

Signs and Symbol in the Sexual Act

Dans l'anthropogénie, la sexualité a une importance extrême du fait (a) de l'évidence organique du corps humain due à la station debout, (b) du rythme croisé de l'orgasme bisexuel, (c) du ralentissement des comportements en particulier dans la caresse. En même temps, la description phénoménologique du coït et de l'orgasme a été d'ordinaire insuffisante, parce qu'elle contraste trop avec celle des comportements techniques et sémiotiques pour lesquels le langage a été créé et se développe. L'Intention sexuelle (1968) et le présent article, d'abord publié dans les Cahiers du Symbolisme (1970), tentent de combler cette lacune.

The human being lives in the midst of signs. One can even define the human being as the originating principle of signs, and with structuralism describe human consciousness as the void, the empty box through which signs change and eventually reorganize into new signs.

Characteristic for the sign is that it emerges, rises from a ground; at the same time it takes on integrative properties. Thus it presents the essential features of form (*Gestalt*). But beyond the fact that it is more conventional than the form, it joins to the perceptual datum a concept; this is made up of a signifier (for example, a word) and a signified (the concept designated by this word). On the other hand it refers to its environment in a definite manner: a sign always refers to another sign, says Peirce; in the world of signs, says Saussure, there are differences only, so that a sign signifies only within a system of signs; it gives rise to a discourse in being enunciated, or at least to a course in being effected. Language is assuredly the most elaborate network of signs; but it is necessary to bring signal systems together, including all objects, artificial and natural, whether seen through languages and scripts, or when presenting themselves as scripts. One sees how the world of signs, rich and ambiguous as they are, places the human being in the presence of structures at once precise, intelligible, and effective. But these structures are relative, i.e. localized and successive, spatio-temporal. And they remain before the subject, like objects (*ob-jecta*). In short the sign presupposes, in every way, abstraction. Making at once for lucidity and action, it furnishes the stuff of empirical and scientific knowledge, as well as of practical life and social organization. Which is to say that it has attained its purity only in the West. But even where its status remains uncertain, as in those cultures not deriving from technical Greece, it evidences, relative to nature, a discontinuity and detachment sufficient to demonstrate humanness.

Yet it seems that the human being is not content with this realm of signs. With non-Western man one discovers even in everyday life, and with Western man in certain exceptional activities, experiences of the absolute, let us say total and immediate, abolishing space and time, the opposition of the subject and the object. These experiences are three in number: the sexual act, artistic rapture, and the mystic illumination. In each one the nature of signs is profoundly altered. The body of the beloved and of the lover (or their duality); the major work of art, in its different forms: poetry, painting, architecture, music, the dance; the Self to which the "interior castles" lead, none provide any relief over against what surrounds, neither articulation of the components, nor the rigorous placement in a system, neither the possibility of strict ways of designation nor of performance, neither of objectivity before the subject, nor even distinction of signifier from signified. On the contrary, these phenomena, each in its own way, abolish or encompass their environment, and are thereby infinite; here the parts are already the whole, and here the whole resonates as such in the parts. Thus they vanquish space and time; the signifier comprehends in itself the signified; the opposition of subject and object is surmounted; the active and the passive merge spontaneously. Consequently, even though there is a meaning here, one

cannot speak of signs, nor of signification, and it would have been easy to reserve for this purpose the term of "symbol," in opposing it to the "sign." But "symbol," "symbolic," "symbolism" often designate signs and the capacity in general of signifying. One ought then, to avoid confusion, each time indicate that the experiences of the absolute involve symbols which are "plenary," or "radical." We have nevertheless decided, in this study, to term *symbol*, merely those manifestations of meaning which exceed - in both directions - the world of signs.

