SHADOWS OF EROS: NOTES ON DOROTHEA TANNING'S SURREALISM

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Out of imagination and reality something new is born and it is this very knowledge which is the miracle. The distinction between imagination and experience is no longer valid. But contrary to what one thought, it is not the world itself that falls to pieces as a result, but only the image of an enlightened world, which, although very familiar to us through force of habit, no longer satisfies.

—Marianne Thalman

Surrealism developed as an artistic and philosophical movement in the years following the First World War. 1914 shattered the image of civilized Europe, a cracking of the public facade of reason and decency. While the surrealists created an extensive body of literature and painting to transfigure postmortem effects of the conflict, Freud and Jung probed the human unconscious to provide psychological keys to the event. The fact that the surrealists and the psychoanalysts never found a common ground is a curious and tragic paradox, given their common interest in dreams, fantasies, imagination, and the reconciliation of contraries within the soul.

The French surrealistic painter, André Masson, recently described a meeting between the leader of surrealism, André Breton, and Freud:

...when Andre Breton went to see Freud, they didn't get along at all. Freud said to Breton, not in these exact words but this is the gist of it: that which I want to cure, you, on the contrary, wish to expand.²

Exactly what was it that Breton and his artistic disciplines were attempting to expand? Breton's definition of surrealism in his first Surrealist
Manifesto offers a clue:

SURREALISM, noun, masc., pure psychic automatism which is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason. . . . Encycl. Philos. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of dream, and in the disinterested play of thought. . . .

Freud’s unsatisfactory meeting with Breton should come as no surprise to the students of these movements. Surrealism spoke most powerfully to a generation of young artists intensely involved with sweeping cultural revolution. Freud’s most loyal followers moved along the path of resignation and stoic adjustment to the cultural malaise. What Breton describes in his Manifeso belongs to Freud’s “Id.”

Examining Surrealism in the light of Archetypal Psychology creates a different set of possible cross resonances. Breton’s emphasis upon “the superior reality” of free associations, fantasies, and dream imagery corresponds with this definition of soul:

the imaginative possibility in our natures, the experiencing through reflective speculation, dream, image, and fantasy—that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphorical.

Archetypal psychology reminds us that the soul speaks a wild language, one riddled with contraries and paradoxes. This image of the soul, ambivalent, fluttering in its growth between dream and waking, sanity and madness, anima and animus, satisfies the surrealist definition of the imagination perfectly.

This study brings the language and ideas of archetypal psychology to bear upon one of the outriders of the official surrealist movement: Dorothea Tanning. Like many other women painters involved with Surrealism, she was largely ignored by Breton. Her husband, the famous sculptor and painter Max Ernst, attracted more of Breton’s attention. Her paintings had their genesis long before Surrealism was born and continue long after its demise. Her link with the movement was forged largely through her marriage to Ernst and her involvement with painting oneiric imagery.

In working with her paintings I discovered that myth was indeed a viable tool for a critical sighting of her work. As well, I realized that several of Tanning’s image clusters corresponded to imaginal movements within my own psyche; Tanning’s art, as Jung insists all significant art must, speaks transpersonally, offers constellated images of universal significance.

My main interest lies in examining how the fiery inspiration of Eros moved Tanning to create art that transcends all the conventional notions of Eros. Tanning’s portrayals show that the torch of Eros sometimes points down.

II.

Dorothea Tanning’s reputation rests largely upon a series of canvases completed in the late forties and early fifties featuring pubescent girls wandering in surrealist interiors. Nothing in the history of modern art—or traditional depth psychology—prepares us for Tanning’s young girls.

In “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik” two girls dressed in tattered Victorian garb wander through a large corridor punctuated by several doorways, one slightly ajar. A stairwell leading to a lower level is blocked by a gargantuan sunflower with tendrils partially obstructing the corridor. The girls, one blond, the other brunette, are incompletely clothed. Their dress hangs in erotically provocative disarray. Long hair streams down a back like a cold river or defies gravity by rising in the air like a flame. Other young girls in Tanning’s art sleepwalk to the night’s music. In the terrifying “Jeux d’Enfants” they rip sheets of wallpaper off a bare wall revealing sexual portraits of genitals and pubic hair under the decorative surface. The nude girl in “The Guest Room” stands before an otheworldly gnome figure and in a bed a grown woman sleeps with a battered, deformed doll. In “Palaestra” six girls wander through a corridor full of closed doors, several girls levitating to the ceiling. The one whose head touches the ceiling is nude, the others in various stages of undress.

