



"I'm Sorry, Dear"

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“I’m sorry, dear”

LESLIE FARBER

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. —Genesis

Lust is more abstract than logic; it seeks (hope triumphing over experience) for some purely sexual, hence imaginary, conjunction of an impossible maleness with an impossible femaleness. —C. S. Lewis



THE MODERN DIALOGUE WHICH furnishes me my title is practised throughout the Western world. As a theme with only a limited number of variations, it cannot sustain much repetition: familiarity breeds silence; although never really abandoned, the script quickly becomes implicit. When reduced to a dumb show—or perhaps no more than a monosyllabic token—it still remains faithful to its pathetic premise. However, for the purposes of introduction I shall try to represent its essence in a wholly explicit manner. The man speaks first.

“Did you?”

“Did you? You *did*, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I—Oh, I’m sorry! I *am* sorry. I know how it makes you feel.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m sure I’ll quiet down after a while.”

“I’m *so* sorry, dearest. Let me help you.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“But, I . . .”

“What good is it when you’re just—when you don’t really want to? You know perfectly well, if you don’t *really* want to, it doesn’t work.”

“But I *do* really want to! I *want* to! Believe me. It *will* work, you’ll see. Only let me!”

“Please, couldn’t we just forget it? For now the thing is done, finished. Besides, it’s not really that important. My tension always wears off eventually. And anyhow—maybe next time it’ll be different.”

“Oh, it *will*, I *know* it will. Next time I won’t be so tired or so eager. I’ll make sure of that. Next time it’s going to be *fine*! . . . But about tonight—I’m sorry, dear.”

Unhappily, no end to talking and trying for our pathetic lovers. To deaden self-consciousness they may turn to alcohol or sedatives, seeking the animal indifference that is unencumbered with hesitations, reservations, grievances—in short, all those human tangles that create the sexual abyss they will themselves to bridge. To delay his moment, to quicken hers, they may try to assist the chemicals by thinking of other matters—football games and cocktail parties—in order finally to arrive at that mutual consummation which, hopefully, will prove their sufficiency unto each other, if not their love. All the strategies and prescriptions of sexology that have often failed them in the past are not cast aside but stubbornly returned to, if only because in such an impasse there is nothing else. Instead of alcohol or drugs or irrelevant reveries they may—in solitude or mutuality—resort to sex itself as their sedative, intending the first try to spend their energies just enough to dull self-consciousness and thicken their passion to the “spontaneity” necessary for this second and final attempt. Although normally truthful people, our lovers are continually tempted by deception and simulation: he may try to conceal his moment, she to simulate hers—as they stalk their equalitarian ideal. It can happen that they will achieve simultaneity by means of one or several or none of these devices. But their success—in the midst of their congratulations—will be as dispiriting as their failures. For one thing the joy the lovers sought in this manner will be either absent or too fictitious to be believed. Furthermore, once the moment has subsided they must reckon with the extraordinary efforts that brought it about—efforts that appear too extraordinary for ordinary day-to-day existence. Thus does it happen that success may bring as much as or more pathos than failure. And always lying between them will be the premise borrowed from romanticism: if they *really* loved each other it would work. Small wonder, then, as self-pity and bitterness accumulate, that their musings—if not their actions—turn to adultery: a heightened situation which promises freedom from the impingements of ordinary sexual life. Or, pushed gradually past heightening, past hope, they may even come to abstinence, which can seem—with some irony—the least dishonourable course.

MY CONVICTION is that over the last fifty years sex has for the most part lost its viability as a human experience. I do not mean there is any danger it will cease to be practised—that it will be put aside like other Victorian bric-a-brac. The hunger will remain, perhaps even increase, and human beings will continue to couple with as much fervor as they can provoke, all the while that the human possibilities of sex will grow ever more elusive. Such couplings will be poultices after the fact: they will further extend the degradation of sex that has resulted from its ever-increasing bondage to the modern will. To those first pioneers at the turn of the century—sexologists, psychoanalysts, political champions of woman’s suffrage—“sexual emancipation” seemed a stirring and optimistic cause. Who could have imagined then, as the battle was just beginning, how ironic victory would be: sex was emancipated, true, but emancipated from all of life—except the will—and subsequently exalted as the measure of existence.

At this point I think it only fair that I commit myself, even if briefly, on how sex was, is, or could be a viable human experience. My view is not that of St.

