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# Aftermath

## *The Clinton Impeachment and the Presidency in the Age of Political Spectacle*

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## The Spectacle and the Libertine

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What was going on last year anyway? Monica, Clinton, the Republicans: some kind of freight train through our collective life, massive, unavoidable, by turns exciting, gripping, and then gone, as suddenly as it had come. A year ago an interdisciplinary Monica festival like this would surely have convened a full house, and look at us now. The incandescent spotlight cast then on the chattering classes has been switched off, the cud chewers of the academy have returned to pasture.

I must say I've had a hard time figuring out just what cud to chew, chastened that our ephemeral pop-cultural phenomena should turn out to be, well, ephemeral and pop-cultural, resistant to the weight of interpretation and analysis. It all seemed very meaningful at the time, and I remain convinced that Monica was basically good for the country. But maybe the whole thing was simply very present, a thrilling presence, less a "distraction" from other pressing matters than the breaking through of sound, sight, and feeling onto an otherwise cloudy cultural and political surface.

There is no shortage of explanations, interpretations, and reactions to what happened, just as there was no shortage of commentary at the time. Take only the questions of politics and sex: the Clinton Impeachment retold as a story about the maneuvers of politicians in a legal regime, the Bill-Monica (Hillary) Affair as a story about the machinations of men and women in institutions and families, evaluated in every sort of social, moral, legal, and religious frame. People have attitudes about things like "What the nation's first impeachment trial in more than a century meant for our institutions." We get conclusions like "Congress did its duty," or "the presidency has been compromised," "the Republicans went too far," or "the Democrats will stop at nothing," or "someone politicized what is properly legal," or "legalized what is properly political," and so forth. And

there are reassurances that, in the end, our institutions worked rather well, even as any number of reform proposals, from proportional representation to term limits, elbow their way onto the event's ample coattails. People have attitudes about things like whether Bill and Monica's adventure was or was not sexual harassment, or exploitative, or demeaning, or adulterous, attitudes which are every bit as nuanced as Bill's own analysis of whether it was "sex" at all. And there are reassurances that, in the end, the American people showed good sense about the whole thing, just as there are numerous proposals about what Bill and Monica—and for that matter Hillary and Linda and all the bit players—should, in fact, have done. Once it all got going, no one could move without stumbling into a tar pit of moral and political and legal interpretations.

In books like this, one can certainly revisit this terrain. I'm sure the event did (or, as some of our authors argued, did not) have one or another consequence of this sort, and there is nothing wrong with getting a bunch of academics together to try to sort it all out. But monumentalizing last year's experience into these molds loses a lot of wax. And it was great wax, even where it prefigured this meltdown into meaning—there is just something different about it before it turns to bronze.

In today's academic world, it has been the traditions of "cultural studies" which have held onto the wax most aggressively; resisting the pull of our most familiar interpretive machinery while simultaneously expanding its range. In cultural studies, the ephemeral, the low, the random, and the rote can all be grist in the mill of meaning. These broad historical-cultural readings do open things up, and the results can sparkle with wit and wisdom. But I am wary to turn Monica over to the mavens of cultural studies—their practices can be at once too earnest and too glib.

For all its zip and buzz, much of cultural studies today remains a redemptive practice—emphatic while looking down the microscope that these little things do *mean* something. Although we know that reading the surface can also efface it, there is gravitas in being savvy this way, reformatting the lofty and the base in the key of history, a world of mythical antecedents and hidden political effects. Somehow Culture already knew all this and now embraces all this, understands all things and, ultimately, judges all things. It is *pleasurable* to ask what it all means, for our "system," for our "Constitution," things which go up and down like stocks, and for which cultural studies might provide a helpful index, folding the speculation of yesterday's talking heads into the measured paragraphs and bright narratives of significance.

Robert Gordon suggests that we should think of the Clinton Scandal as an enormous populist deliberation about sex and politics and the Constitution, a sort of legislation from below. Expansive historical reading—legislation from, as, culture. He seems right—there *was* deliberation and most everyone participated and afterward we *had* legislated together, about adultery and phone sex, about the President and the Congress, about the media and the public will. More *was* going on than the operation of a separation of powers scheme, and it makes more sense to align last year with other great moments of popular legislation—prohibition perhaps, or withdrawal from Vietnam—than to see it merely as one more Constitutional Crisis or Impeachment Trial.

But last year was more intense and less certain than populist legislation. We might better line it up with Anita Hill and O. J. Simpson and Lindberg's Baby, with the Gulf War and Waco and the national election process, with Elian Gonzales and Mrs. Simpson and Sally Hemmings, with Louise Woodward, Tawana Brawley, the Death of Diana, or the Chicago Seven. The line to Monica runs through Oscar Wilde and Scopes, through the Rosenbergs and McCarthy and Watergate. These spectacles take more than an instant—an assassination, a moonshot—they seem to take deliberation and a narrative unfolding. These offer more than the catharsis of collective empathy or condemnation—this is not Dahmer or McVeigh, or even the Unabomber. For this sort of spectacle there needs to be debate, at best the intense enactment of debates at once dormant, even unspeakable, but unsettled.

