

# NEW REFLECTIONS ON THE TABOO OF VIRGINITY

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Translated by Lindsay Watson.

There are two reasons why I have been impelled, today, in 1997, to reopen the question of the pertinence of the notion of the taboo of virginity in psychoanalytic practice.

First of all, when Editions du Seuil decided to publish my book Que veut une femme? [What does a woman want?] in a new paperback edition,<sup>1</sup> my publisher asked me if I wanted to modify the original text, which had been published in 1986. Once I had re-read this text - this author's 'proof', as the vocabulary of the press quite rightly has it - I reached the following conclusion: either I needed to rewrite it completely, or else I would leave it as it was, and put up with its flaws and its gaps. I chose the second option: after all, it had been written, and this writing marked a certain stage in my practice and in my reflection on clinical and theoretical psychoanalysis. If, on the other hand, I had chosen the first option, I would have re-framed my questioning from the perspective of an interrogation of the notion of virginity in the woman. Why? That is what I will try to explain here.

Furthermore, I was recently confronted with this question in a brutal and surprising fashion by a case in my analytic practice. Very briefly, here is the interesting problem which it raised for me. The patient is an obsessional man whose infantile and adolescent sexual life was subjected to an extremely severe repression. His parents, primarily his father, were opposed to his being distracted from his studies by the possible seductions of certain pretty sirens. Once his university studies were over - this was what he had to achieve in order to be allowed access to women - he "pulled out all the stops" to get married, and wed a young woman he had been seeing for two years, but whose existence his parents had deliberately ignored until the diploma was handed over. In short, then, it was marriage, children, professional career... an ordinary man's life, more and more invaded by symptoms up till his entry into analysis.

When he came to consult me, he explained that he was having to adjust to an embarrassing situation, but he had ended up getting used to it. After about fifteen years of marriage, he had accepted the double life of his wife, who had become involved in a passionate homosexual relationship with a very young colleague. One evening, on his return from work, he surprised them in the marital bed, at the most dissolute moment of their converse. He stopped, paralysed, in front of the scene spread before his eyes. They invited him to watch them, which he did, rigid and speechless. What did he see? He saw appearing on his wife's face the ravaging expression of a *jouissance* he had never known in her before. Some months later, he himself would have a sexual relationship with his wife's partner, but it would not be sufficient to appease his thirst for revenge.

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<sup>1</sup> André, Serge: Que veut une femme?, 1st edition Navarin/Le Seuil, Paris, 1986; 2nd edition, Le Seuil, collections Points, Paris, 1995. A translation of this work is currently in preparation: Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, NJ, USA.

The years went by, the analysis ran its course. He was cured of one of his most debilitating symptoms: the strange speechlessness that would overcome him in front of an audience composed mainly of women, to whom in his professional life he had to give lectures. If he raised his eyes to look at the audience, he told me, he saw nothing but an opaque cloud, and would immediately be deprived of the power of speech, mouth agape, unable to articulate a single word. He linked this phenomenon of speechlessness to one of the key memories of his early childhood. The memory is as follows: he was five or six years old, he was lying in his bed, ill with whooping-cough. He coughed, he could not stop coughing; the whole night long he was consumed by fits of coughing. Suddenly his father appeared, looking furious. He slapped his hand over the boy's mouth and bellowed the order, "Shut up!". From that moment on, he said, the repression - to which he submitted - was in place, of any coughing, any show of feeling, even any expression of his own ideas. Of course, this symptom shows the trace of a defiance of the father's dictatorial authority, and of the very Freudian fear of castration. But it also seems to me that here it is a question, beyond the Oedipus complex or the castration complex, of a sort of beyond of speech which has the closest relation to the question which always leaves him speechless, that of feminine *jouissance*.

