Venus in Furs

Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch

Introduction

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch was born in Lemberg, Austrian Galicia, on January 27, 1836. He studied jurisprudence at Prague and Graz, and in 1857 became a teacher at the latter university. He published several historical works, but soon gave up his academic career to devote himself wholly to literature. For a number of years he edited the international review, *Auf der Hohe*, at Leipzig, but later removed to Paris, for he was always strongly Francophile. His last years he spent at Lindheim in Hesse, Germany, where he died on March 9, 1895. In 1873 he married Aurora von Rumelin, who wrote a number of novels under the pseudonym of Wanda von Dunajew, which it is interesting to note is the name of the heroine of *Venus in Furs*. Her sensational memoirs which have been the cause of considerable controversy were published in 1906.

During his career as writer an endless number of works poured from Sacher-Masoch's pen. Many of these were works of ephemeral journalism, and some of them unfortunately pure sensationalism, for economic necessity forced him to turn his pen to unworthy ends.

There is, however, a residue among his works which has a distinct literary and even greater psychological value. His principal literary ambition was never completely fulfilled. It was a somewhat programmatic plan to give a picture of contemporary life in all its various aspects and interrelations under the general title of the *Heritage of Cain*. This idea was probably derived from Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*. The whole was to be divided into six subdivisions with the general titles *Love, Property, Money, The State, War,* and *Death*. Each of these divisions in its turn consisted of six novels, of which the last was intended to summarize the author's conclusions and to present his solution for the problems set in the others.

This extensive plan remained unachieved, and only the first two parts, *Love* and *Property*, were completed. Of the other sections only fragments remain. The present novel, *Venus in Furs*, forms the fifth in the series, *Love*.

The best of Sacher-Masoch's work is characterized by a swift narration and a graphic representation of character and scene and a rich humor. The latter has made many of his shorter stories dealing with his native Galicia little masterpieces of local color.

There is, however, another element in his work which has caused his name to become as eponym for an entire series of phenomena at one end of the psycho-sexual scale. This gives his productions a peculiar psychological value, though it cannot be denied also a morbid tinge that makes them often repellent. However, it is well to remember that nature is neither good nor bad, neither altruistic nor egoistic, and that it operates through the human psyche as well as through crystals and plants and animals with the same inexorable laws.

Sacher-Masoch was the poet of the anomaly now generally known as *masochism*. By this is meant the desire on the part of the individual affected of desiring himself completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex, and being treated by this person as by a master, to be humiliated, abused, and tormented, even to the verge of death. This motive is treated in all its innumerable variations. As a creative artist Sacher-Masoch was, of course, on the quest for the absolute, and sometimes, when impulses in the human being assume an abnormal or exaggerated form, there is just for a moment a flash that gives a glimpse of the thing in itself.

If any defense were needed for the publication of work like Sacher-Masoch's it is well to remember that artists are the historians of the human soul and one might recall the wise and tolerant Montaigne's essay *On the Duty of Historians* where he says, "One may cover over secret actions, but to be silent on what all the world knows, and things which have had effects which are public and of so much consequence is an inexcusable defect."

And the curious interrelation between cruelty and sex, again and again, creeps into literature. Sacher-Masoch has not created anything new in this. He has simply taken an ancient motive and developed it frankly and consciously, until, it seems, there is nothing further to say on the subject. To the violent attacks which his books met he replied in a polemical work, *Über den Wert der Kritik*.

It would be interesting to trace the masochistic tendency as it occurs throughout literature, but no more can be done than just to allude to a few instances. The theme recurs continually in the *Confessions* of Jean Jacques Rousseau; it explains the character of the chevalier in Prévost's *Manon l'Escault*. Scenes of this nature are found in Zola's *Nana*, in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, in Albert Juhelle's *Les Pecheurs d'Hommes*, in Dostojevski. In disguised and unrecognized form it constitutes the undercurrent of much of the sentimental literature of the present day, though in most cases the authors as well as the readers are unaware of the pathological elements out of which their characters are built.

In all these strange and troubled waters of the human spirit one might wish for something of the serene and simple attitude of the ancient world. Laurent Tailhade has an admirable passage in his *Platres et Marbres*, which is well worth reproducing in this connection:

"Toutefois, les Hellènes, dans, leurs cités de lumière, de douceur et d'harmonie, avaient une indulgence qu'on peut nommer scientifique pour les troubles amoureux de l'esprit. S'ils ne regardaient pas l'aliéné comme en proie a la visitation d'un dieu (idée orientale et fataliste), du moins ils savaient que l'amour est une sorte d'envoûtement, une folie où se manifeste l'animosité des puissances cosmiques. Plus tard, le christianisme enveloppa les âmes de ténèbres. Ce fut la grande nuit. L'Église condamna tout ce qui lui parût neuf ou menaçant pour les dogmes implaçable qui reduisaient le monde en esclavage."

