

SEX & CIRCUSES

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Abstract Now that sexual transgression has left the dungeons and is freely available, the new universal injunction is no longer repression but *enjoy!* – echoing Kafka's father and repeated at unison by a choir of *Starbucks* baristas. Is this the manifestation of what Nietzsche called the *Dionysian*? Or are we instead lulled into the false freedom of repressive de-sublimation? Has sex been reduced, like mainstream psychotherapy, to yet another set of gadgets and techniques? Have we become truly acquainted with the elusive, terrifying and creative energies of Eros?

Sartre, in *Saint Genet*, writes of *visceral love*. In Lévinas, the notion of *desire* exposes the subject to vulnerability and to a radical ethical stance.

Key Words sex, sublimation, de-sublimation, Dionysian, desire

Leaning over the Abyss

Sex is thirst for otherness. In sexual desire, we lean over an abyss. The experience of the abyss is central to pre-existentialist thought: in the 19th century, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche experienced - each in his own unique way - a yawning abyss under their feet, a place of terror and exhilarating freedom which they chose to name using various names: resignation and faith, God, *amor fati*, eternal recurrence, innocence of becoming, will to power... a place where freedom and determinism, self-creation and *Moirai* (destiny) come together. Paradoxically, Nietzsche wrote of an *abyss of light*, a most peculiar image, for an abyss is normally dark and obscure, Hell, the underworld, a place of darkness and unconsciousness. "There is no light in the abyss; the light is always upward, towards the heavens [...]. Nietzsche invites us to a terrifying descent, to a ruinous fall. He beckons us to an abyss of light, to a descent whose depths and perils we ignore (Bazzano, 2006, p 60).

Since those heady late-Romantic days, cheery week-end expeditions have been organized by enterprises such as *Existentialism Ltd* and *Existential Psychotherapy Ltd*. It is now possible to visit those places, using comfortable trains, air-conditioned coaches and taxis taking us to the numinous locations where the abyss opened up under Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's feet. Incidentally, an opening onto the abyss is not exclusive to the 19th century. It happened many times in history. It

happened to the historical Buddha 2500 years ago, and as a result, an entire religion was built on the experience of one man seeing into the abyss.

Sex is one of the ways in which the principal construct of our western civilization, this thing we call the self, stumbles upon the abyss and has a glimpse of its own fluidity, and of the fluid nature of the other and the world.

We cannot achieve full awareness and full recognition of sex because of its very nature: elusive, ineffable, so intimately connected with inner experience: both its *essence* and its *meaning* escape us and will continue to escape us no matter how many books are written on the topic, no matter how many papers, conferences and discussions are held on the topic.

Saint Tony's Boudoir Philosophy

The publication of the *Kinsey Report* in 1948 and 1953 (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin 1948; 1953) marked the beginning of a quantitative scientific attempt to shed a light (and a glaring light at that) on the experience of sex. That was the beginning of a process that culminated with the publication of a book, in October 2010, the title of which epitomizes the most hackneyed cliché used for the description of life's path, a cliché we psychotherapists might have contributed to popularize: *A Journey*. Some passages of the book were candidates for the bad sex literary award; its author overstayed his residence at n 10 Downing Street, and dragged Britain into a disastrous war heralding the beginning of a misguided 'war on terror'. In a century or two the book might be seen as a valuable anthropological text providing valuable insights into the life and practices of successful delinquents suffering from a major narcissistic disorder. The following passage might shed interesting parallels between the instinctual urges expressed in the boudoir and a thirst for power which has rightly been deemed criminal in some of its manifestations.

"That night she cradled me in her arms and soothed me; told me what I needed to be told; strengthened me. On that night of 12 May 1994, I needed that love Cherie gave me, selfishly. I devoured it to give me strength. I was an animal following my instinct." (cited by Page, 2010)

Mr. Blair's book is important in two ways: it is the first example of a new literary form, *auto-hagiography*, i.e. the autobiography of one who believes himself to be a saint, and it also represents the culmination of a process which I would describe as the banalization of sex and the thorough misunderstanding of the Dionysian.

