

Moustapha Safouan: Questions Concerning Feminine Sexuality, 16th October 2004

Question: I have two questions, one for each side of the table of sexuation. For the side of the man, if we have on that side all men — and that's the side of the universal — what's Lacan saying? That we should get a proper definition of masculinity? Or, is the definition of masculinity that which resorts to universality? That's my first question. The second question is: Why do you think that when Lacan talks about feminine sexuality the only examples he uses are mystics? You made a link between female sexuality and a closer relation of women to the real, and you talked about life, death and reproduction. That indicates something quite different to Lacan's examples of St. Theresa or St. John of the Cross.

Moustapha Safouan: As to the first question, it is not a matter of defining masculinity. You can't say what masculinity is, nor what femininity is. You can read them in the genetic codes and that's all. What it is to be a man is a problem of language, in as much as it gives us concepts but it doesn't give us definitions or essences. And that's why, in front of this incapacity to say what a human being is, we proceed to classifications — there's the white and the black and the blue, etc. We make distinctions between species and genders precisely to get around the difficulty of finding essences. That's the first point. As for the second point, it's because there's nothing to be said about feminine *jouissance* beyond what can be said of it in relation to the phallic function. The question is whether there's something that corresponds to this — unspeakable or not. The answer might be yes, but before you can say yes you have to say it's *because* we don't know anything about this other *jouissance* that we have the feeling that it's there. The less you know something, the more you talk about it. So we can go on about it and imagine it in *La Nuit Obscure de St John de la Croix*, or wherever. We can attempt to find an expression of it. But these are never really expressions of the other *jouissance*, these are things which come to fill the hole created by our not knowing what it is. It could be this, it could be that, it could be a whole lot of other things, but there is always a question as to why support this other *jouissance*. The answer is because there are things which try to pin it down, and the very existence of these things forms some sort of 'proof'. Also, this thing that escapes the phallic function can only be in the order of *jouissance*, given that *jouissance* is the only place the subject can find in language. But it is a *jouissance* of which you can say nothing — which, incidentally, doesn't mean that it is repressed. The repressed is the *jouissance* of the symptom, but here we are talking about a limit of language.

Q: So the attempt to describe this other *jouissance* is often this 'mystic' attempt. I was thinking that, if phallic *jouissance* forms a kind of narrative, structural, graphic part, i.e. a horizontal part, then the notion of the mystic has a vertical structure. It seems to me that you can move both upwards and downwards. I don't think it's accidental that the examples that present themselves are on the side of moving upwards towards an answer that disappears.

MS: There are a couple of points here, whether you choose to go up or down. I think the common point is that it is expressed as a dream of fusion, of oneness.

Q: Why?

MS: Because it's a lack. In the pursuit of a whole — in masochism, philosophy and amorous life — we are all taken with this idea of 'the One', of totality. And that's why it's difficult to switch from English to French, because in French you have 'tout' — the word means both 'universal' and the 'whole'. So, as usual, Lacan makes use of this ambiguity.

Q: The people who wrote about mysticism are mainly men writing from a particular position, and therefore the striving for 'the One' is defined from a position within phallic *jouissance*.

MS: If you want to put it simply, there are two varieties of lack which are easy to spot. There is the lack which is described in need. There is also the lack which is formulated in a demand. And it

was Lacan's idea to specify that there is a third lack — desire. Because, after all, when you talk about the energy of the libido you are not talking about either demand or need. So what exactly are you talking about? This question prompted the whole verbiage from mysticism to philosophy. Lacan himself was one among others who tried to say something about this lack. It pretends to have its basis in a certain experience, which is the psychoanalytic experience, but outside of this experience you have no other option but to imagine it in the context of mysticism, philosophy, etc. And, of course, by its very definition you can describe it as a lack with reference to some idea of completion.

Q: You talked about feminine and masculine desires and feminine and masculine jouissance, although it didn't seem to me that you made desire and jouissance equivalent. Could you say something about that?

MS: To start with, jouissance is the place that one finds when there is no place for the subject. This is the only thing you can be sure of concerning jouissance. But this jouissance has to be imagined, and your imagination will draw it from the signifiers of the demand. You can find it in all the phantasies of devouring, of the gift — all of the oral, anal and phallic phantasies. They are all ways of imagining the jouissance of the Other — the enjoyment that the Other is supposed to get from you. This is what corresponds to the function of the phantasy. But why doesn't one remain there? What makes the pathway down from jouissance to desire? One can be happy enough with one's phantasy. That's why we have hell in changing the subjective position in analysis, because there is such attraction in the symptom. So the thing that makes the mediation between jouissance and desire is law, the prohibition of incest, in that it excludes you from identification with the phallus. This identification and this exclusion comes from the very beginning of life. The human subject cannot help but identify with the signifier of the mother's desire. But this identification itself signifies its own 'forbiddenness', although this can never really be clear. And here comes the function of the real father, in as much as he can give some weight to the Name-of-the-Father. This is the 'normalising' operation of the real father. Of course, in analysis you are not going to rebuild this function, but you can at least help a subject to have some understanding of his own phantasies, and their hopelessness as a method of knowing the unknown — I mean their *a priori* character. It is not a process comparable to the 'normalisation' brought about by the real father (when there is a real father) but it has the result of detaching the subject from all phallic identifications through the recognition of his own phantasies. So the brief answer to your question is that it is Law that mediates, that makes that jouissance go down to desire.