Some time after the disappearance of this symptom in the analysis, this patient reported to me that he had started an extra-marital affair with a young woman he worked with. The starting point of this liaison seemed to him to be incredible. The first time he had made a date with her outside working hours, having made up his mind to seduce her, she arrived dressed as a boy, "like a fourteen-year-old boy scout", he said. He was flabbergasted, and wondered anxiously what monumental resistance he would have to overcome in order to win the battle. Then they made love, and, he told me, something very odd happened. As he was gradually taking possession of his young partner's body, giving way with ever-greater abandon to the variants of his own desire, she, on the contrary, was falling progressively into a sort of state of catalepsy. She was, as he put it, as tense as a bow, from head to foot, completely rigid and (psychically) absent. However, after the lovemaking, apparently coming back to her senses, she confided in him something which left him feeling completely perplexed: "You have made a woman of me!" At this moment in the narrative, I heard myself saying to him, "You're heading for serious trouble...", and I ended the session.

In the sessions that followed, I never heard him mention this woman again, nor refer to that strange experience. Not the slightest allusion to either. Until two years later, when, one fine day, he arrived at the session completely devastated. Now, he said, he absolutely had to speak to me about his girlfriend: she had just committed suicide in an extremely violent way. In fact their relationship had continued very happily throughout the two years, at least, for him. The only cloud in the sky had been that, for the last few months, his girlfriend had begun to ask him, more and more insistently, to leave his wife and come and live with her. During the last few weeks leading up to the suicide, her insistence had turned into outright harassment. She besieged him, telephoning him at all hours of the day and night to tell him she could not bear to be alone any more, sending him letters and threats, following him everywhere, etc. Above all, he told me, she was making such terrible scenes that he thought she was losing her mind, and he started to wonder if his girlfriend wasn't quite simply going mad.

He found it all the more difficult to understand this harassment since, for him, things were quite clear, and the contract had been explicitly formulated right from the start

and repeated several times over since then. From the very first he had explained to his girlfriend that he would never leave his wife and he would not allow her to disrupt his family life. They had agreed that this situation would not change, there was no question of changing anything whatsoever in their pact, he had always been very firm on that point. Their relationship was asymmetrical and they both knew it: he *desired* his girlfriend, and she *loved* him. She loved him madly, as they say. This is what both overwhelmed him and interested him. He had never believed that anyone could love him like that. To love him for his body, in particular. This body which had appeared to him, at the age of puberty, as an object of revulsion, of shame, a defect to hide. While his girlfriend seemed to adore his body. In that first phrase that he had reported to me two years before: "You have made a woman of me!", I felt there was already some indefinable note of ecstasy. Later she had given him a nickname: "The Magnificent Lover". This name flattered him, for sure, and also made him anxious, but above all it aroused his curiosity.

Now, confronted with his girlfriend's suicide, he felt as if he has both woken from a dream and entered into a nightmare. He suddenly realised that, for two years, his happiness had come from living in a dream, but that, throughout that time, his girlfriend was not dreaming. And he wondered: "What have I done to this woman? What was I for her? What was she trying to tell me when she said, 'You have made a woman of me'?, when I wasn't even her first sexual partner or her first love..." The stupidity of men, the madness of women. I confronted him with this proposition as an enigma: he deflowered her. And I added: without even noticing it. She had had her revenge, but it is not the end of the story, nor of his analysis.

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In 1918, continuing on from Totem and taboo, and with the idea of finishing the series *Contributions to the psychology of love*, Freud wrote a short paper entitled *The taboo of virginity*. It is one of his works which is seldom commented upon; in any case, it is referred to far less often than the other two papers in the series. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that it is a text which contemporary psychoanalysts have practically allowed to disappear into oblivion.

It is true that it is a rather confusing text in so far as Freud's thought, or more precisely his thought process, appears to be somewhat less clear than in the preceding two essays. It is also true that this text may appear a little old-fashioned in so far as the question of the virginity of the young woman is no longer posed today in the rather dramatic context that still surrounded it in 1918. Nonetheless, an attentive re-reading, in the light of the new insights that the teachings of Jacques Lacan have given on the question of femininity, gives it a freshness and a modernity which might not be apparent at first glance. Perhaps I would even dare to propose that this question of virginity is at the forefront of our questioning of the essence of femininity.

