

## the unkindest cut<sup>1</sup>

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“A cigar is just a cigar”, says Freud or so the story goes, implying that for him at least, the phallic symbolisation is elsewhere – that he’s not chewing on it. But why are we so keen to believe him? How would he know the truth about his cigar, given the nature of the unconscious? How would he know, anymore than the next man, that truth which is his own unconscious? For all of us, including Freud, to speak of the unconscious is to speak of the limits to what we can know. Who then will fully interpret that unknown for our benefit? Still, we do like to believe in the exception, in the one who does not lack; in the one who does not lack regarding a knowledge of the phallus in its function, and in its signification. The father, the father of psychoanalysis, is the exception to the lack in knowledge.

Thus the belief that Freud’s cigar is just a cigar. He said so.

Here’s another cigar. Lacan’s. Is Lacan’s cigar the same as Freud’s? Certainly not! But is it anymore the truth that it’s just a cigar? Does the French man, of lascivious reputation, produce the exception? Would such a lover need to be satisfied with a substitute for the phallus? Is there a limit to his own phallic enjoyment? Certainly not! These simple examples show how we are determined via our beliefs to avoid the lack which castration implies.

The question that motivates me this year is the question of castration. It’s a question redolent of the phallus, which speaks of phallic symbolization in relation to the status of signification. It evokes the belief in the masculine libido. Counterposed to what? Let us then reconsider the concept of castration, its definition, which is anything but obvious and its implications for the clinic and beyond. For if there is a fundamental concern at the heart of man’s suffering, at the origin of desire □ a cut at the limits of his enjoyment, then it is castration. A term which speaks so well of the horror, pain, threats and anxiety, which is the truth of human sexual experience.

Why are we so keen to believe that someone can say, “a cigar is just a cigar”? Because *he knows*, either as the father of psychoanalysis, or as his son and heir. That we believe in the exception is precisely our response to the fact that there is no exception. That the exception exists in the world of logic, even to prove the rule is one thing, but in the world where we live the exception does not exist, amusingly enough. When Freud or Lacan, exceptional individuals as they were, tell us there is no exception, that is the only time we don’t listen to them or choose to ignore their words. For it would of course mean that they were also subject to the lack, which is castration. And aren’t they? Or weren’t they?

Freud writes his contributions to the psychology of love. He writes that all men have their sexual potency limited by the incestuous object; the mother. In beginning this article he states that the commonest presentation in the clinic of psychoanalysis is impotence. Furthermore, that all men are subjected to the problematics of the maternal object as cause of this impotence. All, and always, having to bear the anxiety of impending impotence. Why would we believe this statement except that it is true? I would observe that such a universal statement has not been taken up particularly by psychoanalysts. It’s also worth observing how Freud derives his contribution from the clinic. Whatever he uses to explain it, myth, or

otherwise, the fact is that every man suffers in the face of this threat. Even Freud himself therefore.

Here we have the conjunction of the universal, the curse on sex, the threat of impotence, which is surely a matter of the question of castration. Not defined as the loss of the penis, nor the testamentary capacity, but as the fragility of the phallus in its capacity to function when the demand of enjoyment is placed upon it. This differs from Freud's working of the myth. The primal father is castrated by the sons, the exception thus personifying the father's incapacity to enjoy, having first been the only one able to enjoy freely. Lacan, in his television experience states "that no amount of excitement – which it stirs up as well – can lift away the evidence of a curse on sex".<sup>3</sup> And in *Ecrits*, he cites Freud in writing not of a contingent, but of an essential disturbance of human sexuality, which is attributed to the effect of civilisation. Let's not lapse into equivocation. There is a silence. It surrounds the truth. And yet the truth has been spoken! Still the silence intervenes. Our attention is directed elsewhere. Who wants to know the truth?

The truth, which is the fact of castration; how do we conceive of this concept?