The word "symbol" has the advantage of marking the fact that the theme of the experiences in question is not entities but relations -which still does not go beyond the signs - but where the relations in question are not posterior to their terms, where it would even be inadequate to say that their terms take place within. On the contrary, like the Greek *symbolon* (an object divided into two parts between two separate persons which enable them to be identified, according to Bailly), the symbol is a relation anterior to its terms, engendering them, a unity whose partition is simply a fructification, an internal polarization. This conjunction, prior to what are conjoined, governs in two ways what we are discussing. On the one hand, it defines the relationships between the parts and the whole in the object: the way in which in the beloved body, in the work of art, in the mystic Self, the parts do not remain parts (even of a Gestalt) but are internal resonances, and in each instance integral ones, of the whole. On the other hand, this conjunction rules the contact between the object of the experience and its subject, it brings it about that there is no longer a subject contraposed to an object (*Gegen-stand, voor-werf, pre-met*), but precisely a couple, where the lover and the beloved, the work and its beholder, the Self and the "I," find themselves literally produced by a unity anterior to their distinction, a unity of which they are the dialecticization, lacking which it would stagnate in identity. These two aspects harmonize : it is because the parts and the whole are completely resonant in the object that there is a coupling of subject and object, and reciprocally. In brief, the symbol is absolutely concrete.

This shows that it is not *some thing* which is total and immediate, and that here there are not so much symbols as symbolizations. In particular concords (or discords) of subjective and objective conditions, in certain of their dialectical moments, it is evident that perception, instead of remaining perspectival and successive, as in ordinary life, anticipates, in each profile of the object, its whole. The imagination no longer consumes images at once delimited and successive, materials of memory and need, but phantasies, matters of reminiscence and desire, or more precisely fantasy, by which we designate (in a usage a bit different from that of psychoanalysis) the primordial and individualizing union of a conscious body with the world. In short, the accomplishment is no longer a work, which produces or constructs; since it displays the unity instead of effecting it, it proves just as passive as it is active; or better, as spontaneous it passes beyond the opposition of activity and passivity by the same movement in which it surpasses that of the subject and object. Now, perception, imagination, realization, became immediate and total, not only enable one another's possibility, as in everyday life, but as vital aspects of one another, as aspects of a body given up to its pure presence at the same time as given up to the pure presence of the universe as whose focus it experiences itself.

One must not divide the sphere of symbols from that of signs. The symbol is a negation of determination; but it has been observed, ever since neo-Platonism, that a negation of this kind has no meaning save by the determination which it negates; it is the richer as the negated determinations become more numerous and subtle. Thus the sexual symbol, artistic and mythic, requires a world of signs, a world of everyday life or of science if its negation is not to be an empty one. Just as, reciprocally, the world of everyday life and of signs has need - existenti-ally if not formally - of the underlying presence of symbols to preserve the living tie without which relations become lost in their unending reflections.

One could define coitus as the symbolization obtained through orgasm in completing a caress that crosses the bodies of two subjects according to the modalities of masculine and feminine.

Physiologically, the orgasm involves a synchronization of neurons rising sharply toward a climax before breaking down in energy discharge. Psychically, it unites in extreme fashion intensity with expansion. Discriminating nothing, it transmits no information, it neither receives nor sends any sign; it is at once perception, imagination, motor activity, none of which are informational, and thus indefinite, infinite, like the rest of the genital sensation which prepares it. Finding its point of application at the center of the organism, it brings it together again as a whole, securing the fusion of its parts, and at the same time their diffusion. Experienced from the abdominal region, and from the extremity of this region, it leads the living body back to the level of its continuity with nature. It is even an experience of fusion, from the fact that it takes its felt start in the erectile tissues, leading to an effusion, projecting the subject outside of himself in a manner referred to as his ecstasy, so much so that the play of sensation and desire here becomes the sensation of desire. Its passivity, or if one prefers, its spontaneity, is such that it is able to pass for an automatism. Its predispositions for symbolic experiencing are evident.

Nevertheless, if the orgasm were nothing but that, it would be confusion, loss of consciousness; its renditions of totality and immediacy would be empty. But it is rhythmic, i.e., return at the same time as departure, coming and going. This can be seen in the failures of the male: overly abandoned, he loses himself in premature ejaculation; overly restrained, he hesitates in delayed ejaculation. And there are the comparable difficulties for the female. As Ferenczi has well noted, orgasmic success is a subtle equilibrium of abandon and recovery, of transcendence and immanence, of ecstasy and consciousness, of in-determination and determination. Projection to the extreme limit of self, but remaining within the self. Trusting and self-control in turn, alternating so rapidly as to form but one consciousness, one *Erlebnis*.

