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Paul Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender: From Subject to Drive*

Paul Verhaeghe's third book (after *Does the Woman Exist?* and *Love in Times of Loneliness*) is a collection of essays spanning the period 1986 to 2001, showing, as one would already expect from this author, a threefold scope: in the forefront, the clinical preoccupation, the settlement of exact references through the seminal work of Jacques Lacan, and their articulation—as accurately as possible—with the original Freudian concepts. This complex network demands not only a highly elaborate and detailed reading of these three perspectives (i.e. the clinical field, the entire writings of Lacan and those of Freud) but also working through and avoiding or dismembering many misreadings, misconceptions and misleading interpretations accumulated since the beginnings of psychoanalysis—(even) during the post-Lacanian period as well. As the latter—it may be added—are usually presented with some fine, good-humored touches and spicy wit, it's difficult to resist the book's charm.

An appropriate example is given in the first essay—*The Riddle of Castration Anxiety*—where Verhaeghe examines the current state of the Freudian term and addresses the disappearance either of the concept itself in postfreudism or the loss of its meaning in the post-Lacanian development.

The conclusion runs like a red thread through the entire book: sexuality—or rather, *phallicisatio*—is a secondary construction, a phobic signifier attempting to cover the Real. Sooner or later the attempt is revealed to be in vain, especially so when ethics (of which the analytic dispositive is but a vehicle) are expected to lead to an encounter with the Real.

Being practically the first appearance, in psychoanalysis, of a theory of negativity, the Lacanian field can only find an adequate expression in negative statements (*there is no sexual relationship, The Woman does not exist, there is no Other of the Other*). Verhaeghe links these with Freud's more "concrete" illustrations, i.e. the unsolved infantile questions (the primal scene, castration complex, the role of the father); indeed, "concrete" here means the Imaginary side of an underlying structure.

The Real, too, produces nothing but negative definitions in attempting to encircle an impossibility. However, Verhaeghe attempts to come as close as possible, discussing the core of the subject's fears: engulfment in the Other's jouissance, Freud's "passive" position, which is traumatic itself. A historic, unremembered event is yet another illustration of this basic lack, as well as the identification of this position as "feminine".

The second essay, *From Impossibility to Inability*—I had expected a literal translation of Lacan's blunt "*impotence*"—on the theory of the four discourses, is one of the best available presentations of this aspect of Lacanian endeavor. If ever these "algebraic" mechanisms are to elicit any movement, a clear presentation such as this one could certainly contribute to it. Verhaeghe successfully explains the basic elements, (as well as some of) its applications, as well as the advantages and some risks (rather than shortcomings) of its use.

After decades of its extensive use in specific psychoanalytic *milieux*, it is still difficult to produce an accurate balance regarding how productive or merely repetitive and/or emblematic these formulae are. Probably the first thing to drop is the illusion of its alleged “algebraic” character, in which abbreviations would suffice to dispel any possible misunderstanding. Quite to the contrary, usefulness would only seem to emerge when explanations and arguments are developed from the outset, as in these essays.

The third chapter, *Teaching and Psychoanalysis*, fulfils this need, as every single element of the engine is once more examined. How can a necessary phase of analytic practice, which is expected and requested by every patient—i.e. the analyst in the Master position—be overcome? Furthermore, how can psychoanalysis be “taught” at a University avoiding the pitfalls of the University discourse, in Lacan’s conception an abject version of the Master discourse? Must the teacher remain enclosed in that impossibility which emerges when his signifiers are exhausted and his pupils alienated in their impotence?

Trauma and Psychopathology in Freud and Lacan brings us back to the issues that had been presented in the first essay—the Real side of the drive being the ‘cause’ of ‘inner’ trauma, any other trauma remains but a second, ‘external’ edition, and the ever-insufficient attempt to work through it by means of signifiers amounts to a ‘sexualisation’—or, more exactly, a phallicisation. The important consequences have their incidence regarding the conduction of an analysis: the full development of associative paths, through the signifiers of sexuality, is a necessary agency to elicit the encounter with the Real—and here the analyst goes beyond the framework, allowing the subject to face this ever-insisting, uncanny presence by means of his own creativity.

It would be difficult, indeed, to review the two central essays in the book, i.e. *Subject and Body*, which gathers comprehensive remarks on the status of the Body in psychoanalytic theory—as a surface to write upon, i.e. an ensemble of signifiers, or as the body of the Real?—which produces a fine articulation of the Lacanian field with a detailed, literal rendering of Freud’s ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’. And the following, highly condensed *Mind and Body*, an astonishing working-through of one of Lacan’s most difficult Seminars, *Encore*—both texts, Lacan’s and Verhaeghe’s, should probably be read side-by-side and simultaneously.

Dreams between Drive and Desire transfers these developments to the sphere of the formations of the unconscious, again dispelling some post-freudian misunderstandings which have laid the stress on the more anecdotal aspects of *The Interpretation of Dreams*; if not caricatural, these may not be necessarily wrong, but still could be regarded as misleading, as the unraveling of phallic signification (the Lacanian *automaton*) leaves the “kernel of our Being” (i.e. the Real cause of anxiety, in Lacan’s terms, *tykhe*), untouched. A new goal, indeed, for an analytic treatment?

Finally, *Obsessional Neurosis* presents us with a welcome closing to the selection, as it gathers together the book’s main ideas, setting them as a foundation to a clinical picture. Symptomatology is certainly not dealt with in the mere psychiatric, descriptive sense (even if this aspect is also carefully considered); rather, all the creative elements to develop within an analysis are pointed to, provided that its goals are kept. Here, Verhaeghe accordingly sees the concluding moment and leaves the remaining task to practitioners.