

## 1 iconology and perversion: post-psychoanalytic aesthetics

A manifesto, if universally accepted, is nothing but cruel necessity; if unread, it is merely a phantasm. Yet phantasms do not exist within intercalary moments, but in history, where the “cunning of reason” (Hegel) engenders coherence from chance, contingency, chaos. Whence the paradox of all expression, political or otherwise: discourse is inadequate to its causes (desires) and is exceeded by its effects (texts, events). Art obeys the laws of productive desire in a realm of pure volition, irrespective of the axiomatics of rationalized reality, while aesthetic theory and criticism provide the articulation of the structural “laws” of art and the “logic” of historical events. Our icons and symbols are residues of the gaze and the world’s visibility, based on phantasms and restricted by history. When these icons are transformed into idols or truths, difference is abolished and the violence of universal reason is unleashed. That uniformity, that statistical leveling of value, is the historical form of modern, technocratized rationality.

Culture, once it becomes aligned with capital, follows the statistical curves of the various economic and political laws of averages, where the new paradigms of cultural realities are those of marketing and pari-mutuel betting. Freedom itself is the greatest threat to freedom: the double bind of democracy is that in a media-oriented epoch, cultural value becomes a function of the representation of *stereotypical* symbolic phantasmagoria. At this time, perversion—through its ability to side with the unique passions against universal reason and totalization—can offer a subversive possibility, a contentious measure, a countertradition whereby difference is guaranteed and maintained. Difference is at the foundation of all possible hermeneutics, of all interpretation; for what is interpretation if not the projection of difference?

Ultimately, such a strategy should contest the presumption of speaking for the other in the name of reason or of common sense, a presumption which in effect would be to silence the other. This silence is precisely the subtle, veiled violence of reason. We must seek different paradigms, different test cases, different ideals which permit the liberation of alterity. Perversion must be subversive, or it will no longer be.



Nietzsche teaches that, as a condition of being "human, all too human," the world is a host of errors and phantasms. We might take one particularly willful error as our theme and speculate upon the phantasms which sustain it. In a certain French convent, today, the novices permit themselves a perverse literary amusement. During the evening meal, as the others eat, one novice is entrusted with reading, out loud and in Latin, the *Lives of the Saints*. The game is to add additional tortures to the multitude already suffered by the martyrs, in such a manner as to escape notice of the spiritual director supervising the reading. Willful error or perverse phantasm? Within the theological context of the convent and the exigencies of the novitiate, the bodies of Christ and the martyrs serve not merely religious ends. They also populate the imaginative scenarios which proffer the corporeal surfaces on which are inscribed the most varied and extreme sadomasochistic phantasms, and from which radiate the most sublime beatitude. Before permitting any heuristic or hermeneutic operation whatsoever, these inscriptions are the mark of aesthetic pleasure.

It would be a mistake to understand the novices' little game as simply a hypocritical amusement, where the textual pleasure of their "literary" hagiographical inventions would be dissociated from the historical and theological reality of the martyrs' suffering. Rather, the forms of torture delineate forms of pleasure, however incongruous and illicit their entry into the text may be. We cannot dissociate the textual *description* of torture from its physical *inscription* on the body, as we would, in the abstract, sever a signified from a signifier. The novices' little inventions are precisely a rite of passage, a subtle but

transgressive means of entry into a theological system through acknowledging—in a fabulation guided by the rhetorical form of the epitrope<sup>1</sup>—the signs of that system by adding their own variations. To add, subtract, or change a sign in a theological system is to create a heresy; but it is only in relation to the multiplication of heresies that orthodoxy can be established. The heterodoxy of blasphemy, heresy, phantasms, and simple (or complex) errors is the provocation at the origins of orthodoxy.

In 787, the second Nicene Council stipulated that the Incarnation justified, indeed necessitated, the veneration of icons of Christ, the Virgin, the angles and the saints. The iconoclastic denial of such veneration became tantamount to the denial of the Incarnation—the foundation of New Testament theology—and was explicitly heretical. Though iconoclastic outbreaks were to continue for another half-century, 843 marked the triumph of orthodoxy, which was the definitive victory of Christian iconophilia. At stake here was the representation of the human body; the aesthetic vectors of this victory extend through the entire subsequent history of European art, and certainly continue to be experienced today, despite the effects of secularization.

