

*Introductory Remarks on the Theme of the Geneva
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I would like to begin by making a few introductory remarks to today's "Clinical Conversation" which as you know evokes the theme of the eight congress of the NLS to be held this year in Geneva, in June, under the title "Daughter, Mother, Woman in the Twenty First Century".

My first remark concerns the question of how we are to situate psychoanalysis in respect of this very contemporary theme, which one could, for example, approach from a feminist perspective – a perspective that has often been wary of psychoanalysis and especially of Freud's controversial notion of "penis envy". In Freud's deployment of this latter concept many have seen, for example, an attempt being made to assign an inferior position to women, and indeed there is no getting away from the fact that Freud's account of human sexuality is pretty normalizing and segregating: men are like this, women are like that. However, if one pursues Freud's argument, what one sees is that what Freud is struggling with here, is to give an account of sexual difference that captures the uniqueness of the feminine position in a way that does not simply reduce things to socio-culturally defined gender differences. In doing so we move beyond and away from the questions and debates that inform the feminist movement centered as they are on issues of equality. Here we can note that while the feminist discourse on "equality" may have succeeded, by in large, in emancipating women, at least in the western world, from the worst excesses and exploitations of a patriarchal society it has at the same time largely failed to address the question of what a woman essentially is. For example, Freud as early as 1908 in a paper entitled "Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness" could be critical of the constraints and burdens placed on human sexuality and particularly on women by the social mores of his time but he was also aware that what was of interest to psychoanalysis was not this, but rather the fundamentally different position a subject assumes in being one sex or the other.

My second set of remarks relate to Freud's account of female sexuality as seen through the lens of the Oedipus Complex. As we know Freud's account of human sexual development stresses from the very first the contingent nature of human sexuality. In other words drives are initially partial, "soldered together" as he says, and the genital drive is formed only via the apparatus of the Oedipus Complex. Freud here takes as his paradigm the boy's erotic attachment to the mother and consequent rivalry with the father which following an encounter with castration, and in the absence of conflict, normally shifts to an identification with the father and to a heterosexual object choice. In Freud's early writing on the topic the boy and girl's Oedipus are seen as more or less similar, the only difference being that for the girl the father represents the positive object choice. However, in his later writings on this topic he gives greater attention to the development trajectory the girl encounters in the Oedipal situation and his account of sexual development becomes more complex. Thus in 1931 in "On Female Sexuality" Freud is obliged to introduce what he terms the "negative Oedipus Complex" stating that: "the female only reaches the normal positive oedipus situation after she has surmounted a period before it that is governed by the negative complex. And indeed during that phase a little girl's father is not much else for her than a troublesome rival" (p.226). In other words she is initially in an active or masculine position in relation to her erotic attachment to the mother. Moreover, Freud now argues that the negative Oedipus applies to both sexes given what Freud saw as an originary bisexual potentiality intrinsic to human sexuality. Thus for the girl (as for the boy) we have a situation where initially there are three oedipal positions at stake, positive, negative or inverted and then in a second temporal moment, following the introduction of castration, there exist again these three possible oedipal positions though now with significant subjective changes being made both in object choice and as a result of newly manufactured identifications. At this level of detail Freud sees that for the girl the situation is altogether more complex than it is for the boy. Thus, and unlike in the boy's case, she must change her primary object (from mother to father) and also change from a masculine position, seen as active, to a feminine one, seen as passive, the latter opening the way to the vagina as against the clitoris becoming the prime erotogenic zone. The problem with all this, for Freud, is that this encounter with the asymmetry between the sexes leads to a number of more or less well known impasses and paradoxes. For example, we can see that at the moment the girl must reject her mother as love object she must also identify with her, somehow retaining by way of identification the very element she must abandon and give up in terms of her erotic interest and

attachment. Moreover, in order to become a woman she must come to want precisely what the mother lacks, namely the phallus.

My next set of remarks concern Lacan's radical reformulation of the Freudian Oedipus; so radical in fact he comes to refer to the Oedipus as "Freud's myth". At the center of Lacan's reformulation we find the phallus, not as it was for Freud, as a representative of the penis (whether present or absent) but rather as pure lack. Of course here we must note that we are not speaking at a biological level where indeed nothing lacks but are rather dealing with images of completeness/non-completeness and their symbolic signification. If we now turn to the infant-mother dyad we see that for Lacan what the infant in his or her state of helplessness desires is first and foremost the mother's desire on which the infant's recognition and survival depend. However the fact that the mother herself desires presupposes that she is missing something and it is this respect that castration is first encountered in the mother, for what Lacan calls the "phallus" is the signifier for this lack in the mother, encountered by the infant, for example, in her absences and in her whims. Here the phallus is not a thing, an object or an organ but rather the signifier of the desire of the Other and the child tries initially to situate itself there as precisely that which could satisfy this lack. This however is impossible as what the mother desires refers to an elsewhere and thus the infant experiences what we could term a first temporal phase of castration. As a result of this the child is forced in a further structuring moment to recognize the presence of this third term – a signifier that will come to substitute for the mother's desire and which Lacan will introduce as the Paternal Metaphor and as a symbolic separating function between the child and mother.