One could assume on the basis of these early canvases simply an obsession with awakening female sexuality. One could fantasize this involvement stemming directly from the artist’s past. Tanning writes of herself in the third person:

Dorothea was raised in an atmosphere of strict Lutheran piety. But at the same time there hovered over the Tanning roof a genre of extravagance which might
have been named "Keeping Up." Thus, while dancing and card playing were forbidden to the three little daughters of the house, they were to be found wearing lace, and velvet cloaks, and dresses that might have been Paris originals."

Certainly the raw materials for these works existed in Tanning's personal memories. But they function like buckets dipped into that eternally flowing river of the imagination which both surrealist and archetypalist seek to tap. As Tanning herself states: "One of the goals for me in painting was to escape biography."

Tanning's girls are overwhelmed by sexuality (suggested by teasing undress or total nudity). They embody some of the demonic airs suggested by Hans Bellmer's "The Doll." But while Bellmer infuses his doll with sadomasochistic fetishism, Tanning's girls suggest an erotic curiosity and impulsiveness. Sex happens to these girls, shocks and imbalances, sends them to the ceilings. Who are Tanning's girls? Rather than speaking of them as symbols of an individual psyche, allegories of Tanning's own childhood and adolescent erotic confusions, perhaps they are crystallizations, imagistically of her various souls. The notion of a polycentric personality realized on canvas is hinted at in Tanning's interview from Alain Jouffroy:

My personal space is so sumptuously furnished that there is not the least room for feeling exiled. ... There is such a plethora, and everything out of place. Everything moves. Also behind the invisible door, another door. I suppose one should say that I live a double life."

Later in the same interview Tanning speaks of living "a double life. Or triple or multiple." Doors are the keystones of Tanning's pictures. As Lewis Carroll reminds us in Alice in Wonderland any doorway is a potential entrance to another reality, another level of consciousness. The various souls in Tanning's paintings flutter near thresholds, peek around doors slightly ajar, wander through endless corridors of shut doors searching for someone or something. In what is Tanning's most widely recognized canvas, "Birthday," the artist stands, breasts bared, before a series of open doorways. The maiden's positioning near the doors suggests the soul's fervor in wanting to cross the threshold into erotic fulfillment. Their long tresses, often defying gravity, intimate a desire to be swept away.

The longing is surely for Eros. But the mingling of erotic and fearful imagery, the static postures and raging stances declare that the embrace of Eros is not all sweet delight. We do well to remember that Freud, lifelong charter of Psyche in Eros' tangles, concluded his life meditating on the death wish, and that James Hillman has said: "Fear seems an inherent necessity to the eros experience; where it is absent, one might well doubt the full validity of the loving."18

Tanning's canvases show that Eros can sometimes be a god of the underworld, a sleeping monster, both animal and angel, dog as well as god. Dogs are everywhere in Tanning's work. The winged creature resting at the artist's feet in "Birthday" synthesizes characteristics of boar, porcupine, cat, eagle and dog. A pekinese—that classical "lap"-dog—assumes a variety of conventional and non-conventional guises. In "The Rose and the Dog" it echoes the terribly sentimental gazing face of a child painted by a commercial artist like Keene. It wears a fully human face in "Maternity." In "The Blue Waltz" a girl dances with a serious looking pekinese her own size. We can note a strikingly similar use of the dog in Charles Olson's poetry. Charles Stein writes:

The figure of the "Dog" ... occurs with some frequency in the series, and the various meanings which this figure is given bear archetypal resonance. Like the serpent, the image of the dog connotes a bi-valued principle of energy which is both creative-daemonic and rabid-daemonic.

As Olson's dog is both bestial and heavenly so too is Tanning's image of Eros. In her vision Eros is also a force which dogs us, sniffs in embarrassing places, tripping and screwing the soul at every opportunity. The tears and terror of many of Tanning's girls are not a preparation for Eros; rather they are the experience of Eros as Thanatos, the god as rabid dog.

Tanning's experience of Eros is reminiscent of Orphism. The Orphics too noted some of the shadows of Eros, claiming in their cosmologies that Eros was born from Chaos. This genealogy of Eros may account for the presence in many of Tanning's pictures of peculiar unformed creatures—unformed in the sense that there is no hint of human proportion. These shapes often resemble sculptures created in clay or bread dough, or energies fashioned by closely wrapping metal sheets haphazardly together. In "Interior" and "Interior With Sudden Joy" these figures rest on spidery, thin leg forms. As Tanning says: "My paintings bristle with objects that have no relation to anything in the dictionary." These
formless forms are not, I suggest, chaotic images, but images of Chaos. Compelled to imagine the origin of Eros, Tanning repeated the Orphic genealogy.

