

A theatrical performance of being less than a full adult, and therefore happily dependent upon the other, seems to be a perfectly legitimate signal of private trust. It displays that you can put yourself in the other person's hands, let your guard down, and throw your dignity to the winds, and yet feel perfectly safe. The same might be said for more lurid actings-out of scenarios of domination and surrender, in which case the bondage gear of the pop concert doesn't answer to anything more sinister than a desire for safety and trust. Perhaps this is confirmed by the femininity of the dominating male (fig. 8).

Such intimacies are properly private. We would be embarrassed at being discovered during them. The intense desire for sexual privacy is frequently misinterpreted as shame at doing something that therefore must be intrinsically shameful or even disgusting. But the desire for privacy should not be moralized like that. Our intimacies are just as private as our couplings. Embarrassment arises because when we are looked upon or overheard by someone else, there is a complete dissonance between what they witness—infantile prattlings, or, if their gaze is obscene, just the twitchings and spasms of the bare forked animals—and the view from the inside, the meanings that are infusing the whole enterprise.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Substitutions

The fourth mode of objectification, fungibility, is the most difficult item on Nussbaum's list. It is worth noticing, however, that there is no immediate connection between fungibility and objectification. If I feel lonely and would like a conversation with someone, I may talk to A, although if B or C had happened along they would have done just as well. It surely doesn't follow that I am "objectifying" A in any sinister sense.

But we like Aristophanes' myth that for each of us there is just one soulmate, the unique other, and in turn we want to be unique to our own lover. We do not like the thought that if the other loves us for our bank balance, manly jaw, or baby blue eyes, then anyone else with the same bank balance, manly jaw, or baby

blue eyes would do just as well. It is a mistake to dwell on the question "Do you love me for myself, or only for my qualities?" since there is no distinguishing the self from its qualities. It is because of our qualities of mind and body that we are who we are. But as a relationship progresses, the beloved starts to gain more and more genuinely unique properties, ones that nobody else has or could have. These are the qualities of having shared experiences and gone through events together with the lover. If those qualities play a role in sustaining the affection and desire, then even an identical twin of the beloved would not be a proper substitute, since those are qualities that the twin does not have. So there is a point in distinguishing loving a self from loving its qualities: the self can change its qualities, for better or worse, but love continues unchanged. Erotic love has the same capacity for permanence through change as maternal love.

Still, it has to be confessed that lust is a little too friendly to substitutability. If we like evolutionary speculations, we might even suppose that it is adapted to be so, precisely to overcome the wholly individual response that love generates. In the play, Gertrude is not given time to have children with Hamlet's uncle, but she is well on the way to doing so. Hamlet supposes it was lust that overcame her wifely loyalty to the dead king, his father. If he was right, then perhaps nature was reasserting itself against the waste of Gertrude's reproductive

potential. Gertrude is the victim of the genetic engine inside her. Lust knows no decorum.

One philosopher, Roger Scruton, has gone so far as to say that before sexual desire has the interpersonal focus on a particular person, it does not really exist. So fungibility is actually incompatible with desire. In a remarkable passage he writes:

Likewise with randiness, the state of the sailor who storms ashore, with the one thought "woman" in his body. His condition might be described as desire for a woman, but for no particular woman. Such a description, however, seriously misrepresents the transition that occurs when the woman is found and he is set on the path of satisfaction. For now he has found the woman whom he wants, whom he seeks to arouse and upon whom his thoughts and energies are focused. It would be better to say that, until that moment, he desired *no* woman. His condition was one of desiring to desire. . . . desire is as distinct from the impulse that compels it as is anger from the excess of adrenalin.<sup>69</sup>

It seems strange to suppose that the sailor storming ashore has no sexual desire. And it is possible to accommodate him without losing Scruton's idea that sex is best thought of in terms of a response to an individual as an individual. The description Scruton rejects is

the right one. The sailor is like someone who longs for a steak. His longing compels him to go to a restaurant, and there it is—the steak of his dreams. Thereafter his focus is no doubt entirely on *that* steak, as he works himself into what theologians like to call an I-Thou relationship in which every detail of the steak is gazed at, and caressed with the senses, and admired and savored. But before *that* steak swam into view, he still wanted a steak. He wanted a steak from the beginning: he did not just want to want a steak, as I suppose someone very different might, who is worried about his feeble appetite. This was not the sailor's problem. In the sexual case, what the sailor desired was relief from womanlessness. But that can be a genuine desire or lust, just like desire for relief from steaklessness (the great philosopher W. V. Quine talked of someone wanting a sailboat, seeking relief from slooplessness). Similarly, a person might be just *angry*, while still waiting for something at which to direct his anger.

