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Sex and Longing in Old Vienna

This seems to be Arthur Schnitzler's year in the English-speaking world. In "The Blue Room," we saw all of Nicole Kidman -- well, not in a good light -- in a daring adaptation by David Hare of one of his most dazzling works for the stage, "Reigen" ("The Round Dance"). Ten couples pair up for the ultimate pleasure, one of each continuing with a different partner until in the last scene the prostitute, who has appeared in the first sketch, appears once more.

And this week we will be seeing Stanley Kubrick's last film, "Eyes Wide Shut," an adaptation of a late Schnitzler story, "Dream Novella": a couple whose marriage is in some trouble manage to rescue it by profiting from mysterious events. The husband, a physician, witnesses, and participates in, some highly peculiar, perversely erotic, nocturnal adventures. Meanwhile his wife has a powerful dream, which, as the two later compare notes, turns out to have been a precise recapitulation of the husband's experiences. Chastened, they decide to go on together. It is a demanding story, and one wonders what Kubrick has made of it.

Arthur Schnitzler (1862-1931) is not a household name here, though some of his vast output, 4,000 closely printed pages in the complete German edition, has been translated. Born in Vienna, the son of an eminent Jewish laryngologist, he became a physician but let his practice lapse around 1893, after his father's death. Significantly, the only branch of medicine that interested him was psychiatry; the most tangible reward of his practice was that some of his patients were women, young, pretty and eminently seducible. Apart from glances at the anti-Semitism that swamped late-19th-century Vienna and at dueling, an aristocratic survival he detested, his main, almost his only, topic was sexual love, chiefly its psychological roots and consequences.

In one of his poems, Schnitzler said that while he had been accused of concentrating too much on love, play and death, he had no apologies: these "eternal three" contain all the world. But the premier of them was the erotic side of life. It was, however, far from being a pure pleasure for him. He was, like one of his best-known dramatic characters, Anatol, a man about town changing mistresses

the way others might change shirts, a "hypochondriac of love."

In short, Schnitzler knew his subject only too well. Once started on his sexual adventures -- and he started early -- he never stopped. The list of his affairs, most of them brief and casual, is very long. He was a sexual athlete whose formidable capacities never quite matched his ever-alert appetites. Leporello could have sung a good catalogue aria about him. An eligible bachelor until he married at 41, he found his prey everywhere, and for some years, ever the scientist, he would count up every month the number of orgasms he -- and he hoped his partners -- had savored.

In early 1885, he picked up a good-looking young woman on a walk. Anna Heger -- she called herself Jeanette in a pathetic effort to raise her status -- did embroidery for a paltry living and was, in Schnitzler's pitilessly discriminating class society, an unsuitable and hence all the more desirable target. Two days later she visited his rooms and became his mistress. To his astonishment, Schnitzler grew attached to her, though this did not keep him from cultivating amorous entanglements on a trip abroad. But when he returned to Vienna on Aug. 25, 1888, he celebrated his reunion with Jeanette five times. By the time the two parted at the end of 1889 -- their romance had deteriorated as she made jealous scenes -- his proofs of potency with her stood at 563. By then he had been carrying on an affair with an actress, Marie Glmer, for some months, and on the day he added up his final total with Jeanette Heger, he could look back on 35 consummations with his new love. He needed sex the way more balanced men need food; if he did not have it for a week or so, he confided to his journal, he felt like an animal.

This prodigious activity was less an achievement than a symptom. Evidently Schnitzler was driven to prove something to himself; the psychoanalytic conjecture that he needed to drown out homoerotic urges is highly plausible. Whatever the cause, he used his life as practice for his work. True, he indignantly dismissed any suggestion that he had put much of himself into his stories and plays, and we may enjoy them without knowing anything about him. At the same time, as his diaries and letters document, he often virtually transcribed his feelings, his encounters, his neurotic preoccupations.

Schnitzler's intrigues had one unanticipated consequence: they supplied a footnote to the literary and cultural history of Vienna. One of his early loves (he offered more than one candidate) inspired him to coin a term for a sexually available young woman: *das sse M*. These accessible women were *petites bourgeoises* escaping the monotony of their impecunious existence and the company of their dull, unpromising future husbands. For rakes with their consciences well under control, sweet girls were a boon. Some well-calculated talk of love, a few dinners in fancy restaurants, an occasional weekend in a country retreat seemed, to these women thirsting after life, adequate recompense for the favors they dispensed. But for all the enjoyment they derived, they were victims, as Schnitzler well knew. In his fictions he would satirize the idlers who exploited them, criticize these narcissists, in short, for doing precisely what he was doing.

Schnitzler made a career of exploring such loves and others, too. A pile of unpublished manuscripts proves that he never ran out of plots, but what really interested him was the inner life of his characters, their joys and sufferings, their mixed feelings, at times their tragedies. More than one of Schnitzler's protagonists shoots himself. And he understood the men and women he invented with exceptional shrewdness. His gift for observation equaled his gift for dialogue. Was he then the Freud of fiction?

Freud certainly thought so. In May 1906, thanking Schnitzler for sending congratulations on his 50th birthday, he expressed his amazement at Schnitzler for garnering "secret knowledge," the kind of psychological insight that he, Freud, could obtain only after laborious research. "For many years," he wrote, "I have been aware of the far-reaching agreement between your and my conceptions of quite a few psychological and erotic problems." He candidly added that he envied Schnitzler. Then, in 1922, congratulating Schnitzler on his 60th birthday, Freud confessed that he had not sought his acquaintance from a kind of timidity at encountering his double -- Freud coined a handy German word for it, *Doppelgänger*. One can understand Freud's enthusiasm for a fellow investigator of the human soul, but a close look suggests that Freud was being too generous. Schnitzler's sensitivity is undisputed, but his range was narrow. One need only compare Schnitzler's work to Freud's epoch-making "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905) to recognize Schnitzler's limitations. Schnitzler's favorite plot device was the triangle -- a married woman between husband and lover -- and their love, though it may end badly, is untroubled by the vagaries and complications that Freud put on the map. Homosexuality appears a few times in some mild jokes. Impotence is the lot of one character in "Reigen." And that is about all.

Is his work worth discovering, or rediscovering, for Americans? He had an uncanny ear for dialogue, a gratifying wit, a talent for spinning out tales of adultery in almost infinite variations, a keen psychological eye even if it did not match that of Freud. Naturally some of his main preoccupations -- can a respectable man marry a "fallen" woman, one who has had an affair or two? -- are of mere historical interest. But the best of Schnitzler is very good indeed. I have already mentioned "Reigen"; I should add "Professor Bernhardt," probably his most interesting play, which deals unsentimentally, even humorously, with the plague of anti-Semitism in Vienna. And there is "Lieutenant Gustl," an internal monologue, one of the first in literature, that digs into the depths -- shall I say shallows? -- of a young blade who faces a duel and is mortally afraid. It is as brilliant as anything Schnitzler ever wrote, and it alone speaks for a new look.

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