The frightened sleepwalkers who wander through the halls, the winged animals and dancing partner dogs, the precise formlessness of Tanning's images of Chaos, imaginings of this dark truth; it is in our fears, our wounds, our chaotic emptiness, our private hells that Tanning would lead us. She says:

I want to seduce by means of imperceptible passages from one reality to another. The spectator is caught (oops!) in a net from which he can extricate himself only by going through the whole picture till he comes to the exit. My dearest wish: to make a picture without any exit at all, either for me or for him.\(^{10}\)

Tanning desires to seduce us through the doorways, down the corridors, into these chaotic regions so that we, like her, may know Eros.

Many of the themes here discussed coalesce in the painting "Interior With Sudden Joy." Six figures coexist in a dark room featuring one wall covered by a blackboard. Curiously, the French word for shame, Honte, is written on the board. Reading from right to left: the first figures are two adolescent girls in partial undress, their small breasts revealed, linking arms in a loving gesture. The girl on the far right has one arm linked to the other girl (her sister), the other hand puts the head of a large pekinese, its rear its only visible aspect in the picture. The next two figures merge into one another: a nude black girl in tight embrace with one of Tanning's Tangy-like globular masses. Next to this entwined couple a woman stands in an open doorway, dressed entirely in black, the bottom half of her body obscured in smoke. In her hand she holds a glowing object. Whatever she is holding emits a pale white light that frames her face in ghostly luminescence.

I propose the following reading: the painting is "about" the soul's relation to Eros. All of the actions are happening simultaneously, deepening and complicating each other. On one level there are the caucasian girls, a curious mix of eroticism and eeriness. Both are dressed in old-fashioned, long, white nightclothes, their tops unbuttoned. One wears a chemise totally buttoned under her nightclothes, the other wears a fashionable low cut, flesh-tone bra. The chemise girl wears bobbysocks—that perennial symbol of adolescence; the other wears black

nylons. A lit cigarette carelessly burns at the feet of the bobbysocked girl. One girl puts the pekinese while gazing away from the other figures; the other looks in the direction of the black girl locked in erotic embrace. Both girls are clearly toyings with the outward trappings of being grown up, yet are still virginal and girlish.

The embrace of the black girl and the other worldly creature is a psychic deepening of the virgins and the pekinese. The virgins become a black nude woman, worldly wise—the anima is no longer so pure. Eros is no longer a force easily domesticated and house broken. Here the god is a terrifying ungainly form, plaster white, that suggests anything but unbounded sexual pleasure; or sexual pleasure as death. The relationship between virginal anima and cherubic pekinese is no longer a condescending pat; instead the black woman bends one of her knees slightly to allow for maximal genital contact with the alien form.

At the threshold of a coniunctio, a voluptuous union, is the final figure. Dressed in black, her marriage will also be a funeral, a death of psychic virginity, an awakening through death of soul into life. She looks frozen—perhaps already feeling the icy wind of Hell—her pose is an essential one, she is a soul iced in its own essence. Already occurring is the change of anima into psyche, a change signified by the smoke, and as Wheelwright has noted: "...smoke, cloud, and vapor are but different forms of the state of being of things intermediate between fire and water, and soul belongs ontologically in this area. Being vapidous a soul is also smoky..." Finally, the light is a lunar light, pale and white, the self-reflective light of an awakening psychic consciousness.

Tanning's surrealistic art connects not only to Orphism but also to Neoplatonism, alchemy, and to archetypal psychology. This tradition imagines that the anima, the white virgin, the innocent young maiden is awakened into psychic life only through tortures. While the pathology must be valued for its own sake, it is not the end. The anima is tortured out of innocent girlhood and in to something else: the torture by Eros into the complications of beauty.

III.

These bodies are rather affirmation, symbolic perhaps, of voluptuousness, but also of the fiercestes of a connection, of the amazing will of a being to affirm his most ancient roots upon the civilized plane.

--- Dorothea Tanning

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The leap from Tanning’s paintings of the forties and fifties to her most recent works exhibited at the Gimpel and Weitzhofer Gallery in November 1979 in New York is a dizzying passage. In his 1974 interview with the artist Jouffroy attempts to establish discrete stylistic periods that Tanning’s pictures can be classified within. Tanning rejects such categories:

Each of my paintings is a station on the same track. I don’t see any breaks or deviations—even temporary ones. The same preoccupations are obvious from the beginning, the same obsessions rise to the surface... My paintings, and lately my sculptures, are part of the same search, with discoveries, storms, hilarity, sufferings, rebirths.¹³

Yet the links between works of different periods require a patient and critical eye to detect. The surface trappings of her surrealist style are absent from her recent works. The adherence to sharply defined objects arranged in startling juxtapositions in realistic interiors (a style connecting her with various works by Ernst, Dali, Magritte, and Sage) is no longer present. Nude girls have vanished. Even the doorways are absent.

