

DAVID B. MORRIS

### *Eros Modigliani*

*“Life is a gift, from those who have it and know it to those who don’t have it and don’t know it.” —Amedeo Modigliani*

Only one man in Paris knew how to dress, said Picasso, and that was Modigliani. Picasso, who dressed up like a college professor, perhaps meant to diminish his rival with a backhanded compliment, but coverings and uncoverings in the era of modern art carry extended significance. The single crime with which Picasso reproached himself—in a life remarkable for acts worthy of self-reproach—was once during his early years of poverty in Paris to paint over a Modigliani canvas. Art historians have repeated this effacement, methodically neglecting the work of Modigliani. Change is under way, as suggested by several blockbuster Modigliani exhibitions at the start of the twenty-first century. Auction prices for paintings un-saleable before his death are sky-high. Yet, the effacement continues in backhanded reviews implying that the crowds lined up outside the Jewish Museum for the 2004 Modigliani show in New York still manage to get it all wrong. Popular art critic John Hughes reviewing the Jewish Museum show seems almost in crisis at the idea of a truly popular modernist. Modigliani’s work, he writes with rapier disdain, is “modern art for people who don’t much like modernism.”

Modernism in art was invented in pre-World War Paris, and Paris then (according to Gertrude Stein) “was where the twentieth century was.” It was also where Modigliani painted his distinctive swan-necked portraits that resist the Cubist assault on representation. As the Montparnasse evenings passed deeper into alcohol and drugs, a moment arrived when the impoverished young Italian painter—with the bearing of an aristocrat or prince, as many said—began to remove his clothes. Maybe it was at Maria Vassilieff’s, where the Russian painter (who had studied with Matisse) converted her second-floor studio into a canteen, offering painters a cheap refuge and giving tourists a venue for sampling Parisian bohemia. Modigliani would stand upright and began by unwrapping the long red scarf coiled around his waist in the style of French workers. His trousers

slipped down to his ankles as he pulled up his shirt, displaying a slim white torso. An eyewitness heard him saying: "Aren't I handsome? Don't I look like a god?"

Then came verses recited from Dante, the poet-hero of his beloved Italy. Or passages from *Les chants de Maldoror*, the overheated prose hallucination by an obscure late-nineteenth century French poet who published under the name Lautréamont and vanished without a trace, casting a spell on Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and (later) the Surrealists. A cynic-outlaw at war with bourgeois decorum, Maldoror spoke for the torment that friends such as sculptor Jacob Epstein observed in Modigliani. "A dark fire," Epstein wrote, "lit up his whole being." When fueled by alcohol, the fire often turned self-destructive and violent. His brooding temper and scornful laugh, cut short by bursts of tubercular coughing, made him an erratic companion. He also pointedly avoided the usual café talk, preferring to discuss literature and philosophy. While he was a certified public nuisance, many women found him irresistible, and he returned their passion. Significantly, none of his nudes—which number over three dozen paintings—is male.

Everyone who knew him well called him Modi, indistinguishable in spoken French from *maudit*, signature of the cursed and doomed dark-romantic artist in the line of Baudelaire and Nerval, although *I Modi* ("The Ways" or, in English tradition, "The Postures") is also the short title of notorious erotic sonnets and engravings, recovered (after their burst of fame in the Italian Renaissance) in the early twentieth century. Modi's Parisian intimates such as the mystic poet-painter Max Jacob preferred the nickname that his family used, Dédo. All knew when Modi's striptease would begin, late at night, at an almost measurable stage of hashish intoxication. Friends would sometimes seize him and tie up the red scarf. His excess, brooding, or just plain drunkenness, contained an element of performance. It was Picasso who asked why when Modi was drunk he always just happened to be drunk in front of the artist-haunt, tourist-stop cafés La Rotonde and Le Dôme. Like inebriation performed by an artist who is in fact inebriated, the calculated uncovering of the body—whether through artful striptease or painterly nudes—served for Modi as a ritual that gestured toward something primal, Dionysian, and utterly beyond calculation.

Several years before his death at thirty-six in January 1920, when Modi was visibly or invisibly dying of alcohol, hard living, poverty,

and TB, his friend and art dealer Theodor Zborowski installed him in a studio and commissioned nudes that (according to Jean Cocteau) he painted “ceaselessly.” The nude, as an exercise in Western painting, is as academic as the still life, but these ceaselessly painted nudes are no academic exercises or potboilers. They uncover the female body, true, but what do they reveal? Why, beyond a basic male pleasure in women’s bodies, am I so drawn to them? Renowned artists whose work Modi knew well—Botticelli, Titian, Ingres, Degas—have painted masterly nudes that interest me far less, so artful female nakedness can’t explain my response. I click past internet come-ons that strike me as tawdry, depraved, or exploitative. What gives these Modi apricot-toned nudes their mysterious power?

This question occupies me stretched on the cement floor of the Guggenheim Museum warehouse—a treasure fortress concealed as a nondescript brick building—where the curator has given me an hour alone with a Modigliani nude. In the echoing industrial space, no museum etiquette required, I lie on my side beneath a sunny window, inches away from the creamy and surprisingly rough painted textures of a woman with eyes closed, wearing a necklace that only emphasizes her serene and utter nakedness.

