

From Freud's Theory of Polymorphous Perversity to Transsexuality: Psychoanalysis Today

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Freud's understanding of infantile sexuality as polymorphous-perverse establishes the accidental nature of gender identifications and the unpredictability of desire. In this sense, the Freudian insight that our sexuality is thoroughly traversed by the primary process of the unconscious means that the psyche is marked by difference rather than by categorical gender opposition.¹ Yet, while in contemporary cultural life the visibility of transsexuality is part of a larger cultural revolution reorienting the nature of identity, sociality, and modes of self-fashioning, in the therapeutic clinic, transsexuality is still often considered a pathological condition. By and large, the transsexual subject is thought of as a problematic figure whose insistence on becoming a "real" man or woman is seen as an inability to accept the limits of the sexed body. As the theory goes, the transsexual treats his/her body as a fetish in her/his struggle with the presence or absence of the penis, and therefore, the desire for surgery is seen as a means to become a complete, whole subject. Sex reassignment surgery is interpreted as evidence for such conceptualization and is construed as an omnipotent attempt to enact a phantasy of re-birth or reach an ideal construction of self through the transformation of one's biological sex. What is problematic about such conceptualizations, however, is the disavowal of the fundamental Freudian insight that fetishism is inherent to the imaginary construction of gender (the equation of the gender with the absence or presence of the actual penis). One can see how gender, perceived as a transparent binary categorization resting on a biological "truth," constitutes an example of fetishism, where the presence of the penis sets once and for all the question of sexual

difference through the illusion of intelligibility. From this perspective, one could argue that any claim to identity involves a “mystification” of the phallus, a certain degree of concretization and certitude.

In examining what he terms “infantile sexual theories,” Freud universalizes the role of fetishism as the mechanism through which the psyche simultaneously registers and disavows the maternal phallus (through the fantasy that the other possesses the phallus inside her). The simultaneous denial and recognition of the absence of the maternal phallus (castration) can only be maintained through the fetishistic eroticization of an object that comes to represent absence. Because the fetish functions as a veil that both signals and hides the absence of the maternal phallus, it serves as a defence against a traumatic perception (the absence of the penis) and as a transitional object with the potential to be used as an enigmatic object that facilitates transition (temporalization) through the work of the imagination. The subject's capacity to play with the signifier in ways that escape the determinisms of culture speaks essentially about the subject's capacity to transgress and shape the signifier. To the extent that the fetish can function as a transitional object, it can potentially unite materiality with phantasy.

And yet, as Alan Bass observes,² Freud's theory of sexual difference reiterates the same fetishistic thinking that his theory is meant to explain insofar as it treats castration as fact rather than as fantasy, thus reinforcing the phallic monism that characterizes his theories of infantile sexuality. In other words, in arguing that the fetishist disavows the “fact of castration,” Freud forgets that castration is as much a fantasy as is the maternal phallus and, therefore, to embrace the reality of sexual difference what needs to be overcome is the fetishistic phantasy of phallic monism (non-castrated/castrated).

Psychoanalytic theories of transsexuality are themselves caught in the aporetic encounter between nature and culture, normative sexuality and polymorphous perversion, but are seldom able to hold in tension the traumatic quality of that which cannot be known or the implications of the irreconcilability of these terms.

In this paper, I am going to think about transsexuality as an experience that thwarts the ideal of subjectivity. I would like to formulate transsexuality as a psychic position and as a metaphor for the transitional experience of the transformation of the psyche. I suggest that we consider transsexuality through an aesthetic approach to the question of sexual difference, under the assumption that transsexuality may open rigid, naturalized, and concretized understandings of gender. To do so, I will turn briefly to literature. Literature allows us to take our time to observe the machinations of origin. We are allowed to individuate from our objects, slowly take distance from them, and treat them softly, as malleable and transitional.

