

“The Image of Hermaphrodite”

(from *Instinct*)

by Norman Weeks

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During one of my habitual Sunday morning visits to the Capitoline Museums, I discovered that a wing that had long been closed for restoration and rearrangement was open again. I immediately entered the corridor to search for a small bronze statue, the Alexandrine Hermaphrodite, which I had seen once and which has been on my mind since.

I found it in the same corner, amidst the general rearrangement, but it was larger than I had remembered it, about thirty-two inches tall with the base.

Hermaphroditos, the mythmaker said, was the son of the god Hermes and the goddess Aphrodite. An incarnation of double-divine physical beauty in the flesh, Hermaphroditos was loved by Salmakis, a fountain nymph. When he resisted and rebuffed her, Salmakis prayed to the gods to unite her forever with Hermaphroditos. The gods granted her plea, fusing the two of them into a single person, now Hermaphrodite, the actual embodiment of male and female become inseparably one.

The Alexandrine Hermaphrodite is a standing bronze nude of beautiful form and dual sex and gender, with a classic male/female head, phallus erect, moderate perfect breasts, and arms outstretched, reaching for the viewer in soft feminine acceptance.

I oscillated slowly in an arc in front of the figure. From each position the face seemed to shift subtly along the gender spectrum, now masculine, now feminine, now indeterminate. Similarly, the sensuality of the flesh—the skin and muscles and limbs—appeared male or female or both as I scanned and blinked. Transfixed by the idol, in simple receptivity, I felt hushed in awe at the idea, if not at this particular execution of it.

I studied and stared at the Alexandrine Hermaphrodite for a long time, both as a work of art and as a psychological clue. I reacted with the same responsiveness I had felt when I first discovered it. An appreciator of either sex must feel drawn to that body with a human erotic desire. One identifies with the sameness, one is drawn to the complementarity, in that embodied representation of complete human sexuality. There is a love-triangle of Narcissus, Eros, and Hermaphrodite,—of self-love, otherness love, and total love.

The Alexandrine Hermaphrodite of the Capitoline Museums is so small compared to the other bronzes in the gallery and in such an inconspicuous location there that most visitors pass it by without really seeing it. Those who

stopped to look did so with only a cursory glance, in uncomprehending distraction. Most museum-goers are mere label readers, as if mere identification were appreciation and understanding. A few visitors, just come from church, when they drew close to look, did see, and they quickly retreated in Christian revulsion, as if their cultivated Sunday morning piety had just been spoiled.

But there is a mystery to be revered here, not a theological one, idol though this is. There is a human psychological mystery here.

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When Nathaniel Hawthorne was in Rome, he chanced to visit a fellow American who was a sculptor, resident here to draw inspiration from the classical artifacts.

Hawthorne found him in his studio, carving away at a colossal nude hero in the idolatrous style of the ancient pagans. Hawthorne found the very idea absurd. Remarking to his notebook, if not to the sculptor, Hawthorne said that we are so clothed, body and mind, birth-to-death, that an artist has no more right to depict a man naked than he does to depict him flayed.

Yes, we have left behind paganism, the naughty childhood of our race, and put on clothing as a dermic identity. In his disapproval of the sculptor's project, Hawthorne was not so much the prudish New England Puritan as an honest psychologist. Naked no more, this modern human being. We see ourselves, and so should portray ourselves, as the clothed animal.

However, there was plenty of nakedness in ancient Rome, as I realize when I walk through the capacious halls of the Baths of Caracalla or the Baths of Diocletian. Mediterranean nakedness extended even to the communal privies, with their dozen holes side by side, so strange to our modern sense of physiological privacy.

We can't be naked anymore, because of Christianity, which joined the adjectives *naked* and *ashamed* in an indissoluble molten link. We can no longer be naked innocently or look at a nude innocently. Actual nakedness is temptation verging upon sin, nakedness in art is pornographic idolatry. There is a cultural taboo upon *full frontal nudity*, whether of the living body or of any representation of a living body, say in movies. Never mind classical aesthetics, the heavy negative moral judgment of Christianity lies upon the nude.

Christian culture, the soul at war with the body, made the natural forbidden, only to make us crave the natural all the more. Isn't there now something perverse in our nostalgia for nakedness? The desire to see nakedness, voyeurism, is a neurosis of the clothed and sickly ones.

