Precis

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Ellen Altman
Encounters with Sexuality

Marco Focchi

What do we mean by encounters with sexuality? Do we need to encounter sexuality? Isn’t it a part of us, something we discover with our developing body? A body that when it has reached a mature stage, we start to explore and also to experience in its sexual aspects. This would seem a reasonable argument, were it not that this evolutional or naturalistic version of our relationship with our body goes in the direction of a scientistic interpretation of the discourse of sexuality. Women and men, however, are not merely natural beings. They are caught in the web of language and, in a certain sense, are traumatized by language. The encounter with sexuality is then also an encounter with a word, a word that marks the body and separates it from its mere natural existence. In my presentation, I will develop an alternative, non-naturalistic point of view.

Is there such a thing as a “normal” sexuality?

To begin with I’d like to talk about a doctor friend of mine, who at one point set up a health-related website. He began to receive a great number of questions on the theme of sexuality and asked me to reply to the queries he was getting. “Why not?” I thought. It was going to be an opportunity to deal with questions unlike the more sophisticated ones I was usually faced with in my practice. On the Internet one finds a wider audience and I was curious to find out what issues arise among such a wide range of people in their encounters with sexuality. These questions did indeed embrace a vast range of themes, but if I were to point out one central thread, I would say it was quantity. The questions focused on the countable, things like penis size or how often one should have intercourse in a given time. Quantity: something that concerns issues of a statistical nature, people wanting to know what is normal in the domain of sexuality. They would therefore question me on normality in sex. People wanted to be reassured that what may have seemed to them a strange encounter, what they discovered in their encounters with sexuality was, from some aspects at least, nothing new. Obviously they weren’t talking to me as an analyst – these were only e-mails on the Internet – but they were writing to me as someone they had put in the position of expert. They were simply looking for a repository of knowledge. They wanted to verify that what they were discovering in their encounters with sexuality was part of a repertoire, that it had been classified, was in the encyclopedia, had already been written. And this had to occur through quantity, the ultimate form of knowledge in the scientific field.

This is the issue: Normality. This implies attempting to put encounters with sexuality through knowledge, and today this attempt to piece together knowledge and sexuality has become dominant. It has become dominant through what we could call sex pedagogy, a fast-growing field. When I went to school, for example, there were no sex education classes. Today schools compete – here in Europe, at least, and I’m looking forward to you telling me how things work over here – in organizing sex education courses. We may ask ourselves how this impulse to put sexuality through knowledge originated. Let’s take a paradigmatic case.

Measured sexuality

In recent history – no need to go too far back – a man who is largely considered the patriarch of sexologists, Alfred Kinsey – we’re all familiar with the Kinsey report – was the first to try and test sexuality, to shift sexuality to the domain of the measurable. It’s the late 1940’s, Kinsey’s training was in entomology. Being an entomologist mainly implies classifying, and Kinsey had specialized in research on Gall wasps, an extremely specialized field of study. He had classified several thousand. For him knowledge meant stockpiling cases and examples. His career was already thriving when a female student association invited him to hold a course on marriage. In his
meetings with students he was astonished to discover their inexperience about all matters sexual. I’m sure the current situation on knowledge of sexuality can hardly be compared with that among students of the 1930’s and 1940’s. At that time many girls still believed they could get pregnant if a man had as much as kissed them. So, Kinsey is amazed at all this ignorance regarding sexuality. It must be said that this experience most probably resonated with him as well. The son of a sexually phobic Methodist pastor and of a devout mother, Kinsey had received a strict religious education that had rather inhibited him, and his reaction was probably one of wanting to know. So, what does he do? He transfers to the field of sexuality the classification method he used as an entomologist and applies it to men and women, albeit with criteria which today we would consider questionable. He wants to measure sexuality, he needs criteria and the criterion he adopts is orgasm. He considers that there has been sexual intercourse when orgasm has occurred. Of course this is a questionable criterion: It can more or less make sense where men are concerned, but definitely not for women. But, in the end, he doesn’t find a better alternative and starts recording thousands of cases, just as he did for Gall wasps, and archives containing all the knowledge thus piled up still exist to this day. And there is the Kinsey report that has become famous the world over 1.

The need to frame sexuality through knowledge thus received its earliest impulse from Kinsey. It’s true that we know a great deal more today. Sexology has made huge progress, and research too, we’ve had Masters and Johnson, for example, but what we see in the experience of psychoanalysis, for example, is that the more light one tries to shed on sexuality, the more what we’re looking for seems to escape us.