The theoretical debates of the iconoclastic controversy—centered around the differentiation between image and idol—entailed the detailed investigation of several issues which remain central to our epistemological, metaphysical, and aesthetic discourse. Foremost among these issues are: (1) modes of the representation of an original, archetypal object (recollection, typification, analogy, imitation, imaging, etc.); (2) degree of reality of images (simulacrum, idol, phantasm, figure, sign, etc.); (3) types of resemblance (in medieval theology: *imago, similitudo, figura, effigies, facies, pictura*, etc.). A concerted examination of Western church iconography, according to the intricacies of this problematic, would certainly reveal a deeper metaphysical and semiotic level to Western art. The conflict between the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation is but one moment of this history.

An ancient iconoclastic tradition—that of the fourth-century Bishop Epipanius of Salamis—insists that, “it is only

in man himself that the divine realities should be engraved, imprinted; it is only in the heart that God should be recalled."<sup>2</sup> Ironically, if taken literally, this dictum evokes not so much the iconoclasm for which it was originally taken, but rather a new relation between icon and incarnation, an iconology of torture, with the Passion as its paradigm and the martyrdom of the saints as its variations. Extrapolated to its logical limit, and serving as a de facto apology for martyrdom, this iconoclasm would excoriate not only images of the divinity, but also that primal source of all imagery, the human body itself. For the inscription of the divine truth upon the body can only destroy that delicate, sensuous surface of our very existence. The exemplary—and symbolic—tortures suffered by the early Christian martyrs would later be appropriated and refined by the church, utilized against *its* enemies in the name of orthodoxy. But before thinking of this as a symbolic system, it must be recognized in its most immediate, harrowing, tormenting reality.



There is a long tradition of symbolization based on the corporeal paradigm, originating in Platonic philosophy, extended through the medieval notion of man-as-microcosm, and delivered unto its contemporary avatars. Freudian metapsychology affirms that, "The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface."<sup>3</sup> Thus, as Freud demonstrates earlier in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), all dream imagery symbolizes the body, and all symbolism is ultimately body symbolism. Phenomenological epistemology ascertains the same relations between body and symbol. Merleau-Ponty shows how the body gestalt subtends every other gestalt, how the body "is that strange object which uses its own parts as a general system of symbols for the world."<sup>4</sup> But all such theories function at the level of description, and remain a *fortiori* representational schemata. The entire problematic of corporeal inscription is neglected, or repressed, except insofar as it is recuperated by the symbolic.

It is rather a certain contemporary tradition of thought—originating in Nietzsche's famous analyses in the second book of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887)—which offers an epistemology based upon the analysis of corporeal inscription. Foucault: "The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration."<sup>5</sup> Lyotard: "The surface, the libidinal skin, is thus already a memory of intensities, a capitalization, a localization of their passages."<sup>6</sup> Here, the idealized gestalt of a "good form" of corporeal unity and symbolic consistency is perpetually disarticulated, decomposed, transgressed.

Libidinal *intensity*, and not a symbolizing *intentionality*, is at the origin of consciousness where, as Nietzsche teaches, memory and gregariousness (and ultimately the symbolic) are instilled by corporeal punishment. Memory is created by blood, torture, and sacrifice: the most originary mnemotechnics insists that, "If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in."<sup>7</sup> Blood and cruelty are at the very base of rationality itself. All value is, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, a function of the "extraordinary composite of the speaking voice, the marked body, and the enjoying eye,"<sup>8</sup> in a festival of cruelty of the most ancient origins. The body *is* memory, where the wounds inflicted in initiatory ceremonies and vindictive punishments become the scars that remain the trace of one's own suffering, a suffering that creates both self-consciousness and its ethical double, social consciousness.

The anthropologist Pierre Clastres shows how the individual body is marked by the tribal ethos:<sup>9</sup> (1) In the "primitive" legal systems of societies without a state, torture affirms and initiatory scars denote the *interdiction of inequality*; nobody is "worth" more than another. (2) Conversely, in societies with a hierarchized state, punishment ratifies the *interdiction of equality*; the economic, political, and libidinal systems of exchange are based upon unequal values and a disproportionate distribution of powers. Yet in both cases, the use of torture, the forceful marking of the body, transforms the memory of pain into

the meaningful sign of the relation of our bodies to the socius. In a culture where the law would be civilized, rational, its signs must be meaningful. The disquieting nature of Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* [1919] is due to the fact that the enunciation of the law as verdict is simultaneous with the act of punishment: the law is inscribed directly on the prisoner's flesh. Furthermore, since the script is so full of embellishments, it is initially illegible; the revelation of the law, by means of deciphering the script through sheer pain, is too little, too late. The advent of meaning is but the prefiguration of death. Here, in the penal colony, far from civilization and with the collapse of tradition, the law as punishment is no longer a social spectacle, and the legal gesture of draconic inscription is transformed into the self-destructive mania of the last keeper of the tradition. There is no text inscribed on his body. The broken machine merely jabs the officer to death: inscription transgresses the boundary of sense, and nonsense is revealed as the mark of death. We may only wonder whether for Kafka this breakdown of meaning is a function of the ultimate sophistry of rational thought, or whether this parable is in fact a footnote to Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ironically indicating its applicability to nihilistic Western modernity.

