

## The Nymph of Sex

### *Divine Eros and Human Sexuality*

**W**E HAVE A habit of talking about sex as merely physical, and yet nothing has more soul. Sex takes us into a world of intense passions, sensual touch, exciting fantasies, many levels of meaning, and subtle emotions. It makes the imagination come alive with fantasy, reverie, and memory. Even if the sex is loveless, empty, or manipulative, still it has strong repercussions in the soul, and even bad sexual experiences leave lasting, haunting impressions.

In general, we treat the body as though it were a skeleton wrapped in muscles and stuffed with organs. When illness comes along, we go to a doctor and expect X rays, pills, or surgery. We don't talk about the way we're living, strong feelings that may be related to the illness, or whether life has meaning. We separate the body, mind, and emotions as though they were properly contained in individual and unrelated compartments.

The philosophy characteristic of our culture, in which the body is treated as unrelated to our emotions, our sense of meaning, and our experiences, has deep implications for sexuality. Not only do we deal with sexual problems mechanically, we may well approach our lovers mechanically—without the deep engagement of the soul and spirit that would give sex its depth and humanity.

Against this point of view, the eighteenth-century poet William Blake, who used his power of words to fight against the rationalistic and mechanistic thinking of his own time, made a statement that could fittingly be printed at the bottom of every page of this book:

Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that calld  
Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the  
chief inlets of Soul in this age.

Unless we have lost imagination completely, when we look at the body we are seeing the soul, and when we have sex, we experience the body as a way to the most penetrating mysteries of the soul.

It may be tempting at times to imagine sex as purely physical. Then we might not have to deal with feelings, personalities, and repercussions. We may try to avoid the complexities that always appear in relationships and look for liberated sex in "free love." How pleasant it would be, we may think, to have sex without strings attached, without all the painful emotions and partings and reunions. But the soul has its own life and its own will. It won't submit to our manipulations. The attempt to have sex without implications may backfire, and through a meaningless sexual fling we may find ourselves in the biggest emotional mess of our lives.

This human body that we have been conditioned to see as a system of chemicals, pulleys, pumps, and plumbing is an expressive entity of great subtlety and nuance. This subtle body is alive, diaphanous, full of meanings, poetic, expressive in every organ and part, intimately connected to emotion and feeling, and, by no means least, beautiful. This is the body that engages in sex, a body with so much soul that any attempt to deny its layers of meaning will likely come back to haunt us.

Obviously, the body can be appropriately studied, measured, and treated at a merely chemical and physiological level. But at the same time the body is infinitely more, and to grasp its sexuality we have to go far beyond the scientific imagination. We can appeal to artists, poets, and mystical writers, and to the rites and images of religion to get a fuller picture of its sexuality and to glimpse the myriad of ways the body can be sexually expressive.

The key to going any further in this book is to set aside our habit of looking at the body and its sexuality materialistically and to realize, as fundamentally as we can, that there is no such thing as a human body without emotion and imagination. The larger part of human sexuality is inaccessible to the materialist's viewpoint. Beyond it lies a whole world of sexual meaning. By looking at the sexual myths we live out, and at our spiritual attitudes, however developed and conscious they may be, we will find the roots of our desires and the sources of our satisfactions. Here lie secrets critical to our problems and unfulfilled hopes, here a way to educate the young in their sexuality, and here the means of reconciliation between sex and morality and between the body and the spirit.

### Evoking Venus

The *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, an ancient story about sex, describes what I believe is the key to keeping the “human” in human sexuality. Zeus, to the Greeks the divine governor of life, wants to make certain that immortals and humans interpenetrate. This great mystery, related in Christianity to the incarnation, addresses the human condition, in which spirituality and ordinary life go together to complete our humanity. We are made up of spirit and body, with an animating soul in between, and any embodiment of spirit is an incarnation. The story begins with Zeus instilling in Aphrodite, goddess of sex, a desire for a mortal man.

