Brigid Brophy's Phenomenology of Sex in *Flesh* and *The Snow Ball*

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Ian McEwan's 2007 novella *On Chesil Beach* opens with a pair of young newlyweds, Edward and Florence, eating bad food in a Dorset hotel, prior to retiring to their room to consummate their marriage. When they do, in the book's calamitous climax, Edward suffers premature ejaculation: 'He emptied himself over her in gouts, in vigorous but diminishing quantities, filling her navel, coating her belly, thighs, and even a portion of her chin and kneecap in tepid, viscous fluid'.[1] McEwan, who made his name with stories that revelled in all manner of sexual perversion – child sex abuse and murder, incest, sadism – here seems to be suggesting similar depths of gothic horror in the most commonplace, even vanilla of sexual encounters: the heterosexual marital bed.

Edward and Florence are products and victims of Britain's post-war puritanism, a time when, as the novella's opening line has it, 'conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible'.[2] They are unexperienced, unenlightened, and unprepared. It is 1962, the year before, Philip Larkin famously asserted, sexual intercourse 'began'. Before then it had been

> A sort of bargaining,
> A wrangle for the ring,
> A shame that started at sixteen
> And spread to everything.[3]

McEwan's novella is a dramatisation of this state of affairs, with its handbooks for young brides talking of mucous membranes and glans, and 'happily, soon after he has entered her's,[4] and, for Edward, rumours of 'men and women in tight black jeans and black polo-neck sweaters [having] constant easy sex, without having to meet each other's parents'.[5] After the disaster of Edward's coming too soon, and Florence's appalled reaction,

and the frightened, thoughtless words that follow, their marriage is doomed. If only, you think, if only one or other of them had read Brigid Brophy's novel *Flesh*. Tragically, however, Edward and Florence married in July 1962, and *Flesh* wasn't published until later that year,[6] by which time Edward and Florence were definitively divorced. But if *Flesh* can't save Edward and Florence, it can, at least, give the lie to Larkin. Sexual intercourse *did* begin before 1963, and Nancy and Marcus are the proof.

Brophy is often celebrated for her novels' sexual non-conformism and what Carole-Anne Sweeney calls their 'delightful perversity',[7] an aspect of her writing entirely in line with the progressive views expressed in her journalism, that pushed for, among other things, gender equality, homosexual rights and animal rights. (It is worth noting however that her most celebrated feature articles on these subjects were not published until after the novels I will be discussing in this essay.) Books like *The Finishing Touch*, *In Transit* and, in a more subdued manner, *The King of a Rainy Country*, give us ingenious role play, gender bending and gender blending, the intricate dance of fantasy. These are features the novels share with those of her contemporary, friend and lover Iris Murdoch, who, in books such as *A Severed Head*, *The Bell* and *The Black Prince* explored the consequences the loss of religious faith, and the flooding in of Freud's theories of the unconscious, and of psychosexual development, to replace it. Murdoch's novels can seem like a series of laboratory experiments, under the controlled conditions offered by the often enclosed communities of her settings, in which she tests for the presence and behaviour of morality in these (those?) psychologically-determined times. But while Murdoch's characters fall in and out of love with alarming regularity, and as a consequence are habitually, even compulsively adulterous, they don't often actually have sex. They don't have to. The libido, in Murdoch, is a psychological, even an intellectual or spiritual mechanism, rather than a physiological one. Nor, where sex is concerned, is she interested in depicting the act; when she does, it is more likely to be from the exterior,

stumbled upon, and of an illicit, taboo nature. (I'm thinking particularly of the incestuous sex either interrupted or spied upon in *A Severed Head* and *The Time of the Angels*.)

Like Murdoch, then, Brophy is interested in perverse, transgressive and anomalous sexual behaviour, and positively so, but she is also interested in the erotics of sex in its more conventional forms. Twice in the run of three very different short novels she published in the early years of the 1960s, she describes heterosexual intercourse at some length, and makes it a critical element of the plot. These are: Marcus and Nancy's first time in bed together, on their honeymoon, in *Flesh* (1962), and Anna and 'Don Giovanni''s one-night stand in *The Snow Ball* (1964). The first she writes from the man's point of view, the second from the woman's. In both cases she ignores the physical mechanics of the act, but concentrates entirely – and in detail – on the physiological and psychological experience: of what sex feels like, and what goes through a person's mind when they are doing it.

Where Murdoch's novels are concerned with the social aspects of desire, then – how it spills out of the bedroom to other aspects of life – *The Snow Ball* and *Flesh* concentrate on the erotic, by which I mean the aesthetics of sexual appetite, desire and identity. (And I very much include under this aesthetic banner the squeamishness and horror expressed in the failed sexual encounter in *On Chesil Beach*.) In this they tread a perilous line, not just in terms of offending prevailing morality – *Flesh* was published only two years after the unexpurgated *Lady Chatterley's Lover* – but of upsetting critical sensibilities.

