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**LARRY, RELIGIOUS ART, AND
SEX MAGIC BEHIND HAPTIC LITEROTICA
ONE-HANDED READING: EROTICA OR PORN?
BONDAGE ISN'T BONDAGE
UNTIL YOU WANT OUT**

In the 1970s, Larry's commercial writing helped set up an evolving fusion of high and low art which fellow marketing genius Robert Mapplethorpe perfected in the 1980s. Historian Stephen Rutledge wrote in the *WOW Report* marking Robert's seventy-fourth birthday, November 3, 2020: "Mapplethorpe made art and porn the same thing. That is his greatest contribution to our culture."

In the same way, it is useful to the history of gay pulp fiction to remember that photography itself even in the Pop Art 1960s was not accepted as a proper establishment art until the mid-to-late 1970s when Mapplethorpe and his powerful and rich lover Sam Wagstaff began collecting antique photography, put high prices on it, linked Mapplethorpe's calculated homages to it, and declared to international dealers and critics that photography was indeed an art worthy of collectors, galleries, and museums—and, if they didn't think so, well, maybe they were not as avant garde as they thought they were. Larry, in the same way, was daring gay gatekeepers to accept S&M Literotica on its own terms. Or were they not as inclusive as they thought they were?

The purpose of Literotica is orgasm. The purpose of Literotica is sex that starts in the head and works its way down. Mapplethorpe told me in a letter that he liked "intelligent sex." Even more than writers of mainstream fiction working to suspend the disbelief of willing readers, erotic writers are hypnotists, magical creators casting their spelling with runes of the alphabet which

the seduced reader sees in his mind's eye and makes haptic in his nonverbal hand. The *Sefer Yetsirah*, the mystical *Book of Creation*, dramatizes God manipulating the Hebrew alphabet to create the world. In the New Testament, the Word is made Flesh in the Body of the Christ. It takes a special talent to turn sex into literature, and literature into porn vivid enough to excite the reader's suspension of sexual disbelief. The money shot is the business of Literotica, and Larry made a small fortune from grateful readers he'd given a hand.

Erotica is aggressive and interactive. Having studied Catholic theology, ritual, and art for eleven years in a Vatican-run pontifical seminary (where no one ever molested me), may I suggest this parallel about the psychology of erotica. There exists a kind of invocative transubstantiation for eager readers of sex writing, much like a priest sets in motion in the Catholic Mass with his ritual words, "Hoc est enim corpus meum" meaning "This is my Body." Saying this, the priest changes the bread and wine in his hands into the Flesh and Blood of the Christ which he then lays on the tongues of cooperating believers willing to suspend disbelief in search of ecstatic Communion with the God-Man they worship.

The Crucifixion, because of Catholicism's deep stamp within art traditions, is a primary image and psychological hang-up in western art and culture. Muscular Christianity with its patriotic discipline of virility inspired without irony by the superhero stoicism of the fasting and tortured Christ demands boys "Man-Up for Jesus." Joris-Karl Huysmans acknowledged in his perfectly decadent book of fetishes, *Against Nature*, how viral was "the Church and her hereditary influence." More than one altar boy, when told during his adolescent magical mystical tour to be an "Imitation of Christ," has been transfigured from prayer to orgasm by the sadomasochistic sex appeal, and stamina, of the athletic Crucifixion sculpture, six-pack and all, of the multiple-choice handsome, bearded, bruised, bleeding bodybuilder Jesus Christ Superstar nailed up, naked but for a gossamer posing pouch, crowned with thorns, life-size and larger, looming over every Catholic altar like an Olympic gymnast poised in the "Iron

Cross” on the still rings. Religion has made a fortune selling erotic masochism based on the “Humiliation of the Christ.”

Larry, who was not at all religious, picked up such an education on his grand tour of European churches and museums about this iconic connection, this desired hallucination, of Catholic imagery with S&M that he made special mention of the *Catholic Martyrology* as a “jewel” of a source book which drips with S&M details of the sexual martyrdom of voluptuous naked Christian youths tortured by uniformed Roman soldiers and leather-clad gladiators in the Colosseum.

The first jewel [in my collection] came to me for one buck, through the Marboro Book catalogue. [Marboro mail-order was then the nation’s largest retailer of remaindered books before it was bought up and consumed by Barnes & Noble.] It is entitled: *TORTURE* [his caps] *of the Christian Martyrs* (Illustrated), adapted by A. R. Alinson from the “DE SS. MARTYRM CRUCIATIBUS” [his caps] of the Rev. Father Antonio Gallonio. [Larry misnamed the book whose actual title is *De Sanctorum Martyrum Cruciatibus*.]

The erotic author’s collaborator is the one-handed reader with a prehensile grip and a prehensile mind. Invoking the gods Eros and Priapus, the author and reader become one in a physical connection that breaks existential isolation and spills seed. The reader’s orgasm is the author’s best review.

