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The Wounds of the Masculine

Summary:

Starting with some seemingly contradictory contemporary phenomena, the author makes an examination of the “masculine” in psychoanalysis, focusing on the phallic economy and the regime to which it corresponds. The crisis of patriarchy and the paternal function has compromised the “masculine identity,” which, as a reaction, amplifies and/or reintroduces long-standing and equally execrable modalities that are always waiting to be triggered. This rebound compromises the search for and construction of a new masculine, more able to relate to its “feminine” counterpart and summoned in every discourse.

Men, or rather, the masculine is in pain. Patriarchy is more than in crisis, at least in Western countries, the paternal function is in “evaporation,” as Lacan observed as early as 1938. Men (although I do not necessarily link the signifier “male” to gender membership) wander somewhat lost, seemingly orphaned of paternal identifications, uncertain whether to invest in the old or the new.

Yet, in recent years we have witnessed the rekindling, with a large following regardless of gender, of identity and sovereigntist instances, animated by hatred for the Other and for the difference of which he is the bearer, vigorously supported by subjects representative of an emblematic masculinity: tough, belligerent, shamelessly sexist and xenophobic, inevitably violent.[1] Data that seem an apparent contradiction.

But what is it all about when we talk about “masculine”? And, of course, its implications in relating to the “feminine”? Immense issues of which I will try to say something.

For Freud himself, some not insignificant issues remain enigmatic, for example, the fact that the assumption of sexual identity does not explain the drive of one sex toward the other because there is no genital drive, therefore, heterosexuality requires an explanation (Freud, 1905), unless we resort to the idea of the “natural,” antithetical to the psychoanalytic perspective. In any case, the expected passage for the male subject to enshrine his sexual identity is identification: the man-child identifies with his father and at the same time assumes the most hostile renunciation for the human being, that of incest. Becoming a man passes, also, through a renunciation that is not only that of the mother as a desired (I would say coveted) object; this is the almost a naive aspect of the matter. What matters is the renunciation of being, phantasmatically, one with the Other, of the completeness that does not ask for ... Other. To renounce incest is to open oneself to the Other (to the world) without guarantees. This is, however, a necessary and almost impossible operation that is incumbent on humans, men and women, if they are not to incur the end that the beings, of which Aristophanes speaks, in the Platonic myth of love, do when their halves meet again.

The path to assuming a male sexual identity is marked by the impasses associated with its female counterpart, becoming a woman (Freud, 1931). At the center of both is the relationship of subjects to the

object favored by psychoanalysis, namely the phallus, to which the entire symbolic order refers, for better or worse.