When these events get going, the result is more than legislation. We feel a welling up of ambivalence, a flood of uncertainty and conflict. Many people feel an intense personal engagement with media images and issues of which they may have hardly been aware. These events multiply the scandalous—one thing seems outrageous to some people, to someone else it is something else which outrages, soon one's indifference to the other's outrage is outrageous, and so on, until the original scandal is lost under layers of reaction and failures to react. Much of cultural studies, much historical study—work like Gordon's—takes us into the heart of this second process. But even the best work leaches the ephemeral and the uncertain from our great public spectacles, ironing out the contradicted meanings which gave rise to this grand cultural legislative moment in the first place, off-loading the intensity we experienced. I was not surprised to learn that the very word "sincere" once meant without wax.

There were certainly big public spectacles like this before 1950, but we remember them only dimly, as a vague disturbance, a diversion, a footnote for

the vagaries of popular enthusiasm. Spectacles disappear from History, unless, like Dreyfus, they become connected with the Real Politics of the day. Otherwise they are slowly replaced by depressions and wars, by presidents and proclamations, judgments and legislation. Unless the historian means to say, with a wink of surprise, amusement, irony, "*meanwhile* people were preoccupied with this kind of thing." This forgetting is not surprising. Spectacles expend themselves into meaning. The social body smooths its feathers, tucks away the loose ends of our experience, fading the intensity and ambivalence which first made it vivid. For last year's events, this is well underway, the whole complex business reduced to an impeachment, a President, the Clinton Scandal. Efforts like ours here are less about remembering than forgetting.

There is another side to cultural studies, however, which can ruffle up the feathers again, often by leaning against our taking all this too seriously. This is the cultural studies which opposes meaning, stands against interpretation, the cultural studies of irony and loopy calls for self-reference to inoculate against anyone thinking you're taking anything too seriously. Relax, chill, be happy, it's all just culture—and the word *just* does an amazing work, *brutally denying us the importance of our earnestness*. But this "just" is never just just. The cultural studies of the "just" offers lots of flash, a babble of academic winks and nods accompanying, masking, counteracting the somber timbres one hears as new pieces are chipped and fit into Culture or History. We wink because we know how silly it all really is, how much of the real is really ritual, of the canny really cliché. We wink at *their* folly—they think they are thinking, struggling, seeking, when we know they are speaking the lines of a thousand plays, novels, stories. "All the world's a stage" might itself be a cliché, but not when we're the only ones who know it, when the actors go on thinking they're real. It's so dear, so droll, when all they would have had to do is take a few more literature courses, and they would have known too, and none of this would have turned out quite this way. Would not have turned out this way because, really, if sensible well-educated people like us were out there on stage we know what we'd do—the right thing. This last is the sound of the nod which follows the wink.

Let us set both cultural studies traditions to one side, both the muse and the bemused. My own inclination is neither to drag Bill and Monica into meaning, nor to push meaning aside, leaving it hidden and unspoken—the *knowing nod of what would have happened had they only known what we all understand but needn't say*. I mean the term "specta-

cle” to help resist a knowing celebration of the surface, as also an erudite plumbing of the depths. I want to keep it light, but not half-baked. The spectacle is surface, ceremony, culture, and cliché. But the fantasy that we’d escape all these roles once cast in them, that we could play Hamlet in the tabloids without being Hamlet, is just that.

Against the hidden convictions of the glib, I mean to foreground the intense and awkward feelings one has *in* spectacle. Role playing, when you do it, is more than an ironic gesture. In spectacle, there is something abject about our relations with one another. Sometimes the intensity itself is, at least retrospectively, a bit embarrassing—but even at the time, it feels odd to be so intensely present, alive, concerned, and at the same time see ourselves living forth what we recognize as a role. The spectacle offers less the experience of meaning making than the awkward, unsettling collective experience of cliché-being. And it’s uncanny to feel both commitment and cliché.

You’ll feel this better if we focus on Monica, returning her to the center of the story. Let’s call it The Monica Scandal, the Monica Affair, Monica-gate. Just say her name now—Monica. Monica Lewinsky. Monica Monica Monica. Saying her name aloud—try it in a restaurant these days—produces a weird feeling, somehow embarrassing, conjuring words like wallowing, obsession, unseemly, and sentiments like how-could-she, how-could-we. I want to hold that feeling, place a magnetic field around it, at once a bit giddy and childish, but also tawdry and uncertain.

