CHAPTER 3

Phallic and Vaginal Mysteries

Meaning and the Sex Organs

THE SIMPLE presence of the body inspires worlds of meaning. The human body is crammed with significance in all its parts. Even the prohibitions against sex—how much cleavage can be shown in an approved movie, whether frontal male nudity is more objectionable than frontal female nudity, whether the nudity is brief or extended—betray a studied interest in the erotic significance of the most finely measured displays of the body. So powerful and fascinating are its details that we measure sex in centimeters.

The ante is raised when we focus on the sex organs per se, the penis and the vagina. The sex organs give rise to such primitive and fundamental thoughts and feelings that they elicit both extreme interest and extreme measures of control.

As we continue to track down the soul of sex in the body,

we can see the sexual body as a constellation of images rather than a collection of mechanical organs, and we can find the soul in unexpected places. The sexual organs not only have a huge role in our imagination of sex, they have given rise to religious ritual, meaning, and art. In fact religion demonstrates that the sex organs and the body's capacity for sexual expressiveness are not only meaningful, they convey the grandest and deepest truths about human life.

The Penis and the Phallus

I keep in mind a lesson I learned from a friend, Professor Rafael Lopez-Pedraza, that the soul sometimes manifests itself most directly in the freakishness of human life. I want to begin our search for the soul in the sex organs with the odd interest shown in their weight and size.

Japanese erotic drawings show the penis being weighed and measured, and I recently came across an image of a woman holding her breast on a scale. Men's magazines discuss penis length and girth, sometimes in fun and sometimes to reassure men who are anxious about the relative size of their penis. A well-hung man or a well-endowed woman is something of an ideal that people aspire to, and they often have corresponding feelings of inferiority when their organs don't match up. I've counseled women who are deeply disturbed by the large or small size of their breasts, and men who have become preoccupied with the proportions of their penis.

This anxiety doesn't make much sense at the purely biological level, and usually magazine writers assure men that physically they can have satisfying sex regardless of the size of their penis. What the writers fail to see is that the worry may have more to do with the symbolic resonance of the

phallus than with the physical penis. This is a source of confusion in sex: taking organs, desires, fetishes, images, and ways of making love too literally, and failing to bring a sufficiently rich imagination to everyday sexual concerns.

The simplest psychological analysis sees a parallel between penis and ego—the bigger the penis, the more confident the ego. But what is it about the penis that inflates the ego? And why would breast size have such deep emotional importance for both men and women?

The penis is an unusually fertile source of mythology. Just as the rosy light of early morning inspired the Greeks to imagine the mythological figure of Eos, Dawn, who was then identified with the "brilliant" Aphrodite, so the penis, a natural phenomenon in the geography of the body, can stir the imagination. The phallus is the penis mythologized and fantasized, and mythical fantasy extends, of course, to every aspect of the male and female pubic area.

Penis size has long been part of this mythology. Men seem to be proud of whatever it is that a large and long penis gives them, and it's too simple to describe that gift as ego or personal power. In some cultures the phallus is an image of divine potency. Perhaps some men, without consciously being aware of it, find real magic in a large penis, the ample size being sufficient to transform the penis into the phallus. The bigger the penis, the greater the myth. As the story usually goes, a man so endowed can give superhuman pleasure to a woman, and the man takes pride in the intensity of her response. Women may express their concerns about the penis size of their partner, and there, too, may lie a fantasy about the greater meaning of the penis.

Because of our secular ways of thinking, we see personality issues where other cultures might see myth and religion.

When we study images in which the penis or breast is being measured and weighed, we tend to see the anxious ego, wondering if it measures up. From a less secular point of view we might realize that the penis represents life's potency in the largest sense, something we all need and crave. There is nothing neurotic or egotistical about desiring the fertility and potency that are epitomized and compacted into the image of the penis.

A man wants to give his partner pleasure, and he feels powerful and fulfilled through her or his responsiveness and enjoyment. Eros is a vast source of power and satisfaction. If the world loves you, you are not going to feel weak and insignificant. A man's wish for a bigger penis might more deeply be a search for the phallus, the source of erotic vitality. The advice columnists are correct—penis size is not essential. Nevertheless, the story about wanting a big penis *is* important, because everyone, man and woman, encounters a particular aspect of life's possibility in the penis. The larger the penis, the more we may sense the myth and the more we may imagine the erotic power stored in that image.

