QUEERING OEDIPUS: TOWARDS A TIRESIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS?

Jens De Vleminck

Tiresias – you teach us
What it means: to hold your own

Kae Tempest, *Hold Your Own*

Introduction

If Zygmunt Bauman (2007) famously defined our present era in terms of 'fluid times', then the contemporary preoccupation with sexual and gender identity can be understood as one of its most visible and talked-about symptoms. According to some, the contemporary emphasis on the individual's self-expression regarding sex and gender is at odds with psychoanalysis and its alleged dominant-patriarchal, hetero-normative (binary) and repressive discourse. At least, in this version of psychoanalysis, the hegemony of *Oedipus Rex* is undisputed and orthodox-canonical psychoanalysts seem to cling to a relic from a not-so-distant social past out of a conservative reflex.

What can be the significance of Oedipus in confrontation with the current spectrum of gender and sexual diversity? Is he permanently limping along after drinking today's 'alphabet soup' (LGTBQIA+)? Or, does Oedipus continue to confront us with the paradoxical kernel of our human condition despite of a transformed social context? And with that, we are immediately at the heart of question of identity intertwined with it. What about the contemporary proliferation of identities, stressing variation, diversity or non-conformity regarding sexuality and gender in a field of non-binarity?

In what follows, we explore the question of both the contemporary relevance of Oedipus and the current preoccupation with identity in confrontation with the enigmatic figure of Tiresias. In an attempt to think outside the binary about the enigmatic nature of gender and sexuality today, Tiresias can function as an alternative lens, as a 'heterotopia' or as a potential 'line of flight' from binary thinking. In this light, 'queer' will be questioned as an historical entity, with its possibilities and impossibilities, related to 'identity' as a paradoxical concept. Finally, we raise the question of the critical potential of contemporary psychoanalysis. Does it need an urgent transition itself, or can psychoanalysis re-actualize its inherent potential as 'counter-science' in confrontation with a changing, 'liquid' social environment?

O Oedipus, Where Art Thou?

Not infrequently, psychoanalysis is one-sidedly reduced to the so-called Oedipus complex. In the past as much as today, this popular opinion goes together with the implicit idea of Oedipus as an alleged guarantor and a conservative remnant of a patriarchal society. If Oedipus is outdated, does this also hold for psychoanalysis? Or, does there exist a non-Oedipal potential in psychoanalysis whose theoretical and therapeutic capacities remain intact 'beyond Oedipus'?

In order to reflect on these questions a contextualization of the status of Oedipus in Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis is required. For, besides Freud, also Jacques Lacan came under fire

for his alleged Oedipal normativism. No doubt, his best-known criticisms can be found in Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (2004), but also in the first volume (1978) of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, entitled *The Will to Know*. However, is it really the case that the Freudian project is necessarily, let alone exclusively, based on Oedipus? Or, is it also possible to discern a 'non-Oedipal psychoanalysis' in Freud's collected works (Van Haute and Geyskens 2012)? And, if Freud is not the instigator of the 'evil', is it possibly Lacan? Didn't Lacan's 'return to Freud' put Oedipus more firmly in the saddle than ever by identifying psychoanalysis with Oedipus? We will briefly explore these different lines of thought in Freud and Lacan.

When Oedipus forms a motif in Freud's oeuvre relatively early on, this places him in the ranks of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche. However, while Oedipus still functioned there as an abstract *locus* of the 'Subjective Spirit', Freud transformed it into the theatre of the personal unconscious. Amongst other literary figures, such as Hamlet, the Oedipus motif already appears in the *Letters to Fliess* and in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). In these texts, Oedipus is 'discovered' as a motif and as an infantile phantasy. Similarly, in the case studies of 'Little Hans' (1910a [1909]) and 'The Rat Man' (1909d), Hans is referred to as 'a little Oedipus' (1909b: 111) and the Rat Man is suffering from a 'father-complex' (1909d: 218). From the Rat Man onwards, it becomes clear that obsessional neurosis is the actual *locus* of Oedipus, defined by Freud as 'the nucleus of perhaps every psychoneurosis' (1912-13a: 132). It was not until 1920 that Freud enshrined Oedipus as an inalienable element in his meta-psychology. Only from the fourth edition (1920) of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* onwards, Freud declared in an added note:

> It has justly been said that the Oedipus complex is the nuclear complex of the neuroses, and constitutes the essential part of their content. It represents the peak of infantile sexuality, which, through its after-effects, exercises a decisive influence on the sexuality of adults. Every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls a victim to neurosis. With the progress of psycho-analytic studies the importance of the Oedipus complex has become more and more clearly evident; its recognition has become the shibboleth that distinguishes the adherents of psycho-analysis from its opponents.
>
> Freud 1905d: 226 note 1

If we know that Freud wrote this at the very same moment of the introduction of both the death instinct and the second topography, this means that the Oedipus complex was placed in the focus of his theory relatively late.