Sir Kenneth Clark, focusing on the male nude, introduced a bogus but influential distinction between nudity (formal/static) and



*Amedeo Modigliani. Nude (Nu), 1917. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Gift, Solomon R. Guggenheim, 1941.*

nakedness (erotic/kinetic), which Modi's painting blows away. The necklace sends an erotic signal. Who gave it to her? If she owns it, for whom does she wear it? Or, is this modest strand of jewels—which highlights the uncovering that it interrupts—sheer self-expression: an innocence of auto-eroticism? Modi's painting, like the necklace, predicts an admiring gaze, likely a male gaze (given the tradition of the nude and the gendered art market). But male only? Closed eyes are a recurrent feature in Modi's nudes, the sign of an interior state, either sleep or dream, to which buyers and interpreters alike are shut out. First-generation feminist critics would emphasize the old phallogocentric narrative of dominance and submission, in which the clothed male artist exploits the unclothed female model and codes the spectator's gaze as masculine. Recent feminist art historians find this explanatory narrative reductive. Modi's nude, as I gaze, is more than just another lesson in the historical asymmetries of power that transform biological women or models into the passive tropes and metaphors of oppressive male desire: earth mother, virgin, whore, showgirl, sex goddess. My response seems irreducible to a male need for dominating or objectifying women, which I really try to avoid. It raises the question, however, of what brings me back to these mysterious Modi end-of-life nudes.

#### I. ENSEMBLE AND EROS: THE NUDES AS A SERIES

Modi's nudes assume added significance when we recognize them as belonging to a series. Modigliani *thinks* in series. The series is his basic unit of composition, homogeneous and ongoing. Portraits, for example, not only dominate his work—unique among modern painters—but also (as their well-known similarities attest) constitute a series. The series is to Modigliani what the period or style is to Picasso. When asked what school or style his paintings belonged to, Modigliani replied that they were “Modiglianis.” As serial compositions, Modi's portraits—no matter whom they portray—all bear family resemblance as Modiglianis, and their underlying similarities reveal (from upper-crust Right-bank intellectual Jean Cocteau to unidentified lower-class workers) a certain underlying coherence. Even the notorious swanlike necks put numerous unrelated contemporary historical persons under the aegis of a non-genetic family resemblance.

As I gaze at the necklaced Guggenheim nude, then, I am also seeing it within an absent or silent ensemble. The ensemble, as with his early series of hieratic limestone heads, alters my sense of the single work. The Salon d'Automne exhibition of 1912, for example, displayed multiple Modigliani limestone heads in a semicircle. The catalogue describes them as *Têtes: ensemble decoratif*. Together they lose their resemblance to other single or individualized art works and appear instead more like archaic gods from an unknown religion, as one critic called them. Jacques Lipchitz encountered some of the individual heads in the courtyard of Modi's studio. "He explained to me," Lipchitz reports, "that he had conceived them as an ensemble."

The ensemble nature of Modigliani's nudes has gotten lost in questions concerning the ideological impact or meaning of specific paintings. Is a woman undressed for a photographer or painter converted from an active, free subject into a passive, subjugated object? Recent post-colonial theorists have added the idea of a "colonized" female body represented by men and thus unable to speak its own truth. Small wonder that women artists today resist, disfigure, or reject painterly traditions of the female nude. In Modi's day, ideological condemnations of the female nude issued not from feminists or from anti-imperial thinkers but from male painters, especially from his artist/countrymen in Paris, the Italian Futurists. Modigliani pointedly declined to sign their manifesto, published in April 1910, which linked nudes with the painterly traditions that they hated, even as they loved the new age of machines. "We fight against the nude in painting," the manifesto proclaimed, "as nauseous and as tedious as adultery in literature." It demanded for ten years a "total suppression" of nudes in painting. Modi's series, painted well within the ten-year Futurist moratorium on nudes, represented a resistance to ideology: a sustained defiance of mechanism and domination.

As an ensemble, Modigliani's nudes resist any program to limit the uncontainable play of eros. Erotic pleasure, as Modi knew firsthand, includes multiple gazes. Alice Prin, the runaway baker's apprentice and post-1920 superstar model known as Kiki, described her own view of Modigliani: "All he did was growl; he used to make me shiver from head to foot. But wasn't he gorgeous!" French writer-critic Francis Carco owned several Modigliani nudes and was no less erotic in his response. "I had these nudes in my home

like a love," he wrote, "they were women I loved . . ." Carco's passion, however constrained by his gender and historical moment, oddly approximates the response of my reasonably straight wife, who finds Modi's nudes seductive and sees in them a post-coital glow. Such responses across time and gender raise another question relevant to Modi's series of nudes. Who has the right to legislate the limits of pleasure? How can we understand—not legislate out of bounds or dismiss as bad faith—a woman's pleasure or a man's pleasure (straight, gay, or rainbow queer) in gazing at Modigliani's series of sensuous female bodies? Such questions led me inescapably to the boundary-crossing power of eros.

Eros, the archaic divinity and ruling spirit behind Plato's *Symposium*, is antithetical to hierarchies. Sappho's repeated epithet "bittersweet" suggests its power to blur boundaries, as does her other epithet "limb-loosener," in which self-control is lost. Connoisseur of eros Anne Carson lists the metaphors that classical poets commonly apply to erotic experience: melting, piercing, crushing, bridling, roasting, stinging, biting, grating, cropping, poisoning, singeing, and grinding to a powder. "Eros," she writes, "is expropriation. He robs the body of limbs, substance, integrity and leaves the lover, essentially, less." Through desire, eros also triangulates the lover and beloved in a three-figured geometry where the third figure is obstacle, loss, or lack. Painting, spectator, desire: Modigliani's nudes make contact with the limb-loosening and category-rending power of eros. Desire circulates through the paintings in ways that neither artwork nor critic can contain, like the erotic impulses circulating through Montparnasse, where Kiki famously not only wore no panties but also turned public cartwheels in order to distress exactly the same bourgeois culture that strives to keep eros in line and under wraps. No panties, she said, also gave her the same freedom as male drinkers to piss outdoors. Like festive comedies, eros embraces freedoms and pleasures that subvert the hierarchies opposed to its uncontainable and thus threatening dynamic.

