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Baroque Perversions and Counterpoints of Love and Hate:

Review of Sergio Benvenuto's *What are Perversions?*

Sexuality, Ethics, Psychoanalysis

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Sergio Benvenuto's *What are Perversions?* Provides at once a psychoanalytic exploration of the dynamics and aetiology of perversion as well as an ethical treatise on the centrality of *caritas* in human life. These two aspects of this great work are, however, not separate. For Benvenuto, the ability to love and care for the actual people that populate our lives is the central building block of a healthy life. The subject who is incapable of love becomes, instead, hampered and persecuted by the terrifying vicissitudes of perversion marked by a desperate attempt to transform pain into voluptuous bliss. The narcissistic wound of *exclusion* throws this subject into the erotic flames of exhibitionism, fetishism, sadism, masochism and voyeurism. These are, at once and paradoxically, analgesics to pain and, ultimately, relics of its inevitable triumph. The ethical and metapsychological position Benvenuto develops in this work is arguably founded on two central Freudian precepts. The first has to do with the centrality of love so beautifully rendered in an untimely passage from *On Narcissism*:

“Here we may even venture to touch on the question of what makes it necessary at all for our mental life to pass beyond the limits of narcissism and to attach the libido to objects. The answer which would follow from our line of thought would once more be that this necessity arises when the cathexis of the ego with libido exceeds a certain amount. A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must

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begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love” (Freud, 1914/1957, pp. 84-85).

The second has to do with the inevitability of loss and pain, that is, the centrality of castration in human life. Commenting on a boy whose perverse disavowal was followed by a fear of his toes being touched, Freud proclaims the inevitability of castration: “in all the to and fro between disavowal and acknowledgment, it was nevertheless castration that found the clearer expression” (Freud, 1938/1964, p. 278). The imperative to love and the centrality of loss (mourning and weaning) form the basis of Benvenuto’s proposal for an ethical-psychoanalytic aetiology of perversion.

In a time when psychoanalysis has become progressively mentalized and desexualized (p. xxxi), a thorough study of perversion provides a great opportunity for highlighting again the centrality of the sexual in the human unconscious. Benvenuto reminds us that for Freud normal sexuality is a bricolage of perversions (p. xxix). Adult sexuality draws its source from infantile pre-genital sources. If we forget this basic tenet of psychoanalytic thought, we not only fail to understand the specificity of perversion but, more importantly, that of human sexuality in general insofar as it is ineradicably perverse. Moreover, we know from Freud (1938/1964) that splitting is a general mechanism of the mind, constitutive of the human rather than the seal of pathology. We may thus conclude with Benvenuto that “we are all split, all of us are potentially perverse” (p. 51). Benvenuto’s work thus arrives as a timely intervention to counter mentalization-desexualization, reasserting the primacy of sexuality and the universality of subjective division.

A central axiom of Benvenuto’s reflections is the idea that perversion provides a defence against pain. What was once experienced as a trauma is reworked, under the aegis of perversion, as a paradoxical kind of pleasure. More specifically, perversion is linked to the experience of jealousy; the child confronted with the pain of exclusion is forced to find a way of enjoying that pain through the creative powers of perverse *jouissance*. In perversion, the experience of betrayal by the other is put to play (p. 13). For Benvenuto, this betrayal by way of exclusion is constitutive of human experience; we are all excluded from the other as subject

