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Author: Jacek Mydla

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JACEK MYDLA

“Lust in Action” Possession, Transformation, and the Exorcising of Eros

Culture generates eroticism as a form of discourse; I would like to propose this statement, combining as it does the insights of Bataille (cultural genealogy of eroticism) and Barthes (eroticism’s discursive potential),¹ as a motto for my essay, which is intended to focus on the overwhelming ontological complexities of eroticism. The occidental cultural legacy is marked by an ascendancy of the idiom of possession and transformation which, with respect to Eros, towers over other discourses. Eros and possession seem to have been chained together and used to define one another, even if by way of privation. It was of course Plato who initiated this bonding for it was Plato who, in the *Symposium*, defined Eros or Love as “the everlasting possession of the good.” Thus, if Emmanuel Levinas, centuries later, seeks to disengage Eros from the possession idiom (“Nothing is further from Eros than possession,”² in contradiction to Sartre’s statement that even “the caress is an appropriation of the Other’s body”³) he still moves within the same paradigm, and the apparent disparity can be reconciled. A typical sorting out is found in Ortega y Gasset, who defines

¹ Cf. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (Penguin Books, 2001); also: Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 221 ff.; Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse. Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978).

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1995), p. 265.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge 1995).

sensual desire (lust?) as desire to take possession of the object, to make it part of our being⁴; this completed, desire goes away. Love, on the other hand, is an everlasting yearning for satisfaction.

Indeed, the way in which the possession idiom infiltrates and even saturates our thinking about erotic love almost defies critical detachment. The English language, for instance, makes eroticism *qua* possession obvious to the point of obscuring all traces of conventionality and arbitrariness which perplex the inquiring mind. The verbal repertoire that is always on hand when one wants to describe the sexual act or an erotic liaison is nearly ineluctably suggestive of appropriation, conquest, captivation, etc. To have, to enjoy, to take, to use, to possess, to conquer – such and suchlike are ideas and metaphors society lives by in all kinds of configurations of amatory relationships. Having shaped the dominant discourse of sexuality for centuries, they are capable of generating a near-inexhaustible verbal gamut, as literary specimens can very amply illustrate.

Of course, no literary sedimentation of the possession idiom will enlighten us on the underlying ontological substructure, which itself can be treated as yet another product of vibrant cultural interaction. On the contrary, the insinuated and rhetorically exploited onto-theology (one must not forget, to give an example, of the propping up that ontology offers the doctrine of chastity) has been oftentimes twisted out of its indigenous bedding, its categories dislodged, freely shuffled around and arbitrarily reassembled in the service of an artistic "whim." One thinks here of the semantic entanglements of poems such as Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 ("The expense of spirit in a waste of shame | Is lust in action [...]").⁵ Overflowing as it does with the possession idiom (*vide* the unbelievable compression of the two lines: "[lust is] Mad in pursuit and in possession so; | Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme"), which lends it its rhetorical nerve as well as its sting of moral chastisement, the sonnet denounces lust, or illicit sexual pleasure, for transgressing the boundaries of righteous humanity in so many devious ways. Being much more than a fleeting whim, literary sedimentations and consolidations are a living catalogue, as in Barthes, of discourse-mediated impulses, appetites, forces that will not be tranquillised by theories or straitjacketed by rigid systems.

For centuries, lust was both denigrated as well as firmly circumscribed by an ontologically underpinned system of morals. The argument that is going to unfold here will aim at exposing certain shortcomings of the essentialist ("objectivist") approach, which affixes sexual gratification in general and lust in

⁴ José Ortega y Gasset, *Estudios Sobre El Amor* (Lectorum Pubns, 1984), Polish trans. Krzysztof Komyszew as *Szkice o miłości* (Warszawa 1989).

⁵ Shakespeare's sonnet is quoted from the following edition: *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977).

particular to firm sources (gradually in the course of centuries re-defined with recourse to scientific categories: cf. Foucault's analysis of *scientia sexualis*). A refutation of the onto-scientific approach can pick up and follow sundry leads, from Marcuse (his utopian delineation of Eros liberated from genital gratification), to Foucault (his genealogy of sexual pleasure), to Fromm (his attempts at vindicating matriarchy as a gesture against the patriarchal distribution of property, hence also of possessive sexual behaviour).⁶ The antagonisms which lie at the foundation from which gratification springs have always been given some ontological framing, as exemplified by the discrepancy, evolved in the modern era, between biological drives and the superstructure of moral evaluation.