As the story opens, Aphrodite goes to her temple at Cyprus, takes a bath, oils her body, and clothes herself in beautiful garments and golden jewelry. Then she finds Anchises, a young shepherd, and disguises herself as a youthful virgin. Taken aback by her beauty, Anchises suspects that she may be a goddess, but she says no, she is the daughter of the ruler of Phrygia. Hermes snatched her from her home, she says, to be the wife of Anchises and the mother of their children.

Convinced that she is mortal, Anchises makes love with her, but then she wakes him from his sleep and reveals herself in all her divine glory. “When I first saw you, I knew you were divine,” says Anchises, worried about the consequences of sleeping with a goddess, including loss of potency. She assures him that everything is fine and in accord with the divine will. Their son will be raised by the big-breasted mountain nymphs, the same, she says, who live long lives and eat divine food and make love with Hermes in the corners of their charming caves. Then she gives Anchises a warning:

When anyone asks who the mother of his child is, tell them she is a flowerlike nymph who lives in the mountain woods.<sup>1</sup>

This lovely erotic hymn to the goddess of sex offers many fascinating insights, but the theme that has kept me ruminating on it for years is the idea that sex is part temporal and part eternal. The son whom Aphrodite and Anchises conceived at their remarkable rendezvous, Aeneas, would go on to found Rome. His powerful creativity is an indication that lovemaking between a human and a deity, the union of spirit and body, can be extraordinarily fruitful.

Aphrodite’s last comment also hints that one’s partner in sex is more than human—he or she is a nymph. A man or woman can inspire such deep fantasy and emotion that through the loving embrace of our partner’s body we may break through the limits of the human condition to touch upon another level of reality. The sex spirits come to us as from another world and can’t be reduced to pieces of human personality. Sex with soul is always a form of communion with another level of existence, and that quality alone may be a major reason for its compelling attraction.

I find this nymph pictured in many places: in the lovely ancient Cycladic figures of the Mediterranean where she is shown almost without a face, her body erect and breasts small, and the pubic area a luminous triangle; in Lucas Cranach’s nudes; in African wood-carved statues of woman; in Edward Weston’s photographs; and in almost every picture of



Cycladic Figure

Marilyn Monroe. In these images the nymph is given form, but I also sense her, invisible, in certain groves, gardens, and bedrooms. I smell her in some perfumes, and I feel her in a scarf. I enter her bower whenever I visit certain exceptional stores and salons where she is present in all her beauty and where the sensitive shopkeepers are sacristans of the goddess of sensuality.

When Aphrodite says she is a flower nymph, she is also revealing something of great importance about herself and about sexuality. The divine pleasure granted to Anchises has come from the simple beauty of a flower. Aphrodite's Roman counterpart, Venus, was honored as the goddess of gardens. Nature's beauty, not just her functioning organs, is the essence of sexuality. In a sense, this book is inspired all the way through by this simple revelation of the goddess: if you want to know what sex is, think long and hard about a flower, especially its beauty and its appeal to the senses. Then think about all of nature and your own place in it. Whatever makes a flower glow with enchantment is the essence of your own sexuality.

Something deep in the human makeup needs and longs for a taste of eternity—at least a momentary release from the relentless pace of time. We don't usually place eternity in our list of needs, but the soul is only half satisfied with the things of this world. Traditional literature states over and over that the soul needs to break free from time and place. It needs regular excursions out of busy life, demanding relationships, and incessant productivity. For the monk, contemplation is one kind of deliverance from clock time and busyness, while for the average person sex can serve the same purpose.

The soul wants union not only with other persons but also with another dimension altogether, one we can call eternal,

immortal, mythic, or a host of other names. As we'll see at the end of our journey through the many realms of sex, the soul craves the mystery lover, who inhabits and transcends the known partner. We'll also see how this world, including our flesh-and-blood lover, is not necessarily an obstacle but offers a positive route to the eternal and spiritual realm.

The brief sex-play of Anchises and Aphrodite gave birth to an entire civilization, and when our sex has soul it too can create worlds—families, communities, friendships, and personal vitality. Without the mystery dimension sex is not fully human, and it may feel incomplete or even empty. Sex is not something apart from life but is implicated in every aspect. The goddess is a mere flower nymph, but the ancients also called her the soul of the world.

