

# Sexual Stereotypes

John P. Sisk

I UNDERSTAND that Dr. Benjamin Spock's completely revised *Baby and Child Care* will, among other things, warn parents about the danger of sexual stereotyping. We went through three copies of the original Spock while raising our own brood. For me one of its most memorable passages had to do with bloody diarrhea, about which the author managed to be both comforting and tentative: perhaps the manifestation would clear up by the next diaper change, but perhaps too it was already time to call the pediatrician. I find it hard to imagine a Spock so revised that he will not manage to be tentative about sexual stereotyping as well, but it may be that the prevailing climate of opinion has been too much for him. Perhaps he has read Germaine Greer, whose inclination is not to be tentative about anything, least of all sexual stereotyping. Twenty years ago Spock readers confronted with bloody diarrhea in the middle of the night couldn't have cared less about the dangers of sexual or any other kind of stereotyping. Will it now be the other way around?

In any event, during that twenty-year period many of us have acquired stereotypical reactions to sexual stereotyping that may be as restrictive as the old stereotypes ever were. Indeed, one characteristic of the post-modern 70's, narcissistically concerned as they are with self-realization, is their anxiety of the stereotype—a social version of Yale professor Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence. Bloom's term refers to the poet's fear that his own creativity will be crippled by the influence of mighty predecessors. It suggests that Freudian myth in which the anxious and envious sons must devour their father—their past—lest their manhood be denied. It suggests too the self-congratulation (as well as the subterranean anxiety beneath it) with which Rousseau begins his *Confessions*: "I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different."

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Perhaps the anxiety of the stereotype, the anxiety of not being different, is at bottom a fear that unless the past can be disposed of, the individual will remain a prisoner of culture, which, as the formal result of the human effort to cope with environment, is everywhere involved with history. Contemporary society, in this view, consumes stereotypes as voraciously as it consumes everything else, as a way of eating up and disposing of the past. It appears, then, that we need to discover or create new stereotypes in order to have the experience of freeing ourselves from them.

Certainly there is evidence of such a need in the naiveté about history that informs so much of the popular literature designed to flatter and reinforce the liberational impulse in both sexes. The writers who appear in *Playboy*, *Playgirl*, *Hustler*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Cavalier*, and *Viva* characteristically express an often touching dawn-age conviction that not only they but the world itself, insofar as it really matters, was born yesterday. When they traffic with the past at all it is from such a polemical and limited perspective that it is easily disposed of—as if it were, in the opinion of all reasonable people, a child's legend.

In fairness to such writers it ought to be conceded that an ignorance of history—or, more exactly, an absence of the historical imagination—is often necessary equipment for the pursuit of a radically new vision. Unfortunately, an ignorance of the past fosters the arrogance of the present, a device we employ to hide from ourselves the very real possibility that the past existed not only for itself but in order to produce presents beyond ours, which may turn out (as usual) to be anything but what we hoped for. Thus our attitude about the nature of our own moment in relation to all previous moments is not only a familiar post-renaissance stereotype, but it turns out to be, as stereotypes generally are, a great comfort to us.

## II

THE EXHILARATING conviction that by consuming stereotypes we are disposing of the menace of the past keeps us from seeing that what we put in place of them is often little



more than rejuvenations of old stereotypes. SCUM (The Society for Cutting Up Men) founded by Valerie Solanas, the woman who shot Andy Warhol, and WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), which came to public attention by way of bra burnings and opposition to the Miss America pageant, no doubt induced their members to think of themselves not only as liberated from cultural stereotypes but as something entirely new under the sun. Both organizations, however, fostered variations on the historically familiar stereotypes of the shrew and the witch, as a reading of Elizabeth Janeway's *Man's World, Woman's Place* helps to make clear. Similarly the relatively rapid passage from boom to bust of figures like Timothy Leary and Abbie Hoffman (to say nothing of counterculture heroes generally) has a great deal to do with the fact that they were recurrences of stereotypes with which Western civilization had been contending since early Christian times. To judge from his recent book, ex-Yippie Jerry Rubin, having been forced to abandon his stereotype of playboy nihilist, is currently displaying himself as a bargain-basement version of Goethe's *Bildungsroman* hero, Wilhelm Meister, and is thus exploiting one of the oldest of romantic stereotypes.

