

WOZU PHALLUS IN DÜRFTIGER ZEIT?

In my discussion of Aristophanes' myth in the Symposium, I introduced something like "full frontal castration" (to paraphrase Monty Python's "full frontal nudity") as the pivotal point of the structure of comedy, provided that we understand castration as the gap that at the same time separates the subject from and links her to her enjoyment and/or symbolic function.

This brings us to what is perhaps one of the most controversial points of Lacanian (or, more generally, psychoanalytic) theory today: If this is all about the inherent gap or noncoincidence, why not call it just that? Why call it "castration," with an explicit reference to the male organ? Lacan insists on the term castration, although what he means by it is very often misunderstood. The key to his argument is, first, that he calls the phallus the signifier of castration (and not, perhaps, the signifier of its opposite: of some full enjoyment, symbol of fecundity, or something of that kind). However, in understanding this we do not get very far if we simply keep repeating that the "phallus" is a symbolic function, and that it has nothing to do with the penis. For we can then repeat the same question as before: why, then, call this purely symbolic function the "phallus" (and not, for instance, the "gapus")? In all his complex elaboration of the phallic function as symbolic, it never crossed Lacan's mind to say something like: "But in the end, it doesn't really matter what one calls it." When he insists that the phallus is the signifier of castration, Lacan presses the following question: Why is it that this anatomical peculiarity of human males can and does function in human relationships, and for both sexes, as a signifier of castration (in the Lacanian sense of the term)? His answer to this might seem rather trivial, yet in all its trivial realism it makes a lot of conceptual sense. With its very anatomical peculiarity, the male organ quite obviously suggests (and displays) the following features: a relative autonomy of enjoyment (with, among other things, its not-always-predictable ups and downs); its local—or at least localizable—nature (the interval between the body and enjoyment); and the status of enjoyment as something that can be excluded, detached, or attached,

annexed? These are precisely the features Lacan associates with castration. To put it very bluntly: in the case of the male organ, we can see very clearly what comes between a man and his enjoyment—but also what comes between a woman and her enjoyment. By this I mean nothing but the fact that a woman's relationship to her enjoyment is also not simply an organic, immediate relationship, but involves a gap that sustains its possibility through its very impossibility. Contrary to what it might seem to be the case, the error of the claims about feminine enjoyment as immediate is most obvious precisely if we consider certain cases of feminine enjoyment that can strike us as most "organic" or "physical." Consider the classic hysterical symptoms which usually take the form of some kind of physical dysfunction. If we think about the flexibility of these symptoms, how they seem to be uncannily able to "decide" which part of the body will "take on" the impasse of enjoyment and "speak for it," we can perhaps get a clearer picture of the interval or gap that separates, from the inside, human enjoyment from the body that bears it. Lacan's point is that this is true for both sexes, and the phallus functions as the signifier of this interval for both sexes, whereas sexual difference is defined by the mode of the relationship that the subject assumes in respect to this signifier.

It would be difficult to avoid mentioning, in this context, that this is precisely the point where Otto Weininger slipped: he slipped on the fantasy of female enjoyment as noncastrated. The following passage is very eloquent in this respect, especially against the background of our former discussion:

Woman is only sexual, man is also sexual. . . . In man, there are only a few body parts where he can be sexually aroused, and even these are strictly determined as to their location. In woman, sexuality spreads around her entire body, wherever you touch her, it excites her. . . . Since in man sexuality is only an appendix and is far from being everything, for men the sexuality can be psychologically distinguished (separated) from the background, and he can become aware of it. . . . In woman, sexuality cannot be reflected against a non-sexual

area, since it doesn't occur in temporally limited outbursts, nor is there an anatomic organ where it could be locally seen already from the outside. (Weininger 1993, pp. 78–79)

It would be difficult to spell out the connection between the phallus and castration more clear: since woman does not have the phallus, she does not know castration, which is why her relation to enjoyment is immediate—it is all-embracing, and saturates everything. What is lacking is the cut ("separat[ion] from the background"), which, and only which, introduces a reflexive relation towards enjoyment, an awareness or consciousness which can never be immediate, but requires a certain distance or gap. From there it follows (for Weininger) that women do not have consciousness in the strict meaning of the word, and that they are not really capable of thinking. We can see very clearly how this fantasy of female enjoyment (as noncastrated) is based upon the apparent absence of visible, anatomical physical signs of detachability of enjoyment: since in the case of woman we cannot think of enjoyment (or see it) as excluded/excludable, she is "obviously" drawn and sunk into it entirely. Psychoanalysis (especially Lacanian) intervenes precisely at the point of this imaginization of the sexual difference (its "metaphysics"): castration (in the sense described above) is a universal feature, and if it plays an important role in the difference between the sexes, it does so precisely as their common point, the point of their intersection.