The women of ancient Greece waved huge wooden phalluses during religious processions. They weren't advertising for bigger penises; they were celebrating the phallic potency in life, the divine power that grants a more-than-human passion for life. It is the phallus we want in marriage, in love and sex, not necessarily a big penis. In that spirit the Japanese drawings of the weighing of the penis tell the story of the weight eros has in life—nothing is as simple or as literal as it appears to be, especially in the area of sex.

Literature on the phallus that explores its importance in male experience is often rich and full of insight, but if we consider the phallus solely as the penis, just as an aspect of

male physiology and psychology, we are in danger of literalizing and limiting its meaning. Unlike the penis, experienced subjectively by males, the phallus is available to both men and women, whether they are waving it in procession, pleasuring it in sex, or strapping on a rubber one. In imagination the phallus is not limited to literal gender.

The small penis has its own allure in the imagination. The nonthreatening, normal, ordinary, flaccid penis is also, in my view, part of the myth of the phallus. The male knows the ups and downs of desire partly through his penis, and the ordinary state of being limp is as important as arousal. To be always tumescent is an undesirable condition, whether in the actual penis or in the emotions of desire and excitement.

An ancient note on Aristophanes' play *The Acharnians* refers to the people who carried large images of penises in processions as *phallophoroi*, phallus-bearers, and it says that once, when the citizens of Athens refused to honor Dionysus, "a grievous disease attacked their men in their private parts," a malady called satyriasis, compulsive sexuality.[1] Could our social satyriasis be due to a neglect of the religious aspects of sex? Today we still use the word priapism, after the phallic god Priapus, for the condition in which a man cannot get rid of an erection—a physical analog of compulsive sexuality. Honoring the penis only in its erect state may be a psychological variant of *priapism*, the inability to find relief from our preoccupation with sexual excitement.

Fascination with the phallus is not merely about power. It is a numinous source of mystery as well. On one hand the penis is common, ordinary, and insignificant, and on the other it is the focus of curiosity and interest out of all proportion to its size and function. The organ is relatively small, but the myth is big, and it is the myth that means so much to

the imagination and to the soul's quest for meaning. Interestingly, the word "fascination" is a phallus term, used by the ancient Romans to refer to an amulet in the shape of a penis worn around the neck to ward off the evil eye.[2]

Many explanations have been offered as to why the ancient Greeks placed at their doors a herm, a stone pillar topped with a bust of Hermes, often with a phallic image attached. Among other things it must have been an emblem of protection. They also placed phallic images at gravesites, presumably because Hermes, an especially phallic god, guided souls to the underworld. An image of divine power that provides reassurance in the face of death must also have healing properties, if for no other reason than that it serves the life principle.

Why not extend this idea into everyday life and imagine that sex can be healing? The display of each other's bodies and especially the private parts, the organs usually veiled, may help heal a marriage or keep each person lively and vibrant and, as the Greeks would say, in touch with immortality. Naturally, an anxious person may use this power of the phallus for personal gain, but the abuse of phallic power neither defines nor negates its healing potentiality.

Technologically primitive societies use sexual power to sustain community and to remain in sympathy with nature, while we reduce sex in our collective imagination to physical and emotional dimensions and then try to live a vibrant life cut off from the wellspring of sexuality. The phallus represents life itself—procreative, pleasurable, rising and falling, penetrating, healing, enduring. Our powerful attraction to images like the phallus and the breast, even the buttocks and crotch, may serve simply to spur us on to living a lively and abundant life. In the ancient world the sexual organs were as-

sociated with the cornucopia, the horn of plenty, an image of life's copious gifts.

Perhaps the ultimate healing is to find a way to break through the wall of habit and culture and let nature's raw vitality penetrate our small ideas and fearful repressions. Orgasm in the broadest sense is an important gift of sex—a collapse of control accompanied by a healing infusion of vitality.

In a time of neurotic male dominance and jealous defensiveness, it's difficult to recommend honoring the phallus, but we have to get beyond personal matters and gender battles if we want to tap into the deep soul of sex. We should be able to distinguish between neurotic abuse of phallic power and genuine honoring of sexuality. Ancient myths and rituals give us a taste of the vast meaning of the phallus that far transcends our current biological and psychological attitudes toward the penis. This new appreciation for sex and its imagery encourages us to leave behind our nervous and life-suppressing prudishness. Our anxiety about sexual imagery is not as righteous and high-minded as it appears to be; it may contain more than a little fear of life's basic fruitfulness and vitality.