A FEW years ago Dr. Mary Jane Sherfey, a New York psychiatrist, argued in *The Nature and Evolution of Female Sexuality* that women are by nature sexually insatiable and that civilization derives from the forcible suppression by men of this insatiability. Of course, this idea, without such psychiatric support, was already abroad in the land when Dr. Sherfey's book appeared, thanks to an assist from Masters and Johnson. In the mid 60's, for instance, Brigid Brophy, in the process of taking a stand against monogamy, could write as though it were common knowledge that while the needs of a man can be satisfied quickly "to the point of exhaustion by one woman," her biology "really requires a large number of lovers," perhaps three or four permanent husbands, so that she can only be frustrated by the traditional marriage relationship.

No doubt such an image of female sexual voracity was (and still is) unacceptable to many women; nevertheless, it was indicative of a significant change in attitude—one that appeared quickly in the more respectable women's magazines. Modern women, Jessie Bernard writes in *The Future of Marriage*, "are potentially 'sexier' than women were in the past." They "seem to have lost their inhibitions about sex and want their pleasuring," says the psychotherapist Wardell Pomeroy. The recently published *Hite Report* would appear to confirm him. This random survey, Dr. Mary Calderone is convinced, indicates clearly that "the sexual potential of women is almost infinite in its variety and richness." P. B.

Jones, the scabrous narrator in Truman Capote's work-in-progress, *Answered Prayers*, would agree with her, though he would probably avoid an honorific term like "richness."

Such a theory about the erotic capacity of women may promise a good deal more than life can deliver (human visions of sexual fulfillment being notoriously hyperbolic). Still, it is understandably attractive to those women who still suffer from a guilty attachment to an asexual "Victorian" image of themselves and to the men who suffer with them. Dr. Sherfey and Shere Hite may seem to have discovered the true New Woman, a figure only faintly adumbrated by the *Cosmopolitan* cover girls or by those wives who, according to last year's *Redbook* survey, had been able to indulge in extramarital affairs without ceasing to think of themselves as happily married. Nevertheless, the sexually insatiable woman has a long and colorful history—one which in Western civilization should perhaps be traced from that legendary Greek transsexual, Tiresias, who, having been both man and woman, judged that women derived the greater pleasure from the sexual act.

In his Sixth Satire, Juvenal, for instance, cites the sexual insatiability of women ("Foul longings burn inside each girlish breast") as a chief reason why his friend Postumus should not marry. In Book III of *The Art of Courtly Love* (surely one of the most influential books in our culture) Andreas Capellanus warns "friend Walter" that "Every woman in the world is likewise wanton, because no woman, no matter how famous and honored she is, will refuse her embraces to any man, even the most vile and abject, if she knows that he is good at the work of Venus." The robust sexual appetite of Chaucer's Wife of Bath ("five husbands at church-door, besides other company in her youth") anticipates Joyce's Molly Bloom. The insatiable woman is insatiably at work in Boccaccio and Rabelais, to say nothing of *commedia dell'arte* farce and medieval fabliaux like Chaucer's "Miller's Tale."