Perhaps it might be equally useful here to be reminded that, before working for the *Daily Mirror* and later in Downing Street in (when he single-handedly contributed to turning politics into a 24-hour media circus), Alastair Campbell began his career writing erotic prose for *Forum* magazine. He was “doing it purely for a laugh[...] There must have been something in me, though, that wanted to write that sort of stuff and see what effect it had.” (Thorpe, 2010). In sharing nuggets of sexual and literary wisdom with interviewer Vanessa Thorpe, Mr Campbell now turned novelist encourages his compatriots not to be so straitlaced about sex.

It's a bit like writing about food," [...] "It's a physical thing, but that doesn't mean writers should avoid it. In this country we are a strange cross between being squeamish and prudish about sex (Thorpe, 2010).

Does Campbell find it difficult writing about sex? “I don't find writing these scenes difficult – says the once spin doctor and now the new Stendhal of British letters - The difficulty lies in finding the right balance” (ibid)

Sublimation and the Dionysian

Of Dionysus, god of revelry, vulgarized by the Romans as Bacchus, we only know his initial phase. Our culture is in many ways the culture of *Dionysus's arrested development* (Bazzano, 2006). In its first phase of development, the Dionysian is chaotic, formless, violently shifting towards the interruption of the discontinuous self and a clumsy attempt to achieve continuity. But there is also, according to Nietzsche, who literally *created* Dionysus for us moderns, a more mature phase, an energy that has embraced Apollonian qualities, i.e. has become honed, spiritualized, or, in other words, *sublimated*, and he saw these qualities embodied, among others, in his hero Goethe.

We owe to Nietzsche the modern idea of sublimation, inherited from the Romantic and the late-Romantic tradition. For Novalis, “the coarse Philistine imagines the joys of heaven as a fair”, whereas “the sublimated one turns heaven into a magnificent Church”. And Schopenhauer too wrote of “representation” as “sublimated into abstract concepts” (Bazzano, 2006). But the first modern definition of sublimation is found in Nietzsche's *Human all too Human*, where he wrote of sublimation first as *chemistry*:

All we require . . . is a *chemistry* of the moral, religious, aesthetic conceptions and sensations, likewise of all the agitations we experience within ourselves in cultural and social intercourse, and indeed even when we are alone. What if this chemistry would end up by revealing that in this domain too the most glorious colours are derived from base, indeed from despised materials? (Nietzsche, 1986, p 12)

...then as *gardening*:

One can dispose of one's drives like a gardener and, though few know it, cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis; one can do it with the good or bad taste of a gardener and, as it were, in the French or English or Dutch or Chinese fashion; one can also let nature rule and only attend to a little embellishment and tidying up here and there; one can, finally, without paying any attention to them all, let the plants grow up and fight their fight out among themselves – indeed, one can take delight in such a wilderness, and desire precisely this delight, though it gives one some trouble, too. All this we are at liberty to do: but how many know we are at liberty to do it? (ibid)

Sublimation is related to *alchemy* and must not be naively confused with repression. It is spiritualization, refinement of instinctual desire, and of sex in particular. This is miles away from the asceticism and the denigration of life that has characterized Christian but also Buddhist teachings, an attitude Nietzsche exemplified in the figure of Silenus, the ascetic for whom life is shameful and imperfect, the body is mortal coil, a bag of rice, an assemblage of impurities, at the most a vehicle for transcendence. For Silenus, life is not worth living. Best would be not to be born, to be nothing, and second best is to die soon.

