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Never Been Human I am Bird: On the Shape of Love

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Susan Sontag famously wrote that an erotics of art ought to take the place of hermeneutics. Love should replace the search for interpretation of content and true meaning that supposedly characterizes art criticism. Instead of trying to interpret art, assuming art is all about content and meaning, commentators ought to feel it. Commentators ought to transmit a feel for art -- for instance, a feel for the love that goes into the making of artworks. Sontag's essay Against Interpretation was published in 1966 – during the so-called Summer of Love. Fifty years on, German philosopher and marine ecologist Andreas Weber has called for a response to a contemporary predicament, which this thinker conceives as a critical lack of love. Today's world, according to Weber, is loveless. Weber has argued that the scientific understanding of the natural world suffers, like art commentary in Sontag's critique, from a dispassionate attitude, where the source of knowledge is cerebral. Utterly void of love. Weber argues that there is a popular misunderstanding of what it truly means to love. Love and the erotic are, respectively, prurient terms that are not well construed in the popular perception. Weber has argued that all ecosystems, down to their cellular and molecular levels, need love to function as such. Love and eroticism are woven into the physical and metaphysical fabric of life, and that includes our own human bodies, our emotions, our whole societies. Love, according to Weber, necessitates an allowance, an effort, to propagate more life for all living things. Love is a connective tissue, a channel for self-preserving life.

The issue, as I see it, is not so much that we live in an era characterized by a critical lack of love. The trouble is that love is often mistaken for an exchange function of the economistic kind. Love abounds, but it is a love for self-gain. It is calculated love. In other words, love is only worth what money can pay. Life is often equated with the power of money to purchase, as opposed to the power of life to perpetuate. In a world where love is a currency paid out for sex and friendship, a vital substance is being substituted by the independent and artificial substance that is money. If money is indeed substance, it exists only in the social and financial reality of exchange. The consequence of loving money is not the root of all evil, but the birth of a new love, a perverse love for self.

My critique points in the direction of performance, which I consider here, in a very broad sense, a predominantly anthropomorphic cultural practice. Performance is an act designed to have an effect by virtue of the way it is put to work, in practice, and in a specific shape in time and place. But performance making often shows evidence of a narcissistic love of humans enacting other humans. The human is always at the centre of attention in the shapes that performance makes. When love is performed, that is, when it is staged, it appears typically in the shape of human emotions and relations. That is my point: we perform as humans for the love of humans. But is love really an affair between humans? Perhaps it is a force, an energy that tethers life all the way down to the molecular level, and all the way up to the magnetism and gravitation that pulls the stuff of the universe together. Love is an absolute and immanent cause. A diligent reader will have already noticed that the kernel of this essay is indebted not so much to Weber's concept of an erotic ecology so much as Baruch Spinoza's ethics. Indeed, my main point is, as always, ethical: you cannot represent love, you can only channel it and be a conduit for its reality, that is, its material, physical, and substantial transmission. The point I stress in this essay concerns the ethics of love in performance, which has nothing to do with the representation of love and lovers, but with an event that is more-than-ego, more-than-theatre, more-than-art, more-than-human. Love is the channel to become Other. If theatre cannot be love, then it is nothing.

Theatrical performance often involves the staging of love affairs, but the act of enacting and watching other people falling in and out of love may reveal something about popular representations of love, which, I agree with Weber, is rather superficial. Why do we need actors and celebrities to act out stories of love? To some extent, the representation of love can remove us from the reality of love, which requires suffering. This is the case when theatre does not achieve reflection and contemplation, but only the romantic entertainment of watching others acting out love. Like Sontag and Weber, I call for an erotics in performance. It is not enough to represent love. It is necessary to transmit love, and to channel it via the theatre, or via performance practice. It has become necessary, I argue, to perform an ecological kind of love.

My critique hinges on Love with capital L, by which I mean, the allegorical personification of Love. I mean Eros, and its representation in Classical form. My aim is to critique the shape of Eros, using as counterpoint the Spinozist God, which is shapeless and equal to Absolute Nature. Spinoza's famous dictum 'Deus sive Natura' (God or Nature), which is the same as an immanent cause, is taken seriously here. How can a God of Love be embodied as such; how can it be personified and allegorised in human shape? If Love is human, then love is an idiot. It is a feeling that one species bears for its own members. It is peer love. No wonder they say love is blind. If you can only love yourself, or others like you, you are blind to the power of a boundless ecology.