This superstructure was in the first place provided by classical ontotheology. Thus the traditional moral lore of, among others, the Church goes far beyond a mere condemnation of adultery. Lust is denounced as a capital sin or vice, capable of playing havoc with the souls of men. None the less, the problem of transformation, for all the rigidity of the classical metaphysics, arises here with utmost intensity. Reason and will, the two higher faculties that make up the human-ness of a person are endangered if an individual stoops to lust and allows the lower instincts, which should naturally obey the guidance of the spirit, sneak out of control and get the upper hand. With the resulting metamorphosis of a reasoning animal into an unthinking and wayward beast the transformation process, re-enacting the original Fall of humanity, reaches completion. The decrepitude wreaked by lust, which consists in upsetting the moral order, can only be restored by the divine intervention of God's Grace. However, also here the beguiling force of the within-natural-limits-totally-acceptable sexual drive ("concupiscence") and its potentially corruptive agency remain perhaps as obscure as the great mystery of Evil itself. Before we refocus on lust, let us run a closer examination of the idea of possession, as well as the accompanying ones of penetration and intrusion.

Possession hardly seems to qualify for an ontological category *sensu stricto*. It is easily thrown together with categories describing "mere belonging" of attributes to its "substance" (the inhering of accidents or adjuncts), and hence seems too volatile to have any ontological weight. On the other hand, it seems to have a strong economic, hence also political and eventually ideological, colouring, a fact which has often meant relegating it to an area of enquiry outside metaphysics proper. To put it briefly, according to classical ontology, existence precedes attribute and relation; thus, one has to be in order to possess (or be possessed by another), and hence the problem of possession does not arise as one affecting the firmness of ontological categorisation. If one insists

⁶ Cf. Erich Fromm, *Love, Sexuality and Matriarchy About Gender* (Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1997).

that possession does raise a problem, one leaps beyond essentialist thinking and substitutes relations or structures for substances. The latter being the case in post-Hegelian, post-Nietzschean, and post-Foucauldian thought, one cannot help noticing affinities between literary dislodgement of possession and the modern substanceless dialectic of appropriation and dispossession. Besides dialectical dynamics they share strong determination to burst the confines of essentialist ontology by shifting focus to larger structures, of which an interpersonal relation such as that of sexuality is an example. Here enters Hegel's dialectic of subordination, Nietzsche's theory of instincts as a handgrip for the will to power, Foucault's idea of sexual pleasure as a product of colliding solidifications of power. The literary engrossment with erotic love, whether denunciatory or apologetic, has conventionally followed in the footsteps of the Platonic paradigm according to which the human condition is ridden by acute deprivation of good, and which makes Eros emerge into the world as if from an orifice of that radical ontological deficiency.

The above-described situation makes for the notorious ambiguity of possession. If placed at the lower ontological shelf of an attribute, possession becomes an elusive relation between two discrete entities; however, if promoted to a higher position of a self-standing category, it transforms into a *definiendum* in search of a complement. The modern ontological promotion of possession turns it into a category which, without losing anything of its central position, is doomed to a never-ending search for a fixed meaning. Luckily, as we have already pointed out, the idiom of possession with respect to Eros is firmly established in numerous cultural contexts, which bestows on it the sense of a signified of near-tangible solidity. A given social practice often accompanies such materialisation: as in the case of the wedding ceremony, where the man and the bride 'take' one another to become each other's exclusive possessions.

In this essay, exemplary literary configurations of the possession idiom, which I have earlier on referred to as "sedimentations," will be used to shed sidelight upon the main train of the argument. We shall move from possession to transformation in search of a sharpened insight into the production of Eros. The analysis will hopefully reveal the dynamics of erotic possession which will in turn furnish prospects of a more comprehensive understanding of whatever falls under the bizarre term "lust."

There is an aspect of possession (after Marcel and Levinas, let us call it phenomenological) which ought not to elude consideration. The sexual act can be seen as the enactment of a person's physical identity (close to Sartre's "incarnation"). Levinas insists that sexuality presupposes nudity, the latter being also a product of an identity-bestowing process, of the creation of a psychophysical totality. One is tempted to state authoritatively that at least a minimum of physical exposure is needed for the erotic experience to get a grip on. This

demand may be twined with the notion of vulnerability, implied in Levinas' concept of the face. Nudity here would mean exposure to another's penetration, with submission and appropriation by another as possible consequences. Scarcity or denial of physical exposure can, in turn, be interpreted as prerequisites for the initiation of an effective appropriation of one person by another. Thus denial of physical exposure also becomes constitutive of the erotic experience, which entangles us in apparent contradictions.