**Everybody’s and nobody’s secret**

It’s a little like what happens in a short story by the Argentinean author Borges, a fairly well known tale called “The Sect of the Phoenix” 2. Borges tells the story of a sect whose members devote themselves to a secret rite which consists of some very peculiar behavior, described with great mastery, minute details and particular cases. And, as Borges develops his description, we realize that this secret rite is simply the sexual act. In this sect the sexual act is what everyone does but no one can talk about. In the end, the Sect of the Phoenix is all humankind. The whole world belongs to the Sect of the Phoenix! As I was saying, the encounter with sexuality is the encounter with a word that separates and leaves a mark, the mark of language. If we take Borges’s example, this becomes apparent: The whole world belongs to the sect of the Phoenix, everyone performs a rite no one can talk about, a rite they are separated from by language. For this reason, the more we want to know about this secret, the more it remains hidden.

Despite all the efforts to promote sex education, despite all the sex education courses, what remains enigmatic in the act of making love is really how a man can be a man and a woman a woman. What eludes us about it is not the technique. Rather, it is the jouissance. When a child asks questions about sexuality, one replies with examples typical of sex education classes: the flowers, the birds and the bees, the ways of nature, the way it’s done, and so on. Once all that has been explained one has really told him nothing, because in the end what he really wants to find out about is the secret of the jouissance, which is part of the act, but there are no words to explain it.

How then to be a man or a woman in a sexual relationship? Psychoanalysis has many different trends, often in conflict with one another. But there is one idea everyone agrees on: Being a man or being a woman does not depend on biology, it is not related to any biological structures or physical characteristics. There’s something else, but what?
It was psychoanalysis, before Kinsey’s huge research effort, that shed some light on human sexuality. It was psychoanalysis that made the issue of sexuality emerge, shaking the hypocritical foundations of Victorian society. And early on it was Freud who touched upon the problems connected to sexuality, provoking hostilities in the scientific order of the time, dealing with problems head on and talking explicitly about a sexual etiology.

It is something everyone knew but no one could talk about, a little like the rite of the sect of the Phoenix. Freud, on the other hand, tackled the problem and spoke of a sexual etiology. At the time it was something new. Today we are used to it, it’s become part of our culture. But when Freud talked about it, it was something quite astonishing. So, just for comparison, let me talk a little about Victorian society’s hypocritical vision.

**Encounters with sexuality in yesterday’s world**

What were encounters with sexuality like in Freud’s time? Let us examine it as an empirical phenomenon: In Freud’s time, in Victorian society, the encounter with sexuality for men was the brothel and for women it simply didn’t exist. It was inconceivable for a woman to have a relationship to sexuality. The idea that a woman could encounter sexuality outside the legality of marriage did not exist. The problem can be looked at from various perspectives.

We could for example take the sociological studies that analyze the problem of sexuality in Freud’s time, but I think it would be rather boring. I prefer to approach the issue by taking the testimony of a writer, who was also a friend of Freud’s. The testimony of a writer, of a man of thought, is often clearer than a mass of scientific or statistical data. The writer I’m thinking about is Stefan Zweig, a well-known figure and the author of a fascinating book entitled *The World of Yesterday*. It is a description of the society he lived in and which had dissolved before his very eyes. It’s called *The World of Yesterday* because in 1942, when Zweig is writing the book, the world he describes in it no longer exists. Two world wars have changed the face of Europe and caused the disappearance of the world into which Zweig was born and grew up. The book is full of rather amazing descriptions, things we couldn’t even imagine in today’s society. Zweig tells us that there was a social morality, not an individual morality, but a show-window morality, which was just for appearances, just to be publicly exhibited. This morality presupposed the existence, in private, of sexuality: everyone knew sexuality had its natural course, but no one could admit it. Everyone knew sexuality existed, but it couldn’t be talked about. It was a little like the sect of the Phoenix, an astonishing story that corresponds exactly to what Zweig describes. Zweig also lets us measure the extreme difference in the way the problem was dealt with for men and for women. The fact that a man could have sexual stimuli was accepted, one couldn’t talk about it, but it was tacitly understood. The same, however, could not be accepted for women. Admitting it – granting that a woman could feel sexual desire – would have been an offense against the concept of a woman’s saintliness. This suggests a powerful idealization, and the mere thought that such an angel could be contaminated by sexuality would have destroyed this image. It seemed – according to Zweig – that everyone in that society had agreed to acknowledge that a member of the female sex could not feel any physical desire. Unless – and this is the interesting point – the desire was kindled by a man. There is, therefore, no natural impulse in women, but they can feel a desire by corruption, if it is induced by an external factor. So, in a certain sense a woman desires if she is corrupt, and she is corrupt when she meets this desire outside marriage, while legal sexuality manifests itself in wedlock. In wedlock, therefore, female desire can be awakened, even though this is by no means mandatory. This is the picture of social morality Zweig describes.
This account is of extraordinary interest to us and we have to try to make the most of it and compare it with life today. The first observation one can make is that, in a certain sense, in the ideology of the time, i.e. in the system of values that guided the people of the era, one can recognize, albeit in a very different form, what Lacan says when he states that “woman does not exist”. There is obviously a difference in the sense given to the expression “woman does not exist”. Lacan meant that a characteristic from which we can begin to construct the category “woman” does not exist. There is no characteristic through which we can recognize women as a whole. Who can recognize women as a whole? Don Giovanni! We are all of course familiar with Mozart’s Don Giovanni. Mozart’s Don Giovanni knows how to approach a woman, he can smell her perfume and can say: “I think I smell a woman”. Don Giovanni recognizes women through their perfume. The scent of woman is the characteristic that represents women as a whole to him. In fact he can have any woman, no matter who she may be. When Lacan comments on the Don Giovanni myth he says we are dealing with a feminine fantasy. It is such in the sense that only Don Giovanni can make up the set of all women, the set a woman can feel she is a part of.