The scar turns the body into an icon. The intensity of the knife's passage and the memory of the blood's flow are transformed into a symbol—the mark of passage into society and its regulated systems of value and exchange. These marks transform lived time into historical destiny, where the past (as memory and the unconscious) ordains the future. This passage into culture is the inscription of the phantasmatic upon the symbolic: it is sublimation. Ritualistic tortures are but the signs of this "civilizing" process, indicating the "use value" of the symbolic as a psychic force which instills meaning within us.

But once there is no longer a universal application of initiatory torture, once it enters into the complex machinery of the hierarchized state as an enforcement of the value system, punishment becomes spectacle, theater. The catalogue of torture techniques and devices reveals a specific torture for each part of the body. Torture itself is the most efficient means of

disarticulating the body, destroying its form, and turning sensation into a monolithic manifestation of pain, a sign of power. Hanging, whipping, flaying, dismemberment, disembowlement, beheading, garroting, crushing, blinding, breaking, sawing, beating, burning, impaling, drowning, ripping. Axes, saws, whips, scourges, pincers; head-crushers, knee-splitters, breast-rippers, and skull-smashers; thumbscrews, spiked collars, branding irons, mortification belts, breaking wheels; the iron maiden, the heretic's fork, the pendulum and the rack.<sup>10</sup> This is the stuff that creates martyrs (and saintly relics).<sup>11</sup> The sight of such punishments—perhaps symbolically fitting the “crimes”—provides a perverse pleasure. Concluding with the victim's death, such spectacle now serves the spectator as the reminder of a particular fate to be avoided and is no longer the mark of a mnemotechnic procedure which creates a collective destiny. The forgetting of one's own fate is accomplished by the obliteration of another's life; destiny is renounced for spectacle.

We may see here the origins of a perverse aestheticization, perhaps of all aestheticization, as the distancing of pain through spectacle. The ancient, savage, primitive, barbaric subject is a function of the common inscription of pain directly on the body. But once the application of pain is restricted to one figure in a theological drama (as well as to this figure's saintly avatars), such inscription becomes spectacle, narrative, icon. Modern subjectivity is a function of the reversal of this pain into the pleasures of observation, contemplation, and identification, where the sadomasochistic component of scopophilia achieves the sublimation of those ancient rites. Sublimation—utilizing all of the rhetorical tricks of the dreamwork, and more—transforms the other's pain into our pleasure, through an affective reversal motivated by the exigencies of guilt and *ressentiment*.

The extreme, indeed fetishistic possibilities of veneration are illustrated by the curious case of a late outbreak of iconoclasm, that of Bishop Claude of Turin, around the year 825. In a quite Borgesian tale, Claude—arguing against the veneration of icons in an attempt to preserve the unity and transcendence

of God—claimed that the cross, a horrifying torture instrument, is certainly not a sign of divinity; and if, merely because Christ was nailed to the cross for three hours, we are to venerate the cross, then why not venerate everything that he touched: all virgins, cradles, old linen, boats, donkeys, thorns, lances, etc. And since Christ touched the earth. . . . In a logic moving from metonymic to metaphoric relations, Claude developed, *a contrario* in an *argumentum ad absurdum*, the limitless possibilities of the veneration of icons and relics in order to ridicule their theological basis. In doing so, he developed a pictorial “logic” not to be fully explored until the Surrealists.

The move from religion or theology to aesthetics is centered on the role of the icon and the experience of the *veneration* of images (as opposed to the *adoration* of God). In conformity with the biblical interdiction against worshiping graven images, the ontological status of icons and their “appreciation” had to be distinguished from that of true worship of the divinity. The paradigmatic formula of this relationship was established by the dictum of the fourth-century Saint Basil the Great: “The honour rendered unto the icon returns to its prototype.”<sup>12</sup> Thus authentic worship is a slippage between veneration and adoration, between icon and divinity, between signifier and signified. And it is precisely within the very limits of this slippage that the ambiguities, and heresies, which marked the iconoclastic controversy arose.

Claude of Turin was one of the first theorists of the materiality of the signifier, fully within the Neoplatonic tradition. Considering the representation of man (and divinity) as simulacrum, he concluded that the soul’s reduction to the sheer minerality of an image entailed the elimination of man’s highest quality: rationality. The image is “dead”: the icon is idol. This formula depends upon the confusion between the material and formal aspects of the icon: such is, of course, the question of all visual mediation of the conceptual realm, with the added complication of the relations between the sacred and the secular.

