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Preface: The Birth of Aphrodite

1.

The sea is not a long way from love and its goddess, as if the energy of the erotic was nourished by the force of the aquatic. In Hesiod, the story of love and its divinity, Aphrodite, is inseparable not only from the “restless, white-capped sea”,¹ but it is also clearly emphasized that the originary location of love has nothing to do with the land: what is “thrown” into the sea is cast, the poet maintains, from the sky “clear of mainland”. Love is born out of “something” which has been thrown into the open sea the movement of which brings it closer to the land (“Her first approach to land was near holy Kythera”). Out of the sea towards the land is a direction taken by the erotic undertaken under the auspices of heavenly violence. Vico with his characteristic sense of etymology and language notes this combination of elements which constitutes the erotic: “From the whistle of the lightning must also have come the Latin *cel*, one of the monosyllables of Ausonius, pronounced however with the Spanish cedilla (c), which is required to give point to Ausonius’s own jesting line about Venus: *Nata salo, suscepta solo, patre edita caelo*, ‘Born of the sea, adopted by the soil, raised by her father to the sky’.”²

2.

What finds its way into the sea is by no means unimportant not only because it will produce a body of the goddess of love but also because it used to belong to somebody else’s body. *Before love is formed, another body is de-formed and*

¹ Hesiod, *Works and Days; Theogony*, tr. S. Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 66. All further quotes from Hesiod will come from this edition.

² G. Vico, *The New Science*, tr. T. Bergin, M. Fisch (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 150.

mutilated; Boticelli does not even allude to the scene of the primal violence in which the birth of Venus is irrevocably rooted. Kronos, in an act of the Catilinarian conspiracy in which he gets entangled by his mother, murders with “the fiendishly long and jagged sickle” his father Ouranos (could the whistling Vico hears in Zeus’ lightning also be a sound of a sickle cutting through the air?), and the mysterious “something” which is tossed into the sea “clear of the mainland” are the genitals of the father. The erotic is thus profoundly involved in the scene of the fundamental disobedience and utmost rebellion against the father. The erotic and the torturous have a common genesis. “I go as far as to believe that. . . the world of death is at the base of erotism. The feeling of sin is connected in lucid consciousness to the idea of death, and in the same manner the feeling of sin is connected with pleasure.”³

3.

The castration of Ouranos is not, however, an act of blind violence. In the scheme of events it is prepared at least by one important circumstance: Kronos hates his father because of his double role in the family. On the one hand, Ouranos is a parent, a most productive originator whom Kronos refers to as “lecherous”. On the other hand, however, Ouranos wants to thwart the natural cycle of reproduction by reversing its direction – the children have been fathered, but they are forced, in the act of double violence – against the mother and the children, to regress towards the maternal womb as soon as they are born. Kronos rebels against the monstrosity of the never ending artificial pregnancy and wandering along the alimentary and uterine canals of the maternal labyrinth. In Hesiod’s version “Ouranos used to stuff all of his children/ Back into a hollow of Earth soon as they were born,/ Keeping them from the light, an awful thing to do. . .”. Kronos sets out to liberate the mother from her abominable and nefarious pregnancy, to finalize the process of child-bearing, and thus to, as if, become himself a mother figure, a great liberator, one who sets children, alive but not quite living, suspended half way between death and life, free from the cave of the maternal body. “This cave is grave; this womb is tomb. We are not yet born: we are dead. The souls of children not yet born are the souls of ancestors dead.”⁴ Cioran refers to a pregnant woman as to a “corpse-bearer”: “I was alone in that cemetery overlooking the village when a pregnant woman came in. I left at once, in order not to look at this corpse bearer at close range, nor to ruminate upon the contrast between the aggressive womb and the time-worn tombs – between a false promise and the end of all promises.”⁵ The erotic speaks of this vicinity between desire and death, which is closed for what is merely seductive – of the fact that the womb (and the sea as its form) is also a cave of death where the penis and child die and are buried.

³ G. Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice”, tr. J. Strauss, *Yale French Studies*, No. 78 (1990), p. 223.

⁴ N. O. Brown, *Love’s Body* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 42.

⁵ E. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, tr. R. Howard (New York: Seaver Book, 1976), p. 151.

4.

Venus is born from the genitals of the father cut off by the son and tossed into the sea which, being the female element, prompts us that Venus is a product of a specific sexual union in which a dis-member-ed male body joins the formlessness, chaos, the *chora* of the female. Hesiod: "The genitalia themselves, freshly cut with flint, were thrown/ Clear of the mainland into the restless, white-capped sea,/ Where they floated a long time. A white foam from the god-flesh/ Collected around them, and in that foam a maiden developed/ And grew. . . ." But the birth of Aphrodite, despite its mildness well caught both by Boticelli in his flowery figures and by Hesiod in whose text "Tender grass sprouted up under her slender feet," repeats the scene of the primeval violence: if Kronos wants to liberate the mother from the monstrous pregnancy of the children pushed again and again back inside her womb, if he wants to free her from the torture of the penis ("The symbolic equation, penis = child"⁶), then Aphrodite rising in Boticelli's painting out of an open shell (itself a symbol of the female sex organ) is nothing else but a reconstitution of the penis previously cut off by Kronos's "jagged sickle": "The woman is a penis. 'The symbolic equation, Girl = Phallus'. Aphrodite, the personification of femininity, is just a penis, a penis cut off and tossed into the sea; the penis which Father Sky lost in intercourse with Mother Earth."⁷

5.