Q: Could you say something about the shift from Freud's concept of penis envy to Lacan's idea of *ravage*?

MS: The very idea of desire as a demand for the impossible was inspired in Lacan by the notion that the girl asks for the penis of her mother. This demand for the impossible takes on many forms in the clinic, for example you might see a girl who follows her mother incessantly with the demand: 'Mother, give me something.' But there's absolutely nothing which corresponds to this something. It's a simple trick designed to undermine the mother's omnipotence. So Lacan was the first to find a function for 'penis envy' other than referring it immediately to the penis. The girl doesn't actually want a penis. Her desire is routed through the mother. It's mediated by her relation to her mother. That makes a big difference between Lacan's thesis and Freud's. It's more corroborated by the clinic, because in the clinic you can't say that *penisneid* answers the question of femininity. It's false. You see it in the example of the girl following her mother with the question, 'Give me the impossible'. This particular girl really only related to her mother. The father didn't have even a shadowy presence between them. So when this face-to-face between the child and the mother came to the fore, that child had to do something. I would say this was the only means she had to attenuate the *ravage*. Otherwise she would have been in a position of complete subjugation. But it's a dangerous method because it cuts you off from satisfaction.

Q: You've spoken about difference in relation to lack. I wonder if you could say a bit about difference in relation to psychoanalytical training organisations.

MS: All institutions have the same problem. The problem is group psychology. But group psychology is easily resolved through hierarchy. The fact that there is a superior and an inferior gives everybody a place. The superior is where he is, and the inferior is waiting for him to go away so he can take over. There's a very sharp remark of Lacan's on the subject. He said that in a group of cattle the enemy is someone outside the group, but with human cattle the enemy is every member of the group. So the only solutions are either to kill all of them, or to get closer to some and keep your distance from the others. However, these are not recommended solutions as far as psychoanalytic training is concerned. But what other methods can we find? This is the problem which all psychoanalytic institutions face, and which Lacan himself tried to resolve by creating new methods. Although he failed, some of his ideas are still valid. For example, the idea of working in small groups with some kind of 'plus one' — the 'plus one' being a sort of tutor who is spontaneously chosen for the job. Also the idea of 'the pass' is good enough — in spite of certain misunderstandings. Lacan himself was under the effect of the problem of the end of analysis. There was no issue of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* without at least one article on the end of analysis. Lacan constantly changed his mind on the subject. At first there was the idea of the subject assuming his being-for-death and getting rid of the ego. Later he came up with the idea of the crossing of the fundamental phantasy. But then you had the problem of what the drive becomes once the phantasy has been crossed. Or what is your child for you once you've got over assimilating it with *object a*? Or what happens to your relations with your neighbours or colleagues once they're no longer your enemies? A further idea was the fall of the 'subject supposed to know'. But these can't seriously be considered as the markers of the end of an analysis. They are descriptions of the process of analysis. There can be an analysis without any psychoanalytic work. It can't be helped. You can't do an analysis in spite of the patient. But, in as much as there is psychoanalytic work, it goes in the direction of knowing the phantasy and this brings modifications, which it is useful to follow on the level of an institution. So I would recommend the idea of 'the pass' as something not particularly related to the end of an analysis, but as a clarification of the process of analysis and as giving you a vision of how analysis works. Do people want to become analysts because they have crossed the phantasy? Or do they go to their analyst in order to *realise* the phantasy? In France you have the word 'cabinet', which means both the W.C. and the consulting room. So some people become analysts in order to find their W.C. Now things have moved on from the question of, 'What is an analyst?' to an interest in how analysts become effective. But I do believe that some of Lacan's ideas are still valuable, with a few modifications. They are worthy of being studied because they can help us find a solution to group psychology other than hierarchy.

Q: Could you say something about a remark you made once, that women are better qualified to be analysts than men?