The sensible, corporeal aspect of the icon is hypostatized in its thaumaturgic, miraculous powers. Piety before the icon



invokes beneficial miracles; impiety causes calamitous effects. The following anecdote in this regard, recounted at the second Nicene Council, would have inspired Bataille: a certain Harrasin of Gabala struck an icon in the eye, and at that very moment his own eye was enucleated. The apotropaic power of the fetish is equaled by its Medusal potentiality.

The history of the conflict between iconophilia and iconophobia is based on the ontological problematic of the manifestation or representation of the invisible within the visible, the desire to place transcendence in human form (usually in the mode of suffering). Iconolatriy or idolatriy? Sublimation or perversion? The textual game of our novices—whether blasphemous, heretical, or merely perverse in its hagiographical and psychological implications—is an attempt to change the very order of the theological cosmos, however slightly. One more scar on the martyred body of a saint: a singular passion is manifested in the paranoid order of the sacred universe. These novices wish to participate in creating the scenario and are not content with merely reciting its description. They wish to be authors, artists, creators, and not merely readers, scribes, storytellers. They seek new inscriptions, new intensities, with which to seal their vows.



We might better understand these novices' little diversion—and offer it as an allegory for a possible aesthetic model—by reconsidering it in the light of that astounding text dealing with erotic fetishism and love's singularities, Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (1977).<sup>13</sup> Erotic love demands that each person discover that unique fetish, that singular object of fascination, which suits one's individual desires. The very possibilities of communication and interpretation are authenticated by the fascination, intoxication, and affirmation that such a love-object evokes, yet all the while the very meaning of this fetish object remains intransigently incommunicable, personal, and ultimately perverse. Psychoanalytic transference: amorous transference = universalized hermeneutics: particularized hermeneutics = *mathesis universalis: poesis singularis*. This

analogous thread indicates the significative difference between rational cognition and perverse affect, between sublimated constructions and desublimated phantasms. In contrast to philosophical aesthetics, which constitutes a universalizing hermeneutic procedure, we may posit an anti-universalist practice (mute *pragma* versus loquacious *theoria*) where aesthetic effect is recognized as a function of an ultimately incommunicable phantasm, affect made manifest as a particularized representation. Such affect would operate in regard to the universalized constructs of aesthetic theory as their very internal rupture, as the mark of their very impossibility in the face of the artwork's material particularities and the spectator's psychic singularity.

Fascination—aesthetic or otherwise—is simultaneously a loss of will before the object and an investment of libido in that very same object. The aesthete, like the iconolater and the pervers, seeks the impossible manifestation of the invisible in the visible. It is perhaps this very contradiction as the heart of the visible, supporting iconoclasts and iconophiles alike, which explains a hatred of the aesthetic such as Bataille's, as well as his notion of a "passion of the pure imperative" toward the impossible.<sup>14</sup> This quest—where even the anti-aesthetic attitude is but a reaction to the aesthetic, a countercathexis without pre-conceived object—entails the notion of the object as catastrophe, as a transitional effect of libidinal cathexes. The form of such "catastrophe" within an ontology of the passions is offered by the notion of a libidinal oscillation between banality and transcendence in the object.<sup>15</sup> All objects are, a priori, overdetermined due to the diverse possibilities of libidinal and hermeneutic investment. The origins of the perverse and the transcendent are one and the same, in that catastrophic, anxiety-producing narcissistic wound from which subjectivity itself arises. In a quest for origins, the bearer of this psychic wound discovers its unique sign in another wound, a corporeal "mutilation" which is to mark the psychic mechanism and the libidinal economy with its own horror, strangeness, excitation. The female sexual orifice (or "slash," if we are to pursue the horrific trail of the libido),

becomes the logical point of departure and symbolic representation of the inaccessible, the unexpressible, the unimaginable, the ungraspable, the unreal, the invisible—in short, of the *unknown relation*. Confronted with this relation, individual reactions may variously be that of horror, delirium, 'construction,' erotic exaltation, voyeuristic interest, disavowal, phobic flight, denial, disquieting strangeness, transposition towards epistemophilia by renunciation, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Any object can, in principle, serve as a sign of the possibility of some love or some identification; any object can be the sign of transcendence, a transcendence which finally traces the symptomatic disquietude of our very immanence. The limits of the self are defined by the scope and variety of libidinal cathexes; the range of these cathexes, these passions, is ultimately defined by the manner in which the anguish of the narcissistic wound, and the fear of the sexual wound, are lived through.

