

SOME NOTES ON OBSESSIONAL NEUROSIS

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We are used to talking about obsession in terms of the binary hysteria-obsession and yet it seems that we are in general much more comfortable talking about hysteria. Lacan's remarks on this neurosis are relatively clear and it is not always difficult to situate them in relation to our experience. But what Lacan says about obsession is rather different. His comments in the 1950s seem extremely philosophical, filled with references to the Hegelian dialectic, to the slave and the master and so on. If we can understand Lacan's identification of neurosis with a question, we can see readily enough how a hysteric presents the inquiry "What is it to be a woman?" but it seems more difficult to grasp the parallel question of the obsessional "Am I alive or dead?". This latter formation is, at the very least, a striking one. If one examines the mainstream psychoanalytic literature in the 1950s on obsessional neurosis, one finds elaborations on the theme of the anal organisation: no references to the dialectic of the master and the slave. And yet, as we will see, Lacan's elaboration is a very Freudian one.

The Psychological Field

Freud had said, after all, that what characterised a neurosis was not the particular drives at play (SE, X, p240). The key was not in the 'content' but rather in the position of the subject in relation to the drive: in Anglo-Saxon terminology, the mode of defence. Now when Freud came to discuss obsessional neurosis in detail in the Rat Man text, he wrote that what matters is less the drive than what he called "the psychological field". How can we understand this expression? Why not start with the most famous field in psychoanalytic history, the military field where the Ratman lost his glasses and where his neurosis was to crystallise.

The obsession centering on the military manoeuvres is so complex that Freud was forced to draw a map to help guide his reader through the discussion of the case material. The Stracheys, in their translation, found Freud's drawing inadequate and substituted a second one. And the most recent commentator on the case, Mahoney, tells us that "even the emendations of the Stracheys leave matters cloudy" (Mahoney, p.53). Yet the map is a pointer to the nature of the problem itself: obsessional neurosis is nothing less than a map designed to mislead. When Freud speaks of the "psychological field", we should take him literally. The key is not simply to find one's way around, but to find the point **from which the perspective is fixed**. So, we can ask, what does the psychological field consist of in this case?

The Ratman loses a pair of glasses on military manoeuvres, he wires for another pair from Vienna and receives it a short time later. But whereas he knows perfectly well who he owes the money to for their purchase, he devises an obsessional scenario which involves a certain Lieutenant A paying the money to a lady at the post office, this lady then passing on the money to a Lieutenant B and then our subject giving the sum of money to Lieutenant A! This scenario is complicated enough, but Freud had to extract it from the contradictory and slippery account of Lanzer himself. Now, when Lacan came to comment in detail on this case in his 1953 *Individual Myth of the Neurotic*, he chose to focus on this episode **rather than** on the more sensational

episode of the rat torture so often discussed by other commentators. This indicates that for Lacan the key features of the case are not found simply at the level of the drive organisation. So what is it that makes Lacan privilege this part of the case, ignored by other theoreticians? The answer supposes a little detour through the realm of structural anthropology.

The Rat Group

The 1940s and 50s saw the introduction of certain mathematical methods into anthropology, primarily, algebraic structures, structures of order and topology. What interests us here is the use of group theory. Levi-Strauss is using the reference to the transformation group as early as 1945 in his essay *Structural Analysis in Linguistics and Anthropology*, and he develops it some four years later in the *Elementary Structures* where marriage and descent are seen as operations that can be combined and inverted. By 1957, Lacan is developing his own formulation of the use of the group concept in his analysis of the Little Hans case, summarised succinctly in the *Écrits* on pp. 519-20. Without going into detail here, the element that interests us is the identification of an equation with a group of permutations, which represent the symmetry properties of the equation. Now, what would such properties consist of? For Lacan, as for Levi-Strauss, they consist in running through the different forms of an impossibility: as Levi-Strauss writes “The inability to connect two (contradictory) relationships is overcome/replaced by the positive statement that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way” (*Journal of American Folklore*, 1955, p.434). This provides likewise the definition of myth that Lacan takes from Levi-Strauss. As he says, it represents “a way of confronting an impossible situation by the successive articulation of all the forms of impossibility of the solution”. Thus, Little Hans’ impossibility of leaving the maternal circuit is reformulated as the impossibility of leaving with the father. Levi-Strauss provides a formalisation of this structure: $fx(a):fy(b)=fx(b):fa^{-1}(y)$. In other words, an equivalence relation is established between two situations which are self-contradictory in a similar way, such that there is an inversion of terms and relations. One term is replaced by its contrary and an inversion is made between the function and the term value of two elements. Now, it is clear that this matheme is the implicit reference to Lacan’s commentary on the Ratman case in the *Individual Myth* text.