Augustine—that man, by reason of the Fall, is necessarily subject to the lust of concupiscence. Nor can I subscribe, at the other extreme, to the position of the Church of England, as reported at the Lambeth Conference in 1958: “The new freedom of sexuality in our time is . . . a gate to a new depth and joy in personal relationship between husband and wife.” Of the erotic life Martin Buber has remarked that in no other realm are dialogue and monologue so mingled and opposed. I would agree that any attempt to offer a normative description would have to include precisely such mingling and opposition. Even if we place it optimally within an ongoing domestic world of affection, in which sex bears some relation, however slight, to procreation, our task is still the difficult one of maintaining that sex is both utterly important and utterly trivial. Sex may be a hallowing and renewing experience, but more often it will be distracting, coercive, playful, frivolous, discouraging, dutiful, even boring. On the one hand it tempts man to omnipotence, while on the other it roughly reminds him of his mortality. Over and over again it mocks rationality, only to be mocked in turn at the very instant it insists its domain is solely within the senses. Though it promises the suspension of time, no other event so sharply advises us of the oppressiveness of time. Sex offers itself as an alternative world, but when the act is over and the immodesty of this offering is exposed, it is the sheer worldliness of the world we briefly relinquished and must now re-enter that has to be confronted anew. Residing no longer in the same room which first enclosed us, we now lie in another room with another topography—a room whose surfaces, textures, corners, knobs have an otherness as absolute and formidable as the duties and promises which nag us with their temporal claims. What began as relief from worldly concern ends by returning us to the world with a metaphysical, if unsettling, clarity.

Though sex often seems to be morality’s adversary, it more often brings sharply in its wake moral discriminations that previously had not been possible. Because the pleasure of sex is always vulnerable to splitting into *pleasuring* and *being pleased*, the nature of pleasure itself, as well as the relation between pleasure and power, are called into question. If pleasuring is the overpowering concern, intimations of the actual and immediate experience of slavery or peonage will appear. On the other hand, if being pleased is most compelling, tyranny and oppression will invade experience with some urgency. And finally, should the lovers will equality between these two concerns, in their effort to heal the split, they will personally suffer the problematic character of democratic forms. To some extent our political past influences our sexual negotiations, but in equal measure sexual pleasure itself is a source of political practice and theory.

The list of oppositions and minglings could easily be extended, but such an extension would not change the fact that human sex inevitably partakes of human experience, for better or for worse, and through its claim on the body simultaneously asserts its particular difference, for better or for worse.

Its particular difference from everything else in this life lies in the possibility which sex offers man for regaining *his own* body through knowing the body of his loved one. And should he fail that *knowing* and *being known*, should he lapse into all those ways of *knowing*

about which he has proudly learned to confuse with knowing—both bodies will again escape him. Increasingly, as D. H. Lawrence understood, man has become separated from his body, which he yearns to inhabit, such yearning understandably bringing sentimental and scientific prescriptions for the reunion eluding him. Yet it is through the brief reconciliation with his own and his loved one's body that he can now grasp—and endure—the bodily estrangement which has always been his lot, without succumbing to the blandishments that would betray the realities of both sides of this duality.

IN ORDER to develop more concretely my conviction that sex for the most part has lost its viability as a human experience, I wish to consider the Sex Research Project, directed by Dr. William H. Masters at the Washington University of Medicine. Through the use of women volunteers Dr. Masters is endeavouring "to separate a few basic anatomic and physiologic truths" about "the human female's response" to what he calls "effective sexual stimulation." The subject, he believes, has been hopelessly beclouded by "literary fiction and fantasy," "pseudoscientific essays and pronouncements," and "an unbelievable hodgepodge of conjecture and falsehood." His debt to Kinsey is clear, though qualified. He acknowledges his "complete awe" for Kinsey's "time-consuming efforts" which have made his own research not only "plausible, but possible." On the other hand he finds that the work of his predecessors, including Kinsey, has unfortunately been "the result of individual introspection, expressed personal opinion, or of limited clinical observation"—rather than "a basic science approach to the sexual response cycle."* Therefore, he has done what was indeed inevitable, he has moved the whole investigation into the laboratory.