The phallus is not an image of the male ego; it is a representation of earth's potency and life's capacity for creativity and pleasure. Ancient and primitive celebrations of the phallus were carried out with joy, laughter, comedy, and celebration. This phallus is not exactly *symbolized* by the ancient images of trees, bulls, and lightning that are associated with it. Rather it represents the power of life we encounter in these overwhelming revelations of nature. The phallus is in fact that power coursing through us, men and women, and in that spring of vitality we can find the creativity and energy we need to get along, survive, and thrive. Ancient humans

knew that the ego is insufficient for making a truly creative life. They knew through their ideas of magic, in which the phallus is profoundly implicated, that we need nature's power in us, and that there is no better example of nature dwelling in us effectively than our sexuality, with its autonomous responses and its ineffable capacity to generate new human life.

The penis we see in pornography is not the true phallus; it is rather a poor attempt to restore the phallic dimension to the penis. Pornographic penises are symptomatic of our need to rediscover the phallus and with it a religious appreciation for life's mysterious potency. Like the ancients carrying huge penises in their processions, we fantasize penises of unusual dimension and photograph them in ways that make them seem huge and detached from individual personality. But we don't yet have a religious appreciation for the penis as the presentation of life's almighty power. Religious institutions remain close to pornography, sometimes in their art and sometimes in their ingenious means of repression, because ultimately both are concerned with life's deepest meaning and mystery. Like Isis in search of her brother Osiris's lost organ, we are in search of the penis that cannot be imagined by medicine, the penis that leads us deep into life in all its procreativity and dynamic pleasure.

Images and Gestures Involving the Penis

Sometimes it's easier to see the greater significance of the sexual body—its soul—in certain gestures and cult expressions than its plain anatomy. Images of the phallus at Pompeii can lead us in fascinating directions as we consider the penis as an image of life's abundance. In Pompeii some of

these phallic images are hung with bells and lamps, and attached to animals such as snails, turtles, mice, and lions. Animal images help animate an object, and here we get the impression that the phallus has its own vitality and doesn't need human personality to justify it.

The penis is often given wings not only because it rises and falls according to the dictates of passion but also to emphasize its animation and autonomy. As many sex manuals advise, one key to good sex is to allow the body to respond to foreplay without the interference of thought and control. Picturing the god Eros with wings gave direct expression to the idea of a flying, lofty eros and acknowledged the comings and goings of erotic desire—and perhaps its spiritual nature as well.

In another example the god Priapus pours oil on his own erect penis, clearly a sign of appreciation and honor. We might consider the use of oil in sex play not only as a means of lubrication but also as a way of evoking the ancient pagan appreciation of fruitfulness and lustiness.

In other localities, the penis might be shown attached to a man, but with enormous proportions. Occasionally in ancient art one even sees the human body sculpted as a man-sized penis. At Pompeii a man is shown lifting his robes to reveal a huge, erect penis, a gesture much used in female erotic display that we'll consider shortly.

The emotional qualities surrounding these various versions of the phallus include humor, honor, playfulness, and vitality. It is possible to restore these qualities to our own personal sex lives and to the culture at large, but it would take strong imagistic thinking and a deep love of life, once the veils of moralism and personalism were removed, to see past the secular penis to the sacred phallus.

Phallic Figure

A Vaginal Way of Being

Perhaps because of the "personality" complex that has seized our culture, we translate the phallus into personal power rather than into life's vitality. With this emphasis on power we simply overlook the imagery of the vagina, which is a rich soul image, full of a kind of potency that is badly needed and in small supply.