What *was going on* last year anyway? What were we all *doing* exactly? Not just watching, certainly. Maybe peeping, peeping together, but more part of the action than that. Talking about Monica, all the time, reading the stories. Obsessively. All those facts—not just the blue dress and the cigar, but exactly what he said when she told him she needed to know if he cared, and how many minutes it took the first time, and how long they talked on the phone afterward. We had *views* on these things. I was on the shuttle from New York to Boston the day the Starr Report came out, and the scene was an ad for the *New York Times*, every passenger holding a copy aloft, avid about the finest print.

Is there a word for performing something together which is and is not a role, which loses track of the line between being and being a cliché? All surface, but not just surface? Could we call it sex? Or “spectacle.” Let’s place these grand media events in line with other liminal rituals, circumcision, initiation, graduation, marriage, orgasm. The spectacle can be very small-scale, like a summer camp talent contest we’d rather forget. Or

perhaps like that show-and-tell at school when you brought altogether the wrong thing—or, more troubling still, when what you brought was, inexplicably, just exactly right and all the school was for a moment your stage . . . and then it was later at lunch, and you took it out of your satchel again so someone, probably not your best friend, could take one more look, maybe even asked you what it *meant*, and you really didn't know, and maybe you made something up, and everyone knew it hadn't been like that at all, and later still, on the walk home when you tried to make sense of these two moments, and you couldn't.

If you've been to a wedding or a circumcision or a fraternity hazing, if you've had sex, you know what I mean. Something happens, something big and connected and social—but there is also the mountain of absurd detail, the struggle against the risible, the weird particularities of *this* wedding. If you've been in a wedding, even gotten married, you will remember the intensity of being for that minute *the one* who is getting married, even as you see yourself strangely turned into this other person, the *bride*, the *groom*. Look at the next wedding picture you see framed on someone's mantle, there is something embarrassing about *having been*—what, exactly—so *young*, so . . . neatly fit within the convention, or so ill at ease with it, or so idiosyncratic. In a way, you can't shake the feeling, you can buy the whole package and let the photographer lead you up the aisle or you can struggle to make each detail meaningfully *your own*, and you will have performed yourself into a wedding either way. It won't do to remember the wedding as a commitment, a transition, a tradition—but we also can't dismiss it with a knowing wink and the suggestion that sensible people like us would know never to find ourselves there. To see the wedding as spectacle embraces heartily at once its intensity and its silliness, affirms it whole, while struggling not to be capsized by wake from the ocean liner of meaning it drags behind.

We need a better taxonomy of the spectacle, just how does it work? I am convinced the key lies less in the event than in our posture toward it. There is something here of the deliberative, something populist, absolutely. The spectacle can be read, lives do get rearranged—afterward these people are *married*, Monica is on television, Hillary is running for the Senate, Bill is entering into history. I've also heard people invoke traditions of drag or camp as a posture toward the spectacle, to capture a confounding at once of meaning and identity. There is something here of drag, of not just watching, but performing, dressing up as oneself who is also something or someone else. A spectacular practice with conse-

quences, a serious practice which expends itself into the spectacular. But just as the spectacular exceeds the deliberative, so it also demands more than the camp of the outsider, the ironist, the drag queen, the conscientious interpretation resister. I want a posture which affirms both what is and is not, which holds the itchy surface, the momentary, collective situation of performance, holds the leftover feelings, unseemly against the memory of all that intense involvement. When we look at the spectacle, then as now, when we adopt the posture toward it of spectacle, we can't help wondering how we got so carried away. Where was our cynical consciousness? What is it, exactly, to be carried away? To embody the form, to rise to the level of cliché.

Choreographer Mark Morris says something unique happens at a live performance, with live music, hard chairs, sweating bodies. You are all together and for a moment you all know that whatever is happening is really happening, now. He says this happens because you don't know what will happen, don't know more deeply than in the most absurdly unpredictable film. But watching a film is also an experience in real time, and even in real life we mostly do know what will happen. Apparently O. J. and the white Bronco changed network television, bringing home to everyone in the business what CNN had discovered: the power of poor production values, of live reporting, and the Right-Now story. But when you see the dramatic aerial shot, a white Bronco on a highway, it turns out you do know what will happen actually, and that is part of the riveting pleasure—you know the police will eventually catch the white Bronco and maybe someone will shoot someone and maybe they won't, and you have a prediction, probably a pretty good one. You are interested—you are in some way—because you know. If you looked at the decision rules (majority in the House, supermajority in the Senate) and the party configurations and the polls, you also knew what would happen in the impeachment trial. Knowing, predicting, interpreting was to be present. And even in dance, you know. You come into being as audience as this knowledge melts into the performance—they'll play music, some of it you will recognize, or know, or think you know, or play yourself, people will dance, you will, or will not, give yourself over to the piece, will or will not use the time wisely to reevaluate your to-do list. Of course someone *might* fall off the stage, just as O. J. might commit suicide, or Clinton might be impeached, but probably they won't.

