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Sam Semper

“What are Perversions?” – Sam Semper

One way to approach Benvenuto’s compelling discussion, one that he is explicit about, is as a response to models of perversion that emphasize attachment, a response as he says, to “psychoanalysts who are too much focused ... on the mother/child ... relationship” – serving as a call to analysts to “Remember that a mother is also a woman!” (15).

While Benvenuto’s work follows the majority of contemporary discussions that move away from demarking certain acts as perverse in themselves to considerations of psychic structure, he departs from the models of perversion that may be most familiar to some in the room that locate perversion in early disruptions in the mother/ child dyad or in the anal-sadistic-rapproachment-bisexual phase of development and define it almost completely in relational terms, as Sheldon Bach does for example, as a “lack of capacity for whole-object love” (xiii).

Against a kind of sea change in psychoanalytic understandings of perversion, particularly from the 1970s onward, that has seen a shift in the etiology of perversion from Oedipus to Narcissus, Sergio’s work returns Oedipus to the discussion. As part of this, there is a re-centering of jealousy and the primal scene – particularly the experience of exclusion.

In this model, “perverse sexuality finds its decisive spring in jealousy, and not so much in envy and its by-products” (11). Unlike attachment models of perversion what is at issue is not so much the absence – physical or mental – of the mother. Instead, returning to Oedipus, more importantly, the child is jealous that the mother takes enjoyment elsewhere, that he has not been chosen by her as her object of enjoyment and tenderness. It is this betrayal that is “the matrix of perversions, which always puts into play an exclusion of the subject” (13).

For Benvenuto, a child always discovers ... that his mother is also a woman. And this can provoke a perverse revenge” (15) – the “transforming the trauma of jealousy into an exclusive [means] of sexual enjoyment” (14). Perverse sexuality then is characterized by an exclusiveness and fixity in its theatrical repetition of the traumatic scene of exclusion, now an exclusive site of pleasure, marked by the addictive quality of the manic defense that requires in treatment, as Benvenuto describes, a process of weaning and mourning.

The final chapter of Benvenuto’s text that focuses on the clinical situation is certainly intriguing, but I am eager for more clinical elaboration of the implication of the return to Oedipus – particularly, how to understand and work with so-called perverse analysands who present with narcissistic disorders. The clinical illustrations in the book focus on neurotically structured patients (with perverse fantasies), not those cases, as Joyce McDougall describes, in which fetishism functions as “a technique ... of psychic survival ... required to preserve the feeling of subjective identity as well” (237) – those patients with issues related to evocative self and object constancy.

One question I have is whether Benvenuto's model maintains a distinction, as Bach does, between "those cases where the preoedipal and oedipal struggle with the parents has been over instinct prohibition and those cases where the struggle has been over recognition of the self"(5)? Is the decisive spring for perverse sexuality always only jealousy related to the Oedipal situation as suggested?

Following from this, how does a model which appears at least at first blush to require triadic structuring in the subject function when the met with the what Chasseguet-Smirgel describes as the "excremental mess made of parts of both analyst and patient" that can mark the clinical situation with some perverse patients (qtd. in Dimen 832)?

If you'll indulge me, I'll offer a brief clinical vignette to help me articulate my questions.

Clinical Vignette:

A man in his twenties began an analysis because he was unable to have romantic relationships. He was desperate for connection, but terrified of making contact. His sexual life at the time was limited to an extensive collection of pornography (almost exclusively involving hybrid-human characters) and a prize collection of figures – small hyper-realistic hyper-sexualized statues of young humanoid 'females' – most of which were human-animal or human-robot hybrids with scant coverings painted on.

In the session he first introduces me to them I ask how he selects them. He tells me, "I only choose ones with brightest colours. How alive they look! They're all so strong and dynamic!" The conversation is exciting to him. This feels to me like a first glimpse into his world that I think I welcome. When he leaves I realize that I am drenched in sweat.

The next session *he* is terribly anxious. He tells me he found an image online that he couldn't put down. He needs me to see it. He warns me that there is nudity but that it's not pornographic. I choose to look. The image is of a woman's breast, close up, cropped. The photograph is incredibly life-like, high-definition. The texture of the skin, goose bumps, fine light hairs, the nipple, are all terrifically visible. On the breast close to the nipple, but not making contact, is a small ladybug. He asks me, desperate, "do you understand? I will only get this close. I can see the fine hairs, but I will never get any closer." I am choked up. I am holding his phone in my hands.

Discussion:

A lot could be said – not the least of which about the meaning of presenting this material here. I do not mean this as throwaway line, but an invitation to discuss this aspect. This aside for the moment, it does appear that exclusion marks a site of trauma and that, as Benvenuto suggests, an argument could be made that it underpins the perverse sexuality.

In the arresting image of the breast the ladybug becomes the one imagined to have access, while he is excluded, made to look from afar, virtually. I wonder about the virtuality itself – a subject that doesn't enter Benvenuto's discussion explicitly – the illusion of mastery, of access, where there is of course only exclusion, which in this case, as in many others, becomes the primary site of pleasure.

But how do we understand the hybrid humanoid figures? Stretching Benvenuto's model we might say that in the collecting of the figures there could be a perverse repetition/ mastery of an exclusion, though I would argue, of a different order. Could there be a perverse revenge for a traumatic exclusion not from the primal scene as such, but from the mind of the other?

These figures, whose omnipotent phallic bisexual maternity denies castration, death, covers over not only of sexual difference in my understanding but also psychic deadness. These figures, so bright, hyper-realistic illusions of aliveness that cover an inanimacy become part of an anal economy, an endless inter-changeable series of omnipotent objects to be desperately clung to. I am not convinced that this man has discovered his mother is a woman or that he imagines her or himself as quite human at times. The ladybug, the one who has access is also him, perhaps the way he internalized his mother's view of him, without humanity, disregarded, and discarded, or the masochistic deflated inverse of his omnipotent selfobjects

While Benvenuto's model re-centers jealousy and anger, which is clearly present at times, what to make of the profound annihilation anxiety that seems to be the currency of the affective exchange so much of the time with so-called perverse patients?

To close, I wonder if the shift in focus to Oedipus, perhaps a needed corrective to attachment models, doesn't underplay perversity as a thwarted relationship – a betrayal, yes, but also an attempt at love rebuked, or miscarried, or barely brought to life – issues that need to be considered as part of the process of weaning and mourning and may profoundly affect the clinical decisions of the analyst.

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