There are four themes which appear in succession, woven into the text. These four themes are linked through a rather disorganised articulation: to distinguish and deconstruct them requires a rigorous reading.

The first is the state of "sexual subjection" (in the French translation), which for Freud would constitute a characteristic specific to feminine sexuality. In German, the term used by Freud is very strong - it will make feminists howl with rage: *Hörigkeit*, that is to say, slavery, bondage in the historical sense of the word. On this subject,

we should recall the title which Jean Paulhan gave to (a section of) the very beautiful preface he wrote for Story of O by Pauline Reage: "Happiness in bondage".

The second theme is the taboo of virginity that can be observed among the so-called 'primitive' peoples (that was the language of the time), and whose significance Freud enlarges upon fairly rapidly, maintaining that what is signified by this specific taboo is, in reality, the taboo of women in general, the taboo-woman.

The third theme expresses, to some extent, the modern version of the taboo of virginity in our culture - at least at the time of writing of the article - because Freud, in 1918, was far from being insensitive to modifications in the traditions on which the civilisation was based in whose bosom he invented and introduced psychoanalysis. The danger which these primitives seek to pre-empt by making feminine virginity a taboo is translated into our state of civilisation by the danger of feminine frigidity.

Finally, in the conclusions of the article, there appears a last theme, whose contemporary resonances will not be lost on the reader who has some acquaintance with the Seminars of Jacques Lacan, particularly the Seminar XX, Encore. It is a question of the feminine division in sexuality. Of course, Freud does not use this term and he is a long way from the hypothesis that Lacan was to construct fifty years later on this question. The French translators of Freud speak of the "incomplete sexuality of the woman". In German, Freud writes "*die unfertige Sexualitaet des Weibes*". "*Unfertig*" is a pejorative term which means immature, lacking in maturity.

Having isolated these themes, let us ponder on what reasoning Freud pursues, what is the movement in his thinking that we can discern in this 1918 text.

First of all he establishes, as a strange fact, the apparent opposition between primitive customs and our customs as civilised men. Indeed, the primitive peoples seem to put no value at all on the virginity of the woman who enters wedlock, since the custom or the ritual is to avoid defloration by the fiance and have it carried out by a third party; whereas in our culture, the fact that a fiance receives an intact woman is a fundamental requirement: a requirement which is constitutive of monogamy, writes Freud. Civilised marriage presupposes that he who has been first to satisfy the maiden's desire for love and who has thus overcome the resistances to sexuality which have been imposed by her milieu and her education, will establish a lasting relationship with her which will not be possible for any other man. This relationship with the first one, at least, the first one to have triumphed over the feminine resistances, entails a state of sexual bondage for the woman. Let us remark in passing, even though Freud does not highlight this point, as if it was obvious to him, that civilised marriage (what Freud calls by this name) thus presupposes a resistance to sexuality, particularly in the woman. Civilisation and unease, civilisation and renunciation, even civilisation and repression go hand in hand, as Freud would later explain, in 1930, in Civilisation and its Discontents. Feminine sexual bondage would, according to this logic, be in direct proportion to the strength of the resistances which would have been overcome in the relationship with the first man.

There is a second logical moment in the text contrary to what one might think at first, primitive peoples do not in the least underestimate virginity. On the contrary, they accord it the highest possible value, perhaps higher even than we ourselves give it. They make it the subject of a taboo, so they take it to be of supreme value. This is ultimately the reason for the strange custom which deems that the defloration of the maiden shall be entrusted to a third party. Freud attempts to explain this taboo of

virginity in an analytic way. After various attempts at elucidating it, which I will leave out here, he concludes that in reality this taboo is subsumed in a more general one which touches the woman herself, as such. The woman, in essence, is taboo. Well, if there is a taboo, there must be a danger. But what is this danger? It is the fact, writes Freud, that “*woman is different from man, forever incomprehensible and mysterious, strange and therefore apparently hostile*”. This passage is truly valuable, because it contains a mention of the radical alterity of femininity, and of the correlation of this alterity with anxiety, which is rare in Freud, and, if I may dare to say it, almost Lacanian. In any case, Freud immediately interprets this affirmation by placing it back in the frame of reference of narcissism (“the narcissism of minor differences”, he writes) and of the castration complex (the woman as representative of castration, a theme which we can find again, for example, in his short paper of 1922 on *The Medusa’s head*).

