want to highlight two main points. First, while many readers will find Fourier's providentialism generally far-fetched and, in particular, unsatisfactory as a way of side-stepping the question of consent, what I find most intriguing is, on the contrary, just how *little* he helps himself to, given what would seem to be up for grabs once one admits the premise of a providential ordering of human passions. If God has ordered the world in such a way that all human needs can be met by a corresponding passion, why wouldn't he have created a certain number of individuals who are sexually attracted to old people—as in Proust's providential "homme qui n'aime que les vieux messieurs"? This idea is surely no *less* plausible than that of Fourier's eager sexual do-gooders; yet Fourier seems never even to have considered it. His elite prostitutes are unambiguously motivated by social duty, by *agape* rather than *eros*. Though the passions as Fourier imagines them have multiple and sometimes unexpected goals, what constitutes a plausible object of sexual desire is apparently as fixed as it is obvious—beautiful young people—and this is not expected to change in Harmony. There is no country, it seems, where old men are sexy.

The second point I want to draw out is the association of sex work and *charity*, for this is a nineteenth-century French obsession that resonates in our own discourse in unexpected ways. Fourier's version of it is an early—though, by dint of its publication history, weirdly belated—fantasia on this theme. But perhaps its greatest exponent, to whom I devote the next section, is Charles Baudelaire.

Sex and charity

As is well known, Baudelaire's prose writings frequently posit a mysterious affinity between the prostitute and the Poet, and associate the work of both with charity and sainthood. These moments are well studied; they are generally treated as metaphorical, and primarily as being about art—which they obviously are.[14] From *Fusées*: "L'amour, c'est le goût de la prostitution"; "Qu'est-ce que l'art? Prostitution."[15] From *Mon cœur mis à nu*: "Analyse des contre-religions, exemple: la prostitution sacrée"; "Adorer, c'est se sacrifier et se prostituer" (Baudelaire 1: 678, 692). The metaphor turns in part on what we might call the 'specialness' of sex, a common enough notion—or problem—in the philosophy of sex; as Srinivasan puts in, responding to Rebecca Solnit: "Sex isn't a sandwich, and it isn't really like anything else either" (Srinivasan 88). Baudelaire's version would appear to be that in modernity, or under capitalism, or in the age of mechanical reproduction (and so on), the Poet in order to live must *sell* his work—which is to say, himself—for a price. But true art is priceless: it is, like sex, intrinsically too special and intimate to be sold. The cash the Poet receives for his pains is therefore only adequate recompense for what he gives within the crude, demystifying logic of capitalism. In a higher order, a sacred order, poetry, like prostitution, is always an act of generosity. What does this metaphor, a particularly baroque version of the familiar nineteenth-century trope (present in Balzac too, of course) of the 'generous harlot,' tell us about prostitution? Not much, one is tempted to say: clearly, the image of nineteenth-century sex work contained within it is a distorted and distorting one. Yet these distortions are themselves revealing. If for Baudelaire the Poet is a poet by vocation, then the metaphor requires that the prostitute be so too; she is moved not by grinding financial necessity, as we might suppose, but by her generous spirit. The grandiloquence of Baudelaire's metaphors makes this sound like what philosophers might call 'supererogation,' that is, a going beyond any reasonable requirement of duty in pursuit of an ethical ideal—here, radical love of the

[14] See for instance Charles Berhneimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 71-74.
[15] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 649.

other. If sex is too special to sell, then every act of sex for money is in a sense supererogatory because it is not for the payee's pleasure, and can never be required nor adequately recompensed. But beneath this idea lie two oppressive male fantasies in one: on the one hand, an extreme case of the self-abnegation the nineteenth century required of its virtuous women; on the other, an extreme case of the demented sexual willingness it assumed characterized its fallen ones.

