

Death Drive in the Feminine

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In his 1924 article, 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', Freud links masochism to the death drive and distinguishes three aspects: erotogenic masochism, feminine masochism, and moral masochism. Feminine masochism includes a paradox. Indeed, Freud speaks about it with regard to the man who puts himself into a "situation that is characteristic of the feminine", that is to say, in the position "of being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby." This deconstructs anatomy and anticipates gender disorder. He did not have to wait for Judith Butler for that. In fact, this perspective is correlative with what he discovers in Anna, his daughter, from whom he hears these masochistic fantasies. A little later, with his article 'A Child is Being Beaten', he would join the love of the father to a masochistic dimension. We will learn later from Anna and her biographers that the child in question was Anna.

For Lacan, the relationship to the death drive for a woman does not come from her masochism, but from a certain feminine madness as such, which permits her to go beyond the limits fixed for the man by his proprietary anxieties. For women, there is a beyond to castration anxiety, a madness which comes from being "not all" in the phallic function. Lacan's work can be read as a long inquiry into feminine madness which is inaugurated with his thesis on Aimée and which is pursued throughout his elaboration on feminine jouissance with Antigone, Sygne de Coûtfontaine, the mystics, Medea and Madeleine. These are women who go beyond the limits. They strike the objects most dear to the man or get themselves stuck by death. Death appears as the horizon of a certain register of love and of jouissance beyond the phallus. Was this proximity not already isolated in the myth of the rapture of the young nymph Persephone by Hades, the God of Hell, a prefiguration of the clash between Eros and Thanatos, to use the Freudian terms. This myth would become an iconographic theme. The somber link between feminine sexuality and death would not, indeed, cease being interrogated by painters from the XVth

century on. Romanticism would accentuate the theme of the young girl and death as one sees with the famous string quartet by Franz Schubert. Cinema will take it up later. Without redoing the history of cinema, let us cite 'Death and the Maiden' by Roman Polanski.

Woman, Lack, Without Limits

Lacan complexified what Freud isolated as a fundamental lack. For him, the anatomical difference meant that woman was castrated in reality. The subjectivization of this "not having" leads to a fundamental meaning: penis envy. The Kleinian substitution of the object "breast" for penis envy (*penisneid*) ends up conceiving of the libido as a mode of seeking to refind the object beyond satisfaction: *object seeking*. The relation of the object comes to the place of the search for pleasure. Lacan will not leave the Kleinian analysts to their maternalizing slope and to their promotion of the "real" of the maternal care which brings jouissance. His fundamental orientation is to denounce the obviousness of the mother, starting with the feminine question. He calls into question two essential propositions of the doxa: the mother is certain, the woman varies. The mother in psychoanalysis is the one who has, the woman is the one who does not have and who makes something of this lack. In this sense, the woman has every affinity with the semblant which makes one believe that there is something where there is nothing. The feminine masquerade by Joan Rivière designates nothing other than this point. To remedy the lack, women make a multiple usage of the fetish as semblant. There is the trapping fetish of feminine seduction. More secretly, there is the usage of the *postiche*/the piece added on, the phallus taken away from a man, living or dead. The *postiche* woman confronted with the fear of her own castration, seeks a solution on the side of having. She uses up the "added pieces" to incarnate the phallus. For Lacan, the woman and the mother do not overlap at all. The woman exists as long as one confuses her with the mother. The woman as such does not exist, this is something else. She has a relationship with the inconsistency of the Other. This accounts for the fact that the woman has no structural rapport with the limit, contrary to the man constrained by the phallus. If the sig-