When I write about Eros, I do so from the point of view of an allegorical character, a personification. Eros is the Greek god of sexual love. But of course, Eros was not the Greek God most closely associated with theatre and performance. That role was given to Dionysus, a fertility and Nature god. Nor was Eros a character to be found in the dramatis personae of Greek tragedy and comedy. Eros was nonetheless mentioned in Greek drama, quite often because he was thought to have a certain power over the affairs of humans and gods. In other words, Eros was not a theatrical character, but a character germane to storytelling. As a mythological character, Eros was only partly available to characterisation in the theatre (through allusions, descriptions, and exhortations). He was celebrated in Orphic ritual, and in a number of comic plays that drew on that archaic tradition, one of which I will discuss in more length anon.

Like his Roman counterpart, Cupid, Eros was depicted as a winged god, part of a retinue of winged gods known as the Erotes. This cohort included Hermaphroditus, or homosexual love, and Hymenaeus, or marital love. My point is not whether Love could be allegorised in a way that is inclusive of homosexuality and marriage. My point is whether Love, in this allegorical personification, can be inclusive of a more-than-human shape. As such, the fact that the God has wings is not trivial. But what is the significance of these wings? Are they just metaphorical, to suggest the fleeting nature of love? Or are these wings pointing in the direction of a more zoomorphic understanding of the power of love? Eros is also depicted blindfolded. He typically carries bow and arrow, which he uses to shoot at mortals and gods causing bonds of

love and all manner of mischief, like the eponymous statue in Piccadilly Circus pointing in the direction of sex shops in Soho, in Central London. And yet, this well-known allegory was popularized much later, in Renaissance imagery, in neo-Classical halls and domes. In pre-Classical Greece, however, Eros' shape was quite different. He was not the son of Aphrodite. He was the son of Nyx, the primordial night. In archaic cosmogonies, and also in primitive rituals preserved in cultic religion (notably Orphism), Eros was depicted as a force that gave form to all things.

The changing faces of Eros will help me exemplify a critical point. The story of Eros is one of transformation. My argument is that Eros' metamorphosis speaks to a more general transformation in the cultural perception of physical love, from an ecological understanding to an anthropomorphic cultural mindset characterised by love of humans for themselves, a sentiment that arguably encapsulates Greek humanism in the 4th and 3rd century BC. In sum, the figure of Eros in Greek culture morphed from a Nature God, a winged being with more-than-human properties, to a minor cherubic character in Olympian religion and Hellenistic culture. From a demiurge to a mischievous child, Eros lost its power to rewild human life. Performance also changed dramatically from the Archaic to the Classical era, as ancient Greek performance practices moved away from a traditional ritual axis, in the context of which humans performed as nonhuman lovers (for instance as birds or other animals). There is a watershed moment, it seems, when Eros lost his feral nature. His wings were no longer extensions of a zoomorphic body, but add-ons, props, a theatrical costume, like winged models in a catwalk. With the advent of Greek rationalism, the figure of Eros could not be expressed in the form of a half-human, half-animal being. Perhaps this cultural recasting of Eros is due to a critical lack of real love for nature, akin to what Weber calls, in a contemporary era context, 'love without enlivenment' (2017) a dead love of humans for their own human shape. And yet, at the height of Athenian imperial power in the 4th century BC, the comic writer Aristophanes drew on archaic depictions of love, and animal guising, precisely to launch a critique of urban rationalism and a loveless Olympian religion. Aristophanes' depiction of Eros, which can be found in his play Birds, is steeped in the Orphic mysteries. For Aristophanes, it seems, Eros had to be portrayed once again as a nature god, rather than an anthropomorphic being. According to Aristophanes' cosmogony:

> There was Chaos at first, and Erebos black, and Night, and the Void profound,
> No Earth, no Air, no Heaven; when, lo, in the realm of the Dark without bound,
> In a vortex of winds the Primordial Egg was engendered by black-wingèd Night;
> And out of the Egg, as the seasons revolved, sprang Erôs, the world's delight.
> His back soft-gleaming with feathers of gold, his heart like a whirlwind storm.
> And he with Chaos the wingèd and dark, being mixed in the Void without form,
> Begat the original nestlings of us, and guided them up to the sun. (1950: 75--6)

According to Aristophanes' account, Love stems from a boundless realm. Love then mates with Chaos in a world without form. Together they beget a generation of still-breeding beings. I will be paying close attention to the expression 'without form' in what follows. The story of the first human race in Aristophanes' comedy signals back to immemorial myth and ritual in Archaic Greece, which celebrated Love as a boundless and formless world. Aristophanes was a romantic—his comedy is a timeless vision of humanity seeking to recast true love as nature, and human nature that as a reality found in formless love.

Aristophanes' Birds can be drily interpreted as a critique of religious thought, an attack on belief systems and conceptual schema that seek transcendence in the form of an Olympus. You could argue that Birds is also a plea for a sort of immanence, a world of human and non-human unity, a political utopia involving the rewilding of human society. The plot is simple. At the start of the play, we find stumbling across a hillside wilderness two disgruntled and middle-aged Athenian citizens. They are called Pisthetaerus and Euelpides. They are fed up with life in the city. They believe people in Athens do nothing all day long but argue over laws. They are looking for Tereus, a mythical king who was once metamorphosed into the Hoopoe bird. Later in the play, Pisthetaerus persuades the world's birds to create a new city in the sky to be named Nubicuculia or Cloud Cuckoo Land, which will gain control over all communications between men and gods.

Nietzsche mentioned Pisthetaerus' utopia in his essay On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense (1873), and made a key point concerning the fallacy of anthropomorphic ways of knowing. Humans know the world through the forms we

make, through images, schema and concepts, that is, through a rational language, and a hopelessly anthropomorphic reshaping of nature. But this same drive for the volitalization of life, this turning of life into dry concepts, into abstract shapes of the intellect, is confused by myth and art, that is, by a human intuition that continually breaks the cerebral framework, puncturing anthropomorphic knowledge with an ardent desire, with more-than-human love. With love, we can refashion the world as dream, as Cloud Cuckoo Land. Thus, Nietzsche wrote: 'When every tree can suddenly speak as a nymph, when a god in the shape of a bull can drag away maidens, then, as in a dream, anything is possible at each moment, and all of nature swarms around man as if it were nothing but a masquerade of the gods, who were merely amusing themselves by deceiving men in all these shapes. (2008: 21)' Shape is no longer a concept, a representation, a theatre, but a dream, a flow of apparitions, a boundless magic, knowable not in the realm of science and rationalist philosophy, but only in the realms of intuition. Nietzsche concluded thus: 'How shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature.' (14)

In Hesiod's Theogony, which is the source of Aristophanes' version of Eros, and which was written as a poetic work— not a chunk of prosaic philosophy— Eros was depicted as the most beautiful among the immortal gods, and a 'loosener of limbs', Eros has the power to 'subdue the mind' (1973: 27). In other words, love is stronger than intellect. It is stronger than language, stronger than science and Truth. It breaks down the shapes of the mind, and alerts us to the shapes of life, which have no eternal form and no bound. No language. No meaning. Just force and energy, just attraction and repulsion. Love: a potential for endless shaping. Or as Nietzsche puts it: 'Nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us.' (2008: 17). We are not human. We were never human. There is no human species. Only the radiated becoming of many species, caught in the crucible of love and hatred.

This recasting of the allegory of Love results in the polarization of two worldviews: the anthropomorphic, grounded in an urban way of thinking in relation to abstract shapes that stand for universals, in this case Universal Love or agape, and the

therianthropic, which is the mythological belief in the capacity for human animals to transform into other animals, and to perform as any other non-human animal. Two types of human being are battling it out: one intellectual and one intuitive. One Apollonian and one Dionysian. One is idiotic and the other is erotic. Perhaps the tension at the heart of Aristophanes' comedy is not only between the human and the avian world, or between mystery and Olympian religion, or indeed between a state that controls nature and one that affirms wilderness over the human world. Perhaps, the tension is also between an archaic performance tradition steeped in zoomorphic ritual, and a stage that rationalized that practice within a strictly anthropomorphic cultural worldview. Perhaps we should shapeshift in the theatre. We should become nonhuman. We should watch and observe a love that is not ours at all.