Stephan Zweig’s World of Yesterday clearly states that woman does not exist, but in a very different way, because it affirms that woman does not exist for sexuality. There is no sexuality for the woman. The woman is authentically depicted as an angel. Angels have no sex and the woman is the angel of the family. This is the classical image.

**Giving sexuality a purpose**

A second observation can be made: that to exist, sexuality has to be justified. Sexual activity as such cannot be conceived as something, let’s say, you can practice merely for your own pleasure: there has to be a justification. In the world of yesterday the woman’s sexuality had to be justified with marriage: sexuality is justified when it has been legalized and it is legalized through marriage. One may think that this corresponds to the Christian vision, to the perspective that tends to hide, to repress, to cancel out sexuality that accepts it only as a mode of reproduction. In Catholic doctrine, in fact, sexuality does have a place. It is justified, but only as a vehicle for procreation. You don’t make love for your pleasure, but to give life, in the context, of course, of a union blessed with the sacrament of marriage. One can think that it is ascribable to the Christian perspective, which restrains, represses and subordinates sexuality.

If we take a broader viewpoint, we will notice, however, that it’s not just the Christian perspective. We think of Ancient Greece as being a freer society than the medieval era, which we imagine as sullen and oppressive. Instead, we think of the Greek as a radiant society. These are preconceived images. Even the ancient Greeks needed to justify sexuality. Not in the same way as the society described in Zweig’s The World of Yesterday, but a justification there had to be nonetheless.

The Greek world’s attitude towards sexuality was not as severe as that of the Christian world, but not even there and then was its autonomous existence accepted pure and simple. We could cite several examples, but I will supply just one, an important one, because it comes from one of Plato’s dialogues. Some think that reading Plato is a boring academic activity. Quite the opposite! Some dialogues are absolutely extraordinary and those on love are particularly engaging. The most famous is The Symposium, but there is another too, Phaedrus, which focuses on the same theme. You know that in Plato’s dialogues Socrates talks with fellow citizens he meets in Athens, and in Phaedrus he meets a rhetorician called Lysias, a sophist. The sophists, as we know, enjoy asserting things contrary to common sense and are proud of being able to prove their
statements with arguments that are apparently logical, but which are actually sophisms and contain a logical pitfall somewhere.

In Plato’s representation of this dialogue, Lysias has fun shocking his interlocutor by subverting a common opinion in the Greece of his time, the opinion that it is acceptable to concede oneself sexually to a lover if love is involved.

It is necessary to give a few coordinates first: Plato is talking about homosexual love. In Greece it was common practice for a boy from a good family, before he grew a beard – the best time was precisely before a beard appeared – to become the object of amorous attentions from an older man and to have sexual relationships with him. Today we would call it pedophilia, but in Ancient Greece it was quite normal. Giving oneself was justified more or less as follows: the relationship was well regarded if the lover, the older man who desired the boy, was in love. The boy could legitimately accept if he felt loved. A relationship by which a boy accepted out of self-interest, to gain social prestige, in exchange for money or anything of the sort, was not well regarded.

Lysias has fun overturning this opinion and argues that it is better to offer oneself simply for sex rather than for love. So, though he considers the matter from the opposite viewpoint, he illustrates what the common opinion was. In Greece too, therefore, sexuality, a sexual relationship, had to be justified and actually was when love was involved.