I should make clear that Dr. Masters's project itself interests me far more than his exact findings. This project strikes me as one of those occasional yet remarkable enterprises which, despite its creator's intentions, quite transcends its original and modest scientific boundaries, so that it becomes a vivid allegory of our present dilemma, containing its own image of man—at the same time that it charts a New Jerusalem for our future. Such an enterprise, when constitutive, is apt to be more relevant and revealing than deliberate art. Because no actual artist is involved, it is not particularly rewarding to ask how this matter acquires its revelatory, even poetic, power. Often its director merely pursues the prevailing inclination in his field. Yet the pursuit is so single-minded, so fanatical and literal, that part of the power of the enterprise as constitutive symbol must be credited to the director's unflagging lack of imagination and his passionate naiveté, which stay undeterred by all the proprieties, traditions, and accumulated wisdom that would only complicate his course.

I SHALL not linger over the anatomical and physiological detail in Dr. Masters's reports, except to say it concerns the changes observed on the various parts of the bodies of his volunteers as they approach, accomplish, and depart from sexual climax. Of all the mechanical,

electrical, and electronic devices at his command in this research, it is movie-making which seems to give Dr. Masters the clearest edge over the subjective distortions of his predecessors:

Since the integrity of human observation of specific detail varies significantly, regardless of the observer's training or good intent, colored motion-picture photography has been used to record in absolute detail all phases of the human sexual response cycle.

This movie is often referred to in Dr. Masters's writings and, I am told, has been exhibited at a number of scientific institutes throughout the country. So fond is he of this medium that there seem to be occasions when his scientific prose seeks, however incompletely, to emulate not only the objectivity but the aesthetic brilliance of his movie sequences:

If the bright pink of the excitement phase changes to a brilliant primiparous scarlet-red, or the multiparous burgundy color, a satisfactory plateau phase has been achieved.

There is even a point at which the movie medium itself becomes the inventor: like the accidental solution or the contaminated culture, which have heroic roles in scientific romances, movie-making allows Dr. Masters to uncover "the vascular flush reaction to effective sexual stimulation" which had not been previously described in the scientific literature.

With the aid of artificially-increased skin surface temperature, such as that necessary for successful motion-picture photography, the wide distribution of this flush becomes quite apparent. . . . With orgasm imminent, this measles-like rash has been observed to spread over the anterior-lateral borders of the thighs, the buttocks and the whole body.

Probably it was this discovery of the "measle-like rash" which inspired a more Pavlovian venture which, if read slowly, will be seen to have quite eerie dimensions:

One observed subject, undergoing electroencephalographic evaluation, had been trained for 4 months to attain orgasm without producing concomitant muscle tension in order to provide significance for her tracing pattern. Yet, this patient repeatedly showed a marked flush phenomenon over the entire body during plateau and orgasm, and during resolution was completely covered with a filmy, fine perspiration.

If movie-making is Dr. Masters's main laboratory device, "automanipulative technics" constitute his "fundamental investigative approach" to "the sexual response cycle of the human female." His frankness here is to be commended—particularly since some scientists might feel that such automanipulation was inadequate to the verisimilitude necessary for laboratory demonstration. Dr. Masters himself does not discuss the issue, but his obvious preference for this approach over "hetero-sexual activity" does not appear to be ascribable to decorum. To some degree, I imagine, it was the laboratory procedures and devices—particularly motion picture photography—which determined the approach, automanipulation being clearly more accessible to scientific inspection than coition. But more important, there is evidence that Dr. Masters regards automanipulation to be a more reliable—that is, more predictable—technique than "heterosexual activity" in the pursuit of "the more intense, well-developed, orgasmic response" cycle.

*These and all subsequent quotations are from Dr. Masters's article, "The Sexual Response Cycle of the Human Female" (*Western Journal of Surgery, Obstetrics, and Gynecology*, Jan.-Feb. 1960).

This type of total pelvic reaction is particularly true for an orgasmic phase elicited by manual manipulation, but it also occurs, although less frequently, with coition.

Little is told us about the volunteers in this research. Apparently the project began with prostitutes. But when objections were made that such a profession might not yield the best "normal" sample, subjects were chosen among medical students and medical students' wives who volunteered and were paid a modest fee for their activities. Naturally no studies could be made on those who, for whatever reason, would not volunteer. and presumably quickly eliminated were those young women who offered themselves out of their enthusiastic wish to contribute to science, only to discover they could not sustain their sexual excitement in the setting of the laboratory, the paraphernalia, the cameras, the technicians, the bright lights. And even more quickly eliminated were those women who on initial interview were not sure whether or not they had climax: "Our rule of thumb is if they're not sure about it they probably haven't had it."