So the prostitution-as-charity idea distorts our view of the prostitute's motivation, or what Corbin calls the 'supply.' What about its effect on our understanding of the 'demand'? This might even be the more interesting point. In Baudelaire's poetry, as in Corbin's study of the sex trade, prostitution and poverty go hand-in-hand, and there is a tendency to conceive of the sex worker's client as needy. One thinks of the desperate "débauché pauvre" of "Au lecteur," who in a particularly gruesome lust/food analogy "baise et mange / Le sein martyrisé d'une antique catin" (Baudelaire 1: 5). Even more telling for our purposes is "Les Sept Vieillards," which, while not explicitly *about* prostitution, is inscribed with the figure of prostitution from its second line, where "le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant," as a streetwalker picks up a client (Baudelaire 1: 5, 87). From the dense mist of the poem's nightmarish opening there emerges a figure who seems to embody much of what I've been discussing so far, "un vieillard [...] dont l'aspect aurait fait pleuvoir les aumômes, / Sans la méchanceté qui luisait dans ses yeux" (Baudelaire 1: 87). Unlike the wide-eyed orphans of sentimental fiction, the mean old man is an unappealing candidate for charity—which is perhaps also to say that he is the perfect candidate for it. To love *him* would be to show saintly generosity, like the "antique catin" of "Au lecteur," whose breast—from which the "débauché pauvre" dangles, a gross nursling—is characterized as "martyrisé" (Baudelaire 1: 5). But in a Christian-inflected rhetoric where abjection and sanctity are inextricably linked, this is trickier than it looks. For to sanctify one who meets the need of another is surely also

to sanctify the need, and the other; the holiness of saints, after all, lies not in their treating the leper or the beggar like any other man, but in their recognizing that those abject outcasts *are themselves holy*. To imagine the prostitute as doing holy work is thus to imagine the horniness of mean old men as somehow sacred.

There is then a conceptual pathway between the Baudelairean idea of prostitution-as-charity and the incel fantasy of sexual redistribution: both configure male desire as need and imbue it with a sort of dignity. Yet Baudelaire resists the most sentimental version of this idea, or appears never quite to take it seriously. Another posthumously published poem, "Le Rebelle," captures with neat irony the possibility that loving—even charitably—the unlovely might simply be too much to ask of mere mortals. To his guardian angel's admonishment that he must "aimer, sans faire la grimace, / Le pauvre, le méchant, le tortu, l'hébété," and that this practice of "charité" will lead to "la Volupté vraie," a recalcitrant sinner replies only: "Je ne veux pas!" (Baudelaire 1: 139-40). "Le méchant" chimes with "Les Sept Vieillards," and the insistence on "la méchanceté" that gleams in the disagreeable old man's eyes. That poem goes further, however, and ultimately refuses to commit to the reading of the old man as a victim; indeed, the poem obliquely suggests that he is to be excluded from the usual Christian association of abjection and sanctity. The old man's beard, we read, is "pareille à celle de Judas," and with his walking stick and crooked spine he resembles "un Juif à trois pattes," that is, the figure of the Wandering Jew (Baudelaire 1: 88). The old man—and the six copies of him that follow close behind—is, the poet seems to suggest through these anti-Semitic allusions, merely a false pauper and a malevolent entity. He is, in this precise sense, the kin of the converted Jew Nucingen, that figure of "accaparement" whose suffering is touching at times, to be sure, but whose sexual and affective deprivation are treated as ridiculous, and whose ultimate fleecing seems like just deserts. Setting aside the anti-Semitism of both texts, we might say that the problem with the figures of sexual exclusion in the nineteenth-century

works I've been considering, as with the sexual resentment of contemporary incels, is that they articulate a demand for sexual generosity while having none to spare for others: what the *vieillard* wants is beautiful young maidens, not worn old spinsters. They feel in all seriousness what André Gide's Corydon observes with tongue in cheek: that "on est en droit d'attendre quelque beauté de l'objet du désir, mais non point du sujet qui désire."[16]

Conclusion

The 'sexual poverty' explored by Balzac and Baudelaire, then, tends to be perceived through a veil of irony, and is marked by a certain cruelty towards the men who seem to suffer from it. Only Fourier treats the old man's plight entirely seriously, and even he, as we've seen, cannot imagine a scenario in which someone might actively *desire* such a repellent being. "No one really wants a mercy fuck," writes Srinivasan (87)—yet this does seem to be all the *vieillards* of Harmony can expect. One wonders how attractive this utopia really is—that is, how attractive it is *even supposing* that one were destined to be the old man, rather than the kind-hearted prostitute. One wonders, too, about the limits of such a 'minimum,' exactly what needs it might be thought to meet. To be sure, such charity might just about do the trick even if, as the sex columnist Maïa Mazaurette recently suggested, some of what is called 'sexual poverty' ought more properly to be thought of as a "détresse affective." But a thornier possibility presents itself, obliquely imagined in Baudelaire's prose poem "Le Miroir":