Among Sacher-Masoch's works, *Venus in Furs* is one of the most typical and outstanding. In spite of melodramatic elements and other literary faults, it is unquestionably a sincere work, written without any idea of titillating morbid fancies. One feels that in the hero many subjective elements have been incorporated, which are a disadvantage to the work from the point of view of literature, but on the other hand raise the book beyond the sphere of art, pure and simple, and make it one of those appalling human documents which belong, part to science and part to psychology. It is the confession of a deeply unhappy man who could not master his personal tragedy of existence, and so sought to unburden his soul in writing down the things he felt and experienced. The reader who will approach the book

from this angle and who will honestly put aside moral prejudices and prepossessions will come away from the perusal of this book with a deeper understanding of this poor miserable soul of ours and a light will be cast into dark places that lie latent in all of us.

Sacher-Masoch's works have held an established position in European letters for something like half a century, and the author himself was made a chevalier of the Legion of Honor by the French Government in 1883, on the occasion of his literary jubilee. When several years ago cheap reprints were brought out on the Continent and attempts were made by various guardians of morality—they exist in all countries — to have them suppressed, the judicial decisions were invariably against the plaintiff and in favor of the publisher. Are Americans children that they must be protected from books which any European school-boy can purchase whenever he wishes? However, such seems to be the case, and this translation, which has long been in preparation, consequently appears in a limited edition printed for subscribers only. In another connection Herbert Spencer once used these words: "The ultimate result of shielding men from the effects of folly, is to fill the world with fools." They have a very pointed application in the case of a work like *Venus in Furs*.

F. S.

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Venus In Furs

"But the Almighty Lord hath struck him, and hath delivered him into the hands of a woman."

—The Vulgate, Judith, xvi. 7.

My company was charming.

Opposite me by the massive Renaissance fireplace sat Venus; she was not a casual woman of the half-world, who under this pseudonym wages war against the enemy sex, like Mademoiselle Cleopatra, but the real, true goddess of love.

She sat in an armchair and had kindled a crackling fire, whose reflection ran in red flames over her pale face with its white eyes, and from time to time over her feet when she sought to warm them.

Her head was wonderful in spite of the dead stony eyes; it was all I could see of her. She had wrapped her marble-like body in a huge fur, and rolled herself up trembling like a cat.

"I don't understand it," I exclaimed, "It isn't really cold any longer. For two weeks past we have had perfect spring weather. You must be nervous."

"Much obliged for your spring," she replied with a low stony voice, and immediately afterwards sneezed divinely, twice in succession. "I really can't stand it here much longer, and I am beginning to understand—"

"What, dear lady?"

"I am beginning to believe the unbelievable and to understand the un-understandable. All of a sudden I understand the Germanic virtue of woman, and German philosophy, and I am no longer surprised that you of the North do not know how to love, haven't even an idea of what love is."

"But, madame," I replied flaring up, "I surely haven't given you any reason."

"Oh, you—" The divinity sneezed for the third time, and shrugged her shoulders with inimitable grace. "That's why I have always been nice to you, and even come to see you now and then, although I catch a cold every time, in spite of all my furs. Do you remember the first time we met?"

"How could I forget it," I said. "You wore your abundant hair in brown curls, and you had brown eyes and a red mouth, but I recognized you immediately by the outline of your face and its marble-like pallor—you always wore a violet-blue velvet jacket edged with squirrel-skin."

"You were really in love with the costume, and awfully docile."

"You have taught me what love is. Your serene form of worship let me forget two thousand years."

"And my faithfulness to you was without equal!"

"Well, as far as faithfulness goes—"

"Ungrateful!"

"I will not reproach you with anything. You are a divine woman, but nevertheless a woman, and like every woman cruel in love."

"What you call cruel," the goddess of love replied eagerly, "is simply the element of passion and of natural love, which is woman's nature and makes her give herself where she loves, and makes her love everything, that pleases her."

"Can there be any greater cruelty for a lover than the unfaithfulness of the woman he loves?"

"Indeed!" she replied. "We are faithful as long as we love, but you demand faithfulness of a woman without love, and the giving of herself without enjoyment. Who is cruel there—woman or man? You of the North in general take love too soberly and seriously. You talk of duties where there should be only a question of pleasure."

"That is why our emotions are honorable and virtuous, and our relations permanent."