Erotic crosscurrents flowed so freely through Modernist Paris as to constitute a fluid basis of twentieth-century art. When asked to explain the difference between sexuality and art, Picasso replied that they are the same. His suite of prints known as "Raphael and La Fornarina" (1968)—based on the theme of Raphael's passion for his model and lover—depicts in explicit detail a legendary paradigm of

artist/model sexual play. (Picasso often includes the Pope as voyeur watching open-mouthed as Raphael, here doubtless a Picasso avatar, simultaneously paints and fornicates.) The transgressive crosscurrents of eros take a less sexually-explicit redirection in Modi's nudes, which allude to works in the tradition of high art, such as Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* and Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Venus as goddess of love hovers somewhere in the background of most Modi nudes, lending a mythic force to his representations of contemporary women. Their flesh-and-blood radiance is the antithesis of marble classicized chill, even as their repose (often via sleep or dream) appears temporary, a transient posture rather than a frozen pose. The nude in this complex moment of suspended radiance corresponds with Modigliani's claim that the artist somehow bestows life as a "gift." Life, in this way of thinking, signifies its presence not through a pulse but through heightened awareness. Awareness represents an intensified state of being. In bestowing this awareness, however, the artist bestows a mixed gift. Modi was well known for saying that he wanted a life brief but intense. Intensity is achieved, we might say, through a bargain with death. The classical geometry of eros, according to Anne Carson, views desire as inseparable from lack: we desire only what we do not possess. The desire basic to eros thus opens up within the gift of life an inescapable fatal flaw, since intensified awareness cannot exclude an awareness of death, and the intensity may in fact be predicated on a silently self-destructive pact.

## II. RETHINKING EROS

French theorists Georges Bataille and Jean Baudrillard offer cross-generational twin peaks in a rethinking of eros. Librarian and ground-breaking amateur sociologist turned theorist of the unthinkable, Bataille based his lifework on a distinction between sexuality and eroticism. Sexuality is a natural drive. Every animal with a backbone needs sex to reproduce. Humans, by contrast, are the only animals to create an erotic life. Erotic life for Bataille is too often betrayed into a tamed and utilitarian reproductive sexuality. Unbetrayed, eros puts humans in contact with a wildness, turmoil, and violence inseparable from orgasm and death. He describes eroticism as "assenting to life up to the point of death." Death for Bataille is thus the outer limit where eros stages the assent to life: a gratuitous expenditure of sexual energies beyond any rational

calculus of production or gain. A generation later, postmodern sociologist Baudrillard links his critique of capitalist production with an unexpected critique of so-called contemporary sexual liberation. Baudrillard resists what he sees as the tyranny of the newly liberated orgasm in its rush toward climax, whereby sex is reduced to yet another utilitarian technology. Seduction is his term for the return of eros—eros reintroduced as a feminine principle that subverts various masculine utilitarian principles and strategies of control. Within economies of desire hijacked to serve utilitarian, pragmatic, (re)productive ends, seduction inserts a traumatic opposition. Francis Carco reports that the concierge who cleaned his room in the Quai aux Fleurs “almost fell dead” when she discovered a Modi nude on his wall. The Paris police proved equally hostile. The Modi nudes that Berthe Weill in 1917 hung in the window of her gallery for his only one-man show drew such crowds that the police commissioner across the street sent an officer to demand she remove them. She crossed the street to ask why. “These nudes,” he sputtered, “they have h-h-hair!” Weill closed the show.

The pubic hair on Modi’s nudes is an explicit, forbidden, sign of eros, and eros (as the commissioner recognized) threatens civil as well as individual order. “The whole business of eroticism,” writes Bataille, “is to destroy the self-contained character of the participants as they are in their normal lives.” Its business also includes destroying or deeply disrupting normal life. As Bataille adds: “Stripping naked is the decisive action.”

Bataille’s key insight is that nakedness—under the sign of eros—represents less a condition than an action (or the result of an action). Action is what matters. Modi’s nudes reflect an agency all the more subversive for the woman’s frequent repose or stillness. They challenge the self-contained character of ordinary life. They uncover what beyond the body has been covered up. In this sense, Modi’s nudes belong less to painterly traditions of ideal form than to the un-ideal, disruptive encounter with eros. His full-breasted warm-blooded images occupy an eroticized space that lies somewhere in between artist’s model and fantasy woman. The erotic, it is crucial to emphasize, does not dissolve into undecidable disputes about definition or questions about subjective taste. Like pain or the perception of beauty, the erotic is always inherently a subjective state, but it is not merely or solely subjective. The erotic is con-



nected to biological drives and coded in historical semantics, which are both inherently trans-subjective. It is also regularly anchored in cultural narratives. One especially important action performed by Modigliani's series of nudes is its subversive removal of a narrative frame. Spectators must experience female nakedness set free from the confining and explanatory resources of story.