It is that place where the body and the soul collide. It is that locus where the symbolic and the imaginary intersect in a manner that has the utmost implications for all that mankind busies itself with. It is that visceral actuality that can be seen, but which we refuse to hear. It's what is repressed. It makes for repression. Castration is the very essence of humanity – both the origin of repression and the return of the repressed. It is a phenomenon, which evokes via the Freudian universal, the question of the exception. Thus, mythically described as the father, the father of the primal horde is the one for whom castration does not function. You can see, as mentioned in my introduction, those moments where this exception apparently walks amongst us incarnated. But I wouldn't need to mention those two. Each one has a particular version of the exception, the father figure, in order to repress the absolute nature of castration.

Two tales, perhaps not true, but truthful: urban or less than that, sub-urban myths.

Not far from here lives a man. Apparently, he has never experienced any disappointment in his sexual life, either in his own or his partner's eyes. I know it's hard to believe but I heard it directly from his lips. Which makes for two possibilities, either he is a virgin or ... The second tale: in the late 1950's, in the American desert where such things happen, an unidentified flying object was seen to crash and presumably vaporize, leaving no trace. Found wandering in the vicinity by government forces – not tall, cone-headed extraterrestrials, but a single woman. So perfect of shape and of such beauty was she, that her form was unfailingly able to arouse any man that gazed upon it. Her origins were clearly from another world; a planet that could be scientifically deduced to be larger than earth, since she and her parts were unaffected by the lower earthly gravity. An all-over, faint tan declared some proximity to a large yellow star, and a much longer annual planetary orbit was attested to, by her apparently not ageing during the ten year period of observation. She lived, of course secretly, for a decade in the White house – a fact not unrelated to the concurrent growth in American strength and confidence, and also responsible for the untimely demise of Miss M. Monroe, who stumbled upon her one fateful night. The sex symbol cannot tolerate the symbol of sex. This apparition of the woman disappeared at the same moment in 1969, that Neil Armstrong slipped upon the moon. Slipped, since you know that in spite of a 400,000 km trip to prepare his speech, he manages to leave out the little 'a', and talk of man, rather than *a* man, himself. One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind; leave me, the 'a' man, out of it. There, in a slip broadcast to the whole world we have the effects of the unconscious. The

unconscious, which accompanies man in his travels, even to the heavenly bodies; even to the most heavenly of bodies. So there's no escaping the gravity of our situation. In reaching for the stars we remain lacking.

The exceptional man does not exist. Except as virgin, wherein he has a potential that can never be actualised. Freud spoke of impotence. The taboo on incest sets a limit.

Then Lacan: there is no sexual relation. And yet the mirage persists, leading us into the desert, towards an oasis of abundance, which does not exist. What to do when the mirage evaporates?

Let us wait until the cure.

Let us wait upon the cure.

Some where, in the unknown past, but still at some time, we came to be human. To have the words to speak, the words to think. Cursed then, to know of failure. To perceive it in all its horror. Cursed by the uncontrollable failure of man's capacity to master the experience of enjoyment within that congress of the relation between a man and a woman. There, where the word has now intervened to give meaning to the act and thenceforth to render it, fragile: uncertain, incomplete, limited. Such is the concept of a man born of language and meaning, even as he walks upon the moon.

Castration is this structural fact of language, defined in many ways. Defined as the impossibility of speaking the truth as whole. Thus, the whole truth of enjoyment of the sexual cannot be spoken, which makes it unattainable. As the signified can never be tied to the signifier, as the word and its object are never exactly concurrent, the bar that renders castration is fact. And whilst nowadays the billboards declare it: not to enjoy coca-cola, but the appropriate length of coitus free from interruptus, a solution is proffered, and a nasally delivered one no less. All this time to discover that Fliess was right after all. Better to drive quickly by. Language produces for man, no longer animal, the certainty of failure. Because there is a limit to enjoyment, no matter how long you take. Why the phallus as its essence? Here is the essential element, related to that apotheosis of jouissance – orgasmic, satisfactory, not to mention its obvious relation to procreation. Without the phallic function, enjoyment is limited.

Need we look far for the effects of castration? Civilisation itself is one such effect. Civilisation is not the bringer of discontent. Freud had it around the wrong way. Civilisation is a consequence of the limit placed on sexual enjoyment by language. Discontent has produced civilisation. Out of the necessity to attempt to regain a relation forever lost. Everything we do; society, its rules and its regulation; all that man has created, is a consequence of the discontent that language has wrought. Sublimation is not a change in aim or object of the drive. It is an attempt to make good the lack in the sexual relation and as such, an impossible task. At the height of civility man fails. Words have placed some value – a value on people. No longer just things to satisfy.

