Metaphors of Nature: Vivisection and Pornography --The Manichean Machine

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The body has a sense of honor
as well as the soul

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Metaphors about nature are mirrors which reflect the human disposition in its relation to mysteries about the cosmos, reflections about human sexuality and the human presence in the universe. Our attitude toward nature is a building block of our religions, often of our philosophies, and a determinant of social behavior. Such phrases as "dog eat dog," "survival of the fittest," "mother nature," "the horn of plenty," and "the womb of nature," reveal a spectrum of attitudes and philosophic positions, embracing the gnostic distrust of matter as essentially evil, the ambivalence of dualistic systems which separate matter from spirit in a hierarchical arrangement, and the view, as expressed in Genesis, of nature as beneficent and good.

The origins of gnosticism are obscure, though in the main traceable to Persian cults of Manichea, Zoroaster, and Mazdha. Judaism expunged dualistic traditions, which contravened the view expressed in Genesis that the creation of matter, earth, and nature were "good" and blessed by God. Christianity

syncretized these opposing views of nature, creating a realm of superior value for the spirit or soul and leaving unresolved an attitude toward matter as "a necessary evil" to be tolerated for the sake of the soul's journey and to be purified or made acceptable by the labor of the soul or asceticism (nicely expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas' apotheosis of virginity as "that state closest to the angels").

Editors' Notes

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HISTORY OF IDEAS

A third tributary to notions about the self and its relation to nature was contributed by the Greek distrust of emotion, particularly sexual emotion, the view of orgasm as a form of madness,¹ and the value of mastery and control of one's emotional life, which ripened into the Stoic philosophies. The reverence for virginity in Christianity was derived from the Greek world, the value symbolized by the Parthenon.

The most recurring model of nature in Western thought is that of a predatory hierarchy. On this model Aristotle justified slavery, the presumption of the powerful over the weak, and even the hunting of weaker individuals by stronger individuals. It is from this model that man derives his justification as hunter, and that philosophies which see the human world as divided between the powerful and the weak receive their rationalization. The Marquis de Sade regarded nature "as a cruel mother," crime as natural, and himself as a "natural man," though there are no analogues in nature for his sexual practices.

It is into this frame, necessarily compressed in this paper, that the mechanistic view of nature was born, Newton and Descartes contributing the most prominent reference points on the new metaphorical map of nature as machine. This metaphor transformed gnostic views of nature for scientific purposes. The value of mastery of the self, particularly of one's sexual nature, and the distrust of emotions gained unprecedented significance under the provenance of this metaphor of the world as machine. Involuntary behavior, such as blushing, sneezing, and particularly penile erection was suspected as evidence of the vitalism post-Newtonian scientists sought to dispel. Thus, penile erection was a central motif in the debate over free will and imagination. The Dutch physician and chemist, Hermann Boerhaave (1668-1738) wrote: "Here a fascinating special case arises to challenge both mechanists and vitalists, both believers in predestination and upholders of free will." And further, "The mysteries of erection and impotence thus provide a focal point for the controversy...on the source of movement in the animal body."² We have here the origins of the fear of impotence and the hardened mask of masculinity of the 19th century.

In *The Bourgeois Experience: Education of the Senses*, Peter Gay laments that "the persistent panic [in the 19th century] over masturbation is far easier to document than to explain."³ The explanation lies in the growing pervasiveness of the machine as metaphor for nature.

As this view was pressed with greater persistence and technological reward, the endeavor to repress human sexuality (as the subversive mark of vitalism) increased with vitriolic force, so that by the 19th century boys and girls fell victim to an hysteria about masturbation which Gay has described as "a half century of terrorism." Young girls were put into strait jackets to prevent their straying hands from reaching "their private parts," and if this failed, they were sometimes subjected to clitoral castration. Boys were outfitted with metal corsets around their penises, some with bells to warn their parents of impending danger. Others were more vindictively fitted with spikes.

In England the attack on masturbation was symptomatic of a profound distrust of sex as the ungovernable betrayal of the machine.