As we can see, a possession-centred argument is apt to make artful U-turns. It is for that reason that the notion of possession becomes coupled with the idea of penetration. Penetration can be and indeed has been redefined with the aim to make it fit for an analysis of the sexual act along the general guidelines of existential ontology, as is the case in Brach-Czajna. In her book titled *Szczeliny bytu* ["The Orifices of Being"],⁷ one finds such an existentially driven phenomenology of the erotic where the central category, penetration (the Polish word *wnikanie*) is forged into a key to the enigma of the human condition. According to Brach-Czajna, one ought not to mistake *wnikanie* for any act of possessive, unauthorised, and forceful appropriation; and that is why she draws a sharp terminological distinction between penetration and intrusion (*wejście*) as a step on the way to establishing the authentic meaning of the sexual act.

In seeing the erotic experience as an act of transcendence, of breaking down the barriers of isolation (in the words of Bataille's narrator, "[we were] very remote from anything we touched, in a world where gestures have no carrying power, like voices in a space that is absolutely soundless"⁸) separating one individual from another, Brach-Czajna is close to Levinas. Her analysis certainly offers a handful of insights which could be helpful in redefining lust as intrusion (*vide* below, the analysis of the *Exorcist* episode) rather than penetration. One has to note, however, that possessiveness is here inextricably allied with vulnerability. The teleological alliance of possessiveness and vulnerable passivity to make up an existential ideal is a repercussion of the Platonic definition of Eros. There is then an aspect of erotic possession that could be dubbed self-sacrificial. The assumption is that the sexual act is capable of transcending the solid opacity of one's body in the hope that such exposure of vulnerable nudity will help to secure a firm hold on the object. This act of de-solidifying sacrifice does not however perform the expected leap into alterity; one inevitably collides with the impenetrable facade of another's body.

Since, according to Brach-Czajna, penetration implies a continuing search for crevices, openings in the unwelcoming texture of another's body, the distinction between penetration and intrusion becomes vague. Instead, one can see

⁷ Jolanta Brach-Czajna, *Szczeliny bytu* ["Orifices of Being"] (Kraków 1999).

⁸ Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal (Penguin Books, 2001), p. 44.

here yet another tension-building antagonism, one of many that make for the goal-oriented dynamics of erotic desire. Levinas states with extra emphasis that nothing drives us farther away from Eros than possession. Ownership, i.e. any actual and stable possession of an object, unlike penetration, institutes a distance between the owner and the object that is owned. Ownership, within this paradigm, precludes gratifying erotic fulfilment for when two people enter the relation of ownership estrangement is inevitable. Yet bondage in the service of sensuality seems to go along with social and political liberation. In the words of Tolstoy's narrator acerbically commenting on female emancipation:

At bottom feminine servitude consists entirely in her assimilation with a means of pleasure. They excite woman, they give her all sorts of rights equal to those of men, but they continue to look upon her as an object of sensual desire, and thus they bring her up from infancy and in public opinion. She is always the humiliated and corrupt serf, and man remains always the debauched Master.⁹

As we shall see more clearly later on, the tension between enslavement and freedom, or between ownership and independence, is one of many antagonistic configurations that spark off an erotic relation. In this particular case, physical and social distance could be needed to liberate mutual gratification, which in its turn is generated by an effort to overcome such estrangement.

Contrary to an optimistic view, it is difficult to determine the nature of physical love in such a way as to foreclose it becoming a tool of reinforcing the barriers of individual confinement. To quote again from Tolstoy:

The impression of this first quarrel was terrible. I say quarrel, but the term is inexact. It was the sudden discovery of the abyss that had been dug between us. Love was exhausted with the satisfaction of sensuality. We stood face to face in our true light, like two egoists trying to procure the greatest possible enjoyment, like two individuals trying to mutually exploit each other.

Whatever social intercourse achieves in the way of removing barriers of estrangement and distance, its physical counterpart secures them back in place.