So what is the crucial difference between Weininger and Lacan? For Weininger, the phallus, as an anatomical peculiarity of males, is a direct proof and expression of castration. In this perspective the phallus is not a signifier, it is not a symbolic function; rather, it is the anatomical condition of possibility of the Symbolic. Those who do not "have it" are not equipped to qualify as beings of the Symbolic; they are sunk into the immediacy of enjoyment, without being able to have a reflexive relation to it. What Lacan does, on the other hand, is to reverse the order of this argument: the phallus, as anatomical peculiarity, becomes significant against the (preexisting) background of the Symbolic, the nodal point

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of which it comes to incarnate. In this way, far from sustaining the fascination with the phallus, Lacan offers an explanation of why this anatomical peculiarity has been able to function as a vehicle of some deeper meaning—and of all the metaphysics of the "other sex" which has so profoundly marked, throughout history, the discourse on women—because it relied upon the imaginary register. On whose screen the anatomical feature is transposed and transixed into a Mystery of Essence. What Lacan discovered, and uncovered, was this unspeakable or never-spoken-of point, where a certain symbolic impasse or difficulty (which springs from the fact that we are beings of language, and that it is precisely this fact that introduces a constitutive split between the body and enjoyment) is linked to a specific image of localized human enjoyment—the phallus—which acquires the aura of a sublime Mystery precisely against the background of and because of that symbolic impasse.

In its imaginary function, the phallus is the veil that screens the traumatic point of linkage, the "impossible" joint between the Symbolic and the somatic. Or, even more precisely, in its imaginary dimension of Potency incorporated, the phallus veils and sustains the very "impotence" and impossibility (that is, the eternal difficulty) of the joint in question. This is also to say that it veils the point of anchorage of the phallic function (as symbolic) in the human body. In the imaginary register, the phallus is put up as the ultimate veil of castration—the position from which it draws its power to fascinate: "You want to see? Look at This (and you won't feel the need to look any further)!"

Insofar as this linkage is not specified and spelled out, it situates the phallus within the field where impossibility is combined with necessity—the configuration that Lacan very subtly formulates as: it doesn't stop not being written. Since it cannot be written, it doesn't stop not being written, it doesn't stop, it persists as necessary in its very impossibility. And it is precisely at this point that psychoanalysis intervenes; this is why Lacan takes a considerable feminist pride in relation to his own contribution to the de-

throning of the phallus. By spelling out the link between the traditionally almighty phallus (which, by the way, functioned symbolically, and as a symbolic power, long before Lacan came along) to an anatomical peculiarity, he (and psychoanalysis) made a crucial contribution to the removal of the phallus from the mode of necessity to that of contingency. The phallus has stopped not being written.

Analysis presumes that desire is inscribed on the basis of a corporal contingency. Let me remind you what I base this term "contingency" on. The phallus . . . analytic experience stops not writing it. It is in this "stops not being written" [*cesse de ne pas s'écrire*] that resides the apex of what I have called contingency. . . . Because of this, the apparent necessity of the phallic function turns out to be mere contingency. . . . It is only as contingency that, thanks to psychoanalysis, the phallus, reserved in ancient times to the Mysteries, has stopped not being written. Nothing more. It has not entered into the "doesn't stop," that is, into the field on which depend necessity, on the one hand, and impossibility. (Lacan 1998, p. 94)

Psychoanalysis has thus spoken out about the link on account of which an anatomical peculiarity, because of the symbolic deadlock or impasse whose place it comes to occupy, acquires an exceptional symbolic significance. It is through this gesture, which discloses the interval that separates and links the symbolic and the anatomical (the interval that allows, precisely, for their articulation) that a crucial knowledge is produced: the knowledge that makes it impossible to keep considering anatomy as our destiny.

This is not to say, however, that the symbolic impasse on whose account the phallus acquires its significance is not real, or that it can simply be eliminated. But what exactly is this (universal) impasse that psychoanalysis calls castration? As I have already suggested from several different angles, it could be conceived as the very point of junction of the organic and the symbolic, their joint, their articulation. There is something about this joint that is never linear, or nonproblematic, but involves instead a jump and, as I formulated it in Part I, a leak. The fact that psychoanalysis links

this point with sexuality and calls its specific effect "castration" is essential, and at the same time constitutes the side of psychoanalysis that is most often attacked—not only by "conservative" moralists, but even more so by "liberal" culturalists. The "sexual reductionism" of psychoanalysis and its supposedly "obvious phalloscentism" are two objections that miss their mark by such a long way that their insistence is definitely symptomatic. It is symptomatic because it involves a radical disavowal of what was really ground-breaking in the psychoanalytic discovery of sexuality. Psychoanalysis did not focus on sexuality, bring it to light, and try to explain (more or less) everything by it. This perspective presupposes that sexuality is a well-established (albeit veiled by considerations of modesty) realm of human nature, nonproblematic in itself, but problematic in its relationship to other human dimensions, especially to culture and its restraints. What Freud actually discovered, on the contrary, was that sexuality was a problem in itself; far from being something with which one could explain other different human phenomena, it needs an explanation itself.

