

Navigating the entanglement of Desire and Jouissance

Perhaps it's apt to begin on a personal note as an entry into the theme of my text: I had been postponing this piece of writing for a while, each day telling myself that I need to read more; I have to get my ideas coherent etc. All this while, the two words 'desire' and 'jouissance' were right in front of me, beckoning me to write something. I finally got down to writing only after I asked myself the question: what is this hesitation about?

That led me to recalling that last month, around the time I arrived at this topic as an idea for my cartel end note, I had participated in a Group Relations Conference as a member after a gap of 14 years, having been on the staff of such conferences in all the intervening years¹. This conference, with its evocative title 'Poetry of Hatred' created an urgency in me to discover whether I am capable of hatred. Dislike – yes; resentment, yes; but hatred...? By the time the conference ended, I had encountered my own capacity for hatred. This discovery however, created doubts in me about whether I can ever staff these conferences again, and would I, with my now-acknowledged capacity to hate, pose a risk to the members? My consultant offered me an interpretation: you have recognized that 'you are not good', but that doesn't necessarily translate to 'you are not good enough'.

The above interpretation opened up a trajectory to investigate my hesitation to write about the relation between desire and jouissance. My desire is to write; but my jouissance is to enjoy being in the place of 'not good enough to write'?

In her paper 'The Body in the teaching of Jacques Lacan' Colette Soler, distinguishing between pleasure, jouissance and desire, writes:²

Jouissance is not what desire aims at. Quite the contrary. Lacan concerned himself with situating the various barriers to jouissance. What creates barriers to jouissance, in Lacan's teaching, is in part pleasure. Pleasure is what he calls: the incoherent binding

¹ Group Relations Conference is a methodology that originated in the Tavistock Institute, UK, to learn about the roles one takes up in groups and systems, with particular attention to the unconscious processes at work. 'Member' is someone who has signed up to learn; 'Staff' consult to the unfolding dynamics.

² The Body in the Teaching of Jacques Lacan, Colette Soler, May 1984, Published Jcfar Vol 6 p6-38 Winter 1995 (Journal of the Centre of Freudian Analysis & Research)

of life, that is to say, in fact, the animal's reaction in fleeing from pain, quite stupidly, as a barrier to jouissance, which basically would arise there where pleasure ends, and most eminently in the form of pain.

Yet this first barrier, which is a natural one, he says, fundamentally comes to be relayed for humans through a prohibition, by means of the law. In other words, the forbidden, which founds desire, in Lacan, is what sets up a barrier to jouissance. Ah! Obviously, that cannot be grasped unless you hold on to the vital principle that, for Lacan, desire, in essence, is to be unsatisfied, that is to say, desire has no object which responds to its aspiration. So there we have the first split: pleasure, desire and jouissance.

Eric Laurent, in an interview published in the Lacanian Review Online, contrasts between Jouissance and Desire thus:³

In Freud the category of 'desire' was a notion that opened up the paradoxes of an object that is always elsewhere, that flees, is displaced. It is desire for something else. It is the displacement of desire.

Jouissance in contrast is fixed, fixated. To do harm is not a desire, to harm is a mode of jouissance.

And indeed, when a subject comes to analysis, he or she has fixations of jouissance. (...) In order to have a project of embarking on this experience, the experience of an analysis, there has to be a tension between desire and jouissance, there has to be a possibility of displacement. This means that the subject can be fixated but at the same time has to have a desire for something else.

Which leaves me wondering: can the work in analysis then be described as orienting oneself towards one's desire, by circumscribing our fixations of jouissance? That desire remains elusive is perhaps what pushes one to find 'a mode of jouissance that is liveable, satisfying, and which allows one to have a dignified life' as Laurent posits?

Ganesh Anantharaman

10th July 2021

³ Desire, Jouissance, and Fantasy, Laurent Eric, Lacanian Review Online, May 2019. Excerpts from Interview by Iara Bianchi for *De Inconscientes*, translated from Spanish by Florencia F.C. Shanahan and Roger Litten