But, because of such seizure the orgasm, too brief, would remain incapable of the symbolization, if it were not joined to the caress, which more tranquil, prepares the orgasm and culminates in it. The caress also has two poles. It is a procedure effusion, of a joining of parts, of a reciprocal generation of parts, or, more precisely, their derivation from their antecedent unity; it thrives on vertigo from the moment it becomes sexual (the simple familiar caress does not concern us here); it does not distinguish subject and object, but invites them to emerge from their duality; culminating at the genital focus, it leads the organism to melt and radiate from its very center; it never explores, manipulates, nor discriminates; it makes use of perfumes, of dusk, of prattle, the better to flow. But at the same time, while dissolving determination, and in preventing its perception as such, it yet introduces it, because, however its ways melt and dissolve, they are still, however slightly, its ways. Inasmuch as it is attentive to the least detail, even if it is always the whole which is perceived in this detail, the caresser summing up the caressed in the lobe of an ear. Moreover, the caress develops the hint of seduction, even if the subject abandons himself. Thus the caress, determining indeterminacy, has the same antinomic structure as the orgasm in its coming and going. Likewise it connects more of the finite, the partial, the successive, to the infinite, the total, the eternal - but from within, without compromising them, so that they are not lost in indifferenciation.

Thus it is necessary to see that the caress and the orgasm are two moments, two aspects, of one and the same experience: the caress is the orgasm begun, guided, differentiated; the orgasm is the caress accomplished, fulgurant, ravishing. Thus both ground the ambiguity of the symbolization, each within itself, but in their relations as well. For the articulation of immediate and mediate, of conscious and unconscious, indispensable for the symbol, is realized by the caress in favoring each first term, and by the orgasm in favoring the second.

Nevertheless, however close and fluid the object may be, the subject, if it did not receive any response, would remain in front of it, and the exteriority, the opposition, the activity proper to the world of signs would not be truly surmounted. In truth the sexual object is itself feelingful, and feelingful to the same caressing and orgasmic rhythm as the subject. So that the sensation of the one, instead of terminating in something strange, drawing back or dissipating, returns to itself via the sensation of the other, achieving closure. Thus the partners, face-to-face in a circle of feeling together, enclose a world, including in it the world and the consciousness of world. Nor do they need to be active, each one taking birth from the other.

However, reciprocal touching must not simply join like to like. For then the circle of feeling, returned from the identical to the identical, would revolve without reference, or, giving each one a response merely the equivalent to his question, would not enable egress from the self. The simple desire of the other's desire, if the two desires are not qualified, ends in a tourniquet and does not overcome solipsism. Only the coital couple does not confront the same with the same but refers it to what is nearest itself. In effect, if one reflects on the minimal relation where affective perception, imagination, and sensible performance -which alone are in accord with the concrete design of coitus - are able to make a unity manifold without distending it, one finds the relation of tenon and mortise; every other way of dividing the initial whole yields a lesser intimacy in their act and in their result. Now coitus not only actualizes this relation but makes it the focus of its attention. It is the relation of tenon and mortise now become sensible and the primitive theme of desire. The joined partners, and, moreover, only face to face, do not have a relation between themselves which binds them in a unity; rather they diversify, at the least possible remove from the origin, the anterior unity of which they are the parting. The genital feeling is experienced as included by the mediation of the includer, as including by the mediation of the included, and in such originary fashion that it is cosmogonically lived.

Thus coitus does not favor the prevalence of the masculine over the feminine, nor the inverse; and it is very much to the point to ask if there is but one libido, masculine, as Freud thinks, or whether there is a second, feminine, in the view of Melanie Klein. On both sides there is but one desire, one libido, that of Conjunction. The coitus is the Conjunction, a unity anterior to its terms diversifying itself, polarizing itself in the roles of fleshly tenon and mortise, according to the anatomical and physiological possibilities of each.

