

Immoralism

“And having thus created me,
Thus rooted me, he bade me grow
Guiltless forever, like a tree
That buds and blooms, nor seeks to know
The law by which it prospers so ...”

André Gide refers to these lines - from Browning's *Johannes Agricola in Meditation* - when elucidating the Antinomian heresy in his introduction to James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (first published in 1824). This “justified sinner” is, according to Gide, “in reality, unknown to himself, no doubt, an *antinomian*, one of the sect which, in about the year 1538, listened to the teaching of Johannes Agricola, as Pontanus informs us in his *Catalogue of Heresies*. And in the *Dictionary of all Religions* (London, 1704) we read as follows:

‘Antinomians, so denominated for rejecting the law, as a thing of no use under the gospel dispensation: they say that good works do not further, nor evil works hinder, salvation; that the child of God cannot sin, that God never chastiseth him, that murder, drunkenness, etc., are sins in the wicked but not in him, that the child of grace, being once assured of salvation, afterwards never doubteth ... that God doth not love any man for his holiness, that sanctification is no evidence of justification etc...

The beautiful Julia Gonzaga was associated with the circle of Italian nobles who, at the ruthless height of the Renaissance, were intrigued by this theory of justification, a sort of licence to kill from God, obviously cheaper than any indulgence. In his *History of Piracy*, Philip Gosse tells how Barbarossa attempted to capture this lady after he had sacked Reggio in 1534:

“Stories that he heard on his progress of the lovely Julia Gonzaga, Duchess of Trajetto and Countess of Fondi, next tempted him to an exploit of a somewhat different character. The young widow was the most famous beauty in Italy; no fewer than two hundred and eight Italian poets had written verses in her honour and the device emblazoned on her shield was the Flower of Love. it occurred to the corsair that she would

make an excellent token of his devotion to his new lord, Suleyman the Magnificent. The lady was at Fondi. Thither the pirate travelled, swiftly and by night. But the fame of his presence preceded him and the lady had just time to leap from her bed and gallop off on horseback dressed in the flimsiest of night garments and accompanied by one male attendant. She managed to escape, and afterwards condemned the attendant to death because, she alleged, he had been unduly familiar during that desperate nocturnal ride.”

It can be seen, from this arrogant annulment, that the antinomians carried their repudiation of good works to the extent of maintaining that even bad works could be done with impunity by those who were predestined to salvation.

In James Hogg’s novel we are led through the increasingly extravagant misdeeds of a character already bad who is egged on by this doctrine, and, as Gide avers,

“the account of the ‘bad works’, into which the ‘justified sinner’ complacently lets himself be drawn, is in itself passionately interesting ... we see him little by little yielding to the persuasion of a powerful friend whom he recognises, only when it is too late, as the very devil himself - though the devil is never actually named. One of the major interests of the book is the figurative portrayal of states of subjective consciousness and the slow exposition of the something possibly flattering in this progressive acquaintance with the Prince of Darkness.”

Gide goes on,

“No doubt it was necessary that this book should try or feign to be edifying ... Otherwise it would not have been tolerated. But I doubt whether Hogg’s personal point of view is that of true religion or whether it is not that of reason, common sense and a natural Tom Jones-like expansiveness, which is that of the justified sinner’s brother, whom the ‘justified’ murders out of a jealous and brooding hatred and, moreover, with the desire of getting hold of the elder brother’s share of their father’s inheritance. All this he does with the inspired claim of

committing not so much a murder as a pious deed ... All fanaticism is capable of bringing forth similar dispensers of justice.”

This story is revealed to us in the *Editor's narrative*, which constitutes the first part of the book, simply by way of an account of a series of horrible and confusing events. In the second part, however, which contains the 'justified sinner's' *Private Memoirs and Confessions*, we enter into the mind of the perpetrator of these crimes, and we are invited to share his sense of mystic confirmation:

“I wept for joy to be thus assured of my freedom from all sin, and of the impossibility of my ever again falling away from my new state.”

Gide is convinced that Browning was aware of Hogg's revolutionary novel, and was perhaps influenced by it in the creation of his dramatic soliloquies which so often invite the reader to identify with evil by following the introspection of some criminal mind. Consider much of *The Ring and the Book*, or *My Last Duchess*, or these lines from *Porphyria's Lover*:

“Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
 Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
 Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
 In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around
And strangled her ... “

This invitation to come into intimate contact with evil, even to explore its innermost workings, can sometimes beguile the reader into sympathy with its practitioners. It is a literary pleasure, in a Barthesian sense, a pleasure we take in the text, and this is subtly distinct from that fascination with the macabre celebrated so exhaustively in *The Romantic Agony* by Mario Praz. Here, we are not concerned with the poet's preoccupation with the ghoulish (essentially the envy of the non-participant), but with an enquiry into what makes wrong-doing so “human”, for surely it is an enigma that

the lovers of violent criminals will often remain faithful to them even after they learn the ghastly details?

Gide himself is the foremost exponent of this conceptual genre, manifest in various arts. which we might call "Immoralism" - to coin a term from his most celebrated novel *The Immoralist*.

A bookish and sedentary young man called Michel, the immoralist of its title, starts to cough blood on his honeymoon. His wife Marceline nurses him carefully, and he struggles towards health. During that struggle he comes to realise that he has never lived with any appreciation of the pleasures of health, sunlight and bodily beauty in mind. Now he embraces a more hedonistic approach, recovers and becomes a changed personality, rebelling against the morality of self-sacrifice and social compromise enjoined by the Christian ethic of service. Subsequently, Michel resolves to follow the dictates of his own desires in fervent admiration of crude but vigorous pleasures. He enjoys pure air and perfect objects. He gives a series of lectures in which he expounds his new theory of passionate engagement:

"Speaking of the later Latin civilization, I depicted artistic culture as welling up in a whole people, like a secretion, which is at first a sign of plethora, of a superabundance of health, but which afterwards stiffens, hardens, forbids the perfect contact of the mind with nature, hides under the persistent appearance of life a diminution of life, turns into an outside sheath, in which the cramped mind languishes and pines, in which at last it dies. Finally, pushing my thought to its logical conclusion, I showed culture, born of life, as the destroyer of life."

Later, a sort of panic seizes him at a gathering of acquaintances:

"Hubert and Louis were carelessly turning over some fine etchings from my father's collection, entirely regardless of how they were creasing them. In the smoking-room, Mathias, the better to listen to Leonard, had put his red-hot cigar down on a rosewood table. A glass of curacao had been spilled on the carpet. Albert was sprawling impudently on the sofa, with his muddy boots dirtying the cover. And the very dust of the air one breathed came from the horrible wear and tear of material objects ... A

frantic desire seized me to send all my guests packing. Furniture, stuffs, prints, lost all their value for me at the first stain; things stained were things touched by disease, with the mark of death on them.”