Lacan tells us that he will focus less on the classic motif of the rat torture than on **the system of relations** involved. The starting point is the constellation preceding the subject’s birth, which, he says, “happens to have a very precise relation, perhaps definable by a **transformational formula**” (my emphasis). This formula becomes “crystallized” in the scenario concerning the glasses that we sketched above. Note Lacan’s use of the term “crystal” which we find again in his many references to the “crystal of phobia” and we remember that the development of group theory is closely linked to the science of crystals, via the formalisation of symmetry properties. Crystals were no longer to be identified with the imaginary notion of, for example glittering, glassy stones, but with a mathematically defined class based on considerations of symmetry. With this passage from the imaginary to the symbolic, such apparently non-crystalline objects as certain liquids were to “become” crystals, just as, we might say, Hans’ first picture of a giraffe was to “crystallize” into the crumpled giraffe that indexes the reference to the symbolic.

Lacan singles out two elements as the key factors in Lanzer’s constellation:

- 1) The father’s marriage to a woman of higher station, privileging the rich girl over the

poor one.

- 2) The father's gambling debt, from which he is saved by a friend whom he subsequently fails to repay.

Lacan sees "a strict correspondence between these initial elements of the subjective constellation and the ultimate development" of the obsession, that is, the scenario with the transmission of money at the post office. Now, if we follow the logic, there must exist a transformational formula which ciphers (1) and (2) into the scenario, or better, which ciphers the **contradictory relation** between (1) and (2) into the reimbursement scenario. When Lacan qualifies the imaginary scene as being "complementary in certain points and supplementary in others, parallel in one way and inverted in another" in relation to the initial constellation, we must take these terms literally in the context of a Levi-Straussian formula: Lacan's vocabulary here can hardly be accidental.

So, the father owes money to the friend who has saved him on the one hand and he has substituted a rich girl for a poor girl in his marital choice on the other. Unfortunately, unlike in the comedy of Menander, the solution is not available whereby the poor girl loved for her beautiful eyes turns at the end of the play to be the rich girl he was intended by his family to marry. Within this scenario, Lacan says, "we observe something like an exchange of the outside terms of each of these functional relations". The reader initially sceptical of the presence of a latent *matheme* can hardly fail to be convinced at this point. If we follow the terms involved, we might suppose that the transformation first comprises the debt to the friend becoming a debt to the woman (exchange of the outside terms), more precisely, a debt to the poor girl and through her to the rich girl substituted for her in the scenario. The substitution of the rich girl for the friend is indeed, Lacan argues, what gives the structure to the transference to Freud, a point which is generally passed over due to the apparent predominance of the Cruel Captain signifier. Yet if we take Lacan's argument seriously here, one would be forced to rethink the transference here in a radical way, as one which repeats and reformulates the relation to the mother.

