

Vernon A. Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. x + 243 pp. \$35.00 (cl). Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN: 0195104838.

Review by Christopher E. Forth, Australian National University, for H-France, March 2000.

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When it comes to matters of sexuality, French physicians and psychologists have rarely received their fair share of attention from anglophone scholars, at least when compared to the wealth of scholarship focusing on their British and German counterparts. To be sure, there have been quite substantial histories which draw upon developments in French medicine and psychology, but with few exceptions these works usually treat sexual science only as an adjunct to some other topic and rarely explore it as a subject in its own right.(1) This scholarly lacuna is evident in a recently published two-volume set of sexological studies and documents which, despite its generalist scope, either ignores most French contributions or, perhaps because the editors discovered his work had already been translated, presents Auguste Forel as a kind of exemplar of French medical thought on the topic.(2) If Vernon Rosario's *The Erotic Imagination* were merely a historical exploration of how French medical experts addressed the problem of sex, it would already represent a significant contribution to the field. But it is because Rosario's work does so much more that it achieves a relevance that transcends the specialized confines of medical history.

As the book's title suggests, Rosario is less concerned with medical views on sexual practices per se than with the "erotic imagination", which on one level refers to that aspect of psychic life whose depths would only be sounded in the psychotherapeutic encounters which constituted modern sexual knowledge in the western world. This imagination, we see, was considered at once a source of deviant sexuality as well as a potential site for the implantation of therapeutic ideas. Rosario does not locate the erotic imagination solely in the minds of patients, however, but sketches a more complex scenario in which the lines between medical knowledge and sensual literature were blurred with individual erotic confessions. With literature often castigated for its deleterious effects on impressionable readers, medical case studies provided the only legitimate forum for the publication of erotic material and often featured graphically detailed accounts of sexual fantasies and practices that attracted a lay readership beyond the narrow circle of specialists to which they were directed. Through their frank presentation of sexual matters doctors thus risked perpetuating the very "obscene" narratives they denounced by producing what Rosario calls a "therapeutic metapornography," or medical tales about curing the erotic" (p. 56). This situation was rendered even more complicated by the fact that doctors often invoked

literary examples in their cases while novelists avidly consumed medical texts in search of new material. Though patients stood at the center of all of this, they were hardly alone in the cultivation of the erotic. Addressing the longstanding assumption that medicine stood outside of the desire it purported to explain, Rosario develops a point fleetingly made by Michel Foucault that the confessional aspects of western sexual science could indeed generate a pleasurable *ars erotica*. As Rosario writes, "physicians, patients, and novelists coaxed (and even coached) each other to reveal and consolidate the pleasures of the erotic imagination" (p. 8). The "erotic imagination" was therefore the product of a complex and unintentional collaboration among patients and doctors, writers, and readers.

The book is divided into chapters exploring the four "pathological" figures whose sexual proclivities constituted different aspects of the erotic imagination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: onanists, erotomaniacs, inverts, and fetishists. Rosario traces the history of each of these figures with attention to their very particular inflections during the modern period. Thus we see how masturbation slowly shifted from a medieval religious discourse, directed at sinful adults who risked corrupting their souls, to a modern scientific discourse aimed largely at children whose self-indulgence could result in physical debility and mental derangement. We learn how erotomania, which developed out of medieval love melancholy, was in the nineteenth century cast as a form of deviant sexuality that had more to do with base genital desire than any lofty notion of "love". Representations of same sex relations or "inversion" also changed from being the "vice" often associated with aristocrats to an organic disease that marked the individual as biologically degenerate, while fetishism, dubbed by Alfred Binet the "cult of trinkets," was first understood as an aspect of "primitive" idolatry before being associated with the most primitive of human senses, especially tactile, olfactory, and gustatory sensations.

The imagination which helped formulate these styles of eroticism was no disembodied faculty during the modern period, but was considered by most doctors to be intimately related to the body and thus it was possible to link it to biological defects which might explain such "perverse" sexuality. Yet the doctors who claimed exclusive rights to the erotic confessions of these patients concocted diagnostic formulations that were often shaped by professional ambitions and internecine conflicts with political and religious authorities. Physicians therefore relished the fact that François Bertrand, the "Vampire of Montparnasse" who stood trial in 1849 for exhuming and mutilating corpses, had spent time in a seminary: this bit of personal history allowed largely anticlerical doctors to allege the erotic improprieties of religious training and thus to pathologize one of their most bitter opponents. Rosario also demonstrates how medical knowledge converged with broader social anxieties, from the sensuality of novels and the morally

corrupting nature of modern consumerism to the nationalistic association of certain perversities with specific countries (e.g., sodomy with Germany).