MS: They are, because man wants an object in the woman — in a trait, a shine on the nose for example. But what a woman wants is a man's desire. It's completely different. And that's why a woman, as Kirkegaard said, is more liable to feel anxious. But this attention to desire itself qualifies her better for the profession of psychoanalysis. She's more attuned to unconscious desire than men, who are somehow obtuse.

Q: Just to return to this question of psychoanalytic organisations and the problem of the group — there's a clue in in something you said earlier about the struggle of the subject to find a place when there isn't one. It seems to me somehow to give us a pointer in the direction of resolving group psychology, especially in relation to hating one's neighbours. In the end we are returned to the analytic experience, which offers us a treatment for our jouissance.

MS: There's a serious flaw here, in that the solutions offered by Lacan seem to suppose that the problem is already solved. For example, he recommended that we should be attentive to each other's work — to listen to what our colleagues say. But this already supposes that analysts are really interested in psychoanalysis while, as a matter of fact, they often aren't. That's why it's possible for three bad elements in a group of a hundred to spoil the whole group. There are

people who are poisonous. The problem is that solutions like this one suppose that the problem is already gone. But still it's better to say it, because at least it gives us a direction. Imagine how difficult it is to replace sympathies and antipathies with attention to work. It's a hell of a job, but you have to insist on it anyway.

Q: I have a question about a point you were developing at the end of your paper when you contrasted the inscription in the phallic function with this link to what you called the 'tree of life'. Does that open up different perspectives on motherhood from a non-phallic point of view?

MS: No. The castration complex has two stages, that's why I object to the idea of the pre-oedipal in the girl. The first stage is this identification with the signifier of her desire. If there is no signifier of desire in the mother there will be no constitution of desire at all. The desire of one is the desire of the other. But there must be something to indicate what this desire of the Other is. Which means that the mother must have a desire which extends outside the child. The phallus points to this outside. That's why it is present from the very beginning of childhood. But it is not pre-oedipal — it is already the effect of being part of human culture, which is essentially oedipal. So there is no 'pre-oedipal' stage. The girl and boy go through the same period, but then there must be a second period in which the work is affected. There's a detachment from this first identification, and this is precisely the detachment which makes the descent from jouissance to desire. As far as motherhood is concerned, suppose a mother is still in thrall to the first incest — the incest between herself and her child. This may be clear on the clinical level if, for example, you have someone who doesn't feel the presence of the child, or who feels it simply as something real weighing down on her. This may be an indication of psychosis. At other times you see how absolutely proud a mother is, going out on the streets and exhibiting the baby. The very term 'exhibition' makes you think of exhibitionism. She is caught up in phallic imagery. You could call it 'false motherhood' — very different from 'true motherhood', which testifies to more detachment from this adhesion to phallic imagery.

Q: It's a delicate operation to manage this sort of attachment.

MS: Yes. It's difficult because of what you lose. Your phantasy gives you a sense of certainty as to what the other wants. For example, 'She devours me'. This may be a very telling metaphor as to the oral character of the relation. I have a patient who consistently betrays this presence of the oral component. This gives her both a certainty and a jouissance. So to deprive her of these two benefits cannot be easy work. To liberate the drive would be to lead her to see that she is using her own lack to interpret the other's desire, because her own desire has been severed — and instead of accepting this severance she identifies with the severed object. She is the breast and her mother wants to devour her. The whole point is to lead her to see that she is using her own severance, or lack, to interpret the other's desire.

Q: I'd like to add that there's the problem of the mother giving up the child enough to allow some separation, but there's also the problem of the mother pushing the child away. It's a delicate operation to find a balance between the two.

MS: A mother's love is absolutely essential. We insist on mortal reality and being-for-death, but as far as it talks in the unconscious, death speaks both as a destiny and as an origin. The first experience men and women have of death is the experience of abandonment by the mother — her disappearances and absences. These are the initial steps towards assuming human reality, and the mother is so deeply involved that without it there can't even be an assuming of one's own image. We all know the phenomena of autism. You can offer these children all the care you like but still they don't want to be human. The whole problem is to offer the child love which is not infected with sexuality. Love is one thing, and perverting a child is something quite else.

Q: Woman is more likely to experience anxiety. Does that mean she is more likely to encounter the void in being? Or that the gaze as a protective covering has a dual, or different, function?

MS: Perhaps not the void in being, but in men. As there is no gift, the whole idea is to distinguish between the object of desire and what you can give as an answer to a demand, to the object of a demand. Still, you can say that what man has to give is his own desire, and not his phallus. Men really desire the gaze, they want to be looked at, but in the dimension of vanity — they are exhibitionists. You can see it in 'The Balcony' by Manet: two women and the man behind, glowering. He offers himself to the gaze. He looks for it. It's completely different. I agree that this entails a difference between men and women in relation to their respective positions with relation to the gaze.