Freud's point was not that sexuality is a natural realm of human life which created problems only in its encounter with cultural codes and restraints; his crucial point was that human sexuality is the very encounter between "nature" and "culture," that it is the name of their always difficult, problematic, and erratic junction. This junction is the site of sexuation in the strict meaning of the word. What does this tell us? Human sexuality is not sexual simply because it includes the sexual organs (or organs of reproduction). Rather, there is something in the very constitution of human nature that, so to speak, sexualizes sexual activity itself, endows it with a surplus-investment (one could also say that it sexualizes the activity of reproduction). This point might seem paradoxical, but if we think of what distinguishes human sexuality from, let us say, animal or vegetable sexuality—is it not precisely the fact that human sexuality is sexualized (which could also be put in a punch

line like: "Sex is sexy")? This constitutive redoubling of sexuality is what makes it always-already dislocated not only in respect to its reproductive purpose, but also and above all in respect to itself. The moment we try to provide a clear definition of sexual activity, we run into trouble. We run into trouble because human sexuality is ridden with this paradox: the further sex departs from the "pure" copulating movement (that is to say, the wider the range of elements it includes in its activity), the more sexual it becomes. Sexuality gets sexualized precisely in this constitutive interval that separates it from itself. Nothing could be further from psychoanalysis than the simplistic claim that sexuality has its natural place in human life, that this place should be acknowledged, and sexuality given a proper consideration alongside other human activities. The central point of Freud's discovery was precisely that there is no "natural" or preestablished place of human sexuality; that it is constitutively out-of-it-place, fragmented, and dispersed; that it exists only in deviations from "itself" or its supposed natural object; and that sexuality is nothing but this "out-of-placeness" of its constitutive satisfaction. In other words, Freud's fundamental move was to deessentialize sexuality; the sexual is not a substance to be properly described and circumscribed, it is the very impossibility of its own circumscription or delimitation. It can neither be completely separated from biological, organic needs and functions (since it originates within their realm, it starts off by inhabiting them), nor simply reduced to them. The sexual is not a separate domain of human activity or life, and this is precisely why it can inhabit all the domains of human life.⁸

It is because this paradoxical joint between the biological body and the Symbolic is inherently sexual (in the sense that it constitutes the generative source of human sexuality) that its effect is called castration. The "phallic signifier" as the signifier of castration (also referred to as the signifier of lack) is, one could say, the signifier of the missing link between the biological and the Symbolic (or between nature and culture) as the generic point of sexuation. This is why psychoanalysis must resist the conciliatory "philosophical"

attempt to replace the term castration with something more neutral, like the description of the human condition as essentially paradoxical, limited, finite, vulnerable. . . . For this is nothing but a re-mythification of something which psychoanalysis has already demystified. The cultural neutralization of the concept of castration (into more or less pathetic slogans about human limitations) is part of the very same tradition that was inaugurated by Jung in relation to Freud. That is to say: the discovery of the real impasse inherent to human sexuality, as well as the operating of this impasse in the present actuality of each and every subject (where its destiny is being decided, again and again), is translated into this or that cultural archetype, which is certain to endow the impasse in question with a dignified patina, and cover it with the mist of a respectful Mystery. If anything, this—not the term phallic signifier—is an emphatic gesture of “phallicization.” it would be very wrong to think that so-called phallocentrism could be countered by a politically correct restriction regarding the use of the term phallus. As history makes more than clear, phallocentrism can work splendidly, and much better, if the phallus is not directly named, but reserved for Mysteries. And we should not forget that it was only with the advent of psychoanalysis that talk about phallocentrism really took off in the first place.

Thus those who reproach (Freudian–Lacanian) psychoanalysis with phallocentrism reveal a spectacular misapprehension of the fundamental psychoanalytic act. By using the name phallic signifier and by insisting on the signifying, symbolic function of the phallus, Lacan is by no means idealizing—and thus “rescuing”—a male anatomical peculiarity, promoting it into an ultimate reference of human reality. His gesture is exactly the opposite: onto the very ground where, throughout the centuries, the phallus has had only a cultural signification—that is to say, (religious, as well as other) rituals and symbolic practices encapsulating the Mystery of Man and dictating the hierarchic structures of his universe as emanating directly from the supreme Mystery—onto this very ground steps Lacan, and Freud before him, to say: Surprise, sur-

prise—the Mystery is none other than the phallus, and it draws its power from the symbolic workings of castration. To call the signifier of castration the “phallic signifier” implies both a real and a conceptual desublimation of the mystery of the Phallus. It is not a culturalization of the real phallus in a quasi-neutral symbol but, rather, a “realization” of its cultural significance and meaning—that is to say, an act of reattaching this significance to the piece of the Real whose veiling has produced the effects of the sublime Meaning.