With respect to Eros, possession and the verbal idioms it churns out cannot be penned into a restive ontological framework. Erotic possession is a thing in motion, purposefully, if madly, chasing its goals, as we have seen. Hence no ontological pigeonhole is ever able to contain it entirely. The frantic and ultimately futile nature of penetration was alluded to by Marcuse, for whom genital gratification was a mode of alienation: "The existing liberties and the

⁹ Count Leo Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, online edition by the Gutenberg Project at www.promo.net/pg/. All quotes from Tolstoy's story are from this source.

existing gratifications – writes Marcuse in his *Eros and Civilization* – are tied to the requirements of repression.”¹⁰ Marcuse looks ahead to the day when genital sex will be replaced by a more comprehensive type of gratification involving the entire human body. Contrary to this utopian belief, no spatial extension of the field of sensation can radically solve the impasse; rather, it will aggravate the sense of isolation, proportionally to the increased demand of fulfilment that our bodies make on the prostrate object.

We have already mentioned the goal-orientedness of desire. As it is clearly stated in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129, gratification derives from keen anticipation rather than actual fulfilment: “Past reason hunted, and no sooner had | Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait.” The futurity of Eros radically precludes the firm grasp one would like to have on things. Levinas states this very clearly, which, regrettably, does not stop him playing down erotic teleology. For Freud, however, “being is striving for pleasure” (as paraphrased by Marcuse). Or more radically: pleasure, which *is* being, is striving for pleasure. Anticipated pleasure contains the seeds of gratification, and lust, a thing in the making, forever fails to congeal into a full-fledged entity. Little wonder that this fact condemned sexual gratification to a subterranean existence of an ontological anathema. In other words, erotic transformation, being the ecstatic coming out of one’s shell, is destined to remain incomplete. Hence lust can only be an untiring pursuit of a mirage, an “unreasonable project,” inasmuch as it entails an admission of defeat already at the starting point. At the same time, lust does upset the salutary balance between pleasure principle and reality principle, between the entropic expenditure of energy and its possible justification. To resort once more to Shakespeare’s words, lust is “Mad in pursuit, and in possession so | Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.” The insanity of lust consists in the fact that the pursuits it initiates never terminate in any effective appropriation of the object. Lust forever leans into the future, a future that lustful pursuits themselves misconstrue into a stagnant present: “La, tout n’est qu’ordre et beaute’ | Luxe, calme, et volupte.” – “There all is order and beauty / Luxury, calm, and sensuousness.” (Baudelaire quoted by Marcuse).

To return to the idea of penetration, if gratification partly consists in surrendering the opacity of one’s body by making it an object of possible exploration, then this act inaugurates a bountiful reciprocity that all too soon re-solidifies the participating subject. The resulting object-like passivity is a signal of denial which precludes gratifying participation. Let us conclude, as we proceed to discuss the next subject: the possessiveness of Eros, which makes up a central facet of lust according to what we have said, would make little sense if the idea of transformation did not bring it into higher relief.

¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros And Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), p. 92.

It should have begun to transpire from the forerunning overview of some ontological vagaries it unleashes that an analysis of Eros, and let alone that of lust, entails an examination of its constitution within a larger cultural context. Any variation in the sense-generating social mechanism can affect the idea of lust ever so totally, perhaps even to a point where its meaning becomes dim and starts to vanish altogether. Nowadays, in the wake of the "sexual revolution," lust as a notion seems not to carry any specific content at all. As we shall see, however, an internment of lust would be premature. Domesticated sexuality would exclude that specific kind of gratifying sensation which arises from the breaking of taboos (one of which could be, as we have seen, property as the foundation of social relations). As long as there are taboos to break any such attempt at laying "old lust" to rest must needs prove futile. Or, which is perhaps a metaphor better tuned to the voice of our times, the forever-transmogrifying lust is on the prowl searching for new hunting grounds. The following conversation between two of David Lodge's sex-bedevelled characters glibly delineates this impasse:

Polly herself, who had been an early apostle of the sexual revolution, was beginning to wonder whether things hadn't gone too far. She had of course been happily doing *n* things with Jeremy for years, but when he showed signs of wanting to do them with *n* partners, she jibbed. They received an invitation to a swinging party at a country house owned by a film producer Jeremy knew; he pressed her to go, and sulked when she refused. Anxiously she strove to show more gusto in their lovemaking, proposing games and variations that she knew he liked, though she herself found them a little tedious, bondage and dressing up in kinky clothes and acting out little scenarios – The Massage Parlour, The Call Girl, and Blue Lagoon. These efforts diverted Jeremy for a while, but eventually he began pressing her again about going to swinging parties.

"Why do you want to go?" she said.

"I'm just curious."

"You want to have another woman." He shrugged.

"All right, perhaps I do. But I don't want to do it behind your back."

"Why do you want to? Don't we have fun in bed?"