Later his wife falls ill, after a miscarriage; but whereas his wife nursed him with “Christian compassion”, Michel’s reaction to his wife’s illness is largely one of revulsion:

“Meanwhile the horrible clot had brought on serious trouble; after her heart had escaped, it attacked her lungs, brought on congestion, impeded her breathing, made it short and laborious. I thought she would never get well. Disease had taken hold of Marceline, never again to leave her; it had marked her, stained her. Henceforth she was a thing that had been spoiled.”

Michel admires the Barbarian empire of the Goths, especially the fifteen year old king Athalaric, who plunged “for a few years into a life of violent and unbridled pleasures with rude companions of his own age ... dying at eighteen, rotten and sodden with debauchery.” The immoralist’s fetish of health thus becomes confused with a callous hedonism, but his contempt for anything that is not stainless and recognition of such fresh-blooded vigour as was originally the child king’s strikes a chord with the idealised primitivism of the *Hitlerjungen* - that fascist impulse to sweep away our old, tired civilization in order to create a violently raw new regime, Spartan in its nudity - for Michel says of Athalaric, “I recognised in this tragic impulse toward a wilder, more natural state, something of what Marceline used to call my ‘crisis’.”

Michel is unable to nurse Marceline with the care she requires, and, finally, she fades. In reading *The Immoralist* we may feel unable to forgive Michel for not preferring her to himself. Yet this is the crux of the dilemma presented to us; for despite ourselves we sympathise with Michel’s impulses, we identify strongly with his first person singular, we share his confession - his “I”.

In his introduction to *The Justified Sinner*, Gide prefaces all his remarks by stating his admiration for John Stuart Mill’s essay *On Liberty*, to which, in 1924, “current events and the menace of ‘totalitarianism’ were then giving a renewal of topical interest.” It should hardly be necessary to point out that immoralism is not advocacy of a thuggish

approach to life; on the contrary, it is a literary and artistic method of drawing attention to issues which many people may prefer not to entertain. Yet all too often the immoralist work of art is attacked for perpetrating its content.

Such a benighted attitude may explain the comparative neglect of John Hawkes, one of America's most interesting contemporary authors. Reading Hawkes is to be placed in a condition of uncertainty. One is unsure whether the characters are good or bad, unsure of what one's own attitude should be towards them, and finally one is unsure as to what the author's attitude might be towards them, especially since, in the trilogy of novels comprising *The Blood Oranges*, *Death, Sleep and the Traveller* and *A Travesty*, the author is entirely absent, and, in each, a main character speaks throughout the text. In *The Blood Oranges*, the character speaks with an overweening confidence in himself, in his sexual prowess, his fine physique, his looks. Though not a criminal, he is, one feels, at least a sinner, and his sin is *orgueil*, a bumptious vanity which ignores the state of affairs. His is a self-consciousness which bathes in itself, blind ultimately to what may be going on in others, although he is quite prepared to judge others, usually with a withering contempt. Needless to say, this character hardly shares the reader's doubts about his worth; rather his belief in his own worth is absolute - so absolute that one comes to doubt one's reading (This is the most nauseating character I have ever come across, though he doesn't feel himself to be so: am I wrong, am I misjudging, have I misread the author's intention?). Even when his blithe, ham-fisted adherence to his pleasure-principle (or more properly self-worship) causes the suicide of one character and thereby induces a catatonic state in another, one remains in some doubt as to how to read the protagonist because there is no author to give one the pointer that Hogg supplies in his *Editor's Narrative* and Gide gives in his preface to Hogg's novel. The sole narrator here though is the main character; the arrogant shit whose confidence erodes one's own judgement. So one is left with distaste, at the end - but is this distaste for the book, for the shit, or for the author?

Death, Sleep and the Traveller appears to be narrated by a victim, constantly dwelling on how he has been the object of much bantering from his wife and her sardonic, psychiatrist paramour. He is less physically at ease than the narrator of *The Blood Oranges*, and he seems rather pathetically grateful for the affair he becomes engrossed by, and embroiled in, on ship-board, during the cruise he has been packed off on by his wife. To some extent, one sympathises; but one also shares the contempt obviously felt by his largely-sexed tiger of a wife (or so she is seen by the hubby). Sympathy is

further undermined when the narrator lets slip that he has but recently been acquitted, after a lengthy trial, of the murder of the nymphet who took him to bed on board ship. His guilt is never clearly established however, but then, nor is his affair - after all, it's all his story. Is one sympathising with a murderer? He asserts his innocence. The reader remains in doubt.

In *A Travesty* this issue of the character's villainy becomes indubitably established. The narrator is driving a car down a long French road, his foot firmly pressed down on the accelerator, driving his passengers (and himself) inexorably towards destruction. The story will end when they plunge off a viaduct. Meanwhile one is subjected to the remorseless monologue of the murderer-to-be. But though this situation may seem cut-and-dried, uncertainty creeps in as one continues reading (if one does, as I did). For why continue reading such a text; the last hour or so of the ravings of a monomaniac? If one persists, one has to admit that the narrator has secured an hypnotic hold. Why is one so fascinated, especially since very little is eventually revealed, as it might be in a conventional thriller?

What grips the reader is the appalling situation, that and the hypothesis of the text which posits that it could be in actuality an extended *parole* delivered to the ultimate captive audience: the narrator's own daughter quietly vomiting in the back of the speeding car, and her lover (who is also the narrator's wife's lover) sitting beside the narrator - as well, of course, as the reader, who must either identify with one or other of these characters or accept the role of captive voyeur - and how often has one not wanted to "put one's foot down" when the situation threatened to get out of hand, or indeed actually put one's foot down, allowing the speedometer to register one's rage? Yet now the narrator is way beyond rage, and jealousy is emphatically denied as the motive (yet the denial comes from the perpetrator of the crime and therefore must remain suspect). However, instead of jealousy, *form without meaning* is cited as motive - the mere imaginative possibility of the outcome, just as Mount Everest is climbed "because it is there". Echoes here of Gide's interest in *l'acte gratuit*: the crime committed for no reason other than to defy the law of cause and effect. Is crime fascinating more because of its invitation than because of what it may facilitate? Raskolnikov, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, is lured on by the ease with which the job may be done - ultimately his hunger hardly matters.

Hawkes's novels in this trilogy are exercises in reading between the lines. They do not mean what they say, or they may not. Readers must make up their own minds about

the worth of the characters, the worth of their author and the worth of their interest in reading his books. Perhaps this is true of all literature, but rarely is the experience of reading so “confrontational” in these respects. Nevertheless, if they coax the reader into persevering, there must be in them that pleasure that Barthes saw as crucial to the text.