Up until a few decades ago this *forma mentis* was still alive in our societies: a woman who offered herself for love could be excused in many ways, but it was not acceptable for her to do it for her pleasure. In a memorable image from the *Inferno* 5 Dante shows us Paolo and Francesca, lovers and adulterers, therefore sinners, condemned to an eternal embrace. In describing them, Dante charms us and makes us love them because, yes, they did give in to sin, but they did it for love, and there’s nothing repulsive in them as there is in other sinners.

**The sexual revolution**

The fundamental justification is: For love. You see, it is very different than from the times we live in. Everything we have talked about so far may seem a little old fashioned to us, but we have to consider that something important has happened, the divide of our time: what is commonly referred to as the sexual revolution.

In the seventies – years of protest throughout the world, years when the world saw its first authentically globalized movement, if we can call it that – there was a rebellion against the customs, habits and morality established by society, and this has completely transformed the picture of our lives. People of my generation experienced the sexual revolution directly. In those years I was just a teenager at high school.

It has to be said that the expression “sexual revolution” was coined by psychoanalysis. *The Sexual Revolution* 6 is the title of a decisively significant book, written by a psychoanalyst who is not given much importance as of late, Wilhelm Reich. As an author he is no longer studied much in our institutions, but it would be a pity to forget him altogether, if only for the rift he introduced in psychoanalytical thinking. Indeed, he set forth some audacious and very substantial ideas.

It cannot be said, however, that the great sexual liberation movement has made our encounter with sexuality easier! It has completely changed our way of life, but it hasn’t changed the particular impossible crux of encounters with sexuality.
Let’s then ask ourselves: if the sexual revolution was a key moment, one of overwhelming social transformations, why has it not solved the problem of sexuality? The problem is, I think, that the ideas on sexuality the theoreticians of the sexual revolution put forward were marred by a substantial naïveté. Sexuality was conceived as a set of positive impulses tending to pleasure, which were being denied and repressed to favor forms of social control.

One of the main theorists of the sexual revolution was Herbert Marcuse, a German philosopher who lived in the U.S., very well known at the time and disciple of the most important contemporary philosopher, Martin Heidegger. There is one book all of us read as students: *Eros and Civilization*[^7], where Marcuse tries to bring up to date the Freudian vision presented in *Civilization and Its Discontents*[^8].

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud affirms that the basis of society lies in a *Triebverzicht*, a renunciation of drives: we have to partially deny ourselves the satisfaction of our drives. This is an insurmountable fact. For society to exist a renunciation at the level of drives is absolutely necessary. Marcuse sets out to update this Freudian conception and argues that everything has to be relativized in relation to capitalist society.

What is capitalist society regulated by? Capitalist society is regulated by the needs of production, which always have to grow. To meet the needs of production, individuals have to adapt to the performance principle – that is what Marcuse calls it – and capitalist society is founded on the performance principle. It is no longer a pleasure principle that regulates the lives of individuals, but a performance principle. For the performance principle to work, for people to dedicate themselves adequately to the production necessary to capitalist society, an additional repression is necessary.

According to Marcuse, there is not only the repression Freud speaks about, but there is also a supplement of repression. This additional repression manages to keep the natural impulse towards pleasure quiet and a radical overturning therefore takes place. If life is naturally directed towards pleasure, the artifice of additional repression overturns the natural objective of life and redirects it towards work. Marcuse takes several mythical figures and gives them new blood. He takes Prometheus as an emblem of toil, of hard work, as a legitimate representative of the performance principle, of work as life’s purpose. Then he takes Orpheus and Narcissus as mythical icons of pleasure, joy, and self-fulfillment.

**The illusion of sexuality as positum**
The naïveté of this conception, you see, consists in the fact of considering sexuality as something exclusively positive, awaiting to be set free, that can’t wait to be ransomed and unleashed from the chains of a society that represses it.

The other theoretician of sexual liberation I mentioned, Reich, goes even further. Reich is a psychoanalyst, his aim is to free people from neurosis, from neurotic suffering. So he claims that the only way to do that, to become well again, is to get rid of any censure on sexuality. How do we get rid of censure on sexuality? Reich goes as far as doubting that there is a good reason for keeping children away from their parents’ bedrooms. There is no real reason. We only do it for our own convenience, for our own pleasure. But the best thing would be for children to watch their parents’ sexuality without restrictions, to learn it directly from them. Reich did not endorse sex education classes. He thought children should learn sexuality by watching their parents make love.
I say there’s a naïveté in all this because sexuality in this perspective is considered something exclusively positive, a *positum*, something that exists and is repressed and must be freed. It is as if he imagined sexuality as having been put in a jar, society puts a lid on it and sexuality pushes to get out and if we take the lid off, then sexuality gushes out free and concrete, joyful, consisting of nothing but pleasure. The ideology of the sexual revolution had an underlying naturalistic conception, a sort of realism where sexuality was considered something intrinsically good, something belonging to the order of nature, to *physis*, a natural reality to emancipate.

