



# ANIMALITY

## *Its Covers and Transcendence*

...

I have broadened the concept "escape" so that it means both literal flight and steps taken to change or mask an unsatisfactory condition—scrubland, urban neighborhood, whatever. Any physical place, natural or artificial, can be altered for the better; people do it all the time. But what if the "place" one wishes to escape from is one's own body? Can one take flight from one's own corporeal wrapping? The very idea is science fictional. Yet we do it often—imaginatively, as in daydreaming, or when we become wholly absorbed in some other person, object, or event. If one can't escape literally from an unsatisfactory body, can one rebuild it? Well, there is plastic surgery, and some people in the entertainment industry have taken rather extreme steps to alter their appearance.<sup>1</sup> As for internal organs, when they malfunction they can, in many instances, be repaired and even replaced. But these remain minor adjustments.

At an everyday social level, dissatisfaction is not with the body as such, but rather with its imperfections as measured by the standards of the time. At a deeper level, dissatisfaction may be directed at the body simply because it is an *animal* body, with offensive odors and fluids, humors and imperious biological demands.

Hi - Fu Turn  
Escapism (1998)

No matter how comely in its own way, the body can still be an embarrassment, a reminder that our reach toward some more elevated status called "human" or "spiritual" is tenuous—hostage to the sewer odor of Hattus.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, this very awareness of being an animal makes us human, for it is a problematic awareness unknown to other animals. Self-awareness is an ambivalent gift. Endowed with the ability to take a position outside myself, I can look back on this self and see it in all its corporeal grossness. But why do so when the result is mortification? More bolstering to self-esteem is to turn my gaze on some other man's or woman's animal self. Or better still, more elevating morally, is to turn my gaze on the cultural world. The first two turns of the gaze drive me to the third. Embarrassed by animality—my own as well as other people's—I and my fellow human conspirators cover it up, escape into a world of cultural creations that reassures us of our exceptionalism.

The story of cover/escape shows an overall progression from less to more elaborate forms of art and artifice. But that progression is not straightforwardly linear. It has twists and turns because that is how our consciousness and feelings work. The value they aspire to may turn at some point, unexpectedly, into its opposite, such that, for example, the animal rather than the human (cultural) state is preferred. To complicate matters, wanting to be more natural and animal-like is itself a cultural attainment. "Less is more," and even as one strips down, one may become more rather than less sophisticated. Another point to bear in mind is this: It has often been said that humans are animals that possess culture, which amounts to saying that they possess both the desire and the ability to escape from or cover up their condition. Wanting to reach a better condition and having the cultural skills to do so, being embedded in the very definition of humanness, cannot therefore be a deviation, and it certainly is not deviance. Yet in many societies it was and is often seen as such. Not only are

"cover" and "escape" strangely ambivalent words; even "transcend" can carry a negative meaning of arrogance or excess. Still, overcoming animality is a universal human undertaking, one in which some people have shown greater ambition or have been more successful than others. I shall tell this story of overcoming by exploring three prominent indices of our animality: food and eating, sex and procreation, and dying and death.

#### FOOD AND EATING

Eating is both necessity and pleasure—until we pause to reflect on what we are doing, at which point a feeling of unease obtrudes. Is this uneasiness widely shared among humans, a hidden sensitivity that can be aroused under the right circumstance? What would be a right circumstance? Perhaps the most common is when we watch others eat or are watched as we eat. Eating may be a joyous public occasion in which many people participate, it may be accompanied by much ceremony, but it is not itself a public performance. Eating, humans realize, is animal and must remain essentially private, a condition they ensure by creating a space for it and protecting it against the appraising eye. Animals at the zoo cannot have such privacy; indeed, they are assumed to need none. One of the more popular events at the zoo is the feeding time of the great carnivores. People feel a combination of awe and superiority as they watch a lion chomping on raw meat. To human eyes, the lion then is no longer king, a regal figure with its crown of mane, but simply a feeding animal, one that, moreover, did not obtain its own food but was given it, and that burdens the animal with an extra measure of humiliation, which people enjoy watching.

#### ЭТНОГРАФИЧЕСКАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРА АС ВЯТЧИНА

One reward of reading the older ethnographies in today's austere moral climate of correctness is that it provides us with the guilty

pleasure of watching. We “watch” as we read about others, their habits and customs. An anthropologist of the 1920s tells us in the superior tone natural to his time that on Diomed Island the Eskimo hunters

would squat around their meal of long-buried walrus meat which lay on bare ground strewn with the excreta of dogs and people. The raw, rotten meat was reminiscent of highly ripe cheese. . . . [Bering Strait] Eskimos bury fish heads and allow them to decay until the bones become the same consistency as the flesh. Then they knead the reeking mass into a paste and eat it. A few other examples of Eskimo food will indicate his lack of squeamishness: raw intestines of birds and fish, swallowed like oysters; live fish gulped down whole, head first; slime scraped from a walrus hide together with some of the human urine used in the tanning process. . . . fat, maggoty larvae of the caribou fly, served raw; the contents of the caribou’s paunch, left in the body so long that the whole mass has become tainted; deer droppings, munched like berries, or feces taken from the rectum of this animal.<sup>3</sup>

Did the Eskimos like being watched while they ate? I doubt they did, for it must have made them feel self-conscious. The anthropologist himself got a certain amount of pleasure out of observing, as we can judge from his prose. And what about us who read him?

Reading anthropologist Colin Turnbull’s account of the Mbuti Pygmies of the Congo rain forest provides much innocent pleasure, for here is a people who until recently seem to have lived in Eden, a benign natural environment that is the polar opposite of the Eskimos’, supporting a way of life in which there is no recognition of evil. It comes as a shock, therefore, to read in another writer’s book that this Eden too is stained by the sort of bloodiness inevitable whenever big-game hunting occurs. The picture that emerges in my mind is a disturbing mix of skill and courage on the one hand and on the other hand the unique human power,

even in a group deemed “primitive,” to rain havoc (temporarily) on nature. Wielding only a spear, a Pygmy hunter can bring down an elephant, thus demonstrating admirable courage and skill. What follows is less inspiring and is certainly not Edenic. Tropical heat triggers rapid decay. The beast’s belly starts to swell. A hunter climbs up it and dances in triumph. Someone plunges a knife into the belly, letting out an explosion of foul-smelling liquid and gas. Pygmies swarm over the carcass in an orgy of butchering. Within a couple of days a patch of forest becomes a blood-spattered field of skin, bone, and intestines. Celebration may continue for weeks. People gorge themselves with meat and sing and dance with mounting erotic fervor.<sup>4</sup>

A British travel writer recently observed, with a mixture of revulsion and satisfaction, a guzzling feast in Canton, China. As readers of his seductive prose, we share his satisfaction, his sense of superiority. Spread before us is the following scene. A dozen men—small traders and merchants—gather at a table in a floridly decorated restaurant. Their expectation is unbearably tense: “Every course drops into a glowing circumference of famished stares and rapt cries. Diners burp and smack their lips in hoggish celebration. Bones are spat out in summery showers. Noodles disappear with a sybaritic slurping, and rice-bowls ascend to ravenously distended lips until their contents have been shovelled in with a lightning twirl of chopsticks.”<sup>5</sup>

#### THE PRESTIGE OF MEAT

Reading about the eating habits of people in other places or earlier times reminds us of how until a certain stability was achieved by modern means of food production and distribution, human lives—outside a few favored areas, including prosperous cities—alternated between feast and famine. In the rare times of plenty, almost everything that could be eaten was eaten, and in astonishing amounts. The menus of the past surprise us by their inclusive-

ness. Yet this inclusiveness ought not to surprise us, for one reason why humans have spread successfully into so many geographical environments—one reason why they have become “lords of the earth”—is their ability to chew and digest almost anything. Most societies nevertheless have some kind of food taboo, and some have strict dietary laws, one purpose of which is to distinguish members of that society from others and to allow them to feel superior (less animal, more spiritual). But before I describe the various attempts at transcendence, I need to address an apparent contradiction in my thesis. If gorging food is a sign of animality, if eating meat is the clearest exhibition of carnivorous brutishness, then why have the powerful and the rich in the Western world stuffed themselves openly in the past, with no sense of shame, and why has the consumption of meat, not only in the West but in other parts of the world as well, become a signature of status?

Consider the ancient Romans, the medieval Europeans, and their descendants. Civilized in so many ways, the Romans were remarkably uncouth in their feeding habits. We see them lounging around a table groaning with food, their fingers sticky from gravy-drenched meats, for they had few utensils; foods were wrapped in pastry so that they could be lifted cleanly to the mouth, and additional shells were provided to scoop up the juicier slippery bits.<sup>6</sup> Eating manners hardly improved in medieval and Renaissance Europe, even among powerful people who had no need to stuff themselves in anticipation of lean times ahead. Indeed, manners did not show real finesse until the eighteenth century. Movie scenes that depict England’s Henry VIII chomping on a leg of mutton held up by a bejeweled hand are probably fairly accurate. Here is a real feasting Lion King! If we who watch the film feel superior to uncouth Henry, such could not have been further from the thoughts of participants in the lively event itself—the courtiers, pages, and servants who if anything felt only admiration and awe.