In legend, folk art, and ritual, the vagina is associated with a number of things that share its physical contours and its deeper significance. Each one of the related objects says something about the vaginal mystery, opening it up to meaning in much the same way that the penis flowers into the phallus.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King,* the blind seer Tiresias reminds Oedipus that in his various voyages—in the play he is often called the pilot of his boat—he found a harbor in his parents' house; that is, he found his way to his mother's vagina. The Freudian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi describes sexual intercourse as the return of the penis-child to the mother's womb, which, he says, is itself at some level the originating sea in which life is born. Both Greek and psychoanalytic literature give us a strong emotional image for the vagina as a haven from the threats and cares of life, the goal of a regression toward our peaceful origins. In *Oedipus at Colonus,* when Oedipus is preparing for death, he moves from the busy life of the city to the sacred thicket in nature where only the gods and spirits are to be found, a holy alternative to his mother's "thicket" and a parallel to the momentary harbor he found with her. We might understand the tragedy of Oedipus not in personal terms but as the archetypal quest for the stilling of life's anxieties and heroics imagined as womb and tomb.

In a strongly heroic world where we are all—man and woman—expected to face our challenges, carve out a life of success, and be thoroughly independent and individual, the vagina offers a contrary objective. The vagina was seen in seeds, caves, rings, triangles, shells, flowers, and fruits—for the most part containers where life germinates and blossoms. It was also the gate and doorway, the oven, the alchemical alembic or furnace, the dolmen, garden, path, hearth, ditch, and ship. The vagina is the holy of holies, the place where the penis finds the doorway to bliss and where human life arrives after descending from eternity.

This is the realm of soul par excellence—containing, creating, warming, assuring. When my daughter was four, she was still trying to mimic her return to her mother's belly by crawling up under a billowing shirt or robe. She seemed ambivalent about entering life on its harsh terms and preferred to return to the place of safety and comfort. I feel the same when I'm traveling and seek out the comfort of a warm bath and piles of bedcovers on a cold night.

In my years of doing therapy I noticed how often both men and women crave a retreat from life into a place of safety and containment yet feel embarrassed by this failure in heroics. Yet it makes sense to find those places of felt safety and holding, whether in a comfortable home or town, in an embracing relationship, or in the sensual enclosure of sex. Even when sex is passionate and aggressive, I would think the otherworldly and eternal refuge of the vagina lies somewhere deep in the lovers' fantasies. The woman's sexual generosity lies in the profound regression and containment she has to offer as well as in the power of her expressive love. In the sexual posture of intercourse, she is the world, life itself, the great mystery of all that lies beyond and behind the heroics involved in making a life.

There are other archetypal feminine images, such as the Greek Artemis and Athena, where the accent is on future, development, strength, militancy, individuality, and personal integrity. Still, the receptivity of the vaginal harbor is of great importance to the emotions and to meaning. Our culture, in particular, both neglects and badly needs this dimension of eros and desire.

One of the deepest motivations in modern life is the assumption that life finds meaning or justification—the two are often interchangeable—in doing instead of being. It is a highly questionable assumption challenged by most religious mystical literature, and it may be behind our fear of the feminine secret and our corresponding aggressiveness toward it. We may arrive at an appreciation of the vagina only after we have considered and accepted its deep mysteries and have discovered that being fully present and secure in one's life can be the ground of creativity.

The Poses of Venus

We have a habit of encountering religious statuary and paintings as though they were illustrations of beliefs or theological ideas. Another way of looking is to see postures in sacred art as the mysterious re-presentation of a sacred act. The gestures Aphrodite makes with hands and torso in her many images point far beyond aesthetics to representations of her particular mysteries.

While I was teaching at a university in the mid-1970s, I inherited a course called "Women in Myth." It had been taught by a professor educated in anthropological approaches to religion, but I addressed the topic from a literary and psychological point of view. This was before books appeared describing the role of gods and goddesses in personal life, and

so I had little precedent to guide me. Preparing for the section of the course on Venus-Aphrodite, I noticed that this goddess was presented in certain traditional poses, and I decided to study these as though they were mudras of the Buddha—gestures that had particular meanings and that expressed the nature of the archetypal reality represented by the deity.

Since Aphrodite is the classic sex goddess, her ritual and art postures offer us the opportunity to reflect on certain aspects of sex. For instance, as the classical Venus in the Museo Capitolino in Rome, she places her hands in front of her breasts and genital area. The effect is ambivalent, indicating both modesty and seduction. I have read many different interpretations of the historical background of this gesture, but to me there is allure in the ineffective attempt to cover up the body. Naturally, a goddess is reluctant to be seen by mortals, and this reserve in a sexual goddess might show itself as modesty. On the other hand, Aphrodite was known for her sexual cleverness and coquettishness. A partially covered body can be more alluring than a naked one, and she may be slyly and self-consciously enhancing her appeal.