Modi's nudes, just as they resist the posture of timeless classical bodies, refuse to cover their nakedness with implicit narratives of shame, degradation, or self-display. The absence of narrative is as impudent as the presence of pubic hair. The detachment from story is mirrored in placelessness. Backgrounds dissolve into swatches of rich color and garments grow indistinct, as if to defeat narrative. Nakedness cannot be explained by narratizing the women as prostitutes or oriental slaves, as in Manet's much-storied *Olympia* or the brazen *Grande Odalisque* of Ingres. Prostitutes in a hotel where Modi stayed, knowing he was too poor to afford models, sometimes (according to Carco) voluntarily posed for him after their customers left, but his paintings never transform models into whores, unlike Picasso's *Damoiselles d'Avignon*, which practices the shocking distortions of cubist style upon women whose profession in some sense explains their status as objects. Eros in Modigliani is never for sale but resists the commercialized narrative that Modi's cash-strapped friend Apollinaire explored in the pornographic tale *Les onze milles vierges*. (Picasso declared it "a masterpiece.")

Narrative tradition also associates nakedness with sin and shame, starting at the Garden of Eden, where unshamed nakedness is compatible only with a pre-lapsarian state of theological innocence. Modigliani in Catholic France sometimes defiantly asserted his Jewishness at moments of open anti-semitism—"I am Modigliani, Jew"—and his nudes stand defiantly outside bourgeois norms of Christian decency, just as they remain unnarratized as either innocent or guilty. They are rather deliberately storyless. This storylessness is often regarded as a fault. "Modigliani nudes were to raw sexuality what Rousseau's palm-court jungles were to nature: red in tooth and claw," art critic Hughes writes in derision. "They look charmingly artificial." Modi admired Henri Rousseau's artificial wildernesses, which also defeat narrative explanation, and he declined contemporary *recits* of sexual rawness. Eros, however, is not identical with sexuality, raw or cooked. Stripping nakedness of its traditional

narrative cover, Modigliani invites spectators to confront the subtle but insistent, separable relationship between eros and death.

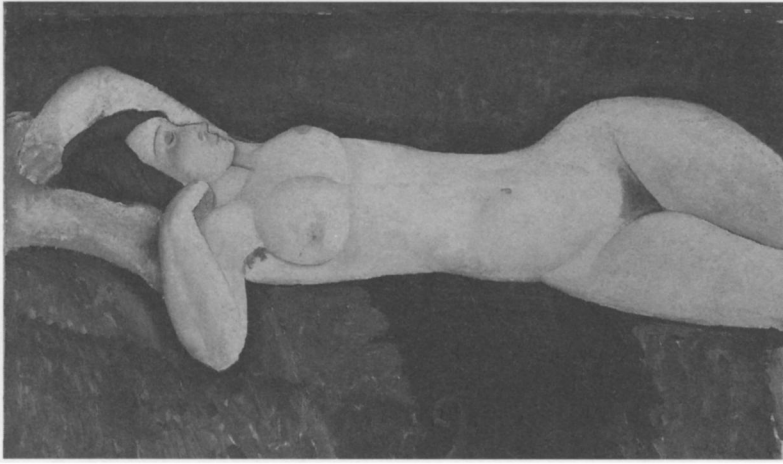
Death, women, and eros are constant companions in Modi's life and art. His adoring mother nursed him back to health from near death as a child, feeding too his love of art. He knew his tubercular lungs would kill him, regularly spitting blood as he painted the nudes, cigarettes and rum close by his palette. He was drawn to self-destructive acts, like the two hours shortly before his death he spent exposed in a cold January drizzle. A late photo shows the clean-shaven artist now a bearded, hollow-eyed figure out of Dostoevsky's underground. Death in his art is not a faint abstraction or an emblematic skull. Rather, eros and death are intertwined in the nudes like strands of DNA, invoked through their interrelations. Two days after he died, Jeanne Hébuterne, his wife in all but legal form, leapt to her death from a window in her parents' home, killing also their unborn child. Raw sexuality is simply one more facile myth in the post-Sadean construction of desire. Eros in Modigliani's nudes is set free from narrative, liberated from all narratized beginnings, endings, and mythic structures, but it is not set free from death.

### III. EROS AND DEATH

Modern narratives of sexual liberation stand behind Philip Roth's novel *The Dying Animal* (2001), which unfolds the continuing erotic education of middle-aged Jewish professor David Kepesh. Born too soon for the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Kepesh makes up for lost time by seducing a willing ex-student, Consuela. They begin an intense exploration of erotic experience, until Consuela initiates a breakup. Six years after the breakup, she sends him a postcard reproducing an image from the Museum of Modern Art: Modigliani's *Reclining Nude*.

Does Consuela, Kepesh wonders, intend the image as an invitation to resume their erotic play? His question is momentarily side-tracked by his attention to the picture:

... the cylindrical stalk of a waist, the wide pelvic span, and the gently curving thighs, by the patch of hair that marks the spot where she is forked—by the trademark Modigliani nude, the accessible, elongated dream girl he ritualistically painted.... A nude represented with her eyes closed, defended, like Consuela, by nothing



Amedeo Modigliani. *Reclining Nude (Le Grand Nu)*, ca. 1919. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

other than her erotic power, at once, like Consuela, elemental and elegant. A golden-skinned nude inexplicably asleep over a velvety black abyss that, in my mood, I associated with the grave. One long, undulating line, she lies there awaiting you, still as death.

