

TRANSSEXUALISM, SEX AND GENDER

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"I was immediately taken to be what I wasn't, I said nothing, and I was lost" (:212)

INTRODUCTION

In a previous article(), I referred to the transsexual's relationship to the feminine and masculine identificatory landmarks in order to show that the origin of transsexuality is to be found in the earliest constitution of the subject, prior even to its birth. In this article, I will try to more specifically elaborate on how the transsexual constructs a feeling of sexual identity which is contrary to his/her anatomical sex.

When one tries to specify the relationship between the anatomical body and the awareness of gender identity, first and foremost one must understand by which means a human being comes to know it is a boy or a girl. How does the body in which a baby is born, a body which carries the anatomical characteristics which allow assigning a sex of masculine or feminine to the newborn, becomes a sexual body? Do the anatomical-biological characteristics of masculine or feminine suffice for a subject to "feel" like a man or a woman? How is this usually "fervent conviction" constructed, which consists in believing that one is the sex one has? In short, what makes the passage from identification to identity?

It is the consolidation of a "belief", which brings a child to say he is a boy or she is a girl. This belief begins with the sex (and gender) assignment at birth by the persons present, and by the legal registration of the birth certificate. This assignment is traditionally based upon the anatomical configuration of the newborn; in consequence of which the baby begins to be treated according to the attributes specific to the assigned sex and gender. It is this reference which will come to signify - through words, the parental discourse about and towards him/her based on their desires, fantasies, beliefs, the social discourse, the gifts received, his/her place in the family and in society - that he/she is a boy or a girl, which will be confirmed lifelong, by his/her body, and psychosexuality as well as social opinion. At the same time, the child learns to play the roles designated by his/her gender (the anxiety of parents whose children do not play with the expected toys is frequent). The parents and the family circle function as intermediaries in the acquisition of information regarding the symbolic system of the society in which the child is immersed. As either boy or girl both must submit to a set of rules, according to which they must conform. What is expected of the child only heightens the social conventions of a symbolic system which belong to no reality, the anatomical-biological characteristics in themselves offering no solid basis to the cultural category known as gender.

IDENTITY: WHAT IS IT?

Although the notion of identity is not a psychoanalytic concept, it is often used clinically. One speaks of identity problems, of one's feeling of sexual identity... Nonetheless, tackling the question of identity implies inevitable contradictions, even deadlocks and will not spare us the concept of identification. For psychoanalysis, the notion of identity remains somewhat marginal as it is linked to a dynamic which is the result of an identificatory process: for want of an identity, the human being is "condemned" to identification.

One's identity, the "conscious result" of unconscious processes of identification can be expressed through the fantasy of a periodic synthesis which the subject is obliged to accomplish despite the impossibility of doing so. It is also a sort of back-ground, having the contents of the repressed as a base, which gives each individual the feeling of on-goingness,

a sort of "identificatory support" allowing repetition without being limited to such (:109): identity "establishes" itself at every moment in a particular and paradoxical movement which is continually repeating itself. It rests upon an imaginary "demarcation line", indicated through fantasies which permit the subject to "resolve" the paradox between what resembles him and that which is different. Referring to an ensemble of beings, identity is a repetition in terms; but it is also that which is unique when it designates particular characteristics identified as well by the I.

Thus, with regard to sexuality, one may only speak of a feeling, of belonging to the feminine or masculine gender. To speak of a "feeling of gender identity", one must follow in Freud's footsteps when he described the "oceanic feeling" (:72) even if the latter is not to be confused with the former. Nevertheless, in both cases we are confronted with feelings, experienced by the ego, whose contents are not objectively verifiable as they are subordinated to the world of fantasy. The feeling of sexual identity is thus closely linked to the contents of that which is repressed in each individual human being. This repressed material, which contains each person's singular history, represents, in this sense, the identity of the subject, that which makes each human being unique: after all, it's in the repressed that one finds the "history" of the choice of objects and drives, as well as the pathways of desire in quest of its hallucinatory fulfillment. On the other hand, when a subject evokes, with great certainty his or her feeling of sexual identity, the repression is in place since the beginning of his or her life prevents access to the fantasy scenarios which underlie what he/she is telling us.

IS ONE BORN A BOY OR GIRL, OR DOES ONE BECOME ONE?

The questions regarding the construction of sexual identity have, without doubt, produced the most passionate debates in history of psychoanalysis(). Since Freud, the ways in which the different psychoanalytic schools have elaborated their theoretical framework diverge considerably depending on whether one considers the masculinity or femininity of each individual innate(), or if, on the contrary, it is acquired independently of the anatomical sex?

