

From castration to otherness.

Why do we avoid talking about castration today? It disturbs us! It disturbs our enjoyment... except that when we deny the limits, the Real always catches up with us and puts a stop to our feeling of omnipotence.

What is this Real? It's what we're up against. First and foremost, it's the drive, the parental discourse, the social discourse... As long as castration is avoided, it creates upsetting events, repeated failures, rivalries, rejections, traumas, frustrations... It's the imaginary discourse that the patient brings us. It's his or her complaint (feeling under control or self-deprecating). The real is also the symptom (when the body sets the limits). But it can also be a social symptom, creating a contemporary phenomenon.

In short, the real is a great malaise that falls upon us...

And why? Because we don't want to let go and leave our drive unsatisfied. We don't want to give in to our society's excessive demands for more pleasure. As a result, our resistance to limiting our jouissance means that castration has become a taboo concept. Yet castration is part of the psychoanalytical vocabulary. It was introduced by Freud, who identified a major structural role for it, and was widely taken up by Lacan. What's more, the denial of castration has (for the sake of convenience) been lumped in with perversion. But all structures, beyond their defense systems, are traversed by the denial of castration.

What's wrong with the notion of castration? Believing it to be related to anatomy: anatomy is destiny! Except that the mistake has always been to believe that a woman's sex is missing something. And that the phallus (which is often opposed to it) is the male organ. But no! Women are not missing anything. The phallus is neither masculine nor feminine. Just as Freud confirmed that the drive is neither masculine nor feminine. It's a fantasy... The symbol of the erection. It's the erotic pleasure that children (of both sexes) experience when they discover masturbation. The phallus, as fantasy, is generated by this pleasure. It's something shared by both sexes, opening the door to reciprocal desire (heterosexual or homosexual).

What is castration?

First and foremost, it's the anguish it arouses in the newborn, in the face of too much maternal solicitude, which can become all-consuming. That's maternal castration anxiety... It's the fear of the Other, and the guilt of not responding to his request. It's about creating symptoms (giving her a piece of your body) to keep the peace.

But castration is also, at the other end of the development of the structure, this crossing, when the adolescent subject (or the subject at the end of analysis) uproots himself from his incestuous marasmus and extracts himself from it. The more the boy or girl parricides parental discourse, the more he or she leaves parental objects. The more he or she leaves endogenous space to cross the threshold into exogenous space. And this is precisely where otherness (difference) is encountered, and where the subject comes into his or her subjectivity.

Otherness is encountered in this exogenous space: this phallic space particular to the subject, outside the sphere of his childhood. Why phallic? This phallic terrain of otherness is that excitement discovered at the moment of masturbation, (in the entry of the phallic phase). It's precisely this pleasure that propels men and women into fulfillment, independence, creativity and lovemaking. Otherness is also the moment when the subject assumes his or her singular thought, in complete freedom and without guilt. All these parameters belong to the exogenous, to the world of otherness, and project the subject into a symbolic castration.

We know we've passed through a castration passage: when, after repeatedly confronting the real (which stumbles and holds back), all of a sudden, something has let go! A few sessions later, the patient returns and describes a (usually painful) situation which, strangely enough, without even realizing it at the time, has for once unfolded differently. Neither he nor the psychoanalyst really knows what triggered the change. The real has lost ground, laminated by the cleaver of the symbolic, and all of a sudden, it becomes fluid. This is where the right encounters take place, where, after many failures, there is success, the right opportunities... Everything is there.

And this symbolic overcoming of castration concerns both men and women. It all takes place on the same phallic terrain. This terrain (once reserved for men) is just as accessible to women (as they have demonstrated), and they share it alongside men. So castration doesn't just concern their sex. Anatomy no longer has the role (which has always been culturally ascribed to it) of hindering women's future. If women were to free themselves from male prejudices, they could even (after having fantasized about the penis as children) accept not having a penis.

On the subject of social phenomena, there's the question of transgenderism. As if anatomy really posed a problem! Ultimately, however, what really poses a problem is sexual identity, which, as long as it refuses (in adolescence) to leave endogenous parameters, encounters difficulties in assigning gender and remains imprecise. This difficulty, specific to sexual identity, already existed last century. Today, however, ideologies have taken it on board and emphasized it.

Before, patriarchy was a form of castration denial: the denial of the feminine was a symptom. Today, transgenderism is a symptom.

In fact, castration has always been a blur. But with transgenderism, its denial is truly exposed. Except that we still don't hear that castration is an unavoidable structural fact. Now that it's making headlines in the West and around the world, it's the Great Malaise!