Visceral Love & Funereal Blow-jobs

In *Saint Genet* Sartre similarly quotes twelfth-century Christian monk Odo of Cluny who in the attempt to disgust Christians declared that to embrace a woman is to embrace a sack of manure. Sartre comments that anyone who has been a lover can see through the sheer stupidity of the statement, and he adds that, however, no one before Jean Genet has dared to properly answer Odo of Cluny. Before quoting Genet at length, Sartre poignantly adds:

One loves nothing if one does not love everything, for true love is a salvation and safeguarding of all man in the person of *one* man by a human creature" (Sartre, 1963, p 532).

He then adds a quote taken from *Funeral Rites*, Genet's pivotal work of fiction whose title plays on the ambivalent meaning of both *funeral rites* and *funereal blow-jobs*.

Language expresses the soul [...] The soul appeared to be only the harmonious unfolding, the extension in fine and tenuous spirals of the secret labour, the movements of algae and of waves, of organs living a strange life in its deep darkness, of these organs themselves, the liver, the spleen, the green coating of the stomach, the humours, the blood, the choral canals, the blue intestines. Jean's body was a Venetian flask. I did not doubt that a time would come when this wonderful language which was drawn from him would reduce his body, as unthreading reduces a ball of thread, until it was a speck of light" (Genet, cited in Sartre, 532).

Jean Genet uses the same detailed description of human entrails as the one used by religious writers, yet in his text *transubstantiation* takes place. Genet explored transubstantiation (alchemic and symbolic transformation of the bread and wine during Catholic mass into the body and the blood of Christ) in *The Maids* (1989) in more vivid, 3-dimensional way where the parallel with the Catholic mass is made explicit by the double suicide of the maids who both failed to bring to completion their plan of murdering their mistress.

In *Funeral Rites* sublimation occurs through the transformation of the organs and entrails of the loved one into sublime language. This movement is crucial: not sublimation as ascending to a supposedly higher, transcendent realm but the very *alchemy of language* heralded by Arthur Rimbaud (1986). In Genet we find a dual movement, one of descent into the entrails, the inner organs of the human body, which is not transcendence but *trans-descent*; the other movement is a transformation or sublimation of the facticity of the body into the beauty of language.

Sartre's preposterous study of Genet, a living author being monumentalized by a 600-page dense philosophical treatise, is nevertheless vital, as it charts Genet's own creative contamination on Sartre, who here moves from the stance of "Hell is other people" to the affirmation of visceral love.

We do not approach sex with the glaring light of science but we are respectful of its ambivalent, i.e. *soulful* nature, because love, as we know from Diotima in Plato's Symposium, is not a god, not a person, but a *daimon*, belonging to the intermediate realm of *psyche* which can be felt, experienced,

expressed poetically, but is doomed to the banality when explained quantitatively and unimaginatively. The process through which we embrace the numinous, non utilitarian (i.e. sacred) and terrifying realm of sex is through appreciation of our human condition and by the symbolic act of sublimation. Sublimation is the realm of art and culture, of *high culture* and of self-creation, of the supreme art of becoming what one is, which is of course possible, in Nietzsche's terms, only if one does not know who one is.

Sex in the current Era of Technological Barbarism

Is there a link between desublimation and technological society? Yes, according to Marcuse. Mechanization of life has diminished the erotic dimension and intensified sexual energy. Technological reality limits the scope of sublimation and reduces the need for sublimation. The dissemination of images and the absorption of the reality principle into the pleasure principle relax the tension between what I desire and what is permitted. I must adapt to a permissive and "democratic" world which no longer demands a denial of my needs, a world which no longer seems hostile yet is profoundly manipulative and seductive (*se-ducere*= leading elsewhere, leading me astray from my path). The permissiveness of "democracy" must be problematized if we are to become individualized beings rather than consumers. This requires embarking on the rebellious path of sublimation.

