

Fermata

N.Baker

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This is a book about sexual phantasy. In a sense it is second order pornography, allowing you to be titillated by the smut without taking moral responsibility for so doing. Whether it is pornography in the commercial sense I am not in a position to know. There certainly is explicit and graphic sex, but that you can find in the novels of Updike and Lodge as well not to mention Roth, and is becoming part of the modern mainstream one, including those high on the high-brow spectrum.

The author is known for his meticulous novels in which he concentrates on the prosaic details of everyday life to the point of obsessiveness. In this case the obsession concerns sexual phantasies. The protagonist has the ability to stop time more or less at will, and then the further ability, without which the former would be pointless, to explore the world when temporarily paused, being the only moving object. In fact the flow of time is folded, a pocket is created, in which he can act. This ability has many striking applications, but our man, working as a temporary typist, puts it just to one use, namely to satisfy his voyeuristic passion, to undress women, and as he puts it, satisfy an in-saturable and unending curiosity about the female body. He means no harm and the women will never know. Now you may take this ability literally, thinking of it as a science fiction fantasy, or you may take it as a mere diversion of the narrator, because the phantasies presented as such are not directly related to his time warping, although admittedly at times his supernatural ability can serve as a prop to the plot. It is typical that Baker, the author, is very careful to avoid logical traps involved in the time-folding, and when the reader thinks he may have caught him out in one, the author, as if addressing long since anticipated objections, shows that he has not been unaware and presents some solution to soothe the logical concerns of a reader so inclined to entertain them.

Now the ability to stop the world and walk around in it with impunity shares many of the features of solipsism. For one thing you are no longer part of the world, it is you against everybody else, and in a sense it is under your control. Psychologically solipsism is about extreme loneliness, made the more pungent, by being in the middle of everything. You are in the world, somehow, but not part of it. Other people, in spite of being just a part of your imagination, become inaccessible to you, they all share something that is denied to you, namely being part of your imagination. They have a life, of which you cannot be a part, at least not on equal terms. Thus we are not really becoming privy to the sexual acts of the protagonist when he is, at what he refers to as the fold, because you cannot properly interact, sexually or otherwise, with somebody who is frozen and inactive (just as when being in a solipsistic situation you cannot have a proper love relation with one of your phantagonists), that would be on par with necrophilia (as the protagonist's ex-girlfriend explains to him in disgust), only that his stratagems allows him to engage in actions of voyeurism getting access to private hiding spaces. Thus the main pornographic contents of the novel is to be found in the phantasies he has decided to type down for

the delectation of hapless female victims, brought about to bump into them. He means well, he keeps on explaining, his only purpose is to give women a good time. Stories which are freely shared with the reader, although from a technical plot point of view would have been enough to refer to. So one may inquire into the real purpose of the author. Are those two lengthy excerpts the central part of the novel, and everything else is just concocted to give them a proper context to justify their publication? Or is it a novel about a pathetic character obsessed by pornography, and thus through the very instinctive desire evolved to get him in contact with the rest of humanity, actually insulates him from it, as his very imagination perverts it into mere phantasy, rendering him solipsistic, the logical destination of imagination gone hay-wire. The author himself displays a fair amount of original imagination, in fact more than enough to elicit if not admiration at least making for impressiveness. A writer who describes a murder or any act of violence does not necessarily have to write out of experience. In fact the purpose of imagination is to transcend your experience, and many acts of murder and violence are described very convincingly. In fact it is doubtful whether actual experience would necessarily add to their persuasive powers, as opposed to factual truths. We would not condone writers actually committing murder to get a real feel for what it is like (but that does not necessarily prevent people, sadly enough, to turn to accounts of real murders by actual murderers, just to satisfy a voyeuristic curiosity to what it really feels like), on the contrary we would consider it a perversion of curiosity and a criminal act not mitigated by a supposedly ulterior motive. But if you present a sexual phantasy (and not just as a quotation, but one originally conceived) you cannot do so without having had the phantasy, as description and act are more or less the same thing. Now sexual phantasies, just as any other phantasy, including those of violence are not illegal, but that does not prevent them from our disappropriation and disgust, especially if they are of a kind, when acted out would be criminal. People who lust for children, even if they would never touch them, earn our contempt, and we would be gratified if those so inappropriate lusts could be stamped out of them. But even if the lusts are innocuous enough, we feel slightly uneasy about them, at least as far as they are publicized, we rather not know about them. There are many things in life, although indispensable, which we rather not know about. A sharing of sexual phantasies, unless done in the intimacy of two people, momentarily merging into one, seems a transgression on privacy. Yet, curiosity may trump natural inhibitions, just as lust overcomes what may be termed natural physical repulsion, necessary to maintain bodily integrity.

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