In fetishism, the paradigmatic perversion in psychoanalytic theory, the desired "cult" object circumvents the symbolic order by threatening the establishment of an alternative law: the pervert substitutes the law of his desire for the symbolic law. The very intensity of pleasure—and not the structural coherence of the object's position within the symbolic—is the lived, corporeal sign and proof that *desire is law*. The pervert's gaze, marked by the scopophilic/epistemophilic passion, follows the objects and effects of desire as the signs of a new law. But if this is the case, wouldn't each perversion be founded upon a unique passion and offer a singular "iconology"? Wouldn't a typology of fetishes and perversions be as spurious as those pamphlets which provide the key to the meaning of dream symbols? Wouldn't the psychoanalytic attempt to ground the theory of perversion on castration anxiety—and the theory of fetishism on the phantasmatic construct of a female phallus as ego defense mechanism—be merely another attempt to recuperate incommunicable perverse passions within the symbolic, and an attempt to circumscribe and define the "*unknown relation*"?

Fetishism and all other perversions are libidinal ceremonies, utilizing certain objects as traces of, and instigations for, the passions. The fetish object is an apotropaic medallion that annuls the narcissistic wound. The fetishist loves details; such details escape iconography and are subsumed by the particular history of the subject, with all of its attendant accidents, errors, misinterpretations, and so forth.<sup>17</sup> If the icon arises from the symbolic, the detail develops from the passions, the imaginary. We might consider a particularly striking case, whose singularities suggest the possibility of a "hermeneutics of misreading" where the effects of libidinal oscillations are factored into the interpretative scheme as the feature of its very indeterminacy.

In *Confessions of a Mask* (1949),<sup>18</sup> Yukio Mishima recounts his first view of the reproduction of Guido Reni's *Saint Sebastian* (from the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa). "That day, the instant I looked upon the picture, my entire being trembled with some pagan joy." His very first orgasm soon followed, "bringing with it a blinding intoxication." The entire iconography of this depiction of a Christian martyrdom was of secondary import; rather, it was in the surprising sensuousness of the details that he revealed.

The arrows have eaten into the tense, fragrant, youthful flesh and are about to consume his body from within with flames of supreme agony and ecstasy. But there is no flowing blood, nor yet the host of arrows seen in other pictures of Sebastian's martyrdom. Instead, two lone arrows cast their tranquil and graceful shadows upon the smoothness of his skin, like the shadows of a bough falling upon a marble stairway.

Revealing a "strong flavour of paganism," this painting depicted "a remarkably handsome youth . . . bound naked to the trunk of a tree," exposing his "white and matchless nudity." He showed none of the decrepitude or suffering common to depictions of martyrdoms of the saints, but "only the springtime of youth, only light and beauty and pleasure"; rather than pain, his face and posture expressed "some flicker of melancholy pleasure like music."

This saint, whose mutilation—but never whose actual death and martyrdom—is depicted, is both the provocation and the sign of Mishima's passion. (Mishima was to pose for an infamous photographic depiction of Saint Sebastian, based on another work by Guido Reni from the Pinacoteca Capitolina in Rome.) In his particular, perverse inversion of the role of iconographic features and incidental details, the classic iconographic components of Guido Reni's painting are transformed into the least significant factors, while the details of Saint Sebastian's corporeal posture and ecstatic expression—free from iconographic restraint and thus different in each depiction—become the key features of Mishima's erotic appreciation of this artwork. It is the image's affective power, rather than its semiotic, communicative intent, that thrilled Mishima. And it is precisely the idiosyncratic nature of its effect that led him to conceive of what he termed a "confidential criticism," "a twilight genre between the night of confession and the daylight of criticism."<sup>19</sup>

The detail—be it iconographically significant or pure marginalia—is always susceptible to the libidinal oscillation between banality and overdetermination. Each recognition of yet another detail of a scene reorganizes the meaning of the entire scene: a painting is a diacritical system of signs where the meaning of each sign is fully dependent upon its relation to all the other signs, but where the meaning of the whole is a function of precisely which signs are taken as central by the hermeneutic process. The detail, that area of free play beyond iconographic restrictions, is both trope and trap. (In fact, the decorative is always significant: there are no purely "decorative" arts, opposed to the "fine" arts.) The detail's literal position is extremely tentative, fragile, since it can always be taken up as a term in the symbolic system of the picture, and thus play a figurative role; yet its symbolic position is equally delicate, since it may also be taken simply for what it denotes, a literal reading tempered by the iconographic context. (Hence the two limits of fascination: the epistemophilia of connoisseurship and the scopophilia of fetishism—where, in the latter case, a libidinal reversal transforms iconophobia into