**There is no res sexualis**

This was not Freud’s perspective. He said that men feel condemned to sexuality and would do anything to get rid of it. Nor is it Lacan’s perspective. He doesn’t consider sexuality to be something natural at all. Instead we could say that for Lacan sexuality is a meeting point between the orders of nature and culture. Also, if we take this perspective, we cannot consider sexuality in the reified sense, as if sexuality were a thing. On the contrary, from the point of view of the sexual revolution, of sexual liberation, sexuality is seen as something that has been compressed somewhere and has to pop out and break away from its bonds.

This is not the realist perspective of the *res* that Lacan makes his own, because for him there is no such thing as what we could call the sexual *res*, the Thing of sexuality, the empirical Thing of sexuality. Instead Lacan’s consideration is that for the speaking being, the real is something we lose. And where do we lose it? We lose it in the sexual relationship. In the sexual relationship there is no existence, no Thing, no referent, so to speak. No reality apt to founding the term sexual intercourse. There is no reality that corresponds to what we call sexual relationship.

It is plain to see that this perspective is very different from the liberating vision, where the speaking being would inscribe himself in sexuality joyfully and carefree. On the contrary, in the field of sexuality things are always rather complicated, and psychoanalytic practice is there to put that before our very eyes.

**Exciting and repulsive**

I’d now like to mention a case. We don’t usually mention cases in public conferences, but this one can speak about without the risk of violating privacy, because it is quite a well-known one. It is the case of Franz Kafka, a case frequently studied by psychoanalysts. His encounter with sexuality is particularly interesting and we have a detailed description of it in one of the letters to Milena. Kafka had many problems, but he did not deny himself sexuality and occasionally entertained himself with Prague prostitutes. He did try to have fun. In the letter I just mentioned, Kafka describes the moment he encountered sexuality.

He was still at university and was studying law, which he considered very boring. One day he was tediously studying for a Roman Law exam – I have no precise idea of what Roman Law represents, but have no difficulty in convincing myself that it must be pretty boring. He is studying for this exam and walking up and down in his room with a book in his hands, looking out of the window from time to time. Down in the street he sees a girl, the shop girl from the store opposite his house. He starts a game of looks – the girl certainly interests him more than the Roman Law book – and as the day slowly passes by, as they talk to each other with their eyes, they understand each other and manage to arrange a date for that very evening.

At the appointed hour, Kafka punctually turns up in front of the shop where the girl works, but there is a small problem: another man is present. Kafka doesn’t worry. The girl discreetly beckons
him to follow her. So, he follows the couple as they take a stroll in the streets of Prague, stopping from time to time. The man then accompanies the girl to a house, he takes leave of her, the girl goes inside and comes out shortly afterwards. The girl is now alone and Kafka can finally go up to her and talk to her. They walk for a while, through the *Karlsbrücke*, the bridge on the Vltava, and then walk into a hotel.

At his point Kafka’s description becomes absolutely fascinating. He says that already in front of the hotel everything seemed delightful to him, exciting and repulsive at the same time, and once inside the hotel the sensation is the same. After a night of love, exciting and repulsive, on his way home in the morning he again crosses the *Karlsbrücke*. We could now imagine a student who, after having spent a long night of love with a young stranger, skips happily along feeling on top of the world. No, that’s not Kafka, because instead Kafka starts questioning himself on whether he really is happy about what has just happened. And he replies to himself that he is happy, undoubtedly, but the happiness only consisted in the relief given to a whining body, it consisted above all in the fact that it hadn’t all been even worse, even more abominable, filthier. He doesn’t therefore see the night he has just experienced under the light of an enchanting experience!

Kafka meets the girl again, sees her for a day. Then he goes off on holiday and starts courting another girl he meets in the resort. When he returns to Prague he realizes that he can no longer talk to the young shop girl. He writes — and this is very strong — that she has become like an enemy to him. Kafka realizes she was a gentle and friendly girl. She looked at him in amazement, dumbfounded by an apparently incomprehensible attitude.

