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Sexuality and Solitude

In a work consecrated to the moral treatment of madness and published in 1840, a French psychiatrist, Louren, tells of the manner in which he treated one of his patients – treated and, of course, as you may imagine, cured. One morning he placed Mr A., his patient, in a shower room. He makes him recount in detail his delirium.

“But all that”, says the doctor, “is nothing but madness. Promise me not to believe in it any more.”

The patient hesitates, then promises.

“That’s not enough,” replies the doctor. “You’ve already made me similar promises and you have not kept them.”

And he turns on the cold shower above the patient’s head.

“Yes, yes! I am mad!” the patient cries.

The shower is turned off. The interrogation is resumed.

“Yes, I recognize that I am mad”, the patient repeats. But he adds: “I recognize it because you are forcing me to do so.”

Of course another shower.

“I assure you,” says the patient, “that I have heard voices and seen enemies around me.”

Another shower.

“Well then,” says Mr A., “I admit it. I am mad and all that was nothing but madness.”

And of course he is cured.

To make somebody suffering from mental illness recognize that he is mad is a very ancient procedure in traditional therapy. In the works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one finds many examples of what one might call truth therapies. But the technique used by Louren is altogether different. Louren is not trying to persuade his patient that his ideas are false or unreasonable. What happens in the head of Mr A. is a matter of perfect indifference for Louren.

The doctor wishes to obtain a precise act, the explicit affirmation: "I am mad." Since I first read this passage of Louren, about twenty years ago, I kept in mind the project of analysing the form and the history of such a bizarre practice. Louren is satisfied when and only when his patient says: "I am mad", or "That was madness." Louren's assumption is that madness as a reality disappears when the patient asserts the truth and says that he is mad.

We have, then, the reverse of the performative speech act. The affirmation destroys in the speaking subject the reality which made the same affirmation true. What conception of truth of discourse and of subjectivity is taken for granted in this strange and yet widespread practice? In order to justify the attention I am giving to what is seemingly so specialised a subject, let me take a step back for a moment. In the years that preceded the Second World War, and even more so after the war, philosophy in continental Europe and in France was dominated by the philosophy of subject. I mean that philosophy took as its task *par excellence* the foundation of all knowledge and the principle of all signification as stemming from the meaningful subject. The transcendence of the ego reigned. The importance given to this question was, of course, due to the impact of Husserl, but the centrality of the subject was also tied to an institutional context, for the French university, since philosophy began with Descartes, could only advance in a Cartesian manner. But we must also take into account the political conjuncture. Given the absurdity of wars, slaughters and despotism, it seemed to be up to the individual subject to give meaning to his existential choices. With the leisure and distance that came after the war, this emphasis on the philosophy of subject no longer seemed so self-evident. Hitherto hidden theoretical paradoxes could no longer be avoided. This philosophy of consciousness had paradoxically failed to found a philosophy of knowledge, and especially of scientific knowledge. Also, this philosophy of meaning had failed to take into account the formative mechanisms of signification and the structure of systems of meaning.

With the all too easy clarity of hindsight, let me say that there were two possible paths that led beyond this philosophy of subject. The first of these was the theory of objective knowledge as an analysis of systems of meaning, of semiology. This was the path of logical positivism. The second was that of a certain school of linguistics, psychoanalysis and anthropology – all grouped under the rubric of structuralism. These were not the directions I took. I have tried to explore another direction. I have tried to get out from the philosophy of the subject, through a genealogy of the modern subject as a historical and cultural reality. That means as something which can eventually change, which is, of course, politically important. One can proceed with this general project in two ways. In dealing with modern theoretical constructions, we are concerned with the subject in general. In this way, I have tried to analyse the theories of subject as a speaking, living, working being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One can also deal with the more practical understanding found in those institutions where certain subjects became objects of knowledge and at the same time objects of domination: asylums, prisons and so on.

I wished to study those forms of understanding which the subject creates about himself. But since I started with this last type of problem, I have been obliged to change my mind on several points. Let me introduce a kind of autocritique. It seems, according to some suggestions of Habermas, that one can distinguish three major types of techniques: the techniques which permit one to produce, to transform, to manipulate things; the techniques which permit one to use sign systems; and finally, the techniques which permit one to determine the conduct of individuals, to impose certain ends or objectives. That is to say, techniques of production, techniques of signification or communication, and techniques of domination. But I became more and more aware that in all societies there is another type of technique: techniques which permit individuals to affect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power. Let us call these kinds of techniques technologies of the self.