The sheer quantity of food made for prestige, but what really counted was the amount of animal flesh. At a Twelfth Night feast in mid-seventeenth-century England, *each* guest was expected to guzzle his way through seven to eight pounds of beef, mutton, and veal.<sup>7</sup> Meat remained supreme in the West’s hierarchy of gustatory values till the last quarter of the twentieth century, when, increasingly for health reasons, it lost its former eminence. Yet it retains a certain aura. As one hostess notes, when she serves food to her guests it still seems natural to put the roast beef on the plate first, then the vegetables; first the principal actor makes an entrance to admiring “oohs” and “ahs,” then come the supporting players.<sup>8</sup> This bias of the West is, however, far from unique. Perhaps the carnivore in the human beast has something to do with it. Most people, historically and in different cultures, simply like cooked meat. What makes one sniff the air in anticipation? The fragrance of a roast, not that of cabbage. Texture too matters. Think of the meat’s chewy resistance to the teeth and its subsequent collapse into a rich paste that coats the cavern of the mouth. Even when a religious culture turns to the ideal of eating only vegetables, as in Buddhism, artists of the palate strive to give them the flavor and texture of meat. The nutrient value of animal protein no doubt plays an additional role. Eating meat seems to make people feel stronger, more packed with substance.

Apart from these intrinsic qualities, there is the external factor of prestige associated with the hunt. Recent research among hunting-gathering bands and among people whose economy combines agriculture with hunting shows that meat, rather than the plant foods that make up the bulk of the diet, is the delicacy. Gender roles come into play here. Women forage for edible plants and trap small animals in the camp’s neighborhood, to which they are confined by the needs of nursing infants and young children. Where a people also practice agriculture, the women may have primary responsibility for taking care of certain

crops and vegetables grown around the village. In one way or another, they contribute most of the food, but their means of obtaining it are dull and routine. By contrast, the men hunt, a far more exciting and glamorous activity. Hunting requires that the men move out into a larger and less known world. The fact that this world can be dangerous calls for close cooperation and bonding, which are gratifying in themselves. Moreover, unlike women's work in the village fields, hunting is a story with a plot climaxing in a dramatic kill, a story the telling of which back home yields extra prestige. To put it a little differently, hunting is an exhilarating escape from the constraints of rooted life. Men in pre-literate communities appreciated it, as many men in modern society still do. Game meat too tends to be more highly regarded than the meat of livestock, as though the freedom of wild animals to roam gave their flesh a virtue that confined domesticated animals do not and cannot have.<sup>9</sup>

#### MASKS AND DISTRACTIONS

Food is life—energy and power. Having enough to feed not only oneself but others less capable or fortunate boosts the provider's ego. All this is well known. Food's preeminent place in life is hardly a puzzle. At the same time, however, shoveling it down one's gullet is stark animal behavior—one end of a process the other end of which is the evacuation of urine and feces. Coarse eating may not arouse universal disgust, and table manners may be so elementary among some people as to seem nonexistent. Nevertheless, an underlying judgment of food guzzling is implied, if only in the sense that no culture has raised it to the status of commendable practice.

Among masking devices, the most common is to turn eating into a social rite. People chewing food can pretend that they are engaged in loftily listening to their neighbor's remarks, the music of a flutist, or even poetry read aloud by an educated slave—a

practice of proper Romans in ancient times that somewhat excused their sloppy eating. To take a more modern example, Dr. Samuel Johnson was a notoriously coarse eater. On one occasion he demanded the boat containing leftover lobster sauce and proceeded, to the horror of his fellow diners, to pour the thickening goo over his plum pudding. If he remained an acceptable, indeed popular, guest at the dinner table, it was because he had the wisdom and raconteurial skills to compensate.<sup>10</sup>

But if eating is to become a genuine social event and ceremony, manners must be refined. In Europe from the late Middle Ages onward, aspiring courtiers and the upper class took steps in that direction. They adopted new utensils that put a distance between the food and themselves—outstandingly, the fork (a metal claw), which substituted for the human hand in performing unseemly tasks. Old utensils were refined—for example, the knife, the sharp tip of which was rounded off in the sixteenth century so that it would seem less an instrument of violence. The more elegant eaters stopped spitting bones onto the floor, and they learned to masticate with the mouth closed, noiselessly.

The animal origin of the food itself could be masked as well. From 1700 onward in Europe and particularly on the Continent, meat was less frequently served whole. Elizabethan England even enjoyed a vegetable renaissance.<sup>11</sup> English gardeners had long recognized the medicinal and hygienic virtue of herbs, but in the sixteenth century they extended the property to a number of vegetable foods, encouraging their greater use. A dent was thus made in the picture of man as a natural carnivore. Delicacy of taste, aroma, and texture increasingly came to matter more than the sheer bulk or cost of the food. Cooking strove to become architecture and art, and as such it successfully hid from consumers the fact that the materials used had once been living animals. Language might also be enlisted as a masking device. What are we eating? Not cattle, pig, or deer, but beef, pork, and venison,

words of non-English origin (think of the menus of fancy restaurants, where what we eat is buried under a flourish of incomprehensible foreign words). As for plants, it is significant that we never consider picked fruit and cut vegetables as mutilated and dead. Our terms of evaluation are “fresh” and “stale” rather than “alive” and “dead,” though the terms “rot” and “rotten” are used.

Societies differ in their sensitivity to the animality of eating. The Chinese elites have been, historically, among the more sensitive. Since the earliest dynasties they have striven to cover up the grosser aspects of food consumption. An ancient practice that has become a signal trait of Chinese cooking is the shredding of meats and vegetables into small pieces that are then variously recombined. The origins of the materials are thus hidden. But perhaps at a conscious level what the Chinese chef desires is not so much to hide something as to experiment with new flavors and textures, to elevate cooking to an art—and indeed to something beyond art, for art in ancient China was also cosmic world-view, ritual and religion. Food and eating thus found themselves propelled into exalted realms.

Consider health. An overriding idea among the Chinese is that the kind and amount of food consumed are intimately related to health; food is also medicine. Health is ultimately an effect of cosmic harmony, and it was and is the Chinese view that foods play there a mediating role. They can do so because they are believed to have either yin or yang qualities, yin and yang being the two principles of the cosmos. As early as the Chou period (ca. 1100–220 B.C.) illness was considered a disequilibrium of yin and yang forces in the body, which could be set right by foods of one kind or another.<sup>12</sup> Food and eating are an essential part of the cosmic ritual. *Li Chi*—the Book of Rites, a Confucian classic with material dating back to the fifth century B.C.—is full of references to the right kinds of food for various occasions. It is a work of elaborate etiquette, except that etiquette here is a system of reverend

attitude and reverend gesture that goes far beyond mere social manners.<sup>13</sup>

Food enters the Chinese understanding of health, ethics, and religion in other ways as well. One ideal of food is its freshness and natural flavor. As men and women should be what they seem—open and pure, honorable and trustworthy—so food should be pure and fresh, its natural flavor not hidden under a meretricious covering of sauces and spices. Taking the parallel one step further, the Chinese believe that just as such qualities in human beings promote social harmony, so in foods they promote the harmonious functioning of the internal organs—that is, individual health.<sup>14</sup> Another ancient Chinese ideal is “the middle way”—nothing to excess. Excesses of crudity—the frenzy of eating in the Cantonese restaurant noted earlier—are to be avoided, but also excesses of refinement that can tempt a sophisticated society. Must meat be cut and presented in a certain way before one would deign to eat it? Confucius himself, though a strong advocate of “the middle way,” seems to have at times gone pretty far in that regard.<sup>15</sup> Must tea be sipped only from the finest china? Does one lose face if one can’t distinguish rainwater from that which comes from a stalactite cavern? Perhaps; but a man of real taste knows how to distance himself from extreme refinement. The great playwright of the thirteenth century, Kuan Han-ch’ing, included in one of his dramas the following lines of rural rhapsody: “The fall harvest is gathered in. Let’s set a feast under the gourd trellis, drink wine from earthen bowls and porcelain pots, swallow the tender eggplants with their skins, gulp down the little melons, seeds and all.”<sup>16</sup>

#### GENDER DIFFERENCE

One way to indulge the animal appetite and still feel superior is to make the unabashed claim of being a “king among beasts.” Raw animal power itself then commands admiration and deference. I

have already broached this point, but it now calls for a further comment along gender lines. Consider the West, where men have not hesitated to show, even boast of, their kinship with carnivores. In the *Iliad* Homer repeatedly likened heroes to wild beasts—eaters of raw flesh. Germanic parallels suggest that ancient Indo-Europeans were in the habit of thus portraying heroic behavior.<sup>17</sup> When rising above one's lustful and sinful self became the ideal, as among the religious in medieval Christendom, men and women showed surprisingly different ascetic styles. A monk would have struggled to abstain from sex; should he succumb to temptation, the fact would have been acknowledged only in the confessional. But a Thomas Aquinas, no doubt abstemious sexually, could openly enjoy his food and be proudly wide of girth. A religious woman, by contrast, had to be both virgin and sparing in diet. Far more than an obese abbot, an obese abbess presented a troubling image. Gender differences were equally manifest in secular Europe and its offshoots overseas. Elizabeth I might have been more of a man than her effete courtiers, but it is hard to imagine her biting into a leg of mutton, as one so readily can her father, Henry VIII. In the frontier towns of America, women stood for refinement and culture, men and boys for nature, and one way for the males to demonstrate their uninhibited naturalness was to wolf down their food. In Victorian England, men could eat heartily, provided they knew how to distinguish the fish knife from the butter knife. Women showed their even greater distance from biology by eating little, and that with as much daintiness as they could muster. Putting food into the mouth was itself animal enough; actually eating might even make one far—a truly devastating revelation of animal being.<sup>18</sup> Even in contemporary modern society, men seem to feel that one way to exhibit their maleness is pointedly to ignore the finer points of etiquette. The "Animal House" of movie notoriety can only have been a fraternity.