Freud's first detailed and comprehensive account of the so-called 'more complete Oedipus complex' does not appear until 'The Ego and the Id' (1923b: 33). Contrary to what one might expect, Freud's presentation of Oedipus primarily focusses on the genesis of both the Ego and the Super-Ego, rather than on sexual object choice and libidinal object cathexis. In other words, the emphasis is on the genesis of identity, that is, psychosexual identity, since gender identity did not exist at that time. The stake of Oedipus is the individual's inclusion in society, that is, the process of socialisation, as evidenced by Freud's cultural writings dating from the same period. Rather than by a complete integration into culture, the human condition is characterised by 'a tormenting uneasiness' in civilization (Freud 1930a: 135). In addition to socialisation – initially through the family – the cultural disciplining and normalisation of sexuality also plays a role. In this respect, Oedipus did become the culmination point of Freud's developmental psychological model. 'Normal' sexual

development implies a disciplining towards a heterosexual object-choice, with the ideal of the nuclear family as the ultimate horizon.

The normalising and normative tendencies that can be discerned in Freud's work from the 1920s onwards were not present – or, at least, not that outspoken – in his earlier work. Nowhere is this more evident than in the first edition (1905) of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. In the first essay, perversions are not understood as perverse identities, as did psychiatry and sexology at that time, but as magnifications and intensifications of tendencies in 'normal' sexuality. Exactly the multiplicity of variations in sexual life and the continuum between normality and pathology are the stakes of his argument. Correspondingly, Freud arrives at the radical insight that human sexuality is in principle not determined by an inherent norm. From a study of its exaggerations and intensifications, a generally human condition of 'polymorphously perverse' sexuality is defined as the 'normal' constitution.

However, it this not the 'radical' Freud of the early years of psychoanalysis that is thought trough by post-Freudians, both in the United States (including Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris and Rudolf Loewenstein), in the United Kingdom (including Melanie Klein) and in Europe (including Jacques Lacan). It is the late Freud with his Oedipus that serves as a starting point for these authors. During the interwar period, American psychoanalysis acquires rather medical and moralising characteristics, which can be illustrated by the vicissitudes of ego-psychology (Herzog 2017). Somewhat paradoxically, Lacan will argue against the imaginary normalisation of an autonomous ego, which is propagated there, by making an appeal to the symbolic Norm, in particular the 'Name-of-the-Father' (Lacan 1994: 379; 1998). Informed by Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, Lacan's 'return to Freud' [*retour à Freud*] revitalises the late Freud and the central importance of the Oedipus complex.

Exemplary of Lacan's initial formulation of the Oedipus complex are the seminars around 1957, in particular *La relation d'objet* (1956-57) and *Les formations de l'inconscient* (1957-58). For Lacan, the Name-of-the-Father is the guarantor of the symbolic order and the law contained therein. The Oedipus complex becomes a *structure* that determines the relationship between cultural norms and rules on the one hand and polymorphously perverse activities on the other. The entry into the symbolic order is linked to the Law of the Father. Submission to this Law is equivalent to normality, to entry into the 'normal' order. In contrast, mental disorders stand as 'denials' (in schizophrenia and psychosis) or as 'rejections' (in perversions) of the Oedipal law that sets the norm and thus marks the boundary between normality and deviations from it. The function of the father, as the representative and guarantor of the symbolic order, regulates interpersonal relations, protecting the child from the mother's desire by establishing the law. This is how Lacan thinks the transition from nature to culture. We also start to understand in what way Lacan's interpretation of Oedipus is marked by his preoccupation with the clinic of psychosis – in contrast to the clinic of (obsessional) neurosis in Freud.

From the 1960s onwards, Lacan develops a radically different account of Oedipus. However, Oedipus is not thrown overboard. Lacan's focus turns to the real and to 'symbolic castration'. The real is the real of the body that is at once pleasurable and threatening. This mix of pleasure and threat is defined by the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*. As a subject, as a talking being, the subject loses immediate contact with the real. With the term 'structural castration', Lacan refers to the original impossibility of pleasure. For, according to Lacan, pleasure must always pass through the signifier to reach pleasure. The function of the father is to pass on and perpetuate the symbolic castration to which the father himself is also

subjected. The function of the Oedipal structure for every human being is 'to use it in order to get past it' and to leave it behind (Lacan 2005: 136). In the seminar *Envers de la psychanalyse* (1969-70), Lacan thinks exemplarily and correspondingly 'beyond Oedipus' (Lacan 1991).

