

THE AESTHETICS OF SEXUAL LOVE

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A Reflection on **The Impassioned Body** by William Cornell, published in the *British Gestalt Journal*, 12, 2, pp 97-104.

I find myself in deep accord with William Cornell's wish to restore sexual passion to its once venerable place in psychotherapy. And I am glad that he writes about it with considerable eloquent force. It is good to be passionate about passion. I like to imagine that psychotherapy is, among other things, about the restoration of the freedom to be passionate – and not only sexually passionate but also passionately curious, passionately spontaneous and playful, passionately interested in acquiring new skills, passionately absorbed in the task at hand, *etc.*

So I join Mr. Cornell in deploring the fact that much current psychotherapy has taken a turn toward restricting itself to mild, safe, and pious sentiments, such as mutuality, trust, empathy, caring, the relational, *etc.* These all too often seem in the service of proving that the therapist is a good soul, custodian of a hygienic theory of human relationships, from whom one has nothing to fear. The sanctimonious view of love in the quotation Mr. Cornell chooses from Judith Jordan illustrates the point perfectly. I am not claiming that these are bad ideas in themselves; obviously they are all on the side of virtue. But in so benevolent a setting how does one's patient open up and explore the darker fears of childhood, the bottled up aggressive desires, the messy, effusive animal of the body?

Consider a patient who has struggled to survive the terrifying and often secret libidinous and violent impulses – from parents and siblings, as well as from himself or herself – threaded through family life. On the other hand, take a patient whose family tolerates only harmony and good feelings, so that there was no place to express suffering, grief, hate, lustful desires, and other so-called negative emotions. Neither of these patients is likely to be in very good shape to make his or her way through an adult world where, alongside opportunities for growth and fulfillment, lurk predatory love, aggressive willfulness, and sadistic authorities parading as experts who claim to know what is in your best interests. To introject therapeutic benevolence is not going to help patients in

search of intimacy to learn to navigate the hidden shoals, hungry marine life, and treacherous undertows that make every deep erotic experience such difficult going.

What has happened to the Freud who was said to be seen leaving a therapy session barely able to disguise an erection? Or to the Ferenczi who wrote a brilliant article entitled 'Nakedness as a Means of Inspiring Terror', as well as a book called *Thalassa* which portrays sex as paradise mixed with catastrophe, and who sometimes sat a patient on his lap? Or Jung, who had an affair with Frau Spielrein, his patient who began as a schizophrenic and ended up a psychoanalyst? Or Otto Rank, who engaged in a tumultuous and ambiguously close relationship with the novelist Anais Nin and helped free her to become a passionate writer? I am by no means advocating all these behaviours – some of them crossed borders that probably should not be crossed, although I do think that the whole question of borders needs to be re-examined rather than merely subjected to automatic assumptions of therapeutic political correctness. For example, one might ask how far a therapist can go in responding to a patient's sexual desire yet keep his or her (the therapist's) needs from muddying the waters. At any rate, I am impressed with the early psychoanalysts' willingness to risk engaging the more volatile emotions inherent in intimate human encounters. It is not difficult to guess how a culture, in which sexual harassment and abuse by caretakers (including therapists) and bosses number among our prevalent crimes, would look upon the conduct of those early analysts.

No doubt fallout from this cultural atmosphere has helped make psychotherapy since Freud turn increasingly pale in response to anything to do with sex and just about everything else that might be charged with libido. Another factor is the extent to which psychology, in theory and practice, has either stripped the psyche from the body or made the human body itself an abstraction, as if to eliminate its sloppy ambiguities in the name of squeaky clean science. The body was strongly present in Freud's own theoretical musings, although its orifices and

portals (oral, anal, phallic) lost a good deal of their physicality as they became psychological categories in his developmental theory, and the vagina was not even there – it was just an absence left behind from a missing penis. The growing tendency to eliminate the body from psychoanalytic thought is by no means only a product of modern psychoanalysis. The body had already pretty much disappeared from the view of the Freudian revisionists, such as Eric Fromm and Karen Horney, who tended to dissolve biology and instinctual life into sociology. For them, human nature was equivalent to social nature.