This anteriority of copulation (at least phantasied) to its partners is so genuine that there are not, properly speaking, sexual organs, i.e., apparatuses which precede the sexual act, as the hand precedes grasping, the mouth chewing. The penis does not become an organ save in its erection, the vaginal orifice in its opening, as vaginismus attests. It is not as altogether constituted that they excite first the image of their union, then this union itself, but on the contrary it is the phantasy of their conjunction, sustained by their erectile capability, which gives them their form. It is for this reason that they belong to no one. Lacan has emphasized this for the phallus on semantic grounds, and Claude Simon, in *Flanders Road*, from simple experience; one might say much the same for the vagina. The sexual organs do not bring about the Conjunction, for in that case they would belong to the partners. Once they have been formed by the conjunctive phantasy, they are the Conjunction itself - perceptual, imaginary, and motoric - in the course of self-accomplishment. Accordingly, there is neither attraction nor the *need* of a feminine pattern by a masculine one, nor the reverse, but *desire* of the copulation.

We have seen that the symbol supposes the signs, inasmuch as surpassing has no meaning save in relation to the surpassed. To arrive at a full comprehension of coitus, it thus becomes necessary to see how it connects with everyday life. In itself alone the differentiation of the sexes is a sheer superabundance of unity, and not yet, properly speaking, a determination. But as involved in daily life it is genuinely determined.

For the human being there is, in effect, a simultaneous appeal to two opposing orientations: to favor the discontinuous and live as a subject confronting the world, modifying it by work in a dynamic transformation; or to live as a subject-object united with the world, favoring its fresh growth and its own being in a dynamic adaptation responsive to continuities. It is impossible for the individual to accomplish these two aspects of his destiny to the same degree; he must favor one of them to secure inner coherence. Now the masculine genital form, convex and discontinuous, is more conducive to the first attitude, while the feminine genital form, concave and continuous, is more conducive to the second. From which, whatever be the cultural differences, there is an evident complementarity of existential styles between man and woman (Buytendijk), and a primary manner of being determined.

And, since the human being is a classifying animal, groups have taken up this distinction to construct systems all the way from astronomical phenomena to kinship ties, social stratifications, culinary prescriptions, technical terms. This is responsible for relating the masculine to the luminous, the solar, the mountainous, the arid, and the feminine to the shadowy, the lunar, the low-lying, the humid, with inversions, sometimes striking ones, of particular peoples. This procedure is very evident in cultures called primitive, but echoes of it can be found in the so-called evolved cultures, even at the very heart of scientific speculation, as Bachelard has shown.

It is thus necessary carefully to distinguish three levels: (a) the elementary distribution of the Conjunction as vital tenon and mortise, as it is experienced in the coitus itself; (b) the complementarity of styles of existence resulting from this distribution; (c) the concrete forms assumed by the existential styles in a particular cultural complex. The first of these levels is that of the symbol. The third is that of the signs. The second is the mediation through which the symbol acquires the signs whose negation comprises its meaning, and through which, in return, the signs guarantee remembrance of the originary bond within its diffused everyday forms. This intermediate level is close enough to the Conjunction so that through it the commonplace manifestations of the masculine and feminine assume, even in their artifice, the quality of ontological complementarity.

Moreover, the coitus is linked not only with the entire existence of the individual, but with his beyond, his issue, in the eventual fertilization. As continuation of life, insofar as it introduces a combination of genes which is an extension of the couple become visible, the fertilization opens the Conjunction (without breaking it) to a fresh proliferation of signs and operations. As moment of death, for it announces the relief of one generation by another, the fertilization summons the Conjunction, in extreme fashion, to the negation of every sign and every individual. The fertilization undoubtedly affords the ultimate distension of the symbolic.

The necessary articulation of sexual symbol in terms of signs, despite the inner logic of coitus and despite its fundamental intention, results in a variety of sexualities according to individuals and cultures. Thus the pervert, characterized by failure to attain symbolization, contracts the symbols into signs: his desire, instead of liberating in the joined bodies the infinity and immediacy of phantasy, shrivels to *objects* or *organs* (fetishism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, sadism, masochism), or encloses itself in *roles* anterior to the Conjunction (homosexuality).

Without going as far, the West, whose merit it has been to abstract pure signs, has had to express the sexual act in the most operational vocabulary possible: these have been the reproductive and hygienic conceptions, reducing the sexual act to a *means* of propagating the species or securing physical equilibrium, or to the hedonist conception, which sees in it a simple pleasure. Such activism borders on perversion - a phenomenon essentially Western - but it customarily remains sufficiently theoretical so that it does not truly compromise the acts, salvaging in actuality the symbolic dimension repressed (or precluded) in the theory.