Now, (1) and (2) constitute an impossibility. (1) indicates basically, the father's castration: the prestige, the money, is on the side of the mother. (2) indicates a social debt. The mother's money seems to accentuate the gap between the imaginary and the symbolic father, a gap which is identified at this date in Lacan's teaching as the key source of the oedipal dynamic. In the Lanzer family, the money is always somewhere else, anywhere, in fact, except with the father. The latter is constituted as someone who fails to have. The gambling debt and the subsequent debt to the friend present a similar scenario but at a different level. Now the problem consists, Lacan says, "in the impossibility of bringing these two levels together". So in accordance with the formula for myth Lanzer tries to recipher this first impossibility. In other words, **he reciphers the way in which (1) and (2) cannot coincide**. The reimbursement scenario is the ciphering. Note how even in 1953 Lacan's approach to the problem of obsessional neurosis focuses on the motif of impossibility. When Lacan refers to the "functional relation" we understand the relation of "owing", the relation centring on the debt, and when he refers to the "exchange of the outside terms" we understand the exchange of the rich girl for the friend. The scenario itself contains a number of relational elements:

- a) Lieutenant A pays money to the post office lady. A debt, it seems, is paid.
- b) The lady gives money to Lieutenant B. The woman is thus the one who gives, but since she fails to recuperate the money, she is the one who loses out. She

ends up with nothing.

c) The subject gives money to Lieutenant A, that is, he repays a debt to a friend.

But the key to all this is **the superimposition of (c) and (a)**: the debt is paid back to a woman, who at the same time, via (b), **is not repaid**. This contradiction 'to pay back the woman: the woman is not repaid' ciphers the double debt of the father with **a new form of contradiction**. The gap of the neurosis is opened up precisely due to the crippling of the paternal image in the first elements of the constellation. The relation is "parallel" in the sense of the debt operation, and "inverted" in that it pays the rich girl, and not the friend. Thus Lacan has changed the coordinates of what Kris had called the "personal myth of the neurotic": in Lacan's new formulation, the myth is a quasi-matheme, a principle of transformation, what we may call a **Rat Group**. Lacan's text continues with a discussion of Goethe. Without commenting on this section, let us simply point to the implicit irony in Lacan's juxtaposition. The Ratman case is explored from the perspective of the glasses scenario, and yet what trait so often distinguishes the Weimar poet's quirkiness if not his own pathological suspicion of anyone wearing glasses! With his last cry for 'More light' he was to meet the same gaze as Lanzer was to imagine in the sunken eyes of Freud's daughter.

An Error and a Fault

The mother's financial position together with the father's debt accentuate the gap between the paternal figure and the symbolic father in Lanzer's case. This is precisely the reason why Lacan condones Freud's apparently mistaken intervention on the subject of Lanzer's marriage. Freud interprets with the idea that the father is opposed to the match in question, when it seems that it is in fact the mother. The intervention, however, is successful in the sense that what was needed at this point in the case is just this reference to the father as prohibiting. It would be an example of the inexactitude of an analytic interpretation. We could contrast this sort of inexactness with one of Lanzer's manias, his obsession for understanding everything completely. "He forced himself", Freud tells us, "to understand the precise meaning of every syllable that was addressed to him". This is hardly a convenient symptom to have in the modernist era, to have a symptom which requires the production of univocal meaning from every sign that one encounters. I'll say something later on about the tension at the clinical level between what appears to be the obsessional's demand for exactitude and the inexactitude of analytic interpretation, but for the moment let's elaborate on the characteristics of this subject's relation to the signifier. We could put it in the following way: **a hysteric is a person to whom things happen** whereas **an obsessional is a thing to whom persons happen**. In other words, he will do everything to avoid an encounter with the *jouissance*, the living dimension, of another subject. When he does encounter this, he tries to deploy the signifier to absorb all of the *jouissance*. The empirical result of this attempt at reduction to the signifier is **mortification**. We see this for example in verbal obsessions: a subject's whole life can be structured by some simple verbal command. One of the most important examples in the Ratman case concerns the repayment of the florins. A particular signifying proposition comes to exert a tyranny over Lanzer's life; "You must pay back the 3.80 kronen to Lieutenant A". The key here is less the meaning than the linguistic formulation itself, the command **as a signifier**, as we see from the fact that it is not acceptable for Lanzer to give the money to someone else to pay back the Lieutenant for him when the opportunity arises. When an officer returns the money after failing to find Lieutenant A, Lanzer is greatly relieved: as Freud says, "this method of fulfilling his vow had not satisfied him,

as it did not correspond to the wording, which ran “You must pay back the 3.80 kronen to Lieutenant A” (*Ibid.* p.168). This attention to the letter makes us qualify obsessional neurosis as a propositional neurosis.