Heavily overdetermined, it was a cultural symptom laden with baffling meanings that reached across nineteenth-century society and down into the buried unconscious core of its most troubling preoccupation....To masturbate — so ran the theory — is to expend energy....The 'fabric of our machine' is so constituted that essential body humors like milk or blood need to be continually restored....The terroristic prophecies, the ingenious mechanical devices and barbarous operations inflicted on masturbators, look almost like acts of revenge.⁴

If much of this activity looked like "revenge" to Peter Gay, a good deal more of it, as practiced in the overwhelming number of ovariectomies, looked like specific revenge against women to Elizabeth Blackwell, one of the century's first women doctors. She described this operation as castration and estimated that in 1896 there were "500,000 castrated women in France and one in every 250 women throughout Europe."⁵

The 19th century saw the rise of the medical profession. Crucially for women, the development of gynecology and the creation of birth control methods transformed the century's view of women, and the metaphorical relationship of nature and women. One final quotation is needed from Peter Gay's study of masturbation in this century, which also saw the rise of vivisection and pornography as expressions of similar views:

What made physicians, in company with their patients, so apprehensive about masturbation in the nineteenth century was that it seemed a

pointless and prodigal waste of limited and valuable resources leading, figuratively and often literally, to impotence. It constituted a loss of mastery over the world and oneself. The campaign to eradicate self-abuse was a response to that danger: a way of conserving strength and maintaining control, both highly cherished and maddeningly elusive goals in the nineteenth century.⁶

Sexual intercourse was charged with metaphors of money: e.g., to have an orgasm was described as "to spend." Whether energy or money, the driving concept is a utilitarian rationalism; the subliminal metaphor of the body is that of an efficient machine which wastes nothing and whose purpose it is to produce something. Again, the machine model is built on Christian theology of the justification of sex in the maintenance of the human race, thus transforming a theological concept into a scientific model.

The 19th century, heir to such persistent traditions, now combined with scientific rationalism, saw the evolution of the image of woman undergo a transformation from that of "household nun" at the beginning of the century to that of the female vampire who drains man of his vitality, the "vagina dentata" of the male nightmare, the woman whose sexuality is destructive and emasculating.⁷ The creation of effective birth control methods, far from liberating man's sexual relationship to woman in the 19th century, threatened it. Birth control gave women sovereignty over their reproductive lives and destroyed the rationalization of sexual utility; by implication it gave women sexual rights equal to men; it also threatened basic models both men and women held about nature and which men held about their sexual authority.

"Man's fear of woman," Gay writes, "is as old as time."⁸ But its increasingly malevolent expression in the literature and art of the Victorian era and in the growth of sadistic pornography was new. "No century depicted woman as vampire, as castrator, as killer, so consistently, so programmatically, and so markedly as the nineteenth."⁹ Other views of woman in the 19th century included identification with nature, the animal world, irrationality, and importantly for the conjunction of vivisection and pornography, woman as the source of sentiment and emotion, the locus of the subjectivity which science felt compelled to expunge from its practice.

The medical profession, whose rise in the 19th century Gay characterizes with irony as a "flight from ignorance" to a "flight into knowledge," sought respectability as a science. This century became decisive for the medical profession as it struggled for and won social and intellectual status. The battleground was fought in the laboratories, littered with the debris of animals.

Descartes' dictum that animals are machines more somberly and fatefully augmented the mechanistic view of the world: a classical boundary, perhaps reaching into the pre-historic mental construct of the world, was erased with that fatal view of the animal world. Animistic man could imagine that the non-organic was organic, but never before had the organic been imagined inorganic except by schizophrenic victims. Nor the historic boundary between organic life and the inorganic previously been defined in such a way as to reduce the sources of organic life. Critical of this, Elizabeth Blackwell noted that all good science — as well as moral knowledge — rests on the distinction between the organic and the inorganic.

This "original" sin in modern mode, enunciated by a brilliant mathematician, was not an example of a philosophical eccentricity but the acceleration of a point of view. By extension animals and women became detrimentally imprisoned in this view of nature.

The force behind vivisection was not the univocal hope, as many believe, of driving disease from the world but of aligning medical practice with the dominant machine model of science, quantitative and experimental. Charles Richet, an eminent physiologist in the 19th century, wrote:

I do not believe that a single experimenter says to himself when he gives curare to a rabbit, or cuts the spinal marrow of a dog, or poisons a frog, "Here is an experiment that will relieve or cure the disease of some man." No, in truth, he does not think that. He says to himself, "I shall clear up some obscure point; I will seek out a new fact." And this scientific curiosity which alone animates him is explained by the high idea he has formed of science. This is why we pass our days in foetid laboratories, surrounded by groaning creatures, in the midst of blood and suffering, bent over palpitating entrails.¹⁰

Such comments from this century are not hard to duplicate. Professor Leon Le Fort at the Faculté de Médecine of Paris, addressed his class on the subject of vivisection:

