

The Erotic Body

Beauty, Face, Hair

IF WE TAKE seriously William Blake's reminder that the body is the soul manifested by the senses, then we have to look at the body in a new way. This view of the body, quite unlike anything we find in modern culture, offers two challenges: how to see the soul when we look at the body, and how to use our senses as the primary means of knowing the soul. Usually we think of the body in purely physical terms and consider the soul abstractly. People often ask for definitions of the soul, as though it could be grasped intellectually. They want to know if it is immortal and how it functions. Blake invites us to think about the soul in a different way, as something to be discovered through touch, smell, hearing, taste, and sight.

We make a mistake when we think of sensation as a purely physical experience. Like everything human, sensation can-

not be separated from imagination. We are always living in a story, always surrounded by images, and always perceiving with imagination. Sensation is a particular way of imagining, fully grounded in physical perception, but nevertheless determined by fantasy. Ralph Waldo Emerson said as much when he observed that only the poet can really see the stars. At a mundane level, a person eating pasta that his mother has cooked all his life will have a sensory experience heavily influenced by past memories and by affection for his mother. Sensation is never separated from fantasy, which gives it meaning.

Everyone is aware that sex is a physical experience. What we sometimes forget is that even in the midst of ecstatic sensation, we are still deep in the imagination as well. We can't appreciate the deeper dimensions of sex unless we consider the poetics of this body that speaks to us through sensation.

The Landscape of the Body

The body is an erotic landscape with regions of special interest, some common to all people, some proper to certain cultures and individuals. It's always difficult to read the symbolism or imagery of the body, but in general the body and its various parts echo certain themes in a person's psychology. It doesn't take much effort, for instance, to see a child's attachment to mother in a man's attraction to big-breasted women. But what is the meaning of an interest in feet or shoes? What is going on in the attraction to a man's pectoral muscles or to a woman's calves or thighs? What does it mean when we're fascinated by a man's or woman's "buns"? I've never been able to accept the common idea among scholars that the thigh is a

euphemism for the genitals. Thighs have their own eros. And what exactly is the lure of underclothes, and what is it about the eyes that can be erotically hypnotic?

The body is a mythology, entire and complete in itself. Just as we can turn to any culture's traditional stories and rituals and find gods of war, nymphs of groves and streams, and spirits of place, so we can look at the body and find nurturing breasts, protective muscles, luxuriant hair, adventurous feet, and boyish buttocks. Each part of the body, differing slightly from person to person, is a window onto a world of meaning and allure. This stirring of fantasy and desire shows that the body expresses the soul, or even, in Blake's language, *is* the soul.

The Freudian body is a mythological terrain of nurturing breasts, retentive anus, and sexual phallus. But it would be a mistake to limit the meaning of any body part to a Freudian interpretation, no matter how imaginatively nuanced. In the writings of the Marquis de Sade, for instance, the anus is mysteriously an object of adoration, and in statues of Artemis the breasts seem to have nothing to do with nurturing.

The body is always available for poetic reading, and there is no need to become rigid about a particular way of interpreting it. Each person, each culture, each historical period, and each theory has the right to its own storytelling based on images that lie piled on each other in every inch of human tissue. The skin is thick with stories, told and untold, already explored and yet to be discovered.

Some ancient sculptures show trim, muscled men running races, throwing spears, and fighting in battle. Some depict a mother nursing her child. Aphrodite appears preparing for a bath, loosening a sandal, placing her hands over her breasts and pubic area, glancing back over her shoulder to see

her buttocks, or tending to her bracelets and other adornments. She seems to enjoy looking at herself and being looked at, and she is often preoccupied with things we might consider peripheral and nonessential. She seems generally happy in her apparently unproductive, insignificant preoccupations.

These delightful images of the goddess of sex may help correct our biases. To the soul it may be fruitful to look at our bodies, to take time at the bath, to consider our jewelry and body ornaments. The soul may be restored by a long soaking or an hour stolen from a busy life for a fragrant sauna. The soul may need attention to nails and skin and hair.