Other circumstances surrounding the study can only be guessed at. Like much scientific research, this particular project must have been an orderly affair. It can be assumed that the investigators did not wait on the whim of their volunteers; that is, they were not subject to call day or night whenever the volunteer felt in the mood. No, the women were given regular appointments during the working day when the entire research crew was available. Doubtless, too, the directors of the project considered it scientifically unseemly to encourage sexual titillation in their volunteers—certainly out of the question would have been anything resembling a physical overture. Should suggestive reading matter be required by the research—as it indeed occasionally was—it would have to be offered the volunteers in a spirit of detachment; not even the hint of a smirk could be allowed to disrupt the sobriety of the occasion. On the whole, the erotic basis would have to be provided by the scientific situation itself, in addition to the actual manipulation: that is, the prospect of arriving at the laboratory at 10.00 A.M., disrobing, stretching out on the table, and going to work in a somewhat businesslike manner while being measured and photographed, would have to provide its own peculiar excitement. (Thank you, Miss Brown, see you same time next week. Stop at the cashier's for your fee.) So back to one's ordinary existence.

IF THESE speculations have any truth, what can be said about the qualities that the ideal subject for such experiments would have? In a general way, her sexuality would have to be autonomous, separate from and unaffected by her ordinary world. "World" here would have to include not only affection but all those exigencies of human existence which tend to shape our erotic possibilities. Objectively, her sexuality would be mechanically accessible or "on call"—under circumstances which would be, if not intimidating, at least distracting to most bodies. Hers would have to be indifferent to the entire range of experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, whose claim is not only not salacious but makes us forget there is such a thing as sexuality. Her lust would lie to hand, ready to be invoked and consummated, in sickness or in health, in coitus or "automanipulation," in homo-sexuality or heterosexuality, in exasperation or

calm, hesitancy or certainty, playfulness or despair. (This would be the other side of that older, though not unrelated romanticism which just as willfully insisted on soft lights, Brahms, incense, and poetical talk.) In other words, her sexuality would be wholly subject to her will: whenever she determined—or the project determined—that she should have reached a climax, she would willingly begin those gestures that would lead to one. To use the modern idiom, all that would be unavailable to her sexological dexterity would be frigidity. Or, to speak more clearly, all that would be unavailable to her would be a real response to the laboratory situation. Insofar as her sexuality was under her will's dominion, she would resemble those odd creatures on the old television quiz programs—also ideal subjects in their own way—who were led from boarding houses to stand in a hot soundproof isolation booth, and when the fateful question was delivered from the vault, answered correctly and without a tremor how many words there were in *Moby Dick*—answered correctly in a loud clear voice under circumstances in which most of us could not even mumble our name. The popularity of these programs (at least until skullduggery was revealed) suggests the audience looked with envy and/or admiration at this caricature of knowledge—a knowledge equally responsive to its owner's will, regardless of contingency or trapping.

A truly constitutive symbol should embody both an accurate rendering of contemporary life and a clear indication of what that life should be. Taking, for the moment, only the ideal contained in my description of the volunteer in these experiments, I would say that she is a latterday Queen of Courtly Love, a veritable Queen Guinevere. For most modern men and women, who grow ever more discouraged by their bodies' stubborn refusal to obey their owners' will, this Lady of the Laboratory has long been the woman of their dreams: men long to channel or claim this creature's prompt and unspecific response for their own specific overtures, while women dream of rivaling her capacity to serve her body's need whenever she so wills.

And what of those self-effacing scientists behind the camera who conceived and guided this research? Do they too reflect who we are and who we would become? We know as little about this research team as we know about the volunteers. How the scientific boundaries were staked out and protected against trespass is not described in the reports. Once again we can only surmise but that there was difficulty is suggested by a remark Dr. Masters made in one of his lectures—namely, that he preferred to have a woman scientist alongside him in these investigations because she helped to make him or keep him more "objective." I assume he meant that having an actual woman present, fully clad in the white coat of science, reminded him not only of the point of the matter at hand but of the more hazardous life to be lived with women outside the laboratory—of the difference between the ideal and the actual. It would be a ticklish problem how to maintain the proper detachment to protect the scientists without at the same time inhibiting the volunteers. Here the equipment and rituals of research would help. And very possibly there would be a deliberate effort to eliminate even the ordinary frivolity that sometimes overcomes a surgical team in the midst of the most delicate operation, because frivolity in this sort of research might be only a way-station en route to the lubricious. Any falling-away into the most ordinary