nifier of the lack in the Other $S(\emptyset)$ is worth something for both sexes, it is valuable for each one in its own fashion. For the woman, $S(\emptyset)$ designates the feminine jouissance beyond the phallus, for the man it designates a register of jouissance of the drive insofar as it is asexual. In the sexual relation, the woman wants, certainly, the organ, but even more, she wants the phallus as signifier of desire, of the desire which speaks, she wants her man to say her being. It is in this way that man “says woman” [*dit femme*] beyond the phallus. With the certainty of a shared love, she, then, finds in him a limit which is going to fix in place the drift of the drive. In analysis, the exploration of the manner in which the mother named her rapport with the phallus and its beyond is the path by which the analysand can mesh together the particular collection of her signifiers, depending on the drive circuit to which they belong. The metaphorization of the drive jouissance without name, forms of the lack of the mother, leads to a releasing of the name of jouissance. This is already to take a distance from what a signifier of jouissance would be. This name even has the same structure as the $S(\emptyset)$. It writes a lack. There is not a name of jouissance which would not be, in the final instance, a semblant. The value of truth, fundamentally, linked to the semblant, butts up against the impossible of the writing of the sexual rapport and of a signifier which “would say woman.” Lacan could say in the course of his elaborations that the woman is the object of man’s fantasy, but also is his symptom. How is one to understand this last formulation? The woman, symptom of the man, supposes the definition of the sinthome as a body event. It designates the effect of the signifier’s jouissance on the body and comes to the place itself where Freud inscribed the drive. J.A. Miller has shown how the term “partner symptom” rises up in Lacan’s teaching as symmetrical with the speaking being (*parlêtre*). This condensation includes the speaking being in its dimension of semblant and the living body in the structure of *lalangue*. The “symptom partner” is a new status of the Other to which the subject is linked in an irremediable fashion. It designates the real as impossible to bear and which the subject enjoys at the same time. It is also the one who has a chance of responding. The “partner symptom” implies, not only the autistic

jouissance of “the *apparole*,” but also the address to an Other by which something of jouissance can take its body for something. The twists and turns of the rapport between the sexes is that of an infinite discourse where contingency of the encounter does not cease deciphering itself. There where there is no sexual rapport, there is this semblant which each one enjoys. From the anatomical Freudian lack to the lack of the signifier of the phallus, women deploy the relation to the semblant and to the *apparole* to protect themselves. Also, women know that that the burden returns to them, the burden of making exist, in a singular fashion, one by one, this being who has no signifying and libidinal essence. They have no other choice.

Feminine Jouissance and Death

The figures of women that Lacan explores in his work illustrate a regime of the beyond of the phallus which precipitates them or their partners into a deadly, even mortal, abyss. Let us consider the most striking of them.

Madeleine Gide is among those who have produced a devastation (*ravage*). Lacan used the term of devastation (*ravage*) for the feminine subject when she is confronted with the feminine jouissance of the mother. He notes this effect for most women. It is a structural phenomenon. It can express itself in a more or less marked way. It depends on the discourse in which the mother comes to name the beyond of the phallus. This discourse is not without a link with the partner she has chosen, but this partner always falls short of the task to be accomplished. The man is not confronted with the phallic limit in the same way the woman is confronted by the unlimited. But he can be devastated by a woman when she touches, in one way or another, his fundamental partner which is the object *a*. Gide is an example of this. In burning the letters that Gide had written to her throughout his adult life as a man, Madeleine targets this place. She destroys what was most dear to him at the moment when he testifies to a love which had been scandalous. He had found the meaning of the world by seeing this young girl crying and had gotten busy trying to find the words to console her. She destroyed this part of himself that was extracted and lost, this part of which she herself was the destination. Devasta-

tion “of an inhuman privation” that Gide will mourn for a long time.

There is also Medea, the magician, the woman in love, the criminal, the mother, the wife. She is the one who kills her father and certain others for the love of Jason, her man, who is also the father of her two children. She is the one who, abandoned by Jason for her rival Creusa, decides to punish him in a murderous madness. She is the one who kills Creusa, Creon who opens his kingdom to her, and her two children. The only survivor of this carnage is Jason to whom she refuses the body of his children so that he can give them a burial place. The turning of love to a hatred without limits is a pure expression of the death drive which aims, from then on, to sacrifice all the objects of Jason’s love and desire. She can even go so far as attacking her children, starting from the moment when they have no more phallic value and become an object for her. The extreme of feminine jouissance in these consequences permitted Lacan to say that all women are mad. This feminine jouissance beyond the phallus breaks the moorings to the Name of the Father and the symbolic order. To deprive Jason of his children, living and dead, is to deprive him of any possible relation of filiation, of any possible transmission of his name.