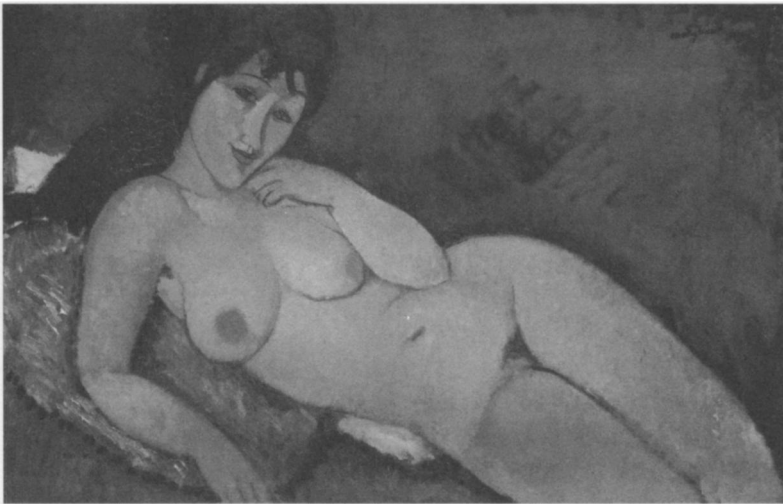
Kepesh does not know that Consuela is dying of cancer. The appearance of Modi's *Reclining Nude* serves as an ironic, unrecognized turning point. It marks the moment when Roth's erotic self-absorbed hero must awaken to the underground, inescapable link between eros and death.

An underground link between eros and death does not disrupt the pleasures intrinsic to Modi's "dream girl" nudes, including the pleasures of fantasy, but the hint of death turns the pleasure (in Sappho's phrase) *bittersweet*. The bittersweetness of eros, as Modigliani evokes it, helps account for the melancholy that many commentators see in his work. The union of love and death, while consistent with certain forms of melancholia, is a tragic theme that underlies Modigliani's fascination with the human subject. He was strangely dependent upon the presence of a model. "To do any work," he claimed, "I must have a living human being—I must be able to see him before me." While human form is accessible through plaster casts, "living" models bring life, with all its erotic possibilities, into the studio. In return, the artwork for Modi bestows the

gift of life upon spectators. The nudes endorse an erotic power that Modi sees as making possible an authentic aliveness. "They were women I loved," Carco wrote of his Modigliani nudes, "and I felt alive beside them." By contrast, a subgroup of Modigliani portraits depicts individuals who are rigid and expressionless: husks missing the spark of eros. In the nudes, the underground link between eros and death is ultimately life-affirming, unlike these dry husks that represent the subtraction of life, life leaking away, eros visible only in traces left by its departure.

It is not necessary to strain or over-read individual nudes seeking for underground hints of death. In a series, individual works are never wholly self-contained but exist within a network of intertextual relationships. Modi's nudes required a series in order to explore the wide range of eros, from a woman whose necklace sends undecidable signals to a sexual playmate whose look borders on the unmistakable.

A version of this painting appears, almost like a signature, in a depiction of the studio that Modi briefly shared with Moise Kisling. Judaism, as historian David Biale points out, never embraced celibacy as a spiritual value, and Modigliani (a secular Jew) both rejected privations of the flesh and holds some kinship with the traditions of erotic Kabbalism. One observer approaching



*Amedeo Modigliani. Nude on a Blue Cushion, 1917. Chester Dale Collection. National Gallery of Art. Washington, D.C.*

his hut-like studio at night saw a woman in a kimono, nude to the waist, with her hair down, dancing madly in the moonlight, and opposite her clad only in trousers, leaping and yelling, was faun-like Modi. "Then," the observer says, "the woman dropped her kimono and the two danced nude."

Eros, as we have seen, is not all pagan delight. Modi's difficult affair with the ambitious, hard-drinking English journalist Beatrice Hastings included tooth-and-nail battles, bodies flung through windows and bottles smashed, so that friends felt relieved when he replaced Beatrice with the wispy, docile Jeanne Hébuterne, whom Modi painted often but never nude, nor did he let her pose nude for other painters. "When a woman poses for a painter," he insisted, "she gives herself to him." Sex between painter and model was common in Montparnasse, but the give-and-take is not for Modigliani exclusively or primarily sexual. If a model displeased him, Modi reportedly exaggerated any bourgeois features, as if exposing the poison that interfered with eros. *Dirty bourgeois* was his favorite term of abuse. The nudes reflect his belief in the erotic body as a source of values cleansed from bourgeois accretions. Nakedness removed a layer of public falsehood and social death. The Japanese painter Tsuguharu Foujita reported that Modigliani painted in a manner so body-centered as to seem "orgiastic": "he went through all sorts of gesticulations, his shoulders heaved, he grunted, he made grimaces and cried out, you couldn't come near." The faithful Zborowski, who supplied studio, paint, canvas, models, rum, and a small monthly allowance, was banished whenever Modi worked on a nude. The nudes express an eroticism central to Modi's work, central to his own act of creation, and central to his passionate struggle against bourgeois values.

Death, we might say, takes two forms in Modigliani's art. There is the bodily death—redolent of sex—that he represents as basic to eros. There is also, however, a bourgeois death-in-life, which his nudes so deeply resist. As a genre, the nude of course traffics in nameless women. Picasso put it frankly: "If I do a nude, people ought to think: It's a nude not Madame Whatsit." Modi's nudes, unlike his portraits, seem disconnected from distinct personality or individual character, and they mostly eliminate the ethnic details typical of the portraits. In creating the nudes, Modi often dismissed his models to finish the work later from imagination. The model thus serves less as a personal referent—Madame Whatsit—than as

a living conduit for eros: a power that flows through bodies without necessarily expressing individual character. Eros did not require naming names, but the nudes are not context-free. In their preoccupation with eros, the nudes assume added significance when set against another realm of contemporary life inseparable from their creation: the slow-motion bourgeois inferno of mud, blood, gas, and bayonettes known as “the great war.”

