CHAPTER TWO

Excess

So far we have confined ourselves to sexual desire, but the word *lust* has wider application: lust for life, lust for gold, lust for power. Perhaps sexual desire should be carefully recognized as just one kind of desire among others. Saint Thomas Aquinas put to himself the objection that lust was not confined to sexual (venereal) matters:

> It would seem that the matter of lust is not only venereal desires and pleasures. For Augustine says (*Confessions* ii, 6) that "lust affects to be called surfeit and abundance." But surfeit regards meat and drink, while abundance refers to riches. Therefore lust is not properly about venereal desires and pleasures.[11]

He also worried that lust had been defined by previous authority as "the desire of wanton pleasure." But then wanton pleasure regards not only venereal matters but also many others. Therefore lust is not only about venereal desires and pleasures.

Aquinas was right to worry about getting this part of the subject straight. In many lists of the Seven Deadly Sins, lust is replaced by *luxuria* or luxury. This is not an innocent mistake or confusion, but reflects the urge to inject something morally obnoxious into the definition. If we associate lust with excess and surfeit, then its case is already lost. But it is a cheap victory: excessive desire is bad just because it is excessive, not because it is desire. If we build the notion of excess into the definition, the desire is damned simply by its name. And the notion of excess is certainly in the wings (as sonnet 129 made plain). If we say that someone has a lust for gold, we imply more than that he simply wants money, like the rest of us. We imply that the want is disproportionate, or has expelled other interests. It is not just that gold puts a gleam into his eye, it is that nothing else does, or gold puts too bright a gleam. The gleam has turned into a monomania.

There are many dimensions of excess. A desire might be excessive in its intensity if, instead of merely wanting something, we are too much preoccupied by it or we are obsessed by it or pine for it or are unduly upset by not getting it. Differently, a desire might be excessive in its scope, as when someone wants not

just power, but complete power, or not just gold, but all the gold there is. We have to admit that sexual desire could be excessive in either way. It might preoccupy someone too much, and it might ask for too much. Don Juan illustrates both the fault of excessive preoccupation and that of encompassing too many objects. Yet many men might be hard put to it to know whether they differ from him in both ways, or only in one. President Clinton is reported to have gone into therapy in order to "cure" his sexual "addiction," yet the problem on the face of it (if that is the right word) was not with the intensity of his desire, but with its wayward direction and his limp self-control. And why did these minor faults, a subject of mirth in the rest of the world, arouse such obsessive hostility in conservative America? After all, it has been known for a long time that more prostitutes fly into towns hosting Republican conventions than Democratic ones. Perhaps this sector of the American public does not like to think of its president, its God of War, stretched out in post-coital slump, victim of the calmly triumphant Venus, and with his weapons demoted to mere playthings (fig. 2).

If we talk of excess, it seems we ought to be able to contrast it with some idea of a just and proportionate sexuality: one that has an appropriate intensity, short of obsession but more than indifference, and directed at an appropriate object. People manage that, sometimes. Indeed, nature often manages it for us,

in one respect, since eventually we calm down and go to sleep. So it would seem quite wrong to say that lust is in and of itself bound to be excessive. Indeed, when we are listless or depressed, or old and tired, we suffer from loss of appetite, too little lust, not too much. And after all, judged from our actual choices rather than our moralizing, we like lust well enough. Advertising agencies fall over themselves to suggest that their products enable us to excite lust in others, but nobody ever made a fortune from prescribing ways of making ourselves repulsive.

There is indeed another dimension in which lust might seem in and of itself excessive, admitting of no moderation. Eating relieves our desire for food, our hunger. And we dine together, eating and talking, or eating and reading the newspaper or watching the television. But the activity that relieves our lust typically blocks out other functions. It doesn't literally make us blind, even temporarily, and we would be quick to desist if the wrong visitor arrived, or if someone shouted "Fire!" But it is as close to ecstasy—to standing outside ourselves—as many of us get. As the body becomes flooded with desire, and still more as the climax approaches, it blots out much of the world. It fills our mental horizon. The brain requires a lot of blood, so there is a saying that men have two organs that require a lot of blood, but only enough for one at a time. There is a literal truth here, and not only about men, which is that sexual climax drives out

thought. It even drives out prayer, which is part of the church's complaint about it.

Perhaps it does not have to be like that: there are records of Chinese voluptuaries who could dictate letters while coupled to their partners. It is certainly virtuoso, but deficient in at least one of the pleasures of exercising lust, which is the abandonment itself.

This abandonment deserves more than a moment's attention. It a good thing if the earth moves. There is no such thing as a decorous or controlled ecstasy, so we should not want to persecute lust simply because of its issue in extremes of abandon. Indeed, such experiences are usually thought to provide one of life's greatest goods, and a yardstick for others. Even in the rigid atmosphere of Catholic sanctity, the best that mystics could do by way of expressing their ecstatic communion with God or Christ was by modeling it upon sexual ecstasy. The metaphors are the same: in the ecstatic communion the subject surrenders, burns, loses herself, is made blind or even temporarily destroyed, suffering a "little death." When Saint Teresa of Avila talked of an "arrow driven into the very depths of the entrails and the heart," so that the soul does not "know either what is the matter with it or what it desires," and still more when she talks of the experience as a distress but one "so delectable that life holds no delight that can give greater satisfaction," it was not only Bernini who was driven to depict her in terms of orgasm (fig. 3). Her

contemporaries, as well, were hard put to know whether this was the work of God or the devil, and it was a close call when they finally decided on the former.[12]

The interesting thing is the association of such a state with *communion* and with knowledge (compare the biblical equation between knowing someone and having sex with them). Hard-nosed philosophers are apt to look askance at incommunicable knowledge, and since the mystic's claim to know something that the rest of us do not seems unverifiable, it is easy to remain skeptical about it. However sensible that may be in the case of divine ecstasy, it is harder to dismiss the association in the case of sexual ecstasy. Are all sexual experiences of communion, of being one, of becoming a kind of fusion of persons, to be dismissed? Is it illusion all the way down?

We shelve this for the moment, returning to Aquinas's own answer to the problem of definition. It is scarcely reassuring:

> As Isidore says . . . "a lustful man is one who is debauched with pleasures." Now venereal pleasures above all debauch a man's mind. Therefore lust is especially concerned with such like pleasures.[13]

First of all, it seems wrong to say that a lustful man is one who is debauched with pleasure: he may or may not be, depending on his luck. And in any case, sexual desire is rather more acute just when we are not debauched with pleasure. A sated man or woman is no longer lustful. And then the word "debauch" is scarcely neutral, implying riot and ruin. Finally, it is not true either that venereal pleasures debauch a man's mind. Newton seems to have been fairly ascetic, but Einstein was certainly not.

So we must not allow the critics of lust to intrude the notion of excess, just like that. We no more criticize lust because it can get out of hand, than we criticize hunger because it can lead to gluttony, or thirst because it can lead to drunkenness.