Every human subject faces the challenge of positioning itself in relation to the deficit, recognizing the deficit, breaking free from the imaginary (the illusory totality). Having overcome anxiety, it relates to the deficit in a singular way by constructing its most singular symptoms. It is here that Lacan defines the *sinthome* as the name for *jouissance* in its singular uniqueness (Lacan 2005). In this late Lacan we encounter a potential for plurality and multiplicity in order to think sexual and gender variation beyond Oedipus and beyond norms.

From this perspective, Lacan's genuine 'return to Freud' is perhaps more likely to be situated in the late Lacan, who points to the indigestible remainder of the real, of which also Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) testified much earlier. At the same time, one should raise the question whether norms do not *per se*, and thus necessarily, orient us towards the other? Doesn't this touch upon the fundamental uneasiness of being socialised and the 'dissatisfaction' in civilization (1930a: 136)? Perhaps the need arises to dare to think Oedipus' historically-contingent transformations and variations, instead of preserving it 'as a kind of invariant', accompanied by the call 'to shatter the iron collar of Oedipus' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 60).

The Enigma of Tiresias: Queering Oedipus?

Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition with him might be in danger of focusing too much on Oedipus as protagonist and as exemplifying the tragedy of the human condition. In the same mythical *locus*, more in particular in the same tragedies by Sophocles, the figure of Tiresias can be found. While Tiresias is not mentioned by Freud, he is noticed by Lacan and Bion – albeit as an antagonist in tragedies dominated by Oedipus[1]. In what follows, the roles in the mythic disposition are reversed by giving Tiresias a place in the spotlight as the protagonist. Within this strategy, the figure of Tiresias constitutes a 'heterotopia', an 'other place', from which social evidences and apparent necessities can appear in a different light (Foucault 1984). As a '*heteros topos*', 'another place', does also function the oeuvre of the British spoken-word artist and writer Kae Tempest. In their work, Tiresias is given a prominent place, appearing as a non-binary alternative to Oedipus as the 'hetero-normative hero of psychoanalysis'.

In 2020, Tempest decided to identity as a nonbinary person, being addressed with the pronouns 'them'/'their'. For readers familiar with their earlier work, their coming-out as nonbinary is nothing more than an offshoot of a process already articulated in the remarkable poetry collection *Hold Your Own* (2014). Following their tried and tested recipe of using mythical stories as a matrix for contemporary reflections, Tempest construct their poems around the mythical figure of Tiresias, an enigmatic figure that has a reception history in the history of ideas, in art and literature from antiquity to the present: from with Hesiod, Ovid, Sophocles, Euripides, Homer, and also later with Dante up to and including T.S. Elliot, Virginia Woolf and Guillaume Apollinaire (Brisson 1997). The myth of Tiresias, retold in the opening poem, forms the underlying structure of the poems in *Hold Your Own*. Perhaps not coincidentally, Tempest chooses the version from the *Metamorphoses* by the Latin poet Ovid.

[1] Another interesting interpretation can also be found in the work of Hélène Cixous (1981) and Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger (2000), but its specific elaboration is beyond the scope of this article.

The poem forms a string of stories about the origins and history of the world. A common feature of Ovid's protagonists is that they all undergo a metamorphosis or transformation. In between the series of gods, such as Jupiter and Apollo, and heroes, such as Odysseus and Aeneas, the blind seer Tiresias is also given a place. Tempest will make him the focal point of their contemporary poetry collection. They bend the figure to their will and use the mythical material as a springboard to the poems they wanted to write. The mythical context lends a universal dimension to the very personal life questions and stories of how people relate to themselves and to each other, including within life domains such as sexuality and gender. Tempest's fascination with Tiresias becomes immediately clear when we briefly consider the fate of Tiresias, which is elaborated in the opening poem (Tempest 2014: 1-24).

When Tiresias, as a young boy, disturbs two snakes during mating, the goddess Hera turns him into a woman as punishment. Years later, the snakes crawl across his path again and at the sight of them he becomes a man again. Tiresias, having thus experienced two sex changes during his lifetime, is sent to the Greek Olympus by the supreme god Zeus to settle a domestic quarrel between Hera and him. The marital dispute involves the question: who enjoys sex more, man or woman? Tiresias, who was familiar with both experiences, answered 'woman', playing into Zeus' hands. Displeased by the answer, Hera tore out his eyes as punishment. Zeus compensates Tiresias by granting him the prophetic gift of clairvoyance. Thus Tiresias becomes the blind seer, who is not necessarily welcome by those who do not want to face the truth (Ov. *Met*. III, 316-38).