#### IV. EROS, WAR, AND BEING

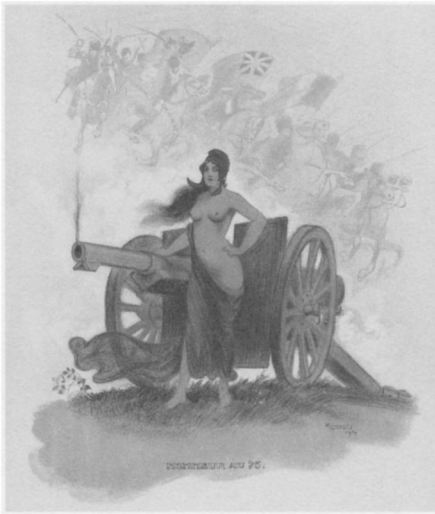
War fever in Paris and Modi's accelerating ill-health led Zborowski in 1918, nearly broke, to take a small entourage of more desperately impoverished painters to southern France, so that even when Modi temporarily escaped wartime Paris his escape was predicated on war. The Paris crowds shouting “To Berlin, To Berlin” in August 1914 soon gave way to casualties straggling back from the bloody trench stalemate on the Western front. Veteran, gourmand, and beloved poet-critic Apollinaire wore a huge white bandage on his head as he circulated among Montparnasse friends, which included Modi. Among Modi's mobilized Parisian friends were writers André Salmon and Francis Carco. Cocteau joined an ambulance unit. Picasso discreetly disappeared. A curfew—9:00 p.m. for cafes and 10:00 p.m. for restaurants—turned Montparnasse into an evening ghost town. The British fought for fifty months. Trenches (so close that enemies shouted insults) zigzagged across waterlogged terrain for 25,000 miles. The new diagnosis “shell shock” entered the medical lexicon and popular speech. During six days in 1918, at the Somme, British forces took 300,000 casualties. This was mechanized killing on an unprecedented scale. It is the unseen landscape of Modigliani's nudes.

Modi had no use for this war. One report says he tried to enlist but was rejected for poor health. Another, more in character, says that after waiting in line for an hour he walked off in a rage. His politics, when not downright anarchist, resembled the radical socialist position (his brother was a Socialist deputy in Italy) that found no significant difference between two vast armies of the bourgeoisie. One contemporary, alert to his self-contradictions, called Modi a “violent pacifist.” Another report quotes him shouting: “Down with the Allies! Down with the war!” The war for Modigliani was a death trap opposed to everything his art stood for. It would not have escaped his notice, if he saw the poster, that nudity and pubic hair

did not cause civic disorder or mass panic when enlisted in support of the nation state and its war machine.

His wartime choice to paint nudes—a choice already opposed to Futurist dogma and the love of machines—resists any reduction to a political slogan (“Down with the war!”) because politics as yet another bourgeois institution is partly what it opposes. Instead, the nudes explore a counter-route in which female nakedness evokes what is vulnerable and infinitely valuable: human being.

The exaggerated nakedness of Modi’s nudes—the nude in effect stripped bare—finds its corollary not only in the pubic hair that scandalized the police commissioner but also in less visible links between nakedness and veracity, as when we ask for the naked truth. The closed or blanked eyes in so many of Modigliani’s nudes and



*Edouard Bernard. Honor to the 75TH, 1914. French poster from World War I. Bibliotheque de documentation internationale contemporaine (BDIC) et musée d'histoire contemporaine.*

portraits, while evoking precedents from late-medieval Siennese sculpture to contemporary African masks, are consistent with the view that his paintings convey an imperative that spectators awaken to their own blindnesses. The non-literal blindnesses that matter most to Modigliani are all associated with failures to live—failures, that is, of eros. The nudes, with their eyes often shut in sleep or dream, suggest blindnesses in the spectator that extend beyond politics or erotics to what Heidegger a few years later would call the truth of

being. It is significant, from a philosophical perspective on being, that when Heidegger described truth he described it both as un-forgetting and as un-concealment. Like the nude, it shows us what in the context of bourgeois life we have both forgotten and concealed.

Being, as a persistent topic in philosophy, is notoriously resistant to an empirical or scientific discourse of clear and distinct ideas.

Being, whatever else may define it, is defined by its invisibility to reductive languages of matter, fact, mass, and data. Skeptics will question what *being* can possibly refer to, but the questions it raises are rich with possibility to contemporary philosophers willing to consider the paradox of religion without religion. “The anonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person or thing,” writes Emmanuel Levinas at the close of World War II, meditating on what would be left if the entire world of data suddenly disappeared. “It is like a density of the void,” he writes, “like a murmur of silence. There is nothing, but there is being, like a field of forces.” Modi’s mystical friend Max Jacob said that Modigliani’s portraits did not seek the personality but the “soul.” If Jacob is as correct as he is perceptive, then it may be useful to return to the discussion of being that Heidegger soon made central to continental philosophy. The thought to explore is whether art maintains for Modigliani in his nudes, as it did for Heidegger, a privileged relation with being.