By contrast, non-Western peoples have always conceived coitus as symbol: in a cosmical form in Africa and India, "erotic" in Greek esoterism, creationist in Israel, orgiastic in countless dissident groups. Then it is the signs, in the form of mythological proliferation, which menace the symbol, and in these groups sexual mythification assumes the role which perversion plays for us. Finally, in the countries of advanced industrial civilization, a new type of sexuality, which one could call interpersonal, is born. If elsewhere the partners obliterate their singularity for the sake of the Conjunction, here they underline it; and it is the personalized flesh, this recent invention, which, in its singularity, conjoins the determinism of the sign and the infinity of the symbol. Yet perversion is always at hand, and Sartre has described an interpersonal nuance of sadism and of masochism.

The evocation of signs by the symbol also explains the genetic development of sexuality, whose initial manifestations are to be found in the erections of the nursing infant, joined, like the earliest smiling, to the so-called REM sleep, in which dreaming occurs. If it is true that the erection already commences the desired Conjunction, if smiling is, as Freud thinks, an acquiescence not to the particular but to the world in general, if the dream provides the least restrictive liberation of fantasy, we have there the original nebula of sexual symbolism, and even of symbolism in general. Then, in the same way that learning seeks to record or to establish differentiated signs, it is possible to see a quest for self-regulation spurring the individual on to annex more and more extended and abstract realms. This is the viewpoint of the logicians like Piaget, for whom after all the truly real is to be found in the functioning of comprehensive signs. But this movement can also be that of symbolization, which, in order to grow, or simply to remain conscious, requires circumstanced mediations. A dialectic of this sort is particularly clear in the resolution of the Oedipus complex, where sexuality passes beyond the family circle in the direction of social preoccupations in the latency period, then toward the adult choice of a sexual partner outside the family circle, and that less by reason of an irrational defense forbidding the mother and father - except by historical accident - than by a requirement of the sexual intention itself, whose symbolic outreach would end in failure if it were to enclose itself in the semantics, so soon stagnant, of the parental triangle.

Thus it is necessary to be careful in deciding whether the sexual symbolization is archaic or creative. As a symbol it always refers back to the initial nebula. But this nebula, in order to continue to exist, in order not to lose consciousness, must differentiate itself from a differentiation, which each time it negates. Such an unfolding, always recognized in vain, is undoubtedly the very movement of existence, flux and reflux together. It is strictly the case that the more archaic the coitus is, the more it means the future. Just as art is the more creative as the primary fantasy is more liberated. As the mystical culmination is the more inspiring of action as its abandon is without return.

Of all experiences of symbolization, coitus is the most primitive. We have surmised its presence in the smiles and the precocious erections of the nursing infant during REM sleep, the sleep of dreaming. But theoretical reasons can be given, too. It is in the sexual experience that the articulation of the symbol into signs fundamentally occurs: the body of the subject contraposed to another body of the same species, the latter convoked by the erection (masculine or feminine),

of itself conjunctive. Contrariwise art has for its material an object which is nothing but a quasi-subject (Mikel Dufrenne), and the mystic Self supposes the world. As for the act of symbolizing, since we have seen that it grounds the symbol, it assumes equally in coitus, at least as fantasied, the most elementary of forms: that of orgasm pursued for its own sake. Contrariwise, artistic creation or mystical ecstasy have recourse to neuron synchronizations of the orgasmic type - without which no symbolization is possible - but *with* the subtleties and moments of suspense that introduce into perception, imagination, and performance (as in the perceived, the imagined, and performed) the distance of knowledgeable mediations.

If it is not true that the sexual act is the model of all symbolism and all semantics, it remains their permanent root. Other levels of symbols, art and mysticism, other systems of signs, science, technics, logic, develop latent characters irreducible to the sexual act. But its priority, both temporally and dialectically, makes them lose their originary bond, so that they become rank or wasted - neuroses or psychoses - as soon as they neglect its renewal or its recall.

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