"Of course we do, darling. But let's face it, we've been right through the book together, there's nothing new we can do, just the two of us. It's time to introduce another element. You know, sometimes when we're fucking, my mind wanders completely off the subject, [...] That worries me. And you needn't look at me like that. It's nothing personal. It's the nature of the beast."

"Beast is the word." Polly felt a cold dread at her heart. Was it possible that the flame of sex could be kept burning only by the breaking of more taboos? After group sex and orgies, what then? Rubber fetishism? Fladge? Child porn? Snuff movies?

"Where does it end?" she said.

“It ends with old age,” said Jeremy. “Impotence. Death. But I don’t intend to give in until I absolutely have to.”¹¹

A similar predicament, let us note, is retraced in Roman Polanski’s film *Bitter Moon* of 1992, and the fact that lust continues to make popular movies also testifies to its vivacity and will have to be addressed separately.

That an Eros-focused discourse involves transformation is suggested by the multiple tensions that pull at it from different directions. Lust-building tensions obtain between pairs of antithetic, conflicting qualities, and we have already looked upon those of union vs. estrangement, and liberty vs. bondage. However, there are others: sacred/profane, pure/defiled, feral/human, spiritual/physical. To these could be added, if one disentangles the knots of desire with Bataille, boredom and inaction vs. ferocious expenditure of energy. Further still, here too belongs the conflict that we have touched upon when talking about penetration, that between inside and outside, between the inner and the outer, etc. in all possible shades of meaning. No matter how doggedly carried out, attempts at minimising the pull of the minus pole of each antithesis always leave an ontological gap between the two dialectically joined qualities. If one takes into account the temporal dynamics of desire, they are poles between which desire and lust are played out. Thus erotic desire, especially with regard to the teleological aspect (the goal-orientedness or single-minded pursuit of gratification) implies transformation. Perhaps it is better to put it like this: transformation makes up the dynamics of desire. A further implication of the above is the ontological ambiguity of the human being.

It is now time to home in closer on the subject of this essay. The standard denunciation of lust has partly been presented: lust is conceived as stray (rampant, runaway, immoderate; “inordinate” as theological tracts have it) hunger for carnal pleasure, for sexual gratification, for the satisfaction of the flesh. This may sound archaic in the era of sexual liberation yet for the time being we can ignore this tinge of antiquity. The inherited disapproval harbours an anxiety over instability that unsettles the very kernel of an ontological fixation of sexuality. Anxiety over lust is in its depth a sense of uneasiness about the threat of a radical transformation that the human person repeatedly proves to be capable of. In short, this anxiety is at heart trepidation caused by man’s protean mode of being. If capable of lust – the argument goes – that is to say: of conduct that makes man “ecstatically” go over the confines of reason-endowed humanity, the protean mode of being unmarks the conventional and arbitrary character of ontological-ethical frames imposed on his existence. Lust makes the metaphysical “substance” of man open up inside to expose the horror of vacuous indeterminateness.

¹¹ David Lodge, *How Far Can You Go?* (Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 156–157.

If it is true to say that, paraphrasing Foucault, sexual gratification (hence also lust!) is a product of a certain configuration of power, then no train of “sober reasoning” will prove impartially that carnal pleasure is something to abstain from. Let us look at one or two examples characteristic of the “objectivist” approach. Sexuality refers generically to the sphere of activity of a living organism that ensures the biological preservation of its species. This definition however shuns any specifically human involvement (constitutive of eroticism). The traditional biological-moral harness put on the sexual act, i.e. regarding it as justified only if conducive to the propagation of the human species, institutes a divide between the function and the accompanying sensual gratification; obscurity envelops the connection between these two, or perhaps one is missing altogether. Is gratification secondary to biological function? Does gratification derive from the fact that a creature endowed with reason, merely on account of sensible judgment, espouses the procreative function of sex? Or alternatively: Does pleasure stand alone as something self-substantial, something that claims recognition in virtue of its unique properties? That the latter seems to be the case has always been the hope of libertines and voluptuaries, and the terror of moralists.

The denunciation of lust on the principle that the sexual act should not be divorced from the procreation function hurtfully rebounds on its proponent: it effectively denounces the order of Nature itself for having made such dissociation at all possible. If sensual pleasure and propagation of the species are “naturally” separable and different, then yoking them forcefully together can only sound uselessly autocratic.

The procreation principle fails a second time, namely in branding lust as socially destructive. According to another conception similar to the previous one, lust is a monster on the loose, guilty of demolishing serene and steady relationships. Shakespeare in his lust-defaming sonnet condemns its excesses but also calls it “perjured,” which points to the potentially fornicating, adulterous drives dormant in human sexuality. One of the most ferocious indictments is found in Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata*, where time after time narration collapses under the weight of principled exposure of vice.