And could we not say that the human practice which, in its own way, has always already pointed its finger at precisely such links between the “highest” and the “lowest,” between the purely spiritual/symbolic and the materially anatomically obscene, is precisely comedy?

To a great extent, human society and culture are constructed around what we could briefly call “respect for castration.” The manners we teach our children (don’t stare, don’t point, don’t talk back, respect the elderly, don’t make fun of people who seem strange to you) are all modes of respect for castration. They introduce and demand a certain distance, thus making it possible for us not to walk on each other’s enjoyment, if this can be avoided. The veil of respect and the blush of shame usually conceal the fact that there is nothing behind them, yet this does not mean that this “behind” can simply be eliminated with the proclamation that surface is everything, and “behind” is a mere metaphysical illusion. Comedy likes to transgress the rules and demands of respect. It also likes to unveil the veils, tear down the folding screens, and open the closets. Yet it does not usually claim directly that there is nothing behind. Rather the contrary: behind the veil there is always a naked bottom, behind the folding screen a scantily clad lady, and there is always, of course, a lover hidden in the closet. Comedy is in very great need of this double configuration. We could even say that in comedy, there is always something behind. Yet the comic point is that what is behind is—Surprise, surprise!—nothing but what we would expect (from the surface of things). Concerning

the proverbial comic scene of the lover in the closet, *Mladen Dolár* has made an important point. Imagine *Othello*, the classic tragic masterpiece on the theme of jealousy—what would happen if *Othello* were in fact to find a lover in Desdemona's closet? The whole thing would immediately turn into a comedy, if not a farce (*Dolar* 2005a, p. 203).

In this context we could formulate a further important difference between comedy and tragedy. It is essential to tragedy that there is nothing behind, that the closet is empty; and it is precisely this nothing that becomes the space of the hero's infinite passion, which ultimately brings him down. The hero, be it *Oedipus* or *Othello*, is convinced that there is something behind. Yet what he finds behind the curtain is himself as subject, his own passion, and it is this confrontation that finally brings him down. On the other hand, what comedy puts in the place of this infinite passion is a finite, trivial object: instead of the abyssal negativity of the subject, it puts there its other, "objective," objectified side.

This gesture desublimates this dimension or the space of "the behind," but at the same time it preserves it. Comedy always materializes and gives a body to what can otherwise appear as an unspeakable, infinite *Mystery* of the other scene. Of course there is always something behind! You want to see? Watch this! Of course there is always a lover in the closet and a naked bottom under the skirt. What else did you expect? The key is precisely in the fact that in comedy we are usually surprised by things and events that we, at least roughly, expect. And we could even say that what often surprises us is precisely that there is no particular surprise—that what is behind is indeed precisely this: Here it would be difficult to resist quoting one more time Groucho Marx's famous line: *He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot, but don't let that fool you. He really is an idiot.* Thus, the point is not simply that surface is everything: of course it is, but this cannot be said or shown directly. Comedy needs and plays upon the duality of appearance and truth, of surface and depth. But it does so in a way which, at some precise point, links the two, or in a way that endows the subject's infinite

passion with the form of a concrete—and thus necessarily "banal"—object (which is behind). The mental experiment we carried out above with *Othello* can also be carried out in the opposite direction—say in the case of *Molière's L'Avare/The Miser*. Considering the passion that dominates the main character, *Harpagon* could also have been a tragic hero: avarice, this sole motor of his existence, drives him far beyond the pleasure principle, and threatens to ruin his life as well as the lives of those close to him. But in comedy this passion has a very concrete shape and size: ten thousand silver coins, *Harpagon's* treasure, buried in the garden, where he regularly visits it and counts it. What is funny in this play is not simply *Harpagon's* idolatry of money, but above all the incarnation of the subject's finite passion in this countable object. However, that does not make *Harpagon's* passion any less real and infinite—and this is what makes it comical. It is comical because, bound to this object, it is at the same time real, infinite, and desublimated.

This is precisely how comedy helps us to understand a crucial dimension of the Lacanian notion of castration: castration is not simply a lack (which would be the origin of an infinite desire and passion); it always comes in this or that concrete form—for instance, the form of a lover in the closet, or the form of ten thousand silver coins.