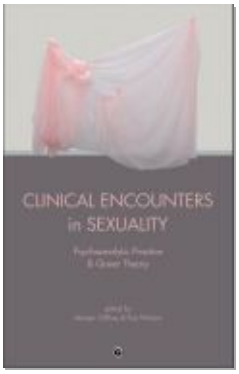
20: Sexual Difference.



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Sexual Difference: From Symptom to Sinthome

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"We speak therein of fucking, and we say that it's not working out" (Lacan 1998[1972–73], 32). Without splitting hairs, Lacan bluntly summed up what people talk about when they are on the analytic couch. If all what we talk about on the couch is sex, nothing much has been discovered in psychoanalysis since Freud and Lacan. Freud's major revelation that the unconscious is at root sexual is confirmed in our current practice. It is not just that, as Lacan has noted, one hears that something is wrong with sex. Consider the case of one of my analysands, Melissa, a twenty-four-year-old female, who felt that her analysis was progressing because she was "feeling pretty stable and calmer." She added however that "at the end of the day" she always felt anxious. "Perhaps it's this recurrent thinking, this unrelenting questioning," she added. Her problems, she knew, were about relationships. The trouble was not just her mother, looming large and overwhelming, or her father, weak and slightly perverse, but her current boyfriend, who overwhelmed her with his affection. "I want to figure out what Mike means to me. Sometimes I experience a sense of happiness because I love him; it can be really wonderful. Sex can be good but as soon as he expresses how much he loves me, I have only regret." Fundamentally, his love and support did not bring her satisfaction but rather a sense of loss and emptiness. "His intense admiration for me is overwhelming. As if I were cut off from him or myself. Something

keeps me from connecting with him." Melissa had a suspicion about what the problem was: "It is the issue of seeing other people, but it does not seem worthwhile."

She had a confession to make: "I have had a couple of dreams in which I had wild sex with this guy. I felt as if I had betrayed Mike. His feelings for me are so monogamous; he has not been interested in anyone else. There again one can see in which ways we are so different. I have to accept the fact that I have desires; I may have dreamt about sex with a man, but in fact I have been wanting to be with a woman." That she had not acted upon those wishes nevertheless made her feel guilty for a transgression that had only taken place on her dreams. "What's wrong with me? I do love Mike. I do value our relationship. I wish I didn't fantasize about other people. […] I will have to make a choice about the relationship." Was her guilt justifiable? "Mike talked in such an emotional tone. When I heard him talk like that I cried, and almost immediately I felt distant. […] I fear it will become the devouring love I have for my mother." Separation from her first love had a cost: "I forged my own way outside my relationship with my mother by acquitting my own sexuality." Melissa was operating in the shadow of fear. "It is scary for me to have sexual desire for Mike. He is the main focus of my sexual attention. What feels really scary for me is that I haven't had any real relationship with a woman but this is part of my sexuality. It is really confusing. I would not identify as lesbian but I do not really know if I am really myself with Mike." Identity does not resolve the issue of desire for Melissa. Eventually, the logic of the unconscious takes hold and makes itself explicit in questions of sexual difference:

> What's the difference between men and women? My mother would say that gender is societal. How much do I disagree? Men and women are different. Yes, there are women who are masculine and men who have feminine sides. But still this is very confusing for me […]. I feel attraction to both men and women. It is physical […]. I think that's how I know; this physical attraction to women is not going to go away. I also

> have emotional and intellectual attractions to women. Being around women feels right. What is the source of the attraction? It has to do with issues of gender and sexuality […].