If we turn to inner experience, i.e. if we adopt Bataille’s method of approaching the erotic, we soon discover that no awareness, no matter how acute, of the procreative goal of sex is able to engender the intense sense of gratification that comes with the sexual act. Again, it seems to lie in Nature’s bounty (or bane?) to have allowed for sensation of supreme intensity (one thinks of Simone’s orgasms being compared to “long-lasting spasms [of the savages], with all parts of the body in violent release, and they go whirling willy-nilly, flailing their arms about wildly, shaking their bellies, necks, and chests, and chortling and gulping horribly”¹²) coupled with an ostensible lack of an exter-

¹² Bataille, *Story*, p. 46.

nal purpose or justification that would lie outside the actual performance of the act. Is the natural man “lustful” by a decree of Nature, pleasure transcending any conceivable purpose? To give a literary illustration of the shabby nature of the naturalist attitude, let us quote from the tirade of Tolstoy’s inflamed narrator:

“The felicities of the honeymoon do not exist. On the contrary, it is a period of uneasiness, of shame, of pity, and, above all, of ennui – of ferocious ennui. It is something like the feeling of a youth when he is beginning to smoke. He desires to vomit; he drivels, and swallows his drivel, pretending to enjoy this little amusement. The vice of marriage” [...]

“What! Vice?” I said. “But you are talking of one of the most natural things.” “Natural!” said he. “Natural! No, I consider on the contrary that it is against nature, and it is I, a perverted man, who have reached this conviction. What would it be, then, if I had not known corruption? To a young girl, to every unperverted young girl, it is an act extremely unnatural, just as it is to children. My sister married, when very young, a man twice her own age, and who was utterly corrupt. I remember how astonished we were the night of her wedding, when, pale and covered with tears, she fled from her husband, her whole body trembling, saying that for nothing in the world would she tell what he wanted of her.

“You say natural? It is natural to eat; that is a pleasant, agreeable function, which no one is ashamed to perform from the time of his birth.

From our considerations, lust indeed emerges as utterly unbridled, devoid of a naturalist justification, adrift, self-contained and self-seeking, a for-itself and an in-itself at the same time.

Here also lie some of the reasons why a philosophy of pleasure, thus also of sexual gratification, is not forthcoming. To be sure, there has always reigned a peculiar dearth of knowledge in this department, which has not been radically overcome to this day. Marxist-Freudian social critique, for instance, maintains that the restrictive and alienating impact that the ethos of communal labour has on human instincts initiates the rule of reality principle over pleasure principle. For Marcuse, ontological transformation also becomes an issue, as he inquires: “Is the conflict between pleasure principle and reality principle irreconcilable to such a degree that it necessitates the repressive transformation of man’s instinctual structure?” Yet it seems to me that on the whole this approach tends to dilute sexual gratification into a pitifully slippery category as ethereal as – why search any further? – happiness. Liberated thus, gratification easily turns into a political slogan before being tested for solidity in the crucible of philosophical debate. This puzzling semantic volatility in a roundabout manner confirms Foucault’s suspicion that gratification has been a by-product of the transmission of power. On the other hand, pleasure in general and sexual gratification in particular seem to stand aloof among other simple

phenomenal qualities and hence to defy breaking down into elementary components or deducing from more fundamental ones. It certainly puzzles us if compared with other sensations, such as that of satiety after a meal or a surge of vital forces after taking a nap. Here the fulfilment of a function does not generate a specific kind of sensation, satisfaction deriving largely from the removal of discomfort. This, interestingly, does not mean that eating cannot be abused and morally addle into gluttony. To sum up and illustrate: When a Freud-inspired Marxist embraces the possibility of "transformed libido beyond the institutions of the performance principle," there is no guarantee that such liberating transformations will generate anything even vaguely reminiscent of pleasure.

