



Lorenzo Lotto, "Venus et Cupidon", Metropolitan Museum N.Y.

WHAT IS MODESTY?

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MODESTY IN THE SEXUAL COMMUNICATION

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The animal is always unaware of modesty in its acts of reproduction. This obvious reality calls for a reflexion on the sexual communication in the animals and, in addition, a comparative glance on animal sexuality and human sexuality. We must initially notice that such a way of approach has been very little exploited by scientists on this precise subject, in spite of this fact that the animal model is an usual reference in many disciplines. **Would a modest reserve also affect the scientific discourse?**

Freud and Darwin

We know that the psychophysicologists do not cease to compare with those of humans the performances, attitudes, spontaneous or experimental reactions of the rat, the chimpanzee and of many other species. It has been known for a long time

that many organic functions and many behaviours **do not have zoological specificity**. Mode of coupling of the sexes, in all mammals, does not have more. But confronted with the opportunity to know, on this subject, all animal dimensions of behaviours in human beings, one retains the feeling of certain timidity in scientific research.

Curiously, to explain this reserve and this deficit of knowledge, one cannot underestimate the influence of **Freud** and of freudism on all the reflexions concerning our sexuality. For this researcher, sexuality constitutes a fundamental social determinant and we must not forget his firm determination to use only a model resulting from **physicochemical sciences to conceive and to represent the interplay of the impulses** in human psychism. This option, always maintained, marks with an imprint still very tenacious the contemporary scientific thought. It is always subjacent and obviously distances itself from any observation of the animal model. This way of thinking finds its origins in the development, at the moment, of the physical sciences and especially of chemistry.

Following on, **symbolism** quickly constituted the fundamental axis of the analytical doctrines and there we can see **the clearest division between the man and the animal**. However it is precisely on the theory of symbolism that we will place the axis of our research into modesty and immodesty.

On the other hand, let us point out that **Darwinism**, contemporary of **Freud**, could put the scientists on the track of a certain convergence between the man and the animal. But it is then necessary to take into account the criticisms which attacked this quasi-revolution of the thought process. The reason was precisely this unacceptable convergence. Today still certain retrograde ways of thinking, virulent at the end of the last century, draw aside the idea of *parallelization* between human sexual behaviour and animal sexual behaviour. **Man's value is defined by his differences with the animal and never by such similarities** which are pushed back with horror. In front of obviousness the "non-knowledge" is always the best solution.

Human sexuality is sacred and the human being, by his dignity, in the moment when he couples, is still confronted by guilt feeling (since the Origins) and because of that, can't be reduced to the state of animal... **which never has guilt feelings**.

More deeply, contemporary anthropology, because it is influenced by freudism, is curiously party to idealistic tendencies. Indeed, a materialist way of thinking implies, in the long term, the idea of a finished world including the human being. But how then could it remain a field for the interdicts? To be inattentive with this contradiction or to refuse to face it, is "*to deprive itself of part of the knowledge, it is to clothe it in mystery, in taboo...*".

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However of the sexual behaviours of animals, we know with precision how they are elaborated in a system of sexual "rites" varied and specific to each species. These rites are obviously no linguistics. Each animal variety, for its "coupling" has olfactive, tactile, visual or vocal signals at his disposal...

These messages are constraining and ensure that males and females meet each other in a time and place which can be narrowly determined. This constitutes **the sexual courting display of each species**.

Even if the timidity of the clinical glance is surprising in this scientific field, one can note that the **man, subjugated to the same function, has his own similar courting display for sexual coupling**.

Few researchers however have ventured on this ground in order to exceed the simple well known statistical compilations.

Better than sciences of mind, the literature, scenic and advertising arts know to which point we are endowed with "reference marks" such as the sight, hearing, sense of smell, etc.

One knows how much the coquetry gesture, voice and language, clothing, **fulfil the functions which one finds in the animal** like many signals, of invitation and mutual seduction.

Thus in our culture the women are more directly *"concerned with this possibility of making themselves noticed, to appear as an object of desire. It is difficult not to realize it, while walking in the street."*

But in the street, precisely, clothing is essential, and, in our species, **the incentives of nature undergo cultural transfigurations** by clothing, make-up, perfumes, etc.

But when, in love, when the time comes to remove clothing, other stimuli come into play, more spontaneous, more bodily direct, coming from attitudes, forms, contacts and odours.

When the language is interfered.

But for the same purpose of sexual search, man, with his voice, use his language and his capacity of speech.

We will see that the main part of the psychosociological problems posed to human by sexuality lies in the fact **that the human being uses the two distinct registers : linguistic and extra-linguistic** (where animals use only one).

In the immediate future, this last mode, extra-linguistic - to which everyone is subject - will retain us.

One knows that **to see and to be seen** is very important in respect to sexual search and sexual behaviour. People, in all places, try to verify the availability, the sexual receptivity of men and women and the desire which they inspire.