All the characters loom a trifle too large. In this sense, they resemble the portraits of Alex Katz. They are all Long Island types, whether they be Americans or Europeans. Both attractive and vacuous, the enigmas they raise are those we encounter, if not among murderers, among our less colourful fellows. For people do not go around with labels hung from their necks. No narrator whispers to us, so-and-so is a villain, so-and-so is a victim. We are forced to make up our own minds, though most of the time we may not, and we live among people doubting their worth and our own, and our own ability to judge.

In his critical interpretation of Hawkes’s novella, *The Owl* (New York, 1954), Robert Scholes refers to Browning, as Gide did in his introduction to James Hogg:

“It is relevant to think of Browning here, for Hawkes has come to specialise in the extended dramatic monologue. Like Browning, he is drawn to the strange and the perverse, and he delights in immersing his readers in the voice and vision of a character whose consciousness is disturbing to ‘normal’ sensibilities. The point of this immersion is to force readers to acknowledge a kind of complicity, to admit that something in us resonates to all sorts of monstrous measures, even as we recognise and condemn the evil consciousness for what it is. As a literary strategy this requires great delicacy and control.”

(from Scholes’s “Introduction” to *The Owl*, first presented at Muhlenberg College, 1976.)

The latter half of this quotation could stand as a manifesto for immoralism.

If we now bring the visual arts into the debate, it is interesting to note that a passage from this same introduction is quoted by Janet Kardon in an essay written to accompany the catalogue to a show by David Salle:

“One is always aware of being in a powerful emotional and intellectual climate ... The climate manifests itself in extreme diversities of appropriated subject, modes of attack, and, for want of a better word, anticomposition. Indeed, Salle’s work seems left-handed in a right-handed universe; it functions like antimatter in that it disposes of a great deal of what passes for art. That climate has literary analogues, and significant among them are the novels of John Hawkes whom Salle admires. About Hawkes, Robert Scholes wrote: ‘Because he starts with images rather than a story, his work is different from intentionally plotted fiction - his method has always been to work with strong images that can be developed into scenes of nightmarish power and vividness, and then to seek some means of connecting these scenes in a coherent and developmental way.’”

Here immoralism passes from the realm of subject to that of structure, for our century has given our handling of the medium the same status as content; and so immoralism shifts into this area as well, and the practitioner may well be accused of having committed crimes against “painting”. Bad drawing, lack of unity, presentation of pornographic images - such are the sins “committed” by the contemporary immoralist. Yet as Janet Kardon goes on to say:

“Illusions are being removed, and not gently. The work subverts the viewer’s desire to look away; it returns one constantly to the harsh task of looking and feeling. A perception of the viewer is more or less implicit in every artist’s work. Catherine Millet has called Salle’s ‘a fallen viewer’, and I agree. To the idea of art making one feel better - one of the most offensive of art education’s constructs - is counterposed a set of images that almost can be interpreted as a string of curses.”

Catherine Millet, the renowned editor of *Art Presse*, the foremost French art magazine, deserves mention in her own right in any essay on the subject of immoralism. An informed commentator on contemporary art, she curated the French section of the 1989 Sao Paulo Biennale and the French Pavilion at the 1995 Venice Bienale. But when her “confessions” - *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* - were published in Paris in 2001 they caused a sensation. Were they the actual experiences of this respected

cultural figure, or were they inventions designed specifically *“pour épater les bourgeois?”* To profess to them as experienced facts when they were in fact fictions would constitute a fairly immoralist strategy, but one suspects that the events described were indeed experienced. Any one who opens this book becomes ‘a fallen reader’. In “mandarin” prose as elegant, in a present day context, as the fine sentences of the Marquis de Sade, her book explicitly details a life of casual sexual encounters, many anonymously engaged in: threesomes, serial intercourse, orgies. To enter into reading it and then to read on is to voyeuristically participate through the imagination in a life most of us are too prudish to entertain in reality. And yet there is something abstracted about the narration. These incidents have to do with control rather than with love, and in the case of “Catherine M”, it is the control required, paradoxically, to acquiesce to whatever comes. The events are laid out for us with a dispassionate coolness under four headings: *Numbers, Space, Confined Space* and *Details*. These provide an analytic framework for the examination of this intimate history, and they allow us to contemplate the eroticism alluded to from different conceptual perspectives. *Space*, for instance, alludes to sex in the open air, whereas *Confined Space* deals with sex in cars or in corridors or very much in the proximity of others. Anecdotes multiply and the imagery that rises like a sort of vapour from these condenses to form a melancholy film, a post-coital sadness, I suppose it is, that reminds me of the sad, shadowy spaces to be found in the paintings of De Chirico.

Perhaps all confessional writing has something immoralist about it, if ever it is more than some respectable auto-biography. The posthumously published *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, written in the eighteenth century, do not balk at describing early experiences of masturbation and the callous act of consigning the five illegitimate children he had with a chamber-maid to the Foundling Hospital. But Rousseau writes with such a clear expression, with such an engaging tone, that we identify with his vicissitudes and, while we may not condone, we at least manage to accommodate his failings, and are far less appalled by his “real” callousness than we are by the cruelties alluded to in the fictitious monologues of John Hawkes.

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Doubts similar to those raised by our reading of Hawkes’s unappetising characters may well beset us when we find ourselves confronted by the exposed labia of a rather battered-looking blond, painted by Lucian Freud. The woman is presented as so close

to our eyes that we feel we are in the room with her, perhaps standing in the shoes of a photographer who has advertised for this thrill in some contact magazine. In a sense, we possess her, or at least we possess our view of her, and this is an identification with the image which is similar to the identification with the character we experience in the work of Gide and Hawkes.

Among American painters, Eric Fischl is an artist whose work has consistently drawn the viewer into it in just as powerful a way. In his introduction to the paintings by this artist exhibited at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Canada, 1985, Jean-Cristoph Amman has said of Fischl's viewpoint that it is:

“...as if one unexpectedly entered a room, as if one were looking from above through a window, as if one were off to the side in a beach chair, contemplating what was going on, as if one suddenly became aware of a situation in passing, as if one unexpectedly became witness to an event.

Here the question immediately arises: who is one'? The answer, 'the artist of course,' hardly gets one further ... I am of the opinion ... that it is the view of a boy, a boy who has just recently reached puberty, who apprehends the grown-up world, but also his world, in the intermediate domain of erotic ambiguity. *How* he sees this world, and to a lesser extent what he sees, is what is crucial. Through his manner of seeing, the often altogether usual becomes specific to such a degree that the viewer of the painting, who almost inevitably adopts the perspective of the viewer substituted by the artist, is, in a subversive way, forced to adopt this manner of seeing.”

