

## Overcoming Pessimism

Venus or Aphrodite has an old association with the sea. She is born from the sea, born in a shell. We drown in each other; Chaucer talks of "lovers who bathe in gladness." But the biological symbol of the female is a mirror, which is also the astrological symbol of the planet Venus. For moralists, the mirror represents the essential narcissism of sin, and a high proportion of the great nudes in Western art confirm their pessimism. Venus's narcissism is also associated with her love of luxury (fig. 16).

We have already talked of various kinds of pessimism: that of supposing that sex is essentially tied to degradation, that of feeling ourselves to be puppets of nature, and that of objectification. The lust of the objectifier asks too little, as it were, in seeking

only their own private gratification, or merely the Kantian use of another's organs, rather than a Hobbesian unity, or meeting of pleasures. The narcissist, as well, fails in the desire for Hobbesian unity, as does someone who thinks that you can achieve it by paying for it.

But there is also pessimism that comes from thinking that lust asks for too much. The Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius thought this, holding that the project is that of recovering Aristophanic unity, which is metaphysically impossible. The finest expression of the idea in English is John Dryden's translation of the fourth book of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. The whole passage laments the unsatisfiable nature of sexual desire. Unlike the appetite for food or drink, satisfaction is always denied to lust:

So love with phantoms cheats our longing eyes,  
Which hourly seeing never satisfies;  
Our hands pull nothing from the parts they strain,  
But wander o'er the lovely limbs in vain:  
Nor when the youthful pair more closely join,  
When hands in hands they lock, and thighs in thighs they twine,  
Just in the raging foam of full desire,  
When both press on, both murmur, both expire,  
They gripe, they squeeze, their humid tongues they dart,

As each would force their way to t'other's heart—  
In vain; they only cruise about the coast,  
For bodies cannot pierce, nor be in bodies lost.<sup>81</sup>

Men waste their strength in "venereal strife," and besides, they enslave themselves to a woman's will. This may seem a bit negative. But twentieth-century philosophers refurbished the idea in terms of other unfulfillable projects. Perhaps lust seeks to possess the other, to incorporate and destroy the other's freedom, to overcome the other. The most notorious account of this kind is due to Jean-Paul Sartre, although Proust can be seen as an ancestor. Proust's narrator Marcel wants to "know" Albertine in a particularly horrible, invasive way, subjugating her entirely to his will, while somehow leaving her as a real person.<sup>82</sup> The contradictory elements in that impulse were given a theoretical embroidery by Sartre.

In a nutshell, for Sartre, consciousness has a big problem with the gaze of the other, the moment when your own subjectivity is itself being subjected to the scrutiny of a different consciousness. In one of his central examples, you are crouched at a keyhole concentrating upon the scene within, when you become aware that you yourself are being gazed at.<sup>83</sup> This engenders embarrassment and shame. To overcome this shame you have to overcome the gaze of the other. The appearance of the other in the world corresponds to a "congealed sliding of the

whole universe," a "decentralization of the world." Human interaction thus begins in conflict.

Sex simply exacerbates the shame and leads to the desire either to abolish the point of view of the other, which is expressed in sadism, or to escape humiliation by presenting yourself as an object from the start and submitting to being nothing but flesh for the other, which leads to masochism. Each project, however, is equally doomed to failure, for each involves a contradictory combination of a desire for freedom and a desire for control. At least the desire remains contradictory so long as the other exists. A desire to take over the other person's subjective point of view is in practice a desire to abolish that point of view, to destroy the other altogether.

The empirical, and somewhat horrified, English remark is that while it no doubt can be like this, it doesn't have to be. Very few human interactions, fortunately, conceal a desire to abolish the other (Sartre is even supposed to have remarked that the trouble with football is the other team). It seems so perverse to generalize from the troubled cases when someone does want to overcome, degrade, or abolish their partner, that the exaggeration may only be explicable by some problem with the philosopher. And indeed there is a biographical explanation that Sartre himself gives. Sartre was no oil painting and in his autobiographical work, *Les Mots*, he describes how as a young child he seemed to get by

on looks mainly because his mother grew his hair long and treated him as a girl. Then one day his grandfather took him to a barber who cut off his long hair, and Sartre never forgot going home to his mother:

There was worse to come: while my pretty curls waved round my ears, she had been able to deny the existence of my ugliness. . . . She had to admit the truth to herself. Even my grandfather seemed quite taken aback: he had gone out with his wonder child and had brought home a toad.<sup>84</sup>

*Un crapaud*. No wonder, then, that the gaze of the other engenders conflict, becoming a source of shame and humiliation and something best abolished. Of course Sartre may have been constructing his childhood in accordance with his philosophy, rather than vice versa, but in the absence of another explanation, the event may be the best we have of this perverse view.<sup>85</sup>

In Dryden, we glimpse again Aristophanes' description of sexual desire in terms of the hopeless attempt to regain a total unity, a fusion of self and other. Since this is metaphysically impossible, we are stuck with an ideal we can never attain, a "trouble" that we would therefore do well to wish away. But this is an invitation to despair rather than a realistic description of the human condition. The "project" of sexual desire is not that of

literally occupying the mind of another, let alone that of abolishing it. It is centrally the project of obtaining a Hobbesian unity, which is not metaphysically impossible, and implies the reverse of these sinister designs upon the other. When things go well, what we ask of other people is something that they enjoy giving.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Farewell

So everything is all right. Hobbesian unity can be achieved, and if it cannot be achieved, it can at least be aimed at, and even if it cannot be aimed at, it can be imagined and dreamed. By understanding it for what it is, we can reclaim lust for humanity, and we can learn that lust best flourishes when it is unencumbered by bad philosophy and ideology, by falsities, by controls, by distortions, by corruptions and perversions and suspicions, which prevent its freedom of flow. It is not easy—and we do not side with Diogenes and Crates, after all. But it is not impossible. And when we remember the long train of human crimes that have ensued on getting it wrong, it is surely worth getting it right.<sup>86</sup>