This emplacement of sexual pathology into its historical context is absorbing indeed, and Rosario has drawn upon a rich vein of untapped material that is as compelling as it is instructive. Yet the author's larger purpose is to explore how confessional discourses allowed doctors to classify their subjects as perverse while unwittingly providing these problematic individuals with opportunities to subvert this medical aim. In many ways Rousseau's bold autobiographical account of his masturbatory and masochistic pleasures served as a model for the erotic confessions that graced the pages of nineteenth-century medicine, thus illustrating the idea that telling the truth about sexuality amounted to a full disclosure of one's innermost self. While nineteenth-century doctors initially had to extract from unwilling patients what Jean-Jacques Rousseau had freely offered as the "truth" about himself, in time many people subject to medical scrutiny discovered the joys of confessing and even insisted upon having their stories cast in the language of sexual science. Thus we see how the "erotomaniac" Mademoiselle G experienced great pleasure in describing her voluptuous sensations to friends and physicians alike, thus freely offering what would nevertheless be identified as part of her pathology by the same physicians who labored to extract similar confessions from more recalcitrant patients (pp. 45-48). The blurred boundaries between medicine, literature, and personal confession are well illustrated by the anonymous Italian "invert" who framed his erotic autobiography in the language of a medical case history, thus producing an account which he had hoped the novelist Émile Zola would use to craft into a character in a forthcoming novel (pp. 89-98). These and other examples not only suggest that doctors failed to secure a monopoly on narratives of the self in the modern era, but that they were unable to prevent the creative appropriation of these discourses by their own subjects.

One of the most provocative aspects of *The Erotic Imagination* is concerned with how the internal contradictions of medical discourse threatened to undo the sexual taxonomies it endeavored to construct. Taking his cue from Jacques Derrida's reading of Rousseau's description of masturbation as "that dangerous supplement", something which both supplements and supplants that which is usually considered more primary, Rosario explores how the erotic imagination was itself seen as an artificial supplement to (and potential substitute for) "natural" living. Charged by the sensuality of novels, many physicians feared, the imagination which fueled the onanistic impulse might end up replacing "reality" altogether in the minds of patients. In a similar manner, Rosario uses the metaphor of "inversion" (a radical contradiction between inner being and superficial appearance) to interrogate the manner in which the medical writer Marc André Raffalovich problematized the very idea of sexual inversion (a category suggesting an effeminate soul lurking within a male body). Not only was Raffalovich

himself an "invert" in a number of senses (a homosexual, he was often taken for a doctor though he held no medical degree), but he contended that many so-called inverts were actually *more* virile than heterosexual men and suggested the notion of "unisexuality" to refer to mutual love among men, thus introducing in France the contemporary notion of homosexuality. Alongside such examples of the blurring and even reversal of accepted categories, Rosario even reveals a history of physicians who came close to collapsing the boundary between the normal and the pathological altogether, including Félix Jaquot, who suggested in 1849 that all eroticism is based on illusion, and Alfred Binet, who asserted that some form of fetishism resides at the heart of all "normal" love. By the end of the nineteenth century scholars like Gabriel Tarde would even conclude that "perfectly normal" love was itself rather unusual, thus calling into question the very ordinariness of "the normal".

These brief remarks cannot do justice to the many levels and textures of Rosario's work. In this book, fascinating and well chosen case studies are interpreted by a scholar whose firm grasp of the history of medicine is complemented by a keen eye for literary subtleties. Rosario's productive use of Foucauldian, Derridean, and other contemporary theories adds even more dimensions to his subject, and makes reading the book a truly stimulating experience. With *The Erotic Imagination*, Rosario has established a benchmark for future studies of the erotic in France, and has produced a work which will be essential reading for anyone concerned with the relationship between medical and literary representations of sexuality.

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1. See, for instance, AnnLouise Shapiro, *Breaking the Codes: Female Criminality in Fin-de-siècle Paris* (Stanford:1996); Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York, 1994); Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Princeton, 1993); Ian R. Dowbiggin, *Inheriting Madness: Professionalization and Psychiatric Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, 1991); Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989).
2. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, eds., *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998); and Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, eds., *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science* (Cambridge, 1998).

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