Tempest is fascinated by the enigma of Tiresias as an incarnation of gender queerness and seership. They underline that Tiresias is given his gift because hither has been both woman and man, suggesting that those who live as neither or both genders are endowed with a sensitivity or specific perspective needed for prophetic insights. The figure of Tiresias forms a projection screen for them to stage their personal gender struggle as the contemporary identity quest. While in the nineteenth century Oedipus still functioned as a symbol of the human quest for insight into oneself, with Freud presenting his own twentieth-century version of it, Tiresias is used by Tempest as an alternative lens to raise the question about our subjective identity in times of non-binarity. Tempest thus acts as a child of their own time, in which Tiresias is revitalised as a symbol of the queer community. Together with other voices from the LGBTQIA+ choir, Tempest call Tiresias to the fore in their resistance against the alleged hegemony of hetero-normative and nonbinary thinking in contemporary society.

One can read Tempest's strategic mobilisation of Tiresias as an attempt at 'Queering Oedipus'. With the alternative choice for the Tiresias figure, they call into question the classical frames of reference. The entrenched, conservative patriarchal structures are disrupted by Tiresias as a game changer for the near future and as a subversion of identitarian thinking. Here, the introduced queer perspective takes on the meaning of 'questioning', in accordance with the definition of man being a question mark for himself. But what is the broader context of origin and what is the meaning of Queer as a new *dispositif*?

How Queer is *Queer*? The Genesis of a Unity in/or Diversity

The term *Queer* has its origins in the increasing gay persecution in nineteenth-century Britain. The original association of the word 'queer' with homosexuality transformed over time into the term 'gay'. This implies a historical shift from sexual orientation to the *pleasure* of the *experience* of sexuality. During the 1980s, the resistance against queer being an

offensive term began to transform into an activist resistance. At this point, the term acquired its contemporary meaning. However, what is current queer resistance actually about?

Queer emerged as a reaction against identitarian thinking originating in the nineteenth century. From that time onwards, social distinctions, such as race, class and nationality, start to play a central role in how the human subject begins to experience itself as an individual entity. These developments have an impact on how a 'self' experiences and shapes itself within a given field of subjective possibilities. The concepts provided therein are constitutively determinant of one's private experience of identity. One of the spheres of life relevant to identity formation is sexuality. Simultaneously, sexuality was also developing as the specific research domain of the emerging human sciences of psychiatry and psychology sciences, including sexology as a new scientific discipline. Thus, in this new field of sexuality, the possibility of a sexual identity as classically determined by a binary scheme, is emerging. But how to understand this growing significance of sexuality?

One of the most influential hypotheses in this regard can be found in the work of Michel Foucault. In his four-volume *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that our Western views on sexuality are related to the arrival of the Modern Period. In fact, according to Foucault, the concept of 'sexuality' was only but 'invented' in the nineteenth century. This very invention goes together with the possibility of understanding oneself as a singular subject from that sexuality. For Foucault, this crucial turn has two important implications. First, the assumption prevails that private sexual desires reveal a fundamental truth about the fourth Kantian question, that is, 'What is man?'. Furthermore, it is also assumed that we owe it to ourselves to track down that truth and express it. Thereby, sexual activity is no longer merely a phenomenon, something that one is *doing*, but it becomes a symptom of something else, of who one *is*, of one's sexual identity. Sexuality thus becomes a constitutive possibility of subjective self-experience. At that time, Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1998 [1886/1903]) did function as the authoritative source of information.

The experience of subjective identity can best be illustrated by the case of 'homosexuality', which was first conceptualised in 1869, as one of its most classical examples. This means that, from then on, for the first time, it became possible to identify and experience oneself as homosexual. Despite the familiarity with the *phenomenon* of homosexuality since ancient times, it is only now that homosexuality becomes a subjective possibility for the first time (Halperin 1990). In the wake of this new concept, 'heterosexuality' equally developed, even though *as a phenomenon* it had implicitly served as the norm until then. At the time, not only the binary classification of the sexes in biology, but also the socially dominant heterosexual norm were in accordance with this 'new' kind of binarity.

Accordingly, from the 1950s onwards, with the introduction of the concept of 'gender' – and subsequently 'gender identity' –, although considered to be distinct from it, is still determined by the binary norm, set by the concept of anatomical sex assigned at birth. At that time, the sex-gender differentiation was prompted by the medically problematized phenomena of intersexuality and transsexuality. Alongside birth sex and sexual orientation, gender equally becomes a new possibility of subjective identity formation. During the 1980s, 'gender performativity' and 'gender expression' were added. From the 1990s onwards, an increased number of identities started to get socially emancipated. In the wake of the progressive transformation of both feminism and the women's movement, a more pronounced emancipation movement emerged out of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* community,

accompanied by a severe struggle for social recognition[2]. Parallel to this, a further depathologization took place, as can be witnessed throughout the subsequent editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM) and the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD). Thus, homosexuality disappeared as a psychopathological classification from 1973 and 1990 onwards, respectively. From a queer perspective, however, too many boxes and labels, being too restrictive in various ways, still exist until today.