As a variation on this universal theme, what follows is something quite familiar to psychoanalysts, an old question about sexual identity with a new twist: "How can I accept Mike's love? I feel dirty being sexualized by him. Actually, being with him is strange for me. I did feel comfortable with my sexuality before him. My sexuality was not a source of shame or anxiety. Maybe the issue is: am I straight or bisexual?" Are Melissa's statements motivated by a desire to understand an issue about gender and sex, or does she simply confuse object choice with identity politics? Is she bisexual because she fantasizes about having an affair with a woman? When she asks: "Am I straight or bisexual?" is she asking in fact: "Am I a man or a woman?" If that is the case, then the traditional question of sexual identity that we find at the core of hysteria is shifting from a question of gender identity ("Am I a man or a woman?") to one of sexual orientation ("Am I straight or bisexual?"). Melisa's comments seem to remap the whole terrain of sexual politics (compulsory heterosexuality, sexual choices, monogamy, love, reciprocity in relationships, attachment, sexual prejudice). She becomes aware of her boyfriend's love and while she admits that she is happy with him, this realization makes her experience regret and it is then that she questions her sexuality. Melissa become distant, or, as she puts it, "cut off from him or myself." Does her reference to being "cut off" echo old Freudian ideas about castration anxiety and penis envy? Can her account replay the classic Oedipal familial scenario of identifications and rivalries? Does she question her sexual identity as a phobic reaction to intimacy? Is her sexual ambiguity a strategy that defends her from desire while cancelling out the mother? If, as she stated, she forged a way out of a "devouring" relationship with her mother, "acquitting my own sexuality," can we say that her uncertainty about her sexuality is a sort of father substitute (a stand in for a name or *no!* which

separates mother and child)? Are contested notions like phallic attribution and castration still valid tools in clinical practice?

Melissa's predicament, which is not uncommon, can be understood within the parameters of what Lacan (1966–67) called "the big secret of psychoanalysis" (Session 12/4/67). The secret is that "there is not such a thing as a sexual act," a dictum which tries to delineate the impossibility of a perfect sexual union between two people. Far from being harmonious, the sexual act is always a blunder, a mangled action, a failure, reminding one of the inconsistency of one's relation to sex. Lacan's later variation of the formula as "there is not such a thing as a sexual relationship" (1991[1969–70], 134; 1998[1972–73], 9) provides a condensed formulation of the sexual illness of humankind. Something about sex is intractable; it resists assimilation, it disrupts meaning.

Melissa is not the only case I have met of someone who seemingly breaks away from the paradigm of social conformity to so-called gender. An analysand came to see me with countless questions, since despite being a happily married woman, she had become restless, then had had sex with a woman — just once. This was just because, as she said, she wanted to find out how a woman's skin felt like, and also how it smelled. Was this an issue of identification since she admired and wanted to resemble the seductive, aggressive woman whom she had had sex with? Was she fascinated with an idealized femininity that would help her define her sexual identity on the basis of sexual practice? Or was she "done with men," as she once blurted out exasperatedly and had she, at last, followed her true desire?

I could also mention here the analysand who ran away from a marriage proposal from a man she thought she was in love with to rush into the arms of a lesbian friend, whom she claimed she was not even erotically attracted to. There was another declared feminist analysand who defined herself as bisexual but never had a sexual encounter with a woman. She detested makeup and "girly" things and insisted that she wanted to be loved for who she really was, without being "objectified by a male," but then she appeared smitten by a boyfriend who told her al-

most offensively that she should wear sexy clothes. Moreover, he was constantly comparing her to other women he was ogling. All these cases seem to be variations on a universal theme: the inconsistency of the relation of the subject to sex. Their agents seem to position themselves in a zone of sexual ambiguity, which forces us to rethink how we define sex and sexuality. We can contrast them with other cases that hinge more explicitly around issues of sexual attributes and seem to operate according to a binary of complementary opposites. Thus I treated a trans man who was deeply unhappy in his sexual life because in not having a penis, he believed he lacked a body part that was universally desired by all women and that would warrant their sexual enjoyment. There was also a new patient who explained that in the past someone like her would be thought of "as a man with a mental problem but that it's just the opposite, I am a woman with a physical problem." I have dealt elsewhere (2010) with the case of an analysand who said she had "the worst birth defect a woman can have, I was born with a penis and testicles" (190–93).

Psychoanalysis, with Freud, reveals the challenge of assuming a sexual positioning. As noted by Lacan (1981[1964]), Freud "posit[s] sexuality as essentially polymorphous, aberrant" (176). Freud "perverted" sexuality when he separated the drive from any instinctual function and described its object as "indifferent," that is, not determined by gender. Here, in my view, Laplanche's faithfulness to Freud is crucial. The normative slant in psychoanalysis, which has led to troubling standards of normalcy like elevating the genitals to the status of fetish organs of a mature heterosexual genitality or the pathologization of homosexuality, are post-Freudian deviations based on what Lacan (2006[1958]) aptly qualified as "delusional" notions of normalcy, an "absurd hymn to the harmony of genital relations" that have nothing to do with the reality of sex (507).