If one wants to analyse the genealogy of subject in Western civilization, one has to take into account not only techniques of domination, but also techniques of the self. One has to show the interaction between these two types of self. When I was studying asylums, prisons and so on, I perhaps insisted too much on the techniques of domination. What we call discipline is something really important in this kind of institution. But it is only one aspect of the art of governing people in our societies. Having studied the field of power relations taking domination techniques as a point of departure, I should like, in the years to come, to study power relations, especially in the field of sexuality, starting from the techniques of the self. In every culture, I think, this self-technology implies a set of truth obligations: learning what is truth, discovering the truth, being enlightened, by truth, telling the truth. All these are considered important either for the constitution or for the transformation of the self.

Now, what about truth as a duty in our Christian societies? As everybody knows, Christianity is a confession. This means that Christianity belongs to a very special type of religion – those which impose obligations of truth on those who practise them. Such obligations in Christianity are numerous. For instance, there is the obligation to hold as truth a set of propositions which constitute dogma, the obligation to hold certain books as a permanent source of truth, obligations to accept the decisions of certain authorities in matters of truth. But Christianity requires another form of truth obligation. Everyone in Christianity has the duty to explore who he is, what is happening within himself, the faults he may have committed, the temptations to which he is exposed. Moreover, everyone is obliged to tell these things to other people, and hence to bear witness against himself.

These two ensembles of obligation – those regarding the faith, the book, the dogma, and those regarding the self, the soul and the heart – are linked together. A Christian needs the light of faith when he wants to explore himself, and conversely, his access to the truth cannot be conceived of without the

purification of the soul. Maybe you will object that you can find the same two obligations in Buddhism. The Buddhist also has to go to the light and discover the truth about himself. But the relation between these two obligations is quite different in Buddhism and in Christianity. In Buddhism, it is the same type of enlightenment which leads you to discover what you are and what is the truth. In this simultaneous enlightenment of yourself and the truth, you discover in Buddhism that your self was only an illusion. In Christianity, these two types of truth obligation, the one concerned with access to light and the one concerned with discovering truth inside oneself, have always kept a relative autonomy – even after Luther and Protestantism.

I should also like to underline that the Christian discovery of the self does not reveal the self as an illusion. It gives place to a task which cannot be anything else but undefined. This task has two objectives. First, there is the task of clearing up all the illusions, temptations and seductions which can occur in the mind, and discovering the reality of what is going on within ourselves. Secondly, one has to get free from any attachment to this self, not because the self is an illusion, but because the self is much too real. The more we discover the truth about ourselves, the more we have to renounce ourselves; and the more we want to renounce ourselves the more we need to bring to light the reality of ourselves. That is what we could call the spiral of truth formulation and reality renouncement which is at the heart of the Christian techniques of the self.

Recently, Professor Peter Brown stated to me that what we have to understand is why it is that sexuality became, in Christian cultures, the seismograph of our subjectivity. It is a fact, a mysterious fact, that in this indefinite spiral of truth and reality in the self sexuality has been of major importance since the first centuries of our era. It has become more and more important. Why is there such a fundamental connection between sexuality, subjectivity and truth obligation?

Our point of departure is a passage of St Francois de Sales. Here is the text in a translation made in the beginning of the seventeenth century:

I will tell you a point of the elephant's honesty. An elephant never changes his mate. He loves her tenderly. With her he couples not, but from three years to three years. And that only for five days, and so secretly that he is never seen in the act. But the sixth day, he shows himself abroad again, and the first thing he does is to go directly to some river and wash his body, not willing to return to his troupe of companions till he be purified. Be not these goodly and honest qualities in a beast by which he teaches married folk not to be given too much to sensual and carnal pleasures?

Everybody may recognize here the pattern of decent sexual behaviour: monogamy, faithfulness and procreation as the main, or maybe the single, justification of sexual acts – sexual acts which remain, even in such conditions, intrinsically impure. Most of us are inclined, I think, to attribute this pattern either to Christianity or to modern Christian society as it developed under the

influence of capitalist or so-called bourgeois morality. But what struck me when I started studying this pattern is the fact that one can find it also in Latin and even Hellenistic literature. One finds the same ideas, the same words, and eventually the same reference to the elephant. It is a fact that the pagan philosophers in the first centuries before and after the death of Christ proposed a sexual ethics which was partly new but which was very similar to the alleged Christian ethics. It has been very convincingly stressed that this philosophical pattern of sexual behaviour, this elephant pattern, was at that time the only one to exist.

During this period we may witness an evolution towards the nuclear family, real monogamy, faithfulness between married people and distress about sexual acts. The philosophical campaign in favour of the elephant pattern was both an affect and an adjunct of this transformation. If these assumptions are correct, we have to concede that Christianity did not invent this code of sexual behaviour. Christianity accepted it, reinforced it, and gave to it a much larger and more widespread strength than it had before. But the so-called Christian morality is nothing more than a piece of pagan ethics inserted into Christianity. Shall we say then that Christianity did not change the state of things? The thesis I propose is that early Christians introduced important changes, if not in the sexual code itself, at least in the relationships everyone has to his own sexual activity. Christianity proposed a new type of experience of oneself as a sexual being.