Of course, I have been highly selective; a hearty naturalness among males has by no means always been considered desirable. Thus, from the late sixteenth to the eighteenth century, European men of high status, or with high social aspirations, took pride in being dainty and foppish. Perfumed, coiffed, and reentering on high heels, the men were in every way a match for their ladies in elegance. Hunting culture and a warrior ethos—the two often overlapped or fused—promoted gender difference. They did so in Europe until early modern times—indeed, as we have seen, in our own time. They also did so in medieval Japan, with its stereotypically silent, gruff males and porcelain-delicate females. China was a notable exception, for despite being an empire, it lacked a warrior class. Near the top of its social hierarchy was the scholar-official, his weapon the brush. Warriors commanded admiration only if they were also clever strategists and showed a literary flair. The expression "pale-faced scholar" was complimentary rather than, as it would be in the West, a put-down.<sup>19</sup>

What has happened? What has become of my thesis that escapism is a human universal? My answer is that even in societies where the hunter-warrior ethos dominates or lingers, the men are as committed to escape as are the women; they differ only in the means. Men choose to boast of rather than to hide their animal traits. This choosing to "act the noble beast" is a variant form of "returning to nature"—a move prompted by the need to escape from society's debilitating and unmanly elegancies.

#### THE PRESTIGE OF ABSTINENCE

One route to prestige is to act the powerful animal. Another and opposite route is to make the claim of being a cultivated or spiritual person, so far removed from animality that one hardly eats. History is rich in examples of people who deny themselves food in answer to some higher calling, or simply to appear superior. This denial of appetite and the animal self is not exclusively a re-

ligious affectation of high culture. It was manifest, for instance, among people of the soil and of livestock in Rwanda, a central African country to which the world paid little attention until 1994, when slaughter of genocidal ferocity broke out between its two dominant ethnic groups.<sup>20</sup> As Jacques Maquet has shown, one source of the deep-seated animosity between them was the racist notion of "inferior" and "superior," the one designating bondage to earth and the animal estate, the other implying an ability to rise triumphantly above both.<sup>21</sup>

Rwanda's population was made up mostly of Hutu farmers, a sizable minority of Tutsi pastoralists, and a small minority of Twa hunters, who supplemented their income by singing, dancing, and clowning. A strongly differentiated social hierarchy began to emerge during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, based on racial stereotyping and biases that already existed among native populations but were inflamed by the country's European overlords. The Tutsi were encouraged to see themselves as an aristocracy, tall and of slender build, and to see the Hutu as being shorter and stumper, with the additional unflattering traits of woolly hair, broad flat nose, and thick lips; in time the oppressed Hutu came to see themselves that way as well. As for the Twa, both the Tutsi and the Hutu regarded them, half jokingly, as closer to monkeys than to human beings.

Food habits further differentiated and distanced Rwanda's ethnic groups. The Tutsi diet drew mainly on dairy products and tended to be more liquid than solid. A meal usually consisted of cooked slices of sweet bananas, a bread made with sorghum flour, and lots of milk. When they ate meat, which was only rarely, it was cut into small pieces and boiled. The Hutu ate more, though their food was less refined. Popular among them was a kind of porridge with beans, peas, or maize. The sweet potatoes they consumed in large quantities were considered by the Tutsi too common to eat. The Twa liked to eat and drink as much as possi-

ble whenever they could, for their food supply was irregular, being dependent on a successful hunt or a generous reward for dancing and singing. Conceivably these dietary differences might have remained just that. In fact, they were integrated into conceptions of superiority and inferiority. The Tutsi behaved as if the need for nourishment was beneath their dignity. Eating should be done in private, they believed. Friends would be offered beer or milk, but they would not be asked to share a whole meal. Some older Tutsi took pride in subsisting only on liquids. When the Tutsi went on a journey of less than three days, they might not eat anything at all. As pastoralists, they liked to behave as though they did not depend on the foodstuffs produced by the Hutu. Eating less and differently was a way of elevating themselves above their fellows. The Tutsi have legends telling them that they come from another world—that they are human, but not in the same way as the Hutu, who are greedy, or the Twa, who are gluttons.

In an ideal world, people may need nourishment, but their food is not made up of animal meat. Adam and Eve were vegetarians before the Fall. In the Taoist paradise, people didn't even have to eat plants; when they felt tired and hungry, they would drink the water in the rivers and find their vitality restored. A much later account of an unspoiled world, written during the T'ang dynasty, presents a people of childlike exuberance who lived presumably on fish but not, heaven forbid, four-footed mammals: "They swarm to the tops of trees, and run to the water to catch bream and trout."<sup>22</sup> The Olympian gods were vegetarians, feeding gloriously on ambrosia and nectar. Why couldn't humans do the same? In the mythic golden age of ancient Greece, people did not have to maim and kill to survive, nor did they have to stuff themselves, for nature provided food in abundance. They were free to practice moderation, a supreme Greek virtue. Killing was violence, an egregious offense against moderation, and against peace. Pastoralism and farming were successive falls from

the golden age. Pastoralism, though more benign than farming, still led people to desire property, from which emerged a spirit of contentiousness. Agriculture aggravated that desire and created conditions that encouraged war. Domesticating and killing animals and perhaps eating their meat fielded an innate human capacity for violence.

The ancient Greeks had several arguments for refraining from meat. One was that animals, like people, had "souls," and that there was a time when animals and people shared a common language. The quasi equality thus postulated made the eating of animal flesh unconscionable. To escape the intolerable conflict this belief entailed, the Greeks qualified it, saying that not all animals were besouled. They further distanced themselves from animals by claiming that man's greater intelligence enabled him to converse with the gods in a supernal realm. However, for that to happen, he must first free himself from bondage to his animal body. In Greek thought, the gap between plants and animals, animals and men, body and spirit, tended to broaden over time. Already evident in Pythagoras, the theme became even more pronounced after his death in the writings of his followers. The elevation of spirit over body reached its peak in Plato, whose unrelenting hold on Western thought and feeling, both religious and secular, persisted until our own populist, antibierarchical age. If Plato advocated vegetarianism for philosophers, it was less from a sense of fraternal bond with animals than from a feeling of revulsion toward the lower appetites, tethered to the stomach "like a beast untamed."<sup>23</sup>

In the Middle Ages, Christianity favored periodic fasting for a variety of reasons, including health, penance, and propitiation, and even as a quasi-magical way of inducing fertility, based on the idea that in the natural world scarcity was almost always followed by abundance. Predictably, ascetic Christians also sought to discipline the body so that the spiritual-angelic self could emerge

into the purity of light. Patristic writers "cited not only the Old Testament models of David, Esther, and Judith, who by fasting offered pure hearts to God," but also classical writers, including Pythagoras. Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215) expressed the view that "fasting empties the soul of matter and makes it, with the body, clear and light for the reception of divine truth." In the homely formulation of the abbot Nilus (d. 430), fasting helped one to pray, whereas a full stomach made for drowsiness. In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville summarized much of the patristic tradition when he spoke of fasting as "the doorway to the kingdom, the form of the future, for he who carries it out in a holy way is united to God, exiled from the world, made spiritual."<sup>24</sup>

#### EATING AND SPIRITUALITY

Despite all that has been said about the spirituality of fasting, one may still ask, Cannot eating also contribute to spiritual elevation? Christians in particular must confront this question, for their most sacred rite is the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion). Christ's last supper with his disciples both enforces and contradicts certain common assumptions about a shared meal. On the one hand, it dramatizes the idea that eating at the same table strengthens human bonding; on the other hand, betrayal is shown to occur in its midst. The betrayal is not just incidental to the Last Supper; it is crucial to it, for without the betrayal how can there be the agony in the garden and, ultimately, human salvation? That so much good can come out of evil is a profound paradox in Christian theology, but perhaps the story of the Last Supper resonates for another, nontheological reason, one that rests on human experience, namely, that the very power of the shared meal to cement friendship provides the opportunity for its betrayal.

The Last Supper has another message, which, if understood correctly, would have radically changed the meaning of eating

meat in the Christianized West. How so? Consider what happens at the Last Supper. Bread and wine, unproblematic foods derived from plants, are consumed. But vegetarianism is hardly the issue. The Gospels do not bring the story of the Last Supper forward as a solution to the moral ambiguity of eating. Quite the contrary, for Christ shockingly tells his disciples that the bread and the wine are his own body and blood. Eating and drinking are thus plunged back into their luridly animal nature. Predictably, the more acerbic critics of Christianity have accused its followers of being cannibalistically inclined. In fact, what takes place in the Last Supper is the opposite of incarnadine animality. Eating on that occasion, and on all the subsequent occasions that commemorate it, is so spiritualized that it loses almost all connection with the consumption of animals and plants. Eating is become a sacred ritual at which one human being (following Christ's example) freely gives of himself ("even unto death"), and at which another accepts the gift, with the understanding that he in turn may have to offer his body and blood as food.