iconophilia.) Ultimately, no detail can be fully gratuitous or marginal, as it is recuperated by the semiotic system of the painting. But this recuperation is a function of interpretation, and interpretation in turn is dependent upon the particular cathexes or decathexes of details within the viewer's libidinal economy. Semiotics contextualizes the detail; libidinal economy isolates the detail—or relegates it to oblivion. Criticism is founded upon the incommensurable exigencies of semiotic communicability and libidinal incommunicability: the detail may serve as the articulation of a scenario whereby the particular meaning of its iconography is fixed, or it may even serve as the very emblem of a cosmos<sup>20</sup>—or it may simply be isolated from the rest, and evoke no more or less than would the object that it depicts. How many traditions of criticism, and indeed how many metaphysics, rest upon these differences?



The history of Western metaphysics entails the obfuscation, suppression, and indeed repression, of matter, chaos, the formless, the body. The tradition which subtends this current text originates in Nietzsche's desire to recuperate the body, and materiality itself, as the origin of philosophical speculation and the basis of all metaphysics: "Soul is only a word for something about the body. The body is a great reason."<sup>21</sup> This metaphysical reversal permits us to appreciate the profound importance, in the aesthetic register, of Gaston Bachelard's notion of a "muscular imagination."<sup>22</sup> The psyche is but the nominative sublimation of the body, of corporeal states and reactions. The imagination is but the ephemera of partial objects, the transgression by fragmentation of a cosmos all too unified and all too full to admit the particular, and peculiar, phantasms of our heretics of the spirit. Hence the transgressive character of Batille's observation that,

In an arbitrary order where each element of self-consciousness escapes from the world (absorbed in the convulsive projection of the *self*), to the extent that philosophy, renouncing all hope of logical construction, arrives—as at an end—at a representation of relations

defined as improbable (and which are only the middle terms of the ultimate improbability), it is possible to represent this *self* in tears, or anxious. It can equally be thrown, in the case of a painful erotic choice, toward a *self* other than itself, but also other than any other.<sup>23</sup>

Witness, in this regard, the oneiric genesis of a woman in Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913):

Occasionally, as Eve was born from Adam's rib, a woman was born in my sleep from the cramped position of my thigh. Formed from the pleasure that I was on the verge of tasting, I imagined that it was she who offered it to me. My body, which felt in hers my own warmth, wanted to unite with it; I awakened.<sup>24</sup>

Thus the projection of a world on the ego "surface" is both the ingression of an infinitude of "real," "objective" forms *and* the projection of phantasmatic forms, following the primary process logic of desire. And, following this "logic," we should not be surprised if our own dreams were to transform Eve into her libidinal double: Lilith.

In all but cases of the most extreme paranoia, identification is partial identification, just as all projection and introjection is partial, fragmentary, as dissociative as it is associative. Rational logic and visceral presence determine the polarities of the imagination, where conscious thought is always subverted by the monomania of the unconscious, where received opinion is always in conflict with perverse desire. Communicative structures of exchange *and* incommunicable phantasms; word *and* body; logos *and* corpus—without reduction or suppression, each must be granted its singular, though interrelated, existence. The "visceral imagination" suffers a double constraint: corporeal-gestural/semiotic-semantic. The libidinal/hermeneutic relationship is circular: since all libido is ultimately bound, it is "figured" by representational forms; but since all formal structures originate in and bear a libidinal charge, they continually serve as signs—however arcane—of the passions. Thus we must posit an aesthetics where theory and interpretation are juxtaposed to, or traced above, the effects of the passions, where a muscular contraction or spasm is worth as much as a concept.



In the icon, intensity is fixed as symbol. (If we wish an ontotheological reading, *corpus* becomes *logos*—a short definition of sublimation.) Consider that extreme case of sublimation, always beyond the limits of representation: the sublime. The sublime is the absoluteness of exteriority, a counter-interiority, a counterintimacy. The (Kantian) sublime is the unrepresentable, the formless, that which cannot be grasped either in the unity of a single intuition or in its very principle. (It is a sort of desacralized stand-in for the infinitely perfect, distant, mechanical, and ultimately benign God of Spinoza, which replaced the representable, anthropomorphic God of the church fathers.) The sublime is the ultimate ontological ego-defense mechanism against narcissism and narcissistic wounds, the very dispossession of the origins of the self through a teleological repression. As Harold Bloom explains, the sublime is a mode in which the poet “is able to continue to defend himself against his own created image by disowning it, a defense of *un-naming* it rather than *naming* it.”<sup>25</sup> As such, art, insofar as it aspires to the sublime, is, as Kurt Eissler claims, the “narcissistic projection of the destruction of narcissism.”<sup>26</sup> Just as we can never recover the origins of the self, we can also never directly encounter the ultimate projection of the dissimulation of these origins, the sublime—only its symbols and indexes (but never its icons) appear. Thus, in Kant’s famous example, the sight of a turbulent, violent sea (that ocean which he, in fact, never saw!) *evokes* the sublime, creating a sentiment of the terrifying, crushing reality that consumes our very being, invoking the insignificance of our contingent, material existence. The sublime manifests, on the aesthetic level, what Nietzsche called the tyranny of the absolute.