Peter Schjeldahl has this to say in *Parkett 5*:

“*Daddy's Girl*, one of Fischl's most disconcerting recent pictures, puts a question of guilt or innocence with jarring directness, casting the viewer as a passive participant in its scene of either a) innocuous playfulness in a family of sun-lovers, or b) incestuous abuse, exhibitionistically indulged. The trick is done by the placement of a glass of iced tea 'within reach' of the viewer. It is too far away from the man to be his and, with a slice of lemon, no drink for a child. Thus: They are not alone. Without

the glass, one could observe the action in disinterested safety. With the complicity that it enforces, one is harried towards an emotional decision: What would one's attitude be in this situation, were it actual? Would one try to stop the ominous horseplay? Walk away from it? Pretend it wasn't happening? Convince oneself of its innocence? Be aroused by it? The options are unpleasant and potentially anguishing - disappointing' in the extreme - and make the painting hard to take. They also bear on the ethical befuddlement of the American middle class in the current, gradual catastrophe of its decline."

Both Freud and Fischl are "conservative immoralists" in that their immorality remains that of subject, while their painting is traditional, figurative, realist - and runs the risk of being considered too graphic (or illustrational) for modernist eyes accustomed to abstraction - whereas Salle can be disapproved of *as a painter*, since he seems to be offering the immoralism of sloppy painting, clutter and inappropriate collage. Actually, artists can be disapproved of in a myriad different ways. Fischl is sometimes castigated for getting the proportions of his figures wrong - since on occasion they seem too big from the midriff down. I see this as a method of suggesting that the figure, often engaged in some edgy, compromising activity or placed in a rather alarming pose in some incongruous place, is being seen by a child (and in this, I agree with Amman). It is thus foreshortened by the child's lower view of the adult - which increases the immoralism of the scene. In other ways, Fischl is far from conservative (as I have already pointed out in *The Picture within the Picture*). He has experimented with multi-panelled canvases sometimes propped against or built-out from the wall.

David Hockney has also painted several immoralist pieces - for instance, the sketch of his young friend Peter lying on a bed asleep with his bottom exposed - an invitation which may well offend those who consider it wrong to depict anyone as "a sexual object". In this work, his figuration is as conservative as Freud's, but one should allow that a diligent adherence to figuration is generally helpful to the immoralist, just as an immoralist fiction needs to be clear about its narrative in order to convince us of the reality of what is going on. Immoralism is loaded with content, and this may divorce it from the generally abstract thrust of twentieth century modernism.

Some women artists have also tackled immoralism - notably Sandra Fisher - a figurative painter who was courageous enough to reveal the aroused sexuality of her male models. Sometimes in her canvases one senses a feminine eye surreptitiously

travelling over the relaxed figure of a male sleeper, lingering here and there, luxuriating in the liberties afforded by some abandoned pose. Perhaps more significantly, Diane Arbus deals with immorality in photography. Arbus often took photographs of dysfunctional individuals, those with sexual quirks and people with disabilities. Here the immorality of the shot has often tempted viewers into an indictment on the grounds of voyeurism, or that "it's sick" to look at persons such as freaks, nudists, spastics, idiots, transvestites etc. But can there be anything 'sick' about looking? This question remains crucial for the visual artist, and indeed for the punter. Works of the imagination are one thing, photographs of children being abused are another. To access the latter condones the violence done, although at a remove. A wrangle similar to that attending the work of Arbus also persists around the images of Sally Mann. Mann has occasionally taken photographs of young children, usually her own, in the nude. But why is this abuse? What is often more disturbing than the nakedness of the flesh is the expression on the face. *Jessie at 5* (photographed in 1987) stands with one hip fashionably askew. She fixes us with a stare as hard and knowing as that of any street-walker. Reading it as a man, I get the sense that she "knows where I'm at." Is this genuinely the case, or a chance illusion or trick of the moment when the shot was taken, or is it merely a projection on my part which others may not see or feel? Jock Sturges also takes photographs of infantile models in the nude, but his work is far less alarming. The shots are too composed, too classical - he uses an antiquated box-camera and each photograph takes him a long time to achieve. Ultimately he seems to be after a sculptural quality rather than "indulging" in immorality.

It is questionable whether pop artists such as the American Tom Wesselmann or the British artist Allen Jones can properly be termed immoralist. In both cases, it might be argued that stylised shapes, a flat manner of painting and graphic slickness interfere with the viewer's entrance into the scene. Allen Jones has created furniture though which is genuinely immoralist, and his glass coffee-table held up by a scantily clad female on her hands and knees positively invites the viewer's participation, after that viewer has hung up his coat (the viewer must be a "he", one presumes, before acknowledging the shallowness of presumption) on the equally scantily clad coat-hanger female. The notoriety of these two pieces is justly celebrated. However, it's the vaunted arrogance of the work that makes it immoralist, especially since this is laced with eroticism; but it's worth noting that immorality is not merely a pseudonym for

erotic art. Many Indian miniatures are erotic, and yet they are by no means immoralist - on the contrary, at their most ecstatic they are deeply religious.

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So far, I have concerned myself with comparatively recent examples of this artistic “strategy”. But immoralism is by no means just a post-enlightenment phenomenon. Hellenic sculpture in that luxurious section of the Roman empire that stretched from Paestum to the bay of Naples made a fetish of the depicting Pan going about several of his more scandalous exploits; several of these being now sequestered in the discrete chambers of the Museum of Archeology in Naples. One shows the god ostensibly teaching the shepherd Daphnis how to play the syrinx. Daphnis is an exceptionally pretty young man, very naked and vulnerable. He shrinks somewhat from contact with the enthusiastic divinity who seems to have accosted him; a paradoxical divinity, to be sure, for the imagination is stretched to come up with anything less transcendental than this coarse, hairy, goat-shanked god with his battering-ram nose and emphatically sexualised member. In sculptural terms we may, I suppose, struggle to appreciate the work dispassionately for the wonderfully smooth rendition of the skin of the young shepherd and the violence of the contrast between that and the hirsute brutishness brilliantly evoked by the figure of Pan, but this feels overwhelmingly like Sophistry: what we are looking at so coolly among the crowds respectably queuing to enter these chambers - though children must be accompanied by an adult - is the prelude to a rape, highly eroticised and concentrating its appeal on our own capacity for lasciviousness. Another sculpture in the same collection shows Pan engaged in sexual intercourse with a nanny goat. Pan is quite obviously enjoying himself, and there’s an ecstatic look on the face of the goat!

It seems likely that there were mixed reactions to Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation*. This is a work I’ve already discussed in my essay on *nonfinito*. The three figures in the foreground - an angel, an Italian Prince and a Byzantine emperor - seem far more important than the dimly depicted figure of Christ being whipped in the background. Here Christ may symbolise the suffering of Christians in the east, after the fall of Constantinople. But a cold reading of the painting might conclude that the rivalry of eastern and western powers is of much more importance than Christ’s suffering, for that’s just an old story, whereas the power-brokers of the world are the people who make all the decisions that matter.