One should not forget the shell which not only speaks on behalf of the feminine sexuality and its dangers ("crab woman with immense claws, or a giant bivalvular mollusk, clam, which when opened resembles the female genital organ, and which shuts to devour"⁸) but also reintroduces the motif of the cave. Aphrodite rising out of the open shell signifies the opening Kronos wanted to achieve for his mother and her children – to bring them out of the cave of her womb and to liberate her from the burden of the child/penis ("The child is hollowing out a cave for himself inside his mother's body"⁹). What Blake describes in *Milton* as "a cavernous Earth of labyrinthine intricacy"¹⁰ is nothing else but the body of Mother Earth from which we must emerge in the trauma of birth which is synonymous with the trauma of, at least, temporary blinding. Do not let us forget that Hesiod qualifies as an "awful thing to do" the act of condemning children to the darkness of the womb, and thus Aphrodite who results from the process of castration and reconstitution of the penis must remain in a vital relationship with light. *The erotic, she will become the goddess of, is then a desire to see, which however*

⁶ N. O. Brown, *Love's Body*, p. 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰ W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. G. Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 498.

must remain linked with a temporary blindness caused by a sudden reemergence unto light. When we speak about the blindness of love, we remember this necessary lack of vision which constitutes the wisdom of desire, a radical dim-sightedness which does not deprive one of vision and knowledge but, on the contrary, makes them possible. Love tactics is out of necessity what Derrida describes as *tactique aveugle*, “a strategy without finality”.¹¹ The opened shell speaks of the liberation from the closed cave (a story parallel to the Platonic tale told in *The Republic*) of the blocked vision, of the ophthalmological imperfections of, for instance, iridization and glaucoma, and also of the eye which opens due to the recognition of the fact that it is not enough to merely “see”, but that seeing implies a necessary suspension of visual perception, a blindness which introduces man into a new vision. To speak about the erotic must involve then a discussion of the eye and its momentary and ineluctable blindness.

6.

The opening of the shell is not only a renewal of the eye which sees through its blindness but also of the ear (Blake in “Milton”: “The Ear a little shell, in small volutions shutting out/ All melodies & comprehending only Discord and Harmony”¹²). The erotic which, as we have seen in Hesiod’s tale, is always twisted together with suffering and pain, sketches a certain trajectory of human actions which leads man away from the principles of what Blake calls “Moral Law”. *The specificity of the erotic and its divinity seems to lie in their rejection of being contained in one scenario and one proper name and, as we shall see, in the denial of prayer as the only appropriate form of addressing God.* Hesiod senses this and stresses the semantic variety and indeterminateness of Aphrodite which despite one generic name always assumes names derived either from a specific geographic location (the erotic thwarts the effort towards generalization, there can be no general science of the erotic which is always “local”) or from the amorous anatomy in which she delights (the reluctance of the erotic towards the general is so powerful that it even obliterates the universality of the body and speaks on behalf of its parts): “Aphrodite is her name in speech human and divine, since it was in foam/ She was nourished. But she also called Kythereia since/ She reached Kythera, and Kyprogenes because she was born/ On the surf-line of Kypros, and Philomedes because she loves/ The organs of sex, from which she made her epiphany.” *Deconstruction as an erotic activity*: “At least help me so that death comes to us only from us. Do not give in to generality.”¹³

¹¹ J. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, tr. D. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 135.

¹² W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 484.

¹³ J. Derrida, *The Post Card. From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, tr. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 118.

7.

The “epiphany” (i.e. the disclosure, incarnation, light) of the erotic thus seemingly takes place in a specialized anatomic organ (“the organs of sex”), but we should not believe that Aphrodite is the goddess of sexuality limited merely to the exchange of functions of specific physiological instruments. *Sexuality in the erotic is not synonymous with genitality* (one could ask here whether or not this is precisely what distinguishes the erotic from the pornographic, and to what extent Kronos’s “jagged sickle” pruning his father’s genitals is a suggestion that the erotic does not confine itself to the genital – a hint already present in Hesiod reference to Ouranos as “lecherous” – but overcomes the determinateness of anatomic functions). The “epiphany” stems from the “organs of sex”, but at same time it relates to the organs of seeing and hearing. *The tale of the erotic narrates the project of man’s fundamental disobedience and releasement from the confines of the autocratic principle* (Blake’s “One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression”¹⁴) *which regulates man’s behaviour by uniform rules transferrable from one circumstance to another.*

To be consistent, the erotic as the untransferrability and particularization of ethical principles must then transgress against the limitations of sexuality to the “organs of sex”. In other words, the erotic and Aphrodite as its goddess spell the ethics of radical contextuality; the erotic is man’s utmost responsibility for his/her actions carried not on behalf of the abstract, general principle but in the name of each minute, particularized situation.

The terminology is evidently Blakean. Starting from the conviction that “Every Man’s Wisdom is peculiar to his own Individuality”, Blake consistently develops a theory which links the erotic with (a) the attack upon the “Moral Virtue”, (b) the postulate of a necessary refashioning of perception through the opening of the “shell” of sense organs, and (c) a critique of virginity which allows Blake to emphasize that the erotic is not limited to the sexual. Thus we read in “Milton”:
 “The Eye of Man a little narrow orb, clos’d up & dark,/ Scarcely beholding the great light, conversing with the Void;/ The Ear a little shell, in small volutions shutting out/ All melodies & comprehending only Discord and Harmony;/ The Tongue a little moisture fills, a little food it cloys,/ A little sound it utters & its cries are faintly heard,/ Then brings forth Moral Virtue the cruel Virgin of Babylon.”¹⁵

The erotic, the nakedness of Venus, is implicated in what goes beyond the sexual and what can be understood as the civil beauty or *honestas* and what is representable in the image of androgyne: “that civil beauty that was possessed by Apollo, Bacchus, Ganymede, Bellerophon, Theseus, and other heroes, and perhaps on their account Venus was imagined as male”.¹⁶ This could also be one

¹⁴ W. Blake, “Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, in W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 158.

¹⁵ W. Blake, *Milton*, in W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 484.