1) Phallic splendor

Freud attributed to the phallus not only a dominance (the Lacanian primacy of the phallus) but an inescapability, gradually more and more codified, for both man and woman. The phallus is the coveted (anatomical, for Freud) attribute, the prize. If the man possesses it, for the woman the solution is to be satisfied with an Ersatz that will be her child-phallus but also a man to be placed in the child-phallus place, for example. The Freudian woman is a mother, if only because of the need to make up for her own deprivation, in defiance of the rhetoric of motherhood. She claims to be (mother) through having, if not what she does not have, at least a substitute for it. Evidently, women now have much more choice of objects in which to invest phallic value in addition to a child: career, beauty to maintain unaltered over time, partners with whom to deal in ways previously considered “masculine,” which testifies not only to the unaltered hold of this symbol and its equivalents as insignia of power and dominance, but that phallic exercise is gender-neutral. All that revolves around the phallus moves towards “having” and thus phantasmatically aspires to possession because the phallus is possession. Possession of objects, including women, exhibited by certain men as their property. It is easy to imagine the consequences of such a claim: not only women considered and treated as objects (in the common sense of the term) but especially the violence that ensues if the “object” shirks the role. Not that women are innocent: one can access the phallic economy in many ways, including by becoming a man’s possession (his phallus) and paying the price. Or by identifying with a male position and taking on a male form of desire. Phantasy is common to both sexes, whether practiced on the male or female side. While it is true that there is no sexual intercourse, certainly the phantasy of intercourse is there. The obstinacy to maintain unaltered or to conquer a totality and mastery unscathed by the afflictions and precarious balances that are proper to the side of being is an illusion that affects everyone. It bears the traces of the original phantasy of absolute union to the maternal Other. All these wanderings of the subject on the libidinal plane happen within the framework of that law-regulated structure, namely the Oedipus. But precisely because we are dealing with structure, by definition we are dealing with limit as speaking beings: a certain quota of pleasure renunciation is provided in exchange for access to language and thus to the symbolic plane. The other side of the phallic splendor is thus that marked by the limit in all its possible declinations of which the emblematic one is, of course, castration. It signals nothing other than limit as such, lack as a characteristic of the human being who is not only born premature and powerless (*hilflos*) but who, above all, has the task of renouncing his own narcissistic (phallic) splendor and fullness, which Freud so accurately described in the '14 text, in order to assume a place in the world: I give up something of myself in order to make room for You, Other, and try to meet You. The splendor and fullness that lacks nothing is depotentiated in favor of the desire for an Other who is always the bearer of contingencies and risk. However, in the Freudian perspective, there is no small stumbling block because it is precisely Freud (1937) who enunciates the impossibility (observed during the cure) for the man to submit to another man and for the woman of renouncing possession of the male attribute. She has seen it and she wants it, in whatever form but she wants it. Every cure (and every existence, we might say) is doomed to break against that “bedrock” that is castration anguish, destined to remain so. The anguish and rejection attached to a feminine position, feminine in the sense of deprived, stunted rather than lacking, ensure that the phallic register, which opposes the feminine and rejects it, remains dominant for both sexes. The man maintains rejection for any submission, thought of as a *diminutio*; the woman maintains her claim on the plane of having. Castration, impossible to assume, maintains anguish and rejection for castration as an unbearable limit. I read this perspective in Freud as his subjective difficulty with regard to what revolves around the theme of the feminine (Cimino, 2020). The yearning for an imaginary wholeness is nourished and charged with angry, competitive, demanding instances, for it is constantly marked by the risk of the other side of the phantasy, that is, its real plane, emerging.

2) Not everything shines

If every subject is lacking by definition, the phantasy that would have it not is nevertheless very difficult to dismantle, as is well seen in the clinic.

A patient beginning to move into a very competitive professional field, faced with some difficulties, literally paralyzes. If she cannot be the best of all (she has had some inkling that she may not be so by definition), the perfect, phallic child that maternal desire demands, she is nothing. Better to be nothing (insubstantiality, being “nothing” having assumed lack is declined in the real) than to assume a certain partiality, an intermediate placement that is viable. The phantasy is tenacious on both the imaginary and the real plane (its evidently unsustainable counterbalance) and also the impasse. Difficulties, failures that have happened or distressingly awaited reactivate a trace of abysmal, inexpressible pain that has always been held at bay by a grandiose imaginary side. The patient’s condition repeats in the real (even of the body, evidently) an earlier condition on the one hand. On the other hand, the refusal to assume, at the moment, any form of limitation is very clear.

A patient’s love affairs take place under the banner of an initial, brief passion followed by total disinterest in the woman in question. The state of falling in love is experienced with anguish because it involves the vacillation of a tenacious phallic position and is easily ready to recede. As soon as the love object is domesticated, that is, brought back to a phallic completeness, it loses all erotic and sentimental interest. Usually this happens by exerting a certain aggressive quota to which the woman yields by reentering “the ranks.” In other words, the relocation within the phallic wholeness of the love object causes it to fall as an erotic object because, after all, in the unconscious there is only the mother. The mother’s desire serves the refusal to assume castration and to make room for an exotic Other in the etymological sense of the term. The phallic mastery phantasy that orients it prevails.

The binary logic revolving around having-not-having might even work if it were not loaded with much else on the imaginary plane, a particularly practiced and attractive plane for the human being. It is on the imaginary plane that the subject finds its original status (Lacan, n.d.), its egoic structure as a unitary, “integrated” ego, which it is not from the beginning. According to Freud, such unification is made possible by identification with the self-image by which the subject is captured in the relationship with the other-like, an other that exists from the outset and has a structuring function. This alone would be enough to defeat any reading of Freudianism as a psychology of the monad.