Agnolo Bronzino's sixteenth century *Allegory: Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* in the National Gallery, London, is another example of immoralism at work. This is a mannerist piece which features several *tours-de-force* which are executed with scant interest in the achievement of any over-all unity. It is painted in a glacially precise way, and its nudes are extremely beautiful. A cherub throws flowers at Venus, who is stealing an arrow out of her son Eros's sheathe while he is taken up with fondling her just as a Lilith-like female snake offers them the apple of temptation. A veneer of morality is given the picture by Folly clutching his head in enraged despair - either out of jealousy or from the onset of venereal disease - while a grizzled "Father Time" attempts to throw his blue cloak over everything. The message of the allegory seems cynical, though, since Eros pokes out his rear end in a deliberately provocative manner, making him as much the object as the cause of desire, and this reads as an invitation to the viewer to actively participate in the proceedings and totally annuls all allegorical warnings. That said, a more authentic message is perhaps being projected: how, when abetted by physical charm, desire has the capacity to overwhelm us unconditionally. The painting generates that strange mixed-reaction particular to immoralism, since we feel uncomfortable before it. We cannot read its warning without being corrupted by its allure. This uneasy complicity is exactly what the immoralist artist is seeking to generate in his viewer.

Amusement rather than ambivalence is prompted by that naughty painting known as *The Biscuit* by Fragonard, which shows a young girl romping on her bed while allowing her lap-dog's tail to tickle her fanny. In effect, this is more of a caprice than it is an immoralist work. For when we are confronted by a truly immoralist effort we get conflicting sensations, among them a sense that *something is wrong*, that we should not be witnessing what is placed before our eyes - in the case of Allen Jones, that we should not be placing our coffee on such a chauvinistically devised coffee-table. Such work appears to touch on the dark side of our humanity. There are quite a few canvases by Fragonard, however, which might conceivably be considered immoralist, were it not for the fact that their brand of "badness" only rarely suggests that dark side. In *The Model's Audition*, a mother displays her daughter's breast to the painter while he lifts the girl's petticoats with his stick, more interested in seeing up her leg. Yes, there is something uncomfortable about witnessing the prelude to what appears to amount to a pretty callous transaction, and equally the young man bolting the door so abruptly in Fragonard's painting of *The Rape* (in the Louvre) seems intent on some

swift and unscrupulous business - but this picture was the basis for an illustration to *Lucinde*, the novel by Friedrich von Schlegel which describes free-love rather than cold-hearted seduction.

There is something “cold-blooded” about immoralism. With cool skill it lays out its optional responses as if these were a hand at cards. Schjeldahl points to a number of possible reactions to *Daddy’s Girl*. Bronzino understood how to generate that plurality of effect; whereas the paintings of Fragonard have a less sickening undertone. They offer a witty comment on salaciousness and are therefore more amoral than immoral. This amoral strain in art was the basis for countless “genre” paintings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: priests making untimely visits to the studios of artists and thus catching the model at her most exposed - as in Eduardo Zamacois y Zabala’s - *The Inopportune Visit* in the civic museum, Bilbao. Then there are amorous forfeits demanded for losses at cards (as in Fragonard), and a host of indiscrete interruptions, accidents and intrusions. This tributary of art merges with that of celebratory hedonism: Ganymedes abducted by eagles, bathers with rosy posteriors, countless depictions of an inebriated Silenus and visualisations of the rapes of Jupiter. I think of this amoral strain as “Azure” - since there is something of the warm South about it, where it seems fitting to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, to gratify the taste-buds, to endorse ripeness and fecundity. Much of the work of Francois Boucher resides in this category, and much of Renoir. It accounts for the erotic drawings of Rodin and the wonderful, light-hearted sketches of nymphs and satyrs, goats and naked goddesses done by an ageing Picasso at Antibes.

However, the French painter Balthus has created pieces which are more immoralist than amoral, in my view. His young girls hovering on the edge of puberty, suddenly exposed to sunlight, or seemingly basking in their own erotic dreams, invite us to pry. When their panties are exposed by the somnolent abandon of their positions on couches or deep armchairs, the wedge of material veiling their privacies becomes the object of the gaze, and we are invited to see these adolescents through the eyes of paedophile voyeurs. That we can be doing this in the cool space of an art gallery emphasises an important difference, and that is the difference between art and life. Our imaginations are permitted access to places that are prohibited in reality. Immoralist artists tempt us to venture into such places, but equally there are painters who work with the dark side, yet confront us with it rather than making some subtle attempt to draw us into a condition of complicity with its implications. Francis Bacon,

for instance, cannot really be considered an immoralist since, however bizarre and obscene it may appear, the surface of the painting and the energetic handling of the paint demand that we read the work as “a painting” in a thoroughly modernist sense, and this militates against our identification with the scene. Instead of becoming witnesses to an event, we are in a sense abused by it or threatened by it as by the barrel of a gun, nor are we allowed to forget that we are after all visitors to a gallery, appreciating an appreciating commodity. And so we are either thoroughly shocked by the experience or we approve of the work without risk - because we are not drawn in, not invited to participate in the transgression.

Among Bacon’s generation of painters working in Britain, only Ron Kitaj can lay claim to an immoralism approaching the calibre of Salle’s. This is particularly the case with several of his drawings which are more directly figurative than many of his paintings; the paintings making use of compositional innovation by almost collaging his subjects together - though they are all painted - and this interferes with the work’s capacity to convince us that we are witnessing something in a specific location. That said, among his sketches, there some fine examples of the way he *can* “lead us into temptation” with an immoralist strategy, especially when he places us in the position of a voyeur observing a voyeur - in a drawing where a man at a doorway peers in at a flagrant couple in a bedroom, which *we* seem to be witnessing from the landing above this room. There are also works of Kitaj’s which mix “good” drawing with “bad”, or which “irresponsibly” confuse the terms of painting and drawing - and many of these predate the work of Salle.

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Glancing again at literature, it’s worth noting that there’s a strong immoralist tendency in the work of many novelists aside from John Hawkes. We can identify that complicity which is its salient feature in *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabakov, and, more recently, in *The End of Alice* by A. M. Homes. It is less often to be found in poetry since the days of Browning - perhaps dramatic irony functions better when narrative prose allows it to evolve.

Going back to earlier times, the Latin poet Martial certainly makes for reading that raises an eyebrow. Martial perfected the epigram in the first century AD, and his brief pieces are for the most part sardonic squibs or invocations of amusing lewdness,

though admittedly many of these are amoral rather than immoral. This short poem slyly inveigles us into sharing his amusement at the discomfort of a fellow dinner guest:

“I’ve noticed it before, whenever you rise from your chair,
Your unhappy tunics, Lesbia, turn into sodomites.
You try to pluck them back, with your right hand
Then with your left, and finally wrench
Them away with many a tear and a sigh.
The trouble is they get trapped in your enormous rump,
Entering Cyanean straits between those clashing buttocks.
Lesbia, do you wish to be delivered of this blemish?
I know what the answer is: never stand up or sit down.”

