CHAPTER III

EROS AND THE DEATH OF GOD

I

In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm draws an interesting correlation between the death of God and the disintegration of love in Western civilization. On the surface the thesis is not one for which we can find an abundance of confirmatory evidence, and yet a deeper study of its implications reveals that the debasement of love, its systematic and widespread devaluation, is indeed closely interrelated with the loss of religious faith. Fromm examines the interrelation from one point of view: the loss of the spontaneous self and the consequent decline of spontaneity in love. In religion, too, the concept of God that man professes to worship is mechanical and idolatrous. No longer sustained, as of old, by the traditional theistic faith, the character of man is badly split. If he turns to God it is not with instinctive faith but with a frightened, compulsive longing for security. Thus he leads a double, alienated life. God is present principally as a means to implement his drive toward greater economic advancement.

Fromm does not touch upon the psychological consequences of the loss of faith in God. The progressive disappearance or diminution of faith in God is accompanied by a loss of faith in the possibility of achieving a genuine love experience. Love, like God, is a sham, a myth. Love is sex, nothing more, a physiological function. The rest is an elaborate species of idealization, fed on the ennobling rhetoric of romance and conventional make-believe. The passion of the body is palpably real; the passion of the soul is, at best, only a daring metaphor.

The whole issue of the “free” treatment of sexuality in literature is based on the conviction that man is an animal, and this, in turn, relates to the writer’s conception of the nature of man. If man is no more than a creature responding to the pressure of instinct, then he is not made in the image of God. If sexuality is an expression of life at its most intense, then it is sex that defines the self. Robert Elliot Fitch, in *The

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Decline and Fall of Sex, presents this thesis and then develops it to its logical limit. If the self is identified with sex, then the denial of sexual consummation is the height of tragedy. Here emerges the redemptive doctrine of the lost generation during the twenties, the “religion” divinely revealed by the numinous Priapus: “Sex is Life. Sex is the Self. Sex is the Resurrection and the Life.”

Yet man can abandon his faith neither in God nor in love without feeling the loss as a profoundly traumatic experience. He yearns for God even as he denies the possibility of God’s existence and, like Norman Mailer, experiments with fiction that will celebrate the apocalyptic orgasm. He craves the transfiguring assurance of love even as he pours contempt upon such sentimental twaddle. The struggle persists: the dialectics of the search for a love that transcends bodily union and the tyranny of sexual hunger.

But once God dies, the other gods also vanish from the pantheon, and the God of Love, too, becomes a casualty. It then becomes a mark of iconoclastic courage to announce the primacy of the physical, to dethrone deity and set up biology as lord and ruler of life. The victory is never, alas, a completely satisfying one. Not that modern man can revert to the Christian sex ethos, which disprizes the flesh and denounces woman as the incarnation of sensuality and sin. As far as literature goes, the Pauline dispensation is not one that would appeal to the major writers of our age. On the other hand, they are manifestly reluctant to accept Kinsey’s statistical revelations on the copulatory frequency of the male or female human animal. The zoological emphasis is as distressing – and obviously as false – as the ascetic one.

The death of God was bound to have fateful consequences for the future of morality in the culture of the West. For if no supernatural power controlled the operations of the universe, if evil was not punished and good rewarded in the afterlife by some system of divine calculus, then thinking men, as Dostoevski passionately pointed out, would realize that everything was permitted, though actually this was far from the truth. Recognizing their aloneness in the cosmos, they would be compelled to take upon themselves full responsibility for shaping their own destiny on earth. Nietzsche, in Joyful Wisdom, had sounded the glad tidings of deliverance from ascetic ideals, the triumph over the Christian God. No longer would man look upon Nature as exhibiting proof of the goodness of God or upon history as exemplifying a moral