(p. 13). Benvenuto even ventures to surmise that the anxiety we feel regarding the mystery of sexual difference is itself a derivative of a more originary anguish concerning the mystery of what the other as subject feels and is (p. 13). When the child realizes that beyond her maternal cares, the mother is also a woman – i.e. someone interested in sexual activity from which the child is excluded – he/she may be lured by the perverse temptation, namely the compulsion to repeat this trauma in an endeavour to achieve enjoyment from it (p. 15). Since, as human beings we come late to coitus, we suffer years of being excluded from the parental couple (p. 21). In adult sexuality, we gain our revenge for our exclusion; it is the Other who can now look at us. As Benvenuto puts it most eloquently, the “third party who watches me having sex with another is myself *qua* child remaining there, perplexed” (p. 21). In perverse acts (exhibitionist or voyeuristic), by contrast, we remain the excluded ones. In other words, the subject here fails to avenge him/herself and, instead, puts his/her exclusion back into play. Benvenuto further argues that the importance of secrecy in perversion is tied to the repetition of infantile ignorance. The Other that does not know about the perverse act (e.g. the couple that does not know they are being watched) is the mirror reflection of the pervert’s infantile exclusion from the sexual knowledge of the adults. In all perversions, it would seem that the subject’s exclusion from the field of the Other’s desire is somehow eroticized. This is most materially evident in fetishism where the “marginality of the erotic object” is said to “reflect the exile of the subject” (p. xxxvii). What we generally see in perversion is a radically defensive effort at fending off the unbearable feelings. Where masochism finds a way to enjoy an original exclusion (p. 63), fetishism seeks to derive erotic pleasure from humiliation (p. 73) and sadism attempts to push resentment into the other (pp. 87-88). In all cases, the affect is cancelled out in favor of activity (p. 88). A related axiom of Benvenuto’s work is the idea that perversion at once expresses and attempts to soften the subject’s hostility towards the other (p. 35). As such, all perversions combine aggressive and sexual trends towards a partner that replaces the hated parent. According to Benvenuto, the subject’s anger originates in the experience of a parent’s denial of the child’s gender identity (mainly masculinity). Masochism is thus an antidote to rage that allows the subject “to feel an *actual suffering* related to an actual person” (p. 116).

Most interestingly, Benvenuto isolates a kind of critical vocation in perversion. We must recall that the perverse subject is pained by the realization that the mother is also a woman. This fact,

the source of the pervert's suffering, is what the subject will enjoy denouncing. More generally, the pervert becomes involved in a need to condemn social life as deception (p. 53). At the heart of perversion, Benvenuto finds a radical disbelief in social and moral institutions – interestingly he conjectures that the prevalence of perverts in legal-moral institutions (law, police etc.) can be understood as a reaction-formation by which the subject attempts to overcome this scepticism. Moreover, the pervert's denunciation "never leads to forgiveness for the denounced abuse" (p. 54). In Lacanian parlance, we could argue that the pervert is not "duped" and as such, he/she "errs". The perverse error consists of the fact that the subject cannot see that he/she needs the social/moral imposture in order to gain enjoyment. The exhibitionist can enjoy only by denouncing women's desire, the voyeur must condemn women who want to hide their sex, the fetishist reveals women's desire for the phallus, the transvestite is urged to decry the superficiality of male eroticism (so easily duped by the little fetishes of femininity), the sadist can enjoy only by disparaging his woman-victim who won't recognize the pain she has caused him and, finally and perhaps most controversially, the paedophile finds enjoyment by monstrously revealing infantile sexuality (p. 55). As Apollon (2005) has noted, a *passion for truth* motivates the pervert as his/her life's vocation; he/she must decry the lies at the heart of social co-existence and denounce the imposture of our most sacred moral institutions. What he/she cannot see, however, is that his own enjoyment is tied to this vocation; in short, he/she can denounce everyone's *jouissance* but his own.

This constitutive contradiction by which an expert of *jouissance* (the pervert) misrecognizes his/her own is tied to other paradoxes of perversion. Benvenuto speaks of the irony of masochism by which real humiliation is ultimately inflicted on the person asked to impose it (p. 60). Thus, in the final instance, it is the masochist who gets the last laugh as his/her accomplice is reduced to humiliation. Masochism, Benvenuto concludes, is sadistic (p. 61). In another paradoxical turn, Benvenuto explains that the masochistic manipulation of women is gynephilic. When a masochistic man pushes his female partner to promiscuity, he is taking vengeance on the men he allows her to sleep with. He organises the scenario without their awareness and, more importantly, the woman is ultimately his accomplice and not theirs. The pervert's will to stage an act contrasts with his infantile passivity. The overwhelming passion of jealousy is thus mitigated through the active effort of orchestrating a perverse scene.