In the *Homeric Hymn*, Aphrodite presents herself as both goddess and mortal. I used to think of the story she tells Anchises as a manipulating fiction, an aspect of her skill at seduction and persuasion, but now I suspect that more is going on. The whole tale is one of incarnation, an immortal taking on human flesh. The story she tells Anchises gives her a human family and place, a context that lasts admittedly for only the brief time of their lovemaking, but that gives their sex both humanity and divinity.

The nymph of sex is essential in lovemaking, but so too, obviously, is a human partner. We need to find the man or woman who can evoke this spirit for us. Sexual attraction is not at all a purely physical event. The soul is always in search of whatever will complete its desire, and our physical eyes are never separate from the eyes of the soul.

It also helps to have a place for love that is suitable for the nymph, because these nature spirits show themselves only in particular places and at special times. Marsilio Ficino, a

fifteenth-century Florentine philosopher and magus—someone skilled in lore and magic—taught that by living with a degree of artfulness we can attract the various kinds of spirit, including the sexual spirit, that we need to live a full human life. The whole pleasant work of sex is to incarnate, to call down the spirit that will quicken our physical world and give home to eros.

Most people know that you can go through the motions of sex, even have an orgasm, and still not be fully present. Sometimes the sexual response may feel incomplete. A person may be impotent, emotionally cool, or in some other way unable to be involved in the lovemaking fully, despite an intention to be fully present. In the realm of sex intention isn't as important as it is in ordinary life. Usually we explain sexual problems in personal terms, as though the ego were somehow at fault, but the hymn teaches us that sex is more mysterious and not so dependent on the ego as we might expect.

Lovemaking is a ritual that invites the goddess of sex to be present. The love and affection we may feel toward our partner, the preparations we make for lovemaking, and all the activities that go into foreplay are intended to invoke the nymph of sex, so that what goes on between people is inspired and infused with this spirit. Without the presence of the nymph, sex becomes mechanical. It lacks soul because the soul requires that we attend to both the temporal and the eternal aspects. If we leave out the vertical dimension, our deep feelings and our high aspirations, in any activity, including sex, we disengage the soul and are left with a functional experience that may feel hollow.

When the spirit or genius of sex enters lovemaking through evocative words, touches, and actions, the soul of sex comes into play, and the lovers sense an inexplicable

depth in their union. The sexual experience may feel effortless and even glorious. We may think of sex as something we should do well, with skill and healthy motives. But health and technique, valuable as they may be, are not enough to evoke the depths of sex, which calls for imagination, reverence, and full presence.

Lovemaking is a ritual that, like all religious rites of the world, tries to make present the spirit that will make the human activity magically effective. Like all ritual, too, sex requires art, attention to details, and a devoted imagination. It calls for the kind of humility proper to religious ritual, in which the devotee doesn't force but requests the presence of the god or spirit. We may go to dinner, dress attractively, have an intimate conversation, listen to music—all with the thought of invoking the spirits of sexuality. In the midst of lovemaking we may be guided by deep intuition and imagination to do those particular things that not only please ourselves and our partner but take us away from the cool world of the ego and place us in the warm, dreamlike cloud of sexual trance and charm. In this cloud of Aphroditic enchantment—scholars have translated the name Aphrodite as “shining cloud”—the mystery that is sex takes place effectively and powerfully, as though it were a sacrament in the religion of this goddess whose task it is to deepen human sexuality, giving it a more than human level of meaning.

### *Eros and the Soul*

In modern times the word eros has been corrupted to refer to plain physical sexual acts, and even to the lowest kinds of sex. The word is actually abhorrent to some people, a surprising development since in classical literature it was a highly

spiritual, cosmic, and lofty kind of love. In Greek literature eros is nothing less than the magnetism that holds the entire universe together, and human love in its many forms is simply a participation in that greater eros.