locker-room talk, in or out of the laboratory, would have to be regarded as a danger signal. I imagine each scientist, with all the resolution at his command, would remind himself continually it was just an ordinary day's work in the laboratory, no different from the work next door with the diabetic rats. At the end of the day, when his wife asked, "How were things at the lab today?" he would reply, "Oh nothing, just the same old grind." And if she pressed him in a jealous fashion, his justifications might resemble those of a young artist explaining his necessity to sketch nude models. Of course, there would be strict rules forbidding dalliance between scientist and volunteer after hours. But should they happen to run into one another in the cafeteria, each would keep his conversation casual, trying not to allude to those more cataclysmic events of a few hours before. Mindful of his professional integrity, the scientist would have to guard against prideful thoughts that he knew her, if not better, at least more microscopically than those nearest her. Most troublesome of his self-appointed task, it seems to me, would be his effort to prevent his research from invading his own ordinary erotic life, particularly if it were worried by the usual frustrations. In this regard he would be indeed heroic to withstand the temptation of comparing his mate's response to those unspecific, yet perfectly formed, consummations of the laboratory.

AGAIN, IF THESE imaginings have any truth, how may we characterize the ideal scientist in research of this immediate order? First of all, he would have to *believe*, far more than the volunteers, in a "basic science" approach to sex. This is not to say that he would consider the practice of sex a possible science, even though his practice might eventually be informed by his scientific theories. But it would have to be an article of faith for him that the visible palpable reactions of the organs themselves, regardless of whatever human or inhuman context they might occur in, would speak a clear unambiguous truth to all who cared to heed. In his hierarchy of beliefs, these reactions would take precedence in every sense. The questions we are apt to ask about human affairs, not excluding lust, ordinarily have to do with appropriateness, affection, etc.—in other words, right or wrong, good or bad, judged in human terms. On the other hand, the ideal Sexologist, as he presses his eye to his research, finds another variety of drama—inordinately complicated in its comings and goings, crises and resolutions—with its own requirements of right and wrong, good and bad, all writ very small in terms of "droplets" and "engorgements" and "contractions."

The will of the ideal Sexologist seems different from the will of the Lady of the Laboratory, but it may be the opposition is more illusory than actual. The latter wills orgasm through physical manipulation. Certainly the sexologist supports and approves her willing, such sexual promptness being ideal for laboratory study. However, while his approval may be invented by his will, it is by no means the most important expression of his will. As a scientist his will must be given to the systematic inspection of the sexual response of the "human female," literally portrayed. To this end he persists in his gadgetry, always at the expense of any imaginative grasp of the occasion. His will to be a scientist requires his further commitment to any number of willful enterprises; in the present circumstance he

finds it necessary to will his own body to be unresponsive—not merely to the events on the laboratory table but to any fictional construction of these events his imagination might contrive, because imagination, at least in this arena, is his opponent in his pursuit of science. On the surface his dilemma may seem a familiar one, being comparable to older ascetic ventures, particularly of the Eastern yoga variety. But the sexologist's task is actually more difficult: asceticism is not his goal—the very nature of his enterprise points in an opposite direction. He wishes indifference which he can invoke at will: it may be the project which demands his not responding, but — as we shall see later—it may be other moments, unofficial and unscientific, which seem to call forth his willed lack of response. The will not to respond and the will to respond are related possibilities of the will. In this sense, the Lady of the Laboratory and the ideal Sexologist are collaborators rather than opponents. Of course, I speak in ideal terms—whether these ideals can be achieved is another matter. But if the Lady of the Laboratory is a latter day Queen of Courtly Love, then our ideal Sexologist is the modern Sir Galahad, and together—separately or comingled—they rule our dreams of what should be.

Let us remind ourselves that most of us could not hope to qualify for this research—either as volunteers or as scientists. But this does not mean the differences are great between us and them. True, compared to ours, their lives have an oversized quality, and true, they are in the vanguard. But in a real sense our fleshly home is that laboratory. Whatever room we choose for our lovemaking we shall make into our own poor laboratory, and nothing that is observed or undergone in the real laboratory of science is likely to escape us. At this stage is there any bit of sexology that is not in the public domain, or at least potentially so for those who can read? Whatever detail the scientific will appropriates about sex rapidly becomes an injunction to be imposed on our bodies. But it is not long before these impositions lose their arbitrary and alien character and begin to change our actual experience of our bodies. Unfortunately our vision of the ideal experience tends to be crudely derived from the failure of our bodies to meet these imperatives.

