



HERCULINE BARBIN

*Being the Recently Discovered
Memoirs of
a Nineteenth-Century
French Hermaphrodite*

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A story based on the life of Herculine Barbin

INTRODUCTION

Do we *truly* need a *true* sex? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a "true sex" in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures.

For a long time, however, such a demand was not made, as is proven by the history of the status which medicine and law have granted to hermaphrodites. Indeed it was a very long time before the postulate that a hermaphrodite must have a sex—a single, a true sex—was formulated. For centuries, it was quite simply agreed that hermaphrodites had two. Were they terror-inspiring monsters, calling for legal tortures? In fact, things were much more complicated. It is true that there is evidence of a number of executions, both in ancient times and in the Middle Ages. But there is also an abundance of court decisions of a completely different type. In the Middle Ages, the rules of both canon and civil law were very clear on this point: the designation "hermaphrodite" was given to those in whom the two sexes were juxtaposed, in proportions that might be variable. In these cases, it was the role of the father or the godfather (thus of those who "named" the child) to determine at the time of baptism which sex was going to be retained. If necessary,

one was advised to choose the sex that seemed to have the better of the other, being "the most vigorous" or "the warmest." But later, on the threshold of adulthood, when the time came for them to marry, hermaphrodites were free to decide for themselves if they wished to go on being of the sex which had been assigned to them, or if they preferred the other. The only imperative was that they should not change it again but keep the sex they had then declared until the end of their lives, under pain of being labeled sodomites. Changes of option, not the anatomical mixture of the sexes, were what gave rise to most of the condemnations of hermaphrodites in the records that survive in France for the period of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals. Henceforth, everybody was to have one and only one sex. Everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity; as for the elements of the other sex that might appear, they could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite simply illusory. From the medical point of view, this meant that when confronted with a hermaphrodite, the doctor was no longer concerned with recognizing the presence of the two sexes, juxtaposed or intermingled, or with knowing which of the two prevailed over the other, but rather with deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances. He had, as it were, to strip the body of its anatomical deceptions and discover the one true sex behind organs that might have put on

the forms of the opposite sex. For someone who knew how to observe and to conduct an examination, these mixtures of sex were no more than disguises of nature: hermaphrodites were always "pseudo-hermaphrodites." Such, at least, was the thesis that tended to gain credence in the eighteenth century, through a certain number of important and passionately argued cases.

From the legal point of view, this obviously implied the disappearance of free choice. It was no longer up to the individual to decide which sex he wished to belong to, juridically or socially. Rather, it was up to the expert to say which sex nature had chosen for him and to which society must consequently ask him to adhere. The law, if it was necessary to appeal to it (as when, for example, someone was suspected of not living under his true sex or of having improperly married), had to establish or reestablish the legitimacy of a sexual constitution that had not been sufficiently well recognized. But if nature, through its fantasies or accidents, might "deceive" the observer and hide the true sex for a time, individuals might also very well be suspected of dissembling their inmost knowledge of their true sex and of profiting from certain anatomical oddities in order to make use of their bodies as if they belonged to the other sex. In short, the phantasmagorias of nature might be of service to licentious behavior, hence the *moral* interest that inhered in the *medical* diagnosis of the true sex.

I am well aware that medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries corrected many things in this reductive oversimplification. Today, nobody would say that all hermaphrodites are "pseudo," even if one considerably limits an area into which many different kinds of anatomical anomalies were formerly admitted without discrimination. It

is also agreed, though with much difficulty, that it is possible for an individual to adopt a sex that is not biologically his own.

Nevertheless, the idea that one must indeed finally have a true sex is far from being completely dispelled. Whatever the opinion of biologists on this point, the idea that there exist complex, obscure, and essential relationships between sex and truth is to be found—at least in a diffused state—not only in psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychology, but also in current opinion. We are certainly more tolerant in regard to practices that break the law. But we continue to think that some of these are insulting to “the truth”: we may be prepared to admit that a “passive” man, a “virile” woman, people of the same sex who love one another, do not seriously impair the established order; but we are ready enough to believe that there is something like an “error” involved in what they do. An “error” as understood in the most traditionally philosophical sense: a manner of acting that is not adequate to reality. Sexual irregularity is seen as belonging more or less to the realm of chimeras. That is why we rid ourselves easily enough of the idea that these are crimes, but less easily of the suspicion that they are fictions which, whether involuntary or self-indulgent, are useless, and which it would be better to dispel. Wake up, young people, from your illusory pleasures; strip off your disguises and recall that every one of you has a sex, a true sex.