I do not mean to say that we claim for that method of investigation that it has been of any practical utility to medical science, or that we expect it to be so. But it is necessary as a protest on behalf of the independence of science as against the interference by clerics and moralists.¹¹

Cruelty to animals has always existed, but it now had the approval of one of civilization's most esteemed classes. It had an ideology of cruelty, governed by the criteria of scientific objectivity. The legacy of vivisection was a pattern of individuals molded by what Susan Sontag has called "disciplined inhumanity," what Rabbi Reuben Slovin has called "willful pitilessness," what C.S. Lewis saw as "that hideous strength." He was, as Dodds has noted of the shaman, the priest, and philosopher in the past, a specialized human type, described thus by Claude Bernard, the father of vivisection:

The physiologist is not an ordinary man: he is a scientist, possessed and absorbed by the scientific idea that he pursues. He does not hear the cries of animals, he does not see their flowing blood, he sees nothing but his idea, and is aware of nothing but an organism that conceals from him the problem he is seeking to resolve.¹²

His description prophesied a new type of human, indeed new patterns in crime outrageously flung onto the state of the modern world, for the first time in the person of Jack the Ripper. As Colin Wilson remarks:

One of the oddest aspects of the Ripper murders is that the Victorians did not recognize them as sex crimes (because nothing like it had happened before)...it was not generally recognized as a series of sex crimes for a simple reason: the Ripper killings were the first case of sex crime in the sense that we understand it today.¹³

Like pornography and vivisection, the "pathological" or "serial sex criminal" has a history, an origin, a path of development. Nearly all crime in the past, even violent crime, had a motive

explicable by economic or political ambition, or by known psychological forces, such as revenge. The "motive-less," pathological crime is new. Dismemberment as a sexual act is a modern pathology. The victims of Jack the Ripper were not mutilated or dismembered; they were neatly and correctly vivisected, a fact which has led criminologists to suspect that the murderer was, if not a doctor, someone medically knowledgeable.¹⁴ His obsession with female dismemberment was exercised in the neat excisions of their wombs.

This transition in criminal behavior, a significant social barometer, was observed by Orwell in his essay, "Raffles and Miss Blandish": "Since 1918...a detective story not containing a murder has been a great rarity, and the most disgusting details of dismemberment and exhumation are commonly exploited." In *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, a popular 1939 novel, the main character, Slim, derives his sole pleasure in life "in driving knives into other people's bellies. In childhood he had graduated by cutting up living animals with a pair of rusty scissors."¹⁵ Predictably, Slim is impotent. Nevertheless, he manages to rape Miss Blandish several times until she comes to enjoy it. She is also flogged; another woman is tortured with cigarettes; and a gangster has an orgasm while being knifed. "Ultimately only one motive is at work throughout the whole story: the pursuit of power,"¹⁶ which squeezes from the human scene everything else recognizable as human, even "normal sexuality."

Underground erotica and prostitution are normal reactions against sexual repression; dismemberment and death are not. Even libidinal energies can have rational social patterns. Human behavior is often a symbolic enactment, but it is also learned and imitative. Dismemberment, once learned, became a form of modern sexual crime. "What gave the Ripper murders their special morbidity," Wilson writes, "was the instinctive recognition that something strange was happening, that some basic change was being signalled....Slowly, very slowly, the 19th century was creating a new type of man."¹⁷ And a new type of aesthetics, one in which sadomasochistic pornography, in its assault against flesh and its need to degrade and obliterate it, became a sexual expression. As Susan Griffin writes in *Pornography and Silence*, the pornographic mind wishes "to deaden flesh which is not dead, but is alive and feeling. It is the body in its capacity to feel, to cry, to love itself, to suffer grief, desire, shame, or mortification....which must be

made to suffer."¹⁸ It is the objectification of sexuality, the rendering of self into a machine.

"Nature is weary of life," the Marquis de Sade wrote, curiously separating the two.

The identification of woman with animals was a prevalent symbol in the 19th century, sometimes flattering, most often sinister. The identification of women with the cause of anti-vivisection has profound roots both in the era and in her gender. Coral Lansbury saw in women's identification with the vivisection of animals their own subjection at the hands of men, in reality and in the growing pornographic literature of the age:

Lautenschlager's Trade Catalogues of Vivisectional Apparatus were the major source of equipment for physiologist, and they showed photographs and drawings of animals fixed to boards with straps and cords, together with an array of scalpels and ovens, vices and saws....the animal is extended, its legs outstretched like one of the riding master's victims, and it is bound by thin leather straps.