¹⁶ G. Vico, *The New Science*, p. 203.

of Venus's tricks, and we should not forget that Sappho refers to Aphrodite as to a "weaver of tricks" which allows for a connection between the goddess and Hermes; Aphrodite is a divinity which tends a trick of understanding, and understanding as a trick and an act of thievery. As Norman O. Brown instructs us, "A lover might invoke Aphrodite 'weaver of tricks' or Hermes the Trickster. In fact, Hermes and Aphrodite were frequently associated in ritual, and even combined in a figure of Hermaphroditus."¹⁷

8.

With this we return to the motif of the cave. A liberation from the tyranny of the genital father bespeaks of a rejection of the prevalence of the sexual and seductive (the two form an inseparable pair) over the erotic; in the sphere of the erotic one can detect male mothers and vaginal fathers. Kronos kills his father in order to bring to life, to give birth to, to "mother" his brothers and sisters; Aphrodite, who originates from the act of castration, rises erect, like *rex erectus*, thus becoming the figure of both attributes of patriarchy: the phallus and royal power ("His Royal Highness; his whole body a penis, erect; his whole person a sublimation of a male member. . ."¹⁸). Aphrodite wants to open the sphere in which we could be properly born, emerge from the cave, and where the cave, while certainly alluding to the female topography of sex, would not dominate the scene; in a word, *Aphrodite belongs to the world where sexuality is not only not limited to the genital, but where its drama takes place even before the sexual*. This is the realm of the erotic, i.e. in Blake's terms – the condition of sexuality in eternity, sexuality liberated from the constraints of the Urizenic "One King, One God, One Law",¹⁹ the sexual union free from the restrictiveness of marriage vows ("In Eternity they neither marry nor are given away in marriage"²⁰). Aphrodite rising into a mild Mediterranean light from the open shell announces the termination of gestation, the escape from a cave, that is to say from war and death. As Blake says of Vala, his goddess of nature: "Why have thou elevated inward. . . / From grotto & cave beneath the Moon, dim region of death/ Where I laid my Plow in the hot noon, where my hot team fed,/ Where implements of War are forged, the Plow to go over the Nations,/ In pain girding me round like a rib of iron in heaven?"²¹

The power of Aphrodite, i.e. of the erotic, as a force which allows sexuality to function in the region before the sexual and the rigid laws regulating its practices become possible does not so much subvert the patriarchal society but goes beyond and *before it*. The erotic is not a deregulating potential of the orgy which

¹⁷ N. O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief. The Evolution of a Myth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1947), p. 14.

¹⁸ N. O. Brown, *Love's Body*, p. 134.

¹⁹ W. Blake, "The First Book of Urizen", in W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 224.

²⁰ W. Blake, "Jerusalem", in W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 660.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 660.

violates all possible laws but a puissance which predates the regulation of the human society. Orgy is subversive precisely because it acts to destroy the moral law, but in order to do it it must constitute itself a certain system, some counter-law, and anti-discipline which obviously implies that the orgy is not a manifestation of anarchic freedom but an actualization of a scenario: "The orgy is organized, distributed, ordered and supervised like a studio sitting; its profitability is of the assembly line."²² Thus the erotic does not have to indulge in the stereotypical and necessary practices of a subversive and illegal power – it does not have to hide and conspire. Just the opposite, it does not recognize the law not because it wants to threaten it, but because it is a vigour which makes law possible and in its dynamism it is not restricted by principles and rules. Hence, Boticelli's Aphrodite looks in an unspecified direction, her hand does not point upwards to indicate the directionality of truth (like in a later painting *Apelles's Slander*), neither does she hold any attributes of the feminine (like a stunning Eve in Jan and Hubert van Eyck's *The Altar of the Mystical Lamb* which, herself sensuous and beautiful, holds up a wrinkled and withered apple which narrates a story diametrically different than that which we are being told by the body).

The erotic of Aphrodite does not need the concealment of the cave and conspiratorial system of transgressive actions like those which developed much later and were directed against the paternalistic principles of the father-God. Nothing is further from the erotic and Aphrodite than the orgiastic and the recondite and arcane. Aphrodite does not represent the mother, but a force which is older than the mother and which can wean us from the motherly domain. "Every relapse to the veneration of the mother, which can only be accomplished sexually, is therefore antisocial and is persecuted with all the horror of the so-called religious fanaticism. But this. . . finally results in the preservation and strengthening of the father-like power for the protection of the social community. . . The best known movement of this kind is the pseudo-messianic period of the 'Schabattianians', about 300 hundred years ago. . . In caves in the neighbourhood of Salonika they organized the wildest orgies for religious purposes. At the beginning of the Sabbath they placed a naked virgin in their midst and likewise naked danced around her. Orgies were substituted for prayer. . . Naturally they were most severely persecuted by the Rabbis."²³

9.

If it is true, as Otto Rank maintains about Plato, that "the cave is not merely 'a womb phantasy', but it gives us a deep insight into the mind of the philosopher, who experienced Eros driving everything onwards as a yearning for the return into the primal state",²⁴ then we must interpret Aphrodite's emergence from the

²² R. Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, tr. R. Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 125.