My work with transsexuals has led me to an unavoidable question: do the children of the two sexes respond differently to the castration complex because they are already boys and girls, or is it the castration complex which differentiates them? In the first case, all the vicissitudes of the identificatory processes, including pathology, Oedipus, in sum, psychosexuality, would yield to the constitutional; the identification on the parent of the same sex would only be the normal development due to the difference between the sexes. In the second case, despite its role in the unfolding of the castration complex, anatomy would constitute no guarantee, a priori, for the psychic construction of the difference between the sexes: in this case one must first "position" oneself as a boy or as a girl, and identify (secondary identifications) with one's father or mother. In my opinion, any effort to define the difference between the sexes as beginning with a subject who is, a priori, already a boy or a girl and for whom femininity, or virility, is implied risks invalidating all of Freud's effort to separate the biological from the psychological. From this point of view, it is conceivable, given the phallic challenges to which the subject is confronted, that femininity, as well as masculinity, acquire a certain "independence" from the anatomical sex of the subject. This would constitute a factor permitting the future transsexual, masculine or feminine, to construct, regardless of the biological and constitutional factors specific to his anatomic sex, a psychosexuality which is, in principle, in opposition to those characteristics.

Distinguishing between sex and gender may be helpful in unraveling this question, and the expression "gender identity" has the advantage of separating the idea of a predestined identity linked to the anatomical sexual characteristics, an idea which underlies the classical definition of "sexual identity". This distinction may also help us to understand transsexualism, separating "true transsexual" from others - transvestites, certain homosexuals, psychotics - who, for multiple reasons claim to be transsexuals. The latter, in the name of a "legitimate right" to their sexuality, demand a transformation through the endocrinological and surgical techniques available. The "true transsexual" speaks in the name of his gender identity. The

male transsexual, for example, knows he has the sexual organs of a male (sex), but "feels" himself to be a woman, "thinks" like a woman, (gender). The transvestite knows he possess masculine sexual organs (sex), and feels himself to be a man (gender): he has no sex/gender conflict, his transvestism as a woman has an erotic or perverse character.

If Freud does not use the term "gender" - in German the word Geschlecht designates both sex and gender - one finds in his writings, an organization around gender, a distinction which begins at a stage prior to castration. Very early, according to Freud, and this by "obvious external signs" the child is capable of distinguishing between father and mother, in placing himself on one side or the other(:212).

At this time, the child does not make a connection between sex and gender: knowledge of gender is made without consideration of the genital organ. Now, since gender distinction is given to the child from the beginning it does not depend on the drives: it is perhaps for this reason, that one does not find a "gender theory" in Freud's writings. On the other hand, the sexual investigation which will lead to the recognition of the difference between the sexes is "aroused under the goad of the self-seeking instincts" (7:212), which is to say, has its source in the drives().

Freud's use of the terms masculine and feminine may lend itself to a certain misunderstanding. Masculine/feminine are sometimes used to distinguish man/woman(:113), sometimes to distinguish masculinity/femininity. The latter is more complex and will only be attained at puberty(:198)(:145).

Distinguishing between father and mother in placing oneself on one side or the other is, as far as the evidence indicates, a form of identification, even if this term is not utilized. This reminds us of one of the rare passages where Freud speaks of an identification independent of Oedipal conflicts(:105), an identification which "plays a part in the early history of the Oedipus complex", whose subsequent history "may easily be lost sight of"(12:106).

This same idea, somewhat more elaborated, is taken up again in the Ego and the Id when Freud describes primary identification(:31). In a footnote, Freud adds that it would be more prudent to speak of identification «with the parents»: "for before a child has arrived at definite knowledge of the difference between the sexes, the lack of penis, it does not distinguish in value between its father and its mother."

The notion of primary identification has been interpreted in diverse ways. It remains, however, recognized as a cornerstone in the constitution of the subject. At the same time, one can not separate the growth of the sense of self from parental desire. Thus, "parental identification" already potentially carries the seeds which will permit the child to place itself with the boys, or with the girls. This "choice", by the child, will be reinforced by the identifications stemming from the object choice - secondary identifications - which will make the relationship to masculinity or femininity utterly normal.

Thus one finds two identificatory modalities which, when separated, allow two separate and often superimposed problems to emerge. On the one hand the unchanging feeling, established very early on, of a gender which is translated by "I am a boy" or "I am a girl"; on the other, the feeling "I am masculine" or "I am feminine" relating to masculine and feminine roles(: 61).

This development proves to be considerably more complicated and subtle. It is the combined result of the social and family discourse and autoerotic experience in an individual whose body has been the object of the fantasy projections of the parents that leaves its imprint on the body's functions as well as its desires. The Oedipal crises imposes its dynamic in the form of a normative organization, a psychic process that will not be complete until adolescence.