As Walter Dickey pointed out, the longer the Monica Affair went on and the more intensely we became engaged with it, the more we found



ourselves turning into talking heads, strangely aware that each of our most earnestly felt interpretations was but a line, that we were somehow being spoken to by the affair. Even, and perhaps especially, when we were at our most jaded and seen-it-all-before. Part of the unseemly residue arises here. The name Monica is madeleine to a feeling, but it is not she who disturbs. The sound of her name returns us to the posture of spectacle, to our collective realization that we have met the artificial, and it is us.

This feeling is not at all the contentment we feel when sagely reminded that Monica and Bill and the Republicans, followed at every step by the press, the commentators, and the public, trudged through the oldest scripts in the books. To know that it was all, after all, "just" culture comforts us. It leaves lying there the implication that all these players, ourselves included, *should* obviously have been doing something else, that we knew that then as we know it now. But what should they/we have been doing? Getting on with the nation's "real" business? Minding our own business? Expressing really original points of view, really new ideas and perspectives? Coming up with something really shocking? These are also staged things, mythical things, things performed in a lexicon.

Authenticity, the Real, the Avant-Garde. When we invoke them, we are promising a performance, or, better, performing a familiar promise. Even, I'm afraid, when the promise is staged on a field of pain and death. Or love. I remember a wonderful Quaker wedding in which everyone struggled to be moved to say what they really felt, including the bride and groom. No ceremony here, and yet, didn't it also sound vaguely familiar, a kind of homey Hallmark hodgepodge? And yet wasn't it also moving, not just vagary but vow?

Cultural studies of the earnest and the glib hardly exhaust the range of academic conventions for thinking about the spectacle. There is a whole world of demystification and critical narration, of alienation effects and personal testimonials. In their own way, these also comfort, gently separating the wheat of meaning from the chaff of display. We could say the spectacle is entertainment, an elaborate narcotic circus to placate the proles of the new Imperium, while down below, or backstage, the big boys do the really dirty work of power. We could say the spectacle performs a social function, persuading the people that everything else is real (when you know it's not really real). We could say the spectacle legitimates the state apparatus, persuading us that at least our institutions worked (when they really don't/didn't work). Or we could say the spectacle soothes us, lulls us into passivity by suggesting that in the middle of our meaningless con-

sumer existence there is something real after all (when really there isn't, or this isn't). We could say the spectacle's very spectacularity reassures us that our own lives are truly lived. We Witness, therefore We Are (when really we are not). Or we could say that the spectacle, deliberative theater, teaches us that Politics "R" Us (when really they aren't). These are all fun stories to tell. We can stand outside, lamenting from the desert that Watergate is *not* a scandal, Campaign Finance is *not* a scandal, that Monica and O. J. are *not* important. *People*, we can implore, it's all a delusion. The real scandal is AIDS or poverty or simply your own narcotic stupor in front of the television. Wake Up America.

But the peculiarity of the spectacle lies neither in its escape from the script, nor in its escape into the script. The spectacle functions as a theater of affirmation among players who experience one another staged as real. In such moments we are not the each-one-unique snowflakes of the humanist imaginary, deluded into collective unconsciousness. The spectacle lets us lay down the pretense of individuation, or permits us to rise up and embody the promise of particularity, as a script, a type, a point of view. In the spectacle we enact for one another our deepest and most shallow roles—blow ourselves up into Michelangelo-sized cartoons, stretched across the Sistine ceiling of our imagination. We can be "law" to their politics, good sense to their carelessness. We can be "the people" and, for that moment, they can be "government," just as we can be "men" or "women" or "interns" or whatever. In the spectacle we experience the power and pleasure of the most expansive self-generalization, but we also know that we are just the boy who brought an antler back from Yellowstone to show the class, that they are just our classmates, the teacher just a nice lady playing at pedagogy.

In spectacle we are all somehow always already demystified, we know and don't know that this is all there is, this moment of loss is, in a word, as good as it gets. It is not surprising that in spectacle we judge one another's performance more firmly than their presence. Precisely not the attitude of our critical academic conventions, piercing the veil of performance to show us the real. We ask whether Clinton's contrition was well played, did he "sound" presidential, was Hillary convincing as Tammy Wynette, standing-by-her-man? Of course we are also intrigued to know what The President Is Really Like, and there was an entire second level of commentary here—what did Hillary Really Think, and so on. But this went on one tier below the theater of how-they-performed, like tabloid fascination with whether Matt Damon and Ben Affleck really are friends

beneath more serious commentary on their performances and artistry. There is something scandalous in attention to the “real”—what did you really think about Monica, what does the scandal *really mean* for our Constitution? Far from redeeming our moment of giddy collective artificiality, these gestures steal its thunder. The real is an issue, not an alternative. A promise, a performance. It is somehow unseemly, base, to ask if Monica had an aftermath.

