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PRE-TEXT 8

Breaching the barrier of modesty: the advent of the real of sex¹

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What might the image of Venus, or indeed of Lolita, teach analysts, Lacan asks in 1961, in the final lesson of Seminar VIII, *The Transference*. He has been speaking about the relation between the object of desire – the essential trait in analytic experience in its functions as both partial object and fundamental obturator – and its libidinal effect with regard to narcissism and its central core. The phallus is that around which the maximum investment is conserved and the partial object is elided, left blank in the image that has been so invested. In this context he introduces Botticelli's Venus, the dazzling form of Venus "rising from the waters, "her body erect above the waves of bitter love".² This image of beauty, erected at the acme of the fascination of desire, he says, is a blank space that is surrounded by an intense cathexis. Lacan modifies Fenichel's equation Girl=Phallus to show that while the image is invested with all the attractions, with all the drive impulses that circumscribe it, there where the phallus is, it is not. As such it is the pivot in the constitution of every object of desire. As he notes in "The Signification of the Phallus", the problematic of the phallus is intrinsic to feminine sexuality, and it will lead to his conceptualisation of the not-all and the Other jouissance in Seminar XX, *Encore*.

Lacan's question above appears to continue his discussion of beauty as barrier to the real, in the dazzling form of Antigone, in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Not only does Antigone's beauty fascinate us, "it holds the subject back from the unspeakable field of radical desire that is the field of absolute destruction".³ Beauty is a barrier that, in an analysis, the analyst's know-how aims to

¹ Freud comments in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" that trauma implies breaching "an otherwise efficacious barrier" against excitation from outside. SE XVIII, p. 29.

² Lacan, J., *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VIII*, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015, p. 387. (Lesson of 28.6.61; (*Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VIII, Le transfert 1960-1961*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil 2001, pp. 453-54).

³ Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-6*, trans. D. Potter, London, Routledge, p. 216 (Lesson of May 4, 1960; / *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, 1959-1960, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, p. 256).

breach. Lacan also gives to modesty (*pudeur*) the function of barrier to the real and he makes a number of references to modesty as that which veils while drawing attention to what is veiled. Not only does he say this in relation to the veiling of the phallus, but also modesty is most importantly a barrier to unconscious knowledge. In Seminar VII he says, “the omission of this barrier which prevents the direct experience of that which is to be found at the centre of sexual union, seems to me to be at the origin of all sorts of questions that have not been answered, including notably the matter of feminine sexuality”.⁴

He comments on the function of modesty in 1974, in Seminar XXI, “*Les non-dupes errent*” in relation to *The Ethics*. Having dismissed the utility of the Good, the True and the Beautiful – the “glorious bodies” that we see celebrated in art – he affirms that in analytic experience, the truth, in as far as it can be spoken, is that the body goes towards jouissance and that sex is specifically tied to the death of the body. Lacan asks if his Borromean knot will allow us to go beyond this roundabout of jouissance, body and death.⁵

The real that makes the writing of the sexual relation impossible means that three are required to make the two of love. That the non-relation is the limit to the symbolic, and hence what is signifiable, is evident in the analytic discourse where the relation between the analyst, as the support of the object *a*, and the analysand, the divided subject, is also marked as impossible. The object *a*, as cause of desire, is precisely what is not representable or specularisable in the subject. It is real, extimate and is thus the most hidden point of his being. It is this unsignifiable dimension, always traumatic, that Lacan has in mind when, in the second lesson *Les non-dupes*, he speaks of the “cold horror” of unconscious knowledge that analytic discourse does not shy away from. This he will refer to as *troumatisme* – the trauma of the hole [*trou*] – that is constitutive of the subject in the collision of the body with language.