The queer perspective needs to be understood fundamentally as an attempt to think about identity in general – and about sexual and gender identity in particular – in a non-essentialist way. Queer was originally defined by David Halperin as a 'de-essentialised identity that is purely positional in character'. He states that: '[Q]ueer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality'. He continues:

> As the very word implies, 'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. […] 'Queer', in any case, does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibilities whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.
>
> Halperin 1995: 62

Queer propagates an anti-label thinking. It wants to move beyond labels because labels essentialize: they reduce a complex reality to an essence and thus have a restrictive effect on freedom. Labels do not only confine phenomena to essences, but also actively organise exclusion. Queer thinkers thus point to a first impasse. For, the price that minority movements pay for their emancipation and social acceptance is the fixation of identities. Ultimately, this is excluding exactly those people who cannot fit in. A second impasse implies that the possibility of thinking sexual and gender difference from a basically inexhaustible range of corporeal pleasures, ultimately risks to be reduced to the binary pairs of heterosexuality-homosexuality and man-woman. In order to think 'beyond the binary difference,' [*au-delà de la différence binaire*] queer thinkers want to demolish this 'wall of opposition' [*le mur de l'opposition*] (Derrida 1992: 114-5).

What queer thinkers aim to subvert or undermine is the so-called 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1999: 68) or (cisgender and) 'heteronormativity' (Warner 1991). Such schemes, they argue, are invisibly present within our social structures, in the shared public space and therefore also in the minds of most people. And this matrix is binary. Think, for instance, of the classic pictograms on toilet doors, but also of the spontaneous question to pregnant people: 'Is it a boy or a girl?'. Whereas initially queer criticism was still theoretically abstract, in recent years it manifested itself more broadly, becoming more socially visible. Queer individuals are stepping out of invisibility and making their voices heard, and not only exclusively through organised 'prides'. Since recent years, an increasing number of adolescents are coming out of the closet as nonbinary or genderqueer. They feel constrained by the prevailing social expectations and norms of a gender-binary society, they say. They

[2] The indication of 'trans*' with an asterisk is commonly used to indicate that trans* is an umbrella term referring to a wide range of identities within the spectrum of gender diversity. The identities are diverse and fluid, having as a common denominator that they are exclusively distinguished from cisgender men and women. The category 'trans*' is by definition incomplete and refers to all possible individuals who identify as transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer and genderfluid, among others.

want to deconstruct the binary by stretching it further into a spectrum on which each person can freely position themselves. Accordingly, genderqueer individuals identify with a gender different from their assigned birth sex. This makes them similar to trans* people, yet most genderqueer people will not identify as trans*. Again, they believe that trans* aligns too much with binary thinking. Thus, genderqueer covers a very broad and diverse spectrum, ranging from a-gender to poly-, omni- or pan-gender, with variations in between, such as bi-gender, demi-gender and genderfluid.

The social cry of nonbinariness also finds an increasingly broad audience within the human sciences, such as psychology and sociology. There, the gradual dismantling of categorical thinking schemes results in the development of multi-dimensional models of sexual and gender identity, in which nonbinarity is given a place within spectrum thinking. A multi-dimensional model of sexual and gender identity allows one to position oneself in a spectrum determined by four parameters, namely anatomical birth sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. In this way, a seemingly endless diversity of subjective identity variation unfolds in an 'in-between' or a 'provisional delay', reminiscent of the 'Tiresian condition' outlined above.

Numerous social evolutions concerning gender inclusiveness, such as within the legal or the linguistic domain, testify to a dawning wider social awareness[3]. However, at the same time, the social transition, including the social gains and the 'normalisation' of queer thinking, in the longer run seems to jeopardise its own success. Indeed, queer risks to become a non-identitarian shelter or a one-size-fits-all for the entire non-heterosexual non-cisgender spectrum, it seems. Queer increasingly risks becoming merely synonymous with the acronym LGTBQIA+, in which the 'Q' is contained and where the 'plus' stands for the basically infinite number of subjective identities.

While queer undoubtedly has the strategic advantage of allowing minorities to join forces to defend their interests, its choice of visibility in fact results in obscuring parts of the spectrum. Some feel their specific identity is misunderstood via the signifier queer, while others apparently start to identify themselves 'improperly' as queer. Should the term be protected, as the *gatekeeping* phenomenon advocates? Or, does this gesture in turn imply new forms of exclusion? Apparently, unity also brings new divisions. If everyone knows the original rainbow flag, today an quasi-infinite range of different flags is available. Do we happen to still know what each flag stands for? From this perspective, then, the question arises whether the diverse LGBTQIA+ spectrum has not become subject to what was earlier referred to by Freud as 'the narcissism of minor differences' (1930a: 114)?

Identities in Times of Nonbinarity: From Hetero-topia to U-topia?