To make things clearer, I shall compare two texts. One was written by Artemidorus, a pagan philosopher of the third century, and the other is the well-known fourteenth book of the *City of God* by Augustine. Artemidorus wrote a book about the interpretation of dreams in the third century after the death of Christ, but he was a pagan. Three chapters of this book are devoted to sexual dreams. What is the meaning, or, more precisely, what is the prognostic value, of a sexual dream? It is significant that Artemidorus interpreted dreams in a way contrary to Freud, and gives an interpretation of sexual dreams in terms of economics, social relations, success and reverses in political activity and everyday life. For instance, if you dream that you have sex with your mother, that means that you will succeed as a magistrate, since your mother is obviously the symbol of your city or country.

It is also significant that the social value of the dream does not depend on the nature of the sexual act, but mainly on the social status of the partners. For instance, for Artemidorus it is not important in your dream whether you had sex with a girl or with a boy. The problem is to know if the partner was rich or poor, young or old, slave or free, married or not. Of course, Artemidorus takes into account the question of the sexual act, but he sees it only from the point of view of the male. The only act he knows or recognizes as sexual is penetration. Penetration is for him not only a sexual act, but is part of the social role of a man in a city. I would say that for Artemidorus sexuality is relational, and that sexual relations cannot be dissociated from social relations.

Let us now turn to Augustine's text, whose meaning is the point at which we

strive to arrive in our analysis. In *The City of God*, and later on in the *Contra Julian*, Augustine gives a rather horrifying description of the sexual act. He sees the sexual act as a kind of spasm. All the body, says Augustine, is shaken by terrible jerks. One entirely loses control of oneself. This sexual act takes such a complete and passionate possession of the whole man, both physically and emotionally, that what results is the keenest of all pleasures on the level of sensations, and at the crisis of excitement it practically paralyses all power of deliberate thought. It is worthwhile to note that this description is not an invention of Augustine: you can find the same in the medical and pagan literature of the previous century. Moreover Augustine's text is almost the exact transcription of a passage written by a well-known pagan philosopher, Cicero in *Otensius*.

The surprising point is not that Augustine would give such a classical description of the sexual act, but the fact that, having made such a horrible description, he then admits that sexual relations could have taken place in Paradise before the Fall. This is all the more remarkable since Augustine is one of the first Christian Fathers to admit this possibility. Of course, sex in Paradise could not have the epileptic form which we unfortunately know now. Before the Fall, Adam's body, every part of it, was perfectly obedient to the soul and the will. If Adam wanted to procreate in Paradise, he could do it in the same way and with the same control as he could, for instance, sow seeds in the earth. He was not involuntarily excited. Every part of his body was like the fingers, which one can control in all their gestures. Sex was a kind of hand gently sowing the seed. But what happened with the Fall? Adam rose up against God with the first sin. Adam tried to escape God's will and to acquire a will of his own, ignoring the fact that the existence of his own will depended entirely on the will of God. As a punishment of this revolt and as a consequence of this will to will independently from God, Adam lost control of himself. He wanted to acquire an autonomous will, and lost the ontological support for that will. That then became mixed in an indissociable way with involuntary movements, and this weakening of Adam's will had a disastrous effect. His body, and parts of his body, stopped obeying his commands, revolted against him, and the sexual parts of his body were the first to rise up in this disobedience. The famous gesture of Adam covering his genitals with a fig leaf is, according to Augustine, not due to the simple fact that Adam was ashamed of their presence, but to the fact that his sexual organs were moving by themselves without his consent. Sex in erection is the image of man revolted against God. The arrogance of sex is the punishment and consequence of the arrogance of man. His uncontrolled sex is exactly the same as what he himself has been towards God – a rebel.

Why have I insisted so much on what may be nothing more than one of those exegetic fantasies of which Christian literature has been so prodigal? I think this text bears witness to the new type of relationship which Christianity established between sex and subjectivity. Augustine's conception is still dominated by the theme and form of male sexuality. But the main question is not, as it was in Artemidorus, the problem of penetration: it is the problem of erection. As a

result, it is not the problem of a relationship to other people, but the problem of the relationship of oneself to oneself, or, more precisely, the relationship between one's will and involuntary assertions.