Lacan makes an enigmatic comment in the lesson of March 12, 1974: “... the only virtue, if there is no sexual relation as I have stated, is modesty”.⁶ Given that virtue is a notion that Lacan considers antithetical to psychoanalysis in its connection to the Good,⁷ is he being ironic? I don’t think so. There is an ambiguity to modesty as affect in that it draws attention to what is concealed, but it is also a limit that must be breached in analysis. It is in this context that I am posing a question about what the contemporary movement, #MeToo, might have to say to analysts in terms of its clinical consequences with regard to the advent of the real in the traumatic encounter of the subject, the feminine subject in particular, with sex as radical difference? Certainly, these beautiful women, whom we have known as images and who have been cast, by the media, as heroic and courageous, were initiates to the rites of Hollywood when they were so taken by surprise by one ithyphallic Silenus or another. They speak of fear, anger and powerlessness. But what fuels this rage? A psychoanalyst might point to the effect of ravage: their irremediable castration and the

⁴ Ibid., p. 298. (Lesson of June 22, 1960; Éditions du Seuil, p. 345).

⁵ Lacan, J., “*Les non-dupes errent*”, Lesson of March 12, 1974. Unpublished.

⁶ Ibid., “... la seule vertu, s’il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel comme je l’énonce, c’est *la pudeur*.”

⁷ Lacan, J. *The Ethics*, op. cit., p. 293. (Lesson of June 22 1960; Éditions du Seuil, p. 339).

traumatic effect on the body of the jouissance that exposes the limit of the signifying power of the phallus. For there is no recourse in being a dazzling phallic girl, or container of the alгамatic object when one is the object of the Other's jouissance. The real happens. The hole that appeared then is now being covered by semblants: victim, avenger.

In French “*attentat à la pudeur*”, literally, an attack on modesty denotes both “indecent exposure” and “indecent assault”. In the Anglophone world, the daily publication, since last October, of salacious details of such incidents and the fall of one powerful man after another have had a transferential effect for a number of my analysands, both masculine and feminine, and with obsessional and hysterical modes of response. There has been a sort of deferred action by proxy where associations to past advents of the real have been produced through a personal reaction to an event in the present. Significantly, the predominant affect has been anxiety – not without an object, as Lacan says, but with a hole in signification – accompanied variously by guilt and shame, the push to expel and destroy the disturbing other, compulsions to confess or embarrassment about what has already been exposed about the analysand's sexuality. Such affects have been efficacious in the analyses as indications of the symptom and the approach to the real. Even where inhibition has occurred due to the sudden perception of the analyst as judge, it has not been without benefit in the working through. However, as Lacan says in the lesson of March 12, speaking well (*le bien dire*) is enough “to shock, but it does not violate (*viole*) modesty”.

Unlike the parallel movement in France, “*#balancetonporc*” (squeal on your pig), the very name, *#MeToo* is an invitation to identify. In the horror expressed by these young women, there is a contemporary expression of the traumatic encounter with the real of sex that has had a pronounced social effect. At the same time, there is an attempt to cover this real with the impassioned narratives from all those who sign up. Does Freud's third form of identification in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* offer us a perspective here? He speaks of symptom formation arising from identification that is not based on any object relation but rather by “mental infection” – Freud's term – on the grounds of the possibility of desire or desire to put oneself in the same situation; identification through the symptom as a mark of coincidence between two egos.⁸ For Lacan, Freud's third form of identification makes evident the hysteric's desire to sustain desire in that she “is captive to the point of imaginary identification because her fantasy implies her ensnarement in it.”⁹ And this gives orientation to the analyst: the fantasy that supports desire tries to make the sexual relation exist and must be traversed.

Soon after his reference to modesty and there being no sexual relation in “*Les non-dupes errent*” Lacan says, “*L'amour est passionnant*” (love is thrilling) but only if the rules of the game are followed.¹⁰ However, we don't know the rules; we have to

⁸ Freud, S., *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, SE XVIII, pp. 105-06.

⁹ Lacan, J., “The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power”. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. B. Fink. New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 534 (*Écrits*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1966, p. 639).

¹⁰ Lacan, J., *Les non-dupes errent*, lesson of March 12, 1974.

invent them, using the analytic discourse to do so. The real ex-sists because there is no discourse about jouissance – the body is an enjoying substance and enjoys well or not. From this very fact, jouissance requires the knot, the knotting with the symbolic and the imaginary. In analysis, the function of the barrier of modesty as indicator of what is hidden is to mark with an X the spot where the unconscious treasure lies: at the point where modesty is affronted and the real suddenly appears. Perhaps this is why Lacan plays on his title: “*les non-pudes errent*” (the “immodest” err): a joke, but with serious analytic intent.