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Is Sex a Narcotic?

(From a recent letter)

One little snippet from you arrived not long ago which you probably sent me with delight, hoping it would sting me a bit. It was: «Most men, disturbed or scared, lose their sexual drive. But for him, sex was a narcotic, a bulwark against care.» And then you went on to say that the first sentence was true of you—and—then went on to ask: «What about the second sentence and you?» Well, it's hardly a narcotic. In my books, 'narcotic' is usually taken to mean a drug that induces profound sleep, lethargy and relief of pain. Sex hardly ever did that for me. The root of 'narcotic' is the Greek *narke*, which means numbness—and I never got numb after a party in all my life. Sex is not even an escape for me. The only kick I get out of it might be defined by taking a couple lines out of context from Shelley's 'Skylark'—«We look before and after / And pine for what is not.» I hate the act itself and always have. But I have always 'looked before and after, and pined for what is not'. Anticipation is wonderful, and afterwards, you can call up the event in retrospect and caress it and make love to it—but ugh, the thing itself! You set me to thinking a bit about it, and I decided that if it could be defined by any word at all, you would just have to say it was habit. You know I have always been a record-keeper, knowing (contrary to a quote you used as a filler a while ago) full well when I was seventeen that I would be seventy some day, and want the memories to look back upon—and so I kept records and names, and most of them I have already forgotten: what names are attached to what bodies, who this romantic stranger was, who was the 'Italian taxi-driver' from 1948? Who was the 'huge Negro' from 1952? Who was Leonard? Who was Kenny King? Of course, Kinsey was delighted that I had kept a count . . . And so, we fall into the habit of sex, and we keep it up. And once in a while, alone in the apartment at night, I think to myself of its foolishness and its waste of time and money and emotion; I don't give a damn for it, and yet I keep it up. Is it pride? What the hell is it? I never liked it when I was seventeen, even. I'm not looking for a soul-mate or a Great Love. I'm doing it, I guess, just because it comes along, and there's nothing to do. I could, with ease, stop tomorrow; and depend henceforth on my fantasies and my hand. But when you are as aware of what it is and what it means to you, as I seem to be, can you actually say that it is a narcotic, that it induces profound sleep, lethargy, and relief of pain? In my case, it causes more pain than it relieves, believe me . . . «We look before and after, and pine for what is not.» Well, I've looked before and after—and as for the pining for what is not, do you remember what old Freud said in a late work? It was something to the effect that: «I suspect that in most sexual encounters involving two persons, there are at least four people present.» He was referring, I suppose, to the fantasies created by each person as he engages in sex. When with A, do you think of B? And what does A think of? You, or C?

And finally, if it is a narcotic, and you stop it, would there not be 'withdrawal symptoms'? There would certainly not, in my case. I could cut it off as easily as I stop breathing—and if I did, (he said wryly, negating everything he'd said before) I probably would. . .

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