In Aphrodite, the entire body is alive with significance and pleasure—her smile, the placing of her hands, the crook of a leg, the shape of a breast. We have to remember that statues of Aphrodite are icons, a holy presencing of the goddess and not just portraits of her, and so each subtle element has profound implications for sexuality at the personal level and for life in its largest sense. The curve of her hip may be attractive, and it may also say something about curves in all of nature and all of culture. Her seductive smile may remind us of a friend, and it may also offer some deep insight into the allure of nature and of things. Her gestures are so precise that they appear to be mudras, sacred signals representing holy truths. We will look closely at these mudras in the next chapter.

Aphrodite's body is the archetype of the human body and also of the body of the world. The human body is a miniature world, each of its parts mirroring nature, culture, and ordinary human life. If we could give up some of our modern biases, we could look at the body and see signs of life's deepest mysteries. Every body is a mystical body, each part a

poem. If it's possible to see the whole world in a grain of sand, we can glimpse the meaning of life in an eyebrow, a nipple, a penis, and, in the holy spirit of Aphrodite, a rounded backside.

The Erotic Body

The only way I can understand the enormous curiosity and fascination attached to the human body is to recall William Blake's instruction that the body is the soul perceived by the senses. The body subtly expresses the mystery of the person and of the human race. How fascinating it is to watch bodies go by in a crowded public space. We never tire of contemplating the subtle differences and presentations of bodies in advertising and in serious photography. Artists never cease painting the body in myriad styles and tonalities, and we gaze intensely at our own bodies in the mirror and in family photographs.

It is as if the body holds the secret to who we are and what we are to become. One wonders if the many religions and philosophies that have been repressive and dismissive of the body, seeing it as an obstacle and weight, are merely defending themselves against the vitality promised by the body's eroticism. Spiritual worry about the body seems to come from an undervaluation of physical life that parallels an overvaluation of eternity.

Women tormented by anorexia and bulimia have told me how they wish from the depths of their hearts to be relieved of their bodies. Some are embarrassed to have breasts and curves, some develop an overpowering need to cut off their hair, and some just want to waste away until they have no body at all. I've witnessed profound liberation in such women

when they begin to accept their desires and the unique direction of their attractions.

Often spirituality is motivated by an anti-Venus retreat into an ethereal and bodiless realm where we can escape our humanity. We may see in individual cases of anorexia a battle, enacted in the culture at large, to live virtuously in the undeniable presence of the body. The obvious materialism of our age covers over an extreme spiritualism, in which we deny the necessities of Venus and live as though we could ignore the body. Often men and women are so focused on future success in work and business that they first take note of their bodies in serious illness and in sexual attractions that disturb them.

Men can be extremely self-conscious of their bodies. Some can't urinate in public rest rooms because of their deep embarrassment. Many men obsessively devote themselves to weight lifting and fitness, suffering their bodily existence rather than enjoying it. Obviously not comfortable with themselves, men may strut and brawl as though they need to display their physical power and presence.

One of the first achievements to be made in the reconciliation of body and spirit, which is a prerequisite for a deepened, soul-filled sexuality, is a rediscovery of the virtue and value of the body's eroticism. We may have to realize in the starkest terms that the historical and psychological splitting of body and spirit, of transcendence and sensuousness, and of virtue and desire is a neurosis, a disturbance of the soul. It is not a philosophical choice, not a cultural emphasis, and not a spiritual necessity. It takes many forms both within religion and outside of it, both in explicit spiritual devotion of all kinds and in less obvious forms of dedication, as in business and politics.

These divisions lie at the base of modern Western culture, and as such they lie in the individual hearts of us all, contaminating our marriages and our lovemaking. They are false divisions, unnecessary oppositions that affect every aspect of modern life, from our personal emotional stability to the building of bridges. To find the soul of sex we have to wrench it out of the materialistic and mechanistic body that we have created by means of our modern philosophies and reunite it with the subtle, fantasy-filled, mythologized body of the imagination.