²³ O. Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (New York: Harper Books, 1973), p. 127.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

foam as the epiphany of the power which precedes law as well as prayer. *The erotic: a prayerless prayer, a lawless law. There can be no law of the erotic, and therefore – since law necessarily must begin with a fact the story of which it is trying to reconstruct and verify – one cannot think of a narrative of the erotic, a coherent tale in which events would be organized along the cause-and-effect pattern.* Language does not seem to be a horizon of the erotic; just the opposite, the prayerless prayer of and to Aphrodite must involve a pulverization of language since one cannot articulately address the goddess who is shown by Boticelli in the human form but also a product of the sea, a pearl contained in a shell like, two hundred years later, mussels and mollusks represented by Dutch masters. Aphrodite lives as a human only to the extent to which she conceals and continues to live the life of what is pre- and non-human; caught in the moment at which she has left her animality (a crustacean kind of being) having metamorphosed into a beautiful feminine body she both carries a memory of that older form (one may wonder whether this remembrance is not to be read in the tales of divine sodomy in which Zeus in the disguise of a bull makes love to Europa, as a swan approaches Leda, not to mention a scandalous narrative about Pasiphae and her bovine amorous adventure; Vico notices carefully that the licentiousness of gods is disruptive even of the very “orderliness” of the orgy in that it defies any limitations and recognizes no laws: “Nor is this unrestrained licentiousness of the gods satisfied by forbidden intercourse with women: Jove burns with wicked love for Ganymede; indeed this lust reaches the point of bestiality and Jove, transformed into a swan, lies with Leda”²⁵) and makes us think about the metamorphoses to come. *One cannot experience the erotic (unlike the seductive) on a merely human level; to know the erotic must imply a desperate knowledge about the constraints and pretences of the articulate discourse.* One prays to Aphrodite in grunts and moanings. “Man certainly began praying long before he knew how to speak, for the pangs he must have suffered upon leaving animality, upon denying it, could not have been endured without grunts and groans, prefigurations, premonitory signs of prayer.”²⁶

10.

The “epiphany” of Aphrodite is then doubly paradoxical. It takes place in the realm of the genitals but evidently does not want to be limited to it; it delineates the divine provenance of the erotic but turns away from the orthodoxy. If one of the senses of the term “epiphany” is a revelation of the Law, we will have to admit that the erotic reveals the Law only to denounce it. In the same way as Kronos (who is indirectly responsible for the birth of Aphrodite) radically conspires and rebels against the patriarchal authority and its Law which eventually turns out to address the notion of property and inheritance (“The dispute between fathers and

²⁵ G. Vico, *The New Science*, p. 43.

²⁶ E. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 169.

sons is over property. In . . . patriarchal system paternal power is a property which is inherited and which consists in having property in one's own children"²⁷), Aphrodite disrupts the traditional order of the feminine: her birth of the sea-foam both confirms and denies the role of the womb, the shell which in Boticelli's masterpiece discloses and carries to a shore her beautiful naked body simultaneously represents the closure of the womb and speaks of its ultimate openness. Kronos wants to explode the narrow sphere of the paternal authority; Aphrodite subverts and expands the "Female Space". Both actions aim at achieving *what is central for the erotic – the problematization of selfhood*.

Blake sees clearly both the male patriarchal oppression of the law ("He [Satan] created Seven Deadly Sins, drawing out his infernal scroll/ Of Moral laws and cruel punishments. . . ." ²⁸) and the limitations of the stereotypical female role developed by the philosophy of the family ("The nature of the Female Space is this: it shrinks the Organs/ Of Life till they become Finite & Itself seems Infinite"²⁹) and attributes both to the operations of the self ("Satan, making to himself Laws from his own identity", "I in my Selfhood am that Satan", "I [Satan] have brought them [laws] from the uppermost innermost recesses of my Eternal Mind"³⁰).

11.

To speak of the erotic is then to proclaim and practice a radical birth which could free man both from the regressive disposition towards the womb of unity without condemning him/her to the confinement of the self. On the one hand, there is Plato and his philosophy where Eros is the force responsible for the striving towards the originary union; on the other hand, a long line of philosophers, from Aristotle through Descartes to Kant, wishes to promulgate a separation between the self and the word. ". . . the neo-Platonists and their successors completely succeeded. . . in realizing that striving for union with their origin which was so poetically formulated in their Founder's philosophy of Eros. As a reaction to it appears modern philosophy which. . . took its point of departure from the discovery of man as a part of Nature and sought intellectually to deny and to abolish his separation from it."³¹ The open shell which carries Aphrodite to the shores of Kypros is then a breaking up of the nostalgic drive towards the one which the erotic radically undermines as well as a cracking of the shell of selfhood: "And the shellfishness of selfishness is the reluctance to be born."³² Boticelli's Aphrodite does not belong either to the sea (she has almost landed on a beach) or to the ground (precisely because of the fact that she has only "almost", i.e. not quite, landed);

²⁷ N. O. Brown, *Love's Body*, p. 6.

²⁸ W. Blake, *Milton*, in W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 489.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 490.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 490, 491, 496.

³¹ O. Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (New York: Harper Book, 1973), p. 177.

³² N. O. Brown, *Love's Body*, p. 44.

suspended between the air and its divine patrons and the land with its protective coat she can display her nakedness which does not result from the rejection of garment but which dates back to before the invention and necessity of clothing and become the goddess of flowers which, however, are not rooted in the soil in the same way as the goddess herself is not rooted in and domesticated by any enclosed space. One should never tire of emphasizing the openness of the shell and of the naked body rising against the light blue sky: this conspicuous ascendance filling our eyes speaks doubly against the conventional images of the feminine. First, because of the innocence of the nakedness in question, nakedness which mocks and transcends the demands of modesty; second, because this radical visibility leaves behind a whole cluster of symbols and images which connect the woman with what is covert and hidden, with the subterranean cave, i.e. with the inauthentic morality of oppression and guilt as well as with the establishment of institutionalized religion. Thus Blake in "Jerusalem" turns to the "Female Will" as to a power which hides "the most evident God in a hidden covert, even/ In the shadows of a Woman & a secluded Holy Place. . . / Hidden among the Dead & mured up from the paths of life".³³ We should also remember Bataille's categorical claim according to which "there is in fact no human pleasure without some irregularity in its circumstances, without the breaking of an interdiction – the simplest, and the most powerful of which, is currently that of nudity".³⁴