What is true, of course, is that the sailor need have no desire for the pleasures of sexual activity with X, where X is a particular known and desired individual. But that does not prevent him from excitedly feeling his body's arousal and desiring the pleasures of sexual activity with someone, and we should not let our disapproval, if we feel it, dictate that this is not to count as sexual desire. Scruton may have thrown us off the scent by using an example suggesting prostitution, but the smoldering young

people eyeing each other up in a singles bar are in the same case, and money does not enter in.

We enter here into two very fraught areas: prostitution and pornography. Nobody is really going to say that they represent lust at its best, since in neither of them is there a chance of Hobbesian unity. In pornographic enjoyments there is no real partner at all, and in prostitution there is no partner who desires your desire, only one who desires your money. On the other hand, are they quite as bad as normally painted?

There are certainly arguments in this area to which you would only listen because emotions run high. Consider pornography. The notable feminist Catherine MacKinnon has said that the use of pornography is "sex between people and things, human beings and pieces of paper, real men and unreal women," and another feminist, Melinda Vadas, describes pornography as any object that has been manufactured to satisfy sexual desire through its sexual consumption or other sexual use as a woman.<sup>70</sup> The argument then goes that it is a short step from using pieces of paper as women to objectifying women as mere things, little more than pieces of paper.

This seems unconvincing. If (heterosexual) pornography designed for male consumption is pieces of paper used as a woman, then when I thrill to the description of the battle as I read some history, I must be using pieces of paper as cannon or

sabers. Or, if I weep for the poor Countess as I listen to *Figaro*, I am using the CD as an abandoned wife. And then, by a parallel argument, it should be a short step to using cannons as pieces of paper, or abandoned wives as CDs, in spite of each of these being quite hard things to accomplish.

I should say instead that the central use of pornography, as with other words and pictures, is to excite the imagination. What is imagined is a partner, and she or he may be doing things as willingly or enthusiastically, as actively or passively, or as sensitively or tenderly, as the consumer's inclinations run. People's fantasies may not always be of sex at its best, but there is little reason to deny that they can be. Of course, this does not by itself exonerate the pornographer. There are problems of production, and there are problems in the way women are falsely presented as endlessly available, that constitute real objections. For there are many men in whom the distance between fantasy and reality is less than it should be.

Prostitution is not a simple matter, either. If a person is experienced enough or mature enough to realize that they aspire to Hobbesian unity, then they may not be much motivated to pay for sex. If they are, I should describe what they are paying for as a piece of theater. We have already seen that sexual excitement can lead to imaginings that go beyond rational, clear-sighted belief, and these imaginings may infuse this transaction. The

good prostitute pretends desire, and the client presumably goes along with the make-believe and for a brief while lives his dream. The prostitute acts a role as a character in his play. So at least W. H. Auden thought:

At Dirty Dick's and Sloppy Joe's  
We drank our liquor straight,  
Some went upstairs with Margery,  
And some, alas, with Kate;  
And two by two like cat and mouse  
The homeless played at keeping house.<sup>71</sup>

Sad and touching, rather than wicked and sinful, although the sinister "cat and mouse" image reminds us that both the prostitute and her client are using someone else merely as a means to their own end. Roger Scruton suggests that the institution of the brothel has a function of disguising the cash nexus from the client, since he does not directly pay the woman, and this may well be true.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, that is not to deny that things in the real world are often a lot worse than this. Prostitutes become victims of male hatred and rage, but we have already said that pure lust can be contaminated by things a lot more impure. The reality principle comes back, and the client realizes that what he really desired—Hobbesian unity—cannot be bought and has not been delivered.

And the resulting deflation, especially when overlaid by the cultural baggage we have talked about, that is, with self-hatred, disgust, guilt, and shame, may prove dangerous for anyone in the vicinity. The law, however, prefers to let defenseless young women bear the brunt of this, as of so many other exploitations, so that it can go on pretending that it does not happen.<sup>73</sup>

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Evolution and Desire

Evolutionary psychology is a relative newcomer to the literature on lust. The aim of the evolutionary psychologist is to identify universal constants of human psychology, and then to propose and test the theory that they are evolutionary adaptations. An adaptation is an “inherited and reliably developing characteristic that came into existence through natural selection because it helped to solve a problem of survival or reproduction during the period of its evolution.”<sup>74</sup> It exists in the form it does because it has solved a specific problem of survival or reproduction recurrently over evolutionary history. It stands its owner in slightly better stead in life, and as a result those who have it gradually outbreed those who do not. Adaptations should be distinguished from their by-