Thinking about the events of 1998 as spectacle keeps this experience before us, continuing the spectacle not simply as a diversionary shimmer, but as living terrain for enacting identities and competing over stakes and insisting on what we both want to be right and know as rite. Let us put the spectacle—all of us—in the same frame with our “analysis,” let our posture now continue our posture then. For this, the spectacle offers a vocabulary, roles, positions—offered them then and offers them now. With Monica-Bill you can come into your own as a liberal centrist, feel nobly marginal, practice disdainful lines about the moral majority and then suddenly find yourself at the center of a mainstream chorus. You can think you were 1/3 and turn out to be 2/3, and you will give the whole thing a positive review, unless of course you preferred it over on the cultural edge. Just as you can think you were President and turn out to be Husband, and so forth. You can know and display yourself as the Christian Right, stand ready to assail the media, only to find in their sanctimonious judgments your only real echo. Disorienting, a bad feeling. Is this social legislation? Interpretation from different “points of view” duking it out over who gets in the history book? Yes, but also the making real of different identities, the intensification of being which comes when the wax firms the first time as a model. And knows itself as wax.

Being an internationalist, I thought I would say something about the foreign reaction to the whole thing. If you read around in the foreign press, you find all sorts of things. Recaps of savvy commentary from Washington, odd local preoccupations, restagings of classic arguments about America and the Rest of the World. Are we puritan or not? If they think we are and they’re not, it sounds one way, where they think we’re not and they are, it comes out another. Nations coming into being through mythic differentiations. My favorite foreign clipping was serious speculation in the Egyptian press about whether Monica was an Israeli agent sent to derail Clinton’s efforts to pressure Israel on settlement with the Palestinians. Monica turns out to be an ink blot. Or, better, the spectacle pours us each out as blot for the other.

My favorite line in the Starr Report came in a footnote dangling just where it became clear that there was, actually, no evidence of a quid pro quo nexus between White House support for Monica's job search and her testimony about the affair. Still, the footnote told us, this remained terribly unfair to all the other interns who would not get such favorable letters of recommendation. You can just hear the indignant voice of someone coming into being as a recently graduated law clerk: impeach that man, he writes letters of recommendation which *are not based on the candidate's merit*.

That's the law clerk—but what about me? The Monica Spectacle brought and brings me into being as a Libertine. The Libertine is a role, a position, a set of lines, into which one can constitute oneself in relation to an audience. Here might be one: Monica did more for Libertinism than anyone since the Marquis de Sade. A senior colleague of mine put it to me less gently, before he trailed off, chuckling: "that woman did more for the blow job than . . ."

"Doing something" for Libertinism, or, I suppose, for the blow job, doesn't mean creating more favorable conditions under which appropriately serious national Libertine lobby groups can translate populist consensus about the scandal into real legislative accomplishments in Congress. Although I suppose it could. But Libertinism is not just a position about sex—it is also a position about government, about the centrality and seriousness of society's meaning machine, about what I have been calling the spectacular.

During the 1992 campaign a postcard appeared at gay bookshops and resorts depicting a beaming Bill and Al standing together with buff torsos and cutoffs, flies open just a suggestive bit. Bill has his thumb hitched in the pocket of his jeans, dogtags hang around his neck, his arm loops comfortably around Al's waist. The top. Sporting a string of beads, Al has his arm around Bill's shoulder and looks like the cat that ate the canary. It's a nice shot, very gay-friendly. Something anyone could identify with. Part of the allure is the feeling that Clinton and Gore wouldn't have minded the joke, might even have been kind of proud to be shown so buff. Something about the generational change of that election, something about their style, something about their embrace of the "gay vote." It was a spectacle, a coming into being of a generation.

I remember a hotel ballroom dinner with a thousand blue-chip gay donors to the first Clinton-Gore campaign—tear-jerking videos, smarmy speeches. The only camp table was a bunch of straight folk, queers coming

into the spectacle as voters, citizens, potent sources of campaign cash. Serious articles about whether there were now more gays than Jews in key primary states. There is nothing wrong with trying to translate this feeling into legislation. I suppose, it's a feeling made to be monumentalized and lots of people tried. And we got "don't ask don't tell." And the Defense of Marriage Act. And the feeling, the feeling of coming in as out, was gone. Libertinism locks its fingers around that feeling—even if it is a bit tawdry and awkward, won't shoehorn properly into a party platform. If you can't see the scandal as spectacle, if you insist on dismissing it glibly or embroidering it into meaning, you also can't see it as a Libertine. The Libertine is brought into being in the moment of abjection and ambivalence which stands right at the brink of the descent into meaning and history.