Living in Rome as I do, I might think that the righteous Christian taboo upon nakedness has been left behind. Even the popes, after all, filled their celibate cloister of the Vatican with promiscuous nudes, ancient or contemporary, the works of Michelangelo the most outrageous affront to the taboo. But I think the pagan nostalgia of the Renaissance popes was as psychologically absurd as that of our nineteenth-century expatriate American sculptor.

The body is an irrefutable fact, the soul a mere hypothesis. But Christian scruples have put a fig leaf upon the body. Who is now healthy enough to look upon the nude in a wholesome spirit? Could there be such a son-of-Nature, immune to his own upbringing and to the chronic pathology of our religious inheritance?

We might as well pack off the nude statues of Rome to the niches of the catacombs, inter them there behind sepulchral slabs until some cultural resurrection-of-the-dead.

There can be no return to Eden before the Fall or to pagan idyll, however pressing may be our nostalgia. The many classical nudes in the museums of Rome are like postcards from paradise. "A wonderful time...Wish you were here."

Our aesthetics regarding classical nudes is a wanderlust. Although absurd and nostalgic, it seeks human self-understanding and the satisfaction of human longing.

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Pursuing my quest for instinct among the sculpture galleries of Rome, I paid a visit to the National Roman Museum, a great repository of classical art located in the Baths of Diocletian, just a few minutes' walk from my *pensione*.

There I came upon the Sleeping Hermaphrodite, a near-life-size marble statue of a prone recumbent nude, a Hellenistic work of about 160 B.C. There is another copy of the lost original in the Borghese Gallery here in Rome and still others in the Uffizi in Florence and in the Louvre.

My approach to the statue was interrupted by a foreign school group passing through. The teacher, stereotypically British, hurried his students past the Sleeping Hermaphrodite with apparent overcivilized embarrassment. He spat out the epithet *Bisexual!* at it, as if Hermaphrodite were a freak-of-Nature, a monster, or a pathological medical curiosity. He displayed the repugnance one might feel upon unexpectedly encountering a paraplegic in a beauty contest.

Was that all that he, a teacher of art, could make of what Pliny described as "the noble Hermaphrodite"? I began to suspect that we moderns, when we look at classical antiquity through the dark tinted, nearly opaque lenses of Christianity, are mostly blind to the simple beauty and mystic meaning of

ancient art. The animality that was the wellspring of the pagan mind belongs to an earlier, a more natural, state than the wearied cerebralism of us moderns.

The Sleeping Hermaphrodite was summarily dismissed by the academic, but that did not discourage me from closer scrutiny. After the school group left with a flurry and a few snickers, I approached the statue and circled it slowly.

The body of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite is rendered as duosexual, that imagery so disconcerting to our modern sensitivity. The work is an attempt to create a composite of the total biological beauty and the complete sexual identity of the human into a single body.

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A perverse idea, according to the Christians. A bizarre freak and monster, according to the academics. Most of the critical judgments upon Hermaphrodite have been negative.

Like the teacher I encountered in the museum, the scholars have treated Hermaphrodite from a perspective of pathology. What little literature there is on the subject generally casts a psychiatric eye upon Hermaphrodite.

Artistic representations of Hermaphrodite are relegated to the catalog of decadent grotesqueries. A quote from an academic as example: "The subjects of Hellenistic art range from infancy to decrepitude, from divinity to depravity; not content with two sexes, they imagine intermediate beings, hermaphrodites."

"Not content with two sexes"? Right there the academic stumbled upon the psychological truth, only to flee from it in revulsion. Hermaphrodite is no "intermediate being", a half-and-half. Hermaphrodite is a synthesis; it is completeness.

According to the academics, the myth and art of Hermaphrodite belong to the realm of aberration: "From the fourth century B.C. onwards, when the taste of Greek sculptors was beginning to degenerate, this ambiguous figure was in high favor, and numerous representations, many having a morbid beauty, survive."

"Morbid beauty"! Would the academic art critics use that phrase to describe the iconography of the Crucifixion?

Anyway, the modern supercivilized mind perceives Hermaphrodite in the contexts of depravity, decadence, and degeneracy.

If Hermaphrodite is merely a bizarre specimen of physical and mental abnormality, then even the sleep of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite is perverse. The statue is described as "a spirally contorted Sleeping Hermaphrodite in the throes of an erotic dream". The critics do not hesitate to penetrate into the mind of the marble. They detect "uneasy sleep disturbed by nervousness and

expectation of love". So, Hermaphrodite sleeps an agitated sleep, or not sleep at all, but really nightmare, the nightmare of perverse sexuality erupted into grotesque art.

