

Venus im Pelz

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Wenn der Löwe, den sie gewählt, mit dem sie lebt, von einem anderen angegriffen wird, erzählte der Grieche, legt sich die Löwin ruhig nieder und sieht dem Kampfe zu, und wenn ihr Gatte unterliegt, sie hilft ihm nicht - sie sieht ihn gleichgültig unter den Klauen des Gegners in seinem Blute enden und folgt dem Sieger, dem Stärkeren, das ist die Natur des Weibes.

The pain and humiliation of jealousy in its most brutal form. So brutal, that in itself there is an element, not of joy of course, that is too vital and positive an emotion, but of pleasure to be found in it. The phantasy of being the victorious lion is of course common, but a rather superficial one, demanding little effort of imagination, but also the opposite phantasy of being the vanquished, may not be that uncommon. It is a more private one, and also a deeper one, as it involves a certain effort of imagination, of thinking in counterintuitive terms. While the first phantasy is like a pat on the back, a mere encouragement, the second probes deeper. The first reaction is one of bitterness, but within bitterness, if you search hard enough, there is sweetness. And by focusing on that sweetness, which takes quite an imaginative effort, you make it more pronounced, its vitality enforced by the contrast.

The story is about phantasy, about playing, and the suspense of it is about exploring the limits of the phantasy, when it ceases to be make-believe but becomes in earnest and real. Then of course Love itself is in the nature of a phantasy, a make-believe, that is played according to rules and conventions, most people may not realize they adhere to, but think naively that they act out of free will displaying genuine originality.

The story, with the customary framed introduction, is narrated by a first person by name of Severin K. who meets a young and very attractive widow by name of Wanda, who does not seem adverse to his love interest but is naturally loath to commit herself, her very hesitation, egging him on even further. What is more tantalizing than having someone just beyond your reach? It certainly makes you strive harder. To be sure of a love makes you bored, and to have it beyond reach, makes you resigned. But this very lingering on the limit of your grasp makes you concentrate all your efforts.

But there is more to it. The sense of being at the whim of the one you desire, and thus to be under her power. What Severin envisions is to be under constant domination. To be tortured by this passion and more particularly by its very object. The author throws in a Freudian explanation, incidentally many decades before Freud, involving a distant relative, a woman dressed in fur, who whips the protagonist as a boy, and the boy experiences in that a certain pleasure, the memory of which is further accentuated when he as a young man meets that woman again, still not old, but now as adult to adult. Thus Severin has developed two particular foci for his desire, so called fetishes. One is a woman in furs - *Venus im Pelz*, the other is to be savagely whipped. And thus in his negotiations

with Wanda he introduces those two elements. She is puzzled by them. Why furs? And he makes up some explanations having to do with the connection of women and cats. Ferocious and stealthy creatures who reveal their savageness suddenly and unexpectedly. So she starts to dress in furs, for his delectation, and she even consents to purchase a whip and hit him with it. This she finds a bit disconcerting, and soon stops, after a valiant show of callous ferocity, asking him whether this is really what he wants? He insists that he does, and in fact suggests, nay insists, that a contract is written in which he commits himself to be a slave, the various conditions associated to that status being explicitly spelled out.

Now this is a subtle game, because on the meta-level, rather than she imposing her will on him, which after all is just play, he imposes his will on her, which is serious and not part of the play. The playing is play, but as a play it is part of life as whole, and hence serious, just as anything you do in life is serious, by virtue of being part of it. To put it clearly. The actions within a play are just playful, they are not actions of real life, but the very act of playing as such, is an act not within the play, but outside it, an action of life. Just as the staging of the play in a theatre is an act in real life, involving money and resources, but the acts within the play are not real. A murder in the play does not result in a dead body to be buried. While the production of a play leads either to profit or a financial loss.