The problem with sex in any literary artform is to do with point of view, and this means it's a particular problem for the novel, which rather considers point of view its special province. The novel can show us a character from the outside and from the inside, can even, for example using the free indirect style, do both at once. But this trick doesn't work with the physical act of sex, for two reasons. One is that is that during sex the brain becomes hyper-stimulated with a flood of very particular sense data and a surge of neurochemicals, and our

perceptual apparatus becomes overloaded. We feel a lot, during sex, but we're not always able to say what it is that we feel. The second problem is that although novels are good at showing characters from the inside and the outside, nowhere is that difference greater that in sex. There is a chasm between how sex *looks* – at once frantic and static, and variously brutal and ridiculous – and how it *feels*. Most sex goes on inside our heads, unvocalised. When we do vocalise it ('Yes! Yes! Yes!' or 'God!') we are pointing to a peak experience that is crying out for a means of expression, and to the inability of language to do just that.

This problem of how to depict sex in language is borne out by the existence of the Bad Sex Award, organised by the *Literary Review*, to regular controversy. The prize describes its purpose as 'to draw attention to poorly written, perfunctory or redundant passages of sexual description in modern fiction',[8] and often picks out writers who founder in the attempt to bring metaphorical language to bear on the description of sexual intercourse. Brigid Brophy, I'd contend, would never have been nominated for the Bad Sex Award. Quite what she achieved in her descriptions of sex in these two novels, and what she intended by them, is what I will discuss in the remainder of this essay.

Flesh

Flesh is the story of Marcus and Nancy, a newly married couple whose experience of sex stands in stark contrast to that of Florence and Edward in *On Chesil Beach*. Both couples are newly-weds, and sleeping together for the first time on or just after their wedding night. They are doing so at more or less the same time in history. McEwan's book is set specifically in July 1962, while Brophy's novel is less exact – but, published in late 1962, with Iris Murdoch reading it in typescript in March of that year, I think we can safely say it is set at around the turn of the decade. Brophy's couple are older, 28 and 29 to McEwan's 22 apiece, and,

crucially, Brophy's Nancy is sexually experienced, with four past lovers. More than that, she has, the author tells us, 'a talent [for] sexual intercourse'.[9]

There are other similarities between the couples. All are intellectuals, of the North London/Oxford type. Both women play the violin, though Brophy's Nancy is less accomplished than McEwan's Florence, who will go on to form a celebrated string quartet. Marcus, like both Edward and Florence, is a virgin, and, at the start of the book, easily as socially awkward as either of them. On the night they first sleep together, Marcus is, no less than Edward, 'terrified of making love to Nancy and also terrified of failing to.'[10] Like Edward, Marcus is too nervous to enjoy the pre-sex dinner, though the food in Lucca in Tuscany, where Brophy's couple go on honeymoon, is surely better than that in Dorset; and he too is embarrassed in his contact with the hotel staff, thinking that every waiter and clerk can intuit his deep anxiety about the act: 'He was convinced he would never be able to behave with the vulgar normality of the men illustrated in travel brochures.'[11]

What saves Marcus is Nancy's communication. It's a perennial standby of sex advice columns today, but in 1962 this might have been revolutionary. (Compare to McEwan, as Edward and Florence edge towards their calamity: 'She and Edward still held each other's eyes. Talking appeared out of the question.'[12]) Meanwhile, in *Flesh*:

> She talked to him. Marcus had always imagined that when he did at last make love to a woman it would be in terrible silence, interrupted only by such noises as their bodies might involuntarily make, which he had already conceived might be embarrassing. But Nancy talked to him about what he was to do, about what he was doing, in a low, rather deep, swift voice which provoked in his skin almost the same sensation as her hands. When he entered her body, he felt he was following her voice.[13]

It is the last line here that is typical of Brophy's approach to treating the sex act. On reading the novel in typescript, earlier in the year, Murdoch wrote to Brophy: 'You must be the first person who has described sexual intercourse beautifully and well in a book. I liked the fine fine sensuousness of it all.'[14]

What follows, in *Flesh*, is two pages of lyrical description of what having sex, for the first time, *feels like*, for Marcus. This is part psychological, part physiological. What is written, what is eroticised, is not the act, but the experience of it, as if Brophy is sketching a phenomenology of sex. The description is general, the language abstract, not concrete and graphic. There are no body parts, or at least no genitalia. The only thing that is 'inserted' anywhere, in a comic touch coming at the end of the passage, is Nancy's finger, in Marcus's ear. The language is metaphorical, but the metaphors don't pertain to the physical, as in so many nominations for the Bad Sex Awards. For example, there is a grotto, but the grotto is not – or not primarily – a metaphor for the vagina:

> Where she led him was a strange world that was not new to him, since he had always known it existed, subterraneanly: a grotto, with whose confines and geographical dispositions he at once made himself quite familiar, as with the world of inside his own mouth: but a magic grotto, limitless, infinitely receding and enticing, because every sensation he experienced there carried on its back an endless multiplication of overtones, with the result that the sensation, though more than complete, was never finished, and every experienced conducted him to the next; a world where he pleasurably lost himself in a confusion of the senses not in the least malapropos but as appropriate and precise as poetry – a world where one really did see sounds and hear scents, where doves might well have roared and given suck, where perfectly defined, delightful loyal tactile sensations dissolved into apperceptions of light or darkness, of colour, of thickness, of temperature.[15]

Certainly, it is possible to read this grotto metaphor two different ways: for Nancy's vagina ('with whose confines and geographical dispositions he at once made himself quite familiar'), but also for the dark, interior non-place of sex, as it is experienced, in the moment. The punctiliousness of Brophy's syntax, and her insistence on following a thought or a feeling to its utmost refinement of meaning, is reminiscent of Henry James, and in fact the phenomenology of sex would appear to be as important to Brophy as the deepest intricacies of psychology are to James.

Although this is 'straight' heterosexual intercourse, then, there is perversity implicit in it. If the grotto is a metaphor for the vagina, then Brophy's application of it to Marcus feminises him. There are no phallic metaphors at his disposition, no matter that Brophy

elsewhere accepts these as an appropriate unconscious expression of Freudian truths.[16] The second passage of this extended sex scene does, however, recast Marcus in a more active role:

> And yet, even as he felt drained, a climax would gather out of his pebbly dryness like a wave re-forming in its moment of being sucked back, and he would heave himself up, curling above her like a wave, and would snatch, rape, her into an embrace of bitter, muscular, desperate, violence, that could only, he felt, be resolved by a death agony.[17]

Two thoughts occur on this passage. Firstly, that again Brophy supplies Marcus with a metaphor (an ocean wave) that is more generally applied to the female sexual experience – and in fact that Brophy herself applies to the female orgasm in *The Snow Ball*.[18] And secondly, that it is entirely characteristic of Brophy to use the – here – provocative word 'rape' in its original and correct but now archaic meaning of *to seize by force*, or *carry off*. This points both to her insistence on linguistic precision and variegation as part of the novelist's duty, and to her wilfulness as a writer, and her readiness to court controversy and misreading, even in the passage in her book where she has the most to gain, and lose.

The flowering of Marcus's perversity within the conventional domain of his married, heterosexual sex-life, shows itself both in and out of bed. It is hinted that he and Nancy, while still on their honeymoon in Lucca, experiment with unusual sex acts:

> 'Nothing is perverse. Nothing at all, if you really want to do it.'
> They acted on her apophthegm.
> But presently Marcus reversed it and whispered, in an appreciative voice.
> 'Everything is perverse. If you really want to do it.'[19]

Likewise, he is happy to sashay down the hotel corridor in his wife's dressing gown, 'not caring in the least if someone guessed or even glimpsed that beneath its flounced, flowery cotton skirt he was, and very masculinely, naked'.[20]

This queering or inversion of Marcus's sexual persona is intrinsic to the novel's plot, which is often described as a gender-swapped retelling of the Pygmalion myth, but is as much a response to George Bernard Shaw's 1914 play as to the original. Shaw's play's point of

difference with the original myth – i.e. that the statue/pupil, Eliza Doolittle, outgrows and rejects her maker/teacher, the Professor of Phonetics Henry Higgins – is carried over into Brophy's novel, only for Brophy to engineer the happy ending for her couple that Shaw explicitly rejected for Higgins and Eliza.

In *Flesh*, then, Nancy takes up the shy, awkward, congenitally single Marcus and, in marrying him and 'teaching' him sex, makes of him a sensualist. He grows in confidence, getting a job that he loves and that Nancy resents, and then, when the two of them have a child, sleeping with their German au pair while Nancy is out at work herself. Marcus's sensualism expresses itself through gluttony as well as libido, however, and by the end of the novel he is, in Nancy's own words, 'disgustingly fat'.[21] The book's ambiguous resolution comes from her realisation that she desires him *because of*, rather than despite, the 'horror' of his fatness: ambiguous, because in the book's final scene – another, albeit more perfunctory sex scene – Nancy yields to Marcus in an entirely passive, stereotypically female manner: 'she groaned under the irresistible pleasure he caused her – and also because it *was* pleasure, because it *was* irresistible, where she might have preferred pain'.[22]