Ego and object are constituted in a strictly correlative way; “they are strictly correlative” writes Lacan in his reading of the Freudian text (Lacan, 1988, p. 165). Only from the Gestalt of the other, that is, from the relationship with the imaginary other, with its image as complete, is an investment in the ego possible. This plane of narcissism is but the libidinal investment of an image of the ego. The self that is being formed is exalted by being able to see/imagine itself whole, as opposed to its real counterpart of a premature and fragmented body. Which is also a fundamental Kleinian theme. This exaltation will leave an indelible imprint on the subject’s self, which will continue to phantasmatically seek it out. The Other, will constitute not only a complete and perfect image to correspond to, but also the rival, according to the Hegel-Kojevan lesson on the two self-consciousnesses for recognition. The subject’s self will always be ready to meet the challenge and engage in a fight to the death for triumph over the Other. But the subject also begins to have an awareness that, in the face of vague completeness and rival instances of power, something is lacking. Precisely that something that is lacking in the Other, the mother for Lacan, the child for Freud. From the lack of the Other the subject is introduced to his own, which is essentially lack of the object of love. Such “experienced incompleteness” (Lacan, 2022) is, therefore, not only due to being at fault with respect to the imaginary Other, one of the forms of alienation to which the human being is destined, but also to the fact that the subject *in fieri*, in questioning what is missing, inaugurates all the vicissitudes of the case that revolve around what the Other lacks and the desire to complete it, the insufficiency with respect to this operation, and so on. Freudianly speaking, the specter of castration is introduced in the little boy, and the expectation of repair-revenge begins in the little girl. In this sort of narcissistic agony, the subject *in fieri* is,

Lacanally, introduced by the lack of the Other (maternal) to his own and its assumption, if things work out; Freudianly speaking, nostalgia for a mythical, ideal object appears, which has more to do with the *Idealich* than with the Ego Ideal, that is, with a basic, exigent instance that demands narcissistic perfection. Such an object, in its imaginary version of phallus-breast is invested with the expectation of filling every lack, every insufficiency. This is the case in the case of This is the case in the situation with the patient I mentioned, where, however, the other side of untenable real is also very evident. The shadow of the imaginary, i.e., narcissistic dialectic, the extent of which should be reconsidered, falls over this whole operation and is always ready to recur, even considering its deeply oral and therefore extremely tenacious character. The real of the phantasy, its body, is where Thanatos works with its enjoyments; the impossible-to-say which, in the context of the cure, the patient attempts to say.

3) Male solutions and (O)ther possibilities

Humans are sexually polymorphous perverts not only in childhood but for life, a perspective that has removed perversions from their pathologization. This seems to me one of the great Freudian teachings. Since there is no “genital” economy because there is no genital drive, as I mentioned earlier, the phallic economy is the dominant economy. The whole phallic economy revolves around the anguished question: is there or is there not? Do I possess it (in some way) or not? And does the Other possess it?

Freud’s (1931, 1932) texts on the feminine in this are crystal clear: the indication is to compensate for what the woman lacks with a child, i.e., an *Ersatz* that appeases the instances of phallic claim. Whether they are appeased or not is to be seen, what is certain is that it is an indication toward a substitutionary solution, thus of a perverse kind. But even men do not fare so much better if by definition they do not resign themselves to the assumption of a passive, equally deprived position. This would amount to coming to terms with their own lack, not of organ but consubstantial to the human condition as such. So, beyond the sex of belonging, humans seek constant reassurance about their phallic having, which, on an exquisitely imaginary (narcissistic) and therefore illusory level, is subject to constant oscillations. The temptation is evidently to bypass lack through the fetish that saturates in reality that which is rejected, namely, castration. The use of the fetish-object, imaginary but standing there to symbolize in an elementary way what is lacking and will always be lacking (in oneself and in the Other), draws on the desire to recover a mythical splendor and feeds on the aggressive instances of possession and of ego rivalry. Goods to be possessed and exhibited, power, success, women (and even men) displayed as trophies: beautiful, young, complete, in subjects always oriented toward competition, ready to take up the challenge that the Other poses to them by their mere presence. An Other which, since the binary logic of there is or there is not, that is, yes and no, prevails, can only be, at least potentially, an enemy that succumbs or triumphs.