Yet it would be a mistake to consider the sublime as the prime aesthetic paradigm. We may contrast to this Bataille’s notion of the *formless*: “On the other hand, to affirm that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.”<sup>27</sup> For both Kant and Bataille, water, that archetypal symbolic



floating signifier, delineates the limits of our comprehension. Yet, while the Kantian sublime marks our terror in regard to the ethereal and the infinite, the Bataillian countersublime marks our disgust with base materiality and the processes of the body. Sublimated desire turns us away from its objects; desublimation entails the rediscovery of such lost objects. The rarity of the heavens—and of the pure signified—is contrasted with the body's wastes. The sublime fascinates by escaping the gaze, beyond the limits of epistemophilia; desublimated base materiality captures the gaze in a fetishistic vortex of emotions, invoking a pronounced scopophilia disengaged from ratiocination.

Sublimation—that system of substitutions, deflections, and deferrals of libido—serves as the metamorphosis of desire. Conversely, desublimation is the recuperation of libido, its recognition within the very forms of cultural artifacts (and artworks). Displacement of libido or replacement of libido; formation or deformation: the hermeneutic circle is not situated within a conflict of interpretations, but rather between sublimation and desublimation, between “civilizing” motivations and the barbaric avatars of Eros. Hermeneutic, interpretive judgments must be both universal, categorical, determinate, reactive, *and* singular, disjunctive, indefinite, active. As such, hermeneutics must be viewed in its intimate relation to all phantasmagoria—revealing, in Rosolato's terms, the very law-of-the-transgression-of-the-symbolic-law. (And, if this is indeed the case, then perhaps the current interest in the aesthetics of the sublime is merely a “retro” fashion: the “postmodern condition” would rather be discerned at that point where sublimation and desublimation intersect, or, as it appears on the stylistic level, collide.)



*Sublime*: a noun devoid of all denotation, sign of the absolute; a superlative adjective, restricted from all description; often a sheer interjection. Operating at that subtle juncture of nature and culture, the sublime is the projection of the most severe and discrete manifestations of the libido, the most terrifying

and oppressive effects of the superego, and the most megalomaniacal constructions of the ego. But isn't this all a tautology? Isn't every thought, affect, and object the result of the confluence of these psychic operations? If all the world is but a fable, if all is phantasmagoria, doesn't the sublime explain the limits of our phantasms, and the countersublime the limits of our bodies?

The classic differentiation between *libido vivendi*, *libido sentiendi*, *libido sciendi*—respectively, the desires to live, enjoy, know: the psychic functions of instinct, imagination, comprehension—is only a hermeneutic difference. The separation of these functions is just one connivance of the *libido sciendi* itself, to justify its own distinctness, to valorize sublimation, to dramatize (in both senses of the word, to stress and to stage) certain of the passions to the exclusion of the others. The major effect of the *libido sciendi* is that epistemophilia where the notion of the sublime transforms into sheer vanity those very objects of sublimation which are the real manifestations of our passions.

As scopophilia is sublimated into epistemophilia in the quest for a *mathesis universalis*—where vision itself is quantified, transformed into words, numbers, axioms, formulas—iconophobia finally receives its logical confirmation. Doubtlessly, the development of a rationalist aesthetic and critical apparatus (as a cognitive supplement to the artwork) established the artwork's iconoclastic doubles: the text transforms the work of art into a figment, a fragment, of the imagination.

Yet there was a moment when iconophilia was indistinguishable from iconophobia. These curious relations were perhaps never more passionately (dispassionately?) revealed than in the work of Leonardo da Vinci, at that privileged historical moment just prior to the birth of a unified science and a rationalized aesthetic. Leonardo: "Lust is the cause of generation."<sup>28</sup> Yet this lust is nowhere evident in his work: consider the representations of the sexual act in his anatomical sketches. Expressionless faces, truncated or decapitated bodies drawn in cross section to reveal their internal forms, these works are notably devoid of lustfulness. (This is true to the point that one

such sketch also reveals, as a marginal figure, a severed penis—an antilibidinal warning against whatever passions may be aroused by the scene of intercourse shown on the same sheet.) Indeed, it is precisely in regard to a primal cause of lust and generation—the female sex—that Leonardo's iconophilia and epistemophilia are tempered by a distinct iconophobia. The result is a gross distortion, a grotesquerie.