Aphrodite and the erotic belong to the realm of the non-human: they always deal with the radical birth to the time before selfhood, i.e. before man ("O to have been born before man!"³⁵). One should remember a unique story of Cupid's origin told by Sir Philip Sidney, a narrative which piles one transgression upon another. First, there is Zeus betraying his wife, Hera, with Io, who is transformed into a cow and guarded by Argus. Then Argus proves his lack of loyalty by assulting Io who gives birth to Cupid: "By Argus got on Io, then a cow / . . . / Mercury kille'd his [Jove's] false sire for this act;/ His dam, a beast, was pardon'd beastly fact." Continuing his tale Sidney gives us a description of Cupid very different from ones which traditionally focus on the boyish beauty of his appearance and recklessness of behaviour; before Cupid is transformed into a fat and harmless putto, he is a Dionysian, sylenian figure combining his role as a trickster ("To lie, to steal, to pry, and to accuse,/ Naught in himself, each other to abuse") with the solemnity of the transgressive wisdom: "Yet bears he still his parents' stately gifts,/ A horned head, cloven feet, and thousand eyes/ Some gazing still, some winking wily shifts,/ With long large ears where never rumour dies./ His horned head doth seem the heaven to spite,/ His cloven foot doth never tread aright."³⁶ When we are thinking the erotic, the non-human, or "formless" is never far away. "'Formless' is pre-

³³ W. Blake, *Jerusalem*, in W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 660.

³⁴ G. Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice", *Yale French Studies*, No. 78 (1990), p. 23.

³⁵ E. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 52.

³⁶ P. Sidney, "Cupid", in *Silver Poets of the 16th Century*, ed. G. Bullett (New York: Everyman, 1966), pp. 245–246.

cisely that which is beyond the limits, which has no term, and which exceeds definition. To give it a meaning would not be to take its meaning seriously, to make the word redundant. . . 'Formless' destabilizes the very idea of definition by refusing. . . to give a finite meaning to the word."³⁷

12.

We will be able to appreciate this anarchic freedom of Boticelli's Aphrodite if we set his painting vis à vis Noel-Nicolas Coypel's 1732 version of the same scene where the goddess is shown also in a conch of a shell, but the whole setting brings us to a very different truth of the divinity. What is ontologically ascetic in Boticelli (Aphrodite as a sheer emergence of the power of the erotic, a force which defies determinations and dichotomies of the mortals; one should also note the almost empty, monotonous background of the painting which resembles Baudrillard's "desert vision"³⁸), in Coypel's work is refashioned in such a manner that the goddess is defined in terms of the ontic entanglement with the mortal world: the shell no longer carries it from the chaos of the night journey towards the ultimate birth but serves merely as an elaborate support (one should particularly note a back part of the shell wrought and carved as carefully as if it were a piece of fashionable furniture) for her body which instead of being Hesiod's "epiphany" of Being and Blake's enlargement of the "Female Space" is already preoccupied with the stereotypical feminine operations of coquetry and flirtation augmented additionally by the frolic of the goddess's entourage of naiads and tritons. In fact, the shell is no longer carried by waves, the goddess does not belong to the realm of elemental ontological creation but instead is provided with all the paraphernalia of the social game of domination and power: the shell is carried, like a sedan chair, by the tritons and naiads who bear all the semblance of servants, the body of the goddess no longer frontally confronts the viewer with the asceticism of nakedness but, partly wrapped, in a white sheet (which itself is an announcement of what will soon become a game of lingerie, of the semi-pornographic theatre of silk brassiere and garter with which the erotic has nothing to do) is already caught in the artfulness of the sexual/seductive diplomacy in which the eye, hair, and jewelry play most important roles. The combination of the denial of fronting and clothing marks a beginning towards the orgiastic and pornographic which will eventually bring about a destruction of the woman and its replacement by a feminine automaton: "Woman is destroyed: she is wrapped up, twisted about, veiled, disguised so as to erase every trace of her anterior features (figure, breasts, sexual organs); a kind of surgical and functional doll is produced, a body *without a front part*. . . , a monstrous bandage, a *thing*."³⁹

³⁷ J. Strauss, "The Inverted Icarus", *Yale French Studies*, No. 78 (1990), p. 116.

³⁸ J. Baudrillard, *America*.

³⁹ R. Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, p. 123.

All three elements (the eye, hair, and jewelry) meet in the triangular space demarcated by the goddess's head, her right shoulder, and left hand. The hair is no longer exposed to the wind as in Boticelli's painting in which the long tresses of Aphrodite play with the gusts of the breath of the two wind gods. Coypel's Venus has already subjected her hair to the elaborate treatment which combines coiffure with adornment: the hair is not only combed and plaited but also kept in order by a string of pearls the other end of which the goddess is holding in her left hand. Jewelry constitutes an important feature of the painting not only because we can see another supply of pearls and precious stones held by a triton in the lower left corner of the canvas but, first of all, because it is jewelry that marks a distinction between the goddess and her entourage. The authority of the erotic is marked by a double sign of power: first, by the dominating placing of Venus carried by her semi-divine servants; second, by the goddess's relationship with property – it is only her body that is embellished with the regalia of chiffon, coiffure, and bijouterie (one should also note that the flowers which in Boticelli are painted in the state of awkward freedom and independence, in Coypel appear as already combined in wreaths or flower lines thus totally subjected to the purposes of human aesthetics). The body of Coypel's Venus has been culturally re-written. What in Boticelli belongs to ontology, in Coypel represents the entanglement of the erotic in economy which turns the former into a mere sexual/seductive stratagem in which the insignia of royal power and property play the essential role. *Cosmology of Boticelli has been replaced by the cosmetology of Coypel* (we have no time to pursue this topic here, but one could certainly write an interesting analysis of the two faces: Boticelli's Venus's natural and tanned with wind and sunshine, and Coypel's goddess's which is an arena of scented soap, powder, rouge, and perfume).