It is particularly difficult to individuate transsexuality from its known meaning and consider it through the plays of a transitional object and as a question of object relations. A move to literature will help us make this gradual move from treating the body as object of certainty to a study of its enigmas. When thinking of the intrigue of the sexual body in the last century, two literary characters and two different solutions to the question “am I a boy or a girl” come to mind: Foucault’s *Herculine Barbin* (1980)³ and Eugenides’ contemporary character Calliope (“Cal”).⁴ We know of Herculine through Michele Foucault’s publishing of her diary in 1980. She was a hermaphrodite living in France from 1830 to 1860, attending an all girl school and then committing suicide. Calliope, a character in Eugenides’ novel *Middlesex* (2002)⁵ found Herculine’s story inspiring. Living in different times and contexts, their complex theories of origin and becoming represent two different ways to construct gender and the phantasized Other.

Both provide the possibility of writing the sexual body, capturing the phantasies of intersex and transsexuality, circulating then and now in the public imaginary. Both of their narratives touch upon the collapse of meaning, forms of madness, and notions of transformation. And yet, the narrative of the character's embodiment is strikingly different.

As enigma, gender presents as riddle: "am I a boy or a girl?" To consider the interface between body and language, we face a choice. Can our narrative be of one gender and our body of another? What is entailed in such a choice? Our characters present us with two different answers to the question of gender, one that is absorbed in the social and another where desire becomes a differentiating compass. Each character presents a narrative of their phantasized history. In the act of recounting their history, memory and forgetting come ever closer. We encounter adolescent passion, nostalgia, ideality and primal scenes. Reading Herculine's memoir and Eugenides' novel we may wonder, can narrative be read as memory? Freud reminds us that successful history is always forgotten and memories carry the enigma of sexuality. A failure to remember along with an attempt to recapture something felt to have been lost in time, is the paradox of narrative.

We witness in *Middlesex* the close connection between memory and imagination when Calliope (Cal) says: "I was born twice, once as a baby girl, on a remarkable smogless day in January 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974" (3). The second birth occurs as Cal is rushed to the hospital following an "accident," where her enigmatic sexuality is discovered, causing "confusion." For Calliope, we learn, re-birth is tightly bound with confusion. The confusion on the doctor's face upon discovering Calliope's ambiguous genitalia when she is examined in an emergency room, the confusion of her parents upon being given the news that their daughter is a boy and Calliope's

own confusion are responses to an enigmatic situation that creates a porous membrane at the heart of experience.

Through *Middlesex*, we accompany Calliope's retrospective search to trace the origin of an "accident" that can explain her gender, only to find ourselves at the beginning of the story, now retold by Cal. Calliope's time travel is made through Eugenides's writing and so *Middlesex* opens an enigma for us the readers: can writing be an act of re-birth? What kind of a novel would we have to write that would re-write us? Calliope's narrative and the reader's struggle with gender positioning reflect the difficulty of thinking about gender without recourse to an origin story. As our character struggles with what is experienced as an enigmatic history handed down through the generations, the question for the reader becomes what meaning can we make from our own accident of gender?

The question of meaning and sexuality is one invoked by Freud. He insists on the paradox of sexuality that is beyond meaning, "it goes lower and also higher than its popular sense."⁶ The paradox of sexuality is that it is predicated upon its inhibition, upon lack. To be sexual we must continue making meaning but we must also be duped by the meaning we make rather than become absorbed in its literality. Like the drive, we must miss our own aim to desire. By definition, sexuality is a violation of doxa, is transgressive, and rules out normalcy. In Freud's notion of the sexed body, the body is propelled to survive and not to unite with an external object that will gratify all its needs. Only through the failure of gratification, and the drive's circumvention of the object, can the drive be temporarily gratified.

The transsexual and intersex bodies seem to literalize the complex relationship between sexuality and meaning given that they transgress stable theories of origin; at the same time, their bodies desire certification from the Other. Such estrangement affirms the way in which our

sexuality becomes the Other (an uncontrollable, unpredictable force) that both exhilarates and terrifies, permits and prohibits. Reading Cal's narrative fight with desire may help us to elaborate the transsexual dilemma with seeking comfort in a fantasy of "settled" gender. But it may also broaden the dilemma of gender as a human condition, not limited to the transsexual position.

