

Insistence and resistance of desire

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We have denounced what appears to be a decline of human desire in our times: the mandate to enjoy seems to have dislodged what the philosopher once called *the essence of man*. Yet the continuous creations in the arts and sciences, some of the mutations in human relations that have taken place over the last few decades and — in what is particularly pertinent to us — the persistence of neurotic suffering and symptoms are the evidence of the insistence and resistance of human desire, even if its expressions adopt unusual, convoluted and extravagant forms.



We, psychoanalysts, have joined others in denouncing what appears to be a retreat from desire in our times – a retreat correlative of the increasing dominance of the mandate to enjoy, or the generalised commandment of a ‘will to *jouissance*’ that Lacan identified in the works of the Marquis de Sade (Lacan 2006, 654). Some psychoanalytic colleagues and workers in other fields have interpreted this presumed decline of desire as so serious that what Spinoza considered to be ‘the essence of man’ would be at the border of extinction (Spinoza 1994, 160).

According to this reading of what is happening in our world, we would be close to realising what Jorge Luis Borges portrayed in fiction as the death of desire. In Borges’ allegory, the death of desire would be the direct and inevitable consequence of achieving immortality, that ancestral wish which, if fulfilled, would have the disastrous effect of making of life a torment: since in an eternal, infinite existence all conceivable satisfactions can be obtained, the incentive for pursuing any form of desire would be abolished (Borges 1980).

The logical consequence that can be extracted from Borges’ tale is that one cannot dispense with desire for the sake of satisfaction, as satisfaction itself brings with it a reluctance to pursue further satisfaction: satiation induces revulsion. In other words: although the capitalist discourse promotes the docility of desire and the illusion of satisfaction attained by obeying the mandate to consume more and more, it still requires desire as a *sine qua non* condition to keep the thing going – otherwise the result is death, death either through an overdose of satisfactions or through the realisation of immortality, as immortality would render life inert and devoid of sense, that is, paradoxically, a life devoid of any form of satisfaction (the realisation of immortality is a serious project that some scientists are actively pursuing, having effectively entered what has been called ‘the posthuman era’, which I have discussed in previous papers).

Jacques Lacan referred to this lethal dimension of the capitalist discourse in a conference at the University of Milan in 1972. The capitalist discourse, for which he proposed the formula:

$$\underline{S} - \underline{S}_2$$

×

$$S_1 - a$$

In thus inverting the positions of \underline{S} and S_1 , as they are written in the formula of the master's discourse, and with the arrows indicating that the positions assigned to each of the terms are not stable, he pointed out that it “runs as if on wheels, it could not run any better, but precisely because of that it goes too fast, it promotes consumption, it does it so well that it consumes itself.” (Lacan 1972)

So, it is true that the order of things may take a very wrong turn, and that the existence of desire is not guaranteed. But then the existence of no living organism could be guaranteed and, together with it, *jouissance* — which after all requires living organisms — in all its forms would also cease to exist.

The capitalist discourse has capitalised on the principle that human desire is the desire of the Other, and has been able to utilise the formidable machinery of science and technology in its attempts to orient desire towards the consumption of objects and gadgets that increase constantly and exponentially in number and variety. In this, the dominant discourse has demonstrated inventiveness — as well as imprudence in its lack of respect for the limits that should be observed on human-made things and the exploitation of natural resources.

But that human desire is the desire of the Other does not mean that its course, its orientation and its objects can be determined in a standardised way for the desiring subjects. No doubt the dominant discourse, which is not monolithic because is itself conditioned by historically changing and contradictory cultural factors, has nevertheless enough power to decide in peremptory, non-negotiable ways on quite a few things that individuals end up desiring. Yet the capitalist discourse, in its capacity as representative of the Other of desire, cannot possibly determine all of the desire of individual subjects. There is a residual portion of the life of desire, and of life at large, that is not completely, *not-all* determined by the Other. This is the originality of the conception of Lacan's invention, the object *a*, object *cause* of desire, to be distinguished from the multitude of objects that attract desire in its movement and leave it metonymically un-fulfilled. The indestructibility of desire (Freud's expression) is materially supported by its object-cause which, being lost and empty, is irreducible to any representable object or situation in the world.