"And yet a restless, always unsatisfied craving for the nudity of paganism," she interrupted, "but that love, which is the highest joy, which is divine simplicity itself, is not for you

moderns, you children of reflection. It works only evil in you. *As soon as you wish to be natural, you become common.* To you nature seems something hostile; you have made devils out of the smiling gods of Greece, and out of me a demon. You can only exorcise and curse me, or slay yourselves in bacchantic madness before my altar. And if ever one of you has had the courage to kiss my red mouth, he makes a barefoot pilgrimage to Rome in penitential robes and expects flowers to grow from his withered staff, while under my feet roses, violets, and myrtles spring up every hour, but their fragrance does not agree with you. Stay among your northern fogs and Christian incense; let us pagans remain under the debris, beneath the lava; do not disinter us. Pompeii was not built for you, nor our villas, our baths, our temples. You do not require gods. We are chilled in your world."

The beautiful marble woman coughed, and drew the dark sables still closer about her shoulders.

"Much obliged for the classical lesson," I replied, "but you cannot deny, that man and woman are mortal enemies, in your serene sunlit world as well as in our foggy one. In love there is union into a single being for a short time only, capable of only one thought, one sensation, one will, in order to be then further disunited. And you know this better than I; whichever of the two fails to subjugate will soon feel the feet of the other on his neck—"

"And as a rule the man that of the woman," cried Madame Venus with proud mockery, "which you know better than I."

"Of course, and that is why I don't have any illusions."

"You mean you are now my slave without illusions, and for that reason you shall feel the weight of my foot without mercy."

"Madame!"

"Don't you know me yet? Yes, I am *cruel*—since you take so much delight in that word-and am I not entitled to be so? Man is the one who desires, woman the one who is desired. This is woman's entire but decisive advantage. Through his passion nature has given man into woman's hands, and the woman who does not know how to make him her subject,

her slave, her toy, and how to betray him with a smile in the end is not wise."

"Exactly your principles," I interrupted angrily.

"They are based on the experience of thousands of years," she replied ironically, while her white fingers played over the dark fur. "The more devoted a woman shows herself, the sooner the man sobers down and becomes domineering. The more cruelly she treats him and the more faithless she is, the worse she uses him, the more wantonly she plays with him, the less pity she shows him, by so much the more will she increase his desire, be loved, worshipped by him. So it has always been, since the time of Helen and Delilah, down to Catherine the Second and Lola Montez."

"I cannot deny," I said, "that nothing will attract a man more than the picture of a beautiful, passionate, cruel, and despotic woman who wantonly changes her favorites without scruple in accordance with her whim—"

"And in addition wears furs," exclaimed the divinity.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I know your predilection."

"Do you know," I interrupted, "that, since we last saw each other, you have grown very coquettish."

"In what way, may I ask?"

"In that there is no way of accentuating your white body to greater advantage than by these dark furs, and that—"

The divinity laughed.

"You are dreaming," she cried, "wake up!" and she clasped my arm with her marble-white hand. "Do wake up," she repeated raucously with the low register of her voice. I opened my eyes with difficulty.

I saw the hand which shook me, and suddenly it was brown as bronze; the voice was the thick alcoholic voice of my cossack servant who stood before me at his full height of nearly six feet.

"Do get up," continued the good fellow, "it is really disgraceful."

"What is disgraceful?"

"To fall asleep in your clothes and with a book besides." He snuffed the candles which had burned down, and picked up the volume which had fallen from my hand, "with a book by"—he looked at the title page— "by Hegel. Besides it is high time you were starting for Mr. Severin's who is expecting us for tea."

"A curious dream," said Severin when I had finished. He supported his arms on his knees, resting his face in his delicate, finely veined hands, and fell to pondering.

I knew that he wouldn't move for a long time, hardly even breathe. This actually happened, but I didn't consider his behavior as in any way remarkable. I had been on terms of close friendship with him for nearly three years, and gotten used to his peculiarities. For it cannot be denied that he was peculiar, although he wasn't quite the dangerous madman that the neighborhood, or indeed the entire district of Kolomea, considered him to be. I found his personality not only interesting—and that is why many also regarded me a bit mad—but to a degree sympathetic. For a Galician nobleman and land-owner, and considering his age—he was hardly over thirty—he displayed surprising sobriety, a certain seriousness, even pedantry. He lived according to a minutely elaborated, half-philosophical, half-practical system, like clock-work; not this alone, but also by the thermometer, barometer, aerometer, hydrometer, Hippocrates, Hufeland, Plato, Kant, Knigge, and Lord Chesterfield. But at times he had violent attacks of sudden passion, and gave the impression of being about to run with his head right through a wall. At such times every one preferred to get out of his way.

While he remained silent, the fire sang in the chimney and the large venerable samovar sang; and the ancient chair in which I sat rocking to and fro smoking my cigar, and the cricket in the old walls sang too. I let my eyes glide over the curious apparatus, skeletons of animals, stuffed birds, globes, plaster-casts, with which his room was heaped full, until by chance my glance remained fixed on a picture which I had seen often enough before. But to-day, under the reflected red glow of the fire, it made an indescribable impression on me.