There is a problem with anthropomorphic Love. Anthropomorphism forgets that non-human animals are also sexual, that plants are also sexual and that minerals are also attracted to and repelled by one another. Anthropomorphic Love forgets that magnetism is a mineral form of attraction; that gravity is a physical force for attraction and repulsion, much like love is in the province of human affect. To forget that sex is an ecology, and to allegorize Love in such a narrow human shape, may well disclose a profound cultural transformation of the poiesis of love, the actual making of love. If I make love only to other humans, then I will ignore, it seems, that the process of love making typically involves the use of musk (animal scent), the mediation of flowers, the intervention of natural sounds and rhythms, the effects of intoxicating drink and certain sensualised animal movements, all of which help incite and promote the sexual act. Or as the leader of the avian Chorus points out in Aristophanes' comedy:

> We [Birds] are children of Love, for we fly as He flies, and when true lovers meet, we are there. And pretty young things, at the edge of their bloom, who have scorned all love as absurd; a diligent lover can often beguile through the magic that lives in a bird; The gift of a quail or a coot will not fail, or a goose, or a cock in his pride. (1950: 76--7)

Plenty of sexual energy is involved in the act of making love -- and I mean the entire process of courtship, gift making and attraction, not just the coitus itself. Eroticism

involves more-than-human aphrodisiacs. Indeed, the act of making love -- the act of bringing love into existence in practice -- is a performance of two or more beings sharing an entire ecology of erotic forces and entities, active way outside the confines of human social behaviour. With love, in the expanded ecological sense, we participate in a world that is shared by non-human entities, and which we, as sexual and loving humans, are only a small part of.

Bearing this ecological sentiment in mind, I ask: is this transformation of the allegory of Eros from a nature God to an innocent little cherub, representative of a more fundamental cultural crisis, as classical as it is modern, characterized by a loss of ecological erotics -- a loss of physical love for nature? My thesis hinges on the speculative idea that the archaic mindset, for instance as championed by Aristophanes, teaches us something essential, something eminently Spinozist, about the nature of love. Love is the force and the energy that perpetuates Absolute Nature, which is an immanent cause, the same as God. Perhaps the ecological message of Aristophanes' comedy is more important now, given the critical state of the natural world in an era so blindly in love with capital and money, both at the expense of the environment. Love ought to be recast as an environmental factor if we are to overcome such a selfish love.

The allegory of Eros forgets that what brings about the energy of love is not a human technology (bow and arrow), but a force for self-preservation through commitment to the other. Or as Nietzsche puts it: 'What else is love but understanding and rejoicing in the fact that another person lives, acts, and experiences otherwise than we do?' (1986: 229) Love is always an understanding of oneself with or as Other. My point is not only that love connects us to another human. Love actually connects us to something other than human. Love is always committed to something more-than-human, which cannot be performed in the representational or theatrical sense, that is, in the shape of a human actor acting out or faking out love. Love can be performed only in life, as life. Boundless, without form. I am not saying you cannot put love on stage. But I can only love on the stage what is performed with real blood. You can only love when you give it all away, all the way back to Life itself.

When Aristophanes reminded his audience that the original Eros was not an anthropomorphic God and not the son of an Olympian, but that he was Nature with capital N, (superior to any Olympian god), a very important ecological message was put forward, a message for real love. Birds is a play that can be interpreted on many levels, but if, true to Sontag's call, it is not interpretation that matters, but the loving feelings that the performance of this play can evoke, then it does not matter whether the play is an ironic critique of Olympian religion, a call to renounce urban life, or a call to marry human and non-human natures. The point is not what the play means, but how it feels. For instance, the play finishes off when the Athenian Pisthetaerus is proclaimed king by a heavenly herald and is presented with Zeus' sceptre, amid festive celebration. Pisthetaerus marries a feathered queen, then the chorus of birds departs amid the performance of a wedding march, signalling the coming-together of man and bird. The feeling is one of emancipation. Humans no longer have to be the enemy of birds, since humans no longer seek to catch them in order to place them in cages. By the same token, humans do not have to live caged in their own cities.