In his influential book, *The Office and Dutie of an Husband*, the 16th-century humanist Lodovicus Vives advises young husbands against a too fervent loving of their wives lest they kindle in them "that fire, the which thou canste not quenche agayne." In Presbyterian Scotland at about the same time, John Knox was calling angry attention to the "natural Weakness and inordinant appetites of women," many of whom "have burned with such inordinant lust, that for the quenching of the same, have betrayed to strangers their countrie and citie." Not much later Shakespeare's Iago (who otherwise has little in common with Knox) argues that the presence of the unquenchable fire in Desdemona ("She must have change, she must") is reason enough for the love-sick Roderigo to believe that he will be able to win her away from Othello. Mozart's Don Giovanni no less than Byron's Don

Juan assumes the insatiable woman. In "A Bedroom Discourse" the insatiable Marquis de Sade remarks that since nature has "endowed women with a more passionate temperament and greater sensibility than the other sex, the marriage bond was undoubtedly more stifling for them." And in due time comes the "tropical" Henry Miller with his hero, the indefatigable stud, whose assignment is the herculean one of quenching the raging fires of "uterine hysteria."

Clearly, in these instances the stereotype of the insatiable woman is in great part a male creation containing the mixture of fascination and dread that centers around the male image of the prostitute, the call girl, and the nymphomaniac. Only Sade (women "who have far more violent desires than we for the pleasures of lust, should be able to express them as much as they wish") might seem to point unambiguously to the Tiresias-Sherfey-Brophy counter-stereotype and beyond it to the Isadora Wing of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* and the Ginny Babcock Bliss of Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks*. Both novels are widely celebrated as liberational for women, which can hardly be said of the views of Juvenal, Capellanus, and Knox, for whom the sexual insatiability of women represents an enslavement by passion and therefore a cultural threat to everyone. The revised or new stereotype, then, says that the male-chauvinist version of it was right all along, but for the wrong reasons.

However, it is not simply a matter of the replacement of the obviously outmoded by the new and relevant. The traditional and revised stereotypes continue to coexist, and on occasion to intermingle strangely. Apparently there are women who take as much comfort from Sherfey, Brophy, and Jong as they do from Susan Brownmiller. It is quite possible to argue that women are both naturally insatiable and naturally fearful of rape, but it is not an argument that is likely to impress those who see the new stereotype as simply bringing out into the open what the old one knew all along: that women, being sexually insatiable, invite and enjoy rape. This is ultimately Sade's position: rape is nothing more than a service to a natural impulse, so he has a foot in both camps.

*Fear of Flying* and Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, then, may not be utterly incompatible, but they hardly reinforce one another. The problem is the ease with which one can take from the latter the conviction that rape is the prototypical heterosexual act, that "normal" sexuality is simply a sublimation of rape to which it must always be reduced for purposes of clear definition. Rape, Brownmiller writes, "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" and woman's fear of it, rather than a "natural inclination toward monogamy, motherhood, and love," is

therefore sufficient explanation for the beginning of domestic life. "The insouciance of Brownmiller's generalizations," Diane Johnson observes, "invites cavil and risks discrediting her book and with it her subject." It also risks delivering her into the hands of those who believe that the best way to be against rape is to be against heterosex. *Fear of Flying*, on the other hand, not only resists such reductive generalizations but, by being as committed to heterosex as are *Playgirl*, *Cosmopolitan*, the *Wife of Bath*, and Molly Bloom, it resists the effort to establish the raped woman as the master stereotype of the feminine condition.

### III

The insatiable woman, whether under the old or revised stereotype, is about as far as she can be from the stereotype of the Griselda, that model of submissive constancy whose most memorable appearance is in Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale." In this story a lord chooses as his wife a woman of low degree and then over a period of years submits her promise of utter obedience to a series of cruel tests. After it is finally clear to him that she is really as constant as she appears to be, they live happily together. In the process, Chaucer might seem to anticipate in an extreme form a central thesis of Helene Deutsch's *Psychology of Women*: that it is the nature of woman to be submissive and masochistic.