Returning now to the question of the woman we can see how Lacan comes to replace Freud's two terms "fear of castration" on the male side and "penis envy" on the female side with two very different notions, namely on the male side "having the phallus" and on the female side "being the phallus". On this view one's sexual position is governed by a subjective response to the loss of jouissance involved in castration which in turn defines a jouissance position or mode of jouissance detached from the anatomical and linked to the linguistic Other that both organizes and orients human sexuality as phallic – in effect providing a "treatment" of what Lacan termed impossible jouissance, or jouissance One". Here the sexual relation is governed not by some natural or biological instinct but by a play of semblances something we can see, particularly on the woman's side if we look to what Joan Riviere first described as the "feminine masquerade". In its simplest form what this indicates is that for the woman there is an appeal to a complement, an other who will treat her

as a phallicized love object. The point that Lacan makes in using this term is that if the woman manifests herself in the sexual relation as masquerade it is not the case that behind this phallic mask we can expect to find the “truth of femininity”. Rather the truth of femininity lies in the masquerade itself, in other words in this semblance whereby the ability of the woman to make herself an object of male fantasy and/or fascination is made manifest. It is why in Lacan’s “table of sexuation” the singular rather than universal woman is represented precisely as the “object a” for the man. Indeed one can see here that what man seeks as cause of desire in woman is reducible to a fetishistic object, as she must come to represent, not as complement, but in an autistic way, what he is lacking. To say that the woman, in order to include herself in the sexual couple, must not so much desire but cause the other to desire may perhaps sound controversial though here this pathway through the other must be seen as simply that. Namely as a phallic pathway to a supplementary jouissance that is specifically feminine and outside the symbolic, a jouissance that does not allow itself to be saturated by the object and which Lacan indexed as the woman’s unique relation to the lack in the Other (S - barred A). In the absence of any natural “sexual rapport” one finds a complex play of semblances.

Turning now to motherhood, a few further remarks are indicated. Firstly in Freud we see that there is clearly present a tendency to reduce woman to mother. In other words it is the child that ultimately serves as the phallic object of compensation for the woman. Moreover Freud holds her relations with her husband, as phallic as they may be, are also ultimately governed by this logic, which means that what a woman unconsciously wants in her relationship with a man is a “child-husband”. Lacan strongly disagrees with this notion that maternity is a preferred or natural destiny for femininity. On the contrary he sees a mother’s preoccupation with her child as - without doubt important and even vital, but, ultimately as a *temporary* aberration, something that indeed puts the woman at risk of finding her object in the real and becoming fixed there. For Lacan then the woman is first and foremost the woman attached to the other of the love relation where she, we could perhaps say rightfully, is or receives the phallus and therefore can remain not completely concerned with her child. If a mother finds her satisfaction in her child rather than elsewhere we can say that that child will be doomed to an alienation attached to making the mother’s fantasy come into existence, he or she will be trapped in being the mother’s possession. On the other hand, and at the other extreme we have the specter of the mother who is absent and not engaged with her child understood not as a physical absence but as a subjective abandonment and of course there are many possibilities that

may occur between these two poles. A third problem that may arise for a mother comes about when she is outside the phallic function. Here an encounter with her child can take the form of an encounter with a real and terrifying object, something that is literally experienced as outside of sense. Such an experience can sometimes be calmed by the intervention of another mother, say her own, who acts as a guide, though it may also lead to a full-blown puerperal psychosis. At this point we can perhaps also bring in a reference to the “daughter” of the congress theme and to something that Lacan noted as a particular problem that may arise in the mother-daughter relationship. He termed this “ravage”, or in English one could say devastation, and what he was referring to here was something more radical than the particularity of the maternal prohibition on jouissance that a daughter usually bears, something that in itself can have quite devastating effects, effects that one hears of in analysis in the reproaches a daughter makes towards her mother. However, Lacan uses the term the “ravage” to refer to something else, specifically the danger a daughter encounters when she has the misfortune of having a “perfect mother”, a mother against whom no reproach is possible, an unforgettable mother who makes her passive and blocks her access to her own jouissance. Winnicott was right when he said that as a mother one must be “good enough” although Laurent in a recent article entitled “Protecting the child from the family delusion” (*available at: www.iclo-nls.org*) subverted this somewhat comforting notion when he indicated what was truly at stake here, namely, that the most important thing for a mother is to be “bad enough”!

In finishing I can perhaps evoke rather than speak about the “21st century” part of the congress title. Certainly the position of woman in the social bond has changed dramatically since Freud’s times and continues to do so. For one the segregation of the sexes is now more or less gone, as in, men do this, women that. Also today we increasingly see many new variations of the couple relationship be they serial relationships, co-habiting ones, homosexual ones or the more radical choice, today made more frequently, of “the single lifestyle”. There is also the possibility that the woman’s link to motherhood at least as we know it may begin to disappear with advances in science (e.g. via new forms of birth) and that, in addition to this, the woman’s “mothering role” may in the capitalist market place be one that, for example, increasingly men may come to occupy. And, of course, we all live in a world where the superego no longer prohibits but rather urges us towards an obligatory jouissance – something that impacts on both male and female modes of jouissance.

