

ON THE RITES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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I was born in a place where the earth trembles, but its inhabitants no longer notice it. This place is dominated by a volcano on whose slopes rests an ancient Roman town once buried under its lava, subsequently brought to light again in the stillness of its ruins. On the edges of the unearthed town there is a Roman Villa called 'of the Mysteries', which still imposes a perturbed silence on its visitors. A little further down the coast you can smell the sulphur from the volcanic boiling earth and witness other odd seismic phenomena. Seismologists can do as little as anyone could at the time of Pompeii. And here I am, far from the place of my origins, able to write about these phenomena not only as a geological symptom, but as my own. This unruly land could also be used as a wider metaphor for the unconscious itself, as the place where we all were born, but without knowing it. But with what kind of knowledge are we concerned here? Is unconscious knowledge (*savoir*) a revelation in the sense of an initiation, an exclusive access to a *beyond*? This was the question that Lacan asked in his last seminar La Topologie et Le Temps one year before his death: is psychoanalysis an initiation? So he had come full circle back to the last sentence of his Mirror Stage where the end of analysis does not have to coincide with "the point where the real journey begins": "Psychoanalysis may accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the 'Thou art that', in which is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins."¹ So what kind of revelation is Lacan referring to here? Lacan gives us a hint again later in his Signification of the Phallus² when he says: "The Phallus is a signifier whose function in analysis is to lift the veil of the function it had in the ancient Mysteries." And this is the aim of my paper, to find the function of the unveiling of the Phallus as it is represented in the frescoed room of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. In order to do so, I need you to join me on a brief guided tour through the scenes of the frescoes and the Dionysiac initiatory progression [note: the scenes covering three walls are read from left to right].

The first figure shows Domina, the matron of the house and the priestess who directs the initiatory rites. Some commentators believe that the cult was a pre-nuptial initiation for the bride to be, a rite of passage for women only, as it were. But Dionysus was not only the son of Demeter, goddess of marriage and of the Eleusinian Mysteries, he was also initiated by her and so were other men as well, the way Socrates himself was initiated by Diotima. When the Bacchanalia as mass events were banned in Rome, secret associations practising the Mysteries in limited circles of intellectuals sprang up in the south of Italy.

The second figure shows the entry of the initiate; a child reads the sacred text under the guidance of a woman: perhaps the child is Dionysus himself, and the woman his mother. In the third figure after the libations, Pan, god of 'the all' and of Panic, appears next to a woman who suckles a goat and the half-human figure of Silenus. The uncanny sight of Pan's lost union of nature and the human puts the initiate to her first test: the terrified woman's impulse to flee is the first dramatic phase so far. Nor,

¹ Lacan, J., Écrits (1977), p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 285.

in the fourth figure, does any good omen come from the divination in the next scene where the reflection of the monstrous mask breaks the mirror image in the Satyr's cup. In the fifth, the image of the divine couple appears instead, broken too, but by the accidents of time. This is the impudent blissfulness of Dionysus himself leaning on a feminine lap (of his wife Ariadne, or more likely of his mother Demeter). The mother/son incest is at play in the continuity of the Eleusinian/Dionysiac Mysteries and their common way of reaching ecstasy by means of sexual union, a rite whose only parallel lies in the East, in Tantra's sexual practices. And having learned godly love from his mother, Dionysus enjoys like a woman, and he initiates both men and women to a feminine enjoyment. As the sixth figure shows, it is at this ecstatic point that the most sacred action takes place: the unveiling of the Phallus. One catches just a glimpse of the Phallus behind the veil which is about to be lifted when suddenly a whip prevents the culmination of the action of unveiling. *Aidos*, the feminine winged demon of Shame appears to bar the woman's sight. It is by going through this phallic whipping, a sado-masochist phantasy, that maternity as symbolic fecundity is given to the bride to be. The Phallus almost appears and disappears between ecstasy and shame. In the seventh figure, out of the whipped woman and her shame (for her sterility? For the manifestation of her masochistic enjoyment?) springs the dancing nude, the Bacchante: a transfiguration of the polymorphous perverse into a Bacchante, a transformation of the masochistic phantasy into raving pleasure. And it is consequently to this state of joyful intoxication, rather than to an ineffable one, that the preparation for her marriage can take place. Getting high on dance and wine, or on chemical Ecstasy in that rite of passage which is nowadays youth culture, entails a collective possession. E. R. Dodds³ ascribes this ritual outlet of forbidden drives to the archaic age of Shame Culture rather than to a later Guilt Culture.

Lacan also makes a similar distinction in L'Envers de la psychanalyse where dying of shame signifies the passage from ritual shame (that is, the crossing of the phantasy for the re-appropriation of pleasure under the phallic beating) into neurotic guilt. I will come back to this.