That is why Lacan defines desire in ‘The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power’ as being incompatible with speech (Lacan 2006 [1961], 535), and proposes in *Seminar XI* that desire may be circumscribed, but not named (Lacan 1977, 254). With its enigmatic mode of existence, desire is at the centre of the psychoanalytic experience, and so Lacan proposes in *L’Étourdit* that interpretation, which is *the* working instrument of the analyst, *concerns the cause of desire* (Lacan 1973).

It is in our clinical experience that we can verify that desire has the capacity to *insist* and *resist* the attempts that, in a paradoxical way, the unconscious subject makes at strangling it.

Strangling is what a boy of seven in analysis told me he wanted to do. He wanted to strangle his brother, a boy much younger than him who, he said, had been his torture from the moment he was born. But — he wanted to make the point clear — he would not want to do the strangling himself, and would prefer that somebody else did it. It was only a wish, he said, you cannot just go and kill your brother like that, it is not a nice thing to do. But — he also made that clear for me — he would be much happier if his brother were dead.

In this case we can listen to the manifestations of human desire as Freud was able to recognise from the inception of psychoanalysis: in contrast with previous conceptions of desire that saw in it the unity, the solidity, the consistency and the perseverance of the human will, human beings, and neurotics in the most striking way, revealed themselves to be divided, erratic, contradictory, inconsistent and fundamentally unhappy about their own desire, to the point of rejecting it, of not wanting it, of treating it as evil; so much so that Lacan could say that the model for contemporary neurosis is to be found in that character that is the paradigm of the illness of desire that a neurosis is, a character more than four hundred years old by now, Prince Hamlet of Denmark, the quintessential neurotic created by the plume of the immortal Shakespeare.

My young patient’s split desire concerning his little brother is compounded by his other symptom: *pseudologia fantastica*, as it is aptly called. He tells stories, implausible but not impossible, of achievements and sports victories that make him a hero; the truth of the matter is discovered shortly after, but he is seemingly not humiliated or deterred by it and then merely invents some implausible justification and proceeds to the next story. Karl Abraham, an astute clinician, was the first to link this symptom, together with kleptomania (they tend to go together), with the castration complex: they are both attempts to cover up a lack with a narrative or an action that shows the subject’s lack through the very act of concealing it (Abraham 1927). Desire is thus presented as *unfulfilled*, in a manner analogous to the dream, which Lacan interprets as the *unfulfilment* of a wish, apparently contradicting Freud’s thesis, but in fact making use of Freud’s arguments and extracting a logical conclusion that Freud did not consider.

Freud demonstrated the subject's split in relation to desire in his analyses of the formations of the unconscious. In these formations the subject shows his true colours and his constitutive division, which makes him to not want what he desires. In the seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud approaches desire from a different angle, and shows how the subject is, as a desiring subject, structurally split as to *how* he deals in the unconscious with the task of trying to fulfil his desire. The two poles of the psychical apparatus (the perceptual and the motor poles) attract the movement that desire is (movement towards the reconstitution of the memory trace of an experience of satisfaction, as Freud puts it) in a competing way; the subject is forced to choose between the perceptual pole, which promises the hallucinatory fulfilment of desire (which effectively means no *real* fulfilment), and the motor pole, which does not promise anything but offers the possibility of some fulfilment, a negotiated fulfilment according to what Freud calls *the reality principle*, a fulfilment that requires the surrendering of the attempt to reconstitute an experience of satisfaction that will remain lost forever and the extra labour demanded by the obstacles and conditions that the real actually imposes, if any satisfaction (necessarily reduced and partial) is to be obtained at all (Freud 1900a, 550–572).