Then there is a third moment: Freud reverses the order of his reasoning. Instead of trying to explain the modern overvaluation of virginity through an analysis of the customs of primitive peoples, from now on he takes the sexual behaviour of civilised women as his point of departure, in order retroactively to throw light on the primitive taboos. Civilised sexual life shows that there really is a danger for the man in the encounter with the woman: it is feminine frigidity. At this point, Freud introduces, by the way, a distinction which is by no means trivial, and which might lead to a different conception of virginity. He distinguishes, in fact, between the first occasion of intercourse and the first orgasm (*jouissance, Befriedigung*). It is rare, he asserts, for the first sexual act to lead to orgasm for the woman. Generally, it is a source of disappointment for the woman, “who remains cold and unsatisfied”, and this failure can lead to permanent frigidity. At this point, the content of the problem posed by the text changes. It becomes: how can we explain feminine frigidity? Freud then tries four explanations in succession. First he evokes the narcissistic injury which results from the destruction of an organ (i.e. the hymen). Then there is the need for prohibition which, for the woman, constitutes a condition of love.<sup>2</sup> Next, there is the fixation of feminine libido on the father and his substitutes, which leads to a rejection of the husband. And finally, and this is the explanation he will stop on, there is penis envy. The first act of sexual intercourse triggers a “masculine protest” which demonstrates her rejection of femininity, her refusal to give up a sexuality which is essentially masculine, and, consequently, her rivalry with the man, the desire to punish him and to avenge herself on him by taking the penis from him.

From here, from this last point in the argument, we reach the inevitable conclusion: the sexual bondage the woman feels for the first man, the one who deflowers her, goes hand in hand with the hostility she feels towards him. The two phenomena are inseparable, since even if they are apparently contradictory, they stem from the same root: the privation of the penis which reveals, at the time of the first act of intercourse, the incompleteness of feminine sexuality proper. The Freudian paradox of feminine sexuality thus becomes obvious at the time of the loss of virginity, which in a single movement joins and disjoins the maiden and the male sex, and reveals her irreparable division where the man is concerned.

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<sup>2</sup> Lacan, Jacques: *Télévision*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1974, gives a striking formulation of this feature: “a woman only encounters The Man in psychosis. Let us propose this axiom: not that The Man does not ex-sist, which is the case for The Woman, but that a woman forbids him to herself, not because he is the Other, but because there is no Other of the Other, as I put it.” p. 63.

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Re-read in this way, *The taboo of virginity* requires some further comment and critical reflection.

The first observation that comes to mind is the following: the way Freud dealt with the question of virginity in the 1918 paper appears to the contemporary reader to be at once obsolete and extremely topical. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that the value of feminine virginity, as Freud might have conceived of it, has not ceased to fall. Who, in the Western world of today, would speak of an overvaluation of virginity? Except in certain particularly closed social milieus, the value of the young woman's virginity is close to zero. That is a fact.

And yet there is still something that rings true: 'the first time' continues to have a decisive import. But the meaning understood by 'the first time' has changed. The notion of virginity has been displaced according to the imperatives of a culture whose very evolution has itself been influenced by the diffusion, anarchic and distorted, of psychoanalytic knowledge. The notion of virginity is no longer linked to defloration, as it was commonly conceived of in 1918, but rather to the first encounter with *jouissance*, or, more precisely, with the first orgasm which, as everyone knows, has become a quasi-obligation in contemporary culture. The civilising Super-ego not only demands the renunciation of the satisfaction of the drive. It can also make *jouissance* an imperative, or at least a form of satisfaction. On condition that the latter becomes uniform under the universal and vulgarised sign of the orgasm. We can say that today's virgin is the woman who has not yet experienced orgasm in sexual intercourse with a man. I hasten to add that this definition, which is an observation of a cultural fact, of a password of the dominant discourse, leaves absolutely unanswered the question of knowing what a woman's *jouissance* actually is - the orgasm merely being the masculine model par excellence of the appeasement of an excitation.

