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The "Pinnacle of His Spirit:" Nietzsche and the Erotic

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ABSTRACT While much has been written about Nietzsche's views of women and the "feminine" Nietzsche, little has dealt with his views on sexuality. Since, unlike many philosophical thinkers, he puts value issues in historical context, his main concerns and projects are aimed at social and cultural revolution. The most philosophically profound remarks about sexuality occur in Nietzsche's attempts to counter various fleshless philosophies of the past, especially those that suppress the passions. These range from his critiques of Euripides and Socrates, who are accused of removing passion from art and thought, to critiques of these same tendencies in his contemporaries, especially, in positivists and utilitarians. The bloodless tenor of the works, their admitted escape from the transitoriness of feeling, and the very smallness of their goals are what damn them in Nietzsche's eyes. For Nietzsche, these signaled a philosophy motivated by fear of the unknown, but more important to our inquiry fear of passions and impulses natural to and important for the full experience of life. In this sense his entire philosophy, from start to finish, is an indictment of those who fear the erotic. This paper, while staying true to his works, seeks to consider the consequences of his progressive and retrogressive views of sexuality.

Nietzsche's reputation is built upon his role as "cultural physician;" he considered European culture sick and set for himself an enormous task of moral and cultural reform. The "re-evaluation of all values," aims at the specific problems of the culture of his age. In order to gauge the health of contemporary European culture he engages in comparisons with ancient and contemporary cultures. Philosophy is for him a process of reclamation and invention. We reclaim the healthy philosophies of the past and we invent a new culture for the future. A culture's view of sexuality becomes a barometer for its health; the illness of culture rests on its suppression of instinct. A healthy culture requires the re-integration of drives and impulses. Nietzsche's views of sex can be gleaned from four strands in his thought: his general remarks on passion and the types of philosophers who are its enemies, his powerful and prevalent sexual metaphors, his remarks on reproduction, and his employment of dynamic impulses using masculine and feminine imagery. As is the case with his remarks about art, references to sex, sexuality and

passion are scattered throughout his works, nor have there been many articles on his views of sex in spite of a veritable cottage industry on his views of women. His views of gender range from the merely conventional to the enigmatic and in them is to be found much of his writing on sexuality.

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The resurrection of the erotic motivates his interest in the underside of the cultures of Greek antiquity. *The Birth of Tragedy* moves the high point of antiquity back prior to the golden age; it does this precisely in order to capture the Dionysian elements of ecstatic and orgiastic cults. The book counters the trend to white wash Greek culture and make it palatable to a Christian or positivistic age. Nietzsche turns back to the Greeks for a legacy which includes the sensual and sexual, "...It is here I set the Dionysus of the Greeks: the religious affirmation of life, life whole and not denied or in part; (typical – that sexual act arouses profundity, mystery, reverence)..." (WP, §1052). Against this culture we have the Socratic and Platonic philosophies, which are seen in stark contrast to Dionysus, and who substitute for Dionysian affirmation of life, a philosophy and metaphysics that bases its projects on obtaining truths with certainty and even mathematical precision. This is seen as anti-erotic. The flight to reason claims to be based on truth yet it is ultimately based on fear; this is a fear of the unknown, a discomfort with change, a distrust of the physical and emotional passions.

That Nietzsche sees Christianity as the natural heir to the Socratic and Platonic project is quite clear. The otherworld, created by Christianity, is based on the rejection of the realities of this life. “The Christian priest is from the first a mortal enemy of sensuality: no greater antithesis can be imagined than the innocently awed and solemn attitude by, e.g., the most honorable women’s cults of Athens in presence of the symbols of sex. The act of procreation is the mystery as such in all non-ascetic religions: a sort of symbol of perfection and of the mysterious design of the future: rebirth, immortality.” (WP, §184) In the earlier Greek views the presence of the phallus, to which Nietzsche alludes in this quotation, is a natural part of spiritual life. “It was Christianity, on the basis of its *ressentiment against* life, that first made something unclean out of sexuality...” (TI, p.90). In most of his writing on antiquity he is concentrating on a masculine, a phallic, view of sexuality, “The church fights passion by cutting it out, in every sense; its practice, its therapy, is *castration*” (TI, p.25). As we see in these passages Nietzsche’s most passionate and forceful writing uses strong sensual and sexual imagery; it has as its end the serious criticism of the sterility of many philosophies. To extend his criticism further into history, positivism retains the Puritanism of Christianity on matters sexual; it has yet to be seriously re-evaluated.