Literotica exists to arouse a super-willing suspension of disbelief in the reader who in the privacy of his mind uses masturbation as a dopamine ritual of magical thinking that leads to the self-care of physical pleasure and of existential visions of desire—like pop songs and opera that ignite musical thrills; like poetry inspiring mystical experiences. When masturbation isn’t self-empowerment, you’re just jerking yourself off. Orgasmic literature courts revelations of sexual identity. Orgasm doesn’t lie. Tell me what you jerk off to and I’ll tell you who you are.

Language has power words can’t describe. About the impossibility of defining pornography, Justice Potter Stewart, in the

most famous phrase ever uttered by the U.S. Supreme Court, said he couldn't define it, but "I know it when I see it." (Larry quoted Potter Stewart.) You either get the alchemy or you don't. Sex is personal. People can transubstantiate anything from bible stories to the *Sears Catalog* to NFL football telecasts into porn. In the alchemy of eros, if readers cum, it is their orgasm sorting the denotations and connotations of erotica and porn which, like beauty, are in the mind of the beholder. Erotica doesn't become porn until you cum—the way bondage isn't bondage until you want out.

Larry, who had no aspirations about pushing the margins of the canons of religion, art, and literature, knew how to rouse the sexuality of his readers. That's an art in itself. Not every author can or will do that. It's proverbial that the gay erotic writer is to gay non-erotic writers what Ginger Rogers was to Fred Astaire. Gay erotic literature can do everything gay mainstream literature can, but it does it backwards and in high heels adding to its Olympic degree of difficulty. Both porn and literary erotica can be fine art and pop art and lowbrow and highbrow and interchangeable.

Seventeen years after Michael Bronski in 1984 wrote a marvelous essay about male love in S&M novels titled "S/M: The New Romance" in Boston's *Gay Community News*, Vol, 2, No. 30, he wrote this 2001 call to arms in his essay, "Fictions about Pulp," in the *Gay and Lesbian Review*, 6, November 2001

[These books] ...are an integral aspect of gay male culture and gay history that is as vital as—indeed inseparable from—our fight for legal equality and personal freedom. They are the records—albeit fictional ones, often seen through the peculiar lenses of their times—of how gay men lived, thought, desired, loved and survived.

Wayne R. Dynes, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, led the charge toward scholarship in the "Duke University Guide to Pulp":

Written primarily by gay men..., they served as primers on gay cultural norms for newly coming out or isolated gay men. At first, these gay-themed books did not

acknowledge the possibility of a “gay life,” just “gay sex,” but as gay culture and politics developed, gay fiction reflected a new all-encompassing culture separate from the straight world.

Drewery Wayne Gunn wrote in his *The Golden Age of Gay Fiction* that his younger self discovered the joys of gay pulp fiction when he found Larry Townsend’s paperbacks in a local drugstore. He also discovered there was a genre of “Gay Science Fiction” with Larry’s *2069*, and a genre of “Gay Mysteries” with Larry’s *The Sexual Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by “J. Watson” aka Larry.

With these critics and scholars, including Susan Stryker’s book *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions* (2001), their general acknowledgments include Larry in lists and sentences, but without development. That’s a beginning. Larry Townsend, a writer, thinker, and psychologist who taught generations of leatherfolk how to live, was all of that, and he deserves specific study.

My own point of view is simply personal memoir in this my last testament about my relationship with Larry. His views are his views alone. I am but his friend spilling a drop for a lost brother. Because we bonded over writing, I cast about for literary comparisons. I am not F. Scott Fitzgerald’s narrator Nick Carraway pining to make his pal James Gatz, who changed his name to “Jay Gatsby,” stand at moral attention forever. Larry needs no one to explain him away.

If Larry’s history is anything, it is a cautionary tale about gay men growing older and losing their cool the way Larry did and Truman Capote did and Quentin Crisp did and Tennessee Williams did and Gore Vidal did who “died of booze and revenge” according to his frenemy Edmund White. If Larry had paid attention to any one of them, he might have learned not to become the litigious gay old man yelling at the neighbors’ kids to get off his gay lawn.

Larry and I had a fond fraternal regard for each other and for each other’s boundaries. In the last thirty years, I have written about him, with his cooperation, in three books: his *Leatherman’s Handbook*, Silver Anniversary Edition; *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*; and *Gay Pioneers*. His objective placement

in history is yet to be written by more objective journalists, historians, and scholars who will come to appreciate the pleasure of his company once they realize his S&M books are not bound with human skin.

They have a lot of heavy lifting to do. As late in the gay enlightenment of the fin de siècle as October 26, 1995, the *Bay Area Reporter* allowed its so-identified trans-lesbian “Sapphistication” columnist to take a tasteless potshot at the elder Larry as the “...author of that classic of dead cow, *The Leatherman’s Handbook*.”

This memoir is banking an investment in future gay studies by disclosing private archival eyewitness documents and the local color around them. Perhaps a proper scholarship of reclamation history may begin to emerge to celebrate his hundredth birthday in 2030.