Any Sexual Identity Is Failed

To further contextualize our discussion, let's say that the subject's assumption of a sexual identity is always symptomatic

because it is related to what psychoanalysts call the phallus — a defective tool to negotiate the Real that eludes us. Perhaps those analysands who confuse object choice with identity are searching for a totalizing answer that introduces a paradox: they ask whether they are straight or bisexual as if the simple fact of posing the question would mean that they are neither; but if they are neither, they feel obligated to choose what they are.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, as the mirror stage illustrates, identity is an artificial construct that results from imaginary identifications with an "other" who grants a "sense of self." As Tim Dean (2000) notes, "Human sexuality cannot be construed as in any way as the result of the mirror stage" (191). Identity relies on the assumption of an image and is something that eventually may come to an end during psychoanalysis because the subject emerges exactly where identity fails. In a well-known passage, Rose (1986) writes:

> The unconscious constantly reveals the "failure" of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is not stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or for men) which is ever simply achieved. Nor does psychoanalysis see such "failure" as a special-case inability or an individual deviancy from the norm. […] [T]here is a resistance to identity at the very heart of psychic life. (90–91)

Rose's emphasis on the "failure" of identity is central because it contradicts the usual reading of "lack" as a loss or as an injury that women would have suffered and that men would fear. Lack is neither a negative "wound" due to the loss of an object, nor a deficiency, but rather a productive force. All subjects must confront and assume their lack; furthermore, the Lacanian subject is subjectivized lack. Such a lack carries several effects on the subject — it divides the subject; desire is born through lack and can never be finally fulfilled. I reiterate the importance of desire over identity because the desiring subject is produced by the impact of language on the materiality of the body — the subject of desire does not emerge from identifications with the moth-

er, the father, or a signifier, but precisely when identifications stop working. In fact, identity is far from being stable because the foundational identification of the subject is with a signifier, which means, identification with difference (a signifier designates one thing in opposition to others). Due to the equivocal nature of language, identification is not unifying but rather it creates a split that eclipses the subject. As a result, I will depart from Farina's contention that theories of desire rooted in lack would understand "non-normative" forms of sexuality as excluded from sexual norms — assuming that they are "missing something" that supposedly a "normate sexual subjectivity" would posses. "Normality" is a questionable construct, a compensatory symptom, a norm of *mal* (evil) or the norm-of-the-male (*norme mâle*) as Lacan (2007[1972]) would say, playing with the fact that in French male norm and normal are identically pronounced, thus radically rejecting the notion of a normal sexuality.[1] How subjects relate to their sexual bodies is determined by the way they relate to lack: this is what psychoanalysis calls castration (another name for the "norm-male"). For psychoanalysis, a relation to lack will provide the foundation for diverse structures of desire, whether neurotic, perverse, fetishistic, or homosexual. We note here that perversion is taken as a structure and not as sexual practice. Downing's discussion of perversion in this collection makes evident that even though queer discourse and psychoanalytic discourse may enrich each other there may be unsurpassable chasms. Maybe the "The Woman does not exist" (Lacan 1998[1972–73], 7) of Lacan cannot compare with the "the category woman does not exist" of Monique Wittig (1992, 15). Dean (2000) argues well that Lacan "meets" queer theory but this meeting is not an overlap. Psychoanalysis may be queer but it is not queer theory.

1 Interview with Françoise Wolff at the Belgian television on "The great questions of psychoanalysis." MK2 video cassette under the title: *Jacques Lacan,* conference at Leuven followed by an interview with Françoise Wolff also known as "Jacques Lacan Speaks" (Lacan 2007).