#### DESTRUCTION PRECEDES CONSTRUCTION

In Eden or heaven, eating shouldn't be necessary, since teeth grinding down even plant food is patent violence. On earth, however, destructing and incorporating another organism is how any animal assimilates energy and maintains its body. There is no other way. In the cultural realm too, destruction generally precedes construction. Something has to be "chewed up" before other things can be put up. An outstanding exception is storytelling, which can be practiced without having to destroy something first. Other fine arts, from weaving to sculpture, do require some degree of prior destruction. Visit a professional craftsman's workshop; it can seem a slaughterhouse, except that here the broken and torn viscera of nature—pieces of marble, stone, and wood, bent metal and filings—are mostly inanimate.<sup>25</sup> If, generally

speaking, even the crafts and fine arts require some degree of violence, the scope of the destruction involved in the raising of humankind's larger cultural works—farms, towns, and cities—boggles the mind; more, it can ignite feelings of moral revulsion. Some people, including ecologists of our day, have wished a return to simpler ways of life. But how far back should human beings go? And how simple must a way of life be before it can be considered innocent? The dilemma in its extreme form revolves around the human body, which too is a construction, built up with plant and animal parts.

The covers of culture over the animality of eating are so successful that we—that is, people generally—do not give it thought. Eating? When so reminded, we may say with a touch of irritation, "Of course, we eat. We are, after all, animals in the food chain." Moreover, contrary to my earlier claim, we not only enjoy eating, we can also enjoy watching others eat. What proud cook doesn't delight in his or her guests' ravenous appetite? Few satisfactions are greater in a mother's life than watching her child gobbling down food. Yet it remains the case that once we have peeled off the cultural covers to ponder the moral implications of this inextinguishable and most elemental form of violence, it is hard to retain our innocence. A dilemma infects the core of our daily existence from which there is no escape.

#### SEX AND PROCREATION

As animals, we eat and we copulate. But where human beings are concerned, there is a world of difference between the two. Imagination applied to food has produced some great dinners—has induced sensual satisfactions of a very high order, but hardly anything that touches the soul. Not the worst of vices, gluttony is nevertheless the most contemptible, says Allan Bloom, for it is "a sign of small-mindedness. One can fantasize about a great dinner, but if that's the limit of one's fantasy life, it is a puny thing, morally

and aesthetically handicapped." By contrast, "sex, which is in fact no more naturally spiritual than eating . . . is able to produce the most splendid flights of the soul as well as terrible tragedies."<sup>26</sup>

Eating and sexual intercourse are both necessary to the continuance of life. Both entail violence, but in the one it causes the evisceration of plants and animals while in the other it is more a playful roughhouse of thrusts and bites, an ecstatic frenzy of love, giving intense pleasure to the entwined couple without damaging, in the process, anyone else. In eating, a bloated feeling must sooner or later be relieved by the expulsion of odorous waste; in contrast, the postcoital exhaustion that follows orgasmic union is a reminder that, for all the sense of fulfillment, effort has been expended, some vitality given up, the result of which is the possible birth of a new life. Eating, even in the presence of others, is a replenishing and pleasuring of self; that is what eating is, by definition. Sex, on the other hand, is engagement with another; even in masturbatory fantasy, the image of another must be conjured. Can these be some of the reasons why sex has spiritual dimensions absent from eating? Yet whereas unmannerly eating is deemed merely gross, the display of tumescent sex other than to a lover in secluded privacy is widely considered obscene.

#### VOYEURISM AND OBSCENITY

Sex is the ultimate private act. Ethnographers who do not hesitate to intrude upon the most intimate behaviors in the name of their science hesitate to observe and record the sex act. I noted earlier that feeding times are popular at the zoo; we delight in seeing lions chomping on raw meat in uninhibited animality. I would now add that monkey cages are also popular; they seem to exert a particular fascination for adolescents, yet who other than infants can claim total indifference? Here are our primate cousins, similar to us in so many ways, yet radically alien in their unself-conscious sexual exploration of each other.

Is it really possible to watch chimpanzees in estrus in cool scientific detachment? The mating instinct and its physiological manifestations, which humans find embarrassingly and inconveniently forceful in themselves, seen inordinately exaggerated in nonhuman primates. Human tumescence is chaste indeed compared with the flamboyant genital swelling of the female chimpanzee in the peak stage of her readiness for male mounting. Large, protuberant, and pink, chimpanzee genitalia advertise with a blatancy found among humans only in their pornographic art. As for prose, the explicit accounts of sexual congress that are pornography's specialty appear matter-of-factly in animal-behavior literature. But is it really possible to read them matter-of-factly? What exactly does the reader see and feel upon encountering a passage such as the following? "During a reunion with a female [chimpanzee], a male often inspects her genital area. He may bend close and smell her bottom directly, or poke his finger into the vulva and then sniff the end of it . . . two or three times."

This poking inspection of the female's sexual organ in disregard of her own sense of self would be judged obscene if the players were human. And so I am led to the impolite question, Can the ethnologist focusing his binoculars on the performance, or the reader who sees it all in the mind's eye, altogether escape opprobrium? Is science a cover?<sup>27</sup>

As the female chimpanzee advertises aggressively, so does the male, drawing attention to his breeding potential by various means—bipedal swaggering, the shaking of a branch, and suchlike—but most directly by exposing an erect and bright pink penis, normally flaccid and concealed in the prepuce, against the white skin of the thighs and the lower abdomen. Compared with such uninhibited advertising, the sex act itself is surprisingly subdued, by human standards. In fact, there is little bodily contact as such, no tight locking of two bodies into one. Rather, the male merely leans toward the female's back as he makes his insertion.

Touching, other than the insertion, may be little more than the male grasping his mate with one hand to steady himself in his squatting position. Orgasm there may be (primatologists are not yet sure); certainly the chimpanzees pant and squeal in excitement, but there is nothing like "divine madness" in the coupling—no sweaty overpowering passion that expels the world.<sup>28</sup> The act can indeed seem a merely necessary function, a practical step accompanied by a certain amount of pleasure, in obedience to nature's procreative goal. So in the end, the act, for all its showy physiological billing, is a disappointment to the prurient voyeur, as it is to the prurient reader of the ethnological report.

Reading is voyeurism; pictures emerge from the printed page as one reads. The words are put there by a writer, who encounters a different kind of challenge when he describes eating than when he describes sex. Eating can be presented neutrally, if that is his wish, but sex cannot. Whereas ordinary words such as "hand," "nose," and "shoulder" designate body parts without strong emotional coloring, other parts resist plain utterance. The sex vocabulary available to the middle class is limited to four types, according to C. S. Lewis: "a nursery word, an archaism, a word from the gutter, or a scientific word." Hard as one tries at mere description, one produces willy-nilly baby talk, arch speech, coarseness, or technical jargon. Certain common words have become "obscene" because they have long been "consecrated (or desecrated) to insult, derision, and buffoonery." To speak them at all is to evoke the randy-machismo atmosphere of the slum, the barracks room, and the all-male school.<sup>29</sup> It is the word that is offensive, rather than the anatomical feature to which it is applied. It offends by reducing a human being to a single organ, the (often involuntary) arousal of which holds him in thrall. Again let it be said that the sex act itself, however intimate or acrobatic, need not be obscene to the absorbed pair. Obscenity is an effect of distancing, made possible by a picture or word that turns anyone who uses it

into a salacious voyeur, who then redirects that salacious feeling away from himself by saying indignantly, "Look at these groaning, sweaty animals and buffoons!"

Words such as "obscenity" and "pornography" may be objected to on the grounds that they are judgments of the puritanical West, inapplicable to other times and cultures. I wonder whether this is indeed the case. To the extent that any society has a norm of polite behavior, it has a norm of what lies beyond the pale—the risqué, the outrageous, the subhuman, and the obscene. Moreover, I am suspicious of the modern scholar's tendency to regard any sign of disapprobation as Victorian prudery and, at the other extreme, to commend sexual display in art, no matter how extreme, as healthy and frank. To me this attitude suggests an overcompensation for past excesses of moralism that cannot bear critical review. It may also be a device for avoiding frankness where frankness can really hurt. "Be true!" declaimed Nathaniel Hawthorne, not once but three times. "Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait by which the worst may be inferred."<sup>30</sup> He had, I believe, moral lapses in mind. Total honesty in how we see and treat others is too demanding, but most of us can at least drop nonchalantly a four-letter word or two in conversation by which our animal and sexual nature is acknowledged. The issue even there is how far we can go along that path without dehumanization. Dehumanization does not and cannot mean the return to a prior state of innocent animality. Rather, the process ends in the conjuration of monsters, neither human nor animal, whose reason for existence is to stimulate titillation in private and, more sinisterly, declare to the world that that is what human beings truly are: inconsequential and grotesque. What is a man? To judge by popular Japanese prints of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he is a lascivious beast peeking through refined culture, a penis the size of a bludgeon and the color of a blood sausage exposed under the half-raised silk kimono.

