

## PERVERSION

Historically, *perversion* may be the most affect-laden, ambiguous, and misleading term in the whole lexicon of the study of sexual behavior. "Some form of sex gratification . . . preferred to heterosexual coitus and habitually sought after as the primary or only form of sex gratification desired" is the definition offered by *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961). Although the original negativity of the word has weakened in recent decades, it still retains the connotation of a departure from the norm. Fortunately, most serious researchers recognize the problematic character of the word and use it—if at all—with caution.

*History of the Term.* Perversion entered the semantic field of sexuality only in the last third of the nineteenth century. Until then it had meant simply "any qualitative alteration of a function in disease." Against this background, "perversion of the sexual instinct" meant a change in the direction of the sexual desires, as opposed to a quantitative change (satyriasis and nymphomania on the one hand, impotence and frigidity on the other). The medical criteria for perversion were its involuntary exclusiveness and fixation. It was never asserted, as many laymen were to assume, that all "perverse" behavior stemmed from pathology, but only that certain individuals were in the grip of an **abnormal** sexual orientation beyond their control.

It was Richard von Krafft-Ebing's ill-fated notion that the etiology of perverse (= non-procreative) sexual acts (*perverse Handlungen*) could be ascribed either to *Perversion* (pathology) or to *Pervertität* (vice). This novel distinction was important for the forensic psychiatrist because it separated persons accused of sexual offenses who were unwilling victims of inner compulsions from others who willfully embraced illicit behavior and were therefore responsible for their actions. Though popularized in Krafft-Ebing's best-selling *Psychopathia sexualis*

(1886; 12 editions in his lifetime), the distinction eluded the public mind, all the more as there had been in classical Latin the phrase *perversio morum* that left its imprint on the modern languages in the form of "moral perversion." Worse still, in English the word *pervert* had from the middle of the seventeenth century possessed the meaning "(religious) apostate," so that in the mind of the English speaker the word easily took on the sense of "one who willfully and obstinately departed from the moral norm of sexual behavior."

To complicate matters still further, the Italian physician Paolo Mantegazza had in his best-seller *Gli amori degli uomini* (1885) used the word *pervertimento* in the meaning that Krafft-Ebing assigned to *Pervertität*, and in Emilien Chesneau's French translation of Mantegazza's book, *L'Amour dans l'humanité* (1886) the word was rendered by *perversion*. Richard Francis Burton in the "Terminal Essay" appended to his translation of the *Thousand Nights and a Night* (1886) then wrote of "the wide diffusion of such erotic perversion, and its being affected by so many celebrities." Havelock Ellis, having both Krafft-Ebing and Burton before him when he wrote his pioneering *Sexual Inversion* (1897), used the word alternately in one and the other sense. On one page he could state: "We have no reason to suppose that this physician practiced every perversion he heard of from patients" while on another he wrote that Krafft-Ebing's treatise "contained over two hundred histories, not only of sexual inversion but of all other forms of sexual perversion." Thus the all too subtle distinction conveyed by the two suffixes was confused at the source, and a physician who used the word in one sense could unwittingly be understood by a layman in the other. The final stage was reached by Canon Derrick Sherwin Bailey in his book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (1955), where he employs the word *perversion* in exactly the sense that Krafft-Ebing had allotted to *Pervert-*

*sitāt*. He thus ratified the error that had been made by the very Havelock Ellis whom he berates for his supposed anticlericalism.

However, Bailey's confusion only repeated the misuse of the word that was especially characteristic of two groups of writers: the authors of pornographic novels and the clergy. In Louis Perceau's *Bibliographie du roman érotique au XIXe siècle* (1930), the entries in booksellers' catalogues from 1907 onward show the word *perversion* used consistently in the sense of *plaisir raffiné*, a "refinement of erotic pleasure." And understandably the Christian clergy seized upon the new term as a pseudo-scientific weapon with which to castigate the practice of "unnatural vice."

*Results of the Development.* The upshot of this imbroglio is that homosexuality has had to bear the further stigma of being a "sexual perversion" (however ambivalently understood) whose spread "threatened to corrupt the youth of the nation," "undermined the moral fabric of society," "raised the spectre of race suicide" and the like, while abusive letters addressed to gay organizations abound in affronts such as "You filthy perverts." Through its inherent ambiguity and acquired sinister penumbra, the word perpetuated the semantic confusion that enveloped the subject, hindering the emergence of a rational attitude toward homosexual behavior—and indeed of all conduct that departed from the ascetic norm of Christian theology. Since the underlying assumption of moralizing psychiatry was that nonreproductive sexual activity was somehow "perverse," it served to reinforce the normative edict of Scholastic theologians that sexual acts are legitimate only when performed within marriage and for purposes of procreation. If a scientific term is to be employed for such a deviation of the sexual instinct, then the elegant neologism *parhedonia* would be the logical choice.

*An Attempted Reformulation.* In recent years several professional philosophers have proposed a redefinition of the concept of perversion. Thomas Nagel, for example, argues that perversion is more psychological than physiological, and that perversions are "truncated or incomplete versions of the complete figuration." Thus bestiality, where there is lack of reciprocity, would be perversion, while homosexuality is not. Unfortunately, these philosophers' discussions are conducted in the afterglow of the earlier history of the set of terms—the adjectives *perverse* and *perverted*, the nouns *perversity* and *perversion*, and the verb *to pervert*—rendering problematic their intended reconstruction of it.

Warren Johansson

### PESSOA, FERNANDO (1888–1935)

Leading modern Portuguese poet. Born in Lisbon, he was educated in Durban, South Africa, where he became fluent in English and acquired a good knowledge of English literature. He returned to Portugal in 1905 and led an outwardly uneventful life, earning a modest but comfortable living as a translator of commercial correspondence until his death in 1935.

Though active in Lisbon's literary circles, Pessoa published only a small amount of poetry and some literary criticism during his lifetime. Since his death, however, he has been recognized as the greatest Portuguese poet after Camões and a major European writer. Pessoa is most famous for his invention of the heteronyms Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos, poetic creations with distinct personalities, philosophies, and styles, which were intended to add a dramatic element to his writing. Pessoa wrote poetry in both Portuguese and English, revolutionizing the use of the Portuguese language through his classical English education and his familiarity with English