(Martial, *Epigrams*, Book XI)

Then John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester wrote satires in the seventeenth century which became notorious for their defiant obscenity, but these are often too directly confrontational to be considered immoralist since they lack that essential element of complicity and are not concerned with seducing the reader into any imaginative endorsement of his actions. Rochester deals in cynicism, and his very ironic take on the nature of any union of form and content can be found in his lyrical poems which are always beautifully “turned” - and therefore delightful - despite the prevalent rudeness of the thought. Today we can find a similarly provocative spirit operating in some of the poems of Hugo Williams. Here is *Toilet*, a poem that fools us into imagining that it is simply an innocuous, if nicely written lyric:

“I wonder will I speak to the girl
sitting opposite me on this train.
I wonder will my mouth open and say,
‘Are you going all the way
to Newcastle?’ or ‘Can I get you a coffee?’
Or will it simply go ‘aaaaah’
as if it had a mind of its own?

Half closing eggshell blue eyes,

she runs her hand through her hair
so that it clings to the carriage cloth,
then slowly frees itself.
She finds a brush and her long fair hair
flies back and forth like an African fly-whisk,
making me feel dizzy.

Suddenly, without warning,
she packs it all away in a rubber band
because I have forgotten to look out
of the window for a moment.
A coffee is granted permission
to pass between her lips
and does so eagerly, without fuss.

A tunnel finds us looking out the window
into one another's eyes. She leaves her seat,
but I know she likes me
because the light saying 'TOILET'
has come on, a sign that she is lifting
her skirt, taking down her pants
and peeing all over my face."

But while these examples may demonstrate that a tendency to express lascivious ideas in elegant language can be traced back to antiquity, and that a poetry making use of scurrilous imagery has been an option at times other than ours, I hesitate to identify Martial, Rochester or Williams with the essential spirit of immoralism. All three poets are intent on mischief and let us know that they are well aware of what is going on, whereas the cardinal quality of dramatic irony is a certain lack of awareness in the character of the persona adopted. In *My Last Duchess*, for instance, the Duke seems oblivious to his own murderous cruelty. Browning keeps his own view well hidden. Hogg's justified sinner has his mind firmly fixed on his ends, the brutality of his means is incidental. Nor should immoralism be reduced to the merely scandalous in either sexual or religious terms. Something nastier is afoot. The discomfort felt by the viewer or the reader, where a truly immoralist work is concerned, involves this blindness or indifference to the consequences: it plays games with intentionality, as in

Flannery O'Connor's short story *A Good Man is Hard to Find* where a grandmother's self-interested stupidity brings about the murder of an entire family. What immoralism examines most deeply is a character's self-regard or self-projection, and the way this can serve to camouflage from that character their covetousness, their vanity or their propensity to bear false witness against others. And we find it disturbing because when we are led on by the text that makes such duplicity its business we may pick up on traces of such duplicity in ourselves.

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Where the immoralist strategy has been employed to great effect is in the film industry. Perhaps one of the most interesting uses of it in contemporary cinema can be seen in *Bad Timing* by Nicholas Roeg, made in 1980. Art Garfunkel stars as a personable psychoanalyst in Vienna who cannot control the sexual impulses of his girlfriend, Theresa Russell. He breaks up with her, and sometime later she rings him to tell him she has taken an overdose of pills. He goes over to her place and finds her in a coma. Instead of ringing for an ambulance straight away, he adjusts the clock so that it looks as if he has arrived a while later than is actually the case. He then makes love to her while she lies in a comatose state. For once, he is in control: she can only receive him with an utterly passive, indeed unconscious, stillness. The analyst is a plausible young man, a type with whom many intellectual professionals might identify, and his crime, which amounts to a callous murder attempt, is carried through not with a violent weapon but simply by the innocuous action of adjusting a hand on a dial - it's hardly more than a white lie, a small malicious adjustment within the capability of any civilized person.

A more recent example is *The Vanishing*, a Dutch film, made in 1988, directed by George Sluizer, and closely based on *The Golden Egg* - a novel by Tim Krabbé. On holiday in France, a young Dutch woman goes to the lavatory at a motorway stop and is never seen again. This event is contrasted with the reminiscences of an enigmatic Frenchman who once threw himself off a balcony to prove that he could dismiss concern for self-preservation, that his will was more forceful than his conditioning. Once again there are echoes here of Gide, and of his character Lafcadio, who throws a stranger out of a train simply to exercise free-will in his novel, *The Vatican Cellars*.

The Dutch woman's boyfriend persists in searching for her and is finally approached by the Frenchman who promises to reveal what happened to the girl provided he is trusted implicitly. A drole rationality about the Frenchman's manner offsets the sinister aspect of his proposals, and this convinces the boyfriend that there is something exceptional to be discovered. On top of that there is a fascination about the way the man spins absurd stories about himself.

Insatiable curiosity drives the Dutchman to place his life in the hands of the Frenchman, though the trust which has been built up between them is only based on the Frenchman's version of what may have happened at the time of the girl's vanishing. Of course by this time the audience's curiosity is also aroused, and we feel that we would also comply with the Frenchman's demands in order to find out what happened. I won't divulge the horror of the end. The film's power has a lot to do with the accurate observation of typical circumstances. At some time or other we have all waited for what seems like hours for someone to come out of a lavatory, and the motorway service-station where much of the main action takes place is a familiar setting for just such a delay.

Another great immoralist moment in film is when Gregory Peck raises the knife to slay Damian, the devil child in *The Omen*, directed by Richard Donner and made in 1976. Here is a man about to kill a baby, and yet the film has manipulated the emotions of the audience so adroitly that we all sit there at the edge of our seats willing him to plunge the knife home.

Mention should also be made of *Le Bonheur*, directed in 1965 by Agnès Varda. A happily married man tells his wife that he is having an affair with another woman. Compliantly, the wife drowns herself immediately, leaving her husband free to find happiness with the other woman. The film is shot as if it were a glossy advertisement, and the sheen of its surfaces suggests nothing but an endorsement of the action. Never has Dr Pangloss's maxim, "All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds" received such a glowing commendation.