Kafka adds another consideration and says that he clearly feels that his hostility did not only derive from what the girl did in the hotel — a small innocent filthy act of hers — nor from what she had said — a slight obscenity not worth even mentioning. The memory of these things remained, however, and he knew it would never be deleted. He also felt he knew from the beginning that the filthy act and the obscenity were part and parcel of the whole affair, not necessarily on the material plane, but certainly on the moral one. And he also knew that it was the very filthiness and obscenity — of which the girl’s action and word were small clues — that attracted him so powerfully to that hotel he would otherwise have avoided with all his strength.

I find Kafka’s account fascinating, because it shows us the insoluble contradiction in encountering sexuality and how the contradiction lies in the object itself. In this experience of Kafka’s there is no external barrier preventing him access to what he desires. Yes, there’s the other man, but he leaves, the girl takes leave of him. There is no external ban, it is in Kafka himself that a struggle between equal and conflicting forces takes place: what violently attracts him, the obscenity, the filth of sexuality, is what repels him with equal strength.

Kafka’s description might seem exaggerated to us. Kafka does indeed often accentuate particular traits in his descriptions, but by so doing he puts us before a microscope and shows us what belongs to all of us. I think this example shows us how in the encounter with the Other sex we stumble upon an incoherence, a contradiction, a tension between two conflicting poles. It shows us how we always find the radical point of the inconsistency of the Other, where there is something that’s too much. In the Kafka episode, the excess appears very clearly: it is the obscenity, the filth of sex. Kafka does not often talk about sex in his novels, he does so once, in *The Castle*¹⁰, where the protagonist makes love to a girl, behind a bar, between puddles of beer, in a messy and filthy room. Kafka highlights the filth of sex as an excess point that destroys the consistency of the Other.
It is important to note that when we speak of the encounter with the Other sex we are always talking about femininity, the Other sex is always and only the female sex. For Lacan this alterity is the essential connotation of femininity. Even for women the Other sex is femininity, the female sex.

One could think, one could dream, that the encounter with the other sex implied a sort of exchange within a symmetric balance: In femininity, man desires what he lacks and in the same way woman desires what she lacks and finds in the masculine, as if there were a correspondence that man and woman seek in each other, a secret reciprocity. But that is not how things really stand. Things are more like a masked ball, where two partners chase and court each other all night long and at the end of the party, their masks off, he turns out not to be him and she turns out not to be her.

Encounters always fall into this kind of deception. In the Kafka example, we can say that for the young shop girl too her encounter with sex is her encounter with the Other sex, with her femininity seen through Kafka’s eyes. This shows us that for woman too the Other sex is the female sex, it is her encounter with the power of her own femininity.

**The masks of sexuality and their shedding**

When it takes place, the sexual encounter implies a fall, a fall of appearances, of semblance. In the sexual encounter being a man and being a woman brings semblances into play: the semblance of masculinity and that of femininity, which has been described as the feminine masquerade.

When a fall of semblances takes place, it is essentially the man who finds himself in the greatest difficulty, being this a verifying moment: Show me what you really are. A fall of semblances coincides with the exposure of a nonexistence, and it is at this point that the nonexistence of sexual relations can be touched. Semblance means making someone believe that something that is not there actually exists, and this is why the encounter between man and woman can only be produced starting from semblance. This is also why we say that the encounter with sex is always traumatic.

Freud develops this theme in an important text called *The Taboo of Virginity* published in a collection of writings entitled *Contributions to the Psychology of Love*. In this article Freud writes that where there is a taboo there is also a danger, and if there is a virginity taboo, it implies that virginity hides a danger. To protect themselves from this danger the ancients had specific rituals. The task of deflowering a spouse after marriage could, for example, be assigned to an elder or to a priest, to a specialist in other words, to avoid exposing the husband to the danger.

In archaic Rome there were no *ad hoc* specialists, there were no professionals to carry out the delicate task. There was instead a kind of call for volunteers, with the friends of the groom taking care of the bride’s defloration. We find the same issue in the Middle Ages: The *jus primae noctis* was not just a particular form of abuse by the lord of the manor, but also the observance of an ancient ritual.

Freud makes the following observation: After carnal union one would expect the woman, at the acme of her satisfaction, to embrace the man, thus manifesting her gratitude – and Freud says this with no irony meant. We have to acknowledge – he adds – that this is not how things really
go, and instead the woman manifests disillusion and hostility. Freud seeks the reasons for this behavior. There could be – he says – a narcissistic humiliation or incompatibility between what she was expecting and the reality of the satisfaction she has reached. Freud eventually subscribes to an Oedipal motivation: The man the woman is holding in her arms can never equal her first love: The father. Freud expresses the idea of woman’s spite in a very eloquent sentence: “A woman’s immature sexuality is discharged onto the man who first makes her acquainted with the sexual act.”