Body and spirit marry in the chapel of the soul. They marry every minute of every day, in all activities and in all inactivity, in all thoughts and in all actions, or they marry not at all. If they don't marry, we do not know sexuality with soul, and therefore our sexuality remains incomplete and insufficiently human. We do not find the soul of sex by spiritualizing the body but by coming to appreciate its mysteries and by daring to enter into its sensuousness.

The Beautiful Face

One curious epithet for the goddess Aphrodite is *philommeides*. A tradition going back to ancient literature understands *philommeides* to mean both "lover of smiles" and "lover of the genitals." Aphrodite is often shown with a slight smile on her face, the kind we find both mysterious and intriguing in Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. The smile cannot be reduced to any single meaning, but in relation to other qualities associated with the goddess we can see in it her delight in ordinary physical pleasures, the joy she brings to life, and, not unrelated, her unashamed appreciation for the sexual body.

Aphrodite's mystery is expressed in a smile because she

knows that the face can be used with extreme subtlety to invoke the atmosphere of sex, to attract a partner, and to lure a lover to her sensual rituals. This goddess of the alluring smile is the patroness of seduction. Look closely at statues of Venus and you will find much to read in her smile and in the tilt of her head.

Some people are attractive simply for their facial beauty and handsomeness. With little effort they can work sexual magic, a talent that can be a great gift or a terrible burden. A person with a beautiful face is born into the world of Aphrodite and has to learn how to live in it. As with any immortal gift of birth, such a gifted person has to discover over time how to enjoy it without narcissism and without making it a slave of the ego.

Most of the truly beautiful people I have known confess both their gratitude and their sense of luck for having been born handsome or beautiful, and at the same time they admit that beauty can get them into trouble and can be a weight to carry. They also express their fear of losing their beauty to age, wondering how they are going to get along without it. Their physical beauty becomes part of their makeup and plays a central role in the unfolding of their soul. But the same is true for all of us. Archetypal human beauty shines through in every body and every face, especially to a lover or a parent, and that beauty, with its seductiveness, is part of the life of the soul.

In Marilyn Monroe people encountered the nymph of sex, and she often complained that people looked at her without really seeing *her*: "People had a habit of looking at me as if I were some kind of mirror instead of a person," she said. People didn't exactly see themselves in her, because this mirror performed a special magic. In her they saw their idealiza-

tion of the body and of sex, and beyond that they perceived the sex spirit herself, our nymph, the goddess, who so possessed the actress that the person was hardly to be noticed.

Marilyn Monroe also observed, "The real lover is the man who can thrill you by touching your head or smiling into your eyes or by just staring into space."¹ This simple line captures the sensation of stumbling into Aphrodite's world simply by means of a smile or a stare. All it takes are deep dark eyes, an arch in the eyebrows, flawless skin, a chin of authority, or a delicate throat to do her magic.

The nymph takes residence in men as well as women, and when she is there people react to her presence, sometimes with extraordinary clumsiness, and call it beauty. Cary Grant began his life as Archie Leach, an English actor who worked hard at creating the persona of the suave screen lover—the look, the walk, the accent. His biographer Graham McCann refers to Grant's persona as "a cluster of idealized qualities" and quotes the film critic Pauline Kael describing Cary Grant as "the most publicly seduced male the world has known." He notes that the outrageous Mae West once looked him up and down and said, "You can be had."²

We can all take on the Aphroditic task of making the most of the raw beauty we've been given. The face allows us to eroticize our very persons creatively. Lips, teeth, noses, eyebrows, and skin, along with all the care and medical attention we may bring to them, serve the spirit for whom the body and its sexuality are at the center of life, even though we may judge them superficial.