The figure of the Griselda whose constancy is defined in adversity haunts our high and low fictions. She is still a force to be reckoned with, though she is sorely pressed now by powerful competitors (indeed, even in Chaucer's time she was sorely pressed, otherwise she would have had no meaning). All of Shakespeare's good women are Griselda figures in their constancy, though some of the most attractive of them (Rosalind of *As You Like It*, Viola of *Twelfth Night*, and Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance), are at the same time versions of a type which might be called The Clever Girl, so that an intelligent adventuresomeness is represented as an essential part of their femininity. Our culture has cherished the Griselda not simply as a male convenience but because of the fear of the cultural consequence of erotic selfishness—what Santayana has called "our absolute little passions." By dramatizing the ideal of unconditional self-abnegating commitment, she functions as a fix-point in fictions in which without her (as in *Othello* or Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*) the alternative would be chaos.

Such too was the Griselda's function in her guise as the most popular version of the Victorian woman, whose assignment, Walter Houghton points out in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, was "to guide and uplift her more worldly and intellectual mate," for by her virtue and wisdom "men are redeemed from weakness and vice," especially

those vices that derive from the world of business. The extent to which this stereotype still has compelling force is apparent in Shirley Chisholm's statement of reasons why we need more women in politics: "The women of a nation mold its morals, its religion, and its politics by the lives they live. At present, our country needs women's idealism and determination, perhaps more in politics than anywhere else." In a similar vein the poet-critic Jane Hayman wonders in the *Nation* whether the truth may not be that what many women really want "is a change in morals, a return to standards of goodness, as in Victorian novels . . . because Victorian novelists had very high standards of morality, indeed." And she goes on to observe that while women were very much admired by those novelists, it was the 20th-century novelists "who cheapened and dehumanized women."

If one were to explain the Griselda purely in terms of male needs and male fears one might say that she has been necessary protection against the threat posed to the male by his stereotype of the insatiable woman, or by her more virulent incarnation, the femme fatale, who represents compelling but mysterious forces within himself with which he can never be entirely at ease. No doubt this would be an oversimplification that ignores the possibility, for one thing, that women are quite capable of using the Griselda stereotype as a means of managing their own absolute little passions. In any event, the Griselda continues to trouble our world (she even troubles *Fear of Flying* and *Portnoy's Complaint*, as if she were a conscience-ghost that refuses to be appeased. Who is more a Griselda than Marabel Morgan's Total Woman or the heroine of Pauline Reage's *Story of O*? Sometimes we try to appease the Griselda by combining her with the insatiable woman, and then we have a creature who, for all her inability to curb her appetites or confine herself to one lover, still retains a core of innocence and purity, a capacity and yearning for unconditional commitment which, sadly, the evil times will not permit her. Even that happy hooker, Xaviera Hollander, dreams of a time when, having written the last chapter of her erotic *Bildungsroman*, her "sensual hunger will be fulfilled by one man only."

**B**UT there is a male correspondent to the Griselda, a stereotype that takes us back to Capellanus in late 12th-century France and to the courts of love presided over by Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughters, the Countesses Marie and Alix (surely three of the most influential women in our culture), to the courtly romances and to the rituals of chivalry. Here in a world "deep in fairy tale and magic," as Erich Auerbach puts it in *Mimesis*, the ethics of the perfect knight, "courage, honor, loyalty, mutual respect, refined manners, service to women," were so effectively displayed that they "continued to cast their spell on

contemporaries of completely changed cultural periods." The perfect knight devotes himself to the service of his lady (often enough of course someone else's wife); he transcends his private self as in commitment to her he slays dragons and Saracens, faces without qualm the moment of truth in the tournament, keeps deadly trysts with black or green knights, champions the helpless and sorely beset, tortures his body with fasts and other saint-like disciplines, keeps lonely vigils in midnight chapels. To a purist and puritan like the Tudor Englishman Roger Ascham his appeal, especially as he appears in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, can be reduced to "open mans slaughter and bold bawdrye," which in a purist and puritan context may be true enough, but it misses the point of self-transcendence through service to another or others.

