A marble sculpture of a reclining figure, possibly a woman, with her head tilted back and her right arm raised. The sculpture is set against a dark green background. The text is overlaid on the image.

JONATHAN
DOLLIMORE

SEX,
LITERATURE



CENSORSHIP

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SEX,
LITERATURE
and
CENSORSHIP

JONATHAN DOLLIMORE

Polity

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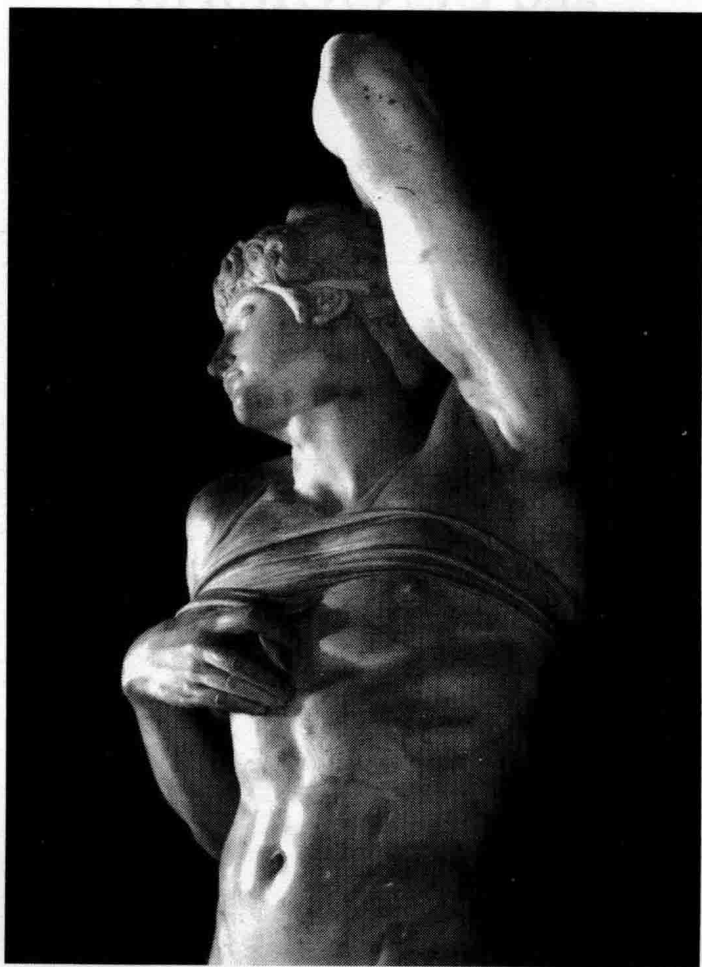
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Preface

This book is motivated by a sense that much current writing about literature and desire, be it ostensibly progressive or conservative, 'theoretical' or traditional, in the academy or the media, promotes complacent deceptions congruent with our time.

Part I takes issue with the spurious radicalism of some fashionable ideas about sexual dissidence. There is a belief that dissident desire has to be theorized; only theory can liberate this desire, and put it into a challenging political confrontation with those who would repress it. But this kind of thinking has become self-deluding, and is itself in need of being subjected to the challenge of the dissident desire it theorizes. Much of this thinking comprises 'wishful theory', by which I mean a pseudo-philosophical refashioning of the world according to a preconceived agenda; a kind of intellectualizing which is self-empowering in a politically spurious way, and which, despite its ostentatious performance of a high sophistication, tends to erase the complexity and diversity of the cultural life it addresses. Bits and pieces of different theories are stitched together in a way which is also a stitch-up, and sex is made into an elaborate, self-confirming intellectual fiction. It's a fiction which is most fully indulged in interpretations of literary texts, where, for example, the world of an oppressively dominant sexuality – usually heterosexual and masculine – is imagined to be permanently, almost automatically, destabilized by its deviant others.