In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the archangel Raphael is sent to Eden before the Fall to chat with Adam – it is a kind of top-down debriefing session on a variety of important topics – the creation, free will, the laws of heaven, the dangers of disobedience, and the war between good and evil. But after they discuss these and other weighty matters, Adam cannot resist a bit of sexual curiosity. In elaborately circumspect terms, he asks Raphael whether the angels engage in sexual intercourse. Raphael blushes (he is more or less incarnate for the purposes of the visit) and responds in the affirmative. But then he goes on to explain that in heaven the angels are pure spirit, unencumbered by bodies. When two angels are attracted to each other, they can simply mingle essences, totally and ecstatically.

So much for eighteenth-century celestial passion. I do not get very excited by this ideal of sex between Platonic essences. We cannot live by it anyway. Behind it lies the Puritan's distaste for the animal body, which gets lustful now and then and eventually rots. You could say that tame relational mutuality in therapy is our secular version of this distaste. In our times we have also invented another more general version of bodiless sex, which you might call digital passion. Sylvester Stallone and Sandra Bullock, in a sci-fi action film called *Demolition Man* (1993), give a neat illustration of it. Stallone is an old-fashioned (late 20th century) action hero who, for some reason or other (I cannot remember why) had been cryogenically frozen and is thawed out a century or two later to help a future society take on evildoers. When the Bullock character decides to have sex with him, she brings out two complicated-looking electronic helmets. They don these and sit across from each other, whereupon they both begin moaning with delight. But the aroused Stallone then wants to touch her. And she, repelled by such a crude idea, explains that the mixing of bodily fluids is a disgusting unsanitary habit from the past. It is no longer practised because it led to lethal diseases like AIDS and a subsequent host of even worse diseases.

At least they sit across from each other. In actuality we have by now taken things further: with sex on the internet, all physical presence disappears from the proceedings. Or

if you wish, identity itself can be dissolved in cyberspace, so that you can have anonymous passion made up of nothing but throbbing electronic bits that find their way to your screen. Diseases, computers, and religious beliefs aside, one reason we have so much difficulty with physical sexuality, either vastly overrating it as the road to paradise (as in advertising) or banishing it from sight (as in certain right-wing religions), arises from our denial of death (see Becker, 1997). Sexual love not only holds out the promise of blissful transcendence, but it also reminds us that we die. The other, whom we desire and often come to depend on, decays and dies, and so do we. This is why the whole enterprise of sexual love is fraught with anxiety and, at the extreme, can drive us mad.

Wilhelm Reich

An important exception to this whole cultural trend, including the trend in therapy from Horney and Fromm to object relations to relational psychoanalysis, was Wilhelm Reich. Whereas the revisionists elaborated one side of Freud – his view of conflict between the individual and society – Reich took Freud's theory of psychosexual drives and mechanisms of defence directly back to the living body and its vital energies. Years before his involvement with Frederick and Laura Perls, Paul Goodman, himself more than a little influenced by Reich, foresaw how the loss of the body from psychology implied a psychotherapy of social adjustment. If human nature is social to the core, as Horney and Fromm implied, then the individual is indefinitely receptive to being shaped by society. Such was the thrust of Goodman's penetrating critique of the Freudian revisionists in a debate with C. Wright Mills and Patricia Salter originally published in *Politics* in July 1945 (Goodman, 1991). Thus the Freudian revisionists helped set the stage for modern liberal social engineering.

It is a striking historical fact that both Horney and Reich were personally involved in Frederick Perls' development as a therapist. From Horney he learned much about the social behaviour of neurotic personality – how, for example, it manipulates support from the environment by presenting others with a carefully maintained inauthentic façade. But he also (literally) fleshed out Gestalt therapy by converting Reich's theory of character armour into his own theory of retroreflections, which is a valuable guide to understanding how the neurotic deforms and constricts his own body to prevent feeling or expressing powerful emotions. In this sense Perls brought back together the two streams into which Freud's thought had been split.

I consider Cornell on the right track in wanting what he calls the impassioned body back in therapy and in recruiting Reich to help get it there. I especially like his insistence, taking a cue from Muriel Dimen, that sex is a

force not a relation. I hate the words ‘relations’ and ‘relationship’ applied to erotic intimacy – they are terms that properly belong to mathematics, although I confess that I cannot figure out how to avoid them altogether. But Cornell also makes it quite clear, though I wish he had gone into more specific detail, that he does not think that our contemporary bodywork therapies offer a satisfying vision of passionate love either. Again, I agree with him. The very name bodywork hints at something that sounds more like fitness training than preparation to grapple with Eros.