Furthermore, we should emphasise, and not without some astonishment, by the way, that Freud was a victim of the beliefs of his time. In fact, Freud did not for one second doubt, either in speaking of the civilised peoples or of those he referred to as primitive, that the hymen was the infallible sign of virginity. It was an objective, material, medical sign. Well, this anatomical materiality of virginity was far from being accepted in all historical eras. In reality, it is purely and simply an act of faith. In a very fine book, to which I have paid the homage it deserves,<sup>3</sup> Giulia Sissa has shown, with plenty of evidence, that the Greeks, the Hippocratic physicians, the Romans and the early Church Fathers did not know of the existence of the hymen, in spite of their considerable knowledge of anatomy. More precisely, they did not recognise the hymen such as it was conceived of later on in Christian theology, that is to say as the veil or the membrane which closed the entry to the vagina like a door.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle does not mention it, nor does Galen in his manual on dissection. In his treatise *Gunaikēia (On the maladies of women)*, Soranos, a famous physician of the period following Galen, affirms categorically that it is wrong to believe that there is such a barrier to the entrance of the female genital organ: "Indeed, the fact of believing that a fine membrane grows in the midst of the vagina and forms a

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<sup>3</sup> André, Serge, op. cit, Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> Sissa, Giulia, *Le corps virginal*, Vrin, Paris, 1987.

transversal barrier in the sinus, and that it is that which is ruptured, either during painful deflorations, or when the menses arrive too abruptly, and that this very membrane, if it remains intact and grows thicker, causes the malady called 'imperforation', is an error (*pseudos esti*)."<sup>5</sup> And if the Church Fathers maintained, throughout the centuries that followed, that the hymen existed, it was above all with a prudence which said a great deal about the anatomical unreality of this veil. Saint Augustine, for example, while recognising the existence of the hymen, was opposed to the idea that a midwife could verify its existence by touch.<sup>6</sup> Saint Ambrose (4th century) also had his doubts about the possibility of such objective verification.

Much later, physicians, freed of the ascendancy of theology, would re-establish this truth forgotten during the centuries of theocracy. In the 16th century, the great Ambroise Paré would categorically deny the existence of the hymen. Similarly, Buffon, author of the article on *Virginity* in *The Encyclopaedia*, expressed himself on the subject with remarkable sagacity: "Virginity, which is a moral state, a virtue which consists only in the purity of heart, has become a physical object (...) to seek to know it is to violate it. Anatomy itself leaves us in a state of complete uncertainty about the existence of this membrane which is called the hymen (...)."

Indeed, the belief in the materiality of the hymen as a veil closing off the vagina is an effect of the persuasion of Catholic theology which crystallised enduringly in the 10th and 11th centuries. The reason for this aberration is the following: it was necessary for the hymen to exist in order to make the virginity of Mary, mother of Christ, miraculous. For this virginity of Mary's did not consist merely in believing that she had been able to conceive a child while remaining a virgin - a situation which was perfectly easy to construe within the philosophical, moral and medical framework of the Greeks, the Romans and even the Talmudists. The dogma of the virginity of Mary (which, let us remember, was only adopted very late by the Church) was that she remained a virgin *before, during and after* the conception, to take up the literal formula definitively consecrated by the Church. In order for this virginity to be miraculous, it was necessary for her to have defied some anatomical materiality. Whence the affirmation, *purely ideological*, that there is a hymen which closes off the entrance to the feminine genitals like a door. This historical reminder, which I have kept as brief as possible, shows clearly that the woman's virginity is a cultural entity: its value, its significance, its sign, even its substance, are determined by the ideals of civilisation - and, I would add, by its dominant powers.