It is in this perspective that one must distinguish the gender in which the subject situates from his/her "sexual orientation": the "choice" of a heterosexual or homosexual object (secondary identification) has nothing to do with feeling oneself a man or a woman. It is this

which allows one to understand, for example, the desire, and at the same time, the ensuing anxiety in the boy who wishes to have a baby or breasts. In sum, to identify with the feminine prerogatives without the individual thinking he is a girl. It is in this perspective that one can interpret certain passages from the case of "Little Hans". For instance, the dialogue between Hans and his father (: 83). Even more striking is Hans' answers to his father regarding "his children" : "Why? Because I should like to have children; but I don't ever want it. I shouldn't like to have them"(15:93). In the same way, many adolescents' crises regarding their sexual orientation do not question their core gender identity. (We would be confronted with a much more complex problem, if, during adolescence, the subject questioned whether he was a boy or a girl). A subject may hesitate, depending on the Oedipal outcome, between the desire to penetrate his mother or to be penetrated by his father, without putting into question the fact that it will be as a man that he will be penetrated by a man, or that he will penetrate a woman. The transvestite may have the illusion that in dressing as a woman he is very feminine, but knows very well, that he is a man. As for the transsexual, F-M (female become male) he feels himself to be a man and it is as a man that he will be attracted by a woman. I will try to illustrate my hypothesis with a clinical vignette.

Clinical Vignette

Nothing in Mark's appearance, a 27 year old "young man", evoked the girl that he had been. His voice, his way of sitting, his gestures, were all typical of a young man of his age. Native of a northern english seaside city, Mark always felt, as far as he could recall, like a boy. He got along very well with the other boys who accepted him. On the other hand, he felt ill at ease as a girl and very early on began to consider girls as "opposite sex". In his mind, it was always as a man that he felt attracted to girls. He peremptorily refused the idea that he was homosexual. During adolescence, he experienced the classical problem encountered by transsexuals F-M beginning at puberty, but managed for the most part to be seen as a boy.

Mark's "transsexualism", was perceived by his parents very early on. Once over the first shock, they accepted it rather well; and encouraged and supported his request for a sex change operation. According to Mark, his parents, but especially his father, always treated "him" like a boy, encouraging him to do things "like a boy": play soccer, and participate in activities requiring strength... Mark also reports that they never really discouraged his dressing like a boy, which he began to do at a very young age. In the same vein, once they understood that Mark was attracted and interested by boy's toys, the parents did not hesitate giving them to him.

An only child, Mark had always heard how disappointed his parents had been at his birth, when they learned he was a girl. Very close to his father - "real pals" - Mark accompanied and often helped him at work. According to Mark, they shared a deep complicity and friendship. When he came to see me, he still worked with his father on the latter's barge. He had already completed the interventions permitting the "sexual correction", a step begun when "he" was 19.

Mark described his mother as very depressed, attaching no importance to her appearance. He has no memory of her being well dressed, made up or hair well done. According to him, she always complained about being a woman and of having been an unhappy child because she was a little girl: "In my house, she said to Mark, only boys counted. I always dreamed about being one!" Relations with his mother were difficult, even tense. At difficult moments, Mark would turn to his father who "understood me". In his opinion, his mother rejected him profoundly and never took care of him because "he" was a girl. On his side, Mark also rejected her, was contemptuous of her and sought absolutely no contact with her.

Discussion

The importance of the mother in the fantasies of seduction in the preoedipal prehistory of small girls is well known: it is the mother who awakens, with her bodily caretaking, sensations of pleasure in the genital organs(9:120). In addition, in order for a child of the feminine sex to develop its femininity, it is necessary that the mother be capable of accepting the body and the sex of her infant; so that it can identify with its mother. Mother must "indicate" that her body (the mother's) as it is, is desired and desirable, that this body brings her pleasure, that she is not ashamed of her body and so forth. Mark's mother, never having accepted that she was a girl, - indicating that she herself had an identificatory problem - was not able to offer an identificatory figure. The body of her child only represented what she was not able to tolerate in herself, and probably was the seat of destructive instinctual movements. Consequently, Mark was unable to construct his core gender identity - the feeling "I am a girl" - in harmony with his anatomical sex. From the very beginning of his life, the identificatory landmarks referring to his anatomic sex were thrust against obstacles blocking any possibility of identification. Mark's contempt for his mother, and for the feminine in general, is the result of a defensive process required to confront the impossibility of identifying with the feminine prerogatives.