The ancient poet Hesiod, writing around 800 B.C. about the origins of things, places Eros among the first beings, but he also warns of the terrible power of the erotic, and perhaps it is this tendency to overwhelm us that makes people wary of eros. Hesiod writes:

Eros, who is love, handsomest among all  
the immortals  
who breaks the limbs' strength  
who in all gods, in all human beings  
overpowers the intelligence in the breast,  
and all their shrewd planning.<sup>2</sup>

Later, the Greek philosopher Empedocles taught that the entire universe runs on the two principles of love and strife. He identified love with both Eros and Aphrodite, linking the binding attraction that keeps all things connected and working in harmony with the allures and desires that ordinarily we call sexual. The tie between this greater notion of eros and ordinary sexuality is a key idea in our search for the soul of sex. We don't want to leave sex behind and focus on some ethereal and generic idea of the erotic life, nor do we wish to reduce sex to physical behavior. Somewhere in between is a valuable way of seeing the erotic within sex, expanding our idea of sexuality without losing its immediacy and intimacy.

Many writers who have described the erotic life help create a picture of eros that might be useful in deepening our notion of sexuality. Plato, for instance, says of lovers that "the deepest insights spring from their love." Eros is a guide

to knowledge, and for that reason Socrates, Plato's archetypal wise person, refers to himself as a lover.<sup>3</sup>

In some cultures it is said that to have sex with someone is to know the person in a deep way, and to have sex for the first time is to know life in a way that is entirely new and transforming. Sex is a kind of gnosis or holy knowing. In sex we get to know a person in a way that is more than special. Sex reveals much that is unconscious to both people, and so the unveiling that goes on at the physical level is mirrored as the soul itself sheds its protective covering.

In sex we also discover the power and direction of our deepest desires. The pleasures we may find in sex—sweet sex, aggressive sex, inventive and explorative sex, sadomasochistic games, dressing and undressing, body parts and kinds of kissing, places and settings—all of these preferences, tied so closely to passion show us who we are, where our soul wants to lead us, and what our complexes, obstacles, and inhibitions look like. In sex we see the private parts of the soul with all its particulars.

In his dream seminars, C. G. Jung once made the comment that "people think that eros is sex, but not at all, Eros is relatedness."<sup>4</sup> Eros is not the physical expression in sex alone, but is rather the physical and the emotional combined. More accurately, it is the meaningful connection established by sex, felt and understood by the people making love. This eros we feel in sex and romance is also the broader magnetism that holds the universe together, the go-between spirit said to keep the planets in orbit and the seasons on track. What we seek in sex is not only bodily satisfaction, but a response to the soul's need for all that eros offers, for a world that holds together and a whole life that is creative and motivated by love.

In her elegant book *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson notes that the Greeks played with the word *eros* by adding "pt" to it, making it *pteros*, wing. When the penis is pictured having wings, or when bird-women like the Sirens tempt and seduce, this idea of a flying, lofty *eros* finds direct expression. When the Greeks and Romans personified *Eros* in their art and literature, they sometimes pictured him as a young man with large and lovely wings. *Eros* seems to move through the air, and he has this quality of taking us, as Anne Carson says, "from over here to over there."<sup>5</sup> When we long for someone or something, we are being invited to make a move, to soar in spirit out of the status quo and into a new world. Maybe this is yet another reason why we're afraid of the erotic and the sexual—it disturbs our current equilibrium. On the other hand, it is also the very source of vitality and animation.

Georges Bataille, a French writer who devoted his life to the study of *eros*, says that *eros* always involves a transgression of some kind. "Unless we see that transgression is taking place, we no longer have the feeling of freedom that the full accomplishment of the sexual act demands,"<sup>6</sup> he writes. Now this is a strong statement that could easily be misread, fitting nicely into the fear many people have that eroticism is evil and sinful by nature. But the transgression in sex may be more a psychological one than a literally moral one.

As *eros* entices us into new worlds, it may entail breaking through current modes and even codes of behavior, and so it can feel like a transgression. The first sexual experience overreaches inhibitions that may have been in place for a long time. The first intimacy with a particular lover breaks the reserve that has kept the couple within certain limits in their contact with each other. The first experiment with a new style of lovemaking may involve the feeling of breaking

rules or habits. The very point of sexual experimentation may be to sense together, in mutual generosity and complicity, the joy of transcending rules and expectations. In this spirit communities have often celebrated important religious festivals with orgies and other kinds of sexual license, breaking into the realm of spirit by means of sexual overstepping.