Some of those I take issue with in these early chapters already have their vociferous opponents. A growing and influential reaction against late twentieth-century 'radical' ways of engaging with the humanities has been mobilized by those who favour a return to a

more traditional approach, most especially to literature. If my own position is at odds with the moderns' in these culture wars, Parts II and III show why it differs much more from the traditionalists'. The reasons are several. For now it may suffice to remark that some of the most earnest of these traditional defenders of art have been its most effective censors; in celebrating art they made it respectable only by stifling it. If wishful theorists fabricate an elaborate kind of theoretical censorship, traditionalists have indulged in a less elaborate yet far more effective mode of aesthetic censorship.

Traditionalists castigate the theorists for undermining the exalted status of art. This is misleading. Arguably, traditionalists who have accorded art that status have done the greater damage by making art so respectable it remains incapable of challenging anything. Instead of challenging complacent thinking about the arts they encouraged it. This is one reason why theorists have been able to show that traditional assumptions about art are no longer tenable intellectually or aesthetically. However, those assumptions survive as the props of a cultural establishment wherein few are inclined to examine them. And with two good reasons: first because conservative aesthetics are an edifice whose foundations have eroded; second because the cultural establishment more than ever needs these traditional assumptions about art, and the respectability they confer, since it is itself increasingly propped up by commercial, business and market interests in search of cultural capital. Often radical in their own terms, these commercial interests are conservative if not reactionary in cultural terms. In fact, this is a pecuniary relationship in which a radical capitalist agenda is often facilitated by a culturally respectable one. There's a stark irony here: the traditional defence of art's exalted status is today increasingly dependent upon what, in the nineteenth century, it was a reaction to: this defence of art was once inseparable from a critique of the philistinism of commerce and the destructiveness of capitalism.

And yet, in institutional terms it's hardly surprising that traditional academic critics have domesticated literature. How else could they justify the subject pedagogically, especially its central place in a liberal, humanities education? Could we ever hope to persuade parents to allow their children to study a subject which, in today's security-obsessed society, should probably have an ethical/psychological health warning attached to it? In a culture ever more anxious to protect the young from itself, the necessity for such warnings is only avoided by methods of reading which muffle the truth, that art constantly transgresses the limits which define what it is to be decently human. And since education too has been thrown into the

marketplace, the need for such readings to sustain vested interests is greater than ever.

The case for saying literature all the time violates the decently human could be made persuasively enough with disreputable kinds of writing like pornography, or the semi-respectable, like gothic fiction¹ or Jacobean tragedy ('excluding Shakespeare', as some classifications still have it). But I've endeavoured to take the argument to the heart of canonical respectability – including, albeit briefly,² Shakespeare and Yeats.

To take art seriously must be to recognize that its dangerous insights and painful beauty often derive from tendencies both disreputable and deeply anti-social. We know that the aesthetic vision has the power to threaten reactionary social agendas. Indeed, for most defenders of art today, though by no means all, that is welcome enough because they have a moderately liberal agenda. But art can also seduce us into attitudes which threaten progressive, and humanely responsible, social agendas as well. In fact, to take art seriously is to recognize that there are some very reasonable grounds for wanting to control it. Lovers of art have promulgated well-intentioned lies: they tell us that great art and the high culture it serves can only enhance the lives of those who truly appreciate it; that such art, unlike say, propaganda, popular culture or pornography, is incapable of damaging or 'corrupting' us. Such an attitude not only fails to take art seriously enough, but rests on a prior process of pro-art censorship more effective than anti-art state censorship. The defence *of* art is more often than not a defence *against* art, and an exaggerated respect for it becomes a way of not seeing, and nowhere more so than in mainstream theatre, where such respect leads audiences into a state of uncritical, even stupefied reverence.

To avoid misunderstanding I should declare that I share with others an implacable, libertarian hostility to state censorship. But this is not because I think the usual objects of censorship, including literature, film and pornography, are not capable of being socially harmful. Whether or not they are, or might be, depends on many factors, including the kind of society being defended or fought for. I would, incidentally, challenge many of the actual claims made about the harmful effects of, for example, pornographic art. But an effective opposition to censorship has to recognize that in principle such things *may* harm, and not just in terms of a morality which one does not accept, but in terms of one's own. A libertarian opposition to censorship is self-deluding if it refuses to recognize that the things it wants to defend from censorship may be harming someone, somewhere. And if that harm is proved to be great enough, state censor-

ship has reason and ethics on its side. Bluntly: civilization is inseparable from censorship of all kinds, and most people, civilized or otherwise, are in favour of censoring something.