Our residence in the laboratory is recent: really only since the turn of the century has the act of sex been interviewed, witnessed, probed, measured, timed, taped, photographed, judged. Before the age of sexology, objectifications of the sexual act were to be found in pornography and the brothel, both illicit, but pleasurable in purpose, both suggesting the relatively limited manner in which will—given absolute dominion—could be joined to sexual pleasure. However else the Marquis de Sade may be read, he at least offered the most exhaustive inventory yet seen of techniques for exploiting the pleasure of the body's several parts, if one wholeheartedly put one's will to it. As a moralist he seemed to say, Why our particular rules? What if there were no limits? More recently, yet still before sexology, it was possible for shy erotomaniacs, disguised as grocers, to visit brothels, there to peek at the antics of the inmates. The bolder ones could join the sport. When the performance reached its final gasp our tradesmen, now satiated, would slink back to the propriety and privacy of their own quarters, convinced their ordinary domestic world was discreetly separate from the world

INGRID THULIN IN BERGMAN'S FILM "THE SILENCE" NOTABLE FOR ITS SEXUAL FRANKNESS. THE TREATMENT OF THE SCENE WHERE THULIN, THE ELDER (LESBIAN) SISTER, OBTAINS SELF-GRATIFICATION SHOULD BE CONTRASTED WITH THE FILMED EXPERIMENTS DESCRIBED IN THIS ARTICLE.



of the peephole which they paid to enter. In fact, or so it seemed, the separateness of these two worlds heightened the erotic possibilities of each. The emancipation which sexology enforced gradually blurred this distinction, making it unclear whether each home had become its own brothel or whether every brothel had become more like home. The truth is that sexology eventually not only blurred the distinction, but by housing us all in laboratories, made both the brothel and pornography less exciting dwellings for our erotic investigations.

WHEN LAST we left our pathetic lovers I suggested that as their self-pity and bitterness mounted, they might—in desperation—turn to adultery. Yet even for the person who believes himself to be without scruples, adultery—in fact or fantasy—is difficult to arrange, exhausting to maintain. Requiring, as it does, at least two persons and two wills, this illicit encounter risks the danger of further pathos. But if we heed our laboratory drama carefully, we can see there is another possibility preferable to adultery. According to the lesson of the laboratory there is only one perfect orgasm, if by “perfect” we mean one wholly subject to its owner’s will, wholly indifferent to human contingency or context. Clearly, the perfect orgasm is the orgasm achieved on one’s own. No other consummation offers such certainty and moreover avoids the messiness that attends most human affairs. The onanist may choose the partner of his dreams who very probably will be the Lady of the Laboratory, or he may have his orgasm without any imagined partner. In either case, he is both scientist and experimental subject, science and sex now being nicely joined. In his laboratory room he may now abstract his sexual parts from his whole person, inspect their anatomic particularities, and observe and enjoy the small physiologic events he knows best how to control. True, this solitary experience may leave him empty and ashamed. But as

a citizen of his times he will try to counter this discomfort by reminding himself that sexology and psychoanalysis have assured him masturbation is a morally indifferent matter. As a true modern he tells himself that it is not as good as what two people have, but that does not make it bad. Superstitious people of other ages thought it drove one crazy, but he knows better; he knows that the real threat to *his* sanity is unrelieved sexual tension. In fact—he may decide—were it not for certain neurotic Victorian traces he has not managed to expunge from his psyche, he could treat the matter as any other bodily event and get on with his business. So we must not be too harsh with our pathetic lovers if they take refuge in solitary pleasures—even if they come to prefer them to the frustrations of sexual life together. Nor should we be too surprised if such solitary pleasure becomes the ideal by which all mutual sex is measured—and found wanting.

Let us now turn to the phenomenon being inspected and celebrated in our laboratory—the phenomenon which contributes most of all to our lovers’ impasse. Of all the discoveries sexology has made, the female orgasm remains the most imposing in its consequences. De Tocqueville’s prediction of life between the sexes in America* might not have been so sanguine, could he have anticipated first, the discovery of sexology and psychoanalysis, and second, their discovery of the female orgasm.