Lacking his mother's investment in his body, Mark rapidly turned toward his father for narcissistic recognition, which led him to a massive identification with his father and consequently with the masculine gender. The privileged position accorded to the masculine figure - Mark's mother always dreamed of being a boy - only reinforced his identification with his father. "I am a boy" - and in a second period, to the symbolic landmarks of masculinity "I am masculine". These are the parameters for the construction of a psychosexuality opposed to the anatomic sex, and at the same time, the establishment of the underlying structure for the future demand for surgical intervention.

It is most likely that from the announcement of a woman's pregnancy, perhaps even prior, the child to be born already has a place in the libidinal economy of the family in order to fulfill the narcissistic wounds or expectations in the biparental unconscious(): in the parental imaginary Mark was "destined" to be a boy. If one adheres to this perspective, one sees how much Mark's parents prevented their child access to the identificatory landmarks in accord with his anatomical sex. One can effectively see that from the first dressing as a boy, for example, the resistances are always extremely flexible and seem, despite apparent protests, to translate more an underlying and unconscious complicity which supports the child, pushing him in the place to which he was originally destined.

Conclusion

If the feeling of sexual identity in each one of us depends on unconscious impressions, the position that a subject must take in order to be able to say, with more or less assurance that he is a man or she is a woman is not necessarily anchored in one's anatomy.

Rooted, in its origins in an imaginary cartography, the quest for identity is far from being an easy task, nor is it ever totally acquired. In the absence of a biological predetermination and in the impossibility for the drive to find its object of desire, the notion of an "identity" in the sense of a certitude belongs to the domain of fantasy. The possibility that there is not a suitable balance between anatomy and the subject's sexual identity proves to be possible, which allows us to postulate a wide range of possibilities.

The "adjustments" of the transsexual's drives, his/her life course, may certainly surprise us by its radicalism, but its specificity is witness to the particularity of his/her identificatory processes. Destined to occupy a place in the libidinal economy of the family, with an echo of a transgenerational problem which has from the beginning determined first the core gender identity than the gender identity, the transsexual has no other choice than to accept the status unconsciously expected of him/her. It is here that Freud's(: 207) words at the end of the Outline of Psychoanalysis take on all their meaning:

"Was Du ererbt von Deinen
Vätern hast, Erwirb es, um
es zu besitzen."

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- 3 - MIJOLLA-MELLOR, S., "Survivre à son passé", in L'autobiographie VI, Journées d'Aix-en-Provence, Les Belles Lettres édit., Paris, juillet 1987.
- 4 - FREUD. S Civilization and its discontents, (1930). London: Hogarth Press, 1961; SE 21: 64-145
- 5 - One has only has to refer to what was called the "great debate": in 1935 Ernest Jones was invited to come to Vienna to try to elucidate the difference between the British and the Viennese schools of psychoanalysis.
- 6 - For instance, Melanie Klein's concept of "primary femininity" is still rooted in anatomy, which tends to obscure the basic question: instead of conceptualizing the difference between the sexes, Klein attempts to apprehend what is characteristic of each sex. (See KLEIN, M., "The effects of early anxiety-situations on the sexual development of the girl", in The psycho-analysis of children, London, Hogarth Press, 1959, 268-325.)
- 7 - FREUD. S On the sexual theories of children. London: Hogarth Press, 1959; SE 9: 207-226.
- 8 - If it is true that boys and girl react differently once they are aware of the difference between the sexes, the work of Roiphe and Galenson demonstrates this very clearly, one must not forget that these authors deal with children whose parents had no hesitation regarding the child's sex assignment. Thus, the differences observed were based on boys and girls whose the core gender identity was well established. (See ROIPHE, H., GALENSON, E., "La naissance de l'identité sexuelle", P.U.F., 1987.)
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- 12 - FREUD. S Group psychology and the analysis of the ego, (1921). London: Hogarth Press, 1955; SE 18: 67-143 .
- 13 - "It is a direct and immediate identification and takes place earlier than any object-cathexis". FREUD. S The ego and the id, (1923). London: Hogarth Press, 1961; SE 19: 3-66.
- 14 - The distinction proposed by Stoller between core gender identity ("I am a boy" or "I am a girl") and gender identity ("I am masculine" or "I am feminine") is a valuable one. See STOLLER, R., "Recherche sur l'identité sexuelle", Paris, Gallimard, 1978.
- 15 - FREUD. S Analysis of a phobia in a five-year-old boy, (1909). London: Hogarth Press, 1955; SE 10: 3-149.
- 16 - FREUD. S On narcissism: an introduction, (1914). London: Hogarth Press, 1957; SE 14: 73-102.
- 17 - FREUD. S An Outline of Psychoanalysis. London: Hogarth Press, 1964; SE 23: 141-207. "What thou hast inherited from thy fathers, acquire it to make it thine ."

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