The preceding lines lead me to speak of a real paradox of virginity, even in cultures which have believed in its material existence. When it is the case that virginity endows the maiden about to enter wedlock with all her value, it automatically opens up a field for possible contestation by the spouse, who might claim a grievance on the day following the wedding night. The traces we can find of this which have been preserved by historians are extremely interesting. What we find, above all, is that no anatomical sign has ever been held up as a legal proof which would decide the matter. The fiancée's virginity is always proved by divination, or by a judgement, that is to say, oracle or verdict: always by speech. Let us refer to the great experts on this particularly delicate matter, in other words, the Talmudists. Psychoanalysts themselves, among others, could learn a great deal from a reading of the treatise

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<sup>5</sup> Soranos, *Gynaikologia*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, I, XVIII

Kotoubot (On matrimonial contracts) which constitutes the first book of the Talmud (because, among the Jews, the study of law begins with the relations between men and women). By means of infinite and subtle discussions on the question, the text demonstrates that virginity cannot be perceived in nature and is impossible to prove objectively. The true criterion, the one which the Talmudists retain to settle disputes between newly-weds and their families, is the speech of the woman, who has to reply to questions posed by the rabbis. In other words, the stake of virginity and of its loss, however impalpable the sign or the moment might be, is that of the value that can, and should, be ascribed to a woman's speech.

This finding opens a door onto a horizon which is beyond feminine sexuality in the narrow sense of the expression, but which perhaps finds a way back to its essence in a more certain way and via a path which is quite other than that of anatomy. What relation could we establish between the notion of virginity and the usage of speech? Can the psychoanalyst, in his practice, hear the resonances of this song which, traditionally, is the domain reserved for poetry? And, if he hears it, is he in a position to say a single word about it which might cause its beyond-ness to vibrate? The outcome of analysis of the feminine subject (never mind the state of her anatomy) might hang on whether or not the psychoanalyst had, or did not have, the faculty for making audible, through the style of his interpretation, a language which would recognise and preserve the impenetrable virginity of speech.

The Freudian idea of the sexual immaturity of the maiden is obviously linked to his conception of the woman's sexual division. For Freud, the latter is expressed in a radical split between a primary masculine sexuality (for example, what he defines as clitoral sexuality) and a form of feminine sexuality which is in a constant state of coming into being, implying the renunciation, which is often painful, of the phallus. It is the same conception, and why not say it, the same prejudice, which leads him to sustain the truly stupefying idea according to which the woman would have two genital organs: the clitoris and the vagina. (As if the mystery of feminine sexuality were not just that of the connection, that is to say, the metonymy, which occurs from the clitoral zone to the vaginal wall, in defiance of any anatomical innervation.) Within the framework of this conception, it is impossible to see any way out of the hostility towards the man, unless through admitting that feminine sexuality can be achieved only via the pathway of sacrifice.

The teaching of Lacan (I am thinking above all of Seminar XX, Encore) allows us to think about this problem in a different way. The pivot constituted by the loss of virginity, whatever content one might give to that word, is not the choice (which in any case is impossible) between two opposing options, one consisting in being all-phallic (the achievement of *Penisneid*), the other in being all-woman (the definitive renunciation of the phallus). When Lacan states, "The Woman does not exist", he means that a woman is always *not-all*, that is to say, divided between her subjection to the phallus as master signifier of sex, and her openness to a beyond of the phallus, in the form of a *jouissance* which no signifier can account for, certainly not the signifier "orgasm". At bottom, would that not be the true secret of what we can discern in the customs of the primitive peoples which Freud was questioning in 1918? Isn't the truth about virginity bared to us by the rituals of those cultures which really expose the fact that no husband can ever possess *all* of his wife? If the first act of sexual intercourse, or the first orgasm, has the effect of really consecrating the subjection of the maiden to phallic sexuality, it does not necessarily follow that she becomes *all-phallic*. This subjection is more likely to bring out its beyond, if we follow the logic of the formulae of sexuation proposed in Encore. This beyond is not