In place of those images, Tanning has created luminous adult bodies that are swirls of vortical physical energies. An inspirational figure for this transition toward energetic whirls of color might have been Matta. In any event, Tanning’s dancing, gyrating, twisting bodies dominate each canvas so totally that they suggest that the very air and ground they inhabit are created by their movements, inscapes made by imagining. Bodies are no longer destined to wander through long corridors. Ectastically they celebrate being alive in the flesh in a universe humming with Eros.

Consider, for example, the 1977 painting “Family Portrait.” An earlier painting with the same title has a dark and forbidding atmosphere, and was dominated by a massive male figure with eyes totally concealed behind glasses. Like a stony faced Underworld deity, this ‘god’ voids life as he himself is devoid of it. But how different the later canvas! Three humans and one dog twist and turn in a kaleidoscopic swirl of ruddy flesh tones and pastoral greens. The sex of the two figures is obscured. The woman’s figure is corpulent, luxuriously fleshy, a soul ripened and round by experience. Her abdomen and legs are bathed in a bright white light from an unknown source. Above the abdomen her body is wrapped in a
greenish wash, a rich protoplasmic broth. The remaining two human figures merge simultaneously into the body of the pekinese and woman. Many of Tanning’s later canvases celebrate a psychological universe, a world where the soul’s sheer exuberance in being incarnated in matter gives life to the earth. In “Tango Lives” a male and female dancer, their bodies emanating a cool blue luminosity, dance a tango in celebration. Their long limbs gracefully punctuate a backdrop of green floor and chalky white atmosphere. The cobalt blues and ivories imply a subtle cultured eroticism, a contrast to the hot passionate sexuality of “A Family Portrait.”

Given Tanning’s adamantine insistence that “each of my paintings is a station on the same track,” what is to be made of this astonishing transformation? A way into this enigma is offered by her novelette, Abyss, a wonderful surrealist gothic fable in the tradition of Poe and E.T.A. Hoffman, where the haunting binding of Eros and Underworld is ambiguously stated.

The novelette is, at least in some respects, a reverberation of the Eros/Psyche myth. Destina, a seductive little girl living in a large mansion housing a number of her tutores and other boarders, reveals a secret treasure to Albert, a painter residing in the house. Her treasure is a “memory box,” a wooden toy box that contains bits of animal, human and supernatural anatomy. Destina shares another secret: somewhere in the nearby desert she has befriended a panther. In attempting to confirm the existence of such an unlikely animal, and seduced by Destina’s convincing tale, Albert meets violent and untimely death.

Albert’s fate hints at the result of splitting Eros, as is so often done in life and in theory, into a physical and spiritual component. Albert’s desire is ravously physical:

He dragged his eyes away from the table and looked at her face. There was a choking pain in his chest. His gaze devoured the little red mouth, the throat, the hair, the white dress, as his mouth had devoured the plentiful of food.¹⁴

The reader’s nose right away smells something rotten. Albert’s desire is so engorgingly physical, without reflection, timing or culture. But at the same time the fascination with Destina is too puer, too spiritual. Falling in love with the fantastic animal of Destina’s imagination, Albert must know if it is real or not, and it is this complex of to be or not to be that
does him. The division of Eros into dark and light, body and spirit, Tanning may be telling us, keeps the soul forever in a beguilingly white dress.

Destina’s “memory box” recalls the box of beauty in the myth. A brief amplification may be appropriate here. The retrieval of the box of beauty from the Underworld, a terrifying task, is the last chore imposed upon Psyche by a jealous Aphrodite; but instead of delivering the box unopened to the feet of the goddess, as she had been instructed, Psyche lifts the lid herself. As her eyes close, she dives into a deep sleep. Hitting bottom she is rescued by Eros. Since Psyche finds the box in the Underworld, I suggest that the box is an underworld vision of herself, a vision that sees through the strawberry-and-cream appearance of the anima into the lacunae, wounds and weaknesses, the chronic conditions of the soul. This is a dark, dark eye that restores death to life. Death is recalled as intrinsic to life, running through the veins of the world’s body like ice.

Yet the box contains beauty. When boxed in, bound by symptoms, afraid and suffering, and unable to keep the lid on for one second longer, it is then that the flesh unveils its beauty, the beauty of what is vulnerable and fragile. At just this bottoming out moment Eros appears: The celebration of this union is pleasure.