But why is it that this particular proposition attains such a dominance? The answer, I believe, is to be found in the detail that Lanzer knew that it was wrong. When the Cruel Captain told him that he owed the money to Lieutenant A, Lanzer already knew who he really owed it to. Thus the proposition has two initial characteristics: firstly, it comes from the Other and secondly, it is an error. Now, why should an error be so important for Lanzer? Let’s say that it is linked to the Captain’s evident pleasure in cruelty. Where the Captain ought to have incarnated the military signifier, the system of military rules and regulations which have as their object the eradication of *jouissance*, what emerges in the Captain but a horrifying *jouissance*. The Captain is not just a Captain: he is a Cruel one. Thus, in the place of the Other, the Ratman is confronted with a terrifying fault. Now, how does he respond? To start with, he responds with the new obsession: ‘You must pay back the 3.80 kronen’. In other words, to the point of inconsistency in the Other, to the point of *jouissance*, the subject replies with a signifier, one which is in fact borrowed from the Other. The key here is that the Captain made a mistake: Lanzer could thus use an error to put into correspondence with a fault. They are both forms of the Other’s inconsistency, the difference being that one is signifying and one is non-signifying. Thus the obsession is an attempt to introduce the signifier into the gap in the Other; a non-signifying *jouissance* is turned into a signifying imperative. And it can do this because the Captain was wrong.

A Good Natured Man

When Lacan discussed the Ratman case in the early 1950s, we have seen that he treats it from the perspective of the tension between the imaginary and the symbolic father. But by 1958, there is a shift in his perspective. It is now less a question of the function of the father as such than of the dialectic of φ and Φ , a problematic that is given its clearest exposition in the *Direction of the Treatment*. Lacan’s patient comes up with the idea that his mistress should sleep with another man and that he would watch. This is a relatively frequent male phantasy scenario; we find a version in Herodotus, where King Candaule proposes to hide his bodyguard Gyges in his room so that he can see his wife naked, and we see it in our experience in the relations of many men with their best friends. This is what Lacan refers to earlier in the *Écrits* on page 453 where he speaks about “abdicating one’s desire”. The subject places the phallus on the side of the imaginary other and the *jouissance* he is deprived of is passed over to the counterpart. The idea is that the phallic nature of the subject’s position in his phantasy is so accentuated that any passage to the level of sexual action will fail: he therefore dreads precisely what he aspires to, since it would confront him with his deflation. Hence the appeal to the counterpart to act in one’s place and Lacan’s formulation that the obsessional maintains his desire as forbidden. It’s the sort of action by proxy that we find in Goldsmith’s aptly titled play *The Good-Natured Man*. Whereas Jones had argued that the subject fears aphanisis, Lacan’s formulation here implies the contrary: rather than fearing aphanisis, he takes refuge in it. Rather than entering the arena of his desire, the obsessional is always, and with reason, somewhere else.

Now, the mistress of Lacan’s patient replies to this proposition to save the man’s failing potency with a dream which she proceeds to relate to him. She dreams that