There is an irony here that runs counter to Brophy's prevailing image in her novels and journalism as social and sexual provocateur – which is otherwise apparent in the novel's unfussed discussion and acceptance of homosexuality, both in terms of Marcus's sister, Elsie, considered a repressed lesbian, and Marcus's employer, Polydore, presumed 'queer'. Nancy starts out as an embodiment – even a herald – of the liberated women of the 1960s who, as Brophy later wrote in her 1965 *Sunday Times* article 'The Immorality of Marriage', are 'free to admit to themselves that they have a taste for sexual intercourse',[23] yet she ends up literally trapped beneath her overweight husband, and enjoying it. It's true that the *Sunday Times* article does allow for the possibility of equality in marriage:

> Modern married people are free to choose to go back to the 'natural' division of roles between the sexes – provided they can discern what on earth that is.[24]

> Men and women […] can achieve imaginative identification, in which there can be no question of rivalry or a conflict of self-interests; the self-interest, ambitions and ideals – the very Ego – of each are those of the other.[25]

Nevertheless it is an unexpected ending to the novel, and perhaps one as much influenced by the aesthetic demands of the form (it is in some manner a 'twist' ending) as by the ethical or political stance of the author. As Michael Bronski correctly states, 'Brophy's [journalistic] writing explicitly critiques a culture that views the world through heterosexual paradigms predicated on traditional gender roles',[26] and yet *Flesh* pushes back against that critique, toying with the paradigms Brophy elsewhere attacks. The novel's irony certainly precludes the idea that Nancy's submission to Marcus is a full-blown reactionary acceptance of traditional gender roles. For a more appropriate interpretation of the ending we can look to Marcus's fatness, which in the novel feminises him:

> 'Just look at yourself,' [Nancy] said. 'Look at your thighs. Look at your chest. You've got great pendulous breasts, like a woman.'
> He gave a chuckle. 'It's a process of empathy. I've *become* a Rubens woman.'[27]

Earlier, Nancy had explicitly said that she loathes Marcus's sister (the presumed lesbian Elsie) because she looks like Marcus, but with breasts. In submitting to a version of himself *with* breasts, Nancy is essentially embracing her bisexuality, at the very moment Marcus is luxuriating in his newfound hermaphroditism. To a certain extent this prefigures Susan Sontag's 1967 essay 'The Pornographic Imagination', in which she raises an eyebrow at the 'questionable assumption that human sexual appetite is, if untampered with, a natural pleasant function' and that '"the obscene" is a convention, the fiction imposed upon nature by a society convinced there is something vile about the sexual functions'.[28] Rather, Sontag suggests, human sexuality is 'a highly questionable phenomenon, and belongs, at least potentially, among the extreme rather than ordinary experiences of humanity'.[29] The achievement of *Flesh* as a novel is that it buries this perversity at least a little way under the

surface. Nancy and Marcus both are and are not a normal, happily married couple. They are certainly happier than Florence and Edward could ever have been.

The Snow Ball

Like *Flesh*, *The Snow Ball* is structured around (ostensibly) a heterosexual seduction leading to sex, but whereas in the earlier novel the woman is the pursuer and the man the pursued, here the roles are returned to their default, heteronormative position. Anna K, guest of her older friend Anne at her exceedingly lavish New Year's costume party, is pursued throughout the party by a masked Don Giovanni. She evades him for a time, but then yields, in increments. First, they flirt verbally, then they share a clandestine embrace behind the curtains of the raised gallery overlooking the house's packed ballroom, and finally they, almost wordlessly, agree to go to bed together. Anna's first thought, to use the house's master bedroom, is thwarted when they stumble upon Anne and her husband Tom-Tom having sex there themselves; Anna agrees to return to Don Giovanni's flat, although she insists on them both keeping their true identities secret from each other.

Where McEwan's Edward and Florence were both inexperienced, and *Flesh*'s Nancy experienced, to Marcus's virginal innocence, both Anna and her Don are experienced lovers. In this they are contrasted, in the novel, not just to Anna and Tom-Tom, the older hosts, but to a younger couple, Ruth and (another) Edward, who lose their virginities together in the back of Ruth's father's Bentley, parked outside, more or less at the same time as Anna and the Don are sleeping together at his flat.

As she does for Nancy and Marcus, Brophy treats Anna and the Don's sex seriously, as a pleasurable act founded on mutual respect and desire – in which, to use Brophy's own definition of an ideal marriage partnership, they both achieve 'imaginative identification' with each other, with 'no question of rivalry or a conflict of self-interests'.[30] In other words,

sex can be as fulfilling in a one-night stand as within a marriage – a sentiment in line with Brophy's journalism. And, as with Marcus in *Flesh*, Brophy uses the scene to focus on the experience, rather than the representation, of sex.