Continuing, in the first steps of the body contact we enter more directly on the ground of the physical pleasure.

Each partner justifies himself and becomes animated in attitudes, becoming signals, which, especially by the sight, the glance, physical gestures and phonic gestures, are an indication of desire and, an essential fact, **are already pleasure**.

It is obvious that the use of language does not erase the fact that, with man, sexuality, by its essence, **exists initially in an extra-linguistic register**. It is carried out and concluded in an intense, conscious and active communication, but the bases of which are completely external to language. Very concretely, the language is not necessary to the desire and pleasure does not need to have name to exist.

Neither sexual operation, nor acts of generation, could distinguish the non modest animal from the modest man. The dominating factor which indicates the human condition is no other than **the superposition, in our species of this second register of communication, the word**, of which all allows to think that it is antagonistic to bodily act, until evoked. The man uses his linguistic capacity in order to make love. Thus, excepting rape, it meets, to couple, the personality of the other. In other words: **sexual intercourse requires a double encounter: with the body and the mind of the mate**.

The concomitant existence of these two relational registers, and interferences of one on the other, characterizes the human game love.

One knows that in this circumstance the word, which initially undergoes deformations, inhibitions, inversions, is erased when the erotic emotion takes its place. The vocation of the word being to communicate, one can't omit that **the erotic gesture which brings pleasure is also, and especially, an act of communication** between the partners. But this act is neither representation, nor promise of pleasure, it merges with the pleasure itself, it is the pleasure by itself and this pleasure has no symbolic substitute. It is necessary to specify that the word is excluded in the more intense moments of the love? The climax is not the moment for chattering. In this moment, where the partners appear released from modesty, the words which may accompany the pleasure are repetitive and incantatory then become simple **phonic gestures which are not words**. The pleasure is conditioned by "letting go" which is an exit from language.

The ultimate point of modesty.

We are approaching here the central point of the modesty phenomenon : with the linguistic person, **the two registers of communication mutually exclude each other**. Thus the verbal mode is erased as non-linguistic, bodily and voluptuous communication enriches itself. At this point of our reflexion, we advance the hypothesis that the near confusion of the pleasure with the act which communicates it appears to take in count the obliteration of language whereas the erotic

communication is intensified.

There we can see a definite reason: by the gesture and the word, often associated, sexual advance is a promise of pleasure and at the same time it is already pleasure. **So we can conclude that signified and signifier are merged into one and the same reality.**

Erotic scenography has initially the capacity and the function to ensure a communication between beings, but this capacity does not originate in a symbolic or representative power of the acts or gestures, except in a preliminary way. Tender words, by themselves "belong to the message that they states". The irruption, then progressive prevalence of gestures guided by the enjoyment excludes any linguistic sign. This communication by means of no arbitrary signals, **doesn't support any logical relationship with the categories of human language.** In short, within erotic syntax we observe, in man and man only, the competition, on the same object, of two registers of communication. We know that:

- the first one taking part of the **informative function** (cognitive) is supported by the unmotivated linguistic signs ;
- the other one affects the being in an other way which is that of voluptuous communication (contiguity) ; its vocation is to be a direct **transformer of internal reality** ; in this intense and physical communication every thing appeals to the other by innate but **conscious** gestures.

Such a confusion is not as innocent as it might seem: in love, the communicating and the communicated, in other words **signifier and signified, become indistinguishable.** This excludes the emergence of a meaning by the way of "deactivation" of the linguistic sign.

One can now rectify an illusion. One can believe that the partners, in an intimate situation, are released from modesty. That is not reality: modesty as a linguistic inhibition, is not absent. It is even very powerful there in its essential and constant expression which is the abolition of the word.

a mutual exclusion

Modesty appears as a critical reaction as soon as language meets in competition with an extra-linguistic communication.

If it is clear that, in the love relation when partners are willing, the erotic exchange contradict the word, it is important to know that **an impudic insult cuts off the speech.**

Can we draw aside the idea that the two events, which act in same way concerning speech obey identical processes?

Of course the erotic "letting go" is far from being experienced in a negative way; it is sought, it is acquired with the pleasure, it forms a part of it. But the impudic offence, which attacks and humiliates at the place of sexuality, puts the victim in the presence of **an intellectual and verbal inhibition** which interrupt mental elaboration.

The sequence of these facts deserves reflexion for, if the erotic happiness and the

insult have **an inhibiting common effect on verbal formulation**, it should be noted how they are different and opposed in intimate life. All different excepting the sexual question. We must now understand why in the erotic excitement, on the one hand, and impudic offence, on the other hand, such subjective feelings are differentiated. And, concretely, by which subtlety can one, in the love, obtain one without undergoing the other.



H. Gervex, Etude pour Rolla , Coll. Particulière

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