## SEX AND FECUNDITY

Since prehistoric times, representations of genitals have symbolized fecundity. Could Chinese ancestral tablets, longtime icon of respectable lineage, be originally phalli?<sup>31</sup> To put it another way, could piety be a refined human sentiment that started its career as fertility cult—the worship of ancestral genital potency? While the Chinese picture remains obscure, there can be no doubt as to the meaning and ubiquity of the lingam in Indian civilization; and, likewise, the visibility, if not ubiquity, of phalli of monstrous size exhibited in public places such as the theater in archaic Greece. Earth goddesses also flourished—outrstandingly, Demeter, autonomous queen of the fields, whose ability to produce did not require the attendance of a personified male partner. A significant difference thus emerged in representations of female and male generative power. Whereas the entire female figure stood for potency, in the male it was concentrated in just the scrotum and the penis. This explains why Uranus's amputated male organ could by itself, in union with the sea, create Aphrodite.<sup>32</sup> Men have always been greater patrons of pornographic art and peep shows than women have been. It may be that the cause lies in an important difference in their sexual nature, for compared with a woman's excitation, which tends to be diffused throughout her body, a man's is localized. He is—he is even subordinate to—his genitals, which can seem detachable or to have a powerful will of their own. Fertility cults were once widespread throughout the world. With their decline, the tumescent phallus must sooner or later lose its magical-symbolic role in the generation of life, accepted and even revered by society for that reason, to come to an ignoble end as crude pictures and graffiti on detritus walls, cries for attention and relief by thwarted, lonely individuals.

Fecundity itself has over time taken on an ambivalent odor, except when it is applied to plants and animals. Likewise breeding,

That word, with its jarringly mixed signification of animal urge and a technically guided, manipulative consciousness, is suspect in the human realm. And although many societies, including the highest, very likely had breeding and fecundity (among other considerations) in mind when they matched a young man with a young woman in marriage, shamelessly using all the social forces and skills at their disposal to ensure the couple's conjugation, they could rarely say outright what it was that they were doing; even less could they say outright that the sweaty entwinement of bodies on the marriage bed served merely to effect a material or political advantage. Humiliation could go no further than to be coerced to couple sexually for some other people's purpose. An image of slaves toiling in the field is bad enough, but far worse, not so much in conveying physical stress as in evoking the ultimate in social degradation, is the image of slave farms, such as those established by Muslims in nineteenth-century Dar Fur (Sudan) that specialized in breeding black slaves for sale like cattle and sheep.<sup>33</sup>

"Be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth," God said to man ("male and female created he them") (Genesis 1.27-28). Procreation is greatly valued in almost all societies, not least among those that have emerged from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Catholic church sometimes speaks as though giving birth were the highest or even the only justification for sexual union. But it was not always so. Other values have at various times been given greater prominence. In the Bible itself, God wanted Adam to have a companion. Companionship, characterized as that state for which a man would leave his parents and "cleave to his wife as one flesh" (Genesis 2.24), was emphasized, rather than procreation. Anglicans are taught to believe that "the union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy." Mutual joy is mentioned first, then mutual help, and, last, "when it is God's will," children. Elsewhere in the solemn ceremony a couple's carnal desire is mutated into a love that is "a seal

upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their heads." Beyond even this image of regal exaltation is the idea that the marriage of man and woman can be a symbol of "the spiritual unity between Christ and his Church" (Ephesians 5:25; 28–30).

#### DISTINCTIVELY HUMAN: EROTICISM AND LOVE

Sexual insatiability, cruelty, and inordinate violence are uniquely human. So are eroticism and love in all their subtle and passionate forms. They are uniquely human because, for good or ill, imagination is at work, guiding, moderating, or intensifying animal proclivities and impulses. Note how the sex act differs from eating in the measure that imagination comes into play. Eating is pretty much eating, whether humans do it or animals do it, though we humans try to persuade ourselves of a difference by savoring food longer and by putting on a theater of table manners. This is not so in the sex act. Among humans it is never just responding to a physiological urge, but always something much more glorious, but also, unfortunately, much more destructive and sinister. Consider how the tactile sense is activated during sexual congress. Touch matters to humans far more than it does to other animals, including chimpanzees, our closest primate cousins. A well-known reason for the difference is that human beings have strong, flexible, and sensitive hands and that the human body is covered by an expanse of naked, responsive skin, which invites searching caress.<sup>34</sup> A feast of tactile sensations opens up as the lover's hand moves from rumpled hair and firm pectorals to the soft skin below the armpits, the muscled thighs, the knee's hard knob, and as it registers temperatures that range from the nose's dry cool tip to the groin's tropical heat.

Every touch heightens pleasure and desire in oneself and, at the same time, elicits pleasure and desire in the beloved. Seeing this pleasure in the other enhances one's own, and so the pleasure

rises to reach a high glow of concordance when the penis penetrates the vagina. Touch shifts at some stage from hand to sexual organ; the uniquely human yields to the sort of coupling that all animals know. Yet it is this act of penetration, rather than the orgasm that floods and drowns all sense of self and individuality, that is the great wonder of human sexual union. At least, according to Rollo May, this is so with lovers who dream about, remember, and savor the experience. To them, entry into the other and reception by the other in desire is a tremendous high point, not erased even by the orgasm that follows, for it is in this first most intimate of contacts that the lovers' sensorial responses are "most original, most individual, most truly their own."<sup>35</sup>

To touch is to be touched, a union in which an individual feels all the more herself as she embraces the world and becomes that world. What happiness to *be* the silken texture of a flower petal, the roughness and weight of stone, the enveloping warmth and yielding ooze of mud! And if this bliss can occur when one sinks into nature, far greater can it be when one sinks into the arms of a beloved. "The warmth of his shoulder against my palm is all the joy there is in life," says a character in a Doris Lessing novel. "I am so happy, so happy. I find myself sitting in my room, watching the sunlight on the floor—a calm and delightful ecstasy, a oneness with everything, so that a flower in a vase is oneself, and the slow stretch of a muscle is the confident energy that drives the universe."<sup>36</sup>

What of the human face? I have avoided mentioning it thus far because I wanted to start with the animal self, skin rubbing against skin. So, what of the human face? It is by far the most expressive part of the body, an expressiveness recognized and enhanced by the world's art and literature.<sup>37</sup> The face is the index of the whole person—the heaviness of earth, the emptyrean reach of mind, and the profundity of soul. A face commands love. "Love" seems the right word to use, whereas with other parts of the body

we are less certain. Can a hand command love? Perhaps, for the human hand can be very individual and expressive. An arm, a shoulder, a foot? "Fetishism" or "lust" comes to mind when interest in them is irresistible. How natural it is to have the face of the beloved on the mantelpiece, and weird for any other part of the anatomy to be similarly captured and displayed! And it goes without saying, even among the most libertine, that a snapshot of someone's sexual organ taken for purposes of private viewing and arousal is obscene.

The face, perhaps because it suggests the whole person, projects power in a way that the rest of the anatomy does not. From one perspective, it is most vulnerable—the eyes in particular, which as "windows to the soul" imply total exposure. And yet from another perspective, the face—and again the eyes in particular—commands a world. To see a face is to see a subject rather than an object. Think how untrue this is of any other part of the body and of the body as a whole when it is asleep or unconscious. The sex organ also projects power and vulnerability, but in a totally different way. Power in the sexual organ is raw and unmediated. Curiously, that is also the source of its vulnerability. The mere presence of another can cause the penis to stiffen uncontrollably. Whereas the face can deceive—feign and simulate—the penis cannot, and therein lies its innocence.<sup>38</sup>

Humans fall in love. "Fall" suggests the involuntary. Falling in love "at first sight" underlines the involuntariness even more. But when one considers the complexity of the emotion, this manner of speaking is hyperbolic, justified, if at all, by the force of the emotion and its element of surprise. Falling in love, as Irving Singer has noted, is more conceptual than instinctive, more a disposition prepared by a mind that has come under the influence of society and art than an innate bias and surge of hormonal pressure.<sup>39</sup> Of course, the disposition has to be activated; otherwise, it remains a diffuse yearning. When it is activated—triggered per-

haps by a single encounter—the searing emotion seems to come out of the blue, a moment in time that marks the beginning of a new life. The past becomes "prehistory."<sup>40</sup> Lovers, liberated from the rancors and resentments of their earlier lives, find it surprisingly easy to forgive the people who caused them. A past that no longer taunts is a sunny landscape that invites the lovers, when they are not wholly engaged in the present or planning for the future, to stroll through hand in hand, pausing here and there to honor a fond memory.