But we may fantasize these relations in a quite different manner. Consider the rapport between Leonardo's sketches of the actions and forms of flowing water and whirlpools and those fantastic depictions of cataclysmic, apocalyptic deluges which he produced toward the end of his life. And imagine a sketch of pubic hair—with the elegance and formal purity of a Praxiteles or a Michelangelo, depicting the fully stylized curls of hair in mathematical and pictorial similitude with the various movements of water—as the symbolic mediation between the whirlpools and the deluges. We would find the analysis of Eros and Thanatos into their component aspects. Thalassa mediates Eros and Thanatos: the origin of the world, in that pubic region de-eroticized and sublimated by Leonardo, is homologized with the catastrophic finale of the cosmic drama.<sup>29</sup> The end of the world meets its origin in a phantasmatic disaster where sublimation and desublimation intersect. The ultimate deformation and dematerialization of the world in the supreme, sublime manifestation of narcissism's desire to overcome its own wounds would proffer such a sketch of the pubis as an apotropaic emblem destined to abolish all fetishism. Here, a protoscientific epistemophilia (and iconophobia) would be in perfect equilibrium with an aesthetic scopophilia (and iconophilia). But this is merely one long obsolete paradigm of the passions.

In Leonardo, the observed and depicted detail, escaping established iconography, creates an enigmatic, disquieting effect. Yet today, when there is no distance between the artwork and our deepest phantasms (a definition of modernism, perhaps?), the aesthetic icon could not be further from that foundational *logos* and *physis* dear to our philosophers (a foundation of iconoclasm, perhaps?). We must see in modernism—

abstract or otherwise—not a renewed iconophobia, but rather the final conjunction of iconophilia and the unconscious.



Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866) is truly emblematic of origins: of art (witness the originary, paleolithic representations of the vulva); of modernism; and indeed, of the human world. It is also the origin of perversions. It reveals what the entire history of Western art—in fact, the entire history of the West all told—repressed: the invisible, unrepresentable female sex, veritable Medusa. And the fetish is our own personal fabulation of that repression, a substitute representation of that oxymoron, the absent female phallus. The fetish is a replacement for an absent sex or an absent God.

But once visible, this sight overturns our metaphysics, upsets our psychology, and reconstitutes our ethics. In *Madame Edwarda* (1937), Bataille raises this vision to its highest, yet most scandalous, indecent, blasphemous intensity. The narrator, encountering Madame Edwarda in her brothel, recounts:

A voice, all too human, drew me out of my dazed condition. Madame Edwarda's voice, like her slender body, was obscene. "Do you want to see my old rags?" she said. Clutching the table with both hands, I turned toward her. Seated, she held one leg spread high in the air; to open her crack yet wider, she ended up drawing the skin apart with the fingers of both hands. Thus Madame Edwarda's "old rags" gaped at me, hairy and pink, as full of life as some repugnant octopus. "Why are you doing that?" I stammered weakly. "You see," she said, "I am GOD." "I'm going mad. . . ." "Oh no, you must look—look!" Her harsh voice softened and she became almost childlike in order to tell me with lassitude, with an infinite smile of abandon: "How I came!"<sup>30</sup>

In an origin all too human, the ontological and hermeneutic circles are complete; physical and metaphysical origins coincide; decadence and transcendence are one.

We may finally return to the phantasms of our novices, to realize that they just might be merely a slight textual supple-

ment striving toward this unity of transcendence and immanence, a desire for the rare coincidence of an antinomian theology where desire regulates dogma—a theology whose heretical logic will doubtlessly escape their playful intentions. Their adoration, however, is a model not to be dismissed. We may conclude with a parallel but different adoration, at whose altar a very different love is manifested:

After the death of an old American bachelor, a room 8 by 10 metres large, whose walls were lined with shelves, was discovered in his house in Passy. These shelves were covered with hundreds of assiduously cared-for shoes. In the middle of the room was a sort of prayer stool in beige calfskin. This salon, sheltered from the world, was kept locked up with a single key which only he possessed. Each afternoon he isolated himself there and spent three hours polishing dozens of pairs of shoes with the best wax. "It seemed to please Monsieur," explained his butler, "but he always emerged exhausted."<sup>31</sup>