Capitoline Venus

The gesture also presents two sides of sex, openness and privacy. People often go to extremes, being completely uninhibited or excessively reserved. I get embarrassed when people I don't know well start talking about their lovemaking in an ordinary conversation, but I don't know what the norm is. I'm sure that I lean to the side of reserve. When I look at the Capitoline Venus I feel

her chaste sensuality, her sexuality made uncommonly taut in the lived oxymoron of her modest exhibitionism. She contains within herself the dual world of sexual reticence and ease.

The Capitoline gesture, in which her hands both accent and cover her sexuality, hints at the complexity of Venus's sexuality. And other classic poses reveal something about the nature of sex in even more mysterious ways.

Anadyomene

Aphrodite emerges fresh and noble from the sea in one famous pose, as in Botticelli's well-known painting *The Birth of Venus*. *Anadyomene* means "rising up after having been submerged." This mysterious appearance out of the vast sea shows sexual feeling, sensation, and awareness coming into consciousness from a deep source that we may locate within us or at least in some reservoir of life possibility. In the spare and punning words of the Gloucester poet Charles Olson, "she rose from the genital wave." Sexual awareness and sensation do not appear from thin air; they rise dripping from whatever primeval element is their natural home.

A poem by D. H. Lawrence about a woman bathing in the ocean is even more graphic about the anadyomene:

> Oh lovely, lovely with the dark hair piled up,
> as she went deeper, deeper down the channel,
> then rose shallower, shallower,
> with the full thighs slowly lifting of the wader wading
> shorewards . . .
> Lo! God is one God! But here in the twilight
> godly and lovely comes Aphrodite out of the sea
> towards me.

In their search for images that will have strong appeal, filmmakers often turn to archaic imagery, and they have not overlooked anadyomene. Whether the woman is in a bathtub, or, better, just rising from it, or coming in from a swim in the ocean, or half in the sea and half out of it, Aphrodite has been evoked in a classical pose. There is no reason the human embodiment of this divine posture has to be a woman: one might be struck at the sight of a man, woman, or child coming out of a swimming pool or just out of the bath. It might be good to have a full-length mirror in the bathroom just to have a glimpse of yourself or your partner rising up from the water and to enjoy a moment of myth. A man might evoke the goddess as he steps from the shower or gets out of the bath. Even a little boy or girl standing up in the bathtub and holding her hands high to be helped onto the dry floor represents anadyomene.

Somewhat less graphically, Aphrodite rises from her source when the sun comes up in the east—she was identified with the goddess of dawn. She rises when a sexual attraction suddenly flushes up from the genitals toward the throat and into the imagination. She rises when an unfamiliar desire gradually takes shape and then seizes body and soul. She rises when a person walks into a room and you feel that until this moment of appearance he or she has been inundated in the mass of humanity. She rises when a thought of lust or sensuality comes to mind in the middle of church or during a college exam or on just rising from sleep.

I may be pulling a shirt over my head when the idea of a new project or a new sentence rises and I'm struck by its beauty, as though it were a tiny Aphrodite rising once again. Plotinus taught us that the world is full of Aphrodites. The thought of finally traveling to Italy once rose in me as I was

walking to my office on a winter day. The idea for a new book will rise one day from the invisible spring that lies much deeper than my mind. It rises wet and dewy, and perhaps, but only perhaps, later it will be clothed in the hours of actual life. Many ideas rise and then sink down again into oblivion.

Anadyomene is not always welcome or terribly positive in outcome. The rising doesn't stop even when life is full, ordered, and in no need of further appearances and invitations. People may just have settled into a new home when they take a trip and find desire for moving rise in both their hearts. Prudent friends and neighbors try to talk them out of such an impractical change, but Aphrodite's appearance is rarely settling and practical. Worse, of course, a marriage may finally be enjoying a hard-won peace when something attractive rises—another person, a change of work, a shift in personality, a movement of soul.

Anadyomene is the sexuality of the continuous influx of life and vitality. In myth Aphrodite rises naked from the sea and is immediately clothed by the nymphs of the hours and seasons, an eternal and timeless beauty covered over by time and brought into all the bonds of measured life. Among the real challenges of life is the task of giving certain desires a concrete place, some time, a little money, and personal attention.