she has a phallus as well as a woman's sex, but that she nonetheless desires the phallus. Now, the dream does not simply indicate, as one might suppose, that the mistress desires to be a man and a woman. We remember that Helene Deutsch had a similar dream during her analysis with Freud and she could never accept his interpretation that she wanted to be both boy and girl. It was only later when she heard Abraham lecturing on the castration complex at the Hague conference that she understood why Freud's explanation had seemed incomplete. In other words, a dream like this involves a **reference to castration**, the fact that having a phallus does not stop one from desiring one. It involves the symbolic dimension and not simply the imaginary nature of the 'wish to be a boy and a girl', indeed, exactly the sort of wish that Lacan's patient proposes as his own explanation of what was going on. The phallus that Lacan's patient situated on the side of the other man is an imaginary one: there is still the dimension of desire and its reference, the symbolic phallus, one which is impossible to restore to the imaginary body. The woman's dream shows clearly the impossibility of this restitution. The phallus as a signifier is distinct, as the dream shows, from the question of having or no having the penis. There is thus a change in the value of the phallus for the subject here: it is less the imaginary object which he seeks via the other man than a signifier of desire. This non-coincidence of φ and Φ is seen in the Osiris myth, a myth the emergence of which Lacan claimed, at one point in his teaching, characterises the end of an analysis. Isis searches for the scattered remains of her murdered brother Osiris, retrieving all of them apart from the penis. So in its place she erects phallic monuments to commemorate the lost organ, showing how the phallus comes into the place of the lack of the penis. The scattered remains of the body are thus distinguished from the phallic signifier, just as, for the Ratman, the function of the symbolic phallus had to be distinguished from the register of equivalence present in his "so many florins, so many rats".

Now, in terms of technique, what can we learn from this vignette? Lacan does not tell us what he said, but we can surmise, as Jacques-Alain Miller has pointed out, that there was some play on the word *contrebande* - a term he uses to characterise the conditions of the obsessional's desire and which also contains a sexual allusion in the verb *bander*. A clearer formulation of technique is to be found in the *Écrits*, p.315 where Lacan refers to the fact that the "working through of the subject is in fact used for the seduction of the analyst// It is no accident that as the dialectical progress approaches the putting into question of the intentions of the ego of these subjects, the phantasy of the analyst's death will invariably emerge, often experienced as a fear or even as an anxiety. //And now the subject will embark on an even more demonstrative display of his "goodwill"// How can one underestimate, at this point, the effect of a certain contempt shown by the master for the fruits of such labour? It can completely destabilise the subject's resistance.//From this moment onwards, his previously unconscious alibi begins to disclose itself to him, and we see him passionately trying to justify all his work." This passage offers a clear illustration of the pertinence of the master-slave dialectic to the context of an analysis. Lacan is elaborating Freud's comment in the Ratman case where he says that the obsessional introduces death as a solution to conflicts that are left unresolved, that is, most crucially, the conflict with the father. As in German courts, where "suits were usually brought to an end, before judgement had been given, by the death of the parties to the dispute. Thus in every conflict which enters their lives they are on the look out for the death of someone who is of importance to them, usually of someone they love — such as one of their parents, or a rival, or one of the objects of love between which their inclinations are wavering" (*Ibid*, p.236). Lacan reformulates this schema. As the slave waits for the death of the master, he works. But not only are the fruits of his

work taken away from him, the recognition by the subject of his own being in these fruits is simply the recognition of his own 'not being there'. Where he actually 'is' is in the anticipated moment of the master's death, after which, he thinks, he will live, but in waiting for this moment he is identifying with the master, as dead. In the meantime all he can do is to work, in order to deceive the master about his good intentions. Hence Lacan's comment that the analyst's sarcasm applied to all the good work that the patient is doing can make this phantasy of the master's death emerge. Thus the apparently abstract philosophical reference is given a very concrete clinical context.

Now, what about Lacan's use of the term "alibi"? The sentence is striking: how, after all, can an alibi be unconscious? Surely an alibi involves a knowing form of deceit. The key to the phrase is in the earlier reference to the relation of the slave to his work. The slave "is not there" in his labour, but rather, he is in the anticipated moment of the death of the master "after which he will live, but in waiting for which he identifies with him as dead and as a result of which he is himself already dead". Thus the slave's being itself is a not being there to the extent that he identifies with the dead. He is not there in the fruits of his work, his associations, his dreams, as a being but as a lack of being. Thus the obsessional's alibi is his very existence: not being there is precisely his being. The problem in all this is that, as everyone knows, there is nothing more difficult than to keep a corpse dead...