Queer thinkers invoke the ideal of a non-essentialist conception of identity. In reality, however, it seems impossible to escape a new variant of identitarian thinking. Indeed, from a queer perspective identity is essentially conceived as self-stylization, self-creation and self-design. In line with Foucault, queer thinkers argue for the possibility of a non-normative experience of pleasure in which one can experience and express oneself as one is, where one can 'be oneself', without being captured in an identity by the other. Through new modalities of using pleasure, the aim is to promote new forms of life, breaking with hetero-normative and binary cages. Code words are 'inventiveness' and 'self-creation', or 'self-identification'.

[3] This can be illustrated by the Belgian Transgender Act (2018) and the indications of gender-neutral references in Dutch language dictionaries (since 2022).

Identity is a matter of 'becoming who you are', echoing the Nietzschean imperative from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 2006: 192). It's all about (re)finding your true self and expressing it, like the Baron von Münchhausen pulling himself out of the swamp by the own hair. Despite the fact that, in its own self-design, a self wants to make its own truth explicit, while upholding that this truth concerns only itself, the expectation – or even the demand – of recognition by the other seems to be present. Doesn't the idea of self-identification run into its own limitations here, that is, the nature of identity as a structural dependence on the other?

From a psychoanalytic point of view, it seems as if the 'heterotopic' conception of identity present in queer thinking has something 'utopian' about it. After all, it seems to misunderstand the paradoxical nature of identity, in particular that identity, by definition, escapes us. Identity is both inescapable and elusive. That which is most peculiar to us is at the same time that which alienates us. After all, our identity is essentially determined by the 'other'. This other is on the one hand the fellow man or society, the social other, and on the other hand the corporeal, as in Foucault's 'bodies and pleasures' [*les corps et les plaisirs*] (Foucault 1978: 157). Each of these two aspects will be briefly discussed.

For both Freud and Lacan, there is no original ego or 'self'. '[A] unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start,' argues Freud. '[T]he ego has to be developed' and is the result of 'a new psychical action' (1914c: 77). For Freud, this ego is not a purely conceptual construct: it is 'foremost a body ego' (1923b: 27). The singularity of the ego as identity is not but the effect, through multiple identifications, of our libidinal investment into external objects. Moreover, Freud calls the unconscious, as the very core of the ego, an 'internal foreign territory' (1933a: 57). In this way, the most unique and the most intimate is revealed by Freud as the most foreign.

This idea is restated by Lacan as follows. He argues that the identity of the individual concerns an 'imaginary' quantity. The 'self' is an imaginary construct which is not at its own origin, but which is the effect of identification with the other in the mirror (Lacan 1966 [1949]). Mirroring itself to the other, the polymorphous perverse *infans* acquires an ego. The truth of the imaginary self does not consist of anything hidden behind this image. After some time, it is only capable of expressing itself in words that are not his own and that will never have the last word. The subject can't stop talking about himself. At the end of the day, it is nothing more than talking itself.

Like Freud, Lacan's concept of identity is characterised by a strange externality that it cannot internalise, digest or abolish. Lacan firmly deconstructs the idea of identity as completeness, as an essence, and is known precisely for his 'subversion of the subject' (Lacan 1966 [1960]). The subject is a 'split subject' and it is essentially empty and indefinite. This void is covered up by the imaginary and symbolic identifications. The imaginary and symbolic filling of the empty subject never quite succeeds. This is also evident from what Lacan later comes to say about the *object a* as the cause of the desire that cannot be appeased. This inability to appropriate our identity becomes more vivid and all the more acute when trying to understand it specifically from our bodily sexual condition.

Something about our sexuality is part of an intimacy that remains foreign to everyone, no matter how good one feels oneself in one's own body. Therefore, for Freud and Lacan, sexuality is by definition something 'traumatic'. For Freud, the traumatic is situated in the fact that sexuality cannot be fully integrated. It neither merges into a natural function nor can it be fully socialised. For Lacan, trauma is something structural, like a 'troumatism'

[*troumatisme*], like a gaping void (Lacan 1974). Both Freud and Lacan seem to confront us, each in their own way, with the messiness of sexuality. After all, sexuality shows us something about the body that is 'mute',[4] that does not tell us what it means to be man, woman, L, G, B, T, Q, I or A.

During adolescence, the question of 'ownership of the body' is one of the central developmental tasks towards adult sexuality (Laufer and Laufer 2002: 38). The body shows itself unruly and does not provide any answers. It orients the questioner towards the other. This other must help the subject endure that the point at which his intimacy is greatest, namely our sexuality, is precisely the point where that sexuality escapes him. In sexuality, revealing itself as essentially relational, the subject is confronted with the fact that the other cannot provide an adequate answer. This makes it tempting to think that the answer must come from 'somewhere out there', as evidenced by patient testimonials after medical transition. The disillusionment that not infrequently follows evokes that the body cannot be forced to give answers. It remains an open question since the body is silent, as can be evidenced by the discomfort and shame one experiences regarding the sexual body.