And then, we also admit that it is in the area of sex that we must search for the most secret and profound truths about the individual, that it is there that we can best discover what he is and what determines him. And if it was believed for centuries that it was necessary to hide sexual matters because they were shameful, we now know that it is

sex itself which hides the most secret parts of the individual: the structure of his fantasies, the roots of his ego, the forms of his relationship to reality. At the bottom of sex, there is truth.”

It is at the junction of these two ideas—that we must not deceive ourselves concerning our sex, and that our sex harbors what is most true in ourselves—that psychoanalysis has rooted its cultural vigor. It promises us at the same time our sex, our true sex, and that whole truth about ourselves which secretly keeps vigil in it.

Here is a document drawn from that strange history of our “true sex.” It is not unique, but it is rare enough. It is the journal or rather the memoirs that were left by one of those individuals whom medicine and the law in the nineteenth century relentlessly questioned about their genuine sexual identity.

Brought up as a poor and deserving girl in a milieu that was almost exclusively feminine and strongly religious, Herculine Barbin, who was called Alexina by her familiars, was finally recognized as being “truly” a young man. Obligated to make a legal change of sex after judicial proceedings and a modification of his civil status, he was incapable of adapting himself to a new identity and ultimately committed suicide. I would be tempted to call the story banal were it not for two or three things that give it a particular intensity.

The date, first of all. The years from around 1860 to 1870 were precisely one of those periods when investigations of sexual identity were carried out with the most intensity, in an attempt not only to establish the true sex of hermaphro-

dates but also to identify, classify, and characterize the different types of perversions. In short, these investigations dealt with the problem of sexual anomalies in the individual and the race. *Question d'identité*, which was published in 1860 in a medical review, was the title of the first study of Alexina; and it was in his own book, *Question médico-légale de l'identité*, that Auguste Tardieu published the only part of her memoirs that could be found. Adélaïde Herculine Barbin, or Alexina Barbin, or Abel Barbin, who is called either Alexina or Camille in his own text, was one of those unfortunate heroes of the quest for identity.

With that elegant, affected, and allusive style that is somewhat turgid and outdated—which for boarding schools of the day was not only a way of writing but a manner of living—the narrative baffles every possible attempt to make an identification. It seems that nobody in Alexina's feminine milieu consented to play that difficult game of truth which the doctors later imposed on his indeterminate anatomy, until a discovery that everybody delayed for as long as possible was finally precipitated by two men, a priest and a doctor. It seems that nobody who looked at it was aware of his somewhat awkward, graceless body, which became more and more abnormal in the company of those girls among whom he grew up. Yet it exercised over everybody, or rather over every female, a certain power of fascination that misted their eyes and stopped every question on their lips. The warmth that this strange presence gave to the contacts, the caresses, the kisses that ran through the play of those adolescent girls was welcomed by everybody with a tenderness that was all the greater because no curiosity mingled with it. Falsely naïve girls, old teachers who thought they

were shrewd—they were all alike as blind as characters in a Greek fable when, uncomprehendingly, they saw this puny Achilles hidden in their boarding school. One has the impression, at least if one gives credence to Alexina's story, that everything took place in a world of feelings—enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness—where the identity of the partners and above all the enigmatic character around whom everything centered, had no importance. It was a world in which grins hung about without the cat.

Alexina wrote her memoirs about that life once her new identity had been discovered and established. Her "true" and "definitive" identity. But it is clear she did not write them from the point of view of that sex which had at least been brought to light. It is not a man who is speaking, trying to recall his sensations and his life as they were at the time when he was not yet "himself." When Alexina composed her memoirs, she was not far from her suicide; for herself, she was still without a definite sex, but she was deprived of the delights she experienced in not having one, or in not entirely having the same sex as the girls among whom she lived and whom she loved and desired so much. And what she evokes in her past is the happy limbo of a non-identity, which was paradoxically protected by the life of those closed, narrow, and intimate societies where one has the strange happiness, which is at the same time obligatory and forbidden, of being acquainted with only one sex.¹

¹ In the English translation of the text, it is difficult to render the play of the masculine and feminine adjectives which Alexina applies to herself. They are, for the most part, feminine before she possessed Sara and masculine afterward. But this systematization, which is denoted by the use of italics, does not seem to describe a consciousness of being a woman

Most of the time, those who relate their change of sex belong to a world that is strongly bisexual; and their uneasiness about their identity finds expression in the desire to pass over to the other side—to the side of the sex they desire to have and in whose world they would like to belong. In this case, the intense monosexuality of religious and school life fosters the tender pleasures that sexual non-identity discovers and provokes when it goes astray in the midst of all those bodies that are similar to one another.