In love, the beloved is seen to possess not only beauty and goodness but even delectable weaknesses and faults that are found in no other individual. "Let the king have sixty queens, eighty concubines, young women without number! But I love only one," sings Solomon in the Song of Songs (6:8–9). Romantic passion is not unique to the modern West, as was once thought. People have fallen in love and idealized the beloved in all times and places—in China and India, Morocco and Kenya.<sup>41</sup> But it may be that one state of love is more strongly developed in the modern West than elsewhere. It is a state that makes extra demands on the imagination, for the individuality it recognizes in the beloved is not just a virtue like courage or a quality like blue eyes; rather, it is the loved one's unique way of perceiving and living in her world. A man may well think that he "owns" his beloved's blue eyes; he cannot so easily think that he owns the beloved's experiences—her reality. He may enter and enjoy it, but only as a privileged guest.<sup>42</sup>

#### SACRED AND PROFANE ECSTASY

In love, one feels simultaneously vulnerable and strong; united with the beloved and isolated in a heightened sense of self, abased and exalted—delicious emotions that well out of one's innermost being and gratitude for the splendors of the objectively real. Almost the same words serve to describe an encounter with the divine. To most people, the tidal swing of emotion culminating in

the ecstasy of sexual embrace is the most they will ever know of mystical union and transcendence. Not surprisingly, world literature and art—notably those of India, China, and the West—have seen fit to conjoin the two. There was then no cover-up, no sense of a split between body and soul, the “low” and the “high.” In the absence of such a sense of a split, a body evokes feelings that merge and rise effortlessly to the realm of the spirit. In the West, Solomon’s poetry (*Song of Songs*) provides an early and familiar model of how a charged erotic language can call forth the passion and mystery of divine union. Again and again, Western mystics and poets have availed themselves of this model, outstandingly St. John of the Cross, whose *Spiritual Canticle* contains images that could shock even W. H. Auden, a very worldly and modern poet.<sup>43</sup> In sculptural art, the voluptuous forms of gods and goddesses, the transparent identification of sexual congress—the herd girls’ desire for Krishna—with mystical ecstasy, richly adorn the exterior of Hindu temples.<sup>44</sup> Almost as gloriously self-conscious are works of Western sculpture and painting from classical antiquity to the seventeenth century. Over and over again, the perfectly formed human nude is made to serve as a symbol of spiritual perfection. In medieval times, sculptors saw nothing amiss in using pagan Nereids to represent blessed souls on their way to heaven. During periods of religious fervor, outstandingly the sixteenth century, the line between sacred and profane ecstasy was exceedingly fine. Saints, daringly uncovered, turned their eyes to heaven in bliss. Michelangelo’s drawing of the risen Christ (housed at Windsor) shows him completely nude, with exposed genitals. To the art historian Kenneth Clark it is “perhaps the most beautiful nude in ecstasy in the whole of art.”<sup>45</sup>

#### TRANSCENDENCE

Is it really possible to look at the image of a beautiful human body and not be sensually (sexually) aroused? Gerard Manley Hopkins

found the naked Christ a strong temptation to erotic daydreaming.<sup>46</sup> One may dismiss Hopkins as a repressed priest living in Victorian times, with an imagination that could be inflamed by the most innocent matter, but I ask again, Is it really possible for the dense, sexually charged human body to be a window to spiritual values, as words on the printed page are such a window to ideas? Symbols of a spiritual realm are least likely to divert the imagination from their intended path when they are themselves abstract (as, for example, the circle and the cross, light and darkness, the vertical and the horizontal) or when they are taken from nonhuman nature (mountains and forests, the lion and the doe). But the naked human body, unless it be that of an infant, is none of the above. It is in a category of its own, even though it belongs to nature.

A strong tradition exists in the West, and in other civilizations as well, that is deeply suspicious of the body, which is considered—depending on the tradition—the fount of intemperance and lust, of ignorant materiality and illusion, of the sickness, suffering, putrescence, and death inherent to biological life. As we have noted, the ancient Greeks entertained no such bias. To them, a perfectly shaped human being (outstandingly, a naked boy) could be an image of the Good, the only aspect of the Good (the aesthetic aspect) to which humans were naturally drawn. But a puritanical strain also existed in Greek thought. It was given prominence by Plato, and it warned that one must not dwell on the body’s aesthetic-erotic appeal, for that way lay bondage and corruption; rather, one must turn one’s attention away from a particular person’s fairness to fairness in all persons, from fair forms to fair practices, from fair practices to fair ideas, and ultimately to the idea of absolute beauty and the Good. These are the famous rungs of Diotima’s ladder. Progress is upward, from the particular and material to the general and abstract, from decay and change to unchanging perfection, from image to reality (*Symposium* 211E–12). The ladder is a means of escape. Each step up takes one closer to the real.

The human body received respect from the Greeks and even from an important line of Christian thought, which viewed it as a “temple of the spirit”—a suitable vehicle for divine incarnation. Nevertheless, another line came to dominate Christendom, one that looked upon the body, its concupiscence, with deep ambivalence if not outright hostility. Paul has often been blamed for this second line, and he earned the blame not because he thought sexual union within marriage wrong but because he tended to consider the institution of little importance when the Kingdom of God was so close at hand. Devotion to spouse and offspring, commendable in its own circumscribed sphere, distracted one from the higher calling. Continence was the answer. Continence was a gift that made it possible for Paul and others similarly endowed to attend to God’s business wholeheartedly. Paul knew that they were a small minority; that most of their converts could not abstain from sex, and that for them it was “better to marry than to burn” (1 Corinthians 7.9). Clearly, Paul deemed married life second best. However, as his frustration over human frailty increased, he went further. He took to substituting the derogatory word “flesh” for “body” and then spoke of “flesh” as the opposite of “spirit.”<sup>47</sup> Paul’s shift of attitude had major consequences for Christian moral teaching. If, for Paul, the shift contained an element of inadvertence, there was no such inadvertence in the carefully weighed judgments of the young church’s three towering leaders, who in prestige and influence came immediately after Paul: Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome. Together they managed to bind sex firmly with sin, sin with corruption and death, and, conversely, virginity with heroic virtue and eternal life.<sup>48</sup>

#### DYING AND DEATH

As animals, we die—a plain factual statement that is nevertheless riddled with paradox, for what animal will call itself an animal and then go on to say that as such it dies? Can an animal that knows

itself to be one die? Doesn’t this “knowing” hint at a level of being that just might survive bodily decay? I have noted that eating and sex are an embarrassment and a moral dilemma because we are able to stand outside ourselves, watch, and ponder. Is the same true of dying and death? The answer is not so clear. The sort of reflection that makes eating and sex a problem also makes dying and death a problem. But there are surprising differences. Consider the matter of being watched. One does not like to be watched while one eats and even less while one engages in sex. But dying? If I thought I were dying, reduced to the dependent state of a child, wouldn’t I welcome watchful eyes? My human worth, I should feel, would be enhanced rather than diminished. In sharp contrast to sex watch, which is perverse and degrading, death watch—vigil beside a dying or dead person—is a good custom, an achievement of culture; indeed, turning one’s eyes away from the dying and the dead is reprehensible.

As experience, eating and sex differ radically from dying and death. Dying, unlike eating and sex, is normally gradual and non-repetitive. Dying may be so gradual that we are not even aware of it happening—we do not know it as experience—until the critical stages toward the end, when pain first discolors and then consumes our being. As for death, it is not itself a personal experience—not an event that one can ever “go through.” It is “the one experience I shall never describe,” said Virginia Woolf, who so expertly described the death of a moth.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, human imagination can dwell on one’s own death such that a mere endpoint is given the power to haunt or color the whole of life.

#### DEATH’S SHADOWS

Consider some of the ways that death haunts life. I use the word “haunt,” as distinct from “color,” to suggest the negative, and it is with the negative that I will start. It can be assumed that the intensity and extent of the haunting depend on such factors as an

individual's temperament and propensity to reflect, and the culture in which he or she is raised. Culture (group value) may indeed be the paramount factor. However, rather than take up variations in degree of haunting among individuals and groups, I should like to lay the philosophical groundwork by turning to certain common human experiences and tendencies.

Death, I have noted, is not something one can know directly. "Where I am, death is not; where death is, I am not," as Epicurus put it.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, we easily see it happening to others. A person alive one day may be dead the next. What happens to another can also happen to me and to those I hold in affection or esteem. The glow of life is admirable, yet it cannot last. Moreover, is it even entirely admirable? I value my own life and its sensory satisfactions, but these depend on the deaths of other forms of life. If I do not do the killing myself, I know it occurs next door, and I participate in their ultimate reduction by eating them. This is a commonplace of observation and experience, not an esoteric truth. Food that supports life and conjures so many happy images is itself a richly flavored compost of death. I touched on the moral dilemma of food earlier and will not repeat myself here. But what about sex, that second compelling demand of our animal nature? It can give life and is not obviously shadowed by death. Yet life and death are inseparable. Their odors are mixed or waft uncomfortably close. In human birth it is hard to decouple, in fact and in the mind, the emergence of life from the expulsion of waste. The sex act itself—ejaculation that entails a sense of loss, the phenomenon of postcoital sadness—hints at individual mortality even as one generation is engaged in reproducing another.