The subject has the experience that something in his sexuality remains 'mute'. What is most personal, what is most intimate to him, escapes him and remains radically *in-fans* (not-speaking) and radically alien. The most private and most intimate equally remains private and intimate for the subject itself. It is not one's *own* intimacy, but something that remains private to the subject in the sense that it cannot have access to it. Not only does something remain hidden from the other, but something remains fundamentally inaccessible to the subject itself. Such intimacy escapes us, it is 'extimate', and defines the human condition as a 'split subject' (Miller 1994). It is this (external) foreignness *in* the subject, which determines the subject (intimately) without the subject being able to appropriate it, that singularizes the subject.

Here, we can refer to what Lacan began to focus on in his teaching from the late 1960s onwards, that is, the reality of sexual 'troumatism'. Sexual differentiation is no longer thought of in terms of identification, but in terms of diverse modalities of *jouissance*. There is no identitarian logic, not even with regard to being male or female. After all, there is simply no all-male or all-female identity either. For Lacan, 'masculine' and 'feminine' are only two of the many and diverse ways of relating to the fundamental 'lack of being' [*manque à être*], the structural identitarian deficit that characterises subjectivity. Where the late Lacan appeals to the real and *jouissance*, in a certain sense he rejoins the early Freud who, in the first edition (1905) of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, defines the core of subjectivity as polymorphously perverse and as unintegratable. From this perspective, the project of a 'Tiresian' psychoanalysis holds the promise of a psychoanalysis beyond heteronormativity.

Conclusion: Psychoanalysis as 'Counter-science'

In the current medical-scientific discourse on sexual and gender identity, concepts such as 'gender conformity' versus 'gender non-conformity' are gaining importance compared to the psychiatric classification of 'gender dysphoria' (APA 2013). In addition, 'gender congruence' versus 'gender incongruence' function as indicators to thematize the relationship between birth sex and experienced sex (gender) (WHO 2023). However, in our view, such new binarisms are largely symptomatic of a failure to recognize the impossibility of complete appropriation. After all, they not only create the illusion that complete conformity or

[4] For this idea and its elaboration, I am indebted to a central theme in the work of Rudi Visker (1999, 2004).

congruence is possible, but that this is equally highly desirable. It creates an image of social engineering and an ideal of 'perfection' that is at odds with both one's relating to the lack of being and the notion of 'extimacy' [*extimité*]. We seem to be living in times of 'gender euphoria', under the spell of the mirror. Or, is it a genuine hall of mirrors?

What is – or should be – characteristic of psychoanalytic practice is that every identity construction, every aspect of sexuality and gender identity, can become a new question for the subject again and again. This seems to be at odds with the pursuit of alleged objectivity that is central to the human sciences. It confronts us with a paradox of supposedly objective knowledge of that which is thoroughly subjective. This also results in the status of the human sciences as 'unstable', 'doubtful' and 'unsteady'. Despite their lack of solid ground, the human sciences are interested in *posita* (facts) and in uncovering man as an 'object'. They believe they can do so by adopting an objective position themselves and, as modern scientists, adopt an ultimate Archimedean position where 'thinking' equals 'certainty'. This implies a misunderstanding of the paradox of identity in the way it plays a central role in Tiresian psychoanalysis.

With Foucault we want to draw attention to the *locus* of psychoanalysis as belonging to the field of the human sciences and to its role as a 'counter-science' (Foucault 2002: 414). If psychoanalysis wants to be and remain relevant, it must continue to live up to its position as a 'counter-science' within the field of the human sciences. It then turns its attention to the fundamental historicity of cultural orders and systems of meaning, to the singularity of the subject that in principle cannot find the solid ground for its autonomy and identity in itself. The notions of the unconscious, the real and *jouissance* are acknowledging that this solid ground is ultimately lacking in the subject. The subject is never itself, nor master of itself, contrary to the illusion echoed by the Lacanian word play '*m'être/maître-à-moi-même*' (Lacan 1991: 178)[5].

A psychoanalysis that closes itself off and does not open up to the other, that conforms to a psychologizing or medical discourse, urgently needs to be awakened from its dogmatic slumber. If it does not want to miss its appointment with the future, psychoanalysis must continue to fully update its *élan vital* as a counter-science. It must remain inventive, open, and challenged to keep thinking. After all, psychoanalysis is essentially 'Open to revision', as Freud states in *The Question of Lay Analysis* (Freud 1926e: 194).