*“... I never observed that the women of America consider conjugal authority as an unfortunate usurpation of their rights, or that they thought themselves degraded by submitting to it. It appeared to me, on the contrary, that they attach a sort of pride to the voluntary surrender of their will... Thought their lot is different, they consider both of them as beings of equal value... If I were asked... to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought to be attributed, I should reply: To the superiority of their women.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

In the second half of the 19th Century Western man began to see nature in a new and utilitarian way as a variety of energies, hitherto unharnessed, which could now be tamed and transformed into industrial servants which in turn would fashion never-ending progress and prosperity. The health of the machine, powered by steam and electricity, and the sickness of the machine if those energies were misdirected or obstructed, were obsessive considerations of the period. It was entirely appropriate to regard the human body as still another natural object with many of the vicissitudes of the machine: this had always been medicine's privilege. But for the first time the scientists, in their intoxication, could forget the duality previous centuries knew: namely, that the body is both a natural object and not a natural object. And once it was decided the dominant energy of the human machine was sex, the new science of sexology was born. With the suppression of the second half of the dialectic, sexology and psychoanalysis could—with the assistance of the Romantics—claim the erotic life as their exclusive province, removing it from all the traditional disciplines, such as religion, philosophy, literature, which had always concerned themselves with sex as human experience. Qualities such as modesty, privacy, reticence, abstinence, chastity, fidelity, shame—could now be questioned as rather arbitrary matters which interfered with the health of the sexual parts. And in their place came an increasing assortment of objective terms like *ejaculatio praecox*, foreplay, fore-pleasure, frigidity—all intended to describe, not human experience, but the behaviour of the sexual parts. The quite preposterous situation arose in which the patient sought treatment for *ejaculatio praecox* or impotence and the healer sought to find out whether he liked his partner.

IF THE VICTORIANS found sex unspeakable for the wrong reasons, the Victorian sexologists found it wrongly speakable. (To what extent Victorian prudery was actually modesty or reticence, I cannot say. It has become habitual for us to regard Victorian lovemaking as an obscenity.) Science is usually democratic, and since sex now belonged to science, whatever facts or assumptions were assembled had immediately to be transmitted to the people, there to invade their daily life. Writing of the Kinsey Report, Lionel Trilling finds—correctly, I believe—a democratic motive for the study:

In speaking of its motives, I have in mind chiefly its impulse toward acceptance and liberation, its broad and generous desire for others that they be not harshly judged . . . The Report has the intention of habituating its readers to sexuality in all its manifestations; it wants to establish, as it were, a democratic pluralism of sexuality . . . This generosity of mind . . . goes with a nearly conscious aversion from making intellectual distinctions, almost as if out of the belief that an intellectual distinction must inevitably lead to a social discrimination or exclusion.

If we disregard Kinsey's scientific pretensions, we still must recognize his eminence as arbiter of sexual etiquette. Like the lexicographer who finds his sanction in usage, Kinsey discovers his authority in practice: his democratic message is that we all do—or should do—more or less the same things in bed. And any notion lovers retain from an older tradition that what they have together is private and unique is effectively disproved by his cataloguing of sexual manners, providing they join him in

equating behaviour with experience. As a fitting disciple of Kinsey, Masters actualizes the "pluralism of sexuality" within the democratic unit of the laboratory and enlarges behaviour to include the more minute physiological developments which, too, should belong to every citizen.

The political clamor for equal rights for woman at the turn of the century could not fail to join with sexology to endow her with an orgasm, equal in every sense to the male orgasm. It was agreed that she was entitled to it just as she was entitled to the vote. Moreover, if she were deprived of such release her perturbation would be as unsettling to her nervous system as similar frustration was thought to be for the man. Equal rights were to be erotically consummated in simultaneous orgasm. On the one hand it was unhealthful for her to be deprived of release and, on the other hand, psychoanalysis decreed that an important sign of her maturity as woman was her ability to achieve it. In other words, without orgasm she was neurotic to begin with or neurotic to end with.