Of course the Libertine has lines about sex, *sex-affirming lines*. The Libertinism shares a lot with sex-positive feminism and queer theory. Adultery happens. Clinton and Monica didn't do anything wrong. Those would be Libertine lines. Sex-positive doesn't mean any sex any time anywhere is good. Clinton and Monica's sex might have been a terrible idea for him, for her, might have hurt people, including people he/she/they didn't want to hurt. Someone might well not want to have an affair, or become involved with a married man. But it isn't morally wrong or depraved or degraded. Those are other people's lines. For the Libertine, it is simply true that people do follow their desires, and it's generally a good thing. There are risks, you have to calculate, and you can be terribly wrong and pay a high price. People you love can pay a high price. But the price is paid because you were wrong, not because you were bad.

Libertinism is, ultimately, not about sex, comes not to judge what sex is good and what sex is not. It is a posture about judgment about sex—a posture not *against judgment*, any more than the spectacular stands *against interpretation*. The Libertine struggles to keep the vibrating edges of sexual possibility—the structured paradoxes into which the sexual repeatedly falls—on the table. There is an affirmation, a kind of positivism or realism—people will/do follow their desires. There is a pull, a tendency, a default among a range of positions, a default position in a vocabulary, to affirm what happens, to demand that people, oneself, others, accept the consequences of their own and others' desires. But there is just beside it an intense agnosticism about whether it worked as sex, whether it was worth it, what it meant. Maybe it was a terrible idea, a mistake, something to regret, to suffer, in the face of which one must be stoic, whose consequences one can only yearn to reverse. Maybe it was just

great, for Monica, for Bill, in spite of everything, or because of everything. And maybe it was no big deal at all, either way. People routinely decide about these things, individually and together. They make cost-benefit calculations for themselves, other-regarding evaluations, paternalist judgments. For the Libertine, moreover, there is no reader of last resort, no place from which we could know if *this was desire, was sex, was good*, was mistaken. Not Bill, not Monica, not Hillary, not even Barbara Walters, and certainly not the Libertine. We/I/they just don't know, didn't know for certain then and still don't. The Libertine remembers about sex what we know of the spectacle—the experience that one knows intensely, that one is sure, is the canary in the coal mine.

For the Libertine, reading the Monica Spectacle was a terrific experience. There were the bad guys, but then there was Monica. A woman's sexuality and sexual pleasure affirmed. Not just his pleasure, but her pleasure. The very definition of what sex "is" put up for grabs. Fetish practices affirmed as sexual by the country's leading conservative moralists. Sex which was not always reciprocal or parallel, but seemed nevertheless desired and enjoyed. But the more the Libertine talked, the less edgy it became, and the more the Libertine fell into the banalities of knowledge and norms. The *Wall Street Journal* at one point observed with amusement that liberals already thought of Clinton as the first black president—broken home, saxophone, Southern accent and food preferences—what would be next, Clinton as the first gay president? Well, yes actually. Multiple sexualities, public sex, the blow job, the cigar, the closet, the scandal, the universal insistence that it was fine as long as it was *private*. Starr shouldn't ask and Bill shouldn't tell.

As the Libertine became less a posture and more a position, it was easy to confuse the Libertine and the Civil Libertarian. Still, the Libertine tries not to rely on the distinction between public and private to privilege or shield the private. The Libertine shares with feminism the insistence that the private is political. Even when it doesn't result in legislation. Public sex. Sex in the Oval Office, at work, while *talking to a Senator about a bill*. Now that's Libertine. In what it says about sex, and what it says about Senators and bills and the quotidian practices of government. My favorite bumper sticker to emerge from the scandal read simply, "Honk if you're having sex with the President." I hope a lot of people honked. I hope Hillary honked.

But I am afraid they didn't. I'm afraid the only honks were derisive, affirming the sticker's edge, the wedge. Of course the Civil Libertarian

might affirm public sexuality when it is expressive, as a form of speech, perhaps. Sex could be political if they were somehow trying to convince somebody in government to do something, or trying to change public opinion, about something government was about, well then, OK. But sex *qua* sex. Well, no.

For the Libertine, sex is political even, maybe especially, when it's cut off from speech and persuasion. And it can be affirmed as sex, does not need a procedural privilege or analogic reinterpretation as quasi-governmental, an affair of the mind rather than the body. For the Libertine, to be affirmed, sex needs neither to be disentangled from everything else and placed alone in a private cabin, nor to be transformed into something else. It can simply be, and the Libertine defaults to its affirmation. But what is it? Ahh, here again, we can't be sure—identifying sex turns out to be as complex as evaluating it.

Take the blow job. People do it, people deny it, people deny it's sex. You can come into being as a lesbian in that moment's irritation that anyone should "deny" that oral sex is sex, in rage about the preeminence assigned heterosexual genital intercourse. You can come into being as a woman—straight, gay—in that moment's worry about the centrality of a penis, the incapacity it attributes to two women, to woman, in the insult, the shame—at some horrible level, one buys into it. You can come into being as a man, or a woman, in the dozens, but probably not hundreds, of different ways a blow job can be wired into our sexual imaginary. Submission, control, the pleasures of sex which is not sex, service, the prolegomena, the aftermath, the substitute, the homoerotic which is not homosexual, and more. Maybe he just wanted her to be quiet. Maybe she just wanted to stop talking, wanted something to do while he chatted with the Senator. Maybe she was just bored. If we keep the blow job outside sex, do we protect it or demean it? Protect her or demean her? Protect him or demean him? Would it be better if we pushed it on to center stage?