It is said that Aristophanes was a follower of Orphic cultic religion. The Orphic mysteries, which preserved archaic ritual way into the Classical era, were practised at night. Sexual energy is activated in me not only by another human body that turns my own feelings of attraction and desire on. An ecological understanding must recognize that Love, as physical substance in the Spinozist sense, permeates our own human nature, not least because our bodies are only modes of existence. This local modality of nature that is the human existence participates in Absolute Nature. Deus sive Natura -- God or Nature -- as Spinoza put it. Because our bodies are nature, and nature is our own bodies, the effect of the natural world on us humans is immediately felt at the sensory and sensual level. Night is thus a channel that affects our bodies, in the Spinozist sense, transmitting affect. In sum, sexual bonding is not only attributable to a human feeling, but to an attraction that is generated by the movement of heavenly bodies (hence the astrological connections between love and stars), by the drop in light levels caused at nightfall, as the planet revolves. The intimacy that night brings with the cover of darkness excites the body and mind, promoting uninhibited behaviour. There are no doubt common attributes, in the Spinozist sense, across human and non-human sexual natures.

Night is a time for intimacy. Night falls and we succumb to rest, to sleep, perchance to dream. Some people go out, confident that the night is something to be ‘spent’. Some dance and drink away. This, then, is the so-called brood of the night: sleep, quiescence, silence, dream, vision and revelry, as well as reverie, trance, party, dance. These performative habits are caused, in varying degrees, by the night. As Aristophanes reminded his audience, Love spawned from primordial Night, not from an Olympian Aphrodite. Love pulsates in an ecological and environmental shape—as night time. Echoing Aristophanes’ allegory, the Roman poet Statius came up with a memorable zoomorphic depiction of Night. For Statius, Night can be allegorized in relation to the various attributes associated with night-time activity such as Dream, Sleep, Quiet, Forgetfulness, Ease and Silence, which he famously called the ‘dark brood of the Night’ (1955: 329). Perhaps one of the most notable creatures bred by Night is Desire.

If night and other environmental conditions can fuel love, it must be because, as I intimated earlier, there is an affective attribute to nocturnal darkness, which can be felt as uninhibiting. There are other affective properties to night, which elude interpretation, but which may well induce the act of love making. Nocturnal ecologies are thus instilled, as Hesiod himself pointed out, with the real power to loosen limbs, inasmuch as the night can relax the body and the mind, inducing desire. It is worth pausing to consider the etymology at this point, which will shed light on an archaic use of the word. ‘Desire’ stems from the Latin desiderare. Desiderare, in turn, is an elision of de sidere, meaning ‘from the stars’ in Latin. Desire comes from the night, from the pining that star-gazing induces, from the contemplative state instilled by darkness. When faced with the immensity of a night sky, desire is not only an internal feeling felt by the person in love, but also an external energy driven by a delirious cosmic nature.

From a narrow anthropomorphic point of view, desire arises from the person in love, or as a result of an object of love. That is a very limited view of love, in my opinion. It is, in a nutshell, the Lacanian formulation. Desire, for Lacan, comes about as a result of a lack (1991). A lack of being, a lack of phallus, and so on. Sex, from this ego-centric point of view, derives from a lack of sex, and the desire prompted by such lack. Lack is generated in the ego, as the ego’s recognition of lack due to the Other.