Aphrodite rises in the swelling of passions and organs in sex. If she doesn't rise, the sex falls short, and she rises only when she has been properly summoned. She comes up in craving, need, and yearning. She appears in the garments of temptation and allure, and sometimes we may be tempted to look for ways to disinvite her rather than to find her a place. But the rising of Aphrodite is life offering itself to us. As Plotinus says, she is the soul. Her appearance is the opportu-

nity for increase in life, while our challenge is to take care in finding her a proper place.

Anadyomene suggests an alternative way of living: watching for signs of life's stirrings and risings, and responding appropriately, rather than controlling every aspect of life. We might see that the art of living has more to do with finding a place for the inspirations that rise from the sea of possibility than with planning and forecasting from anxiety. This latter approach manufactures a life from the ego, whereas the Aphroditic way is to allow the ego to be the artist who looks attentively for signs of anadyomene and finds a place for all the soul's fertile offerings. And this too, this fundamental way of life, is sexuality, not in any thin metaphorical sense but as a direct and sensuous response to an urge for orgasm, joy, and pleasure.

Parakyptousa

Another subtle pose of the sex goddess is her habit, as revealed in many sculptures, of looking from the side or indirectly. *Parakyptousa*, she was called, a word that means leaning over to look or stooping over to peep in. She is often looking the other way, and yet the impression is that she knows exactly what is going on. Indirection is part of her seductiveness, a quality that extends to sex in general, which is full of insinuation, innuendo, and suggestiveness. In frustration we may sometimes wish that sex were more aboveboard and straightforward, but this aspect of Aphrodite indicates that something in the very nature of sex is indirect.

My Greek dictionary uses the word *peep* to define "parakyptousa," an interesting word, given its widespread use on city streets where peep shows do a good business. We peep at

sexual epiphanies, slight revelations of flesh, and find some thrill in the peeping. But at the same time, the religious presentation of the goddess shows that she peeps too. We are revealed even as we do the peeping. Our desires and sexual inclinations show themselves as we peep at certain sights or try to hide our sexual interests.

Parakyptousa may also lie behind sexual gossip, which is a kind of peeping. What is more interesting in a neighborhood than the sexual stories that emerge about a man or a woman caught in the complexities of sex? Popular magazines depend on this deep interest in sexual peeping, telling story after story of a gay man or lesbian coming out of the closet, or of adultery among the famous. The half-concealed sexual inclination or escapade is more exciting than plain, up-front behavior.

The philosopher Plotinus says that the soul itself is Aphrodite. The soul desires us and craves union with us. The soul seduces us, whether from within, in the form of fantasies and desires, or from without, as the world slyly gets our attention. We don't necessarily get more soul in our lives by doing things in a direct way than by allowing ourselves to be distracted and enticed by the world's beauty and interest. The world is alive and has a body with private parts that can be alluring.

Aphrodite was called Peitho, Persuasion; Porne, Prostitute; Psithyros, Whispering Voice; and, of course, Parakyptousa, the Peeping One. As Aphrodite, life or the soul would like to entice us away from our commitments, our earnest tasks, our seriousness. The historian Karl Kerényi says that Hermes is life tricking us to go deeper into itself and thus into ourselves. In a parallel way, Aphrodite seduces us away from ideas, values, and habits that we may treasure. Call it an

expansion of consciousness, an opening up of personality, soul making.

In a kind of dream I've heard from people over the years, the dreamer is seduced by an attractive person who may or may not be objectively alluring or beautiful. Sometimes the dreamer is surprised to discover that an unlikely person is immensely attractive—someone much younger or much older, deformed in some way, not the dreamer's type. Often, in these dreams, a spouse or lover enters the scene and either trouble erupts or the dreamer is surprised to find the lover or spouse joining the lovemaking or standing nearby approving.

These dreams may have personal and direct relevance to what is going on in the dreamer's romantic life, but they also suggest a different level of seduction. These various figures may embody certain attitudes that play a large role in one's life. As Aphrodite, life might lure us away from our current commitments—say, an idea about what is true, a spiritual or religious attachment, a political point of view, a way of ordering our everyday lives. In general, Aphrodite is not interested in habits, commitments, and orderly and long-standing arrangements. She represents ongoing life. She offers new attractions, new connections, and new passions. She does her work indirectly, her head turned away. We may wake up one day and wonder how we ever got to where we are, the seductions having been so subtle as to be unnoticed.