The recognition of the fickleness of sexual gratification within an "objective" (biological, physiological, etc.) framework, of its dependence on a particular disposition of negative and positive qualities and values, makes room for other discourses, such as Bataille's insistence on phenomenal affinity between religious and erotic experiences. Eros, regarded as a cultural product, owes its objective lodging to a specific cultural process. In short, to resort once more to Foucault's genealogy, one ought to say that bio-physiology of sexuality is doomed to remain a shaky endeavour, being little more than an after-product of the more basic cultural production of Eros. Let us illustrate this on a rather disturbing example, an episode taken out of William P. Blatty's *Exorcist*.¹³

The passage of the book that I would like to refer to come at the end of the second part of "the most famous novel of Satanism and possession ever written" (as the cover boldly announces) which records the story of demonic possession of a teenage girl called Regan. The shocking scene, rather faithfully adapted for the screen, features the possessed teenager masturbating with a crucifix to the horror of her anguished mother, whom the incarnated demon tries to force to participate in the act. The book itself would be of little interest for our analysis, being in fact yet another weary bead on the long string of *Dracula*-like, tedious works of fiction each seeking to outdo its predecessor with the help of outrageous episodes of the kind mentioned; in *Dracula*, defloration by a personified profanity has also been considered ideal for perpetuation on film. It would not then have any title to extensive analysis if it were not for the fact that in its own queer way it summons the ideas we are discussing and fashions them into yet another sedimentation of the Eros-possession-transformation archetype. However, even a cursory view of the said passage of *The Exorcist* will expose its double-layered structure and add an extra edge to the assumption of the culturally-determined nature of Eros.

¹³ The passage devoted to *The Exorcist* has been inspired by the discussion that followed the delivery of my paper at the 2000 conference in Szczyrk, and especially by the problems raised by my university colleague Katarzyna Ancuta, to whom I hereby extend my gratitude.

Possession and transformation both play their part here, perhaps even too obtrusively. An element we have ignored in our analysis of erotic transformation, as well as in the criticism of the conventional denunciation of lust, is “the fear of the automaton.” Lust in action is the human organism set off to pursue its singular goals. The body changes into an automaton that has outmanoeuvred the surveillance of the reason and the will, and thus reduced the person to a passive observer: “Regan now, eyes wide and staring, flinching from the rush of some hideous finality, mouth agape shrieking at the dread of some ending. Then abruptly the demonic face once more possessed her, now filled her, the room choking suddenly with a stench in the nostrils, with an icy cold that seeped from the walls as the rappings ended and Regan’s piercing cry of terror turned to a guttural, yelping laugh of malevolent spite and rage triumphant while she thrust down the crucifix into her vagina and began to masturbate ferociously, roaring in that deep, coarse, deafening voice, ‘Now you’re *mine*, now you’re *mine*, you stinking cow!’”¹⁴

I have to ask the reader’s forgiveness once more, but there seems to be an analogy between religious ecstasy, analysed by Bataille in *Eroticism*, and the demonic rape-masturbation incident in *The Exorcist*. In both cases, the profane, the saint’s body in the former, undergoes penetration by the sacred. The results, however, are different; sanctification in the case of St. Theresa, profanation in the case of the defiled victim of possession. Generally, Bataille’s concept of eroticism falls very near the traditional denunciation of lust. He insists on restricting the term to those uniquely human acts where pleasure is derived from the breaking of taboos or moral boundaries laid out by culture. At the same time, Bataille takes recourse to the animal element in order to make sense of transgression: transgression implies and involves transformation or swings vehemently between the extremes of what’s regarded as human and what as subhuman: “A bull’s orgasm is not more powerful than the one that wrenched through our loins to tear us to shreds [...]” (*Story of the Eye*); “in an instantaneous flash her expression and features were hideously transmuted into those of the feral, demonic personality that has appeared in the course of hypnosis” (*The Exorcist*). In its sweeping defiance of all boundaries, lustful transgression sucks in all and reigns absolute: “My kind of debauchery soils not only my body and my thoughts, but also anything I may conceive in its course, that is to say, the vast starry universe, which merely serves as a backdrop.”¹⁵

The satanic rape episode conforms to this profile of lustful Eros (or should we rather call it *mania*?). As shown above, it meets the transformation condition of lust: an illusory heaven leading – as in Shakespeare’s sonnet – misguided men to hell, lust is always ungodly. It hurls damnation on the perpetrator transform-

¹⁴ William P. Blatty, *The Exorcist* (London: Corgi Books, 1993), p. 183.

¹⁵ Bataille, *Story*, 42.

ing him into a demon. This process however is never complete. Due to the constitutive antagonism, the perpetrator/victim is always afoot, suspended between angelic purity and devilish tarnish. Debauchery increases in proportion to the distance between the poles of the antagonism, hence Bataille's "angelic" Simone is also capable of acts of utmost obscenity. No erotic possession is ever consummate. Lust is never at rest; it is bound to remain a tug-of-war. Can we then finally try to answer what seems to be the basic question: Where is lust found in the *Exorcist* episode? Or, who is guilty of it? In a sense the satanic intent is beyond blame for the possessor is already damned past redemption and turns to wantonness and sacrilege in order to further solidify and multiply his damnation. All this makes us realise that lust comes into being as an in-between thing, suspended as it is between two extremes, innocence and wickedness being two of many pairs, for ever oscillating between them.