Deleuze and Guattari famously turned their back on Lacan when they postulated that desire does not arise from lack at all, but rather is a productive force in itself. With Deleuze and Guattari, desire is no longer confined to an anthropocentric dynamic. Instead, desire takes on the guise of what these authors famously called a 'desiring-production' or 'desire-machine' (1983). Contrary to the Lacanian conception of the unconscious as 'theatre', Deleuze and Guattari conceptualised desire as 'factory'. The nature of desire resides in productive forces, not imaginary or representational forces. Desire is not a theatre. The theatrical stage is only a representation of what exists, in itself, in the factory of life. Desire is an ecology of production, weaving an entire multi-functional universe composed of such 'machines', all connected to each other. The Deleuzoguattarian rejection of psychoanalysis prompts their famous question: 'why should desire desire its own repression?' (1983: 369) In other words, if desire is truly a force that stems from the ego, then why would the ego repress its existence? How can desire seek its Oedipal representation? Or is this theatricalization of desire not the negation of real desire, for the sake of pure representation, self-control and theatrical repression? If, on the other hand, Love does not originate anywhere close to the ego, if it does not happen in a theatre but in a factory where it simply coincides, and bursts simultaneously wherever there is a production of life going on, then it is not at all human. Or rather, it is as human as it is bird.

The ecological reformulation of desire -- of Love -- must challenge the psychoanalytical theatre of representations, and the theory of Oedipal repression at the heart of psychoanalysis. If you abandon the idea that Love comes from the Ego, from the 'I' that lacks, and if we accept that desire is an energy found in matter itself -- I am returning to Andreas Weber's argument on the continuity of matter and desire (2017) -- then you simply cannot represent love. Love is already in your body, which is desired by viruses and bacteria, and, even more fundamentally, for the transmission of touch, heat, kinetic energy, and other physical forms of transmission that serve as channels for love. The body is already a desire-machine. You cannot give love an anthropomorphic guise, because love is neither human, nor representable as such. Love can only be instantiated in the real moment, in the material act of production and generation of life in itself. It is an immanent cause,

going back to Spinoza. Love is real in itself, not in its representation or imitation. If loving desire comes out of everywhere or nowhere at once -- if it does not in fact 'originate' but rather coincides with an entire ecology of relations invested in the production of life, then the human is no longer centre stage. The way in which love can be brought into existence is no longer supported by an anthropomorphic perspective that sees universal Love only in human form, or in the form of a Platonic God that is nothing other than sublimated humanity.

What I have focused on in this essay is the opening up of Love to a more-than-theatre and more-than-art ecology, where the feelings of love I bear (the real feeling of love for my wife, for my children, the cat, for nature) are not derived from representations of my own ego, nor my own sense of self in lack, nor indeed from the theatrical division of 'I' (the lover) and 'them' the loved ones, but from an energy that pervades us all. Love as factory. The ecological understanding of desire, going back to Deleuze and Guattari, must obliterate any separation caused by a theatrical understanding of performance, and must 'explode the Oedipal genealogy through graduated relationships performed in absolute overflights spanning indivisible distances' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 78). Not sure what that means in practice, but it sounds good.

As Susan Sontag and Andreas Weber put it, in their own different ways, it is necessary to champion a knowledge steeped in erotics. To think from a perspective other than mine own. That requires feeling from the side of the non-human. The feelings evoked by Aristophanes' immortal comedy sum this up. When the leader of the Chorus asks what has prompted the two Athenian strangers to come to the Land of Birds, considering humans are the enemy, Hoopoe replies:

> A desire most true for the way you live and manage your day. They are simply longing to dwell with you [birds], and live the life you're accustomed to. (1950: 52)

The feeling of those two men self-exiled from the world of humans, those two men who want to become birds, is one I often feel myself. It is a profound feeling, symptomatic of a species unsure as to whether we belong to a wilderness, a city, or

both. Humans are often caught up in that contradictory sentiment of attraction and repulsion for the wild. There is in us, it seems, both love and hate for our own nature. I am not sure whether it is comforting to think that Aristophanes wrote about that very same feeling as far back as the 4th century BC. A very large part of our human nature desires more wilderness and an escape to the wild. In order to remain wild forever, which is what the two human characters in Birds strive for, first the human animal would need to learn how to love inhuman nature. We would have to recognize just how much in our own bodily nature is not human at all, how much is virus, bacteria, fungus. I do not need to learn how to interpret Love, to find its meaning and content in some cerebral and purely intellectual fashion, in the way Plato did when he wrote, prosaically, of Universal Love. I need to practise, to perform Love. That is what is at stake. In other words, I must perform Love to make it come into existence in practice, and to channel it. Sing and dance its energy, like people or birds do, to challenge the idiotic human love for oneself.

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