

as no more than taking a philosophical stroll in the park, here and there stopping to point out an interesting view. The park is not a paradise. Weeds grow, serpents lie in wait, and people have built slums over parts of it. But we do not have to inhabit them, if we are careful.

C H A P T E R O N E

Desire

It is not easy, to say the least, to identify the object of many of our desires. We are familiar with the idea that we may think we want one thing when we really want something else. We have grown used to the idea that we disguise our desires from ourselves, let alone from each other. Perhaps not our doings, nor our sayings, nor even the tales about ourselves we tell in our heads manifest our true desires. Ours is a suspicious age, receptive to the idea that our selves are slippery and mutable, many-layered, sometimes glimpsed but never known, more constructed than discovered. But this is not itself a new idea. Across the centuries a great deal of Christian energy went into spiritual disciplines designed to strip off the false

veil of our deceptions and self-deceptions so as to reveal our true heart's desires underneath.

When we talk of lust it might seem clear enough what we are talking about: sexual desire. And it might seem equally obvious what that is. The boy and girl back from the bar, stumbling and stripping in the hall, tongues lolling and panting for "it," know what they want. It's simple enough. They want sex.

But that does not get to the heart of it. Someone might want sex for many reasons: to have children, to prove that they can do it, to gratify a partner, simply to be rid of someone, to advance their career, to provide a medical sample, or to earn some money. In such cases, they may desire sex without feeling lust; indeed in some of these cases absence of lust may be precisely the problem. Sex can be a means to further ends, and in any case biologically it is certainly there as a means to a further end, namely reproduction. Our boy and girl don't care about anything like that. Their frenzy is directed not at sexual activity as a means, but as an end in itself.

If we are biologically minded, we might say what they are really after is orgasm and the following relief. But that is clearly wrong. If he thinks about it at all, our boy may be dreading his orgasm as an unwanted terminus, an unwelcome interruption, a possible cause of humiliation and dissatisfaction. Or, he might fear that in spite of his partner's current enthusiasm, he is not going to get sex and may have to go and provide himself an orgasm later. And that is not what he

wants. The focus of his lust is quite different. The mistake here is to confuse anything that brings desire to an end with the intended object of desire, the thing that is actually wanted. Bertrand Russell once proposed such a theory of desire, and it is implicit in the common psychological metaphor of "drives" aiming at their own "extinction." The philosopher Wittgenstein is supposed to have refuted Russell by pointing out that if Russell wanted food, his desire might be extinguished by a punch in the stomach. But Russell did not want a punch in the stomach. Our boy and girl do not want any old means to bring their desire to an end. Their parents' arrival might extinguish their desire very effectively, but it is not what they want.

Of course, orgasm itself might be wanted and often is. Indeed, it is fitting that it should be wanted. It is typically the ecstatic finale, and when we go to the theater we do not want to leave before the ecstatic finale. But neither is the ecstatic finale all we want, as if we could just make do with it, bypassing the rest of the performance. Nor do we only want the relief that follows the ecstatic finale, or the state of having been through it. We can have wants of that kind: I might not want to go to the dentist, but nevertheless want to enjoy the relief of having been to the dentist. I might be going to enjoy having been to the opera much more than I will enjoy enduring the opera. But that is because the processes are regarded as in themselves unpleasant, whereas our specimen boy and girl are anticipating nothing but pleasure.

A different attempt to delineate the matter biologically might identify lust simply with sexual arousal, a physical state that is relatively easy to identify, as well as making itself known to the subject. Unfortunately this is wrong, too. A person can certainly be in a state that would superficially be physically identifiable as arousal without feeling lust at all. Priapism is relatively rare, but is a naturally occurring state of men that leads to pain and embarrassment, not lust. And the same effect can be caused by injections of various chemicals into the penis. Excitements of various kinds can lead to physical arousal: some say traders on the stock exchange are particularly prone to it, but they need not be feeling sexual desire at the time. Physical arousal of this kind clearly has something to do with lust, but it is not enough. So we have to bring in the mind. Lust is a psychological state with a goal or aim. It wants to bring something about—but what?

Rather than saying that our boy and girl are just physically aroused, or that they want orgasm or relief, it is better to say that it is the whole play, the pleasure of sexual activity that is on their minds. But sexual activity encompasses many things—we can only guess at what might go on once they reach the bedroom—so we should talk not of pleasure, but of pleasures in the plural. Perhaps lust is essentially the anticipation of the pleasures of sexual activity.

Yet even that is not quite enough: imagine someone anticipating such pleasures, but somewhat ruefully. They might suffer

from the melancholy feeling that their partner will manipulate them into feeling pleasure, when they would rather not, just as one might wish that one's boisterous friends would not drag one off to an evening in the bar, even if one anticipates enjoying it when one gets there. This is the reverse of lust. We have to specify that our couple desire what they anticipate.

By themselves, even desire for sexual activity and its pleasures, and desire for them as ends in themselves rather than strategic routes to something else, do not give us full-blown lust. Consider satiated libertines who regret the dying of the old fire. They desire to desire as they once did. In doing so, they also desire the activities and pleasures they once had: here, a desire to desire X implies a desire for X. They mourn the days, or nights, of arousal that are slipping into the past. But lust is not thereby electrified. It may remain mortifyingly absent. In the central cases we need to focus upon, lust is not only desire, but desire that is felt, the storm that floods the body, that heats and boils and excites. A cold desire does not count. We need to add the feelings, the portrait in the mind of the body's arousal.⁸

The earliest poems of desire in Western literature are those of Sappho, and she knew what she was talking about:

whenever I catch
sight of you, even if for a moment,

then my voice deserts me
and my tongue is struck silent, a delicate fire
suddenly races underneath my skin,
my eyes see nothing, my ears whistle like
the whirling of a top
and sweat pours down me and a trembling creeps over
my whole body, I am greener than grass
at such times, I seem to be no more than
a step away from death
but all can be endured, since even a pauper . . .⁹

We do not know what even a pauper can do, for tragically the fragment breaks off here.

The arousal, the flooding of the body, can be studied medically, by chemists, molecular biologists, and neurophysiologists. We are told for instance, that

The feelings of sexual desire are best understood as an emergent property of at least four interlocking physiological systems, at least eleven different regions of the brain, more than thirty distinct biochemical mechanisms, and literally hundreds of specific genes supporting these various processes.¹⁰

The interlocking systems are the nervous, endocrine, circulatory, and genitourinary systems. There are also autonomic sexual mechanisms that ignore the brain altogether. They underlie and contribute to the flooding of the body by desire. Their different functioning at different times and in different people will direct the intensity with which lust is felt, and their dormancy may give us good reason, against Freudians, for denying that sexual desire is in the air at all. If we integrate mind and brain as we should, then the Freudian vision of even the infant mind as a seething hotbed of unconscious lusts is revealed as the fantasy that it is. No excitement, no blood boiling, no lust. But our concern is lust in the human world, Sappho's lust, not the correlates of lust in the body and brain.

Putting it all together, we are talking about the enthusiastic desire, the desire that infuses the body, for sexual activity and its pleasures for their own sake, and from now on that is what we shall take lust to mean.