Cosmetic dental repairs and plastic surgery can be written off as the work of vanity, but they can also be soul-saving resources through which our deep, life-giving sexuality is sustained and cared for. Our sexual nymph may not keep the

heart beating and the brain at work, but she makes life worth living and her work is essential for the survival of the soul.

Erotic Hair

Eyes, dimples, foreheads, cheeks, shoulders—any of these can launch a thousand ships in a person's imagination, becoming a loving obsession as we remember, sketch, photograph, and discuss some small feature of a person we love. One element that has drawn particular attention in literature and painting is the hair. Brushed, dyed, shaved, and shaped according to dictates of meaning, pleasure, and allure, hair has drawn particular attention in life as in art. In the realm of sex hair works a special magic.

Hair is of great importance in religion and in communities dedicated to celibacy, where not giving much attention to hair is a matter of serious concern. When I lived in a Catholic religious order, I was instructed to wear my hair short, preferably about three-quarters of an inch long. The rules forbade the use of shampoo and the growing of beards and mustaches. For centuries, of course, monks were recognized by their tonsure, the small shaved bald spot that was a sign of their initiation into religious life. Eastern monks still shave their heads entirely, while yogis never cut a single hair.

Having short, plain hair may help the monk keep his vow, while the evangelist might benefit from the sexual display of his luxurious coiffure—religion is full of concealed erotic signals. As is often the case, religion shows us in the extreme certain patterns that are common in our daily lives. Deep shifts may be taking place in the soul in those ordinary but crucial moments when we decide to change our hairdo or shave off a beard or, certainly, change hair color.

The many rituals and stories surrounding hair also provide some hints about the life fantasies that mingle with our sexuality. When I was growing up in a Catholic school and family, it was the strict custom for women to have their hair covered whenever they were in church. I never thought much about the meaning of covering the head and always assumed that it was a tradition signifying reverence, parallel to the injunction that men not wear hats in church.

C. G. Jung offers an interesting reason for the practice, one I never heard from the nuns or priests. He says that according to tradition the problem was not that men in the congregation might be tempted by the sight of uncovered feminine hair, but that angels might be thrown into rapture in its presence.³ He explains that in some traditions angels are not as pure as we might think. Sometimes they display an eagerness for sex that matches any human desire, and apparently they can't resist the allure of hair.

We are often told, in one form or another, to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. But to live a vibrant spiritual life the angels and spirits have to be enticed into our daily lives. This legend about angels being attracted by beautiful human hair says something profound about both the spiritual life and the power of sexy hair. Lovely, attractive earthly life is epitomized in beautiful hair, and the cultivation of this life, including the sexual potency of hair, plays an important role in our full participation in our humanity.

Renaissance philosophy sees physical beauty as part of a chain from body to spirit. In his book on love Ficino says that we can ascend from body to soul to angel to God by means of beauty.⁴ I take these levels of reality in very ordinary ways. I can be enraptured by my daughter's hair, but that beauty

only leads me immediately to feelings of love for her, and through her to a love of life, and through that love of life to an appreciation of absolute and infinite beauty. I am easily persuaded of the existence of God through the old argument of beauty, and the chain begins with a child's lovely red hair.

As part for the whole, hair can represent earthly human life in all its sensuousness. In 1922 British sculptor and calligrapher Eric Gill published a wood engraving entitled *Nuptials of God*, showing a woman standing with outstretched arms against the body of Jesus as it hangs on the cross. Except for her arms and two small patches of leg, all you see is her body-length hair covering the entire torso of Jesus. For Gill, this coming together of the suffering Christ and human hair represents the deepest mystery of the spiritual life, the erotic union of Christ and his church.



Eric Gill, *Nuptials of God*

peak, you would immediately be charmed and would see the music of his speech give a beatific cast to his face. A person may not be a typical beauty and yet you can be sent reeling in pleasure by the erotic shape of a cheek or the turn of a lip. Because it is more than the product of cosmetics and aesthetics, beauty casts a spell. It is the work of magic and serves sexuality because it offers pleasure and gives rise to the desire for union.