The eighth figure shows the nuptial dressing. A little Eros holds up a mirror for the initiate's ringed eyes on a face which expresses the post-ecstatic serenity following important events (recomposition of the mirror image). On the corner of the wall another little Eros watches and waits for the bride to prepare herself with modesty. And modesty is for Freud dictated by the primary force of shame, but within those limits which are regarded as normal. Shame is neither the neurotic denial nor the perverse disavowal but pure effect/affect of *Aufhebung*: acknowledgement and covering of the obscene. It has nothing to do with the hidden cheating of neurotic guilt. With shame, we enter the realm of the symbolic and of Lacanian practice. The whip and the veil mask the appearance of the Phallus on the scene of nakedness, of 'nothing on' and the Phallus in its essence of simulacrum. The real exposure was the feminine enjoyment of a god off duty, non erect, in an indecent rest. But what shines forth behind the veil is the ultimate lack, death itself. Lacan shifts shame from the field of sexuality to the side of death. The neurotic would rather die than feel shame! He thinks that the cause of shame must warrant death: believing oneself to be the agent of it and that death is deeply deserved. Psychoanalysis instead shames you into living exactly when it finds a 'beyond the limit' (the Real) which is not made to be

³ E. R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (1951), University of California.

known. The fig-leaf covered the genitals only after the 'impossible' fruit of knowledge was eaten. Knowledge, like language, is the veiling of the obscenity of the Real; it covers and uncovers it like a dress but does not replace it. The analytical intervention provokes an exposure which, even only for a moment, produces something new in the relation between conscious and unconscious, knowledge and truth, life and death, love and hate. From this fleeting exposure a friction takes place in our psychic settlement which produces a sparkle, causes that potentially revolutionary fire which Lacan called desire. Analysis causes rather than concludes, it provokes a time to conclude that one has not begun yet. It does not aim at a conclusion but at a beginning of the real journey. There is no other conclusion to a cure but this beginning, this passage to one's own unique destiny which can only be known *après-coup*. The end of analysis too, like destiny, is known only a moment too late when the analysand has no longer returned. The symbolic accomplishment takes place through a process of undressing, of dejection and resurrection which is typical of all rites of passage. Rites of passage, unlike mystical initiation which aims at an esoteric revelation only for the few, do not initiate to a 'beyond' or a 'within' but to life itself: how to carry on living with and in spite of an unknown 'beyond', how to go through the necessary initiation to being human. Psychoanalysis therefore is not a mysticism, as the beyond is not its stake. The ethics of psychoanalysis does not aim at achieving a mystic union and neither do the Dionysiac rites. They described a progression of demoniac and sacred encounters. But their aim was the healing of the soul, an initiation to our everyday life. An impossible unveiling is the ethics of both processes where it is its action that cures.

But as in the frescoes it is by crossing the fundamental phantasy of a shameful whipping as a fixed point of horror and humiliation that the last two scenes are possible: the dancing bacchante and the eyes of the bride at the mirror which express earthly pleasure, the recuperation of one's own flesh separate from the Other's. And Eros waiting in the end seems to witness a change of discourse. It is the discourse of love to recompose the broken image of a subjective dejection. For the Pompeian brides this was their initiation to their wifely love. The Bacchanalia were probably an initiation to love for earthly people.

"There is a forcing (*forcage*) which is called initiation." Lacan continues, "Psychoanalysis is an anti (ante ?) -initiation. The initiation is that by which one can elevate oneself to the Phallus. It is not easy to know what is initiation and what is not. But in the end the general orientation is that the Phallus has to be integrated. It is necessary that in the absence of initiation one is either man or woman ... as a third sex cannot subsist in the presence of the other two."⁴ Could we conclude that this 'forcing' of initiation is what psychoanalysis would be doing if it aimed at a specific conclusion of the cure, that is, to set a limit to the destiny of the subject which will always lie lower or higher than the limit set by the analyst who is supposed to work with his desire and not with a supposed knowledge. The limit of the subject and,

⁴ Unpublished Seminar: La Topologie et Le Temps.

therefore, the analysis will always be somewhere else, where it is not expected. Surprises here can be disappointing, especially when they regard analysts' own analyses. Presumably they are not different because anything different from finding one's own limit, one's own pathway, would be that 'forcing' of initiation which Lacan warned us against, in spite of himself. Indeed, Lacan expressed deep disappointment at his own slip (*lapsus*) of the veil in this last seminar, at this lack of elevation, as if somewhere else he would have liked the phallus revealed somehow in the end. But what he found himself unveiling in his work was not the phallic idol, but the nothing of the feminine encounter with God, there where there would be sexual rapport, but only beyond the phallic distinction of only two sexes. It is this nothing which Lacan unveiled, and which makes one almost die of shame, that really initiates the human quest. And this is not the quest of the few but, like the Dionysiac rites, the analytical unveiling initiates the many, those who want to carry on living to make sense of death which life entails. The mysteric revelation was exactly this experience of elevation and dejection which aims at 'integrating' this Phallus. There is no elevation to the Phallus, which is only the emblem of human power and human fall. Psychoanalysis aims at this integration of the human, necessary step for any possible elevation. This is the Dionysiac and the psychoanalytical initiation. But, as for a mystical elevation to the Other's potency, as for having it revealed at last, yes, that is beyond psychoanalysis.

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