Again, there is no physical description of the act, and we are left to decide whether this shows coyness, self-censorship, or a positive intent to ignore this aspect of sexual behaviour in favour of the physiological and psychological. Here is the start of the sex scene in *The Snow Ball*:

> Then his head plunged, and his face was lost to her. She lost the wish to see it, the memory even that it existed, in the response of her sensations to his labouring body: until she suddenly emerged, at the end of the same arc of sensations which had begun with the flutter of his laugh and of his body, to the knowledge that her sensations had passed the point up to which she was free to go back on them, and that she was now free to have thoughts again, since her voyage to pleasure was from now on involuntary.[31]

'His labouring body'; 'Her voyage to pleasure': the (for Brophy) triteness of the prose perhaps can perhaps be explained by Anna's lack of investment in the act, pleasurable though it is in strict terms. Earlier, she had complained to the Don how 'awful [it was] to be surprised by one's own [sexual] feelings, at my age',[32] and now, during sex, she thinks of her coming orgasm as 'an act as unwilled as sneezing, falling asleep or dying'.[33] When it comes, it is, though pleasurable, described in less than positive terms. 'Suffering, sobbing, swelling, sawing, sweating, her body was at last convulsed by the wave that broke inside it'.[34]

This is not the almost spiritual experience that Marcus has. It is, by contrast, almost entirely physiological. Sex, for Anna, it seems, is – like the desire that preceded it – an inconvenient but entirely natural phenomenon: neither to be courted nor avoided, but to be dealt with as and when it occurs. This plays out also in the narrative technique applied to the scene. Whereas the description of Marcus's first experience of sex is narrated as it were from above, extrapolating, condensing and summarising thoughts he would not have been able to

express in the moment, Anna in *The Snow Ball* is able to think as she fucks; she owns the thoughts laid out on the page.

Afterwards, she puts off her lover's entreaties to allow their relationship to extend, for, he says, he loves her. The short, final third part of the novel is expressly anti-romantic, with Anna giving no good reason why they should not see each other again, and get to know each other. It's certainly not his fault, as they seem particularly well matched in interests, intellect and character. If sex is part of a complex of human activities also including love and desire then what is interesting about *The Snow Ball* is the ease with which it shows how desire and love can become uncoupled. Compare to the novels of Iris Murdoch, where desire is a perpetual motion machine, never sated or extinguished: if sleeping with someone ends your desire for them, then that desire will simply be transferred to another love object. *The Snow Ball* offers a particularly brutal rebuttal to this idea: sex is the consummation of desire, out of which love as likely *may not* as *may* grow, even if the sex is good, even if it's with someone one feels physically and intellectually attracted to and respects.

The novel ends darkly, with death both entering the party, when a random guest collapses and dies, and Anna's thoughts, in the chilling final line. If Marcus and Nancy's marriage triumphs through imagination identification, and survives through the growth of a joint but not strictly shared perversity, then for Anna none of this is possible.

Brophy's possible theories of sex

While Brophy nowhere sets out what she is trying to do in her writing about sex in these two novels, she does makes clear statements in her journalism and criticism about the treatment of sex in literature, from which it is possible to infer, if not a theory, then at least an attitude. These pieces, many of them collected in *Don't Never Forget* – and written, as I have said, largely *after* the novels – include discussions of obscenity and censorship, and reviews of

writers who write about sex. Of the latter, she disapproves of Kingsley Amis (juvenile), the Marquis de Sade ('not graphic enough to be pornographic'),[35] D. H. Lawrence, and Henry Miller; while she approves of Colette, Françoise Sagan, John Cleland and Ronald Firbank.

One might have expected Lawrence to meet Brophy's approval. Certainly she is *for* Lawrence to the extent that she is against the censorship of his work (but then she is pretty much against all censorship), and moreover she approves of his insistence on using simple four-letter words to describe basic human activities, but it is his mixing of sex with a nebulous pagan spirituality that, finally, bores her. Her discussion of Lawrence comes in a piece on censorship entitled 'The British Museum and Solitary Vice', which she ends by quoting from a section on the ideal marriage from his essay 'A Propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*', only to break off:

> 'in the rhythm of days, in the rhythm of months, in the rhythm of…' I can't be bothered to copy out any more of this fake-Swinburne incantation. In fact, marriage is no marriage that is not linked up with human imagination ('the marriage of true minds'), and that's all that matters.[36]

That line about human imagination, with its nod to Shakespeare, could be taken as a vindication of Marcus and Nancy's physical and mental – though not ever quite spiritual – communion in *Flesh*, although it is unclear by the end of the novel whether their growing and evolving sexual compatibility is anything more than a union of convenience between two healthy perverts.

