

'Dear Diary . . .'

The Illustrated Pepys: Extracts from the Diary; Edited by Robert Latham; University of California Press; Berkeley.

by Ronald Berman

Samuel Pepys, Clerk of the Acts to the Navy Board, began a diary on the first of January 1660 and continued it until the 31st of May 1669. The original manuscript was, so far as we know, hardly noticed for the next 150 years. In six bound volumes it remained in the Pepys Library of Magdalene College, Cambridge. It had few readers, even among the learned, because the text was for the most part written in Shelton shorthand, a system which had been in use in England since 1626.

In the 19th century, after transcription of the diary began, Pepys became the interest both of scholars and of the public. Over a 60-year period, from 1825 on, editions of the diary began to appear. But there was one thing common to all of them: they were intentionally incomplete. Pepys was ruthlessly honest and very descriptive about his sex life, and this was simply too difficult for the 19th century to accept. So, until 1970, when the whole text was reproduced by the University of California edition of the diary, any copy of it had strategic omissions.

Most of Pepys's text is in Shelton shorthand; some of it is in longhand; a small but important part of it is in a strange mixture of Spanish, French, and English that Pepys used to describe certain moments—usually those of sexual activity. This private language may not have been intended so much to elude detection as to distance Pepys himself from embarrassing moments. One of the reasons why the University of California "translation" of the diary is important is that the

private language is for the first time included. The Wheatley edition of 1893-99, previously the standard edition, will have the following entry for 25 October 1668:

At night W. Batelier comes and sups with us; and after supper, to have my head combed by Deb, which occasioned the greatest sorrow to me that ever I knew in this world; for my wife, coming up suddenly, did find me embracing the girl. . . . I was at a wonderful loss upon it, and the girl also.

Pepys was being deloused, a more-or-less routine 17th-century practice, and Deb was his wife's pretty servant, with whom he was rapidly falling in love. But the new version of the episode will replace ellipsis with the line "con my hand sub su coats; and ended, I was with my main in her cunny."

When sex is involved Pepys is both open and secretive. He had what I suppose can best be called a mistress of convenience, a Mrs. Bagwell, whose husband was dependent upon Pepys for promotion and who seemed to acquiesce nicely in the arrangement. But even in discussing the routine in this evidently conscious exchange Pepys slips into his patois: "And did senza alguna difficulty monter los degres and lie, comme jo desired it, upon lo lectum; and there I did la cosa con much voluptas."

Although the *Diary* has the deserved reputation of being one of the world's

greatest autobiographical works, it covers a period of only nine years. I think that Boswell is more interesting, but Pepys is more informative. The reason that the *Diary* has fascinated readers since the 19th century even with strategic editorial censorship is that it tells us more about life in general than any other book. And I don't mean by this that it covers business, law, the arts, etc. Nor even that it matters because of the first-hand descriptions of the plague and the Great Fire of London. The reason the *Diary* is important is that it is a literary text.

The *Diary* is not only a journal of events but a series of reflections on them. Thus it is a story of consciousness. It is deeply reflective, concerned with dreams, daydreams, and states of mind. It is about the dissimulation necessarily involved in modern relationships between the self and the world. It is often about Pepys's weaknesses—he was hasty, angry, very stingy, and quintessentially lustful—and even more often about his reaction to them. There was a certain amount of Puritan to Pepys, so that the record of his life is a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress* of body and mind. Richard Ollard's excellent biography, *Pepys*, examines the whole Bagwell relationship, which reveals so much about Pepys's willingness to use his office for sexual favors, his meanness, and his opportunistic use of place and circumstance:

Like the Impressionists he disdains the neutral tints. The actor-narrator provides insights of his own that could support a Marxist indictment of bourgeois exploitation, a Christian exposition of sin, and the more cynical view that morality consists in what one can get away with. . . . Pepys sometimes desires Mrs. Bagwell, sometimes pities her, sometimes despises her. There is no suggestion of love or tenderness. . . . higher feelings were inspired by women of higher class. Lady



Dr. Berman is with the department of literature at the University of California, San Diego.

Castlemaine, for instance, or even the Queen, Catherine of Braganza, were the objects of Pepys' cerebral lust, issuing sometimes in dreams of ecstasy.