As for possession, it fits perfectly the profile of lust as oscillation. Death and entropy are posited as the ultimate goal, yet at the same time one that is infinitely elusive. The mission of taking-possession-of is never completed:

"Oh, please! Oh, no, *please!*" she was shrieking as her hands brought the crucifix closer; as she seemed to be straining to push it away.

"You'll do as I *tell* you, filth! You'll do it!"

The threatening bellow, the words, came from *Regan*, her voice coarse and guttural, bristling with venom, while in an instantaneous flash her expression and features were hideously transmuted into those of the feral, demonic personality that had appeared in the course of hypnosis. And now faces and voices, as Chris watched stunned, interchanged with rapidity: "*No!*"

"You'll do it!"

"*Please!*"

"You *will*, you bitch, or I'll kill you!"

"*Please!*"¹⁶

Any actual possession such as that we claim of our bodies, transforms the sexual act into an autoerotic feat being an endless, futile pursuit of alterity within a barren, totally appropriated area where the blissful sting of unpredictability has been removed. And this is perhaps the Hell wherein *Regan's* demon is hurled to languish if its are to typify acts driven by self-condemning lust.

And further, the idea of sacrilegious defloration can be reapplied to a deeper layer of meaning. Namely one can and should perceive the book, the film etc. as a specific cultural product. To do that we have to broaden the area of critical appreciation and take into account the realities that surround the product's release into mass, "popular," reception. In *The Exorcist*, into the life of the female protagonist, *Regan's* mother, the rejected *sacrum* storms its way back

¹⁶ Blatty, *The Exorcist*, 182.

uninvited through the kitchen door of "superstition" to unsettle her secular complacency. This is however also the meaning of the outrage that screams at us from the pages. The antagonism which emanates erotic tension here holds between the distant poles of the profane and the sacred, poles which, no matter how radically separated, continue to attract one another with all the vehement potency of opposite electric charges. The mock-scientific and clinical approach to demonic possession that dominates the first two parts of the book is a means to lure a sceptic into a situation which later vents at him the suppressed energies, the "canned heat" of "superstitions." The result is the shattering of a mother's dreams of her daughter's smooth sexual initiation. To achieve a wider critical view, one has to advance historically with Horkheimer and Adorno from culture to culture industry and from sexual gratification to mass entertainment, thus from the "good old" anathema of lust to more recent breeds of psychological and socio-technical manipulation. Seen in this light, *The Exorcist*, novel and film, brings to mind the following observation from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "The enjoyment of the violence suffered by the movie character turns into violence against the spectator."¹⁷ Thus the "real" rape (masturbation?) occurs due to the violation that the fiction inflicts on the mind of the reader/spectator, reduced, along with the girl's helpless mother, to the passivity of an observer assailed by goings-on which strike both of them dumb. Why then, does the reader find it impossible to chuck the "electrifying bestseller" in the trash?

Along the itinerary we have chosen for this analysis we have stopped by but a few out of a profusion of landmarks: Plato's transcendental idealism, Shakespeare's poetic alarm, Tolstoy's acerbic ascetism, Bataille's rampant abandon, Marcuse's Freudian eschatology. Having now travelled so far, we still face the lingering problem: Has lust been exorcised out of existence with the advent of our allegedly unprejudiced times? Shall we profit from the clues that have presented themselves? Shall we propose a redefinition of the sexual revolution as liberation into transformed, lust-free pleasure or into transformed lust? Would any progress towards a reconciling conquest of culturally-embedded antitheses, if at all feasible, attenuate to a zero point the existing moral and social tensions and the accompanying existential anxieties. This seems far from being the case. Let a very pedestrian as well as symptomatic example suffice: the world wide publicity of the Oval Office scandal, perhaps to the same extent as the purported acts themselves, is to be treated as a sign of the changing times on a truly global scale. Not allowing us to make hasty predictions as to the future transformations of lust, it shows, along with other symptoms we have looked at, that the afflicted mind is well aflame searching the surviving sanctuaries for penetration, intrusion and violation.

¹⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1995), pp. 138–139.