It was a large oil painting, done in the robust full-bodied manner of the Belgian school. Its subject was strange enough.

A beautiful woman with a radiant smile upon her face, with abundant hair tied into a classical knot, on which white powder lay like a soft hoarfrost, was resting on an ottoman, supported on her left arm. She was nude in her dark furs. Her right hand played with a lash, while her bare foot rested carelessly on a man, lying before her like a slave, like a dog. In the sharply outlined, but well-formed linaments of this man lay brooding melancholy and passionate devotion; he looked up to her with the ecstatic burning eye of a martyr. This man, the footstool for her feet, was Severin, but beardless, and, it seemed, some ten years younger.

"*Venus in Furs*," I cried, pointing to the picture. "That is the way I saw her in my dream."

"I, too," said Severin, "only I dreamed my dream with open eyes."

"Indeed?"

"It is a tiresome story."

"Your picture apparently suggested my dream," I continued. "But do tell me what it means. I can imagine that it played a role in your life, and perhaps a very decisive one. But the details I can only get from you."

"Look at its counterpart," replied my strange friend, without heeding my question.

The counterpart was an excellent copy of Titian's well-known "Venus with the Mirror" in the Dresden Gallery.

"And what is the significance?"

Severin rose and pointed with his finger at the fur with which
Titian garbed his goddess of love.

"It, too, is a 'Venus in Furs,'" he said with a slight smile. "I don't believe that the old Venetian had any secondary intention. He simply painted the portrait of some aristocratic Mesalina, and was tactful enough to let Cupid hold the mirror in which she tests her majestic allure with cold

satisfaction. He looks as though his task were becoming burdensome enough. The picture is painted flattery. Later an 'expert' in the Rococo period baptized the lady with the name of Venus. The furs of the despot in which Titian's fair model wrapped herself, probably more for fear of a cold than out of modesty, have become a symbol of the tyranny and cruelty that constitute woman's essence and her beauty.

"But enough of that. The picture, as it now exists, is a bitter satire on our love. Venus in this abstract North, in this icy Christian world, has to creep into huge black furs so as not to catch cold—"

Severin laughed, and lighted a fresh cigarette.

Just then the door opened and an attractive, stoutish, blonde girl entered. She had wise, kindly eyes, was dressed in black silk, and brought us cold meat and eggs with our tea. Severin took one of the latter, and decapitated it with his knife.

"Didn't I tell you that I want them soft-boiled?" he cried with a violence that made the young woman tremble.

"But my dear Sevtchu—" she said timidly.

"Sevtchu, nothing," he yelled, "you are to obey, obey, do you understand?" and he tore the *kantchuk*[1] which was hanging beside the weapons from its hook.

The woman fled from the chamber quickly and timidly like a doe.

"Just wait, I'll get you yet," he called after her.

"But Severin," I said placing my hand on his arm, "how can you treat a pretty young woman thus?"

"Look at the woman," he replied, blinking humorously with his eyes. "Had I flattered her, she would have cast the noose around my neck, but now, when I bring her up with the *kantchuk*, she adores me."

"Nonsense!"

"Nonsense, nothing, that is the way you have to break in women."

"Well, if you like it, live like a pasha in your harem, but don't lay down theories for me—"

"Why not," he said animatedly. "Goethe's 'you must be hammer or anvil' is absolutely appropriate to the relation between man and woman. Didn't Lady Venus in your dream prove that to you? Woman's power lies in man's passion, and she knows how to use it, if man doesn't understand himself. He has only one choice: to be the *tyrant* over or the *slave* of woman. As soon as he gives in, his neck is under the yoke, and the lash will soon fall upon him."

"Strange maxims!"

"Not maxims, but experiences," he replied, nodding his head, "*I have actually felt the lash*. I am cured. Do you care to know how?"

He rose, and got a small manuscript from his massive desk, and put it in front of me.

"You have already asked about the picture. I have long owed you an explanation. Here—read!"

Severin sat down by the chimney with his back toward me, and seemed to dream with open eyes. Silence had fallen again, and again the fire sang in the chimney, and the samovar and the cricket in the old walls. I opened the manuscript and read:

CONFESSIONS OF A SUPERSENSUAL MAN.

The margin of the manuscript bore as motto a variation of the well-known lines from *Faust*:

"Thou supersensual sensual wooer
A woman leads you by the nose."
—MEPHISTOPHELES.

I turned the title-page and read: "What follows has been compiled from my diary of that period, because it is impossible ever frankly to write of one's past, but in this way everything retains its fresh colors, the colors of the present."

Gogol, the Russian Moliere, says—where? well, somewhere—"the real comic muse is the one under whose laughing mask tears roll down."