In growth there is much passivity—significant loss even as more is gained.<sup>51</sup> In the rising arc of life, one may be aware only of the gain—of increasing competence and a widening world such that the passing of earlier selves and experiences, powerful and wondrous in their own way, is scarcely missed. In the cycle's down-

ward path, the losses mount and a time comes when they can no longer be ignored. The world contracts, or, to put it another way, people, things, and places withdraw—move away, leaving one isolated, abandoned. Death is imagined as this final isolation and abandonment, but its shadow falls on life long before the event itself arrives. The haunting may be mild or severe, depending on individual temperament and the cultural mood of the time. For an example of severe haunting, I turn to China: and I do so because it seems to me that Chinese society, lacking the comfort of either a triumphalist religion or an austere stoical philosophy, tends to fall into bathos when death occurs. The poet T'ao Yuan-ming (365–427) captured the bathos in a poem composed in the style of a coffin-puller's song (*zuan-ko*), so called because it derives from the dirges sung by the men as they pulled the hearse to the graveyard. However, rather than put himself in the position of the mourners, which would have been depressing enough—though redeemed by the prospect of the funeral feast to come—the poet took the viewpoint of the one who had been left behind:

Those who just now saw me off  
 have all gone back, each to his home,  
 my kin perhaps with a lingering grief,  
 but the others are finished with their funeral songs.  
 And what of the one who has departed in death?  
 body left to merge with the round of the hill?<sup>52</sup>

Losses natural to growth are not usually regretted. All over the world, people celebrate the passing of childhood and the attainment of maturity. True, pain, sickness, and permanent debility can occur at any stage of life. Even in the bloom of youth one may experience severe diminishment, a foretaste of death. But these facts do not instill terror. Life is potently regenerative—ever hopeful, and for good reason: One does recover and can no more feel the excruciating aches and pains of the past that one can re-

capture the sensation of icy cold in the midst of summer. Suffering is thus a misleading memento mori. It exhibits duration and it passes, totally unlike the endpoint that is death. Moreover, suffering, because it is, after all, life and even a rather intense form of it, does not prevent—indeed, it actively encourages—daydreaming. Watching flickering images in the mind is a ready means of escape, and why not, if it relieves temporary distress? Daydreaming can, however, become addictive. One learns to be not just an occasional visitor but the habitué of a fantasy world. Of that world's many delusory assurances, perhaps the most cunning is the excision of finality from death, making it seem like mere suffering.

So, rather than sickness and suffering, accident (Iris Murdoch suggests) is a better reminder of death.<sup>53</sup> The total passivity that death imposes has its closest analogue in accident, which by definition is something that happens unexpectedly. Accident is statistically inescapable. When it occurs, though life may turn for the better, more often it seems to turn for the worse—to precipitous decline that may end in death. Tribal societies are known to confront the two; death is itself an accident rather than a biological inevitability.<sup>54</sup> Death ought not to occur, yet it does—perhaps suddenly, when one least expects it. Within minutes of eating tainted food, one becomes a sick dog or, more tragically, a corpse ready to be swept out of the restaurant along with the other waste. Accident is the most authentic foretaste of death's imperium—fate that is beyond imagination's power to cover up. Most accidents are, of course, minor. But even those—even a stumble—can jolt us rudely from our assumption of life's even flow.

#### DEATH'S GIFTS

Death, surprisingly, also has gifts. It consoles, it gives an extra edge to life, and it is the ground of virtue. Death consoles if one thinks of it as the portal to heaven—a familiar route of escape to

many in the Christian and Islamic faiths. Death also consoles *because* it is the endpoint. Jorge Luis Borges said of his aged and sick mother that she would wake up in the morning and cry because, contrary to her fond wish, she was still alive; escape had once again eluded her.<sup>55</sup> Asked to account for his longevity, an octogenarian replied, "Oh, just bad luck!" David, the boy who lacked immunological defense and had to live in a sterilized bubble his entire life, said a short while before his death at the age of twelve, "Here we have all of these tubes and all of these tests and nothing is working and I'm getting tired. Why don't we just pull out all these tubes and let me go home?"<sup>56</sup> Among death's uses, the philosopher Sidney Hook said, is that

it gives us some assurance that no evil or suffering lasts for ever. To anyone aware of the multitude of infamies and injustice which men have endured, of the broken bodies and tortured minds of the victims of these cruelties, of the multiple dimensions of pain in which millions live on mattress graves or with minds shrouded in darkness, death must sometimes appear as a beneficent release not an insoluble affliction. It washes the earth clean of what cannot be cleansed in any other way. Not all the bright promises of a future free of these stains of horror can redeem by one iota the lot of those who will not live to see the dawn of the new day.<sup>57</sup>

Death enhances life by confronting us with an Absolute. Without it, not only can this life seem to be just "one damn thing after another," but the afterlife as well—presumably "one damn good thing after another" to all infinity. "I don't look forward to an eternity of survival," wrote the distinguished philosopher Karl Popper. "On the contrary, the idea of going on for ever seems to me utterly frightening. Anybody who has sufficient imagination to deal with the idea of infinity would, I think, agree." Death, he believed, "gives value, and in a sense almost infinite value, to our lives, and makes more urgent and attractive the task of using our

lives to achieve something for others, and to be co-workers in World 3 [that is, the world of knowledge and art], which apparently embodies more or less what is called the meaning of life."<sup>58</sup>

John Cowper Powys, that maverick Welsh-English writer, had the same essential idea, although he put it somewhat differently, with greater emphasis on happiness as the incontrovertible, great human good. To Powys the line in Wordsworth "The pleasure which there is in life itself" rings true, provided it is expanded to include a clear reminder of death. Happiness? "I tell you the foundation stone of all human happiness is the thought of death."<sup>59</sup>

As for virtue, what is it without the risk and terror of death? In the words of Oliver St. John Gogarty,

But for your Terror  
Where would be Valour?  
What is Love for  
But to stand in your way?<sup>60</sup>

Valor and love are two positive virtues, but a keen awareness of one's own finitude also produces at least one admirable negative virtue, namely, a certain indifference toward the pomp and circumstance of this world. Malcolm Muggeridge in his old age wrote, "Now the prospect of death overshadows all others. I am like a man on a sea voyage nearing his destination. When I embarked I worried about having a cabin with a porthole, whether I should be asked to sit at the captain's table, who were the more attractive and important passengers. All such considerations become pointless when I shall soon be disembarking."<sup>61</sup> In the voyage of life itself, death's shadow is ever present, not just something that haunts the end; at any moment I may receive notice to disembark. Grasping this fact should persuade me that there are better ways to spend my allotted time on the boat—watching the night sky, getting to know fellow passengers, reading good books—than worrying over material advantage and prestige.

#### BEYOND THE ENDPOINT: NOTHINGNESS, GLOOM, CORRUPTION

Mystics may say that at death we fall into the great Abyss, Darkness, or No, which is God. But this is unprovable, and tagging on God at the end sounds like a comforting verbal trick. The part of the assertion that we *can* be certain of, says Karl Barth, "is that man is negated, negated."<sup>62</sup> Negated—annihilated. Is nonexistence itself the ultimate dread that humans cover up with such ingenuity? The following grim conversation took place on April 15, 1778, between a Miss Seward and Dr. Samuel Johnson, when Johnson was sixty-nine years old: "Miss Seward: There is one mode of the fear of death which is certainly absurd; and that is the dread of annihilation, which is only a pleasing sleep without a dream. Johnson: It is neither pleasing, nor sleep; it is nothing. Now mere existence is so much better than nothing, that one would rather exist even in pain than not exist."<sup>63</sup> The void awaits everyone. As I move toward that inevitability, it can render all my life, its struggles and rewards, shadowy and ultimately meaningless—a long preparation or education (as William Butler Yeats put it) that ends nowhere. John Wesley, it seems to me, had something like this collapse of meaning in mind when he confessed, in a letter (1766) to his brother Charles, "If I have any fear, it is not of falling into hell, but of falling into nothing."<sup>64</sup> Hell at least means that what I do in this life has lasting consequence; every moment may be momentous. But what if there is neither heaven nor hell, not even some sort of perch in the afterlife from which I can see in joy or sorrow the effects of my own earthly existence? Does then everything—not only seating at the captain's table but also savoring the night sky—become a more or less successful distraction before the great No?

The human mind cannot come to grips with "nothing." Therefore, even when people imagine the afterlife negatively,

they do not see it as nothing but as something—a shadow of this life. The drearier they imagine the underworld to be, the more they appreciate sunny well-being in the world above ground. A case in point were the Sumerians. What did they treasure? “Wealth and possessions, rich harvests, well-stocked granaries, folds and stalls filled with cattle . . . successful hunting on the plains and good fishing in the sea.”<sup>65</sup> In short, substance to counter the lack thereof beyond. Ancient Hebrews too conceived of Sheol as a shadowland, which was one reason why they so warmly embraced this life’s blessings. People in general want to enjoy material abundance. “Good,” to nonphilosophers, is something tangible that benefits life; in most societies it also connotes “abundance”—initially the plenitude of nature, then the plenitude of manufactures. Notable exceptions occur in certain specialized cultures—hero culture, for one. Warriors in ancient Greece certainly appreciated good things, which they might fight for, but they valued honor more, which they sought in the teeth of death. Yet their idea of the nether world was so dreary that, to escape it, even honor might be forgotten. How the horror of bare existence could humiliate even the bravest! In a picture made famous by Homer the dead are likened to bats fluttering and screeching in a cavern, and the ghost of Achilles is heard to say that he would rather be the serf of a poor man on earth than rule over all the dead.<sup>66</sup> Even the serf can bask in sunshine, quench his or her thirst with spring water, bite into a loaf of bread. And what if one has more than that—a good job, family and children, friends—as many people do? The loss then is immense. We can understand why the novelist Joyce Cary, as his health steadily deteriorated, broke down. “His grandson, Lucius, at Joyce’s request, sang ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem,’ standing in the open doorway of the bedroom so as to be able to hear the piano. When it was over, Joyce burst into tears. The injustice of life and the knowledge of what he was losing had overcome him.”<sup>67</sup>

Death is quickly followed by the indignity of corruption. But rotting can occur long before death. Freud’s cancer of the larynx produced an evil odor that offended even his faithful dog. He and others around him could smell the approach of the endpoint before it arrived. The entire civilizing process may be seen as an effort to bury the fact of death and its premonitory signs—removing from genteel eyes and sensitive noses the necessary work of the butcher, the disposal of animal and human corpses, the care of the sick (not always a sightly undertaking), and all odors of decay, which were once believed to be a potent cause of death, whether as miasma from swamps packed with rotting organic matter, or from city burial grounds swollen with human corpses, or from the filthy, densely packed quarters of the poor. “Cleanliness is next to Godliness.” That ancient saying revived by John Wesley may have a meaning other than the one normally given it: a clean, odorless body is a mark of immortality.

