Crowd rape again: from the Victorian social problem novel to the sexual-political problem novel

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Abstract. The Victorian period was known for the social problem novel, dealing with problems such as those caused by industrialization and the large rich poor divide, but in more recent decades there are novels which approximate to what I call “the sexual-political problem novel.” Brought up in a political elite, with expertise in maintaining a public persona and strategic communication and symbolism and running campaigns, however does one solve the problem of having a sexual relationship outside of this class, beyond engaging in crowd rape?


The real Naomi be my name:

Sometimes wild and sometimes tame

And you’ll never play a better game!

But do not enter in that way,

Those who do I always slay.

I have used the term “the Victorian social problem novel” in my title, but here I don’t actually wish to involve myself with texts grouped under that heading. It is just that I took some inspiration from them to identify another kind of novel. They deal with such matters as problems caused by industrialization and a large rich poor divide (Guy 1996). If we move forward to the mid-twentieth century, there seems to me to be a kind of novel which I call “the sexual-political
problem novel,” or if it does not actually exist, it is as if such a novel were trying to get out. Various texts hover close to it as if the problem were on the tip of someone’s tongue. Perhaps it is not decent in various circles to talk about such material, but I intuit that it is better than alternative choices and so I will!

We have to imagine members of an elite class of society, though they might be a lower part of that elite. They are involved in politics. Well, a lot of things are regarded as political in recent years, but I mean paradigmatically political activities. People from that class might well supply town mayors, be engaged in organizing highly visible campaigns, and sending out party policy messages to the wider public – these activities are nothing unusual for members of this elite. Now imagine someone who is born into such a class and the training they undergo. I would not know much about the details – the movies show us ordinary teenagers; rarely the schooling of teenagers of this class – but here are some guesses as to what is involved.

Public personas. They are trained to maintain a strict public persona, or mask metaphorically speaking, when dealing with people outside this class, who in their eyes hardly understand anything of politics, even if these others vote. This is partly because, owing to the duties of being a member of this class, one might be called upon to represent views which one does not believe. Also long experience has shown that being oneself when interacting with the wider public is very stressful. And the general public are thought to prefer dealing with simple archetypes, rather than real complicated people with their hesitations and more. And there may be information which is thought better for the wider public not to know, which requires maintaining a public mask.¹

¹ A character in a John Fowles story writes, “Maybe you don’t know the kind of world I was brought up in. But its leading principle is never, never, never show what you really feel. I think my mother and father were happy together. But I don’t really know. It’s quite possible they’ve been screaming at each other for years behind the scenes. It’s possible he’s been having it off with any number of women. I don’t think so, but I honestly don’t know. Because that’s the world they live in and I have to live in when I’m with them.” (1988: 208) Much earlier, in a 1939 article for The Left Forum, Henry Sara is even more general: “In voicing his views he [any adult] is by no means a
Strategic communication. Let us suppose that you ask someone whether human beings are good or evil. He says, “Well, it seems to me human beings vary. Some are better, and some are worse. Probably culture makes a difference. If you are brought up in one culture, certain heinous acts are more likely to seem acceptable to you, while in others they are less acceptable. I prefer to assume people are basically good till evidence to the contrary.” This is what the man believes and assumes and he responds in an ordinary conversational mode, when expressing it. But people of the class I have in mind are trained to think of what end they are trying to achieve and carefully control their speech so that it best achieves that end. For example, if the desire is that you stop asking them about this issue, then someone might say, “Human beings are born evil. I learnt that from the Bible.” If you are a respectful liberal, you might well not press them any further. (Often the simple and memorable is preferred, because it will still serve the desired end.)

Expertise in symbolism. Related to this quality above, they exhibit a kind of skill with symbolism. What do I mean by that? Consider this thought: “I have something to communicate to you, but if I just present my position and reasons, you will soon pick holes in my thinking, even though I think there is something valuable which I wish to convey. You are very good at arguing and debating, but I think you something of a fool.” Such a situation can arise even between sides of a single political party, say a nationalist wing focused on maintaining communal identity and an economic wing, focused on what would be best for the economy: “We cannot talk much with them.” As an alternative to no communication whatsoever, there are pictures and noises and smells even, which the other is left to interpret, and isolated words and simple slogans. And here we reach for the word “symbolic.” It all seems symbolic. The people I free agent—only seemingly so. He is unlikely, if he be a normal human being, to express his opinions unless he has some motive.” (1939: 178) I am not in favour of continuously forthright speech, however.
have in mind are experts in this last-resort-before-silence symbolic communication, and may often use it in other contexts, in which the option of communicating by less symbolic means is available, despite the risks of misinterpretation.\(^2\)

*Campaign organization skills.* These include giving and receiving information with a large network of people and also directing a large number of people, involved in a highly visible political campaign. People of the class I have in mind, or a significant proportion, are well-prepared for this.