Fifteen years after Modi’s death, Heidegger delivered in 1935 the lecture that eventually saw print in 1950 as “The Origin of the Work of Art.” His complex meditation focuses on Van Gogh’s painting that depicts a worn pair of peasant shoes. “Van Gogh’s painting,” Heidegger explains, “is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being.” Like Van Gogh’s painting in this analysis, Heidegger’s philosophy sets out to oppose the forgetting of being: a forgetting so total that we not only fail to remember being—what being *is*—but also forget that we have forgotten. We are sleepwalkers. “The art work opens up in its own way,” Heidegger says, “the Being of beings.” Or, as Modi might have put it, life is a gift from the artist (who knows it and has it) to the sleepwalkers.

Modigliani’s encounter with the Being of beings—if we accept this language as at least a provisional metaphor—is what links his portraits with his nudes, where being in its mystery coincides with the naked female body, where truth *is* unconcealment, where stripping naked is the decisive action. Being for Modi is inescapably erotic—a clear difference from Heidegger. Yet, Heidegger can help us see how the nudes might constitute a site where eros momentarily makes its appearances. In this sense, eros and being belong together. Modigliani, however, had just thirteen months to live when an armistice on November 11, 1918 ended the unprecedented conflict of world powers:



over 8 million dead, 21 million gassed, maimed, and shell-shocked. The peace that followed such carnage did not fill Montparnasse with joy. Many complained that the old spirit was gone.

The death of Modigliani in the cold days of January 1920 registered like a shockwave. Modi had spent his best years in Montparnasse, tramping its back streets, camping out in its crazy studios and garrets or, back to his old vagabond existence, grabbing a place to sleep (as one acquaintance put it) “here, there, anywhere.” Despite a near absence of buyers and living in abject privation, punctuated by sprees of wild generosity when he came into cash, he somehow kept on painting works that everyone except the dealers recognized as extraordinary, meanwhile selling sketches for drinks, ripping up the sketch when a café-patron offended him by asking that he sign it. Recent scholars have shown that he sold more paintings in his last years than fits the myth of total neglect. Myths and facts alike fail to predict what happened next. Montparnasse had never seen such a funeral.

“I will never forget Modigliani’s funeral,” wrote Jacques Lipchitz. “So many friends, so many flowers, the sidewalks crowded with people bowing their heads in grief and respect. Everyone felt deeply that Montparnasse had lost something precious, something very essential.” His friends walking in the funeral cortège included some of the greatest artists of the century—Picasso, Kisling, Salmon, Ortiz, Jacob, Brancusi, Vlaminck, Derain, and (his personal gift to Zborowski) the incomparable Soutine. Flowers covered the coach carrying Modi’s corpse, courtesy of his absent brother, the Socialist deputy back home, who cabled the instruction to bury him like a prince. The police who so often had run him in during his drunken public spectacles now stood at attention as the cortège passed. “D’you see?” said Picasso in reference to the attentive police, representatives of the commissioner whose outrage had shut down Modi’s only one-man show three years earlier at the Berthe Weill Gallery: “Now he is avenged.”

#### V. DREAM AND FANTASY

Modigliani produced only a single self-portrait, and it does not depict a torment-driven outcast, Maldoror-Modigliani, but rather it shows the artist at work, holding a palette, a gentle man with closed eyes and a dreamlike expression. Dreams and dreamlike states are prominent too in the nudes. There is no evidence that Modi knew Freud’s argument that dreams are psychic wish-fulfillments, the residue of repressed sexual

desire. Although the Surrealists soon filled Paris with Freudian dream-analysis and frank sexual confessions, Modi's nudes float free from neurosis and psychoanalytic narrative. Desire appears indefinitely deferred or past the state of satisfaction: the opposite of repressed. Its traces are visible even in its surprising absences—voluptuous women suspended in a space free of fleshly urges—a zone of absolute erotic serenity. Indeed, Modi's dreaming or daydreaming nudes—which include an eyes-open full-frontal figure titled significantly *The Dreamer*—are wholly unlike Freud's pale, agitated hysterics. Their main scandal lies in seeming to express the utter health of dream or fantasy. The fantasies may well bear a masculine code, since men have long maintained dominion over fantasy both in artistic production and in everyday life (according to one prominent cultural critic). Fantasy, however, is also often coded female, if derisively, in contrast to military-industrial and monetary-material production. Modi's dreamlike nudes occupy an ambiguous ground where nakedness holds a masculine allure while also affirming (rather than deriding) the feminine, transgressive power of fantasy. This ambiguous ground is especially complex in that its reveries (Roth's "dream girls") lie so close to the bodies of flesh-and-blood women. Are they fantasies or models? Real or imagined? Or does their power extend to undermining the assumptions behind such binary questions?

Dreams were serious stuff in Modernist Paris. "Only dreams," wrote the editors in the inaugural issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, four years after Modi's death, "lead men down the path to freedom." Opium, still unregulated, shared with dreams and hashish the reputation as a conduit of free creative power. Modi's contemporary, former addict Cocteau, wrote against the myth that opium was a source of visions. "Opium," he corrected the record, "nourishes a state of half-dream. It puts the emotions to sleep, exalts the heart and lightens the spirit." The half-sleep half-wake posture of many of Modi's nudes suggests an opiate-like dream state that detaches eros from emotional turbulence. There is no doubt that Modigliani used hashish and opium in pursuit of artistic ends: the characteristic swanlike necks in his portraits he once attributed to a hashish vision. The nudes not only depict women in a dreamlike state, however, but also constitute dream images offered as a life-giving gift introduced into the dreamless world of the bourgeois.