In contrast to the pleasures of adjusted desublimation, sublimation preserves the consciousness of the renunciations which the repressive society inflicts upon the individual, and thereby preserves the need for liberation (Marcuse, 1964, p. 71)

The triumph of virtual reality is a second chance for the advent of a technological version of Platonism, gradually replacing Christianity's millenarian effort to popularize Platonic ideas for the masses. With the advent of virtual reality, the Platonic dream of bypassing the blood, sweat and tears of the human condition might just succeed...

The quickening, the burning of distance bypasses the ambivalent realm of courtship and the dance of uncertainty; it changes the way we understand the gap. There is no gap, there is no intermediate phase.

The indiscriminate use of information technology burns distance.
It robs us of the gift of solitude where loves comes into flower.

It robs us of the gift of love where solitude comes into flower.

(Bazzano, 2009 p 42)

Sublimation is more difficult today than it has ever been. One of the effects of the liberalization – *not* liberation – of sex has been the phenomenon which Herbert Marcuse called “repressive de-sublimation” (1964). That a high-ranking politician would be writing about his sexual life is the culmination of a process whose origins are uncertain but that has two important milestones. One is Franz Kafka’s letter to his father. The other is the Kinsey Report.

We live in strange times: we are not only to witness the adventures and boudoir performances of our leaders but we are also being asked, thanks to quaint, manipulative notions such as the so-called *Big Society* to roll up our sleeves and love our leaders. Only a deeply controlling and profoundly fake democracy demands not only the obedience but the *love* of its subjects.

Through the liberalization of sex, we have endangered the possibility of sublimation, and with it, if we trust Marcuse’s argument, the potential for self-creation and for a meaningful and serious political opposition. The slackening of radical disagreement does not happen only in the sense of the Roman dictum “bread and circuses” (*panem et circensem*), i.e. in this case the hand-out of a permissive liberalized sex which no doubt makes us more placid, complacent; it is also because by the *commodification* of sex what is naturally belonging to a darker, more ambivalent and angst-provoking realm, becomes flattened.

With Georges Bataille (1987), I see sex alongside those phenomena he calls *children in the house*, children in the house of *logos* and of dominant discourse. The force of these children, including tears, rapture, laughter, opens us to a dimension that Henri Bergson (1944) calls the *instant*. The instant opens an abyss, momentarily suspends the linearity of time and the phenomenon is perceived as such, *qua* phenomenon. Of course we cannot inhabit this realm very long; not unlike the dimension of the I-Thou (Buber, 2004), this realm which belongs, as in the Dante of *Vita Nuova*, to *accident*.

“Love does not exist in and of itself as a substance: it is the accident of substance” (cited in Paz, 1993, p. 74)

We cannot live in the I-Thou dimension for very long. We would get burned. There is an irreducible antagonism between the exteriority opened up by sex and the other dimension which Bergson would call the *interval*, where we go back to the humdrum of linear time and subscribe to a mode of linear existence. This dichotomy, *not intrinsically but perceptively dual*, is essential. In pre-capitalist society, art and artistic alienation gave expression to this irreducible element of human experience, perhaps to the human itself. What is the human? Judith Butler would say the human is that which

cannot be represented (Butler, 2004, p. 144). *Artistic alienation*, the feeling that society can never satisfy instinctual needs nor the will to meaning, is expressed through high culture, a clear example of sublimation at work. The world of I-It, the world of the interval cannot alone bring the satisfaction we crave. A fleeting connection with the I-Thou dimension, the realm of the instant or, in Deleuze's (1990) terms, the *event*, is necessary and is accessible to us through great art. A work of art in this way is a product of high culture – at variance, conveying anarchic rupture with the order of logos and the social order. The great Russian novels all stem from this scary, *daimonic* element which can be pointed at through the works of great art: *Anna Karenina*. But the liberalization of sexuality, the reduction of sex to commodity, the amalgamation of every work of art with commercials, TV ads has flattened the world, creating a one-dimensional society where de-sublimated work is produced: *Desperate Housewives*

Can I please have my instinctual needs denied, *please*?