Neither Alexina's case nor her memoirs seem to have aroused much interest at the time. In his immense inventory of cases of hermaphroditism, Neugebauer gives a summary of it and a rather long citation.¹ A. Dubarry, a versatile writer of adventure stories and medico-pornographic novels of the kind that were so popular at the time, obviously borrowed several elements for his *Hermaphrodite* from the story of Herculine Barbin.² But it was in Germany that Alexina's life found a remarkable echo, in a story by Oscar Panizza,

becoming a consciousness of being a man; rather, it is an ironic reminder of grammatical, medical, and juridical categories that language must utilize but that the content of the narrative contradicts.

The editors of the English-language edition have followed Herculine's system wherever possible, italicizing the feminine nouns which she used in referring to herself.

¹ F. L. von Neugebauer, *Hermaphroditismus beim Menschen* (Leipzig, 1908), p. 748. Note that the printer by mistake put Alexina's name under a portrait that is obviously not her own.

² A. Dubarry wrote a long series of narratives under the title *Les Déséquilibrés de l'amour*. For example: *Le Coupeur de nattes*; *Les Femmes eunuques*; *Les Invertis (vice allemand)*; *Le Plaisir sanglant*; *L'Hermaphrodite*.

entitled *A Scandal at the Convent*. There is nothing extraordinary about Panizza's being acquainted with Alexina's text by way of Tardieu's work: he was a psychiatrist, and he lived in France in 1881. He was more interested in literature there than in medicine, but the book *Question médico-légale de l'identité* must have come into his hands then, unless he found it in a library in Germany, where he returned in 1882 and practiced for a while his profession as a psychiatrist. Yet there is something surprising about this imaginary encounter between the little provincial French girl of indeterminate sex and the frenzied psychiatrist who was later to die in the asylum at Bayreuth. On the one hand, we find furtive, nameless pleasures thriving in the warmth of Catholic institutions and boarding schools for girls; on the other hand, the anticlerical rage of a man in whom an aggressive positivism was bizarrely combined with a persecution mania that centered around the dominating figure of William II. On the one hand, strange, secret loves that a decision of the doctors and the judges was to render impossible; on the other hand, a doctor who was condemned to a year in prison for having written *The Council of Love*, one of the most "scandalously" antireligious texts of a time that abounded in such texts; a doctor who was later expelled from Switzerland, where he had sought refuge, after an "outrage" upon a female minor.

The result is indeed remarkable. Panizza kept a few important elements of the case: the very name of Alexina, the scene of the medical examination. For a reason I have trouble grasping—perhaps because, relying on his memories of his reading without having Tardieu's book at hand, he availed himself of another study of a similar case that he had at his disposal—he altered the medical reports. But the most

radical changes were those he made in the whole narrative. He transposed it in time; he altered many material elements and the entire atmosphere; and, above all, he took it out of the subjective mode and put it into objective narration. He gave everything a certain "eighteenth-century" manner: Diderot and his *Religieuse* do not seem far off. There is a rich convent for girls of the aristocracy, a sensual mother superior who shows an equivocal affection for her niece, intrigues and rivalries among the nuns, an erudite and skeptical abbé, a credulous country priest, and peasants who go after the devil with their pitchforks. Throughout, there is a skin-deep licentiousness and a semi-naïve play of not entirely innocent beliefs, which are just as far removed from the provincial seriousness of Alexina as they are from the baroque violence of *The Council of Love*.

But in inventing this whole landscape of perverse galantry, Panizza deliberately leaves in the center of his narrative a vast area of shadow, and that is precisely where he places Alexina. Sister, mistress, disturbing schoolgirl, strayed cherub, male and female lover, faun running in the forest, incubus stealing into the warm dormitories, hairy-legged satyr, exorcized demon—Panizza presents her only in the fleeting profiles which the others see. This boy-girl, this never eternal masculine-feminine, is nothing more than what passes at night in the dreams, the desires, and the fears of everyone. Panizza chose to make her only a shadowy figure, without an identity and without a name, who vanishes at the end of the narrative leaving no trace. He did not even choose to fix her with a suicide, whereby she would become a corpse, like Abel Barbin, to which curious doctors in the end assigned the reality of an inadequate sex.

I have brought these two texts together, thinking they

deserved to be published side by side, first of all because both belong to the end of the nineteenth century, that century which was so powerfully haunted by the theme of the hermaphrodite—somewhat as the eighteenth century had been haunted by the theme of the transvestite. Also because they allow us to see what a wake this little provincial chronicle, hardly even scandalous, managed to leave behind in the unhappy memory of its principal character, in the knowledge of the doctors who had to intervene, and in the imagination of a psychiatrist who went in his own manner toward his own madness.

—Michel Foucault
January 1980