13.

The directionality of the drama displayed in the two works is also radically different. Boticelli represents his goddess in a movement which brings her towards the viewer from the depth of space rather than from the unfathomable chasm of the sea: Aphrodite approaches the shore which is fundamental not only to emphasize the fact that the erotic belongs to the sphere of the ground, i.e. to the realm of the human, but also to point at the boundary character of the experience of the erotic. Aphrodite is where the male (the cut off penis) and female (the womb of the sea) come together and where the sea fronts the land: there can be no true experience of the erotic which would belong to exclusively one of these categories. The erotic names this impossible sphere where one remains always as the "approaching one", as "coming" (one should also hear the sexual echo in this word) to the shore without either returning to the open sea or finally landing in a safe port.

Coypel plays out his version of the drama vertically: the goddess is lifted up (let us note the passive voice which indicates that the work is being done by

somebody else rather than by the divinity herself) and then remains suspended in between the sea and the air. Both spheres however are clearly distant from the shore and therefore banned for the mortals. Venus in Coppel's reading does not involve the necessary openness to and readiness for the other, particularly if the other was to be mortal; rather, she remains locked in the triumph of the divine to which the perishable does not have any access (this unreadiness for the other is also linked with a turning away from Boticelli's Venus's askesis: "Askesis. . . is addressed to the other. . ." ⁴⁰). Coppel's Venus reminds man of his mortality, and it is this awareness which separates man from the erotic and turns the erotic itself unto a path which will lead it closer and closer towards becoming seduction. It is in the realm of the seductive that man must remember his "role", must know his "place" and stick to who he "is" in order to continue the game; the erotic, on the other hand, calls for a radical forgetfulness, for "forgetting oneself" not only in a sense of losing one's constraints and inhibitions but, more importantly, in a sense of not remembering that one has given oneself as a gift to the other. "When man forgets he is mortal, he feels inclined to do great things, and sometimes succeeds. This oblivion, a fruit of excess, is at the same time a cause of his woes." ⁴¹ It is this oblivion which brings us to the problematic of the gift: "For there to be a gift, not only must the donor or donee not perceive or receive the gift as such, have no consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition; he or she must also forget it right away and moreover this forgetting must be so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic categoriality of forgetting." ⁴²

The sea belongs to water deities, the air is filled with puttos who do not even carry their traditional bows and arrows, signals that love does involve the other and is frequently inextricably linked with wounding and suffering: Venus does not belong to the realm, of the shore where the other is dramatically confronted but to the territory of her own power which attracts the other only to repel him in the moment of a supreme reconfirmation of one's own force. This is clearly indicated by the gaze which is a peculiar blend of the narcissistic glance at herself (Venus's eyes are directed towards the pearl string which she holds in her left hand) and the anticipatory look which takes in the value of the embellishment but wants to recognize it as a possible vehicle to be used when an other appears in view. In this space where embellishment plays such an important role, and we will see that soon it will become all, in this space of seduction ("highly seductive spaces where meaning, at these height of luxury, has finally become adornment" ⁴³) a man is involved in a trap of the self, whereas in Boticelli we deal with man's liberation from the shell of self, the "dried shells that the fish have quite forsaken". ⁴⁴

⁴⁰ R. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, tr. R. Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), p. 33.

⁴¹ E. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 165.

⁴² J. Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, tr. P. Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 26.

⁴³ J. Baudrillard, *America*, p. 124.

⁴⁴ W. Blake, "Vala or the Four Zoas", in W. Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 296.

14.

Coytel's Venus, *unlike Boticelli's whose look does not concentrate on the goddess herself or on her vision of the future events but, rather, wanders off towards some nondefinable space as if to say that the other will come when he/she is ready to come, when time allows for the encounter and finds for it its proper measure thus teaching us that the other cannot be anticipated but must arrive only as a gift* (we have no time to develop this important philosophical issue at the moment), *that the other comes only in his/her time which will never remain under my dictate, to repeat – Coytel's Venus fulfills herself in anticipation, in the tantalizing expectancy of the frivolous and seductive.* Boticelli's Aphrodite does not expect anything, her sex is modestly hidden by her hair; she represents the power of the erotic, i.e. of accepting and sheltering what comes, of fronting the world with the look which, like the glance of Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca*, comes from the "absolute eyes that wean/ The pulse of hearts to the sphere's dominant tune"⁴⁵. The anticipation of Coytel's goddess sealed hermetically off in the world of divinities can bring about nothing but alienation which we find in Tennyson's *Mariana* and her refrain, "My life is dreary,/ He cometh not."⁴⁶

If Boticelli's Aphrodite presents the erotic as an open territory of fundamental loneliness which the other enters at a moment which will not be at my discretion or will to determine (unlike in seduction where in the elaborate and well-rehearsed scenario I always try to make the other arrive at "my" time, when and where I will), if then the erotic must signify a certain radical danger (even if we limit ourselves to Plato we will see that there "Eros is the pain wherewith the Demon . . . reclaims the lost Paradise of his pure and original Being",⁴⁷ but the *pain and danger in question are even greater because, as we have been trying to demonstrate, the erotic is precisely the fronting of the fact that no retrieval of the "pure and original Being" is conceivable and yet despite this diagnosis and warning we must try, and this trying is what we call here the erotic*), Coytel's Venus knows the danger of the cosmetics. We should carefully mark the rouge spots on Venus's cheeks, as it is through and in them that the danger of mortality invades the otherwise hermetic world of divinities: "From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century an artificial pink and white face was the fashion. It was produced by the combination of ceruse (the poisonous white lead) and ochre rouge, painted over with egg white or some other lacques to create what would seem to us a grotesquely artificial appearance. Despite the dangers of lead, its use persisted until revolutionary romanticism made it unfashionable."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ D. G. Rossetti, "Astarte Syriaca", in L. Trilling, H. Bloom (eds.), *Victorian Poetry and Prose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), in the section "Victorian Narrative Painting" between pp. 400–401.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

⁴⁷ O. Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, p. 173.