The problem is immature sexuality. This may lead us to think that all that is needed is little more time, that this is how things went on that particular occasion and that they might go better the next time. But no, this is not the case! There is no right day, there is no appropriate day when everything is set. Instead we can say that there is something structural in this immaturity. This is something one is never ready for. The German expression Freud uses is: Unfertige Sexualität, unready sexuality. The day when one is ready, when one is mature, doesn’t exist.

Why? Because there’s no such thing as a knowledge on sexuality, because one never knows what to do beforehand, because there are no manuals on how to make love, or rather, there are tons of them, but they are full of lies. This problem doesn’t concern women alone. Freud refers it to woman, but the Kafka episode essentially shows us the same thing. It shows us how the revelation of sexuality is accompanied by a hostile feeling. Kafka expresses it very clearly: She was my worst enemy.

This shows how sexuality does not simply move in the direction of absolute positiveness in the naïve sense the ideologues of sexual liberation believed in.

There’s always something more. If we take the Oedipal horizon, for man there is the threat of castration. What does woman want? Ultimately, she wants to castrate me. Or there is slander. It’s like in the story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar in the Bible. She tries to seduce him, he resists. She accuses him of trying to rape her. If man can be slandered, woman can be despised.

**You are not what you seemed!**

Beyond the Oedipal plane there is still a fundamental point where, with the fall of semblances, a kind of disappointment arises, a state that can have affinities with depression. What is depression? It is a kind of mourning, and with the fall of semblances, one mourns a delusion, what Freud called overvaluation, Überschätzung.

One mourns the aura of magic, which seemed to surround the partner during those early moments. This is what makes things between women and men after the initial moment of love, after the infatuation, after disillusion has set in with the fall of semblances, so difficult. We become spiteful, we start accusing each other of all sorts of foul deeds. It’s a known fact that marriages start going on the rocks for the most trivial reasons: Because the man leaves his socks in the middle of the room, because he’s messy or because the woman leaves hairs in the sink after combing. The most ridiculous trifles! But it’s not really a question of what a partner does – trivialities that could easily be ignored – it is a question of what a partner is, and this is something hard to forgive. The problem is not what we do, but what we are, and what we fundamentally blame a partner for is not being what he seemed. This is the underlying accusation capable of undoing any union.
It has to be said, however, that demystification is not the only possible outcome of semblance. There are other possible roads to take beyond the unmasking and the rejection of the deceit. There is also, as Lacan suggests, the alternative of letting oneself be deceived by semblance. One road is: “I’ve unmasked you, great! Now I know the truth and no longer believe you”. The other road starts from the unmasking, but does not necessarily lead to the rejection of semblance. One may deliberately let oneself be deceived by it and this is what we might call: Methodically offering oneself to deceit, letting oneself be deceived without needing to believe, consciously choosing to be put under a spell.

You already have what you need, but do not know it
I’ll conclude with what I think is a most significant example, a book that ought to be studied in all institutes of psychoanalysis and which was published – this is only a coincidence – the same year as The Interpretation of Dreams: I’m talking about The Wizard of Oz, a very well-known story written by Frank Baum, an American who achieved great success with this book, then made into a film to become one of Hollywood’s greatest successes.

I imagine you all know the story. Who are the characters involved? We have Dorothy, the heroine, a girl a hurricane sweeps to a faraway land where she meets a group of strange friends: A lion, a scarecrow and a tin man. The lion is convinced he lacks courage, the scarecrow would like to obtain intelligence and the tin man is convinced he doesn’t have a heart. In their adventures, however, we see that whenever courage is needed, it’s the lion who comes forward, when a problem requiring intelligence needs to be solved, it’s the scarecrow who finds the solution and when an act of generosity is required, it’s the tin man who intervenes.

The four characters are looking for the famous wizard who rules the land. They manage to get him to receive them. They hear his powerful voice and are all intimidated by it. They approach him fearfully. But from behind a gigantic mask impersonating the wizard, a tiny minute and insignificant man pops out. There is the great wizard: Behind a grandiose semblance there is nothing more than a little shrimp of a man, a poor humbug who says: “You have unmasked me. I am the Wizard of Oz. In actual fact I cannot do any of the things I am credited for. I have no powers. I am able to do what I do only because the people believe and obey me.” What a huge disillusion! But the wizard offers to do what he can for them, within his capabilities, which are absolutely laughable compared to his fame.