Robert Latham, the editor of *The Illustrated Pepys*, says that its author shows "a sort of innocence, a love of truth for truth's sake." That seems true enough, but the complexities perceived by Ollard are also there. They seem to be related, one would guess, to the autobiographical literature of the Puritan movement, which stressed the exercise of conscience and of constant self-evaluation. We get the tone even in the fragments of another famous diary, that of Jimmy Gatz, who later became Jay Gatsby.

The Samuel Pepys that one reads—or reads about—is liable to be different from one critic to another. He is certainly different from one passage of his own text to another. *The Illustrated Pepys*, in its introduction, views his outstanding characteristic as a "genius for happiness" but notes that is sometimes overwhelmed by a passionate sense of his own capacity for perjury, and a deep sense of worthlessness. He will invoke the pleasures and peculiarities of sex and within moments write, "I do by the grace of God promise never to offend her more, and did this night begin to pray to God upon my knees alone in my chamber; which God knows I cannot yet do heartily . . ." He sounds very much like Boswell, whose life also was a checkerboard of pleasure and guilt.

There is, incidentally, a first-rate study of both Pepys and Boswell in the context of Enlightenment sexual practices. That is in Lawrence Stone's authoritative *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. Stone comes down heavily on both, and judges Pepys to have been an exceptionally virile fantast and voyeur. I would tend to be more sympathetic, but Stone's chapter goes over the evidence and concludes that Pepys had contact with about 50 women in the nine years of his diary, and that nearly all his contacts betrayed some kind of selfish and prudential consideration—not to speak of the extraordinary

prolongation of sexual play, which often constituted the whole of his contact. I note that Stone adds that such behavior was either expected or often acceptable at the time.

The Illustrated Pepys should be read for its own pleasure, but to make more sense of it I strongly recommend the Ollard biography previously cited, the Stone history of sexual practices of the age, and the Caedmon recording of passages from the *Diary* by Ian Richardson. The last provides a new insight into the text, as Richardson's wonderfully self-concerned and self-satisfied voice is deployed about Pepys's deep interest in money, success, wine, food, and drama. I

note that there is even a separate book culled from the *Diary* on the last. It is called *Pepys on the Restoration Stage* and has been around since 1916. There is an irresistible passage in this book which has not been included in *The Illustrated Pepys*:

September 29, 1668. Then to the King's Theatre, where we saw 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life. I saw, I confess, some good dancing and some handsome women, which was all my pleasure.

It is worth the price of the cassette to hear Richardson reading this. □

Semiotics, Sex, Suspicion

Kaja Silverman: *The Subject of Semiotics*; Oxford University Press; New York.

Jacques Lacan and the *ecole freudienne*: *Feminine Sexuality*; W. W. Norton; New York.

by Gary S. Vasilash

The Subject of Semiotics, given the generally accepted meaning of the words and the conventional form of the title, would seem to be a book about semiotics, but to use a well-garbled tag: Things are not what they seem. The book is about semiotics and is *not* about semiotics, a contradictory condition that should arouse no deep concern among those for whom an escape from meaning and certainty is an ideal to be sought. Kaja Silverman admits from the start that hers is not a book in the tradition of those which have a similar encompassing title and which then provide an overview of the object of the preposition; she explains that her book should be "viewed

Mr. Vasilash is associate editor of *Chronicles of Culture*.

as a supplementary and explanatory text rather than as one that precedes the reading of any primary semiotic materials." The fact that she uses the word *viewed* rather than *read* is a telling one, as reading in any standard or expected sense is of less importance than is taking a pseudoscientific approach to and attitude toward *written* materials; films, on the contrary, are not to be viewed but exist to be read. The French frontline, who are essentially responsible for such twisted stances, have gastronomic brethren who maintain that food is, first and foremost, to be viewed; matters of the palate are secondary—at best. One day we may be asked to smell books and to touch celluloid; then the medium will truly be the message.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the putative father of the whole thing, defined *semi-ology* in his *Course in General Linguistics* (published in 1916, three years after his death) as "a science that studies the life of signs within society. . . . Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them." Saussure's use of *science* is a sign that legitimizes semiotics more than, say, "an *approach* to the life of signs . . ." or "a *theory* about the life of