⁴⁸ E. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams. Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p. 108.

15.

And, to close this preface which tries to hint that the erotic is that force which allows us to get to the sur-face, to the pre-face, i.e. to notice the face before it will inevitably be covered up by the cosmetics of the sexual/seductive, let us only very briefly observe a continuation of the trajectory of the development of Aphrodite from Homer through Boticelli to Coypel. The next step is reached when the body does not open itself in its nakedness (and let us add quickly, in its loneliness, or rather in its nakedness being suspended between the sky, sea and earth) allowing the event of the erotic to occur (like in Boticelli and the strange look of his goddess), or when it turns the erotic into the seductive by various techniques of teasing and the gaze which furtively invites and anticipates the other confirming one's own unsharable potential (sexuality as an imposition rather than a gift, like in Coypel's painting), but when the body, always surrounded by other bodies, concentrates upon itself *and simultaneously* looks directly at the other who is no longer anticipated (like in Coypel) but who is already here and yet cannot do anything else but merely observe or worship the body. In the first situation the body is naked and open towards the other, in the second it is (partly) dressed and unavailable, in the third it is undressed and unavailable.

François Boucher's *The Toilet of Venus* painted in the 1740s provides us with an excellent example. First of all, what was already signalled by Coypel's move towards the semiotics of power and embellishment reaches here its ultimate stage: no longer do we deal with the "natural" scene of birth but only with a totally cultured scenario of investiture. The goddess has nothing to do with the sphere of the productivity of becoming; she is already a late comer to a world where one does not concern oneself with the primal violence (Boticelli and Hesiod's story of the castration of Ouranos) but where one indulges in the pleasures of the social stratagems of seduction in which the sphere of the divine is reduced to a mere symbolic representation. This is what differentiates Boucher's painting from Coypel's Venus: whereas in the latter seductivity is inscribed in the world of divinities, the former deals with the licentiousness which is carefully prepared not as a revelation (Hesiod's "epiphany") but as a public spectacle of nakedness. *The erotic demands radical loneliness which results from and which supports a prayerless prayer to the divinities of the elemental forces; the seductive uses the sacred merely as a quotation and stylistic reference (cupids, white doves) and is inevitably linked with the spectacular.* In the realm of seduction the body becomes an actor; first, because it is involved in the spectacle of dress which hides the physical body in order to allow the public to dream about it ("In the capitalist West. . . dress always hints at the secret, hidden body"⁴⁹), second, because the word itself is representable as a performance or, at least, a certain narrative ("'You see me completely naked,' Eugenie says to her professor, 'dissertate on me as much as you want'⁵⁰).

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

⁵⁰ R. Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, p. 159.

The first element is noticeable already in Coypel's work in which Venus is partly covered with a delicate white sheet; the other is emphasized by Boucher in whose painting two puttos are drawing a heavy curtain which could be used either as a backdrop, a *mis-en-scène* for further action or, if need be, as a screen behind which the acting bodies can hide some of their operations.

The drama depicted by Boucher is similar in many ways to the scene painted by Coypel: the same accentuation of property and embellishment, the same architectural details of luxury and wealth with a marked topographical shift (a chariot which Coypel placed in the sky, Boucher appropriately brings to the ground, a richly carved element no longer forms a back of the shell but supports a heavy wooden console, a singular string of pearls has been replaced by a jewelery box, naiadas have transformed into chamber maids). Where the two artists part their ways is the mystery of the gaze. In Coypel we have found the narcissistic-anticipatory look which informed the other about the presence of my body which I myself have found attractive. The relationship between the body and the other remains however unconsummated since the former is locked in the sphere where the mortal other cannot enter. The body is attractive but forbidden. This is an opening through which the seductive slips in and which already rules in Boucher. Unlike Boticelli's *Venus* who look towards some unspecified other without focusing her glance upon herself (*she is, so to speak, absent to herself, forgetful about herself, which is a first step to think of the erotic as of a gift suggested in the mystery of her look which is directed at somebody and yet not at anybody specific as if such a precise address of the gaze would already imply necessity of memory and thus erased the very possibility of the gift to occur*), unlike Coypel's goddess who has seen herself but has not preserved her image as a possible substitution for her own body, as a dream of her which she will allow the other to dream, Boucher's Venus looks at the other and simultaneously offers him her own image.

A double look in Boucher's painting is particularly interesting because it has not been presented to us as a direct eye contact of the body with its mirror reflection (like in Velazquez's *Venus and Amor*), it is not an act either of a reconfirmation of one's beauty or of narcissistic vanity. The image in the mirror is precisely an "image", more a painting than a reflection, it offers a glimpse of Venus's face and upper part of her torso caught as if against her will and decision. The goddess looks at the other not with anticipation, the other has already arrived (it is not a coincidence that the scene is located in a topography which still evokes the shore but simultaneously has nothing to do with Boticelli's primeval shore where the foam of the sea and slime of life are one; the shore has been transformed into a marble-paved bank of a pool or a luxurious bathtub, we have left the scenery of the original baptism to enter the space of cleansing and cleaning of deodorization and sanitation where the body slowly loses its quality (its smell and natural colouring, but does not losing one's smell imply also severing a vital relationship with our own mortality, with our own death working its way through us and leaving us its scent; when Americans indulge in the orgy of deodorants they really want to mislead death and put it off its track. Cioran is right