Thus Severin has the satisfaction of having his private phantasy imposed on another person. She enacts his thoughts, and by so doing she submits to him in real life, while he only pretends to submit to her. And so she decides to leave for Italy the relationship of master and slave not really being suitable in the Austrian Empire, or so she says. Incidentally she is of course very rich, so there will be little constraints for her for a splendid *mise en scène*. Severin is no longer to be referred to by that name, instead she will use 'Gregor'. Likewise, he will be forbidden to address her in anyway other than by 'Herrin'¹. She takes it all in 'earnest' to please him. So he is required to walk behind her ten paces or so while out in the street. To be dressed in a servants uniform, replete with a cap. To carry her luggage and parcels. When they travel by train, she does so in style in a first class apartment, allowing herself to be made court to, while he has to travel in third class, and whenever the train stops at a station, hurry to her run over to her to wait on her and her whims. When they arrive at a hotel, he has to carry all the chests of luggage, one a particularly heavy one, containing all the furs, she is intending to deck herself out with, to please him. A nice touch by the author, reminding the reader of all the concessions she is making to the ostensible victim. She resides in a nice room with a big bed, while he is put away in the servants quarters, hardly being able to sleep, nor to have time to finish his meals, reduced to a constant stage of hunger and exhaustion. But it would all be pointless, would she not occasionally make a break, once again call him by his real name, and showering him with tenderness. Is that all part of the game, or do they make a break from it, the break being defined not so much by the action of tenderness as by the use of their normal form of address. In one of those interludes she reminds him that the contract is still not signed and hence that he has the power to withdraw. He refuses

¹ Master does not really as in German have a feminine aspect. Also the German *Herrin* implies an even wider social gap than 'master' or 'mistress' implying that of a despotic ruler. In masochistic terminology, this has been standardized and vulgarized to 'dominatrice'.

to do so, assuring her that he rather be her slave for life than to lose her love, of which they make renewed assurances.

Is the game a pain for Wanda to play, does she do it only to please him and to submit to his fantasies, or has the play aroused in her a certain genuine pleasure to torture him? Anyway she decides that rather than to rent an apartment in Florence, incidentally the destination of their Italian sojourn, she will rent a house. Remember that money is no issue for her. So she rents a big house with a big garden, replete with black female servants. She starts out with the servants tying his hands and feet and fettering him to a pillar and then giving him a real whipping just in for him to remember vividly what will be in store for him, would he fail to carry out her orders to her full satisfaction. At one time she dismisses him from her presence for a month and he has to labor in the garden with the gardener. And there is a new seriousness to the game after the contract had finally been signed, because Wanda had insisted that he also would sign a suicide letter, so that if she would decide to kill him, her tracks would be covered. And killing him outright, would be tantamount to stepping out of the game, as opposed to just the threat of it. Could it be that by now she has stopped to enacting his fantasy and instead started to act her own? So Severin has lost control and been reduced to a fool? There are of course still interludes when they consort happily and innocently with each other. But are those interludes really? After all his professed ambition is to be a toy a *Spielzug* and she can do whatever she wants with him, including dallying, would that be her passing fancy.

It can be remarked, that although the novel is very highly charged erotically, it is hardly pornographic. There is very little allusion to the physical intimacy itself. There are but passing references to bared arms and busts, fervent kissing, involving the feet, on the other hand many references to protestations of love and much hugging and tears on part of Severin. There is one scene in which she strips for the bath and appears fully in the nude, only to make the narrator remark that no sculptural beauty, however classic and marble, can compare to the real thing of a woman of flesh and blood. And there is some occasional remarks as to the generosity of her curves, and how the furs drape themselves along her naked skin. Thus, in spite of the subject matter, the impression is almost one of chastity, whether by design or ineptness I cannot tell.