Life and sex are profoundly implicated in each other, so we might expect indirection in our sex lives to be matched by indirect seduction in all aspects of daily living. An appreciation for this Aphroditic side of affairs might make us less naive about life in general and deeper and keener in our perception. I've long thought that the best therapists are those who

don't expect life to be direct and obvious, but who have an eye for the subtle lures that keep people alive and changing. People come to therapy sometimes to protect themselves from temptations to change, and a perceptive therapist might address those concerns while at the same time recognizing the soul's way of unfolding, less through design than through a long series of seductions.

Anasyrma

Another gesture that may be familiar from life but may seem extraordinarily odd as a religious mudra is the *anasyrma* or lifting up of the dress. The gesture is fairly common in ancient art and has direct parallels in modern popular culture. It was part of initiatory and religious dances and was associated with Aphrodite, Artemis, Demeter, and Hermaphroditus. Anasyrma is any gesture of shifting the dress or clothing to reveal the private parts.

One of the most illustrious examples of anasyrma in the ancient world occurs in the story of Demeter, the great mother goddess who, depressed and angry, goes searching for her daughter who has been abducted by the Lord of the Underworld. She enters the home of Metaneira and is offered a seat of honor, but she declines. Then, in one version of the story, the rustic old woman Baubo offers her a stool covered with fleece, and Demeter sits down and covers her face with a veil. She sits for a long time until Baubo cheers Demeter up by lifting her dress and exposing her crotch.

Various sources describe Baubo as the daughter of Echo and Pan, which may account for her earthiness and rustic vitality, and she is said to be able to make her genitals look like a child. Her name may originally have meant "vulva" and it

may be she who is represented in statues of a woman with a large head on top of a pair of legs with genitals below the mouth.[3] Demeter's laughter is usually interpreted as a sign of her restoration, her coming back to life. This anasyrma was also a special component in the Eleusinian mysteries dedicated to Demeter and important to people of the ancient religion as a source of hope in the face of human mortality.

Here we have something of a parallel to the public phallic images, both male and female genitals taking part in the comic affirmation of continuing life. People of all ages and sensibilities travel to a liminal place like Las Vegas where they find an alternative to the demands of practical life in gambling, comedy, and skimpy clothing. Looking at the genitals is not simple prurience. It's a momentary way out of the depressing reality of illness and mortality.

In anasyrma, laughter, renewal, hope, and the continuance of life find expression, and even in modern times it is usually part of comedy, dance, and partying. The cancan is a form of anasyrma, as is the scene of Marilyn Monroe standing over a grate on a New York street, her dress billowing up around her and revealing her panties. A little girl lifting her dress for a little boy and perhaps even a boy dropping his pants to show his genitals might be simple examples of anasyrma.

I have a slight memory from childhood of a little girl in the neighborhood swinging on a swing, lifting her dress in fun and play for her gawking playmates. In *Ulysses,* James Joyce describes Leopold Bloom sneaking a peek at Gerty MacDowell leaning over to watch fireworks as her dress rises. Old-time burlesque, of course, is full of anasyrma, and one wonders if the recurring vogue of short shorts and short skirts is not a fashion statement of anasyrma.

The early church fathers, from whom we get much information about Greek customs like anasyrma, were full of thunder and hellfire as they argued for a more repressive attitude, one that still finds a place in society and in our hearts. Yet anasyrma, in the many forms it may take in ordinary life, is an example of pagan joy and may give us a hint of how we might recover some soul for our sexuality.

In the religion of Aphrodite, anasyrma is an odd kind of vision quest. It's as if we never quite get the point of life and death, and so we need to see that part of the body where life is renewed. Anasyrma may be surrounded by taboo, fascination, and ritual, but these are all signs of the shadow side of the sacred. When our city streets are made tawdry by a proliferation of peep shows, perhaps in our puritanism we have forced Aphroditic necessities into extreme modes of expression, where they are bothersome and disgusting. They aren't given a place in ordinary life, so autonomously they dominate and soil.