Other trade catalogues for physicians and surgeons were replete with descriptions of the new gynecological operating chairs and tables, which showed women strapped and bound. The equipment and operating methods of vivisection and gynecology gave birth to a new lexicon in sexual imagery which entered the pornographic literature of the era.¹⁹

For Elizabeth Blackwell, female abhorrence of vivisection lay in her maternal instinct: "The profound depth of maternity in women extends not only to the relations of marriage, but to all the weak or suffering wherever found."²⁰ She shared with Claude Bernard an admiration for the ingenious nature of the animal and would have seconded his description of the animal:

It is as if there existed a pre-established design of each organism and of each organ such that...it reveals a special bond and seems directed by some invisible guide in the path which it follows and toward the position which it occupies.

The simplest reflection reveals a primary quality, a quid proprium of the living being, in this pre-established organic harmony.²¹

Both also recognized the animal as a complicated, change-able, potentially unstable model because of its re-activeness. The perceptions about animals which determined her to denounce vivisection motivated Bernard to master his antipathy:

With the help of these active experimental sciences, man becomes an inventor of phenomena, a real foreman of creation; and under this head we cannot set limits to the power that he may gain over nature through future progress in the experimental sciences.²²

Gaston Bachelard is, of course, correct when he writes that "To know facts and to make things are needs that we can characterize in themselves without necessarily having to relate them to the will to power. There is in man a veritable will to intellectuality." But he also knows that this will, in its pure form, is rare and most often mixed with "primitive dreams." "Even the scientist, when not practising his specialty, returns to the primitive scale of values." The "unconscious of the scientific mind" has been composed "of the heterogeneous nature of certain concepts, and...convictions that have been formed in the most varied fields."²³

The 19th century trembled with male fear of impotence and overvaluation of masculine stoicism. Anecdotes of the "fiasco" abounded. Conversely, the identification of women with feeling and sentiment drew the suspicion and derision of vivisectionists in the 19th century. The physiologist, Elie de Cyon exclaimed:

Is it necessary to repeat that women — or rather, old maids — form the most numerous contingent of this group? Let my adversaries contradict me, if they can show me among the leaders of the agitation one girl, rich, beautiful, and beloved, or some young wife, who has found in her home the full satisfaction of her affections.²⁴

Karl Stern, in *Flight From Woman*, equates hatred of nature with hatred of the female, fear of nature with fear of the feminine, and points out the etymological relationship between mater and materia, or mother and matter. Knowledge, he believes, is expressed through two processes: one process is by abstract logic; the other he describes as "connatural," or "with nature," with another creature. The latter is exemplified pertinently by the child in the womb, where two creatures know

each other as one.²⁵ An epistemology is rooted in biology: "The certainty of the flesh...is the foundation of all certainty...." An idea expressed as "biological wisdom" in Terrence DesPres' book, *The Survivor*, becomes for this century the necessary thread leading us out of the moral debauchery of experimental science as practiced in the concentration camps. It is this biological wisdom — "flesh" — "matter" — which became for Descartes the reason for doubt. Matter is for him a Manichean evil, deceptive and illusory:

Descartes, the adult and philosopher, postulates to "doubt sensible things because they have deceived us," and it is in this connection noteworthy that in French the word *déçu* has the double meaning of "deceived" and "disappointed." The certainty of the flesh which is the foundation of all certainty had to be conjured away — because it was here where the terror and pain of abandonment lurked.²⁶

The combination of *res cogito* and the world as machine fueled by the gnostic aversion to nature and sex erupted into what Stern calls a "pubescent Manicheanism which pervades so much of the nineteenth century...."²⁷

The modern explosion of sadistic pornography is often traced to the classical Christian view of human sexuality. However, the era of theological combat with sexuality in the Middle Ages witnessed the creation of courtly love, the elevation of woman, and the love songs of the troubadours, not sadistic pornography. Debauchery has existed before as overindulgence by over-pampered classes; lewdness, bawdiness (Chaucer), discomfort with sexuality, embarrassment at God's folly (Erasmus), erotic wit (*The Decameron*), and erotic celebration (*The Song of Songs*) but nothing like the literature of the Marquis de Sade has existed before. We witness here the steady transformation of eros into thanatos. Like Jack the Ripper, the Marquis de Sade is an index of a modern mental construct. Gnosticism is a contributing factor to this mentality but not a causative one. The difference in worldview is, as Henry Adams described it, between the Virgin and the Dynamo — the first symbolizing a negativity toward sex, but embodying a life force in the image of the suffering mother reaching into the layers of connatural knowledge; the other a machine, a symbol of power, unfleshed, unsuffering.