But they all make their requests and the lion says: “I have come here to seek courage”. The straw man: “I wanted brains.” The tin woodman: “I need a heart.” That’s easy enough, the fake wizard tells them, it can be done! He makes the lion come forward, gets him to drink out of a vial saying it’s the liquid of courage and the lion immediately feels stronger. A few pins and needles in the head are enough to give the scarecrow the impression of having a piercing intelligence. Finally, a heart of cloth immediately makes the woodman feel more generous. You see: The enigma is more or less this: The fake wizard is unmasked. Everyone knows he’s a humbug, but when he administers humbug remedies, they work!

I think this is the road. There are two possibilities: Unmasking semblance, demystifying it, finding that what we believed in is not true and being unable to forgive the other for not being what we imagined. The other road is choosing to let ourselves be consciously deceived, and ultimately, in a certain sense, this is the road to continue in love. Love, which makes everything that is traumatic about sexuality more tolerable.
Throughout his presentation Dr. Focchi clarified the Lacanian position that sexuality is not something natural that develops spontaneously, growing in the human being with the growth of his body. Instead he explained that (1) sexuality for the human being is linked to language and therefore is traumatic and (2) there is no sexual relation. What follows are major points he discussed to answer the questions he raised.

Sexuality is mixed with nature and with culture, immersed in a web of language. The encounter with sexuality is also an encounter with the word that marks the body and separates the speaking being from an exclusively natural (biological) existence.

Dr. Focchi reported his study of inquiries made on the website of his colleague which fell into two themes of interest among the questioners: (1) how do I get my sexual partner to do what I want, and (2) what is (statistically) normal in sexuality? This brought into question the normative side of encounters with sexuality; the ("scientific") work of Alfred Kinsey; the naiveté of Kinsey's human subjects regarding sexuality; and the search for information from a knowledgeable expert. Illustrating with the novel "Lolita" written in English by Russian born author Nabokov who lost the "play language" of his early life, Dr. Focchi discussed lalangue and everyone's loss and wound. With the poem "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allen Poe, Dr. Focchi illustrated the lost object. He explained that the "word" opens experience to interpretation. His words eloquently conveyed that life is not merely biological and natural but more-- a wound for which there is no remedy. The recognition of this by an analysand -- a recognition that the wound is irremediable and not curable -- permits the conclusion of a psychoanalysis.

With references to the libretto of the opera Don Giovanni, the World of Yesterday by Stefan Zweig, and The Sexual Revolution by Wilhelm Reich, Dr. Focchi addressed the Lacanian position that the woman does not exist, because there is no category in the unconscious for "the woman". He explored the complexity of the knotting of Eros (life drive) and Thanatos (death drive) and the "evil" in jouissance, which he stressed was Lacan's very distinctive and very important way of seeing things. Taking up the issue of packaging and marketing sex education in illusory form, he identified the misguided notion of setting people free of neurosis by eliminating all censors as well as the impossibility of teaching the secret of the jouissance of sexuality.

Dr. Focchi explained that the sexual rapport is what animals have: i.e., they have an instinctual capability to find a partner. Animals have an instinctual drive with precise knowledge that leads to locating a partner and sexual rapport. For humans he reiterated that Lacan said that there is no sexual rapport. Dr. Focchi cautioned that this does not mean that human beings do not make love. He offered two clarifying statements: (1) there is no reality in humans that corresponds to sexual rapport and (2) when we encounter sexuality we encounter the inconstancy of the other sex, which is the feminine sex and which is also the "other sex" for the woman.
In the culmination of his presentation Dr. Focchi's commented on semblance (to fool), which he metaphorized articulately with the "masquerade". Deception is accomplished by each member of the masked pair. When the mask falls, the participants are exposed to non-existence. This enabled him to discuss Freud's notion of overvaluation and clarification of the disappointment in whom the other "is" rather than what the other "does", the latter often being the distractor in sorting out contemporary interpersonal surface problems. He elaborated with Lacan's perspective on alternatives or choices available to the analysand. In addition to the familiar rejection of the other when the deception or lie is exposed, there is also the alternative to allow oneself to tolerate and accept deception and carry on.

The value of the Dr. Focchi's presentation was demonstrated by the interest expressed at the conclusion with enthusiastic questions and comments. The questions elicited further elaboration by Dr. Focchi into increasing the depth of the psychoanalytic process.

End Notes

4 Phaedr. VIII 233a-IX 234b
5 Inferno. V.
12 Ibid.
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