Fantasy is a recurring focus of this book. The creative imagination is inseparable from fantasy and where there is fantasy there is immorality and amorality. In fantasy the unconscious surfaces, and norms of morality, reason and humanity are violated. It has been said that cultured people are more inclined to enact in fantasy harmful desires which others might enact more directly. If so, that is one virtue of culture. But we shouldn't then be surprised to find the art of the educated full of such fantasies.

The renewed realism I advocate recognizes art as frequently – not invariably – a medium of dangerous knowledge. It's ill-advised, I know, to deploy such a slippery and contested term as 'realism'. What I mean by it, is anything but the view that we should accede to what is straightforward or self-evident; rather, I mean a willingness to engage with what is refractory and intractable in human history and human desire, and to undertake a more searching intellectual engagement with past thought. In particular we need to recover, via intellectual history, aspects of our cultural past which currently are all too often ignored or disavowed – be it by fashionable postmodernists on the one side, or by the respectable spokespersons for traditional high culture on the other.

The separate chapters of this book address different topics but follow sequentially in a developing argument. My general concern is sexual desire, and my specific examples include homosexuality, bisexuality, sexual disgust, and the disturbing connections between desire and death, and art and inhumanity. Most persistently this book is about how the experience of desire in life and art compromises our most cherished ethical beliefs; how it sets dissident desire against not just oppressive social life, but also what are widely agreed to be the necessary limits of civilization itself.

Many have helped me write this book, some of whom are unaware of having done so. Rachel Bowlby and Sally Munt read the manuscript with more patience and insight than I deserved.

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PART I

Desire and Theory

In his first letter he wrote of this restless longing which would connect with something about his lover so slight it only added to the confusion, like the way he glanced across a street, offered a cigarette or took one. Fleeting moments having nothing in common except that they were fleeting. Later he wrote: 'everything I desire about him reminds me of something that hurts in my desire for him, a hurt so removed from present consciousness I can't reach it. So I linger at the edge of that past loss which has become the urgency of now – him and me inseparable only in this moment. Am I wrong to sense something like this in him too? Sometimes, when he comes, he sighs in a way I'll never forget; it's like a sigh from the past – his, mine, others, all separate and unreachable.'

Anon., 1953–87

[T]he character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and . . . contains the history of those object choices.

Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*

Too Hot for Yale? The Challenge of Queer Theory

It was a scary class. I knew that if I couldn't control this escalating argument between two students, then not just that one seminar, but the entire course might be wrecked for the rest of the term.

Class warfare

The course in question was part of the Sexual Dissidence programme at the University of Sussex. It attracted some notoriety for being the first of its kind in the country. You can imagine the scene: right-wing Members of Parliament proclaiming loudly that the university should at least be shut down, and preferably bombed as well. The tabloid press agreed, conjuring up lurid fantasies of what exactly we did on such a course.

It's characteristic of academics to get highly indignant about this kind of publicity – and not a little self-righteous as well. In truth it did us little harm, being so obviously ludicrous that informed opinion had to mobilize in our support. But it did lead some students to assume that an in-your-face radical stance on homosexuality was a guarantee that one would complete the course successfully. The argument that blew up in the class that day involved one such student, a young gay man who was insisting that homosexuality was a revolutionary force in western culture, with the power to subvert its heterosexist underpinning entirely. And a good thing too: he disliked that culture, and wanted sexual dissidence to be the spearhead of all the forces that would overthrow it. The other student, also gay, insisted that this was wishful thinking: homosexuality could

exist comfortably alongside heterosexuality and it was only a residual outmoded prejudice that led some people to think otherwise. Education could and would change all this. And part of this process of education involved gay people showing straight people that we really were not that different – that we can be parents, teachers, politicians; as socially responsible as anyone else. He insisted too that the course that had brought us together in that class should be a part of this rational, reformist programme and *not* the platform for the self-deluding revolutionary rhetoric being advanced by the radical student.