*The problem.* Now consider the situation of forming a romantic relationship with someone from outside this class. They have the typical preoccupations of many people outside this class. They are interested in having a comfortable life and climbing up the ranks in their profession and that things should be nice for their family. Our elite member adapts the skills one might use to win voters and keep voters on side, or win the hearts of the public, to this context! “This is the kind of person the outsider to our class might like, therefore I act like that, much as a public persona is chosen for various campaign ends.” But how does this approach realize the end of a sexual relationship, because these skills do not clearly apply to that localized context? That is the problem. (You can think of the relationship as before or after marriage – that ever absorbing issue does not matter here!) One solution is a division of labour, with someone else doing that. Having employed so much strategy earlier, it is hard to reverse but the strategy cannot easily continue: it is unclear how that persona can be steadily maintained in this context, as one enters the penalty area, so to speak. Another solution is crowd rape. The member of the elite and all their masked friends go all the way with maintaining their masks in some troubling scene involving sexual relations with the outsider. Hopefully there are other solutions. I fear someone will say, “How can you say these things? You are totally fake!”

\(^2\) A kind of communication I believe I have encountered is when people pay for lookalikes to send a message to you.
Actual novels. It seems to me that Milan Kundera’s novels hover close to this kind of problem novel, if not being transparent instances. Here is a quotation from a novel which follows the life of an annoying young poet, including his various sexual misadventures:

The students marched through the streets with Jaromil at their side; he was responsible for the slogans on the banners and for the declamation of his colleagues; this time he no longer thought up beautifully provocative aphorisms but simply copied several slogans recommended by central agit-prop. He was leading the shouting like a corporal counting out cadence, and his colleagues rhythmically yelled out the slogans after him. (1986: 176)

Kundera’s young poet is sincere, but as I have described matters, lots of people involved in comparable campaigns may not be. I should think that for various parts of the public, a lot of these campaigns are simply annoying. They flag issues that we are already aware of; don’t clearly introduce any new ideas; and if the campaign is what moves various people to change position, then it seems they are moved by sheer force or desire to partake in group identity rather than argument, since the arguments are the well-worn. Climate change campaigns, or campaigns to change the economics curriculum away from its rational actor models, seem like this at first glance to me. But perhaps they have the benefit of moving issues to the front of some people’s minds which were elsewhere; or have new ideas buried somewhere within them.

In another one of Kundera’s novels, if it qualifies as that, we are presented with a student who has an affair with a butcher’s wife:

Hearing a man expound ideas about life and mention the names of poets and philosophers was something that never before had happened to Kristyna. The student, poor boy, could talk of nothing else; the range of his seducer’s eloquence
was very limited, and he could not adapt to women of varying social levels.

(1996: 164)

If this were a clear-cut instance of the kind of novel I am describing, he would assess the butcher’s wife as having this preference and deliberately perform a role, then return to his home where his interest in that material is more limited. He may have a book of personas for dealing with different people, which someone else wrote, and this book directs him to use this particular one, while his network provides him with adequate information.³ But it is a façade. If he met someone with a genuine interest in literature, they may soon find surprising gaps in his knowledge. This student has been on a diet of abridged versions, say. Presumably, everything down to the timing of meetings is strategized.⁴

The climatic or anti-climatic scene of the story quoted once struck me as unrealistic – if this woman regards this student as such a danger to her health, their relationship simply does not get to this stage – but by varying the details it does not seem so unrealistic now. There is probably some variation with roughly that. (By the way, this may not fit that well with the political variation I imagined above, but when the student meets the country’s leading writers, who are given famous names such as Goethe and Voltaire, and one such writer asks about his relations with the butcher’s wife, it suggests to me a decadent rite of passage directed by masked senior figures.)

References


³ Some celebrity personas seem rather familiar, as if I have encountered a rough draft! By the way, if one groups a set of people as instances of a type, I think there can be a strategy which works with token A, token B, token C, and so on, but strangely does not produce the desired result with one of the tokens. “But I got exactly what I wanted from so many people of that type like this!” It’s a puzzle, isn’t it? They are not that type, inductive skepticism, etc.

⁴ Despite the age gap, I would probably regard such a student in real life as like Vladimir Nabokov. And even Junichiro Tanizaki’s Naomi I tend to regard like that, as she begins a relationship with an older man.