Q: I wanted to ask you about sex changes, which seem to be ever more available and frequent in our culture. Some seem successful and some not. One question would be whether you think that these are all psychotics. And just to add another thought, there's currently a lot of medical debate about sexual assignment surgery at birth, simply because so many of these people grow up and then want to change their sex. There's an argument being made that people whose gender is indeterminate should be left like that until they reach their teens. Do you have any comments on this?

MS: There are two differences between what you might call 'normal' and what we qualify as psychotic. The first is that a normal person identifies with the part of himself that he doesn't know. When you say, 'I don't know what I am,' you are identifying with that part. This permits you to imagine that you might be something else, like the Chinese philosopher who asked whether he wasn't in fact the butterfly he'd dreamt of the night before. You could express the same thing by saying that you don't fully identify with your identifications. If you are actually a king, that's fine, or Napoleon, that's good, but if you absolutely identify with 'Napoleonhood' then it become an excess. This complete absorption of a subject in an identification is what happens in psychosis. He believes firmly that there is 'man' and there is 'woman', and that he is either a 'man' or a 'woman' — you can't take the idea out of his mind. The other difference is that, to the psychotic, the partial object is located in the real. He knows what you want of him, and he has a definition of it. This is what gives limitless power to his revindication, because it is a real thing. This is his object, this is his desire: it's in the real. So, identification with one's own identification (instead of recognising it as an identification), and the placing of the *object a* in the real — these two things are what characterise people who want to change their sex. Therefore theoretically I would say, yes, I consider them psychotics. But still, when it comes to clinical work you have to look very carefully at each case. Decisions as to what to do are always difficult and delicate.

Q: Could you talk a little bit more about the crossing of the fundamental phantasy.

MS: Well, I've just given an example which I could use again. It simply means taking notice of the patient's language. For example, in a situation in which a patient is convinced that her daughter wants to devour her, she may be led to see that she is involved in a phantasy. Perhaps she was severed from her mother at a far earlier age than her own daughter, and is now inhabited by a lost object with which she has identified and with which she is interpreting her daughter's desire. This is the crossing of the phantasy — abandoning one's own conviction as to what the other wants from you.

Q: Could you say more about the idea that female homosexual relations are Platonic?

MS: As the theory goes, a woman may assert the existence of the exception. This was to all appearances the case with Freud's homosexual girl. She was defying her father, and his gaze could push her to such extremes as to throw herself off a bridge. This overvaluation of the father was very apparent in the tableau. So, a woman can posit the existence of an exception and feel herself to be castrated. And then she behaves exactly like a man: she loves another woman. And this is the view presented concerning homosexuality. In this case, we should ask ourselves, as people who have received this theory, if it is corroborated by the clinic. We should see whether, in the homosexual cases we have to deal with, castration anxiety is more vivid. We need to look closely to find out whether this is really the reason why, very often, homosexual relations take on

a character which is chivalrous or Platonic, as was the case with this particular girl. It is a thesis which is defensible, but it needs to be backed up by observation.

Q: I couldn't quite follow what you were saying about Lacan's logic relating to the universal and the way in which this necessitates the exception, which is then immediately eliminated.

MS: There are two conceptions about the construction of the universal, the induction, which Aristotle discussed, and the exception. It's by the exclusion of the one that you can include all the others. My remark was to that effect. In Lacan's presentation, he refutes Aristotle. I would say that in order to make a universal proposition — for example, 'All prophets are liars' — I must have considered the possibility that there is at least one who is not a liar. But we have to say that once we have the proposition 'All prophets are liars' it takes on a meaning which denies the exception (on the level of meaning not of deduction). So Lacan's theory is not necessarily a refutation of Aristotle, in the sense that each of them gives the universal proposition a meaning starting from which he defines the rules of inference. There comes a point at which there is no knowledge. You can define the universal proposition in this way, or in some other way. And, having decided on the signification you give it, you can define your rules of entry.

Q: I have another question about the end of analysis. If the end of an analysis is the crossing of a phantasy, subjective destitution, all those things linked with the fall of the phallic function in fantasy, is it also an encounter with the non-existence of the Other, which is predicated in some way in the table of sexualisation?

MS: There is nothing which, in itself, constitutes the end of an analysis — that's why there are always going to be analysts. It can be a lifetime's work. But everything that is said about the destitution of the subject, the fall of the subject, the assumption of mortal reality, or the crossing of the fundamental phantasy, all of it happens — but it happens as part of the *process* of psychoanalysis. In as much as psychoanalytic work takes place, it goes in the direction of these formulae, but you can go on like this endlessly. Not to mention the fact that what has been saved from repression can go back to repression. As far as the end of analysis is concerned, this is all I can say.

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