We need a more passionate view of the body not only in psychoanalytic and other psychodynamic therapies, not only in bodywork, but in Gestalt therapy as well. Gestalt therapy has its own revisionists who have seized on one rich central theme in the work of Perls and Goodman – the concept of the field – and have turned it into a rather sterile landscape without fully incarnate inhabitants, as though psychotherapy were akin to the study of electromagnetism. (On this score, see Arthur Roberts’ fine essay in the *British Gestalt Journal* on the need to cart the very soil as well as the flora and fauna back into the field (Roberts, 1999).) On the other side of the psyche/soma divide, Gestalt therapy also has its body therapists, who take their cue from the work of Reich.

But for all its value, I do not think that the Reichian body alone does a good enough job to serve as a basis for reintroducing sexual love into psychotherapy. It can lead us to better sex but by itself not necessarily to better love. The reason I think so is because Reich has a great deal to teach us about sexual release but very little about what it takes to give form (in the way that an artist gives form to expression) to this release. (I discussed this problem in Reich’s work more fully in an essay a couple of years ago (Miller, 2001).) Along this line, let me say a few words in favour of restraint, an aspect of passion that Mr. Cornell does not address, because it plays an important role in shaping the forms of love.

Barriers and Restraint

In the first place, I do not believe that there is any meaningful passion without restraint, just as it makes no sense to speak of a brilliant summer day without the contrast of winter cold in the background. Love is a dialectic of release, which expresses the self, and restraint, which respects the mystery of the other. With no restraint, no limiting resistance, passion as mere release is a surrender to nothingness. This comes close to what the poet Robert Frost meant when he said that writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down. It is why the passionate spontaneous improvisations of the jazz musician are anchored in a structure of chord progressions, which also enables communication with

others in the band. The Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka gives a surprising example of what can go wrong when there is no limiting resistance. He writes about a first-rate German weight-lifting team that everyone was sure would win the world championship. But at the championship match, which took place in a brand-new sports arena in Switzerland, the German team utterly collapsed and lost by a wide margin. A Gestalt psychologist (of course!) was dispatched to research the disaster. What he discovered was that members of the team had been able to lift with such power because they had learned to take a fix on the opposite wall and then lift against it. But in the new arena the lighting was such that the glare made the opposite wall seem to disappear. The team had nothing to lift against except its own bootstraps. Herein lies a lesson that can be applied to sexual intimacy: that the recalcitrant differences of the other from oneself, no matter how far one might penetrate them, constitute a limiting resistance to self-expression. This is why it takes discipline and artfulness to create a form of love that satisfies both partners.

Every tale of romantic love contains forces that resist the possibility of coming together. Sometimes these are so overwhelming that they result in tragedy, such as the sea channel that divides Heloise from Abelard and the feud between families that violently opposes Romeo’s and Juliet’s longings to be with each other. Sometimes they produce comedy, such as the misunderstandings and missed opportunities that keep Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan apart in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), along with the lovers in every other Hollywood (or Shakespearean) comedy. The interplay or counterpoint of barriers and unions is what holds our emotional interest in these stories, reminding us that love, however desirable, is also tense, uncertain, and threatens loss. The contact boundary in Gestalt therapy can be understood as a limiting resistance to our yearnings to merge with each other or with the universe. Every contactful meeting with otherness contains elements of both union and differentiation. From the point of view of Gestalt therapy, contact leads to moments of feeling merged, but these are preceded and followed by awareness of one’s inevitable separateness.

So I want to supplement Mr. Cornell’s argument for the impassioned body with my own plea for the aesthetic imagination in sexual love. At one point Elizabeth Costello, the title character in the South African Nobel Prize-winning novelist J.M. Coetzee’s latest work, is standing at the railing of a cruise ship and ruminating about the mouths of underwater creatures. She thinks to herself, ‘Only by an ingenious economy, an accident of evolution, does the organ of ingestion sometimes get to be used for song’ (Coetzee, 2003, p 54). And, I would add, the organ of elimination for love. But neither song nor love is simply a matter of the body; they are also products

of the creative imagination. The body is their instrument of expression.

References

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