When Lacan speaks of the ethical dimension of the analyst's desire as requiring of the analyst that he desires only *what is possible*, it seems to me that he is following the Freudian thesis that the destiny of desire is not necessarily a state of lack of satisfaction: as the neurotic wants to believe (Lacan 1992, 300). On the contrary, it is an ethical goal that the subject manages to find some form of fulfilment for desire; otherwise the state of desiring would be not without satisfaction, but the satisfaction attainable would be a purely masochistic experience. Jean-Paul Sartre writes that we, humans, are the only creatures who can enjoy the state of *desiring*, that is, that there is already satisfaction in the expectant state for a satisfaction that may or may not arrive (Sartre 2003 [1943], 401–434). The neurotic dismisses the satisfaction that may arise in that state of expectation, claiming that satisfaction should be full. Of course, he does his best to prevent any form of satisfaction; he rejects the state of desiring, founded upon an experience of lack, and does not want to recognise in it an opportunity for enjoyment.

Sartre also writes that desire is *trouble*, as is the case with some waters: troubled waters. Yet troubled waters remain water, and the same happens with desire (Sartre 2003 [1943], 409).

As psychoanalysts we meet desire *only* as trouble. The neurotic blames his desire for all his troubles in life, or declares that his desire is dead. Lacan did not accept Ernest Jones' interpretation of those symptomatic states in which the subject appears to have lost his desire, and called it *aphanisis*, or the disappearance of desire (Lacan 1977, 207). For Lacan, this *aphanisis* is a symptom

of the subject's bad relation with his desire, not a state of non-existence of desire; or, as he puts it, not to desire is a form of desire, not its absence.

There are, however, human conditions in which desire has not emerged, or whose existence is questionable, and this time not just by the subject himself, but also from the perspective of the analyst. This is the case of the psychoses and of autism, even if it is debatable that the absence of desire in these conditions is absolute. This is a matter of great interest for our clinical and theoretical research, since we are in need of more knowledge on the capacity of the psychoanalytic experience to assist in the birth of desire.

The annihilation of desire has also been attempted repeatedly in history by totalitarian regimes and their brutal imposition of ready-made formulas of *jouissance* that aim at killing desire in the subject, with the consequent impoverishment of artistic, scientific and social life. Yet even under the most atrocious conditions of social and cultural oppression the voices of desire have managed to make themselves heard.

The Lacanian ethical injunction of not giving ground in relation to one's desire is the logical correlate of desiring only what is possible (Lacan 1992, 319). For it is only too easy for the neurotic to declare that this or that desire is impossible, or that desiring is as a whole impossible. Freud — who was not one to give ground relative to his desire — writes in a little footnote in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *à propos* his interpretation and solution of an old symptom that had prevented him from visiting Rome for years: 'I discovered long since that it only needs a little courage to fulfil wishes which till then have been regarded as unattainable' (Freud 1900a, 194n).

Desire and discourse go hand in hand. There is in the exercise of human discourse a tacit or explicit admission of one's lack-in-being, and as a social bond discourse is the field where desire may find ways to follow its course: clear ways, erratic ways, cryptic ways, and troubled ways. Perhaps the most serious negative side-effect produced by psychopharmacology (and even if psychopharmacology has its merits and its adverse cultural effects are not intended), is precisely the dismissal of discourse as a therapeutic instrument, an effective means for the treatment of the most destructive forms of *jouissance* and the promotion of a desire for what is possible.

Now, to put things in perspective: if the absence of desire corresponds to a very serious form of disarray and the most devastating types of psychopathology, the presence of desire is not in itself tantamount to a cure, as there are pathologies of desire, which were the human modes of suffering that led Freud to his creation, psychoanalysis. That desire is trouble has to be taken literally.

Yet this trouble is the essence of man; and of woman, we can add to Spinoza's dictum, which runs a bit longer: '...Nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there

necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is determined to do those things' (Spinoza, 1994 [1677], 160).

Desire continues to be, in our troubled times, nothing less than that.

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