All of Shakespeare's good men have a Griselda-like capacity to prove their unconditional commitments to another or others or to ideals in crisis circumstances. Indeed, good men tend to be defined in these terms in our fictions until fairly recent times, which is why Hemingway and Faulkner can now sound as old-fashioned as Shakespeare. In time, of course, the perfect knight has assumed various guises: the courtier, the cavalier, the middle-class gentleman, the lady killer, the mere dandy. In time, having run out of dragons and black knights, having divested himself of his armor and gotten off his horse, his services will be confined to writing sonnets to his lady's eyebrow, fetching drinks, putting on coats, calling taxis, holding doors, carrying parcels, lighting cigarettes, and walking on the curb side. In time he will merge with the insatiable male: remain devoted to his sensual appetites but (like Byron's Don Juan) without losing his rather sentimental attachment to a vision of feminine purity and innocence to which he is faithful in his fashion. He may even in time assume a burden he never anticipated, but which is nevertheless quite consistent with his original commission: he may devote himself to the liberation of his lady from the stereotype that makes her dependent upon him for her definition of herself as his lady.

And in the meantime, too, chivalrous gestures, like all cultural gestures, may often enough be little more than blackmail—the iron hand in the velvet glove, as Dana Densmore has bitterly complained. Blackmail is an expected survival strategy of the threatened, of those who discover that in particular situations, traditionally sanctioned power is simply not adequate. So the somewhat less than ideal knight threatens to abandon his chivalry if it does not produce the expected results, just as the somewhat less than ideal Griselda threatens to become a shrew if submissiveness doesn't work, or learns how to use her self-abnegation as a means of imposing a crippling burden of guilt on her oppressor. The gulf between the ideal



model and the nitty-gritty of everyday life is the area in which history happens and the stereotype is born.

#### IV

THE stereotype, like the role or the cliché, is an economical organizer of information and therefore effectively a form of censorship. The *Griselda* stereotype attempts to censor out (it is never entirely successful) the stereotype of the insatiable woman. Between the two, one must imagine, there is always a dialectic tension, with the *Griselda* being until fairly recent times in the ascendancy while the *Nell Gwyns*, *Fanny Hills*, and *Isadora Wings* have been condemned to be underground figures who depend on her the way the Mafia depends on the forces of law and order. But the *Griselda* imposes a conscience-burden of self-abnegation and duty, so that time spent under her sway is for the autonomy-oriented woman, to say nothing of the insatiable woman, time spent on the cross. One might have predicted that given the right circumstances her release from this burden would be just as euphoric as it is now displayed to be in *Cosmopolitan*, *Playgirl*, *Viva*, *Viewpoint*, *New Woman*, and *New Dawn*, in all of which women who want to get their pleasuring find congenial and even instructive company.

Continuing the service tradition of the older women's magazines, these publications concentrate on what-it's-like and how-to-do-it features: how to get rid of your Victorian hangups; how to recover from an affair; how to achieve orgasm (either single or multiple); how to sleep around without feeling promiscuous (an honest and self-respectful concern for one's needs is important); what it's like to be a call girl or a prostitute or to sleep with a male hustler; how to say no to one's partner without discouraging him completely; how on the other hand to encourage him when he seems otherwise disposed; how to have the best possible sex fantasies; how to seduce a man (see Phyllis Penn in the May 1976 *Cosmopolitan* for five easy rules); how to deflower a male virgin (see Shirley Lowe in the May-June 1974 *New Woman*). Unlike the traditional women's magazines, however, these publications have little to do with the problems of child-rearing, and it can be assumed that for them the publication of the revised Spock, with or without the instructions for bloody diarrhea, will be at best a minor event. Parenthood, as Ellen Peck, the founder of the National Organization of Non Parents, points out in *Viva*, not only inhibits freedom, happiness, fulfillment, and spontaneity, but "may be hazardous to your mental and emotional health."

Each of these publications must survive amid fierce competition and so must manage to give at least the illusion of having a distinctive character.