Psychoanalysis must continue to make a difference by confronting itself with the paradoxical, unintegratable core of the singular subject, 'against adaptation' (Van Haute 2001). Unlike Foucault, who seems to proclaim a utopian openness of self, psychoanalysis confronts us with sexuality as enigmatic or traumatic and with the subject's impossibility of coinciding with itself. This is not a plea for 'the night in which all cows are black', but rather for the

[5] Literally: 'Being (of) myself/being my own master'.

continued emphasis of the difference in multiplicity and of difference in the light of the *sinthome*.

Abbreviations

Ov. *Met*. Ovid (2004). *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation* (trans) L. Lomas. London: Penguin.

References

APA (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (Dsm-5)*. Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Bauman, Z. (2007). *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brisson, L. (1997). *Le sexe incertain: Androgynie et hermaphrodisme dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

Butler, J. (1999) [1990]. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York/London: Routledge.

Cixous, H. (1981). Castration or Decapitation? *Signs* 7: 41-55.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2004) [1972]. *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans) R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane. London/New York: Continuum.

Derrida, J. (1992). Choréographies *Points de suspension: Entretiens* 95-115 (ed) E. Weber. Paris: Galilée.

Ettinger, B. Lichtenberg (2000). Transgressing With-In-To The Feminine *Differential Aesthetics: Art Practices, Philosophy and Feminist Understandings* 185-209 (eds) P. Florence and N. Foster. London: Ashgate.

Foucault, M. (1978) [1976]. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (trans) R. Hurley. New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1984). Of Other Spaces *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22-27.

Foucault, M. (2002) [1966]. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. London/New York: Routledge.

Freud, S. (1905d). Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol VII: 123-246 (ed and trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1909b). Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol X: 1-150. (ed and trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1909d). Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol X: 151-318 (ed and trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1910a) [1909]. Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol XI*:* 1-56 (ed and trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1912-13a). *Totem and Taboo*. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol XIII (ed and trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1914c). On Narcissism: An Introduction *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol XIV: 67-102 (ed and trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1923b). *The Ego and the Id*. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol XIX (trans) J. Riviere. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1926e). *The Question of Lay Analysis*. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol XX (ed) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1930a) [1929]. *Civilisation and its Discontents*. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol XXI (trans) J. Riviere. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (1933a) [1932]. *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol XXII (ed and trans) J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Freud, S. (2016) [1905]. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The 1905 edition* (trans) U. Kistner (eds) Ph. Van Haute and H. Westerink. London/New York: Verso.

Halperin, D. (1990). *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*. New York/ London: Routledge.

Halperin, D. (1995). *Saint Foucault: Towards A Gay Hagiography*. New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Herzog, D. (2017). *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in An Age of Catastrophes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krafft-Ebing, R. von (1998) [1886/1903]. *Psychopathia Sexualis. With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct. A Medico-Forensic Study* (trans) F.S. Klaf. New York: Arcade.

Lacan, J. (1966) [1949]. Le stade du miroir comme formateur du Je telle qu'elle nous est révelée dans l'expérience psychanalytique *Écrits* 93-100. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1966) [1960]. Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l'inconscient freudien *Écrits* 793-827. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1974). *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XXI. Les non-dupes-errent 1973-1974*. Leçon du 19 février 1974, inédit.

Lacan, J. (1991). *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XVII. L'envers de la psychanalyse 1969-1970* (ed) J.-A. Miller. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1994). *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre IV. La relation d'objet 1956-1957* (ed) J.-A. Miller. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1998). *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre V. Les formations de l'inconscient 1957-1958* (ed) J.-A. Miller. Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (2005). *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XXIII. Le sinthome 1975-1976* (ed) J.-A. Miller. Paris: Seuil.

Laufer, M. and Laufer, E. (2002) [1984]. *Adolescence and Developmental Breakdown: A Psychoanalytic View*. London/New York: Karnac.

Miller, J.-A. (1994). Extimité *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society* 74-87 (eds) M. Bracher, M. W. Alcorn, R .J. Corthell and F. Massardier-Kenney. New York/London: New York University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (2006). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None* (ed) A. Del Caro and R.B. Pippin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tempest, K. (2014). *Hold Your Own*. London: Picador.

Van Haute, Ph. (2001). *Against Adaptation: Lacan's 'Subversion' of the Subject* (trans) P. Crowe and M. Vankerk. New York: Other Press.

Van Haute, Ph. and Geyskens, T. (2012). *A Non-Oedipal Psychoanalysis? A Clinical Anthropology of Hysteria in the works of Freud and Lacan*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.

Visker, R. (1999). *Truth and Singularity: Taking Foucault into Phenomenology*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Visker, R. (2004). *The Inhuman Condition: Looking for Difference after Levinas and Heidegger*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Warner, M. (1991). Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet *Social Text* 29: 3-17.

WHO (2023). *ICD-11: International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*. Consulted via https://icd.who.int