Lawrence turns up again in her piece on Henry Miller, in which she attributes the British writer with 'the effect of literary fastidiousness, which puritanism, perhaps by accident, lent to [him].'[37] Literary fastidiousness is a quality that could equally aptly be applied to Brophy, it must be said, although nothing in her writing or her life marks her as a puritan. Miller's failings, by contrast, extend far beyond a lack of fastidiousness, as Brophy sets out at length:

> The idea of a woman as a personality by whose autonomous existence he might feel moved is beyond him. Curiously enough, so is the idea – the sexual idea – of the female body. Proclaiming that sex is everywhere, he seems insensitive to sexuality, so blunted that nothing less than a primary sex characteristic can force itself on his attention. He is no sensualist. He might have made a mechanical engineer. He sees the female body as an assembly of knobs, pipes and slots. The connecting passages of flesh mean nothing to him except as a containing wall, on which he might well chalk – he really feels no more about any woman than about that whore, Paris – 'Miller was here'.[38]

Misogyny, anti-sensualism and lack of literary technique are here synonymous, or at least compound one another. What links them is a lack of imagination or empathy, the factors that Brophy has already imputed to a genuine marriage of minds, but which here can be taken as the basic requirements for writing about sex, as opposed to the mere attention to 'primary sexual characteristics'.

In the same review she declares that Miller's 'anecdotes are wholly concerned with externals: accounts of the acrobatics of copulation',[39] and that he 'lacks the skill of the commercial pornographer. The sensibility which is blunt to the poetry of the erotic cannot exploit the erotic either'.[40] It is this 'poetry of the erotic' that is the quarry of this essay. It can be found, clearly, in pornography, and it is there in Lawrence, but the underpinning philosophy, and therefore the metaphors, for Brophy, are wrong. To write sex well, then, you need imagination, empathy, focus, and a sensitive literary technique – just as to *do* it well you need imagination, empathy, focus on the matter at hand, and technique (or, as per Nancy, 'talent'). For Brophy, Lawrence's elevated incantation is as wrongheaded as the mindless sexual graffiti of Miller.

It is worth dwelling on the question of how and whether sex writing should explicitly describe the physical mechanics of sex, as it is something that Brophy avoids. In her piece on censorship she commends Lawrence for his use of four-letter words, for telling the basics of sex like it is. For Brophy, this devolves to syntactic probity:

> any phrase in which the man is or does something *with* the woman is linguistically inadequate – inadequate to the act which, of all acts, is transitive, with a male subject

> and a direct female object. If this seems to us coarse, if it even seems to hint at brutality imposed on the woman, the fault lies with our obsession with brutality. The act *is* so – and is, in fact, not the least bit of good to the woman if it isn't. As a matter of fact the verb *love* is also transitive; it has the same vowel sound as, and is neither coarser nor prettier than, the other four-letter verb which represents one of the act in which it may take expression.[41]

Reading this, it is impossible not to note that Brophy uses the word 'fuck' nowhere in these two novels – nor, in fact, very many transitive verbs at all. We must look for the 'poetry of the erotic' elsewhere.

In the discussion of sex, Kingsley Amis is an interesting case. Brophy's piece on him in *Don't Never Forget* is a blistering attack on his debut, *Lucky Jim,* written on the tenth anniversary of its publication.[42] She doesn't really address the treatment of sex (not that there's much of it in that book), but does miss a trick when discussing 'Lucky Jim, Mark V', a.k.a. Roger Micheldene, in Amis's fifth and most recent novel, *One Fat Englishman,* published in 1963, right in between *Flesh* and *The Snow Ball*. This novel, while full of the sexism, racism and bigotry familiar from Amis's books, is at least a lot funnier than *Lucky Jim,* and does keep step with Brophy in terms of its recognition of the changing place of sex both in society and in the novel as the permissive decade finds its feet. It also contains a sex scene that is particularly interesting for our current discussion. Roger spends the first half of the novel in a permanent state of frustrated desire for the married Helene Bang, who seems uninterested in resuming the pair's earlier liaison, but eventually relents.

One chapter ends with Helene agreeing to go to bed with him, and the next starts *in media res,* with Roger reciting Virgil to himself as a way of delaying orgasm:

> 'Conticuere omnes,' Roger was saying urgently to himself half an hour later, '*intentique ora tenebant. Inde toro pater Aeneas sic fatus ab alto*: '*Infandum. Regina, iubes renovare dolorem* …
>
> What Roger was saying to himself might have struck a casual observer, if one could have been contrived, as greatly at variance with what he was doing. In fact, however, the two were intimately linked. If he wanted to go on doing what he was doing for more than another ten seconds at the outside it was essential that he should go on saying things to himself – any old things as long as the supply of them could be kept up.[43]

If we read this scene, like that in *Flesh*, as an exploration of the phenomenology of sex, then we can see first of all that sex, for Roger, involves a drastic distancing of himself from his experience. And also that Helene is absent. Where for Marcus, having sex with Nancy in *Flesh*, there is a he and a she, and a continuous attempt to characterise and valorise the sensations heaping up on him, and to map the virgin territory of his own sexuality, for Roger there is only a strategic self-blinkering. It is bleakly funny. When it ends – he has moved from Virgil to A E Housman – it is something more than that:

> After the weeping Pleiads had made half a dozen circuits he found things beginning to get easier. His mind stopped behaving like a motor with a slipping clutch and gradually withdrew into itself. He saw nothing; there were sounds, but he heard them less and less. He lost all interest in where he was and who he was with, in any part or aspect of the future. For perhaps a minute, though he himself could not have known how long, he came as close as he had ever done to being unaware of who he was. Then the minute ended and he began taking notice of things again, including who he was with.[44]

Which is as good a description of the *petite mort* as you could imagine, and throws a new light on the reader's understanding of Roger. Rather than being merely a self-serving skirt-chasing arsehole, he is a tragic, self-destructive figure whose compulsive sexual desire is bound up in the wish to obliterate his own personality. It's as cogent and biting an exploration of the phenomenology of sexuality (or at least male sexuality) as anything in *Flesh*, but negatively, rather than positively portrayed.

Where then should we turn for positive descriptions of sex writing? Brophy commends Françoise Sagan for showing her characters as sexually active but free from sex drive, which places them somewhat in the position of Anna K in *The Snow Ball*:

> In love, they are obsessed by the awareness that their love is not quite obsessive. Every act, even every sexual act, is performed in the emptiness where the actors can ask both, and equally, 'Why should I?' and 'Why shouldn't I?' They are all in the situation of Josée in *Les Merveilleux Nuages*: 'Elle était libre. Ce n'était pas désagréable, ce n'était pas exaltant.'[45]

Nevertheless, unlike Anna – but like Murdoch's characters – none of Sagan's characters are!existential ennui: 'An author too tired to evoke a dinner party cannot be expected to

evoke the ambience of sexual intercourse. She merely states that it has taken place'.[46] While approving of this, in Sagan, Brophy clearly wants to go further, herself.

There is more sex in John Cleland, author of the once-notorious *Fanny Hill*, which Brophy approves for its eighteenth-century sensibility:

> It is to Watteau's landscapes that he casts back when Fanny calls sexual intercourse 'our trip to Cythera'. Indeed, Cleland's couples share with Watteau's a grave elegance and a courteous concern for each other. Even when the four pairs take turns on the couch, 'good manners and politeness were inviolably observ'd'. Cleland himself is as decent. Mercifully *not* 'robust' or Rowlandsonian, he is decorous not merely in vocabulary but down to the last cadence of his fine, plain prose.[47]

That 'decent' is unexpected, and perhaps points us back to Brophy's surprising reticence when it comes to the plain facts and acts of sex in her writing. After all, if she would have found herself unable to write 'fuck' in a *Sunday Times* piece about D. H. Lawrence and *Lady Chatterley*, there would presumably have been nothing to stop her putting the word – and others like it – in her novels. Candid in her desire to put sexual activity centre-stage, and keen also to show it at its equitable, generous, and perhaps only implicitly perverse best, she wants the poetry of the erotic to be neither 'robust' (for which read *debased*), nor incantatory, (for which read *elevated*), and certainly nothing like Miller's blunt, violent scrawl. As with Miller, she equates the sexual behaviour described on the page with the linguistic and lexical behaviour of the writer. Miller the author is as brutal and pig-ignorant in writing about sex as his characters are in having it. Cleland is as decorous and decent as his. In fact Fanny's description, at the beginning of her second letter, of the right way to write about sex is of interest: she should write, she says, 'in a mean [i.e. middle way] tempered with taste, between the revoltingness of gross, rank and vulgar expressions, and the ridicule of mincing metaphors and affected circumlocutions'.[48] For the first, read Miller, for the second the worst of the nominees for the Bad Sex Award.

Brophy does neither, but if anything, she leans more to the second charge than to the first. It is fair to wonder why she wasn't more forthright in her language and descriptions in

her novels, as she had been in her journalism. For the combination of imaginative sensuousness with the four-letter words needed to shake society out of its puritanism we would have to wait for John Updike, later in the decade. Yet what Brophy still does better than Updike is the evocation in prose of the feeling of the experience of sex. Which is, after all, our reasons for engaging in it whatsoever. What we all get up to in our bedrooms may not look much like what people get up to in pornographic films, but at best it feels like how they look like they're feeling. *Flesh* embodies and enacts this ecstasy, in a positive way, invoking not the dubious synthesis of phallic mythology, as in Lawrence, but a sensuality shared through the faculty of human imagination, just as *One Fat Englishman* enacts its negative version, the longed-for annihilation of personality experienced in orgasm.[49]