Unlike Eugenide's novel, which starts with a re-birth, Herculine Barbin's memoir begins with a proclamation of death and despair: "I am beyond doubt approaching the hour of my death...forsaken by everyone".⁷ Herculine, as Foucault describes, has "left (her) childhood only to draw apart from the world, condemned, by the strangeness of her body, to love as stranger" (3). We learn, however, that there is a precursor to this estrangement associated with the entrance into adolescence. She never knew her father and by age seven, her mother gave her away. In fact, Herculine's memoir can be read as a relentless search for lost mother. The maternal space is replaced by other maternal figures from which Herculine derives passive pleasure. Living in girls' schools and convents, she experiences the pleasure of "having been touched by words of the mother superior, taken into the homes of the nuns or under their "wings," kissed and caressed, "gazed" at (5). "The mother" plays a dominant role in the narrative despite the fact that she is barely mentioned or remembered. She is found in the teachers, the mother superior, and finally her supervisor at the convent, who replays an uncanny repetition when she sends Herculine away upon the discovery of her "true" gender. The search for the mother culminates in yet another abandonment from which Herculine never recovers. And yet there is her testimony.

The convent experience as a whole is described as a transitional womb-like space that permits ambiguity, an intermediate space, where Herculine can hold on to the enigma of gender. The convent is a place where sexuality is atmospheric, both absent and intensely present. Being declared man by a priest and a doctor, Herculine is sent away from the convent. It marks a

paradoxical moment where all at once she receives the desired certitude that will settle her nagging ambiguity and confront the unbearable.

Like Calliope's narrative, Herculine's memoir addresses the history of her transgression: A genetic mistake, an error of nature that "baffles any attempt to make an identification" (xii). The uncertainty of identification shakes the coordinates of time, turning mute objects to speaking subjects. But the speaking subject is also baffled. Something in Herculine resisted transformation, could not imagine herself in transition. She could not ask herself: am I a man or woman? Does the literalization of her desire to become a man foreclose all possibility of a return to this enigmatic state where she could hold her mother as both present-absent?

Our capacity to listen to our characters' struggles with their enigmatic embodiment as a struggle to make meaning from history also elaborate the way in which we are transformed through our reading. The capacity to tolerate enigma, anxiety and vulnerability in our own countertransference to the novel opens our experience to what Britzman calls "novel education."⁸ To become analytic readers of the story we allow ourselves to be duped by its literality – that which we cannot explain. The act of reading, like the analytic act, involves making the literary into literature. The analytic act requires risk, idealization and a position of being idealized. Reading also risks ideality, a search for knowledge and a need to believe. The analytic act therefore is an acrobatic act on a tight rope between ideality and emptiness – an attempt to orient oneself while walking on a tenuous link between what is known and what is unknown. De-idealization occurs bit by bit, through fragments of experiences that disappoint, miss and reveal the analyst as lacking. It is a position where the analyst's enigmatic response and her temporal presence allow the incremental internalization of the capacity to stay with desire.

Cal's shattered object of phantasy leaves his body with its unending desire, which in its hunger for an answer gives rise to archaic objects, infusing them with meaning. But as Cal's belief in the stability of language erodes, his satisfaction is dispersed, no longer bound to a lost object of the past. For the reader too, something becomes unstable and permits a transitioning where history is opened to narrative and what is known is put in transit. Cal's journey captures the way in which the psychic apparatus and the analytic process may share a similar structure. In analysis, the analysand's narrative is an attempt to present the enigma of the body, its unruliness, its unconscious desire, and its unpredictability.