Benvenuto here describes perversion as “a paradoxical passion that excludes passivity” (p. 88). With respect to these contradictions and paradoxical turns of perversion, Benvenuto speaks of a “baroque oxymoron”. In elaboration, one could say that perversion is the veritably *polyphonic* or *contrapuntal* structure insofar as contradictory *voices* overlap and intermingle in a confusing display where one no longer knows who is master and who is slave; as soon as one gets an inkling roles suddenly shift. For instance, the sadist’s crimes finally culminate in his own punishment; he is punished as the biggest sinner of all (p. 96). Sadism, Benvenuto notes, ultimately results in a masochistic conclusion (p. 95). Or more eloquently, “masochism is the subjectivization of sadism” (p. 97). It is as though perversion puts into play Lacan’s maxim according to which a subject “receives his own message from the Other in an inverted form”. Sadistic acting out pushes the subject’s message into the Other; “the sadist discharges the pain of existence into the Other” (Lacan, 2006, p. 656). However, this disavowed message of subjective suffering caused by jealous exclusion *returns* to the subject in a heightened version of the original pain. The final triumph of pain is like a message from the Other (a kind of grotesque parody of analytic interpretation) reconfirming, through the inevitable failure of acting out, the subject’s own exile.

The principal aim of the work arguably consists of highlighting the ethical dimension of perversion in relation to the subjectivity of the other (p. xxxi). For Benvenuto, the ethics of psychoanalysis cannot be separated from its metapsychology; the latter draws its source from the former. Perversion belongs to psychoanalysis precisely by virtue of its ethical connotation (p. 1). What we see in perversion is the will to take the other only as an instrument (p. 2). As Benvenuto puts it rather gracefully, for the pervert the other is a “subjective object” (p. 3). With this idea, Benvenuto provides a very useful clarification of a central Lacanian dictum regarding perversion. It is common parlance among Lacanians to say that perversion involves the subject’s will to guarantee the enjoyment of the Other (pp. 6-7). To this Lacanian commonplace, Benvenuto adds that in perverse acts the Other that enjoys is not the other person. If the other person was an enjoying Other, he adds, it would not be perversion but sexual play. Thus, Benvenuto concludes, “perversions as a whole consist of that gap between the actual other and the Other, who is always virtual” (7). The pervert assures the enjoyment of a fantasied Other at the expense of the actual other. Perversion involves the lack of care for

the other and for oneself as other (p. 10). Benvenuto explains that the perverse act hinges on the fact that “the passage from the pleasure of the other to that of the subject is interrupted: the two pleasures do not converge but diverge, to the point of possible prosecution” (p. 19). Instead of *gaining* enjoyment from the pleasure of *giving* enjoyment to the real other, the pervert makes of the Other’s enjoyment (a fantasmatic figure) the condition of his own; in perversion the subject enjoys because the Other enjoys (p. 20). The pervert fails to connect to the subjectivity of the other because he/she is far too riveted to a fantasmatic Other: “in order to make the Other enjoy, they inflict pain to others” (p. 100). We could say that the essential masochism of all perversion consists of this primordial subjugation to the Other’s *jouissance*. Rather than “charitable reciprocity”, we have “a double parallel complicity” (p. 33). Benvenuto here speaks of a “wedging of two solitudes” where a masochistic accomplice enables the sadist’s enjoyment. In a contrapuntal inversion of a maxim of La Rochefoucauld (“Hypocrisy is the homage which vice pays to virtue”), Benvenuto argues that “the accomplice of the pervert is the homage that virtue pays to vice” (p. 31).