The battle lines were drawn up. Silence fell and each deferred to me – or rather, looked menacingly my way, implicitly demanding support. I needed to buy time. I could try ‘Goodness, look at the time’ and break for a coffee, or resort to the no less diversionary tactic of asking the views of some other, hitherto silent, student. I opted for the latter, choosing someone who looked cooperative: ‘Jeremy, what do you think?’ Jeremy’s looks belied his thoughts: ‘I feel excluded and oppressed by this discussion. It completely ignores bisexuality, and I’m bisexual.’ Suddenly a new battle line was drawn onto the existing map, and for a moment the revolutionary and the reformist students suspended combat. As out gay men, each distrusted the bisexual, not least because they regarded him as sitting on the fence, unable to make up his mind; avoiding commitment because lacking the courage. ‘Goodness,’ I exclaimed, ‘look at the time . . .’ Angry silence on all sides; nobody moves. The day was only saved by a mobile telephone going off in the radical student’s satchel. He hastily left the room to take the call while the rest of us broke for coffee.

I helped devise that course on sexual dissidence, and at times like that I half wished I hadn’t. It could be impossible to teach, and not just because of clashing personalities: something much more significant was implicated in that three-way seminar stand-off that day, something which made the presence of such a course as worthwhile as it was difficult to teach. Unbeknown to them (at the time), those two gay students were re-enacting one of the most fundamental antagonisms within the politics of sexual dissidence over the past century. As for Jeremy, little did he realize that in just a couple of years bisexuality would cease to be regarded as the dishonest third option. Marjorie Garber’s 1995 book, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* consolidated bisexuality’s return as a viable and progressive sexuality. Meanwhile in the academy, a new bisexual politics, increasingly influential in Britain and the USA, would be claiming this to be the quintessentially postmodern sexual-

ity – mobile, unfixed and subversive of all existing sexual identities, including the gay one. I return to this in the next chapter.

If one central objective of that course was to get students to engage with the longer history of such contemporary arguments, one central difficulty it encountered was that they were already so embroiled in the current arguments that the effort of historical understanding seemed, to them, to be beside the point. We encountered that strange but familiar position in debates about modern sexuality: if recent history has profoundly changed the ways the young think about sexuality, it has also led them to experience *their* sexuality in ways which make history itself seem obsolete.

Too hot for Yale?

Let's for a moment stay with that stand-off between the radical and the reformist gay students. Their argument not only remains with us, but has if anything become more conflicted now that the so-called sex wars and the culture wars have been mapped onto each other. Consider the front cover of the American paper *The Village Voice* for 29 July 1997. It proclaims: 'It's Here, It's Queer, [and] It's Too Hot for Yale.' The sub-heading reads: 'Gay Studies spawns a radical theory of Desire.' The story, by Richard Goldstein, was about how Yale was allegedly trying to play down its earlier reputation as a centre for gay studies, declining an offer of several million dollars from Larry Kramer to fund a professorship of gay studies, on the grounds that this was not yet a proven academic discipline. This was met with loud charges of homophobia. Without taking up a brief for Yale University, scepticism is justified here. Not of course because homophobia doesn't exist, but on the contrary because it does, and to an extent which gives plausibility even to false claims that it's operating. Moreover, as gay and queer studies have become increasingly fashionable in the American academic marketplace, spurious claims are made on their behalf. This *Village Voice* article is a prime case in point. I don't want to dwell on yet another squabble in the American academy, but this one does focus a problem fundamental to education, and in particular the project of an engaged cultural critique. Bluntly, much sexual radicalism today is not radical at all, but tendentious posturing symptomatic of the way that much critique has become relatively ineffectual because academic, metropolitan and professionalized. It's in the American academy that the problem is most obvious, and in ways not unrelated to the more general cultural imperialism of this country.