#### IMMORTALITY

Contrary to common belief, it is not the case that people in earlier times generally expected to survive death in the form of resurrected body or spirit to enjoy the rewards of paradise. Ethnographic and historical evidence suggests that the vast majority of human beings were too humble—too beaten by life’s recurrent insults and injuries, and too habituated to living in dire need surrounded by filth—to postulate living in heaven in bodily splendor.<sup>68</sup> For personal survival in style to be conceivable, there must first be a strong sense of individuality, of being a person who in this life can already engage in enterprises of worth and valor. Among quasi-egalitarian communities, great hunters such as the Iglulik are well known for their belief in a happy afterlife in the Land of the Moon.<sup>69</sup> This is understandable, for hunters are individualists; in their search for game they must often take initiative alone, or with a partner, and they must often confront danger

bravely. By contrast, cultivators and peasant farmers are more group-oriented, the demands of their livelihood providing few opportunities for individual initiative;<sup>70</sup> and perhaps for this reason personal immortality, as recompense for meritorious deeds done here below, is not an element of their world-view. In hierarchical societies, at first only the topmost crust of rulers and warriors had enough presumption to postulate a glorious afterlife. Later, as the livelihood of people in the lower ranks improved and there was more opportunity for them to take pride in their occupations and in themselves, they too found it psychologically compelling to assume the continuation of a richly satisfying existence in another world.

What is bliss like in the hereafter? The human imagination has repeatedly failed to come up with a worthy image. One view, already noted, is that the life beyond is a shadowy existence and not bliss at all. Even when that world is given greater substance, as in many lineage societies, it is still a pale replica of this one. In such a world, ancestors are provided with food and other necessities, are addressed as though they were still alive, and are housed in familiar buildings, but how they live and exactly what they enjoy are seldom described.<sup>71</sup> Vividly original images of the afterlife are far more likely to pertain to hell than to heaven. The human mind seems better at conjuring horror than bliss. The one has the punch and texture of reality; the other is merely a place we already know purged of pain and sordidness, a pastoral landscape or an Islamic garden of delight, in which "the blessed shall recline on soft couches, be served with a goblet filled at a gushing fountain . . . and sit with bashful, dark-eyed virgins, as chaste as the sheltered eggs of ostriches" (the Koran). Theologians must work hard to give a figurative twist to these sensual/erotic images. At their most convincing, evocations of heaven avoid material voluptuousness and resort instead to the abstractly aesthetic and intellectual, as in Dante's paradise, or to dances of light, color, and

sound, nonrepresentational yet of immediate allure to the senses, as in the interior of a great cathedral.<sup>72</sup>

Escape is a response to both push and pull. In deciding to cross the ocean to live in the New World, migrants may well have been more pulled by its paradisiacal reputation than pushed by the miseries of home. The paradise promised beyond death, however, can never have been a serious pull. People of sound mind do not commit suicide because they have conjured an afterlife of irresistible allure. Strange to say, the idea of the void can be a real draw, and this even to individuals who are not *in extremis* but who have a deep longing for things (even good things) to come to an end at a ripe time. The absoluteness of the end has an aesthetic/moral appeal of completion and integrity that the pie-in-the-sky models of heaven lack.

Stoics in classical antiquity embraced an austere outlook on life that included a dignified way to bring it to a close. Well known for their love of fate (with its implied passivity), they nevertheless believed in control over the self. Virtuous living here and now was to them the proper aim, for it alone confers dignity and honor. By contrast, attempts at envisaging the beyond are exercises in debilitating fantasy. People of a naturally stoical temperament or who have disciplined themselves to become stoical have no doubt existed in other ages, including our own. But it is safe to say that they have always been a small minority, and especially so in our time. Why? Let me offer two reasons. First, postulating some sort of survival, if only as an anxious eye watching to see how our biological or intellectual progeny are doing, has by no means weakened even among committed modern secularists; perhaps it is an irreducible element in human mental makeup that cannot be entirely erased whatever one's professed belief. More to the point, for it highlights an important difference from the past, is modern men and women's undoubted antipathy to the Stoic idea of fate, especially when this "passivity" is paradoxically combined with

the demand to exercise heroic control over the self—the body and its passions, the mind and its wayward imaginings. Fate to modern men and women is an outmoded idea even though they continue to experience it under the name of “accident.” As for control, they fully endorse it, but to them, in contrast to Stoics, control means keeping the body perpetually fit rather than keeping desire and will temperate and wise. The body attracts more and more attention now because for the first time there is reason to believe that medical science can maintain it far beyond the “normal” span.

How long can a human life last? Is there a theoretical limit? Can science postpone death forever? As yet few people take the last question seriously. It still sounds more like science fiction than science. The question also deeply offends certain moral-religious scruples. Christianity’s hold on the West may have weakened greatly, but it hasn’t disappeared; the idea of maintaining the human body indefinitely is still too radical a departure from the long-held view of its return to dust and ultimate resurrection. Moreover, theological details apart, there is the lingering awareness that human beings are creatures. Their power is or ought to be limited; and so the idea that they can one day prolong life forever seems the ultimate usurpation of divine prerogative—a transgression that can have the direst consequence.

#### CONQUEST OF NATURE—AND OF DEATH

In the twentieth century, a critical and even alarmist attitude toward technological accomplishment is common in intellectual circles of Western Europe and North America, parts of the world where the greatest technical advances have been made and life is generally the most secure and affluent. Indeed, in recent decades the Atlantic West has moved so far from the hubris of an earlier time that to its more fervent environmental advocates even the expression “conquest of nature” is avoided. Nature has come to

mean almost solely organic life—a thin and frail mantle that has been abused and that now needs human protection. So, if we want a glaring example of Western hubris in the twentieth century—Western in the larger civilizational sense—we must look eastward to the former Soviet Union, where “conquest of nature” remained the official doctrine until the 1980s.

Nature is life and death, nurturing and death-dealing. Historically, it is the niggardly and death-dealing aspects of nature that have been uppermost in human consciousness. Whether as an oppressive background presence or as an immediate threat, these aspects cannot be ignored. Much of the human story is one of trying to escape the oppressiveness and the threat. Deflecting the ferocities of weather, ensuring water for crops, promoting livestock and human fertility, maintaining an adequate supply of food, were and are the basic businesses of society. Repeated success in these areas constitutes progress. Nature’s constraints can be removed by small steps—or, thanks to science, by leaps. An optimistic view sees vast tracts of sterile land turned into unending fields of corn through feats of river diversion and irrigation; and, more recently, it sees genetic technology gaining direct control over the forces of life. Such a rosy prospect, challenged in the Atlantic West, is fully conformable to Leninist-Marxist ideology and so continued to be upheld by the Soviet government until its collapse.

In the midst of Soviet optimism an awkward question intrudes, namely, Just how far can this conquest go? For when we probe into what all the human struggle is about, it is ultimately the overcoming of death. Can humans become immortal? Guardians of Leninist-Marxist ideology deflect the question by saying, Yes, they become immortal in their works and achievements and in the memory of future generations. But this is mere common sense. The hard question is individual immortality and, should death occur, the possibility of recovery—or, to use an older word,

resurrection. Defenders of official thought, although they find the idea of personal immortality distasteful, cannot deny it outright, for to do so would be to put a theoretical cap on the conquest of nature. There exists, then, a loophole in the communist-Faustian ideal: Through it, certain Russian writers and poets have introduced a Christian language of hope.<sup>73</sup> In the communist utopia there will be no slums or poverty—and presumably no filth, disease, or avoidable pain. If the list of evils that can be overcome stops here, one may still say, Yes, this project is hugely ambitious but not impossible. However, to stop at any point is to admit human impotence, which the Leninist-Marxist doctrine doesn't permit. So the list must go on. Does the future also exclude decay, the sewer odors of mortality? Death? The poets' answer, more wild-eyed than even that of party ideologues, is yes. Their utopia is not only tractors and plentiful harvests, happy children romping in the park, social justice. It is far more; it is no less than the Garden of Eden and the Celestial City combined, a world in which Lazarus can walk out of the tomb and Christ can emerge from his death shroud. The critical difference between these religious images and those of the secular, utopian future is this: Whereas in the past the images were mere images and poetic flights, in the future they are detailed plans for the construction of handsome buildings and gardens; and, more generally, they are rational procedures for overcoming poverty and disease, and, beyond these specific ills, nature at its most sinister—decay and death. Can the dream of escape from our biological condition—our animality—go further?