Our contemporaneity offers many phantasmatic enemies, from migrants with their bringing of diversity, poverty, demand, to those who, since the beginning of the pandemic, would have attempted to limit so-called “freedom” through the necessary principals to contain its spread (masks, vaccines, etc.). Different contents that move on the same plane and with the same mechanisms: the Other dispossesses me, imposes its presence on me in the most varied ways, erodes my Ego with its demands, with its different color, with its different creed, with its poverty. After all, everything lends itself to being an enemy in this sense.

But the different Other *par excellence* is the feminine and all that can represent it, beyond sex difference. Not a declination among the almost infinite forms of “racism,” but a paradigmatic and original rejection of otherness (thus “racism” *par excellence*) because it is installed at the very heart of being, marking that transit toward a non-completeness, troubled to say the least. On the one hand, the fullness that does not ask (an old advertisement mentioned the “man who never has to ask,” the real man, in short), opulent, rich, in full self-mastery, and which is not equally in a position to give because that would require openness, the passage to the Other. Always vigilant and belligerent with respect to the danger of the imaginary side spilling over into the misery of the real side. And then that power, that mastery must be indefinitely fed with other power,

other mastery and so on. On the other hand, the assumption (and not just a defeated undergoing) of the constitutive lack able to welcome the Other, to demand and desire. To love, possibly, because love is really Penia's child.

In Palermo, in 2019, there were not only those who spent themselves so that a ship of migrants (147 to be exact) would stay well away from the coast, there was also Open Arms, precisely, with its cargo of desperate people and activists who spent themselves in a completely different sense. Just as America is not just the one of the various QAnon, Groypers, etc., who in 2021 participated in the bloody assault on Capitol Hill led by a lawlessness (thus very close to true perversion), with violence and with great display of insignnia. Nazi Jake Angeli (born Jacob Chansley), with his body completely painted, wearing a headdress equipped with horns remains the emblematic image of that day: Does he want to instill fear and declare to the world that he has none? Does he want to flaunt his masculine "animality"? Probably: Freud said that he who whistles in the dark does so to make himself brave, therefore he is afraid.

The masculine in crisis, the vacillation of the paternal function due to that of the symbolic order (and it is in these terms that it should be considered) sometimes return in a big way, not always with outcomes as conspicuous as the events mentioned but no less risky. Just as it happens to the symptom, which when it is on the verge of breaking down often returns as and more virulent than before, this wounded masculinity returns in exasperated forms that draw on old models that jeopardize not only the achievements of contemporaneity but the very possibility of inventing a new masculinity.

During the pandemic, cases of violence against women increased around the world, to the point that there was talk of a shadow pandemic[2]. Some data: in Italy there was a 73% increase in calls to the anti-violence number between March and April 2020; in ten countries (including Italy, UK, China, Argentina) cases of violence increased from 25% to 110%; during the lockdown in Peru hundreds of girls disappeared.

Violence against women is the rougher side of the phallic regime as I have tried to describe it, but it is only the tip of the iceberg.

The hate, the rejection of a feminine position, sanctioned by Freud toward the conclusion of his course, are a habitual psychic and therefore social grammar, one would say "normal," if we consider the phallic regime as a norm. What is perhaps the quintessential current risk summons psychoanalysts and the micropolitics that take place in the rooms of analysis. In the face of the perpetuation of discourses oriented by tenacious phantasies that re-present themselves in radical forms, one encounters (and it is necessary to note it, to notice it, in short) more and more men who question an ancient and wounded masculinity, and demand to construct a different, singular one. They also demand to "become men."

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Notes:

[1] As I write, the drama of Vladimir Putin's Russia's invasion of Ukraine is unfolding, an example of the "masculine" I refer to in the text.

[2] P. Mlambo-Nguka, Executive Director of UNWomen

Bio:

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