

*Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson.* By Camille Paglia. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. ISBN 0-679-73579-8. Pp. xiv + 718.

Camille Paglia's sweeping redefinition of the supremacy of nature as expressed in art and literature offers a bold and highly controversial challenge to the firmly entrenched ideologies of feminism. Hailed as both "anti-feminist" and "post-feminist," she takes aim at the Rousseauian idealism inherited by current feminism from the romanticism of the 1960s. A large part of the blame, she asserts, rests within the secluded world of academia and the recent vogue of French intellectuals, primarily Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, three thinkers she utterly despises. With her targets clearly defined, she begins her broad-sided assault with her theory about the primacy of nature in shaping our sexual personae and the struggle of our necessarily patriarchal society to control this amorphous power. Patriarchy is the history of men conquering nature, a struggle unnecessary for women, who are biologically more deeply tied to nature and who more easily accept its power. Society and civilization, therefore, are luxuries enjoyed by women but necessarily constructed by men as a bulwark against the advancing tide of nature's power.

Her book, volume one of two, examines this ongoing battle between nature and society, from their harmony in ancient Egypt, through the emergence of discord in Greece and Rome, and on to the conflict between raw pagan energy and strict Christian control evident among post-Renaissance artists. The wonderful complexities and incongruities of Western culture, she argues, have been created out of these imbalances between nature and civilization, female and male, traced back to Dionysus and Apollo. These same themes, she will argue in the second volume, exist in the pop culture of today, through music, cinema, television and sports.

Nature has always been a stumbling block for feminist theory, and Paglia emphatically asserts that this stumbling block lies at the core of feminism's fallacious understanding of humanity. To replace feminism's simplistic, escapist claim that everything before 1960 was patriarchal and created by Dead White European Males, she lays a broad foundation of cultural criticism, focusing on the relations between art and literature and the complex relationship between sexuality and society depicted therein.

Paglia's first chapter is filled with outrageous claims, often suspiciously crafted to arouse controversy and offense: "we have no female

Michelangelo because we have no female Jack the Ripper," or, "if civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts." She abhors the recent trend in academia to reduce everything to language, for "words are the most removed of human inventions from things-as-they-are." The more natural worship of images and imagery continues today in cinema and television, constantly attacked by Christianity and its parent, word-worshipping Judaism. Herself the daughter of Italian immigrants, she claims that Roman Catholicism has effectively fused the pagan with the Christian, thereby controlling the powerful force of nature. Without this outlet, society collapses, for "whenever sexual freedom [from society] is sought or achieved, sadomasochism will not be far behind. Romanticism always turns into decadence." She is not introducing another subtle alteration into an existent critical trend, but is reviving Hobbes, Sade, Nietzsche and Freud to challenge the current accepted trends in literary, historical and cultural criticism.

Alongside her startling ideas, her book's compelling style leaves no room for apathy or boredom. She supports her arguments with everything from established literary and historical theories to re-interpretations of common, everyday occurrences, seeking thereby to rescue criticism and interpretation from academia's current stranglehold. She overwhelms the reader with the scope of her conclusions rather than the precise exactitude of each observation, leaving the details for us to fill in while she continues on to her next example. Her examples are often more of an appeal to emotion than to reason; at times her writing style is more evocative than argumentative, more image-producing than logic-making. She does not create a string of rational assertions, making a sterile point in a sterile way, but instead lets the pages yell that academia has it all wrong, offering a plethora of examples in rapid-fire succession to prove her point. At the very least, reading her book is an adventurous roller-coaster of anger and relief that finally something is breaking out of the mould.

Paglia's new book offers a necessary counterpoint to the often unchallenged ideology of feminism. Her innovative method of examining questions of sexuality and gender cannot be ignored by anyone claiming a fully nuanced understanding of the influence that sex has had on Western civilization, and only the most rigidly dogmatic could read her book and not have a splendidly smashing time of it, either loving or hating her.