What is the relation to anxiety? Language produces anxiety – that awareness of the impact of a threat upon our body. But is castration anxiety's cause or its effect?

The threat of castration was Freud's theory of the origin of anxiety. But if we accept that language produces castration, then all are subject to castration. Therefore castration is the effect of that which produces anxiety; the anxiety that repression will fail to produce the

desired union. Thus I refer, not to the threat of castration, but the threat of failure – the failure of the sexual relation, which to some extent is certain, given the limits upon jouissance. No wonder people get upset!

Now, something of the clinic to underline this observation, and which relates to Freud's observation of the universal. At some point, irrespective of the paraphernalia of the symptom, a man on a couch speaks of his anxiety. He speaks, without exception, of how to relate to his woman when she is cause of his anxiety. Cause of his anxiety, because he cannot relate to a woman without fearing failure (his impotence in some form) to produce the requisite enjoyment for both parties. That's why virginity, or chastity, present as solutions. Adopted by the various churches where, in recognition of the limit, and by deference to anxiety, solace is sought. Or the many women who will protect him from an encounter with one woman with whom he cannot feel safe. The one from whom he must in some way retreat. To the office, the bar, the playing fields, the battlefield.

This is what man fears. Thus he has to deal, not with Freud's threat of castration, rather, the imagined threat of the loss of his penis, which develops from having seen the castrated girl. He has to deal with the established fact of castration; his inability to control the phallic function. For this function is what is demanded of him, and since the garden of Eden he has seen his failure, which no amount of fig leaves might cover. The function of the phallus is the procurement of enjoyment, and with it, its connotations of the attainment of fatherhood. But it is in relation to her pleasure that the problem exists. It's with her that it begins. In that sense she is the mother only as the origin of all this chaos.

The lack of sexual relation has its origins in the threat of impotence, the inadequacy of the phallus, which is his privilege. But he is burdened by this privilege that marks him as responsible, and which has led man to prefer the fetish – the perverse relation to his object. See Freud's paper on debasement – whatever people might play around with in bed, the fact remains that without the phallic function, none will be able to pretend to be happy. I am focusing on the problem from the perspective of he who, albeit castrated, still has to bear the phallus as the image of enjoyment. Any theory of castration must account for many observations. The fetish: the symptom as repressed castration. It is this type of madness that leads not so uncommonly to the actual cutting off the penis. The clinic of transsexualism gives further evidence. Gross evidence that castration does involve man's appendage.

For tonight, given the vastness of the topic, I shall attempt to focus. Firstly, upon a myth of castration. Uranus: the father, castrated by the sons, and from his separated phallus, grows the woman Aphrodite, born in the foam around the father's cut object. Thus the primal father is not the instigator of castration but the victim. The Other is castrated. Secondly: the function of the ritual of circumcision. Not a seemingly, naturally attractive rite. As a young man recently in possession of a functional phallus, the approach of another member with sharpened implement is not overly engaging! Practised by Jews and Moslems, the Egyptians, the Australian aborigines – there is clearly an imperative of human society to make this cut, this mark. Thus, circumcision is the return of the repressed. Man, in connection with the Other, acknowledges both the importance of the phallus and its fragility.

What is the solution? The clinic of analysis cannot make good the lack of castration. There is no cure for that. How does one begrudgingly accept castration and work at what is possible? This is a question I will be speaking of at our annual homage under the title, 'What is an analysis?' For one answer is: an analysis is that which deals with castration. To summarise then: castration is a fact of the structure of language; a fact which renders the phallic function

fragile. Which is apparent to everyone. Which is why neurosis exists to repress this fact. Which is why all men present, complaining of the threat of dysfunction. Which has produced everything that man has ever done in the field of creativity. Which includes civilisation itself.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> Public Lecture, Melbourne, July 2009.

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<sup>3</sup> Lacan, J. *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*. Tr. Denis Hollier et.al. London: W.W. Norton & Co. 1990. 30.