The principle of autonomous movements of sexual organs is called libido by Augustine. The problem of libido, of its strength, origin and effect, thus becomes the main issue of one's will. It is not an external obstacle to the will. It is a part, an internal component, of the will. And it is not the manifestation of petty desires. Libido is the result of one's will when it goes beyond the limits God originally set for it. As a consequence, the means of the spiritual struggle against libido do not consist, as with Plato, in turning our eyes upwards and memorizing the reality we have previously known and forgotten. The spiritual struggle consists, on the contrary, in turning our eyes continuously downwards or inwards in order to decipher, among the movements of the soul, which ones come from the libido. The task is at first indefinite, since libido and will can never be substantially dissociated from one another. And this task is not only an issue of mastership but also a question of diagnosis of truth and illusion. It requires a permanent hermeneutics of oneself.

In such a perspective, sexual ethics imply very strict truth obligations. These do not only consist in learning the rules of a moral sexual behaviour, but also in constantly scrutinizing ourselves as libidinal beings. Shall we say that after Augustine we experience our sex in the head? Let us say at least that in Augustine's analysis we witness a real libidinization of sex. Augustine's moral theology is, to a certain extent, a systematization of a lot of previous speculation, but it is also an ensemble of spiritual techniques. The techniques were mainly developed in the ascetic milieu and monastic institutions, and those relayed by the Augustinian theory of libido had, I think, a huge influence on Western technologies of the self. I shall be very brief about those spiritual techniques.

When one reads the ascetic and monastic literature of the fourth and fifth centuries, one cannot but be struck by the fact that these techniques are not directly concerned with the effective control of sexual behaviour. There is very little mention of homosexual relations, in spite of the fact that most ascetics lived in permanent and numerous communities. The techniques were mainly concerned with the stream of thoughts flowing into consciousness, disturbing, by their multiplicity, the necessary unity of contemplation, and secretly conveying images or suggestions from Satan. The monk's task was not the philosopher's task: to acquire mastership over oneself by the definite victory of the will. It was perpetually to control one's thoughts, examining them to see if they were pure, whether something dangerous was not hiding in or behind them, if they were not conveying something other than what primarily appeared, if they were not a form of illusion and seduction. Such data have always to be considered with suspicion; they need to be scrutinized and tested.

According to Cassian, for instance, one has to be towards oneself as a money-changer who has to try the coins he receives. Real purity is not acquired when one can lie down with a young and beautiful boy without even touching him, as Socrates did with Alcibiades. A monk was really chaste when no impure

image occurred in his mind, even during the night, even during dreams. The criterion of purity does not consist in keeping control of oneself even in the presence of the most desirable people: it consists in discovering the truth in oneself and defeating the illusions in oneself, in cutting out the images and thoughts one's mind produces continuously. Hence the axis of the spiritual struggle against impurity.

The main question of sexual ethics has moved from relations to people, and from the penetration model, to the relation to oneself and to the erection problem: I mean the set of internal movements which develop from the first and nearly imperceptible thought to the final but still solitary pollution, through those ascetic techniques, as through the Augustinian theology. However different and eventually contradictory they were, a common effect was elicited. Sexuality, subjectivity and truth were strongly linked together. This, I think, is the religious framework in which the masturbation problem – which was nearly ignored or at least neglected by the Greeks, who considered that masturbation was a thing for slaves and for satyrs, but not for free citizens – in our society is one of the main issues of sexual life.

FREDRIC JAMESON

The Realist Floor-Plan

The hypothesis to be tested in the following essay is a conception of the moment of novelistic "realism" as the literary equivalent (both on the level of discourse and on that of "realistic" narrative) of what Deleuze and Guattari (in the *Anti-Oedipus*) call "decoding": the secularization of the older sacred codes, the systematic dissolution of the remaining traces of the hierarchical structures which very unequally and over many centuries characterized the organization of life and practices under the *ancien régime* and even more distantly under feudalism itself. The process is evidently at one with the whole philosophical programme of secularization and modernization projected by the Enlightenment *philosophes*, who thematize it essentially in terms of the defence of nascent science and the elimination of superstition or error, as well as the subversion of the older forms of theological power in the church and the monarchy.

I call this enormous process of decoding on all levels the *bourgeois cultural revolution*: a formulation which suggests that we cannot be content with a merely negative account of the whole Enlightenment demolition programme, but must also attempt to convey what "positively" was set in place in the moment of desacralization. Even on a first approach, one would assume the emergence of a new space and a new temporality, a whole new realm of measurability and Cartesian extension, as well as of measurable clock time, a realm of the infinite geometrical grid, of homogeneity and equivalence.

All this can be said in a somewhat different way if we pause to interrogate the function of the writers and the artists of this transitional period, and the culture they produce, in that immense "great transformation", in which the production of legitimizing ideologies by the philosophers, journalists and scientists is only one component. The artists also are to be seen as *ideologues* but not in the narrow and debunking sense of the producers of false consciousness: their service to ideology in the vastest sense of daily practices is a virtually demiurgic one, the production of a whole new world – on the level of the symbolic and