The Right to Speak

In a clinical context, the dead position in which the subject wishes to maintain the master is seen, for example, in the tendency to speak so much that the analyst can't say anything or to make all the interpretations himself. The subject here is like Cato, who spoke for the most part of a day at the Roman senate so that no one else could take the floor. After all, wasn't it the right of a senator to discourse on any subject for as long as he wished before a motion was put to the house? And isn't it the analytic rule that the patient can say whatever comes into his head? Lacan noted the efficacy of the variable length session in countering this tactic. We could oppose Cato here to Demosthenes, who instead of speaking to the Assembly for a whole day, in an effort to overcome the listlessness of the dicasts, began a little story about a donkey and its shadow, only to promptly stop speaking before the conclusion. The result was, of course, an overwhelming increase in the listeners' attention: a Greek application of the Zeigarnik effect, we could say.

The right to speak introduces a further question here. Obsessional subjects frequently demand the justification of the analytic intervention. What this means is that what the analyst says has to be a strict derivation from material supplied by the patient. It is the subject's speech that will justify the analyst. But, of course, this is hardly practical, given the notorious concealment which characterises their discourse. The subject may well speak interminably but this is to avoid speaking about something else. Hence the analytic intervention, in a sense, to be ethical, must be inexact. Freud's intervention in the Ratman case would be an example here. And the subject, confronted with such a lack of justification, will often respond with indignation: the analyst is allowed to know, but **only if his knowledge is justified in the right way**. The right way here is, of course, the way prompted by the architecture of the patient's speech. Follow a different map and see how the subject gets upset.

This lack of justification, essential in the analysis of the obsessional, is one more example of an inconsistency in the Other, presented in the form of the supposedly unacceptable 'leap' of the interpretation. Now, we often hear about the

obsessional's desperate attempts to assure the consistency of the Other. For example, in verbal formulae, in self-mortification, in the imposition of small-scale legal systems in the household and so forth. Everything, it seems, must be reduced to the signifier. He becomes a Casaubon, buried in ancient books and confined to the particular library he invents for himself. This picture is no doubt often a true one, but a peculiar contradiction asserts itself here. The Ratman approaches Freud for the first time at the time of the military manoeuvres. He thinks, we find out, that Freud was in fact the brother of a certain murderer of the same name. He then continues to address Freud repeatedly as "Captain". Furthermore, he tells Freud of an episode in which a man shows great warmth to the subject and befriends him only to discover that this "friend" merely procures Lanzer's friendship in order to introduce himself into the Lanzer household, where his sisters are to be found. He uses the term *Freund*, friend, and Freud underlines this word in his case notes, juxtaposing it to his own name, "Freud". To sum up, Lanzer goes to a man he assumes is the brother of a murderer, he calls him by the name of a man who delights in horrifying tortures, and he puts him in the place of the friend who deceived him. So the Other, at the start of the treatment, is clearly not consistent.

This is a feature we often find in the obsessional subject's choice of an analyst. He will select someone who no doubt incarnates an Ideal, but who at the same time shows a little flaw, a little point of inconsistency. How can one reconcile this apparent search for inconsistency with the famous obsessional demand for, precisely, consistency? The answer is to be found in Lacan's reference to the alibi. The subject will do all the painful analytic work over the years, but he is not there in his work. Rather, where he is, at the level of desire, is what he lodges in the Other's inconsistency: for the analyst to **consent** to ignore the key variable in the subject's desire, he must himself display a fault. It is in this fault that the subject hides his desire. It gives the subject the hinge necessary for his deception. It is as if throughout all the efforts made by the subject towards the progress of the analysis, there is always the demand at the horizon "Can I go now?" As one may guess, such a desire may often take the form of the one desire that the subject hopes the analysis will not put in question: the desire to be an analyst.