

THE EROTIC AND THE SACRED

by Michael Ventura

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Lubbock, Texas is no place to hide. The thunderstorms are violent, the fundamentalists are virulent, dust blows in spring, there are ice storms in winter, and the summers scorch. The city also boasts one of the most spectacular and well-documented UFO sightings on record. It's too small for a "scene" and too big for peace and quiet. But somehow it's produced more fine musicians and artists per capita than any city I've ever heard of. The musicians tend to roam and stay gone; the visual artists seem to roam and return. They make their stand far from the galleries and art journals of New York and Los Angeles, but their work speaks for itself, on its own terms, and finds its own way to those whom it feeds.

One of those artists is a woman named Future Akins. She was named after a Lubbock-born aunt named Wanda May, who left town at 18 and changed her name to "Future." It's said that Aunt Future--"the aunt that everyone needs," as her namesake describes her--went to New York and studied acting with Lee Strasberg. She was a wild, 6-foot redhead who, before her death in 1972, "danced on rooftops" and would send her niece "books of poetry and candles that floated." Her niece has since danced on some rooftops herself, and her art has the quality of flames on the water.

The last time I passed through Lubbock, Future wanted to interview me about the erotic and the sacred. She explained that she'd been taking a workshop in which "everybody kept talking about the sexual, or gender, or pornography, but nobody wanted to touch the erotic. And no one wanted to talk about the sacred. I assure you, nobody even thought that creativity had to do with the erotic and sacred. I started researching the connection between the two, but all I found were books on how to do sex and books on how to be creative, and both were limited--and limiting. But I thought, I have friends who are experts on the erotic and the sacred. So I decided to just interview my friends."

Future: Define "erotic."

Michael: We're designed to be erotic. The elements we're made of, and our great irrational drives as individuals and as a culture, all go back to being erotic. The erotic is the creative, in the most fundamental sense, because human beings were given the erotic in order to reproduce in a violent and unpredictable environment. The erotic governs. The erotic is the organizing principle. That's what this society really doesn't want to admit. Most of our customs, institutions, and taboos, at their core are concerned with the erotic--are constellated around its demands and our anxieties about its power.

Future: Are you equating the erotic strictly with sex?

Michael: Not exactly. With other species, sex is an irresistible drive but the actual act is usually very quick and often violent. With human beings, sex is designed to be pleasurable. And pleasure always involves aesthetics. Different shapes, sizes, textures, colors, give different people different pleasures. If human sex were merely reproductive, anybody could be satisfied sleeping with anybody as long as they reproduced. But there are people you'd never sleep with no matter how horny you are, and people you can't help but sleep with no matter how irrational the situation. And if you're gay, you're not using

sex to reproduce at all. We can speak about that in psychological, social, or genetic terms, but aren't the differences in who people sleep with essentially aesthetic? People with a wide spectrum of the erotic are people with a wide spectrum of aesthetics.

If I were to boil all that down to a definition of the erotic... I'd need a cigarette. (After lighting up.) The erotic is where our sense of beauty and our sexual drive weave in with our fears, our hopes, and our sense of survival, to become an outlook, a vision, that is often unconscious--a vision with which we meet the world.

Future: Now define "sacred."

Michael: Human beings are possessed by the sacred, but the sacred is not human. The way I would explain that is... every human culture has found a word for something that we call in English a "soul." And almost every culture envisions the soul as something that existed before we were born and will go on after we die. That says: The soul isn't human--for humans are born and die. It also implies that, since the soul is not human, it doesn't have human values. When your soul is really hungry for something or someone, it doesn't care what it puts you through, it doesn't care about values like happiness and comfort. Which says to me that the soul is here for its own reasons, its own journey.

It's as though the soul needs to occupy a human being for its education--in order to get things that can only be gotten through us. But at the same time it seems to need to go beyond us, for the soul demands extremes of human experience. I don't just mean esoteric or romantic extremes. It may demand extremes of security, in some instances, or extremes of money--even extremes of violence. So: What is the sacred? The sacred is that which demands more of human life than is rationally necessary.

What is rationally necessary for human life is actually pretty simple and basic. But we find ourselves again and again going over the line of what is rationally necessary in our lives for something more--more than is needed for survival. So the sacred, as it manifests in human beings, goes beyond survival and often even threatens survival.

A human being is constantly in the dilemma of having at one and the same time to satisfy basic human needs and the soul's hunger for the sacred, which is always a hunger for extremes. This pulls us in at least two directions at once. The conflict tears many to pieces. So my definition would be: The sacred is that which drives human beings beyond themselves.

Future: How do you express the erotic within your work?

Michael: The erotic is in every line of my work. The sound and texture of words, the rhythm of words, the sensuality with which a word meets a thought, with which the expression meets what's trying to be expressed. Writing is a pleasure of the flesh. The way words meet in a sentence and a paragraph--that's sensual, much like the balance and discord of notes in music or colors in a painting. So even though I rarely express the erotic directly, I feel that everything I write has an erotic quality because of the sensual pleasure of language.

Future: How about the sacred in your work?

Michael: There's a belief in Judaism--and you find it also in tribal religions--that everything in existence has a spark of divinity. Chairs, clothing, rocks, everything. And that the human task is to awaken that spark of divinity in everything in existence. So in that sense to express anything, whether you're writing politically or metaphysically or telling a story or even critiquing something, is to attempt to awaken the sacred in what you're writing about.

In addition, the act of doing the art, doing the writing, comes from the impulse to go beyond human boundaries into territories that are both human and something else, and I would call that "something else" the sacred. So I'm writing about revolution, or about having a heart attack, or whatever, and I always feel, for me, that it's an encounter with the sacred--or why bother?

Sometimes I directly address the issue of the sacred. In our society, that's very difficult. Nobody speaking English ever invented a great religion. People speaking Aramaic (the language of Jesus), Sanskrit, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, and tribal languages, to name a few--they've all invented great religions. The same with philosophy. The greatest philosophers spoke Greek, German, Chinese, French, Danish, and no philosopher speaking English can compare with them. But people speaking English invented industrialism. People speaking English invented technology.

I don't think this is accidental. I think it's because English is a very, very concrete language. It has a marvelous vocabulary for describing things and surfaces; but it's very awkward, its vocabulary is very poor, when it comes to describing complex inner states. We have a fine language for speaking about the definite, but our language wasn't made to speak about the indefinite. An English-language writer, when trying to speak about the sacred and/or the indefinite, is up against a prejudice built into the language. It makes for a lot of rotten writing--either multi-syllabic words that are dull and confusing to read, or New Age goo-goo that's so generalized it can't mean anything. So when I write directly about the sacred I try to keep the language as simple as possible and let the sacred take over by having it in the context instead of the vocabulary.

So I'd say that I deal with expressing the sacred both carefully and recklessly. Carefully in that I keep the language spare. Recklessly in that I try to make the language leap over its own internal boundaries. Isn't that the way life should be lived? Why should writing be any different?

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