If the Kinsey Report was a pivotal moment in this process, we can also recognize in Franz Kafka's letter to his father a moment of recognition of the shifting attitudes with regards to prohibition and permissiveness:

I remember going for a walk one evening with you and Mother; it was on Josephsplatz near where the Lander bank is today; and I began talking about these interesting things, in a stupidly boastful, superior, proud, detached ... cold ... and stammering manner, as indeed I usually talked to you, reproaching the Two of you for having left me uninstructed; with the fact that my schoolmates first had to take me in hand, that I had been close to great dangers (here I was brazenly lying [...]in order to show myself brave, for as a consequence of my timidity, I had, except for the usual misdemeanors of city children, no exact notions of these "great dangers"); but finally I hinted that now, fortunately, I knew everything, no longer needed any advice, and that everything was all right. [...]

It is not easy to judge the answer you gave me then; on the one hand, it had something staggeringly frank, sort of primeval, about it; on the other hand, as far as the lesson itself is concerned, it was uninhibited in a very modern way. I don't know how old I was at the time, certainly not much over sixteen. It was, nevertheless, a very remarkable answer for such a boy....Its real meaning, however, which sank into my mind even then, but which came partly to the surface of my

consciousness only much later, was this: what you advised me to do was in your opinion and even in my opinion at that time, the filthiest thing possible. (Kafka http doc)

Enjoy! Kafkean law is not prohibitive (Žižek, 2008, p. 87) Whether or not one believes literally in the super-ego, we do have a tendency to introject duty and injunctions. What Kafka's letter highlights, at the dawn of modernity, is whether the modern super-ego's injunction *universally and spontaneously* accepted (two sure signs that we are dealing with an ideology) is not *don't do it, but be free*.

The "obscene super-ego ... in contrast with the Name-of-the-Father: the very injunction 'be autonomous' in its mode of operation, sabotages its goal; the very injunction 'be free' ties the subject up x ever in the vicious circle of dependence" (Žižek, 2008, p 88)

Sexual and Spiritual Tourism

Elizabeth Gilbert's best-selling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* (Gilbert, 2007) enlists gastronomy, sex and spirituality as things you can buy at the click of a button, a "journey" to three different countries, each with a different thing on offer, things that, however, leave the subject untouched: pizza in Naples, a lover in Bali, a guru in India. That this way of apprehending reality should be extended to the realm of spirituality is perhaps a sign of how incredibly clever we are in keeping ourselves isolated (insulated) from the encounter with otherness. During the course of this "journey", of this 'it's-only-a-bit-of-fun-really' approach to existential crisis and search for meaning one can of course have a great time: learn how to cook with Nigella or Jamie, swing from chandeliers wearing a Venetian mask and learn meditation with the Dalai Lama. The trouble is, the original longing for otherness, for transformation remains untouched. The subject comes back to the old coat, the old self, having acquired a few safari items and useless trophies along the way.

Sex is valuable precisely because it represents thirst for otherness. How does it do that? Not through *need* but through *desire*. The distinction between the two is very clear in Lévinas:

Let us note [...] the difference between need and desire: in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in desire there is no sinking one's teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me.

Indeed the time presupposed by need is provided by desire. Need has thus the time to convert this *other* into the *same* by labour (Lévinas, 1969, p 117)

Desire reveals the abyss. Sexual desire reveals the *strangeness* of the other, and the strangeness of the self. However, in order to arrive at this experience we need to free sex from the clutches of Christian love of the neighbour. The neighbour is a frightening presence who eludes attempts at gentrification. In this sense psychotherapy provides one of the few contexts for the exploration of this ambivalent, frightening force, the mystery of which did not escape DH Lawrence:

Sex should come upon us as a terrible thing of suffering and privilege and mystery: a mysterious metamorphosis come upon us, and a new terrible power given us, and a new responsibility. [...] The mystery, the terror, and the tremendous power of sex should never be explained away. [...] The mystery must remain in its dark secrecy, and its dark, powerful dynamism. The reality of sex lies in the great dynamic convulsion of the soul. And as such it should be realized, a great creative-conclusive seizure upon the soul (Lawrence, 1960, pp 113-14)

The Narrow Between

The psychotherapeutic enterprise might be one of the few places where the *daimonic* realm of sex can be explored. As daimonic event belonging to both the “archetypal function of human experience” and to “existential reality” (May, 1969, p 123) the sexual domain is perhaps best explored in psychotherapy. When it comes to articulation, the turbulence, ecstasy and ambivalence of sex is best explored symbolically through poetry:

My tongue sticks to my dry mouth,
Thin fire spreads beneath my skin,
My eyes cannot see and my aching ears
Roar in their labyrinths.

Chill sweat down my body,
I shake, I turn greener than grass.
I am neither living nor dead and cry

From the narrow between
(Sappho in Paz, 1993, p 54)

Sappho writes of the narrow between; sex and love open us up to the intermediate realm which psychotherapy can help explore and which only poetry is able to express. By poetry I mean *a third mode of knowledge*, or indeed of *not-knowing*, a third way of being which moves away from the quantitative explanations and modalities of both religion and science, and is able to face the risk and paradox of existence. In Dante's *Inferno*, Francesca speaks of her dangerous liaison with Paolo, here rendered by the Ciaran Carson's nimble translation:

One day, to pass the time, we read of Lancelot,
who loved illicitly. Just the two of us;
[...]
From time to time that reading urged our eyes
to meet, and made our faces flush and pale,
but one point in the story changed our life;
for when we read of how the longed-for smile
was kissed by such a noble knight, the one
who for eternity is by my side

all trembling kissed my trembling mouth.
[...]
That day the rest of it remained unscanned.
(Carson 2002, p 36)

Paolo e Francesca are doomed for eternity to the flames of hell, yet happy in their mutual passion.

From the Critique of Sexism to Anti-Sex

That Paolo e Francesca should be reading and studying together is all the more poignant. Since the times of Plato and Socrates, via Oscar Wilde, and right into our era, study and love have been happy bedfellows, accomplices in a passion which dares not speak its name. *Studium* is love, and it is sad that the fear of sex has made a factual taboo of sexual attraction in our current pedagogic environment, including the pedagogic field of psychology, counselling and psychotherapy.

How did it happen that the good and just critique of sexism, heralded by both first and second generation feminists, has now been co-opted into the old prurience as well as denigration of sex itself? Feminism has challenged from the start the boundary that separates the personal from the professional (Gallop, 2002, p 56), yet the current emphasis on boundaries closes the border between these two dimensions. Cases of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination have been raised over the years because of *harassment* and of *discrimination*. What the present climate suggests instead is that what is to be now reviled is precisely the *sexual*. The feminist philosopher Jane Gallop makes the point with great clarity:

MacKinnon and other feminist scholars and lawyers were successful in getting sexual harassment legally defined as sex discrimination under Title VII (covering employment) and, presumably, under Title IX (covering education). Yet, in the decade and a half since that clear feminist victory, the feminist definition of sexual harassment appears to be fading, giving way to a more traditional understanding in which this behaviour is condemnable because it is sexual (Gallop, 2002, p 58).

Fear of the sexual dimension in pedagogy similarly erases the personal dimension, a lethal move in the field of psychotherapy and counseling which is shying away, in my opinion, from the complexities of erotic dynamics. We bypass the eloquent beauty of the erotic at our peril; neglecting the tremendous gifts of the embodied experience of sexuality means neglecting the sweat and tears and joy of our peculiar human condition. The last word to John Donne:

her pure and eloquent blood
Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought
That one might almost say, her bodie thought
(Paz, 1993, p 119)

This article is an edited version of the paper presented at the SEA Sexistential Conference in November 2010

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