

Mary Mary

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My Dearest Made Me

'I want to begin by saying that I believe I once did you an injustice, to the extent of misunderstanding your motive for a certain action.'

Robert's uneasy flush confessed his recognition of her meaning. 'Ah if we must go back to *that* - . It is, I think, worth remarking that the 'entire situation' means exactly that: *all* of it – including, it seems, the beholder's *body*.'

'You withdraw your assent to my request?' 'By no means; but nothing consolatory you can find to say on that point can really make any difference. It is popularly believed that a human being is either a man or a woman.'

'Will not the difference in my view of you perhaps make a difference in your own?'

She looked at him earnestly, without a trace of irony in her eyes or on her lips. 'It is really I who have an *amende* to make, as I now understand the situation. Seeing is an activity that is ultimately derived from touching. This pleasure in looking; this scopophilia. I once turned to you for help in a painful extremity, and I have only now learned to understand your reasons for refusing to help me.'

'Oh, my reasons –' groaned Robert. 'Words for mental processes are all derived from physical things. All of my intentions are out of sight and out of mind.'

'I have learned to understand them,' she persisted, 'by being so much, lately, with Madame.'

'The rationalist sees only the details and never the whole!'

'Exactly. That was what told *me*. I understood you through her, and through your dealings with her. There she was – the woman you adored and longed to save and you would not lift a finger to make her yours by means which would have seemed – I see it now – a desecration of your feeling for each other. Lingering over the act of seeing is the same as lingering over the act of touching. It is usual for most people to linger to some extent over the intermediate aim of a looking that has a sexual

tinge to it.' She paused, as if to find the exact words for meanings she had never before had occasion to formulate. 'It came to me first – a light on your attitude – when I found you had never breathed to her a word of our talk together. She had confidently commissioned you to find a way for her, as the medieval lady sent a prayer to her knight to deliver her from captivity and you came back, confessing you had failed, but never justifying yourself by so much as a hint of the reason why. The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilisation keeps curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts. And when I had lived a little in Madame's intimacy – at a moment when circumstances helped to bring us extraordinarily close – I understood why you had done this; why you had let her take what view she pleased of your failure, your passive acceptance of defeat, rather than let her suspect the alternative offered you. You couldn't, even with my permission, betray to anyone a hint of my miserable secret, and you couldn't, for your life's happiness, pay the particular price I asked.' She leaned toward him in an intense, almost childlike, effort at full expression. 'Oh, we are of different races, with a different point of honour; but I understand, I see, that you are good people – just simply, courageously *good*!' She paused, and then said slowly: 'This curiosity can be diverted ('sublimated') in the direction of art, if its interests can be shifted away from the genitals on to the shape of the body as a whole. Have I understood you? Have I put my hand on your motive?'

Robert sat speechless, subdued by the rush of emotion which her words set free.

'That, you understand, is my question,' she concluded with a faint smile; and he answered hesitatingly: 'The material itself is very important to me. I was interested in working with raw materials in conjunction with abstract geological forms.'

Written by **T. Rhonda White**
(for Karla Black) 2003

Adapted from:

Edith Wharton

Madame De Treymes (Penguin 1907)

Jack Flam, Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings
(Penguin 1907/University of California Press 1996)

Sigmund Freud

On Sexuality (Penguin 1991)

Charles Harrison and Paul Wood

Art in Theory 1900-1990 (Blackwell, 1996)

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Karla Black **Robert Drawing**