Nevertheless, to spend time with an assortment of them is to be impressed (if not oppressed) with their conformity to stereotype. This is of course no less true of the even greater number of magazines that cater to the sexually insatiable male. Most people caught up in the sexual revolution (by now a thoroughly stereotypical designation) clearly think of themselves as breaking out of an individuality-denying cultural prison to discover the infinite variety of their own potential as autonomous beings. Yet it is hard to escape the belief that in proportion as people become preoccupied with their sexuality, they become alike, not different. With *New Woman* and *Cosmopolitan* no less than with *Penthouse* and *Gallery*, we are in a world in which, by virtue of recurrent common clichés, stereotypes of male and female insatiability come hand-in-glove together. Thus when, a few years ago, Erica Jong and Henry Miller were represented in *People* magazine reclining socially on a double bed, the effect was less to celebrate them than to trivialize their common theme.

SINCE the *Griselda* and perfect knight define themselves through a selfless and even suffering commitment to a member of the opposite sex, their most complete rejection might appear to be in masturbatory and homosexual acts. Even here, however, the tendency is to move toward counter-stereotypes of service, particularly for women. In Alex Comfort's *More Joy of Sex*, masturbation is an important learning experience, especially for young women who need to explore their own bodies (the biological frontier) in preparation for future heterosexual pleasure. Over the past few years, Linda Wolfe writes in *New York* magazine, "there has been considerable underground proselytizing for masturbation in the women's movement. . . . But most of the movement propagandists have been fiery separatists who urge masturbation as the goal point of female sexuality. Partners are out; heroically proportioned vibrators are in." At the present time, male masturbators are not as fortunate in having a piety that can dignify their self-pleasuring; they must take what comfort they can from the image of themselves as courageous transgressors against narrow-minded interdictions. This image is a good example of a stereotype on the make; unfortunately, though it is much stronger than it was a decade ago, it is still too weak to counterbalance the older stereotype of the male masturbator (still vigorously alive in *Portnoy*) as a figure of frustration and defeat.

With male homosexuality it is another matter. Male homosexuals can come out of the closet and dedicate themselves to the service of a common cause—not simply, as the Mattachine Society once suggested, to the cause of zero population growth, or the cause of homosexuality itself, but to the cause of life abundant. Thus the historian Martin Duberman refers approvingly to those gay people

who are beginning to argue that promiscuity, traditionally considered the very model of total erotic failure of commitment, is really a way of thwarting those Judeo-Christian norms that stand against the legitimate pleasures of sexual variety.

Basically, this is Sade's position. Here the ideal knight is transmogrified. Having been a delayer of sensuous satisfactions because of a conscious intent to serve a self-transcending cause, he becomes now that much more convenient figure who in order to serve the good cause of heroic insatiability need intend nothing more than his own pleasure. What is good for one's absolute little pleasures is good for everybody. This is the *laissez-faire* of promiscuity, if not of narcissism as well. Its proper model is the vibrator kit, on the box cover of a popular model of which is depicted, luxuriously reclined, a beautiful and mainly nude ash blonde in the act of pleasuring herself with her phallic machine. "For relief from tension, frustration, and stress," the text advises, and thereby places its product in the service of what in a sensate and narcissistic culture is the most compelling of causes.

Lesbians are of course free to think of themselves in similar terms when they come out of the closet. They seem, however, to have more limited objectives in mind: not the liberation of the whole human race but a principled liberation from that part of it that appears to have benefited most from the Griselda stereotype. In terms of the individual's need of a self-transcending commitment, lesbianism can be seen (and indeed has been seen) as feminine liberation in its purest form. It has the advantage of a mystique deriving from Sappho that makes it possible for men as well as women to think of it as purer and more refined than male homosexuality. Thus an advertisement for the currently available full-color display of lesbians in action, *Sappho: The Art of Loving Women*, can refer to the book as breathing "a mystical and even sacred element into sex" without sounding excessively hyperbolic. Even Hugh Hefner has commended it.