> Un homme épouvantable entre et se regarde dans la glace.
>
> « Pourquoi vous regardez-vous au miroir, puisque vous ne pouvez vous y voir qu'avec déplaisir ? »
>
> L'homme épouvantable me répond : « — Monsieur, d'après les immortels principes de 89, tous les hommes sont égaux en droits ; donc je possède le droit de me mirer ; avec plaisir ou déplaisir, cela ne regarde que ma conscience. »

[16] André Gide, *Corydon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 30.

Au nom du bon sens, j'avais sans doute raison ; mais, au point de vue de la loi, il n'avait pas tort. (Baudelaire 1: 344)

This is, as we know, a version of a recurrent image in the first half of the nineteenth century, a way of sending up the newly politically dominant but culturally undistinguished bourgeoisie, and its unaccountable self-regard. Intriguingly, though, Baudelaire's version doesn't confirm that the ugly man *is* pleased with what he sees—indeed, the tetchy tone of the man's reply suggests if anything that he's quite aware of his own ugliness, but that he contests the hierarchy by which that ugliness is established. In this sense, the poem reflects one of Baudelaire's favorite conservative bugbears: how the Revolution's maniacal promotion of *égalité* has supposedly instilled in French society a delusional denial of natural hierarchies. The ugly man's insistence that, thanks to the Revolution, he has as much right as anyone else to admire himself in the mirror is at once legally irrefutable and utterly demented: some people are just more attractive than others, and that's that.

But doesn't Baudelaire's ugly man seem to say: "Why *should* that be that? It's not fair." Baudelaire's framing presents that idea as absurd, as a misapplication of the very notion of a 'right' (about which Baudelaire is in any case ambivalent). Yet in this sense "Le Miroir" contains without endorsing an idea that's even more troublesome than the idea of a 'right to sex,' and which pokes a hole in Fourier's convenient plan for state-sponsored sexual charity: the idea of a *right to be desired*. Baudelaire's ugly bourgeois isn't content to be the universal subject—of rights, of power, of desire—that the Revolution has declared him to be; in this scene of vain self-splitting across the surface of a mirror, what he seeks is to be also the *object* of *another's* desire. It is open to us to regard this as the most outrageous demand of (male, bourgeois, heterosexual) privilege, and the political posture of the poem arguably encourages this reading. Yet I would suggest that there's a much more interesting sexual-ethical problem at issue here; we might think it an avatar of what Freud would call "the

economic problem of masochism," about which, tellingly, he never really said anything interesting—so much of a problem, precisely, is masochism for a sexual thinking that reflexively associates desire with subjecthood and the exercise of power.[17] Yet as Andrea Dworkin notes, and as the poet of *L'Héautontimouroménos* surely intuited, "being marked by sexuality requires a cold capacity to use *and* a pitiful vulnerability that comes from having been used, or a pitiful vulnerability that comes from longing for something lost or unattainable."[18] Or as Leo Bersani put it, a touch more radically: "Sexuality, at least in the mode in which it is constituted, may be a tautology for masochism."[19] What the writers I have considered show is that there is at the heart of all power as at the heart of all humans a void, a ridiculous longing for what cannot be bought at any price, and for what no charity can ever supply: a longing to be objectified.

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[17] Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in vol. 19 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press / Vintage, 2001), 159.
[18] Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, (New York: Basic Books, 2006 [1987]), 51.
[19] Leo Bersani, *'Is the Rectum a Grave' and Other Essays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 24.

Abstract

While the notion of ‘sexual poverty’ is rightly contested in contemporary discourse, the phrase usefully describes a style of economic thinking about sex that can be found in a variety of nineteenth-century French texts, in which sex is imagined as a scarce resource and a bodily need. The emblematic figure of such deprivation is the *vieillard*, the old man imagined as desiring but obviously undesirable in erotic terms. I trace this figure in writings by Chateaubriand, Balzac, Fourier, and Baudelaire, and draw out the ironies and ambiguities of how these writers present old men as ‘victims’ of sexual poverty.

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