Sexual Difference and the Paradoxes of the Formulas of Sexuation

For psychoanalysis, sexual difference is not a norm but a real impossibility, which is to say, it is a limit to what is sayable and thinkable; it is a failure of meaning. Our relationship to the body is structured by the symbolic system of language, yet language lacks a signifier to signify sexual difference. To complicate things further, sexual difference is neither just the body (as biological substrata) nor the psychic introjections of the social performance of gender (as a socially constructed role). Neither the perspective of biological essentialism nor that of social constructivism have been able to solve the problem of unconscious sexual difference. Since sexual difference is neither sex nor gender, sex needs to be symbolized, and gender needs to be embodied. This unconscious sexual reality about which the subject has no knowledge, i.e., does not know what is to be a man or a woman; it is a reality that psychoanalysis presupposes. Femininity or masculinity are both failed positions from which we inhabit our sexual bodies.

Lacan maps the implications of this in his formulas of sexuation. The formulas reiterate the dictum "there is no such a thing as a sexual relation" (1966–67, Session 12/4/67; 1998[1972–73], 9) which means that there can be sexual encounters between people, not between complementary beings, if any encounter takes place it is between partial places of the body, thresholds of localized *jouissance*. We are speaking bodies, that is, beings inhabited and exceeded by language. Language makes *jouissance* (a shattering mix of pain and pleasure) forbidden, setting limits and obstacles in the trajectory towards the full realization of desire. To answer Farina's question: "Why is it 'great' that we theorize aggression as inevitable for *jouissance*?" Because *jouissance* is experienced in the body in ways that cannot be signified, the body is transformed — the organism becomes a body of *jouissance*, a body of excesses resonating in the organic body.

With the sexuation formulas, Lacan is challenging a model of gender as a binary relation between two positive, representable and complementary terms. In fact he was grasping the im-

possible relation between sexuated beings of any gender. This is another way of saying that for the unconscious there is no representation of the female sex, that the unconscious is monosexual or homosexual; there is only one signifier for both sexes, the phallus. Tim Dean (2000) observes that, "it is not so important that the phallus may be a penis, or in Judith Butler's reading, a dildo, as it is a giant red herring" (14). As such, the phallus is clearly a misleading clue comparable to the use of smoked herrings to mislead hounds following a trail. To pun somewhat on the phrase, I would like to suggest that the phallus is less a red herring than a "read" herring — in fact, like gender, it is subject to interpretation, and it will always be read like a text. As Bond Stockton remarks, following Copjec, the Lacanian axiom "there is no sexual relation" speaks to a radical antagonism between sex and sense. We should keep in mind that sexual difference is intractable, and castration appears as a partial answer to this deadlock. For psychoanalysis, castration, lack, woman, phallus are ways of representing something that cannot be represented because they belong to the Real.

Can psychoanalysis talk about sexual difference without a direct reference to the notion of "phallus"? It would be just as impossible, Morel (2006) notes, to talk about Freudian sexuality without referring to sexual difference. However, to avoid the trappings of phallocentrism, we can make use of several psychoanalytic concepts that are not sexed and help define sexuality, such the unconscious, repetition, transference, object *a* (cause of desire and surplus *jouissance*) and symptom. Lacan returns to many of Freud's concepts and reformulates them, first in his elaboration of the dominance of the Name-of-the-Father in the Oedipus complex, and later, going beyond the Oedipus complex and proposing a new form of the symptom, which he called *sinthome* (2005[1975–76]). The *sinthome* is a way of reknotting in the psychic structure what has been left unknotted because of the father's failure. This applied to the case of James Joyce but can be generalized somewhat.

Beyond the Phallus

In order to think about sexual difference without a direct reference to the phallus, I propose to follow Lacan's later theory of the *sinthome*. As Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger (2002) argues, it allows us to grasp the impossible relation between the sexes (91). Since the *sinthome* is not a complement but a supplement, it is a vehicle for creative unbalance, capable of disrupting the symmetry. The *sinthome* is what helps one tolerate the absence of the sexual relation/proportion (Lacan 2005[1975–76], 101). In contrast, the phallus is an obstacle. It is nothing other than a failed answer to the conundrum of sexual difference. This difference cannot be fully grasped (it is just speculation constructed on the real of the impossibility of a sexual rapport).