What can one say of Aimée and her passage to the act? At the simplest level, we could say that the passage to the act inscribes itself at the pinnacle of delirious certainty of a threat of death to the infant that she had just had. It aims at her major persecutor, the actress who constitutes a constant threat to the life of her son. If the rapport between the sexes does not write itself, the rapport between father and mother must write itself. For Aimée, that proves to be impossible. Everything topples when the signifier of paternity is called for. The delusional certainty is correlative of the sole identificatory signification that she can assign to her infant. It is not a question of the equivalence infant/phallus, but infant/death. Aimée enunciates, without knowing it, the scope of the criminal potential of her maternal delusion. “I feared very much,” she says, “for the life of my son. If some misfortune happens to him now, it would be because of me, I would be a criminal mother.” Hidden behind the delusional exactions imputed to the actress is a criminal

mother. This is the fundamental process in which is inscribed the relation to the Other reduced to the single will to a deadly jouissance. This action is supported by the same coordinates as the birth of Aimée herself, linked to the accidental death of a sister whose first name she carries and for whom the grief will never be symbolized by the mother. The exclusive attachment of the mother and daughter linked by this death, is found duplicated in the relation that she maintains with her own child whom she overwhelms with worrisome cares. In his thesis Lacan evokes “the perversions of the maternal instinct with the drive towards murder.” We will find, as with Medea, a relation to the child reduced to the pure status of object, a real partner of jouissance, of a deadly jouissance without limits from which only the passage to the act separates her. Lacan notes that the delusional behavior could be understood, then, as a flight away from the infant and the cure as linked to the realization of the loss of her son in a process of self punishment.

Let us consider those who strike themselves down or are struck down.

In the Seminar on ‘The Transference’, Lacan fixes on the destiny of Sygne de Coûtfontaine, heroine of the Claudian trilogy. He considers her death as a suicide.¹ Sygne dies by placing herself in front of the bullet of a revolver which is aimed at her husband by his cousin. She pushes to its final limit something that hardly still merits the name of sacrifice. Lacan distinguishes three. The first is inscribed “in the framework of a spirit of sacrifice, in the gratuity of the gift, in the dereliction of the one who in the obscurity of her act abandons herself to a god who does not answer.”² This is the whole meaning of Act 1 of “The Hostage” in which she devotes herself to the reassembling of the dispersed familial patrimony. No earthly happiness is to be expected. The second sacrifice resides in her renunciation of the first by consenting to the marriage with Turelure, premise of her death to come. It is the renunciation of that which had made her very being. Here we are beyond the framework of a spirit of sacrifice. Sygne’s final No is qualified by Lacan as “the final negation” which is not only the negation of self, but also that of a god capable of receiving a sacrifice. The beyond to which this No is aimed is “beyond any theology

of a retributive god, beyond any economy of redemption.”³

On this point, Lacan distinguishes Antigone from Sygne. Antigone is identical to her destiny and follows the divine law which delivers her up to its trials, up to death. The evil god of ancient tragedy is linked to man by the intermediary of the *até*, destiny as the calculated aberration of which it is the organizer. This evil god is linked to the *até* of the other. “This *até* of the other has a meaning.” The whole destiny of Antigone is inscribed there. Sygne, in an act of freedom, goes beyond everything which determines her. By a simple No, Sygne affirms herself as beyond the submission of an Antigone to her destiny. Lacan adds that “the poet brings us to this extreme of the flaw, of the derision of the signifier itself.”⁴ The tragic destiny of Antigone that Lacan in his Seminar on the ethics had located in a Sadean topology qualified as between two deaths here finds itself passed beyond. From the moment Antigone crosses the entrance of the tomb, she is suspended in a zone between life and death. “Although she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living. And it is from that moment on that her complaint begins, her lamentation on life.”⁵ She evokes everything that she will not have—wedding, husband, child, friends to mourn her, a burial. For Antigone, “life (...) can only be lived or thought about from the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side. But from that place she can see it and live it in the form of something already lost.”⁶ Sygne leaves life far behind by sacrificing what she held the most dear, there is no lamentation on life from her. The evil god of ancient tragedy is the organizer of Antigone’s destiny, even if it leads her to death. From this perspective, it links her to a meaning (*sens*) and to human affairs. With Sygne, we are beyond any meaning articulated to an evil god. Lacan designates her by the term martyr, not in the sense given it in the Christian tradition, but in the sense of the mystics. It is the abyss of jouissance here under the auspices of the death drive which is no longer articulated to a god who organizes destiny. It is an abyss which opens onto a love which bears the stigmata of “pure love.”