The triumph of total mastery, except for the institution of slavery, exists in few places. In the modern world the vivisection laboratory is one place. "Here," as Elizabeth Blackwell wrote, "the student becomes familiar with the use of gags, straps, screws, and all the paraphernalia of ingenious instruments invented for overpowering the resistance of the living creature."²⁸ The world of pornocracy is another. This word, created by Stephen Marcus in *The Other Victorians*, describes the pornographic world of male fantasy, where women are totally compliant and resistance to the masculine will is unknown.²⁹ The paraphernalia for overpowering is often similar, if not in detail then in effectual models for overcoming resistance. There are also stereotaxic devices and rape racks for women.

De Sade believed that nature was vicious and that he received his obsessions from nature. He exulted in crime. Nature knows no such models as de Sade describes, but the modern world does in its admiration for objective cognition. De Sade was at all times, even in the sexual act, the complete investigator, himself as object, objective, himself looking at himself as object looking at his partners as objects. Social space between himself and others did not exist. Flagellation was an expression of abhorrence; it was also a requirement for reification. De Sade whipped and harried flesh as the only means available to him to verify its existence:

The male aggression of the Sadist hero is never softened by the usual transformation of the body into flesh. He never, for an instant, loses himself in his animal nature; he remains so lucid, so cerebral, that philosophic discourse, far from dampening his ardor, acts as an aphrodisiac. We see how desire and pleasure explode in furious attacks upon this cold, tense body, proof against all enchantment. They do not constitute a living experience within the framework of the subject's psychophysiological unity....

The curse which weighed upon Sade...was this "autism" which prevented him from ever forgetting himself or being genuinely aware of the reality of the other person....Sade needed deviations to give to this sexuality a meaning which lurked in it without ever managing to achieve fulfillment, an escape from consciousness in his flesh, an understanding of the other person as consciousness through the flesh.³⁰

This flesh-knowledge in sexual union is another form of connatural knowledge, the being with another creature. Empathy was harried from the stage of Western cognition, derided as female by the requirements of ideological cruelty and the dialectics of power and science. "The will to intellectuality" was, as Bachelard would describe it, "impure at its source."³¹

In *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Bachelard undertakes to psychoanalyze "objectivity," to examine the "unconscious of the scientific mind," a task which is far from quixotic. "The human mind," he declares, "did not begin its development like a class in physics."³² The human mind, even in the guise of objective scientist, is never free from primitive metaphors about life, force, power, sex, and fertility.

There are now experiments in progress concerning sadistic pornography. In laboratories nice young men are fitted with devices to their genitals to measure arousal while they watch videos depicting sadistic sex. (Animals apparently are not used for these experiments.) Sometimes the devices measure perceptible arousal, but no one yet seems to know what it means. A significant change in sexual sensibility has taken place, but we do not know how to know what it means except to strap our sex organs to a machine. We expect the machine to tell us. □

Carol Belanger Grafton,
Old-Fashioned Animals Cuts.
New York: Dover, 1987.

Notes

¹See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*.

²*Languages of Nature*, ed. by L. J. Jordanova (Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. 126.

³Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 309.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 309-311.

⁵Elizabeth Blackwell, *Medicine and Society in America: Essays in Medical Sociology* (Arno Press, 1972. Originally published 1902), p. 120.

⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 317.

⁷See Bran Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁹*Op. cit.*, p. 207.

¹⁰E. Westacott, *A Century of Vivisection and Anti-Vivisection* (C.W. Daniel, England, 1949), p. 180.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

¹²Dodds, p. 210.

¹³Donald Rombelow, *The Complete Jack the Ripper*, Introd. by Colin Wilson (New York Graphic Society, 1975), p. 11.

¹⁴See Daniel Farson, *Jack the Ripper* (M. Jopseph, 1972).

¹⁵*The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. III, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1968), pp. 212ff.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁷*Op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁸Harper and Row, 1981.

¹⁹For an examination of this literature, see Coral Lansbury, *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

²⁰*Op. cit.*

²¹*An Introduction To The Study of Experimental Medicine*, trans. by H.C. Greene (Dover Pub., 1957), p. V11.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 12, 4, 10.

²⁴Westacott, *op. cit.*

²⁵Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965, p. 54.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 112.

²⁹Basic Books, 1966.

³⁰Marquis de Sade, *Selections from his Writings and a Study by Simone de Beauvoir* (Grove Press, 1953), pp. 32-33.

³¹*Op. cit.*, p. 1.

³²*Op. cit.*, p. 57.