Nietzsche takes philosophy’s new job to be cultural creation. As the early Greek thinkers have said, and Nietzsche reiterated, a lot of life is ugly and frightening. Rather than veil it like Schopenhauer; Nietzsche transfigures it. Sexual physiology will then require a transfiguration. “‘The human being under the skin’ is for all lovers a horror and unthinkable, a blasphemy against God and love.” (GS §59) What the masculine artist does is transform what he finds. Nietzsche imagines this transformation in love too. Like Schopenhauer, for whom the actual physical reality of the female form and function inspires revulsion, Nietzsche laments the very reality of women’s embodied nature. Consider the following passage, “When we love a woman, we easily conceive a hatred for nature on account of all the repulsive natural functions to which every woman is subject. We prefer not to think of all this.... Then we refuse to pay any heed to physiology and decree secretly: ‘I want to hear nothing about the fact that a human being

is something more than soul and form.” (GS §59) The above quotation addresses women as the object of attraction but her actual functioning at all stages of life is viewed with condescension or contempt.

Nietzsche's physiological explanations of women's purposes tend to sound essentialist. Women are seen as breeders, helpmates to men “the recreation of the warrior,” and “Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman hath one solution--it is called pregnancy?” *Zarathustra* And once she is a mother, “The females find in their children satisfaction for their desire to dominate, a possession, an occupation, something that is wholly intelligible to them and can be chattered with... Pregnancy has made women kinder, more patient, more timid, more pleased to submit...” (GS, §72) The physiology condemns women to a destiny of submission, yet pregnancy and giving birth become the noblest of virtues, the most potent metaphors for masculine creativity. As with other thinkers of this ilk, the old or older woman presents a problem for him. She appears as a panderer or as the one who advises that man bring a whip when he comes to women. As one critic puts it, “he is decidedly critical of older women and feminists (who devalue their childbearing abilities and want to be seen as equal to men).” (Scott, 69)

As much as Nietzsche finds the image of Dionysus sexually freeing, he is still taking his models of sexual unions and heterosexuality from what are basically Pre-Socratic ideas. His book *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* makes reference to a view of the world, which is divided in sexual terms into the passive and active. “For lovers in complete and strong sense of the word sexual gratification is not essential and is really no more than a symbol: for one party, as already said, a symbol of unconditional submission, for the other a symbol of assent to this, a sign of taking a possession.” (WP 732) Females receive; males give. “It is the same here as with the difference between the sexes: one ought not to demand of the artist, who gives, that he should become a woman – that he should receive....” (WP, 811) This is continued into discussions of male homosexuality where the male who receives is the lower of the two men; he is subject to the other. So to see him using language of submission in dealing with mature women is not shocking. Nietzsche, who smashed so many philosophical, and conceptual dichotomies, seemingly

accepted these essentializing notions. He promises a Dionysian sexuality, a new coupling that should, to follow the method in his other works, not only give us something new but also deny the reality of the preexisting dichotomies. The true and apparent worlds disappear together, objectivity and subjectivity, good and evil are exposed as equally limited in their ability to shed light on the world in which we live. With these dismantled dichotomies, he usually engages in a tri-partite analysis. He shows how these were only constructs, shows next what they were able to do when they functioned helpfully, and finally he shows how they are retrogressive to contemporary philosophical thought. Yet in Nietzsche's writings about sex, we are teased by his metaphorical promises, but it is unclear that he delivers on the suggestions for a new sexuality. And it's hard to think of a new heterosexual sexuality without rethinking gender. His views of sexuality are hyper-masculinized, "sexual love, too, belongs here: it desires to overpower, to take possession, and it appears as self-surrender. Fundamentally it is only love of one's 'instrument,' of one's 'steed' – the conviction that this or that belongs to one because one is in a position to use it." (WP §776) Such metaphors abound in his work.

Since his view is so profoundly masculine, his fear is predictable: emasculation and castration. The following is just an extension of the criticism of Christianity mentioned above but it is nevertheless important since it extends the critique and fear into all contemporary morality. "Affect, great desire, the passion for power, love, revenge, possessions -: moralists want to extinguish and uproot them, to 'purify' the soul of them...the founder of Christianity, recommended this practice to his disciples, the case of sexual excitation, the consequence is, unfortunately, not only the loss of an organ but the emasculation of a man's character – And the same applies to the moralist's madness that demands, instead of restraining of the passions, their extirpation. Its conclusion is always: only the castrated man is a good man..." (WP 383) Nietzsche's point is a powerful one; but in his writings the woman is left "castrated," her passion extirpated.