It is interesting to ask what Monica thought, what Bill felt, what Hillary and Bill's deal had been as to the blow job, and so forth. But even if we could know, if they're sure, we can't be. To find the sex in the story, we need models and roles and types, just as we did to judge. Analogies—the model of males and females perhaps, the models of pornography, of the Bible, of *Esquire* or *Elle*. Perhaps all sex is fetish—or all fetish sex. Maybe sex-with-the-President is never sex, or all sex-with-men is with the President. For the Libertine, sex can be a transaction between individuals, who come to it with objectives, entitlements, dignities, and negotiate a practice. It can also be far

messier, embedded, interactive, among people who are already connected, whose egos float back and forth, who come into being as individuals, as groups, through, around, against their evolving sexual practice. That it is modeled, that one comes into sex by coming into role as sexual, for the Libertine says nothing about whether it is good or bad. In identifying, judging, having sex, there is an aporia, a delicious and delicate coming together of model and its dissolution. The intensity, the coming into being and the loss of being, the residue of shame, the recollection of pleasure, that we, I, you, did that, went there. That we knew ourselves, to ourselves and, if there were two, to one another, as that which is sex. And know our sex, come into ourselves as model.

Sex may not escape modeling, but for the Libertine, sex, model sex, sex-as-model, has specificity. Its own rules and roles, which can't simply be borrowed from the contract, the parliament. It is common just now to think that sex is no good unless it's one man-one vote. Reciprocal. Equal. Dignified. Rational. Chosen. Safe. If, for example, men and women are too unequal for these standards to be met, sex simply cannot be good, or perhaps cannot be sex. Or if some people do not, cannot, know their own hearts—subalterns, who can't speak, or women, for whom the power to choose lies too deeply beneath the coercions of the everyday to be trusted—then they should not, even cannot, have sex. Or better, women can have sex but no one can have it with them, or all the sex they can have is false sex, sex only for men. Or *all* that they have is indignity. To be sexual is to be raped, to experience only the surplus beyond pleasure which we call dignitary injury. Equal. Rights.

For the Libertine, sex on your knees, sex which is not reciprocated, sex by yourself, by yourself with another person, sex in a dog collar, sex when the parties are not equal in status and wealth and salary and job grade and beauty and age and height, can also be sex. Even sex that women want can be sex. For the Libertine, sex doesn't have to be equally chosen or equally desired by all the parties, may not even be chosen at all. You needn't require consent, needn't reimagine sexual partners as autonomous transactors to eliminate coercion. Compulsion, obsession, sex when you can't stop yourself. The Libertine leans toward it, wants to, defaults to its affirmation. Say yes to abjection. Shame. Vulnerability. Inequality. Danger. Lean toward the sadomasochist, the fetishist, the happy couple at home on a Sunday afternoon. Still, coming into knowing, into judgment—in short, coming—great as it can be, is also a loss. The Libertine knows, judges, even comes, against his Libertinism. Comes when he chokes his canary.



And all this develops over time, cycles back, the canary breathes again, and you choke it again, or someone else does that for you. You can bargain about it, and be quite confident, but once the river flows. . . . Sex leaves loose edges and frayed thoughts. They don't fit back into a neat story of right and wrong, of dominance and submission, of love or betrayal. And other people get involved, and things take new shapes. And the man you knew denies you.

Lots of sex-positive readers stayed with Monica and Bill until he denied her. "I never had sex with that woman"—what a schmuck. But had he denied her before? Habitually? "Always already?" Can you get involved with the President without yearning to be denied? Can a blow job ever be affirmed? Or can denial, like the blow job, be erotic? Does it matter what she wanted? Or what she thought? Were they vulnerable to one another? Was he? Was she? Having sex with the President? Having not-sex with the President. With the not-President. Or were they both alone there in the Oval Office. Onanistic, on the phone. Masturbation, anonymous sex, sex by yourself with someone else present. It happens, the Libertine defaults to affirm. But it can be a terrible mistake, you can be wrong, people can get hurt. Just like in the missionary position at home with your spouse.

And can we imagine that in sex we know all this? In the dissolution of self, the loss into and of the other, we know that we don't know? Perhaps. Perhaps sex is simply spectacular. The question is what posture to take toward this unknown, and toward the intense desire, the pressure, the will to know, to intuit, to interpret. *We want to know*. "Was it good for you?" Was it sex, for me, for anyone. Perhaps we should hold a conference, ask some academics, figure out what happened, who came, *what it all meant*. Here the Libertine gets off the bus. He knows the crash to come.