For Benvenuto, ethics consists of giving enjoyment and happiness to the other (p. 72). This ethical dimension is disavowed by the pervert who cannot understand that the most expedient way to love and care for oneself is to love and care, above all, for the other. Perverts do not care for the other’s enjoyment because of an early experience of trauma, namely the realization “that the other lives in a reality from which they are excluded” (p. 136). This closure to the other furthers their pain insofar as it alienates them even more deeply from ethical life. In his critical engagement with Lacanian theory, Benvenuto argues that Lacan’s thought also remains closed off to the other. The strength of Lacanian psychoanalysis, he argues, is that it takes the Other into account while its weakness hinges on the fact that it does not consider the concrete other (p. 99). For Lacan, Benvenuto continues, it is as though the realm of otherness were reducible to the transcendental Other (Nature, law, language and so on) on the one hand and the object *a* on the other hand, namely the thing that arouses me. What is missing is a reference to the concrete other, the subject whose enjoyment and desire becomes my prerogative.

The most daring conjecture of the work arrives at the end of the book where Benvenuto deals extensively with moral masochism. For Benvenuto, moral masochism is Kafkaesque insofar

as one sees the punishment but not the crime (pp. 151-152). Where then are we to find the fault? The answer Benvenuto provides is that the moral masochist has no remorse. Remorse and shame, Benvenuto continues, are “the affective traces of repentance, and thus of the offence one regrets” (p. 152). The moral masochist does not repent the fault of hating someone. Failing to repent, he/she is ceaselessly punished. Here Benvenuto even invokes the Ten Commandments as testament to the fact that the other matters. For Benvenuto, “to be guilty, in any culture, always means to lack respect for the other, to not treat him as the other-than-me with whom I maintain a normatively reciprocal relationship” (p. 153).

To conclude, let us ponder a crucial contradiction in psychoanalytic thought with respect to the relation of love and hate. We see in Freud an irreconcilable tension between the mandate to love (see above) and an explicit refusal to love the neighbor. For the latter Freud, “anyone who follows such a precept [love thy neighbor!] in present-day civilization only puts himself at a disadvantage *vis-a-vis* the person who disregards it” (Freud, 1930/1961, p. 90). Likewise, though one attests to a marked neglect of the category of the actual other in Lacanian theory, one also finds in his thinking an unequivocal critique of Freud’s inability to love the neighbor:

We can find our case on the following, namely, that every time that Freud stops short in horror at the consequences of the commandment to love one’s neighbor, we see evoked the presence of that fundamental evil which dwells within this neighbor. But if that is the case, then it also dwells within me. And what is more of a neighbor to me than this heart within which is that of my *jouissance* and which I don’t dare go near? For as soon as I go near it, as *Civilization and Its Discontents* makes clear, there rises up the unfathomable aggressivity from which I flee, that I turn against me, and which in the very place of the vanished Law adds its weight to that which prevents me from crossing a certain frontier at the limit of the Thing (Lacan, 1959-1960/1992, session of March 20).

To love the neighbour, for Lacan, means to embrace the kernel of hate-evil-*jouissance* that inhabits my neighbour and me. In loving the neighbour-Thing, we must also be willing to explore the dangerous realms of evil. If “Eros is making the other the finality of my

subjectivity” (p. 154) we must also recall that the courage for aggressivity is crucial on this path. With Lacan we may say that “as long as it’s a question of the good, there’s no problem” (Lacan, 1959-1960/1992, session of March 20). The true test consists of accommodating the neighbor’s evil as well as our own. Our greatest challenge resides in the difficult effort to love the neighbor *qua* pervert. When Klossowski (2002) hails Sade as his neighbor, is he not paving the way towards this gargantuan task? Our path *out* of perversion will have to take the paradoxical detour of an immersion *into* perversion. Indeed, for Benvenuto (following Khan and Winnicott), psychoanalysis is a perversion that overcomes perversion (p. 134). As in a fugue, the *flight* from a perverse *theme* will require the perverse exploration of all its inversions and variations. In order to love we must also be willing to learn something of hate; this is what the pervert’s agony and passion can teach us.

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