Artists and writers engage in this strategy at their peril. As I've already pointed out when discussing photography, immoralism can get one into trouble. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes did away with that suppression of literary works before publication which had characterized the *Ancien Regime*. As a result, the

public and the authorities were often scandalised by what did get published, and censorship trials for literary works were a common occurrence in France in the 19th century. Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's story *Le Bonheur dans le Crime*, from *Les Diaboliques* - in which a man and a woman get away with murder and live happily ever after - was one of these (the case was finally thrown out on grounds of insufficient cause in 1874). To an extent, the tale encapsulates that philosophy the Marquis de Sade ironically propounded through his two great novels, *Justine* and *Juliette*. Justine, being resolutely decent, dies a ghastly death in abject poverty. Juliette, her sister, being irredeemably wicked, ends up rich, happy and successful.

The text of these books by de Sade may be more grotesque than immoralist, though in *Juliette*, the Pope's justification of genocide (as a fecund replenishment of the earth's resources) works well as an immoralist tract. De Sade was incarcerated in a lunatic asylum because of the offence his writing caused. Immoralism does more than ruffle feathers! In the seventies, the women's film-distribution service, "Circles", refused to distribute the films of Jayne Parker, one of which was entitled *Snig*. This film shows a number of eels writhing between bed-sheets: sheet after sheet is uncovered by a woman, revealing ever more eels. The eels are then sewn by their noses to the sheets by the woman and the sheets are hung out on the line. The eels stiffen in *rigour mortis* and straighten, and then each is snipped from its sheet. This little film offended feminists. It was cruel to eels. It was wrong of the artist to show a woman being cruel. A woman who showed a woman engaged in a cruel act did not deserve to be distributed by "Circles". I think the film concerned an ambivalent reaction to sexuality: revulsion tinged with fascination, desire mingled with a cold curiosity. It was very powerful. It caused violent reactions, for and against it, and inadvertently it exposed the censorious bigotry then rampant in the women's movement.

A video was shown at the 1990 AVE video festival in Arnhem called *Ohne Pause* (or "Non Stop"). Made in 1986 by the Austrian artist, Erwin Puls, it presents found footage of very early pornographic films which are a delight in themselves, in terms of their humour, pace and absurdity. Inter-cut with these is footage from home movies from the same epoch - the years between the wars - sometimes with disconcerting results such as when a very young boy starts to chase a pig just after a particularly torrid orgy. A text runs continuously beneath the images dryly elaborating on the source of the footage, its aesthetics, the nature of the camera angles, the sociological background etc - thus providing an academic excuse for our witnessing images which

might otherwise be considered obscene. Once again we have been beguiled by an immoralist strategy.

Several works in the *Post-Morality exhibition*, curated by Mona Hatoum and shown in Cambridge in 1993, seemed to me to be of particular interest from an immoralist stand-point. Jon Bewley's *Objects from the pockets of a man with more than one identity* was a piece which presented us with a number of fairly personal possessions which the artist claimed came from the pockets of a man living a parallel life. These included a gold wedding-ring, spectacles, a penknife and several ten pound notes, as well as more trivial items. They were laid out on a mirror. Although the objects had supposedly been a gift to the artist, they were not without value, and presumably they would have been of considerable use to the original owner. One was intrigued by this piece, but at the same time one wondered what forms of coercion might have been employed to extract these items from the subject. After all, those leading double lives may well be open to blackmail. One imagined the satisfaction of the artist as he walked away from his duplicate victim, his pockets laden with spoils. In witnessing his work, gloating over it perhaps, were we endorsing his intrigues?

In the same show, Jamie Thompson exhibited four photographs on glass shelves. Each was a portrait of a young man crying. But the tears dribbled down the cheeks of a face which appeared indifferent to them. The result was that the expression became difficult to read. Was this egotism, arrogantly proud of being a "new" man, able to express the signifiers for sensitive emotions without troubling with the emotions themselves? Were the tears faked? The high finish and fine presentation of these photographs also distanced the viewer from any deep experience of grief. Was this a sardonic work, cynical about all visual expressions of emotional turbulence? The young man seemed not to be crying about anything. He was simply presenting his tears to the camera as a conceptual act. This created complex reactions in the spectator.

Then there was Jamie Wagg's *Post-Gestural, Neo Geo Abstraction untitled No. 1, or, Two Young Boys Injured After a 1,000 lb Bomb Destroyed a House in Managua. They died Shortly After this Photograph was Taken*. The painting which Jamie Wagg exhibited under this title was most definitely an abstraction. There was no hint of a photograph, or of the boys killed in Managua. Had the artist chosen this title simply as a ploy to get this painting into the Post-Morality Show? Certainly, without the title, his

abstract work would have had no place in it. What should we have done about this? Should we have demanded that the work be withdrawn? But doesn't such a prohibitive and disapproving attitude place us in the position of censors? It's precisely this sort of dilemma that immoralism delights in.

Conceptual art such as the works cited in this exhibition put me in mind of a performance by Marina Abramovic and Ulay, created in seventies, when the two artists stood naked on either side of an open doorway. The audience were informed that their exhibition was located on the other side of the doorway. In order to get into the exhibition, members of the audience had to squeeze past the artists, coming into contact with both their naked bodies at the same time. There was of course no exhibition in the room the audience emerged into. The performance generated that ambivalence of reaction that characterises immoralism. Had the artists tricked the audience into an obscene intimacy? Is there in fact anything particularly obscene about contact with a naked body? Ah, but what about contact with two naked bodies at the same time?

There's a problem, though, for performance art. Generally it is differentiated from theatre because it is not about make-believe. It concerns *being* not *acting*, and the integrity of an authentic performance task carries with it no fictional component. A murder may be described in a novel, poem or short-story. A painter may depict Judith slaying Holofernes. For performance art, as opposed to theatre, the event must actually occur. Jayne Parker's films adhere to a similar truth to action, and come up against the same limitation. The subject making things happen in such a film, or creating the piece of performance art, must actually be cruel, or spiteful or lecherous: it is not something that can be represented, since the medium is not a representational one. This restricts performance art to fairly harmless levels of complicity. But I do recall an immoralist piece perpetrated by two German artists on those who attended a festival in Amsterdam, about ten years ago. They invited their audience to strip naked and be sequestered in a locked room for the duration of the performance. At regular intervals the room was illuminated by the flash of a camera, otherwise they were kept in utter darkness. The performance began at seven in the evening. Gradually the room got colder and colder. Finally, at about two o'clock in the morning, the participants broke out of the room. They had gone along with the will of the artists to incarcerate them, beguiled by them, as a reader might be beguiled by a character in an immoralist novel. Finally they made their choice that enough was enough, and with a concerted

effort they managed to escape. The piece seemed to contain a message about taking responsibility for one's own situation and, eventually, doing something about it.