Watteau, the painter, turns up again in a short piece in *Don't Never Forget* on Ronald Firbank, of whom Brophy writes: 'Eroticism plays over [his] surfaces like sunlight on a Watteau sleeve; and because it is so evanescent, resting for so brief a space on each facet, the effect, as with Watteau, is of tragedy'.[50] This evanescence, and the tragedy associated with it, are equally applicable to Brophy's writing about sex, although obviously her surfaces are not exterior, but interior: the surfaces of feelings and sensations, rather than parts of the body. And that tragedy is implicit in sex is central to *The Snow Ball*, where in the aftermath to her orgasm, already described as 'suffering, sobbing', Anna experiences 'an outburst, a shower, of pleasure [and] in this most intense, least voluntary and therefore most death-imaging of pleasures there was – and also for the release – a wry sadness'.[51] The sadness being, presumably – and this is the thing that Roger Micheldene doesn't quite grasp – that sex only detaches you from yourself temporarily. For the greater release you must wait.

Notes

[1] Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 105.

[2] McEwan, p. 3.

[3] Philip Larkin, 'Annus Mirabilis' in *Collected Poems* (London: Marvell/Faber, 1988)

[4] McEwan, p. 8.

[5] McEwan, p. 40

[6] It was reviewed by the *New Statesman* and the *Times Literary Supplement* in November of that year.

[7] Carole-Anne Sweeney, 'Why This Rather Than That?: The Delightful Perversity of Brigid Brophy', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 12: 2 (2018), pp. 233-247.

[8] https://literaryreview.co.uk/bad-sex-in-fiction-award [accessed 26th April 2019].

[9] Brigid Brophy, *Flesh* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1962), p. 52.

[10] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 53.

[11] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 55.

[12] McEwan, 88.

[13] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 56.

[14] *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995*, ed. by Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015), p. 223.

[15] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 56.

[16] See the chapter 'Double Entendre' in Brigid Brophy, *Black Ship to Hell* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1962), p. 45.

[17] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 56.

[18] Brigid Brophy, *The Snow Ball* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964), p. 157. See also *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, discussed below.

[19] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 58.

[20] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 60.

[21] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 154.

[22] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 155.

[23] Brigid Brophy, 'The Immorality of Marriage', in *Don't Never Forget* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1965), pp. 22-28 (22).

[24] Brophy, 'The Immorality of Marriage', p. 23.

[25] Brophy, 'The Immorality of Marriage', p. 24.

[26] Michael Bronski, 'Brigid Brophy's *Black Ship to Hell* and a Genealogy of Queer Theory', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 12: 2 (2018), pp. 171–85 (p. 180).

[27] Brophy, *Flesh*, p. 154.

[28] Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: FSG, 1969), pp. 35-73 (pp. 56-57).

[29] Sontag, p. 57.

[30] Brophy, 'The Immorality of Marriage', p. 24.

[31] Brophy, *The Snow Ball*, p. 156.

[32] Brophy, *The Snow Ball*, p. 135.

[33] Brophy, *The Snow Ball*, p. 156.

[34] Brophy, *The Snow Ball*, p. 157.

[35] Brigid Brophy, 'Justine' in *Don't Never Forget*, pp. 81-84 (p. 81).

[36] Brigid Brophy, 'The British Museum and Solitary Vice', in *Don't Never Forget*, pp. 101-5 (p. 105).

[37] Brigid Brophy, 'Henry Miller', in *Don't Never Forget*, pp. 231-8 (p. 235).

[38] Brophy, 'Henry Miller', p. 235.

[39] Brophy, 'Henry Miller', p. 233.

[40] Brophy, 'Henry Miller', p. 236.

[41] Brophy, ‘The British Museum and Solitary Vice’, p. 103.

[42] Brigid Brophy, ‘Lucky Jim’, in *Don’t Never Forget*, pp. 217-22.

[43] Kingsley Amis, *One Fat Englishman* (London: Gollancz, 1963), p. 107.

[44] Amis, p. 108.

[45] Brigid Brophy, ‘Françoise Sagan and the Art of the Beau Geste’, in *Don’t Never Forget*, pp. 269-84 (p.274).

[46] Brophy, ‘Françoise Sagan and the Art of the Beau Geste’, p. 280.

[47] Brigid Brophy, ‘Mersey Sound, 1750’, in *Don’t Never Forget*, pp. 76-80 (p. 80).

[48] John Cleland, *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (London, 1749) Letter the Second.

[49] It is interesting that although Brophy treats the relationship between Eros and Thanatos at length in *Black Ship to Hell*, she only discusses in passing the self-annihilation inherent in orgasm. See, again, Part I Chapter 5: ‘The Double Entendre’.

[50] Brigid Brophy, ‘The New Rythum and Other Pieces’, in *Don’t Never Forget*, pp. 243-8 (p. 246).

[51] Brophy, *The Snow Ball*, p. 157.