Lesbians can also take comfort from Dr. Sherfey's mystical biology, according to which all human embryos are female to begin with, and from Jill Johnston's equally mystical sexology, according to which "all women are lesbians except those who don't know it yet." In this view, no one knows it less than Griselda, who is locked in her stereotype because she is locked in a closet. Released to vibrant authentic life, however, she can unite with her equally authentic sisters in an effort to establish a radically new order—and do it in a fashion that satisfies her deepest needs for self-abnegating commitment.

A radicalesbian establishment is hardly what Sade had in mind, however, when he wrote approvingly of "this perversion of women." He seems to have expected, with the Greeks, that when "women were satisfied with each other . . .

they meddled less in the affairs of the republic." Perhaps, being at heart not only an anarchist but a male chauvinist, his ideal lesbian was after all only a disguised Griselda—entirely willing to serve men by letting them decide her place and her pleasure in utopia.

## V

EVERYWHERE we turn, it appears, our efforts to be really free are circumscribed by the iron exigencies of service which, in the interest of the human economy of effort, incline us to stereotypes. Perhaps we are confronted here with a dirty trick that culture has played on us: tantalizing us on the one hand with the possibility of a life completely given over to egotistic satisfaction, for which total sexual liberation is at present our most adequate symbol, yet making it impossible for us on the other hand to pursue such a life unless it is placed in a self-abnegating relationship to a cause. To put it another way, the same forces that have made it possible for the self to take its insatiability seriously have made it all too easy to see the care and feeding of the insatiable self as a luxury we cannot afford. No doubt this paradox is an intensifying factor in our anxiety of the stereotype.

Stereotypes, it should be noted, cannot happen unless people are willing to give something of themselves away. This should suggest that the stereotype is what appears when we look with a jaundiced eye on the means human beings use to achieve, for better or worse, the various forms of consensus and continuity. Stereotypes compel service. Yet it is the jaundiced eye of these times (its specific form of tunnel vision?) that is responsible for our pervasive fear that to serve others is to give something of ourselves irretrievably away, so that all forms of service are self-diminishing and reducible to cowardice or blackmail. Tom Wolfe has identified contemporary narcissism as the manifestation of a Third Great Awakening—as nothing less than a religious movement. In this movement, the insatiable self expects to be served by all that is not the self, so that service to the not-self, if it happens, is a by-product. This I take to be the position of Ellen Peck's National Organization of Non-Parents: the self (as no one knew better than Rousseau) is not well-served by children, who are the not-self in its most burdensome form. Sade's position on service is not much different: "There is no question of loving one's neighbor as oneself," he says, "for that is against all the laws of Nature." In the Peck-Sade scheme of things there is no place for bloody diarrhea in the middle of the night that is not a bad place—despite the fact that it appears to happen according to the laws of nature.

Perhaps, then, our fear that Griselda and the perfect knight represent in particular forms perennial

threats to the fulfillment of our absolute little passions is at least as strong as our perception that they are in some measure culturally irrelevant. They cast doubt on the cult of the insatiable self, for which the model figures are writers, artists, rock, movie, and TV stars, and jet-set profligates as they exist in the popular imagination. We see these models as positive expressions of that narcissism which, as Norman Mailer points out in recent comments on Henry Miller, is moved not by love of self but by dread of the world outside the self and by an excessive need of control over external events. Thus the insatiable narcissistic self aspires to that conquest of the anxiety of the stereotype that is a condition of being absolutely beyond category.

This is of course the aspiration of a god. Gods are beyond contingency and each is therefore an exclusive category. Being complete in themselves, needing neither to serve nor be served, they have to give nothing of themselves away. They do not rely on the support of culture, and no stereotypes threaten their autonomy. Neither the past nor the future is a problem for them since they dwell in an eternal present, and their passions, whether little or big, are infinitely satisfied. Because he recognizes this, Sade's anti-theology is furiously non-negotiable, and he "cannot say too often: no more gods, Frenchman, no more gods." And in his way he is right. Once men and women take their insatiability seriously they have no alternative but to get rid of the established gods.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