Modigliani surely bears a kinship to the many painters in nineteenth-century France who shared a fascination with dreams.

Pre-Freudian theories of dreams, as art historian Nancy Locke has shown, were a rich resource for French visual artists. Among these pre-Freudian theorists, Alfred Maury argued in his well-known *Le sommeil et les rêves* (1861) that dreamlike fantasies are marked not by an extravagant departure from external realities—which is how the surrealists marked dreams—but, to the contrary, by an uncanny closeness to what is external and real. Modi's nudes, in the light of Maury's theory, suggest dreamlike transformations in which the fantasies of eros absolutely depend upon (rather than erase) their uncanny closeness to real women. The interplay requires a tension in which real and dreamlike are hard to disentangle.

Consider the irrepressible Kiki. As she explains in her memoirs, she possessed a distinctive feature that, for modeling assignments, she sometimes disguised with crayon. She refers, coyly, to a visibly absent slice of pubic hair. Foujita, for whom she posed, joked about it, and her lover Man Ray made it an inescapable presence in an early photograph.

There is no record that Kiki posed for Modigliani, but her chills and warm response ("Wasn't he gorgeous!") do not suggest an absence of desire. Certainly, several Modi nudes represent the pubic triangle as strangely decentered or askew: "offset twats," as poet Gus Blaisdell describes it.

Distinctive as a signature, this odd irregularity constructs these Modi nudes as doubly un-ideal, both declassicized and deformed, a conjunction of dream image and of Kiki's erogenous zone. In general, Modi's nudes do not edit out distinctive marks, from teeth to breasts to rolls of fat, but emphasize the shifting line between dream and real.



Man Ray. Kiki de Montparnasse, 1921. Man Ray Trust/ADAGP-ARS/Telimage, 2005.



Amedeo Modigliani. *Reclining Nude*. Collection Mattioli, Milan, Italy. SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

One line in Modi's erotic dreamscapes is firm: women, with only two exceptions, appear facing the viewer. Modigliani famously disliked backsides. "But monsieur," he replied to the aging Renoir, who had recommended stroking the backside of his nudes, "I do not like buttocks." One exception is an experiment in Cubist techniques, where the prominent buttocks may signal Modi's disenchantment with Cubism. The second, in a bright, hard, smooth surface unusual in Modigliani, greatly exaggerates the buttocks in proportion to the slim and tapered upper torso in a clear allusion to Ingres' backward-glancing *Grande Odalisque* (1814). Novelist George Sand referred to Ingres' nude as possessing "the back of a white bloodsucker," and her three to five extra lumbar vertebrae may figure somewhere in the genesis of Modi's swanlike necks. Still, buttocks for Modi may also come to signify inversion, eros up-ended, fantasy defeated or wrong-side out, dreams gone awry, erotic nightmares, failures that do not add up to a repudiation of eros so much as an exploration of its limits and discontents. Modigliani does not pursue eros on its Sadean night journeys into deranged lusts or unspeakable acts, the blood sacrifices that obsess Bataille, the macabre erotics of "artist-gravedigger" (a term that some contemporaries applied to Ingres). In nudes conceived as a series, however, it seems inescapable that some will represent eros as dreaming its own disenchantment, its reversals, its sporadic backsliding failures of being.

Modi's nudes resist the dismemberment of the human body typical of much Modernist art—including the techniques of Cubism—in favor of an almost tender re-enchantment of the body. Picasso claimed that a portrait should put the legs *beside* the body, which only reveals his distance from Modigliani's erotic re-membering (or un-forgetting). Modi's nudes, in their mix of dream and reality, not only set him apart from other Modernist painters but also suggest that Modernism in art cannot so easily be recounted as a story of rebels and conservatives. "We were the last Romantics," wrote William Butler Yeats in 1931 about his generation of poets. Yeats reflects the perspective of Modernists who did not repudiate the past but rather sought their themes in what he called traditional "sanctity and loveliness." Modi refused the Futurist agenda to blow up the museums, and his nudes extend the tradition of Titian and Giorgioni into the era of Picasso and Foujita. Yeats praised his generation of last Romantics for taking their themes from the "book of the people." There is good reason why so many museum-goers enjoy Modigliani, to the discomfort of high-brow critics who praise Modernism for its shock of the new. Modi's work, in its contempt of bourgeois restrictions and sleepwalking numbness, expresses a commitment to ancient, archaic ways of being that are ultimately rooted in eros.

Modigliani, like Yeats, Rilke, and Mahler, belongs among the Modernists who are not proto-post-modern. He makes no compromise with commerce or bourgeois values. Surfaces interest him mainly as they cover the unseen or forgotten, bodies interest him as a space of being. He is among the more literary painters, although he wrote little beyond occasional postcards to his mother. His recitations, drunk or sober, included not only Lautréamont but also Dante, Petrarch, and Villon. He venerated Nietzsche and D'Annunzio. His nudes may claim their least obvious kinship, however, with the "great odes" of Keats, similarly emerging from a remarkable creative burst (from 1818 to 1819) while the poet was dying of tuberculosis. Minus the "great odes" Keats is a promising minor poet, and Romanticism minus Keats has lost its heart. The "great odes" both redefine Keats and reshape Romantic poetry. In the era of the great war and its immediate aftermath, the nudes of Modigliani uncover a bittersweet Keatsian semantics of love and death that redefines his lifework and permits us to reshape an understanding of Modernism. They challenge and reward our experience of the complex, life-affirming electrifications of eros.