In a sense Nietzsche is dealing with a great conundrum, that of the European man's heterosexuality. Indeed at times he alludes to the social superiority of the homosexual and homosocial cultures of ancient Greece. Part of the riddle of Socrates can be explained by

his erotic nature. “All great achievements on the part of the man of antiquity were supported by the fact that man stood beside man, and that a woman was not allowed to claim to be the nearest or highest, let alone sole object of his love.” (*Daybreak*, 204-205) If we take this passage with a later one we see the profound consequences of his earlier remark, “The degree and kind of a man’s sexuality reach up into the ultimate pinnacle of his spirit.” (BGE §75) The expressive, dignified, and masculinist culture of antiquity is thus tamed. Compared to these virile images from antiquity Christian culture offers the pale perversion of desire, “- the Christian sex impulse (or marriage)” (WP, §62). The suppression of masculine sexual desire, taming it, moralizing it, all of these, harm not only men, but also the culture as a whole.

But breeding, in the sense of producing a new generation of humans, is not a trivial matter for Nietzsche. “In marriage in the aristocratic, old aristocratic sense of the word it was a question of the breeding of a race... man and woman were sacrificed to this point of view. It is obvious that love was not the first consideration here; on the contrary!” (WP 732) Marriage within such cultures is a proposition regarding procreation and property; it is not a place of sensuality or sexuality. “...The tremendous importance the individual accords to the sexual instinct is not a result of its importance for the species, but arises because procreation is the real achievement of the individual.” (WP 680) Although the writings we have discussed so far are conventional in terms of women’s roles, the type of women with whom Dionysian men might breed remains a serious question.

The physiological woman has to be transfigured; she must be made more perfect. “That making perfect, seeing as perfect, which characterizes the cerebral system bursting with sexual energy... every perfection, all the beauty of things, revives through contiguity this aphrodisiac bliss. (Physiologically: the creative instinct of the artist and the distribution of semen in his blood-) The demand for art and beauty is an indirect demand for the ecstasies of sexuality communicated to the brain. The world become perfect, through ‘love’”(WP 805). Although Nietzsche describes these things physiologically, especially in his unpublished writings, the artist and the philosopher of culture must transform these

physical realities. As one critic put it, “*Where things are not beautiful, attractive, desirable...The Gay Science turns to art...for the erotic transfiguration that is love*” (Babich, 7).

Although his early remarks on women are extremely conventional and stereotyped, “...for in the Orient women regard chastisements and the secret seclusion of their person from the world as a sign of their husband’s love, and complain if this sign is lacking.” (Daybreak, 9) Women want passivity. And women’s sexual passions must still be held in check, lest “...ignorant young wives may become accustomed to the frequent enjoyment of sex and miss it greatly later if their husbands become ill or prematurely feeble; it is precisely this innocent and credulous idea that frequent intercourse is thoroughly right and proper that it produces in them a need which later expose them to violent temptations or worse...” (Daybreak, p159) On a few occasions Nietzsche does try to figure out what love and sex could be to a woman and he states one conundrum with some perspicacity. “On female chastity. — There is something quite amazing and monstrous about the education of upper-class women...All the world is agreed that they are to be brought up as ignorant as possible of erotic matters, and that one has to imbue their souls with a profound sense of shame in such matters...then to be hurled, as by a gruesome lightning bolt, into reality and knowledge, by marriage—precisely by the man they love and esteem most!...Thus a psychic knot has been tied that may have no equal. Even the compassionate curiosity of the wisest student of humanity is inadequate for guessing how this or that woman manages to accommodate herself to this solution of the riddle, and to the riddle of a solution, and what dreadful, far-reaching suspicions must stir in her poor, unhinged soul—and how the ultimate philosophy and skepsis of woman casts anchor at this point!” (GS, §71) In spite of his conventionalism he shows some sensitivity to the plight of the female in the demand for her sexual ignorance and the assumption that she is entirely sexual. “The enormous expectation in sexual love and the sense of shame in this expectation spoils all perspective for women from the start” (BGE, §114)

There is no single work by Nietzsche on sexuality; his views must be pieced together from fairly random remarks. There is no doubt that he took sexuality as crucial to his

new man, “The degree and kind of a man’s sexuality reach up into the ultimate pinnacle of his spirit.” (BGE §75) As one of the primary interpreters of the mixed and multiple motivations that lie beneath human action, it is not surprising to see passion, sensuality and sexuality emerging in almost every analysis and speculations on his sexual life are so important and commonly found in even scholarly works. Such writings about his own sexuality as do exist are all highly suspect; these include his alleged homosexuality, his contracting syphilis, and his fear of sexual contact with women. *My Sister and I*, a text long considered spurious, suggests he experienced childhood sexual abuse at the hands of his sister; this and his having been raised in a largely female household have been used to justify this array of speculations. Apart from his actual known infatuations, such as those with Cosima Wagner and Lou Andreas Salomé, there is very little evidence regarding his own actual sexual proclivities.

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