The lady being rich and beautiful decides not to eschew the pleasures of society to which the narrator is obviously denied. During one of those excursions she catches sight of a young, strapping Greek, and falls in love with him, or pretends to do so. Thus to the ordinary tortures the narrator is now becoming privy to the most acute in any love relationship, namely that of jealousy. This is of course an emotion most people are familiar with, be it with various degrees of intensity and justification. It is an emotion in which there invariably is some degree of sweetness. The German word *Eifersucht* is far more evocative than the English 'jealousy'. The word 'sucht' indicates that it an active emotion, one which is pursued and one which exercises a strong pull, as well as a sickness. 'Eifer' although strictly etymologically referring to fire and bitterness, makes you associate with 'Eifer' and 'eifrig' indicating the eagerness with which one indulges in it. There are many levels of sexual jealousy. At the root is the sense of loss and inadequacy. If the woman you love, really loves someone else, means that she transcends your common world, and enters another sphere in which you cannot join her. The ecstasy you may have felt with her,

may have been real on both sides, but she obviously is about to experience a deeper one, which will forever be beyond you. There is a mystery of desire and she is probing more deeply into it. In many ways the relation of a boy to his mother is of the kind Severin has tried to establish with Wanda. The mother is both a strict disciplinarian ordering the child about as well as sometimes embracing it with her tenderness. But beyond the love that normally holds between a mother and a child, there is the sexual love she holds for the father (or even worse for someone else). A love that goes way beyond the experience and comprehension of the child, even if the child may very well be aware of this, and be frightened by it.

Related to jealousy is the contrast between the private and the public. Sexual desire is both private and individual, as well as being public and generic. For sexual desire itself, the object of it can easily be changed, in fact, as the Greeks pointed out, when lust is concerned, we are all very replaceable and hence disposable. A man that enjoys the favors of a beautiful woman has also the satisfaction of possessing something that is publicly valuable and desirable. It is an aspect of desire that is objective not to say competitive, and thus infers status. To have your wife being desired by others, thus makes her even more desirable to you. The desire is no longer private but public. The public invades and make of the desire something that has less to do with tenderness than with power and strength. But it is also an invitation to share in intimacy. This aspect is also developed in the novel, when Wanda picks up a German painter to paint her and the narrator in a compromising situation, in which she is dressed in furs. The painter is overwhelmed by her, and lets himself be flogged. Obviously that provides the narrator with some satisfaction, although of course the action of flogging being a translated act of sexual congress, one may think that he should have to some extent resented the intimacy involved. The phenomenon goes under the name of Candaulism, being yet another one of the perversions catalogued by Krafft-Ebing, which can take the form of people having their lovers make love to others under their eyes.

But to return to the main story: if Wanda is really in love with the Greek, and not just pretending to, the tables are turned. Pretended anguish turning into real anguish, and by this stage, Severin thinks it has gone far too far, that by now she no longer is *grausam* but *gemein*, i.e. no longer merely cruel, but downright mean. Cruelty is part of play, meanness is not. The implicit trust has been betrayed. Writing and signing a contract is one thing, but to properly interpreting it and its signing, is quite another. He is on the verge of committing suicide, and when he threatens to do so, he is but met with total indifference.

And so comes the resolution. There is reconciliation. Wanda expresses her love for him, and that she only pretended to be interested in the young Greek, he was far too raw for her taste. It was he - Severin, and no one else she loved all the time. It was just a play after all. Would it not be time to end the game and return to normal and get married. The narrator is overjoyed by the prospect. But then there is a sudden turn of pace. He is once again bound and out from her bed emerges the Greek who proceeds to give him a thorough flogging, the likes of which she has been physically unable to deliver. While he is being overcome with pain (in real life he would of course soon have lost consciousness) she seems rather indifferent to his plight.

It is all over. A few years later he gets a letter from her, in which she hopes that she was able to cure his perverse desire for being whipped, by having been whipped to the limit, and that her lover, the Greek, unfortunately is dead, having died in a duel. The narrator has supposedly grown out of his desires by the time we meet him in the introduction, living with a female, whom he dominates and treats abominably, explaining by referring to Goethe, that in a relation between the sexes, one has to be hammer the other anvil, as long as there is no real equality between the sexes (a remark that can be interpreted positively with modern hindsight). The time of the anvil is obviously past for the narrator, now it is his turn to be the hammer.

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