Heralded by Destina’s “memory box,” this transformation of anima into psychic beauty, a transformation occurring through an Underworld experience, a vivid pathologizing, is recorded by Tanning’s canvases. Curiously, archetypal psychology appears today to be making a similar passage, that is, moving through pathologizing and an eye for shadow into an appreciation of the flesh of things, an aesthetic. Suddenly, the irony, if not the outrage, of using archetypal psychology as a means of interpreting Tanning’s work shows itself. In their imaginings the archetypalisists plod heavily where Tanning danced with grace and subtlety. Though that may be the importance of their work. Through painting and poetry the inferiority of psychology is discovered instead of the reverse.

“Still in the Studio” features a nude woman (Tanning?) at work in her studio. The studio is dark except for one overhead light pouring through one uncurtained window. The woman is leaning on her back over the drawing table with what appears to be a watercolor box (the box of beauty?) resting precariously over her breasts. Her lower abdomen is disproportionate to the rest of her figure. In spite of the textual monotony and surface drabness of the studio space, the impact of the canvas is far from morose. The artist’s body bathed in white light is clearly the dominating image. It is a psychic body. Its odd position suggests labor and repose, bodily indulgence and mental concentration, Eros and Psyche in precarious balance with pathology somewhere off in a dark corner of the studio, temporarily contained. The body placed where normally a sheet of paper would appear suggests that the artist’s body is the original prima materia of the artistic alchemical process, that the state of flesh unavoidably enters every moment in creating an artistic work. It is the drawing pad of the artist, Eros; the created image is the soul.

IV.

I see eroticism as superb and triumphant, but what a depth of spirit if that were all.

—Dorothea Tanning

Among the words subject to massive onslaught of cultural debasement, ‘eroticism’ has suffered ignobly. Media distortions create in the public consciousness a notion of indulgent recklessness, genital-bound, manic sexual activity. The real roots of eroticism lie in the mythologem of the Greek god Eros, and those roots are dense and tangled. Eros is the life-force, the urge toward self-preservation, the libido. He is a God, linked, according to Jung, with that portion of a woman’s consciousness between this material world and spiritual cosmos. Although a god of sexual pleasure, and upward transformation from innocence, Eros is also a child of Chaos.

Considering the range of Dorothea Tanning’s art, I would insist on all the multifarious meanings of Eros. I don’t want to split Eros in to dark and light, body and spirit, Freud and Jung. I want to emphasize the advent of Eros in the frozen, fearful stances, seductively disheveled clothes and no-exit halls of Tanning’s early work, while showing that Eros is also manifest in the dances, caresses, swirling movements and intense tonalities of the most recent work. No beauty without vulnerability, no love without fear, no life without death. “Each of my paintings is a station on the same track.” Lines from a Robert Kelly poem provide a fitting epigram:

Eros was my master
& now I wonder
if I ever had another,
he who shaped
all these relentless subtle roads.
THE BENZENE UROBOROS:
Plastic and Catastrophe in *Gravity’s Rainbow*

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Apart from the python, the snake in general appears in Dahomean symbolism and art, though little in Yoruba. In the clay wall moldings (bas reliefs) and decorated cloths in the palace museums at Abomey there are striking representations of brightly coloured snakes, red, blue, and white, the most sacred colours. The snake is curled in a circle, with its tail in its mouth; a very ancient and almost universal symbol of immortality and eternity... by swallowing its tail it forms a circle — which goes round and round forever, ‘like a great ring,’ or like ‘first, last, and midst, and without end.’

The coloured snake is not only called by the name of the principal snake Di, but is also regarded by the Ewe as representing the rainbow, Audo Hwedo.

Geoffrey Parrinder

Fate the rocket describes a parabola
In darkness mostly, more rarely on a rainbow.

Andrey Voznesensky

From the title, *Gravity’s Rainbow* seems exclusively a novel of classical physics. And indeed Thomas Pynchon does combine Newton’s theories of mechanics and of optics, his laws of mass and motion, light and color, in a metaphoric pun of immense imaginative complexity: gravity’s rainbow is attraction’s diffraction. Pynchon describes the trajectory of the visible spectrum; he plots the prismatic curve of a projectile, the plastic roket that writes its iridescent, catastrophic way across the sky until gravity forces it to crash and explode at rainbow’s end. The vapor from the exhaust of the rocket diffraacts the white light of the atmosphere into red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet, and as gravity’s influence attracts the mass of the rocket in motion, the result is a rainbow. Pynchon’s rainbow is not, like Noah’s, the symbol of a covenant that God will never again destroy man in a diluvian catastrophe, but a symbol of the last judgment—that man may well destroy himself in a plastic one.

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