

What Lies Beyond



by Theodore Dalrymple

I do not think ahead a great deal, much less am I a prophet, but I do take credit that for some considerable time I have wondered what would come next when people grew bored with the fashion for transsexualism. I plumped for incest, but Spain, blazing the way to the total liberation of man from all forms of frustration, has answered my question: It is bestiality, which recently it has decriminalized—provided, of course, that the animal does not require treatment as a result of the sexual activity involved on the part of humans.

Consent, I assume, will have to be implicit rather than explicit, for example by an absence of obvious struggle on the part of the beast in question. What in effect is legalization of bestiality seems grossly sexist, insofar as—I imagine—it is far easier for men to practice than women. But this is a question from too close an examination of which I avert my mind.

It is unlikely that the law will make much difference in practice, though one never knows. After all, acts of bestiality have hitherto been unlikely to be performed in front of witnesses, at least witnesses who are not of like mind—if *mind* is quite the word I seek. But it is possible that some people will take the legalization as a secular form of blessing by the state, and thereby experimentation in public will increase. As to what comes after bestiality once it has been normalized, I hesitate to speculate: I leave it to the imagination of others.

What is all but certain is that there *will be* a next, because for some people transgression has become an end in itself, almost the meaning of their lives. Not until the whole litany of sexual practices in Richard von Krafft-Ebing's book *Psychopathia Sexualis* has been first legalized, normalized, and what is now called "celebrated," might reformers be satisfied, and probably not even then. After all, Krafft-Ebing's book was published in 1886, and we have moved on since then. His book is old-fashioned, meaning unenlightened, as most entries on the internet make clear:

Most of 'Psychopathia Sexualis' is concerned with sexual perversion, or "the perversions." Perversion is an old-fashioned diagnostic term that once served as a label for sexual activities considered outside the norm of heterosexual sexual desire and activity.

Krafft-Ebing did not live to know about the activities of Szilveszter Matuska, a Hungarian who was thought to have gained sexual gratification from derailing trains. Perhaps, in the name of harm reduction, railway companies ought to derail empty trains from time to time in order to satisfy those such as Matuska, who on one occasion killed 22 people. His sexual desires and practices were no doubt outside the norm, but let us not stigmatize them.

Transgression has long been a term of praise for art and other critics, without much regard to what is being transgressed, but now transgression is something that has become desirable as social policy also. Find a taboo and transgress it, seems to be the way we "progress" today.

Why is it so important to transgress? I suspect that it has something to do with the decline of organized religion, whose place transgression has taken. I take it that most people above a certain level of mental development desire some form of transcendence, which is the idea that human life has significance beyond the day-to-day flux of everyday existence. With the decline of religion, this transcendence can be sought only in the secular sphere.

Whatever else may be said against it, Marxism provided secular transcendence for many, particularly of the intellectual type. It convinced believers that they were part of something much greater than themselves, namely History, to whose foreordained consummation in a perfect society they were contributing.

Notwithstanding Marxists' repeated assertion that the Soviet Union practiced only a false form of Marxism, the downfall of the Soviet Union damaged Marxism beyond repair. Those few who continued to believe in it were like those followers of religious prophets who predict the end of the world on a certain date but who continue to believe in them when their prophecies do not come true.

Religion has also long been in retreat, first slowly, then fast. Matthew Arnold foresaw this in the middle of the 19th century, in his poem "Dover Beach."

The sea of faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But under the influence of criticism, both historical and philosophical, it began to weaken, first among the educated

and eventually among everyone else:

*But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar...*

When the withdrawal was complete—and there now seems to be no prospect of its recovery—Arnold thought there would be:

*Nor certitude, nor peace, not help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

Ignorant armies clashing by night: Does this not seem to summarize our present predicament? The breakers of taboos propose something in all seriousness, or perhaps I should say earnestness, for seriousness and earnestness are not the same thing at all: something that only a short time before would have seemed impossible, outlandish, or worse, almost certainly in the knowledge and desire that it will produce a reaction of outrage.

The very violence, mainly verbal, of the controversy that ensues is a guarantee of a kind that it is about something of transcendent importance, that the taboo-breakers are fighting for the good of humanity, though in fact the subject may be a trivial one, at least numerically.

They are not seeking improvement; I think that they are searching for meaning in a world that lacks it.

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