James Joyce's analysis of beauty, based on the writing of Thomas Aquinas, considers the radiance of a thing to be a primary source of its beauty, a radiance that can be apprehended "luminously" by the human mind, causing an "enchantment of the heart."⁵ It's interesting in this regard that the Greeks described Aphrodite as one who shines like the dawn. In a poem about a new bride, Sappho conjures up this same idea of beauty:

charming to look at,
with eyes as soft as honey,
and a face that Love has lighted
with his own beauty.

In Sappho it is love that inspires the radiance we perceive as beauty. Especially as part of sex, beauty is the result of attraction, desire, and enjoyment rather than a fixed physical quality. It is the radiance of the soul showing itself in a facial expression, an innate facial figuration, or the face as it has been shaped into a certain glowing visage through years of experience. We perceive these rays shining invisibly through a charming face, even though that face may fail to move others and may by all current standards be plain. We may be captivated, unable to think of anything else, and want desper-

ately never to have this presence taken from us, so powerful and meaningful is its beauty.

Growing old diminishes a kind of beauty that is undeniably potent, but it doesn't destroy the beauty that is the soul's radiance, because the body as soul exists partly outside of time and therefore is differently affected by the passing of years. It may take a person of unusual perspicacity to perceive this beauty, or it may require only a person of experience. In Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, when Marcel sees the ageless Odette after a lapse of many years, he says: "I failed at first to recognize her, not because she had but because she had not changed."⁶ Soul beauty is perceived through the senses, yet it is timeless.

Whatever its source, the radiance of the face plays a central role in sex, so much so that in the moment of passion a person may look at his or her partner and catch a glimpse of Aphrodite herself, no longer disguised as the person who slipped into the bed. Perhaps the central goal in sex is to achieve this apotheosis in which the human lover calls forth a momentary perception of divine beauty, thereby turning the lovemaking into true ritual. What we call "good sex" may be nothing less than a timeless rite carried out so effectively that we are deeply affected by the Aphroditic spirit that has been so effectively summoned.

D. H. Lawrence, who was acutely aware of this mystery of divine sexuality, wrote:

What's the good of a man
unless there's the glimpse of a god in him?
And what's the good of a woman
unless she's a glimpse of a goddess of some sort?

In this definition anyone and everyone can be beautiful. Perhaps only a lover can see the soul's beauty reflected in the face or body of the beloved, but even so that beauty is real, and it plays an important part in sex. It's a sign that Venus has been called and that she has responded. And, as the ancients said, she is the *sine qua non* of sex. She gives new meaning to the word nymphomania, which we can define along the lines of Plato and many of his followers as erotic madness or frenzy. Nympho-mania becomes an altered state of consciousness in which we succeed in beholding the nymph in a male or female body, the nymph whose task it is to grace human life with sensual and sexual wonders.

Near the end of his extraordinarily complex novel *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov places a lovely sentence that captures the essence of his unusual story about a man on the edge of sanity, fiercely in love with a young girl: "the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised—the great rosegray never-to-be-had." Humbert Humbert would be called a nymphomaniac, but Nabokov reminds us that sexual desire can be life desire, the craving for immortal perfections expressed in earthly attractions.

The theme is even stronger in the ancient tale of Eros and Psyche, where in a crucial moment Psyche, the soul, breaks her vow not to look at her lover and gazes at Eros, who is Love himself, "a handsome god lying in a handsome posture." She looks long on his beautiful face, his luxuriant hair, his "hairless and rosy body."⁷

These and other ancient stories tell of the soul's attraction to the human body and especially the face. Beyond its mysti-

cal and profound psychological implications, we might simply acknowledge the importance of our own beauty and allure, however great it is, however slight and relative. Renaissance philosophers said that beauty is one of the graces of human life, a gift and a power that should not be underestimated.

Eros and Psyche