Rebecca Horn showed how abstract sculpture could be used perversely a few years ago, in the nineties, when she created an installation for one of the pools at Bath Spa. This pool was associated with the Regency rather than the Roman period in Bath's history. It is located outside the official baths and, in the days of Beau Brummel, it was, apparently, frequented by courtesans rather than by women of unblemished reputation. Whatever its health-bestowing properties may have been, they were not what counted, in this instance, since this was a locale made notorious by dint of its assignations! Rebecca Horn placed her sculpture in the pool itself. This consisted of a number of thin copper rods through which the water was pumped, to be squirted back into the pool. There were also conical funnels made of glass, which connected to pipes and fed back to the machines pumping water through the rods. Some of the rods squirting water were placed with their ends below the pool's surface, so that the squirt they emitted barely dented that surface. Then a rod might squirt vigorously on its own. Another might squirt well above the surface, its entire emission landing within one of the upended glass funnels. Sometimes two well-aimed rods would squirt simultaneously into the same funnel. Some might squirt bravely enough but miss the funnel they aimed for. The work inveigled the spectator into seeing these permutations in erotic terms, aided and abetted by a sense of place. Like Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped bare by her Bachelors, even*, the piece suggested a mechanised erotics, and it was indeed a finely conceived exercise in sculptural pornography.

A few years ago there was an advertisement for *Highland Spring* water, which showed a young woman sitting on a photo-copy machine, duplicating her behind, presumably to be sent off or faxed to various admirers. Do we find the notion impossibly rude, or merely amusing? Commercial art recognises the essential quality of immoralism: because it generates ambivalence in the viewer, it sticks in the mind. The mind returns to the image - in order to debate its worth, its propriety. Images that stick in the mind are just what the advertiser is after.

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In conclusion, I'll return to the work of David Salle. To my mind it is Salle who has carried immoralism further than any other contemporary artist. That phrase of Gide's,

concerning Hogg - "the figurative portrayal of states of subjective consciousness" - could well be applied to this American painter, for in works such as *His Brain* or *Tennyson* we are drawn into the work, as we are with Fischl, Hockney and Freud, but the work does not appear to represent any external reality. Instead, we seem to have been taken into the interior, into some "clouded pool of personal symbols" - to utilise an expression used by the artist with reference to the work of Jack Goldstein, though it seems to apply just as aptly to the work of Salle himself .

But what are we really looking at here? In *His Brain*, we are basically confronted with a very large behind. A female behind. Why is it there? Doesn't this image denigrate women? Is that his view? - that all a woman is is an arse? Feminists have expressed their indignation about the work. But Salle himself would probably be the last person to defend himself from their attacks by offering a coherent reading of a work such as *His Brain*. But as a viewer, I am at liberty to come to his defence, and to offer as much of an interpretation as I see fit. Looking at Salle's art, we seem to enter that "pool of personal symbols" that he refers to, but the symbols are so personal that it's hard to identify what it is that each symbol signifies. "Personal images" might be a better way of putting it, images which exert a pull on the mind, that keep getting returned to, who knows why? Immersed in the intercourse of these images, we may sense that they have no physical substance, no reference "out there". They are merely shadows. And then it may occur to us that many refer to art, or to representations gleaned from reproductions.

We watch the shadows playing in this clouded pool as Plato watched them in his cave, though now the floor of the cave appears to be strewn with turds and empty wine-bottles still in their paper-bags, while the wall of the cave has been covered with graffiti. This is the perverse effect, yet it is an effect achieved by a brilliantly controlled manipulation of the painterly medium, and by a subversion of modernism to subject. Soaked acrylic, stencil, impasto. diptych and sculpture are each employed in turn to cope with a single item in *His Brain* - only the enormous, shadowy, female posterior is dealt with in acrylic, only the profile of Lincoln is dealt with by the stencil and so on. It is thus that the images get to be superimposed while never seeming cluttered.

In Hogg, Gide and Hawkes, and in Browning's *My Last Duchess*, the author takes on the persona of the unsavory character. The art then is, to write in such a beguiling way

that the reader is charmed or coaxed into thinking along the same lines as that character by reading the text. With painters, there can be a persona adopted by the artist, so that he paints as an unsavory character: Carravaggio really was one, being obliged to flee to Malta having stabbed someone to death in a brawl - although he painted of course with tremendous charm. Bronzino's icy style projects a certain arrogance in the painter himself which may have been an affectation. Here was a courtier painting for courtiers. To some extent, there is the same adoption of a persona in Salle's work. "The clouded pool of personal symbols" may not be as personal as all that. Salle's works are like internal monologues in paint. The cheer ingenuity of his shifts of medium and that ability he has to surprise us by his juxtapositions, keeps us seeking for a key to the "character" of each painting, but the monologues he presents have an element of sleaze to them, and a certain glibness, a flip responsiveness to the *zeitgeist*, and to the smart backtalk of Manhattan, that suggests that a role is being played out - the inner world he presents could be that of a character in a novel by John Hawkes, whom he admires. Nevertheless, it's a world that strikes a powerful chord. Perhaps there is something unsavory in each of us.

So whose brain are we in? It seems to be the brain of a sex-maniac. And yet it is his brain. It's the brain of his society, which is our society - so what is it full of? Mainly of sex, with a film of politics, a large section for wallpaper and some nostalgic desire to get away from it all - for here is Monet's houseboat: memories of some weekend on a houseboat? - or simply the experience of reading John Ashbery's collection of poems called *Houseboat Days*? It is my brain. It is yours.

Anthony Howell, October 2003, based on a lecture given during the *Post-Morality Exhibition*, Kettle's Yard, 1990.

Immoralism

Jules Barbey d'Aureville, *Les Diaboliques*,
Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, London
Robert Browning, *Collected Poems*,

Marquis de Sade *Justine*,
Marquis de Sade *Juliette*,
Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*,
André Gide, *The Immoralist* (originally published as *L'Immoraliste*, Paris, 1921)
André Gide, *The Vatican Cellars*
Philip Gosse, *History of Piracy*, London, 1932
John Hawkes, *A Travesty*, New York
John Hawkes, *Death, Sleep and the Traveller*, New York
John Hawkes, *The Blood Oranges*, New York, 1970
John Hawkes, *The Owl*, New York, 1954
James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* first
published in 1824, (reprinted with an introduction by André Gide)
A. M. Homes, *The End of Alice*, Anchor Fiction, London, 1997
Janet Kardon, *Essay* written to accompany the catalogue to a show by David Salle,
Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1986
Tim Krabbé, *The Golden Egg*,
Martial, *Epigrams*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard Heinemann, London, 1920
Catherine Millet, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*, Serpent's Tail, London, 2002
Dictionary of all Religions, London, 1704
Flannery O'Connor, *Stories*,
Pontanus, *Catalogue of Heresies*,
Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, The Fontana Library, London, 1960 - first published
by OUP, 1933
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*,
Schlegel, Friedrich von, *Lucinde* - a novel,
Hugo Williams, *Self-Portrait with Slide*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990
John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, *Poems*,