hostility towards the man, which is the hysterical version of sexuation, nor a certain type of melancholia typical of certain women, but rather the love, even the *jouissance*, on her own part, that the maiden discovers as something that cannot be attributed to phallic sex. The question of the virginity of the woman presupposes, of course, the encounter with a man, but, at bottom, it is a question which is at play more between the woman and herself than between the woman and the man. To experience *jouissance* of herself as of an Other, discovering herself at a moment when she is radically Other than herself - this is the mystical and anguishing situation of which Theresa of Avila and Marguerite Duras offer us two versions; this is the heart of the difference which is the basis of feminine sexuality.

Lacan attempted to express the specific division of feminine sexuality in his two algebraic formulae of sexuation on the feminine side of the subject.

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Ex.Φx

—  
Ax.Φx

The first signifies that there is no feminine subject who is not inscribed as subject to the phallic function. The second adds that, at the same time, this subject can only be inscribed as not-all in the phallic function. There is a left-over, a margin, a reserve, which exists, or rather reveals itself, which cannot be spoken about, unless one supposes that there might be a possible *jouissance*, suffering or ecstasy, a rapture, as Duras would write, an Other *jouissance* - but that, Lacan insists, is a mere supposition. From this perspective, feminine virginity would not precede the act of sexual intercourse with the man; on the contrary, it would follow on from it as the silent reserve which is made more palpable by phallic sexuality.

This reinterpretation of the notion of virginity may allow us retrospectively to throw some light on one aspect of ancient culture. Throughout all time, as we know, only virgins have been allowed or called upon to fulfil sacerdotal or magical functions habitually reserved for men. For example, there is the case of the Pythia of Delphi, whose position has been studied with remarkable insight by Giulia Sissa. The “mouth down below” of the Pythia, closed to men but open to the exhalations of a crack in a rock (which has never been found by archaeologists) is kept in darkness and secrecy in order that the “mouth above” can open and allow the speech of the god to emerge, proffering the oracle that comes from the Other in disordered manifestations of a strange *jouissance* which the Greeks called by the name of madness (“mania”). Catholicism expresses it, at bottom, in a way which is even more explicit and direct: the virgin is the wife of God. These nuptials of the Other, going beyond any service to be rendered to the phallus, illustrates the fate of the Pauline doctrine, the very essence of Catholicism: this is what happens when it is *love* of the Other which is put in place of the Law, rather than *desire*. That is a point which would be worthy of further consideration.

How shall I conclude this commentary? Maybe like this: what I wanted to say in What does a woman want?, but which I could not express in 1986 in the same way as I can now, is that *a woman is always a virgin*. The phallus does not take her entirely into bondage, as Freud believed. The phallus brings into being for the female subject a beyond, a silent reserve, where the woman does not experience

*jouissance* from the man, but from herself through the man. And just to think that it is commonly believed that it is men who treat women as objects!... Is not this reserve, this absence, this ineffable supplement which makes of her an oracle for the man, the final guarantee of a virginity which lasts for ever, founded on the sexual relation which, far from deflowering the woman, makes her forever impossible to deflower, impenetrable not only for the man but also for herself?

This is why it is true to say that feminine virginity remains and will always remain the fundamental question and fear of men when, to however slight a degree, they sense this radical alterity in the sexual encounter. While for women, virginity constitutes a focus of anxiety which can, in certain cases, border on a form of madness. The relation to God, which Lacan insisted upon in Encore, throws into relief the fact that love, which is put in place by the Law, can also take on the cast of a Superegoic imperative: love unto death, as it is staged in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet or Kleist's Penthesilia. In this respect, a rather more penetrating examination of our contemporary culture leads us, it seems to me, to conclude that the female orgasm has become a password because it functions as a stop-gap.