

Chapter 18 of “Consciousness Regained”, by Nicholas Humphrey, Oxford University Press, 1983 (first published in *Sanity*, June 1982)

AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

At the University of Bologna in the thirteenth century there was a professor, Novella d'Andrea, who, it's said, was so distractingly beautiful that she had to deliver her lectures from behind a curtain. I have been thinking about Novella d'Andrea . . . thinking that what is sauce for Bologna is sauce for Cambridge. If Professor d'Andrea could do it, why not I?

Admittedly my reputation as a beauty is - or has been until now — rather less than Novella d'Andrea's. When in the past I have brazenly given my own lectures in open view of the students, full-frontal as it were, no one has swooned, stabbed themselves through the heart with their biros or wept passionate tears into their lecture notes. But I now realise where I have gone wrong: these past performances must have left far too little to the imagination.

Next term I too shall give my lectures from behind a curtain. And by way of explanation I shall put it abroad that Dr Humphrey is so handsome that, regretfully, he has felt obliged to hide himself from public view. I shall add for good measure that Dr Humphrey's voice is so seductive and the content of his lectures so disturbingly profound that he has thought it best that he should not actually speak out loud. And then, silent and invisible before the massed ranks of students, I shall wait for the myth-makers to do their work. By the end of the year I fully expect to be the most celebrated lecturer in Cambridge.

The principle is not a new one. Indeed, I imagine it has been exploited by enterprising image-salesmen since time began. Film stars, diplomats, poker players, politicians, all know — if they know anything — that if you want people to believe that you are what you are not, then you must not show them what you are. If Ronald Reagan is to be thought statesmanlike, he must not allow himself to speak without a script. If Brigitte Bardot is to be thought young, she must not allow herself to appear without her make-up on. Or — and here is a trick which even Mr Reagan's PR men have hesitated to employ — if an ape is to be thought to be a Don Juan of the forest, it must not be seen to have a penis merely the size of a man's thumb. The carcass of the first gorilla brought to England a hundred years ago had its genital organs deliberately cut off so that the inflated expectations of the public should not be disappointed by the truth. Out of sight, but — we must assume — not wholly out of mind.

But do not get me wrong. I am not suggesting that this kind of humbug is necessarily objectionable. It may do us good to imagine our heroes and heroines to be bigger, more glorious, less human than they really are. And we undermine these illusions at our peril. Jonathan Swift in his poem *Cassinus and Peter* tells the cautionary tale of a young man who, believing his mistress to be free of ordinary mortal cares, followed her into the privy to check that she was not, in fact, as human as the rest of us — and caused himself nothing but distress.

No wonder that I lose my wits:
Oh! Caelia, Caelia, Caelia shits.

A lamentable verse, to mark a lamentable discovery.

No, it is not always wrong to live with a false picture of others. But what *is* always wrong is to live with a false picture of oneself. The real danger is that Novella d'Andrea behind her curtain, Brigitte Bardot behind her make-up, or Reagan behind his publicity machine will themselves come to think that the fictions which they put about are true.

And that brings me to my point: a serious message for Mrs Thatcher, Chairman Andropov — and such others as succeed them. It's this. Whatever the public image you present, it is time you remembered privately that you are in fact no more worthy, no less human than the rest of us. Despite your offices, despite your clothes and titles, it is time you remembered that you too have to shit. And while you're there, remember St Augustine's observation, as true of you as it is of any other: *Inter urinas et faeces nascimur*. We are all born between urine and faeces. Lecture us from behind a curtain if you will, but do not put a curtain in front of your own mirror: because if you do, you may forget that you are human.

In 1957 at the Labour Party's debate on disarmament, Aneurin Bevan declared that he was not prepared to 'go naked into the conference chamber'. It is a phrase which has been echoed by Tory and Labour defence spokesmen alike; something similar was said at the Liberal Party conference in September 1981. But what was it that Bevan had to hide? Bevan came into the world naked, and naked he left it. Why should he have been afraid to go naked into the conference chamber to discuss matters of global life and death? What he had to hide, as much from himself as from his adversaries, was nothing less than his humanity.

Of course, by the rules of the game he had to hide it. For no naked human being, conscious of his own essential ordinariness, the chairseat pressing against his buttocks, his toes wriggling beneath the conference table, his penis hanging limply a few feet from Mr Andropov's, could possibly play the game of international politics and barter like a god with the lives of millions of his fellow men. No naked human being could threaten to press the nuclear button.

So I come to my proposal. Our leaders must be given no choice but to go naked into the conference chamber. At the United Nations General Assembly, at the Geneva disarmament negotiations, at the next summit in Moscow or in Washington, there shall be a notice pinned to the door: 'Reality gate. Human beings only beyond this point. NO Clothes.' And then, as the erstwhile iron maiden takes her place beside the erstwhile bionic commissar, it may dawn on them that neither she nor he is made of iron or steel, but rather of a warmer, softer and much more magical material, flesh and blood. Perhaps as Mr Andropov looks at his navel and realises that he, like the rest of us, was once joined from there to a proud and aching mother, as Mrs Thatcher feels the table-cloth tickling her belly, they will start to laugh at their pretensions to be superhuman rulers of the lives of others. If they do not actually make love they will, at least, barely be capable of making war.