Like Proust's retrieval of lost time through the pathos of writing, the narratives of *Middlesex* and *Herculine* expose one's origin as a phantasy, a place that, much like analysis, is always "no longer" and "not yet," "fugitive traces cut off from past or present."⁹ Through literature we have encountered two scenes of survival: the author's capacity to deal with the emotional scene that produces a character and the character that elaborates the material to be worked through, which of course belongs to the author. The book tells us a story of the narrative of the body, of writing on the body and of writing a body. We are dealing with the author's social phantasy of transsexuality, which goes against the transsexual discourse that is also caught in a phantasy of knowledge, where the story of origin often begins with certainty: "I always knew." This knowledge, however, serves as "after education" – *Nachträglichkeit* – and a negation: there is no "always" for the temporal subject who keeps re-writing herself from the moment of speech. Memory is used as defence against the unpredictability of sexuality and the impossibility of tracing the origin of desire.

When we conceptualize gender as a response to "libidinal difficulty,"¹⁰ we come to place gender closer to a symptom. Gender is a site of collapse, a deadlock, a condensation of signifiers

that, through analysis, transforms into a tolerable myth. But as a psychic response gender is also a container for the irreducible split that cannot be represented, only repeated as a feigned performance – a wink that enables us to survive and transform. *Middlesex* and Herculine Barbin also show us the way in which it is within our nature to go against nature and that there is no grand plan to put us in a reproductive scheme.

The dilemma psychoanalysis confronts is that the psyche is not biology at the same time that it is subject to the determinants of the body. The reader, like the analysand or the writer, begins in misrecognition and oddly the self goes missing. What is known and certain becomes enigmatic and unknown. Our narratives of embodiment as well carry a kernel of indecipherability, as our expression of loss. The truth of the body is that there is never an original body and, therefore, no body is ever false. Coming to terms with our own indecipherability permits us the freedom of kneading raw material into shape that can bring unexpected coherence to experience. In analysis, we tell our story of gender and our theories of becoming that are revealed as pathos. Our re-birth is ushered by giving voice to the parts in ourselves that cannot speak, that can only be represented in writing and to which we can “return” through the pathos of imagination. The body as a representation cannot give expression to the unspeakable, to sexual difference, only brush against it through the way it is narrated. This means that we always read and write our bodies in the shadow of death and that temporality preserves our desire for transformation, for a renewed life.

Psychoanalysis, as a discourse concerned with representation also takes heed of the fact that the pressure of presenting in the world is universal. We may therefore ask ourselves: is psychoanalysis (as opposed to psychiatry or psychology) not interested in the effort involved (the drive) and the capacity to live without falling apart (suicide or murder)? If so, why would we not

consider the possibility of surgery as a radical intervention that is also an act of hope or an expression of the transformative nature of the human? As a discourse concerned with the unconscious, however, there is also recognition in psychoanalysis that there cannot be control over the way our presentation is received. It is this catch that makes presentation hysterical. With this in mind, we must also ask ourselves: is psychoanalysis to be a watchdog for medical profession? Or, is it an experiment in meaning affected by technique? If we agree that an unconscious desire determines psychical life, how do we link those desires to our choice and how do we live creatively with the symptom? Sexuality reminds us that analysis cannot privilege meaning in making choices, as we are bound to encounter only fragments, traces, and partial objects. It therefore invites us to transgress.

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Notes

¹ Alan Bass, *Interpretation and Difference: The Strangeness of Care* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

² Alan Bass, *Difference and Disavowal: The Trauma of Eros* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³ Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin* (New York: Random House, 1980).

⁴ Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (Toronto: Random House, 2002). Further references are incorporated into the text.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Vol. 11, *Wild Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), pp. 221-22.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 3. Further references are incorporated into the text.

⁸ Deborah Britzman, *Novel Education* (New York: Lang, 2006), p. 1.

⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Anish Kapoor: Memory (exh cat)* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), p. 58. This paper contains excerpts from my book titled: *Transsexuality and the art of transitioning: a Lacanian perspective* (Routledge).

¹⁰ Pluth, ed, *Signifiers and Acts: Freedom in Lacan's Theory of the Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 160.