Throughout his writing Plato discusses the role of *eros* in life, but especially in the *Symposium*, where Socrates is taught the nature of love. "Eros," Plato writes, "is a coming to life in beauty in relation to both body and soul." This is an aspect of *eros* that can easily be overlooked or taken too lightly. In our erotic desires we may be in search of beauty, pure and simple. However close to or far from cultural ideals of beauty, a lover introduces us to beauty's soul and the soul's own beauty.

We live in a world that gives scant attention to beauty. We're willing to build cities that function but have little beauty and to make homes that are convenient and affordable but not necessarily beautiful. We believe that beauty is expendable. But to the soul beauty is more important than almost anything, and so it plays an important role in our desires and cravings. It lies at the heart of sexuality and is responsible for a good portion of the pleasure we find there.

In Plato we also find that *Eros* is the child of Want and Plenty. Our erotic lives may feel full for a while, then empty, or maybe even full and empty at the same time. If we knew that both emptiness and fullness were natural to the erotic life, we might live out this natural rhythm sympathetically rather than demanding that *eros* always be full and feeling abnormal or incomplete if it isn't.

A man in his mid-fifties once told me that he was puzzled to see his sexual dreams, cravings, and fantasies diminish at

the mid-point of his life. He thought the change might be due to his age, and yet at the same time he had finally found a partner he could live with and love. Sometimes we expect eros to feel empty, but instead we discover a surprising fullness. At other times we may assume that life will be erotically full, when in fact we still feel some of its emptiness.

At the end of the twentieth century we seek hungrily for sexual satisfaction, but we don't give much attention to eros in the whole of life. Our craving never seems satisfied, or if it is, it may be temporary and not connected with the rest of life. Some work all day drudgingly at a computer and come home to watch a sexy movie on cable television. In their lives eros and work belong to separate categories. Thinking literally and negatively about the erotic life, we don't give eros a place of honor among our values, and yet at the same time we are overwhelmed by our desires and by our basic but misunderstood appetites.

Sex and eros are related, as the Greeks said, like mother and son. If we could recover a sense of the holiness of eros and its creative, divine place in the nature of things, we might see how absurdly small our view of sex has been, and we might reinstate it without moralism at the center of life, where it can offer vitality and intimacy of unrivaled power. Before we can give depth and richness to our sexuality, we have to discover the value of deep pleasure and desire and at the same time relax our anxious attention to the control of the emotions, the justification of our lives by work and restraint, and our belief in the value of repression and suffering.

In our society sex is wounded by a deep-seated masochism, which finds distorted satisfaction in the suppression of desire. This masochism is a symptomatic and destructive

form of surrender. Instead of giving in to our passions, allowing emotion to course through our bodies and psyches, and generously offering ourselves to intimacy, we surrender our joy in life to any authority we can find, and we find many authorities willing to condemn us for our longings and pleasures.

At the very heart of sex lies a profound affirmation of life, giving us a reason for living, optimism, and energy. At every step, this process can be wounded and weakened by a fear of vitality and a failure to trust in life, in others and in oneself. Everywhere we are told to set limits on eros, to be careful that we are not lost in its passion. But if we listen to these worried cautions, we may end up with only a modicum of self-possession purchased at the cost of life's passion. Eros may go underground as seething, dark desire, and the surface of life may turn mechanical and controlled, cheerless and humorless.

When anyone asks who is your lover, Aphrodite says to the shepherd, tell them your lover is a flower nymph who can be found in the woods. Sexual desire always offers an invitation to the world's soul through the nymph responsible for the beauty and vitality of our woods and their plants and flowers. Sex keeps us connected to our deepest natures and links us to our roots. In that way it expands the source from which we live our lives.

The *Orphic Hymn to Eros* calls him "great, pure, lovely, and sweet" and prays to him to banish evil inclinations from our hearts. What change of heart would be required of us to call on the spirit of desire and pleasure to rid us of evil? Yet sex has the capacity to pacify our raging and distressed hearts, if only we would grant it its soul.