Academics less censorious have tried to interpret Hermaphrodite as an *etiological myth*, that is, an attempt to account for the birth of actual physical hermaphrodites. I doubt that. The birth of true hermaphrodites is an occurrence so rare that few people would have witnessed it and demanded an explanation, one that would come to include not only the myth, but abundant artworks as well. The etiological interpretation, attempting to explain away, doesn't explain at all.

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Why do I feel an attraction toward an image that stirs up such revulsion in others?

I looked upon the Sleeping Hermaphrodite. There is, true, a restlessness and agitation in the figure. Hermaphrodite struggles against the blanket over his/her nakedness, that smothering cover of clothed civilizedness. Deep in sleep, Hermaphrodite kicks away the blanket with the right foot, pulls away from it with the left leg, turns the head away, as the coils of the covering twist around the left arm like a fetter. The image portrays the resistance of the organic animal to the confines of civilized restraint. Hermaphrodite is attempting to uncover and expose a mystery.

The statue reveals the Hellenistic interest in unconsciousness, or, as we would say in modern terms, *the unconscious*. Reminiscent of the sleeping or drunken satyrs, sleeping erotes and children, the Sleeping Ariadne, Endymion, and the dying Persians, Gauls, and Amazons exhibited in the museums of Rome, the Sleeping Hermaphrodite seems to the contemplative observer to say as much about sleep and death as about life and sex.

The image of Hermaphrodite belongs not to the underworld of pornography, but to the horizons of psychology. Any salacious interest is dissuaded by Hermaphrodite's eyes, closed in the utter innocence of sleep. Hermaphrodite, lax in the unconsciousness of sleep, breathes that spirit of ambiguous androgyny that we see in the bodies of children.

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Androgyny. Isn't there a recurrent ambiguity of gender in the Mediterranean pagan representations of ideal human beauty? The head and face of Apollo, especially, are often sculpted with a delicacy and refinement that make that ideal male appear fair and feminine. Correspondingly, Athena and Artemis have their masculine traits.

In classical art, human physical beauty tends toward androgyny. From the feminization of Apollo and the masculinization of Athena and Artemis to the unification of opposite sexes in Hermaphrodite there is a single, albeit spectacular, step of artistic imagination.

In Hermaphrodite, the artist composed (put together) and comprehended (held together) the split halfness of the human being into a wholeness. Hermaphrodite, then, is a culmination of the development of an androgynous aesthetic.

If so, a complete change of interpretive perspective becomes necessary,—away from physical hermaphroditism, toward psychical androgyny. Hermaphrodite sleeps. And sleeping within all of us, deep in our unconscious, is an androgyny.

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The sexes are strange to each other. No wonder, because each one of us is strange to ourself. What is more strange than existence, individuality, consciousness, life?

An early awareness is, “Here I am.” Then, “What am I?”

The obvious answer to the “What am I?” is the body. We discover our body as the vessel of life and awareness.

We come to the experience of others as the experience of the bodies of others. There are bodies like our own,—the same sex, and bodies different from our own,—the other sex. And yet, there is a commonality and warm sympathy between all the bodies. Humanness has two body forms, but it is the same humanness.

A later question might be, “Why am I this body, male and not that body, female?” or vice versa. The otherness of the other sex is a puzzle.

Then the adolescent discovers within a powerful craving for the other sex. Does the other feel the same need I do? Do I understand the other sex? How to approach? The otherness is not only anatomical and genital difference, but something in the psychology of the other sex.

Even in that psychology there is, once again, a commonality along with the difference. The sexes may experience feelings differently and may perceive and think differently, but they are both human, humans who need each other.

Differences there are, but it is not a simple either/or between the sexes. There is overlap in characteristics, the one somehow also in the other. The sexes, after all, are not different species, but only differentiation within a single species. Sharing the same origin, the two sexes commingle in a common human nature.

Despite difficulties in mutual understanding, communicating, relating—the puzzle of the otherness—, the two sexes are in a profound sense one kind.

Nonetheless, each feels split off from the other, each craves bonding, union with the other. Or is it re-union?

Why are there the two different sexes? Why do the two sexes crave to be united into one? It's not only a necessity for reproduction, not just a physical drive, but an existential longing. Hermaphrodite is a portrayal of that longing.

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