in his claim that “man gives off a special odor: of all the animals, he alone smells of the corpse”⁵¹) and becomes its own image. The space of dangerous seduction (“We read of voluptuous baths in the dwelling of Circe”⁵²) which in addition turns us back towards the regressive nostalgia of the cave, this time a cave purified, deodorized, sanitized (“Arabian incense used to perfume the grotto of Venus”⁵³). What remains when the body becomes sterile is its image and the relationship with the other comes within the orbit of the economy of absence and substitution: you cannot have my body, even if you have already arrived in its immediate proximity, the only thing you are entitled to is the image of the body. The promiscuity of the image has replaced the askesis of contact. The body, the domain of the erotic, is what you have been excluded from: “The image is presented, pure and distinct as a letter: it is the letter of what pains me. . . I am excluded from it as from the primal scene, which may exist insofar as it is framed within the contour of the keyhole. Here then. . . is the definition of the image: that from which I am excluded.”⁵⁴ The seductiveness of the body (in *Coytel*) is replaced by the seductiveness of the simulacrum (Boucher).

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⁵¹ E. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, p. 208.

⁵² G. Vico, *The New Science*, p. 306.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁵⁴ R. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*. . . , p. 132.



Fig. 1. Noel Nicolas Coypel, *The Birth of Venus* (1732), in *Five Hundred Years of French Painting 15th to 18th Centuries* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1990)



Fig. 2. François Boucher, *The Toilet of Venus* (early 1740s), in *Five Hundred Years of French Painting 15th to 18th Centuries* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1990)



Fig. 3. *Adam and Eve*, details of *The Ghent Altarpiece*, left and right wings, in H. W. Janson, *History of Art* (New York: Marry Abrams, 1986)

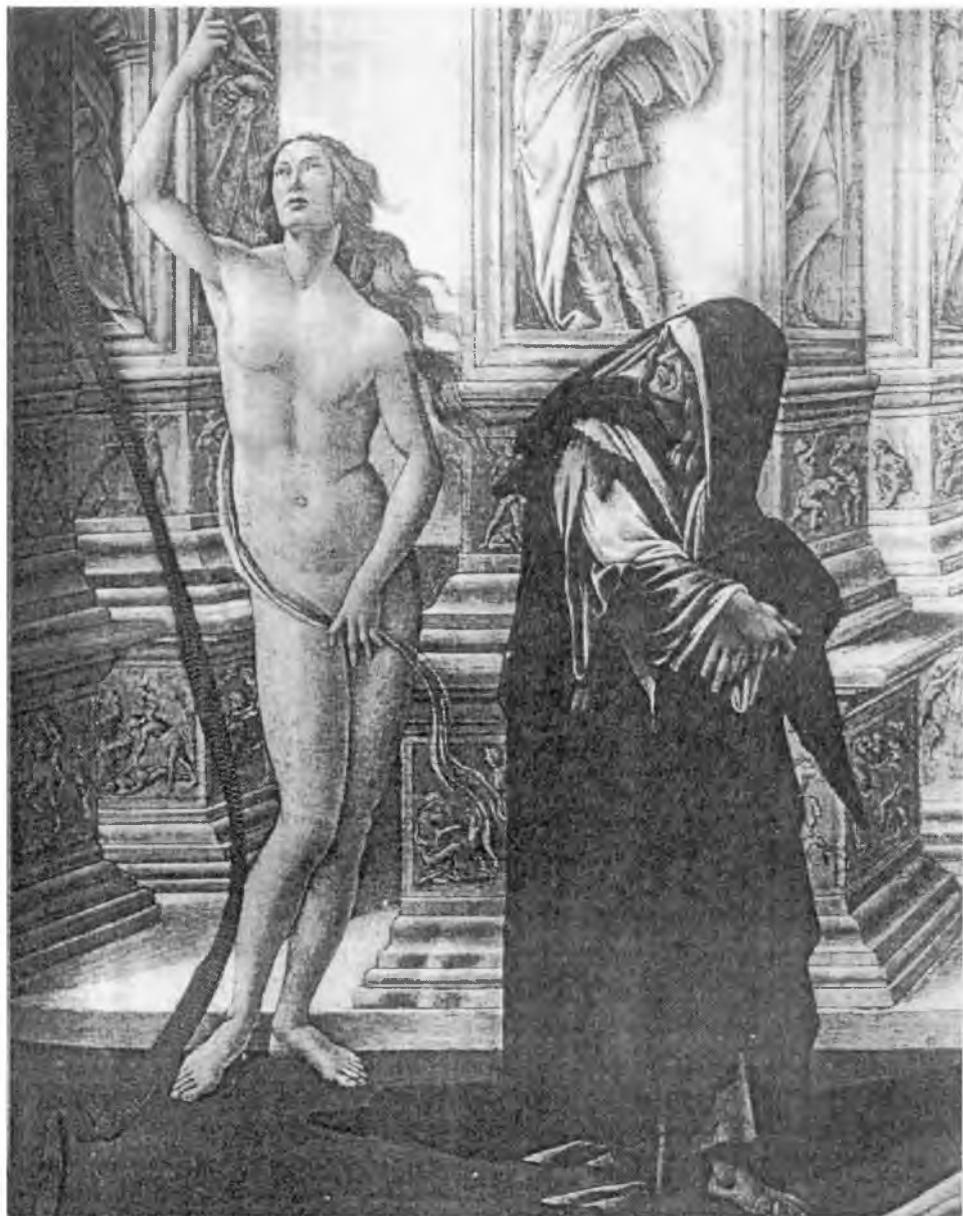


Fig. 4. Sandro Botticelli, *Apelles' Slander: Truth and Remorse* (ca. 1494), in A. Malraux, *Niereczywiste* (Warszawa: KAW, 1985)



Fig. 5. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, in H. W. Janson, *History of Art* (New York: Marry Abrams, 1986)