Anasyrma is not just the exposure of the genitals from the front, but also a special revelation of the backside, which obviously plays an important role in sex. Aphrodite was known as Kallipygos, the beautiful backside. In statuary she is shown lifting her dress and looking over her shoulder at her buttocks. In antiquity this gesture was considered a powerful apotropaic act—one that wards off evil. According to Plutarch it was used to avoid a tidal wave, and Pliny says it could be used against insects. In Germany, people resorted to it to ward off rain.

Anasyrma Venus

The story is told of ancient visitors to the Aphrodite shrine at Knidos who made a point to view the goddess from the back. The Marquis de Sade

made a hasty trip to Italy to avoid the police, going by the name Sado and accompanied by his valet. Sade said the trip was worth the few moments he had to enjoy touching the backside of a Venus he found in a remote alcove. In James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* Stephen Dedalus is discussing Thomistic ideas of beauty with his friend Lynch when his friend confesses that he once wrote his name in pencil on the backside of the Venus of Praxiteles in the museum, a story he uses to demonstrate that art can excite desire.

The powerful fantasy lure of the buttocks and the aggression and exploitation that ensue when the sacred character of this body part is lost are the subject of Susan Lori-Parks's beautiful, tragic play *Venus*. The story is based on the fate of a Hottentot woman lured to London in the last century to show her voluptuous backside, and who was abused by audiences and by insensitive managers.

Aside from the obvious literal lessons we can take from these modern and ancient accounts of the human backside, we might also consider its metaphorical significance. We are basically a frontal society, looking ahead to the future. We don't like to look back, and yet the beautiful statues of Aphrodite show her looking backward, or backside-ward. We don't like to regress, but she finds erotic satisfaction in the back—in the background, the behind. We call it the ass, maybe to distinguish it from the head, where we locate intelligence, the ass being associated with stupidity. But perhaps Aphroditic intelligence is simply different from that of the head, and maybe it has a significant role to play.

The intriguing images of Aphrodite looking over her shoulder at her backside also suggest that in her style of awareness we can fruitfully regard ourselves as objects. This

need not be either narcissistic or dehumanizing. Looking at ourselves more as objects than as subjects, we might see our thoughts, feelings, desires, histories, and temperaments more clearly as elements in our makeup. When I first began reading about alchemy in the writings of Jung, I was taken by the idea that we could regard the psyche objectively rather than subjectively and appreciate it without the usual focus on ego that is so much a part of modern psychological thinking. This focus on the backside is a similar objectification that could help rather than hinder our perspective on our lives.

We might also be led by these images to think about the backside of life: the backside of a marriage—not its frontal plans and understandings; the backside of a career or profession rather than its professed ideals and goals; the backside of a city, and not its well-lighted, glossy front. A young man full of ideals and refined ideas about love suddenly falls into a fit of jealousy, and his father smiles, appreciating this anasyrma of the young man's emotional backside.

Life lifts up her skirts and we behold her secret: that life goes on in spite of our attempts to make it work and to give it sense. This is the human comedy that reflects the divine comedy. The gods laugh at our earnestness and at our belief that life is sincerely and exactly the face that it presents to us. We can laugh now and then, as Demeter did, when life lifts its veils and gives us a comic glimpse of its beautiful and outrageous folly. Few things depict life's earthy vitality as palpably as the cancan or the striptease, and yet few things are further removed from our intelligence and our seriousness.

For generations, people have found Aphrodite in a fig or an apple just by catching a glimpse there of the form of the female sexual body. They have found this form mysterious, comic, compelling, and pleasurable. They have honored it as

a sacred ritual object, the yoni, a stylized image of the female sex organ, and, with various degrees of innocence or depredation, they have enjoyed it as an entertainment on stage and in the movies. They pay dearly for a glimpse of it sometimes in money and in loss of reputation. There can be no denying its immense appeal to something deep in the imagination, and perhaps we shouldn't ignore this image of natural vitality. We might be better off honoring the goddess with pious imagination than denying and suppressing her with rules and prohibitions.

In the secret, half-revealed, enticing sexual body, life breaks through in all its glory. Aphrodite, the soul, makes its holy and sometimes obscene gestures, whether we like them or not. Life itself has private parts, and if we can catch a glimpse of them, we may have come upon a natural sacrament and a common mystery—a perception of the nature of things that allows us to go on with deepened, lowered intelligence and good humor.