Though simultaneous orgasm seemed to be a necessary consequence of equal rights, the problem remained that in matters of lust more than a decree or amendment was required for such an achievement. True, the sexologists were most generous with instruction, but each citizen has had to discover over and over again the degree to which he is caught in the futile struggle to will what could not be willed—at the same time that he senses the real absurdity of the whole willful enterprise. The lover learns, as his indoctrination progresses, to observe uneasily and even resist his rush of pleasure if it seems he is to be premature. When no amount of resolution can force his pleasure to recede, he learns to suffer his release and then quickly prod himself to an activity his body's exhaustion opposes. In other words, he learns to take his moment in stride, so to speak, omitting the deference these moments usually call forth and then without breaking stride get to his self-appointed and often fatiguing task of tinkering with his mate—always hopeful that his ministrations will have the appearance of affection. While she is not likely to be deceived by such dutiful exercises, she nevertheless wishes for both their sakes that her body at least will be deluded into fulfilling its franchise.

AS FAR AS I know, little attention was paid to the female orgasm before the era of sexology. Where did the sexologists find it? Did they discover it or invent it? Or both? I realize it may seem absurd to raise such questions about events as unmistakable as those witnessed in our laboratory. But I cannot believe that previous centuries were not up to our modern delights; nor can I believe it was the censorship imposed by religion which suppressed the supreme importance of the female orgasm. My guess, which is not subject to laboratory proof, is that the female orgasm was always an occasional, though not essential, part of woman's whole sexual experience. I also suspect that it appeared with regularity or predictability only during masturbation when the more human qualities of her life with her mate were absent. Further, her perturbation was unremarkable and certainly bearable when orgasm did not arrive, for our lovers had not yet been enlightened as to the disturbances resulting from the obstruction or distortion of sexual energies. At this stage her orgasm had not yet been abstracted and isolated from the totality of her

pleasures, and enshrined as the meaning and measure of her erotic life. She was content with the mystery and variety of her difference from man, and in fact would not have had it otherwise. Much that I have said, if we leave aside the erotomanias which have always been with us, applies to the male of previous centuries. For him, too, the moment of orgasm was not abstracted in its objective form from the whole of his erotic life and then idealized. And he too preferred the mystery of difference, the impact of human contingency, becoming obsessed with the sheer anatomy and mechanics of orgasm only when all else was missing, as in masturbation.

Theological parallelism is a treacherous hobby, especially when we deal with movements flagrantly secular. Nevertheless, the manner in which lovers now pursue their careers as copulating mammals—adopting

whatever new refinements sexology devises, covering their faces yet exposing their genitals—may remind us of older heresies which, through chastity or libertinism, have pressed toward similar goals; one heretical cult went so far as to worship the serpent in the Garden of Eden. But the difference between these older heresies and modern science—and there is a large one—must be attributed to the nature of science itself, which—if we accept such evidence as the Lambeth Conference—by means of its claims to objectivity can invade religion and ultimately all of life to a degree denied the older heresies. So, with the abstraction, objectification, and idealization of the female orgasm we have come to the last and perhaps most important clause of the contract which binds our lovers to their laboratory home, there to will the perfection on earth which cannot be willed, there to suffer the pathos which follows all such strivings toward heaven on earth.

OKOGBULE WONODI

OKIKE:

The streams are thin these days,
thin straws fall close, so near
the cries of mothers soar high
and their tears run down
 down their cheeks
 to refill the valleys
 now without waters.

They say we shall sing a dirge
for the valleys gone dry
for the sands that burn
brown under our feet.

They say the cleansing will begin
in the hours of mist;
the cries will end
and the streams will tend
to the brink of the land.

Then the land will be born anew,
they say,
 and again we will renew
 with a totem of lament
 (shed our hairs)
 our vows to the land.

And after these will come
another rain
another wind and dust
and yet another ceremony
for the waters of the valley.

JOHN MBITI

MASKS OF FEAR

We are the solitary street travellers
Wearing masks of fear
And fearing death.
We've been waiting here
In the middle of a long narrow street,
Wanting to cross and walk eastward,
Eastward with our backs facing West,
For we fear death . . .
Death before us,
Death from the South and death from the North,
 We are the solitary street travellers
 Fearing death
 And wearing masks of fear.
We are very solitary—
You and you and I
The three solitary men and women and children,
Afraid of death.
 We fear to cross the street
 And fear to wait in the street
 And fear to wear our masks of fear.
Our feet are weary of standing still
In the middle of this long street,
And we fear death,
Death hiding in the big drum,
Death standing in the table clock
Which tows away our fearful days.
We fear the echo of our dying voices
Fading in our life's sore eventide.
 We are the solitary street travellers
 Fearing death
 And wearing masks of fear.