At the start of the Clinton era, Libertinism was on the rise. Bill and Al were on the postcard, flower children in power. Gay men with gay women. Too bad Tipper was so down on rock and roll, and Hillary did seem a bit earnest, but women today, women after Women's Studies, can be like that, and still the situation was basically good. We might contrast the early Bill-Al image with an image of George Bush and Dan Quayle which came out about the same time. George holds Dan by the hair across his knee and slaps his butt to the caption "Now—how do you spell Potato?" Somehow a different spectacle. We don't think they would appreciate the joke.

But as the presidency wore on, the feeling wore off. In the middle years we find a new set of images on the postcard stands. Bill and Al are now dressed in leather shorts and fetish gear, wearing collars labeled slave and

master. It's a complex image—and it's not clear they would appreciate the joke. Al seems happy enough in handcuffs, but Bill's hands are firmly at his side, his mouth set. He's tolerating it, but he's not enjoying it. And in the follow-up card he appears alone, his body in the sharp angles of a sax player on a long riff, and his hands are in the cuffs. Fighting back? Enjoying it? Is it sex? Maybe his hands really are tied, and it's all just a metaphor. About the vast-right-wing-conspiracy, or the constraints of governing, or the fate of Libertinism as the nineties fade back into the fifties.

The scandal breaks and Bill's not with Al any more, but alone with the Republicans and Hillary and the press. Al has disappeared and cute George denounces Bill, and everyone says they are just positively scandalized, and anguished and disappointed. He told us. And it wasn't true. He was Married, and he . . . Suddenly it's all prayer breakfasts and serious family time. He says he didn't do it and it wasn't sex and he's really sorry. For the Libertine this denial marked the beginning of the end, the end of sex and spectacle. Here the beginning of a Libertine morality?

Something about Bill's denial turned their sex into an anonymous encounter, and the Libertine at first leans to affirm—but this time it didn't seem fine. Not because of some general rule against anonymity and denial or a requirement of mutuality. And not because it's the men who deny and the women who need affirmation—there is something anonymous in sex with The President, and women might well hide their pleasure under a denial. No, simply because it apparently went wrong, for her, for him, although that is also just my interpretation. And here is the point—it pushed me over into interpretation. Of course, for all I know they were getting off on the intrigue, the intensity of being denied, reinterpreted, exposed. But I no longer thought so—the ambivalence, the intense uncanny feeling, it had moved on for me, and we were now deep in aftermath. Something touched me deep inside. I even thought about his widowed bride, and that day, I'm afraid my own canary died.

Oddly, for some time Starr keeps the Libertine facts before us. And by the end of the scandal, in some way Monica is all that is left standing. The postcard stands depict Hillary with a whip and a sadistic laugh, and you don't think she appreciates the joke any more than George and Dan. In fact now she's in the same scene with Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush. The card is entitled "First Ladies Club." Hillary and Nancy sport leather—Nancy more playboy bunny, Hillary more nineties dominatrix, Barbara in jogging shorts, brassiere, and sensible pearls. The objects, not the subjects, of Libertinism.

Monica Lewinsky. Libertine Hero. There's Barbara Walters asking her in all earnestness if she didn't agree, looking back, that it had all been pretty degrading. Unreciprocated, on her knees, with the President. Well, actually, she said, no. It wasn't degrading. It was a mistake, but you just had to be there. It was human and touching, and we really had something nice. She describes Bill sucking in his stomach when he opens his trousers as a cute moment of mutual vulnerability, and remembers talking with him about her life and his.

Through all that she was put, somehow she never lost that fresh dignity; she managed to embrace abjection and shame and humiliation without conceding that all that had happened was anything other than human. Maybe I see the world through rose-colored glasses, but somehow our cities seem full of young Monicas. The students and waitresses and sales personnel, there's her haircut, her lipstick, and above all, her firm sexual confidence.

I hope they also share mantras with Monica. It doesn't have to be private or pretty, can be laced with power and pain, but that doesn't mean it's not fun, not human, not really me, and not really him or not really her. And anyway, not "really"? What's that? Last year Monica and Bill and all of us together made a spectacle of our nation. It was great. Let's not screw it up by trying to turn it into legislation, popular or otherwise.

#### NOTES

1. David Kennedy is Henry Shattuck Professor of Law, Harvard University. This talk was delivered at an interdisciplinary conference at the University of Wisconsin Law School on February 5, 2000 entitled "Aftermath: Conversations on the Clinton Scandal, the Future of the Presidency and the Liberal State." My thanks to Len Kaplan and Beverly Moran for the invitation to participate in the conference, and to Yishai Blanc, Brenda Cossman, Dan Danielsen, Karen Engle, Janet Halley, and Duncan Kennedy for conversations about Monica and related matters.