The mystics, in the terms of *Encore*, have subverted the love of the father in the direction of the not all. God loves the

mystic in his exception. This exception manifests itself in excesses of the horrible. Spiritual biographies recount a number of extreme mortifications, corporal tortures, ascetic practices, ultimate tests of hell become present in the encounter with a jealous and cruel God. The love of the father in the Christian regime has its commandment “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Freud underlined its exorbitant character. Lacan pursues this where Freud stops, horrified, before the consequence of the commandment to love your neighbor. Recalling the mystical extremes of an Angèle de Foligno drinking with delight the water in which she had just washed the feet of the lepers, or of a Marie de Allacoque eating the excrement of a sick person, he approaches *das Ding* “as the jouissance of my neighbor.” The neighbor is to be understood here as subject and object of jouissance. With *Encore* Lacan will link this jouissance to the being of meaning (*signifiance*) which has no other place than the Other. This face of the Other, the God of the mystics, is supported by the feminine jouissance that inscribes itself in a relation to the barred A. The other face of God as Other (A) is the place where the function of the father is inscribed.

The Contemporary Forms of the Death Drive

To conclude, let us examine the way in which the irreducible relation of women to the death drive is revealed in the contemporary world. Women, in not being all in the phallic function, are more sensitive to the real than men. Faced with lack, they have three possible recourses: love, the drive, the phallus. The failures of love, whatever may be their forms, plunge women into a state of craziness. One witnesses something like a sucking of their being into an abyss that takes its colors from depression. The mourning in the love relation confronts the feminine subject with the unlimited of the barred A which clothes the death drive. All the research gives evidence of an important prevalence of depression for women in relation to men, without being able to account for it. We could say that with Lacan, feminine jouissance throws some light on it. On the side of the drive, surplus enjoyment can follow various drive circuits, but as Jacques-Alain Miller emphasizes, the will to enjoy, if given free rein, reveals that it is nothing

but the death drive. The anorectic, the bulimic, the compulsive shopper, are some examples of this. Woman can finally confront lack with the phallus whether it comes through the man or the child. In this perspective, can one say that there are reorganizations of the generalized and crazy *zapping* and of women on the masculine program which would really know how to captivate them? Are we not, on the contrary, witnessing an always greater distance between men and women, leading them to a solitude plugged up by the always renewed addictions to the imaginary of a body remodeled by science, sports, anorectic programs, aesthetic surgery, the tyranny of the object of consumption or the addiction to other substances. How can one find something to stop this, to plug the insatiable appeal of *jouissance* beyond the phallus? Will children be able to do it anymore? With *Rose Mary's Baby*, R. Polanski presented the terrifying aspect of the mother caught in the enterprise with the devil which will lead to the frightening murder of his pregnant wife. It is astonishing to note that Mia Farrow, the actress in this film, will devote part of her life to adopting children from the whole world to the point of producing the departure of her companion, Woody Allen, with one of her adopted daughters. That gives a limit to the statement "*Everybody says I love you.*" The maternal program reveals many surprises. In this regard IVF, which is a major advance in the treatment of sterility, nevertheless, permits more easily a fall of the child phallus and its reduction to the object *a*. This is not without consequences for the child. We already see how without the help of IVF, the death drive attacks the child reduced to its status of real object through maternal infanticides or the *human bomb* in the terrorist world that is pregnant women.

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Endnotes

¹Lacan, J. *Le Séminaire "le transfert," livre VIII*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 326.

²Lebrun, J. *Le pur amour de Platon à Lacan*, Paris, Seuil, 2002, p. 321.

³Ibid, p. 323.

⁴Ibid, p. 329 *Psychoanalysis*.

⁵Lacan, J. *Le Séminaire sur l'éthique, livre VII*, Paris, Seuil, 1986, p. 326; cf. also *The Seminar: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Book VII*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Dennis Porter, New York, Norton, 1992, p.280.

⁶Ibid, p. 326/280.