In this context, the clinical example of one analysand, whom I will call Ari, is helpful. Ari is a biological female who has had "top" surgery (breasts removed), prefers the pronoun "they" and takes testosterone. Ari is manipulating their body to transform it into a surface with an undecided readability: What they want is to pass as neither male nor female, thus rejecting altogether the phallus as a signifier of difference. If, according to phallic signification, we write two sexes with one signifier, Ari denounces the aporia of sex by refusing to be seen as either. The phallus is exposed as just a parasite, the conjunction of an organ and the function of language (speech). Ari elevates "the limp little piece of prick" (15) to the status of art and supplements it, transforming physical appearance into the art of divination. It is true that the phallus, often confused with the limp little prick, is not much more than a signified of *jouissance* that sexual discourse transforms into a signifier.

Certainly in some cases, sexual identity is of the order of the *sinthome*; it is acquired as achieving a reknotting of the three registers of the real, symbolic, and imaginary. Then, the *sinthome* shapes the singularity of an "art," a *technē* that reknots a workable consistency for the subject; this movement can best be evoked by saying that it moves the subject from a certain contingency to absolute necessity. Taking into account the complex

relationship that transsexuals have to their body — they often say that their souls are trapped in a body of the wrong (opposite) sex — I claim that an art similar to that of actual artists, if not necessarily with the genius of Joyce, can be found in transsexual artificiality. In some cases, it gives birth to an art that, I argue, is tantamount to a creative *sinthome*. This can be clearly observed in Jan Morris's (1986) sex-change memoir *Conundrum* where Morris describes her trajectory as an inevitable, predestined act, as if the sex change had always been bound to happen (168–69).

One can see why her *sinthome* was necessary: it was necessity itself. A *sinthome* is what does not cease to be written. Thus Morris writes: "I see myself not as man or woman, self or other, fragment or whole" (191). Her continuing ambiguity is not a "solution" but a tolerable, permanent questioning, she can make do with: "What if I remain an equivocal figure?" (191); "I have lived the life of man, I live now the life of woman, and I shall transcend both — if not in person, then perhaps in art…" (190). In Morris's case, the *sinthome* has produced less a "woman" than a "woman of letters." Since sexual difference is real and resists symbolization, it creates a symptom, but this symptom is something that cannot be rectified or cured; it is nevertheless something with which every subject must come to terms. In Lacan's formulation of the *sinthome*, the idea of the symptom acquired a new meaning. The *sinthome* is a purified symptom; it remains beyond symbolic representation and exists outside the unconscious structured as language. In this sense, the *sinthome* is closer to the real. Lacan reached the final conclusion that there is no subject without a *sinthome*. Lacan's contention that there is no sexual relation entails that there is no normal relation, and therefore that the relationship between partners is a "sinthomatic" one.

I argue that in, what I provisionally call a push-towards-writing, a movement or passion that is often observed in transsexuals, the body finds its anchor in the sea of language. Many people who feel trapped in the wrong gender do experience the drive to write, to produce a text that narrates their experience, offering a testimony to their stories of transformation. It is in the

writing of the sex change memoir that a final bodily transformation takes place, when the body is written.

The *sinthome* is a form of writing that offers a new relation to the body based on the possibility of assuming a sexual positioning without the phallus as absolute norm. The *sinthome* is a creation *ex nihilo*: "It is by this [the lack] that I try to meet the function of art, what is implied by what is left blank as fourth term, when I say that art can even reach the symptom" (Lacan 2005[1975–76], 18). The *sinthome* engages the lack but castration is vanquished; the constant weaving and unweaving of creation has nothing to do with the Oedipus complex or the phallus; it is even free from the Other (the Other may be just a semblance, someone's own personal myth). The *sinthome* creatively makes up for deficiencies linking body, ego, flesh, gender, *jouissance*, and subjectivity.

As we hear everyday in our clinical practice, the relation between the sexes is a screw-up (*ratage*) (Lacan 1998[1972–73], 121), and there is only a relation to the extent that it is symptomatic. This contention entails that there is no normal relation, and therefore that the relationship between partners can only be a "sinthomatic" one. This is because, in sexuality, the subject appears as a *sinthome* for another subject. It is at this anti-normative juncture that Queer Studies finally meets psychoanalysts.

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