

JACQUES LACAN AND THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY

Carlo Vigano, June 1992.

In 1966, Jacques Lacan wrote "Science and Truth", and started out with the following question: Can we say that we have laid the foundations for the status of the subject in psychoanalysis?

Lacan's answer was rather surprising. Speaking to epistemologists, he advised them to bear in mind that, in the experience inaugurated by Freud, there is an element which observation confirms on an almost daily basis¹, namely *Spaltung*, the splitting of the subject, and added that the very moment the subject acts his own discourse as divided (the moment pinned down by psychoanalysis as symptomatic) could be traced back to a historical turning point for subjectivity, when science underwent a "radical change of style in the tempo of its progress"².

This tempo was dominated by the cogito of Descartes: the subject, in order to sustain the permanence of his own being, must forego any form of knowledge, and therefore must operate a division between truth and knowledge.

In so doing, Lacan dramatically shifts the question of the scientific reliability of psychoanalysis by underscoring the fact that there is a scientific presence in the subject that has not been fully staked out by epistemology. So far, epistemology has only applied scientific formalism to man as an object without realising that science has been mapping out, at an ever-greater speed, a scientific, human subject. Psychoanalysts are aware of this as, for them, the subject is an effect of language (what is represented by a signifier for another signifier).

If I retrace this fundamental stage in Lacan's teaching, it is not to underline the crisis of humanism, but rather to insist on what, within the framework of analytical experience, drifts toward a new identification of human identity.

The division of the subject, whose topology is defined by the *Moebius* strip, is not the last word of psychoanalysis on the problem modern man has with the definition of identity. The effects of civilisation go beyond the Freudian "discontent", owing to the fact that "drive", as it is constructed by Freud, from the experience of the unconscious, forbids the kind of thought riddled with psychology the last resort, which is access to instinct, in which it "dissimulates its ignorance by assuming a moral in nature"³.

Lacan has developed these effects by singling out the *objet petit a* (object little "a"), that is, the "surplus" *jouissance* which, in the era of science, slips away and subtracts itself from thinking, as what defines the subject. We shall try to track down these effects to the discontent of youth Lacan alluded to at a conference held in Milan in 1972. We will thus see how the discourse of the analyst answers to this discontent, by changing the terms of the identification of the subject.

The Model of Identity and Youth's Discontent

When confronted with the problem of youth, psychology and psychotherapy fall back on worn out, ineffective theoretical weapons. Seeing why it is so, helps us to understand how Freudianism, outside the teaching of Lacan, ends up being drowned

in the same ineffectiveness.⁴

The action of the psychologist is based on the following syllogism: the adolescent is undergoing a change in identity; he is an ego-child turning into an ego-adult. This is the standard Italian wording. The second term is a sociological observation: there is social unrest and there is no stable adult model.

The conclusion is that interchange with the young must not be based on an adult image but, rather, that the young must be provided with a mediation, an auxiliary ego to see them through the coming of age.

This pattern leads to the same deadlock in which psychiatry ended after resorting to the common sense viewpoint that diagnoses its object as an illness interposing itself between normality and pathology. Adolescence, like mental disorder, is viewed as a passage, a borderline between two fields of identity, two sets that encompass homogeneous series of identifications; the imaginary lure stems from there.

The youth question is probably the emblematic evidence of the historical mutation of the criterion that determines the subject as such; it is evinced by a radical parting from the definition grounded in common sense and based on the idea of personality, meaning that it implies the presence of a self which is fully recognisable in the field of the Other.

The modern conception of passage bears the stamp of a preformative stage, which is the reason why the Freudian reduction of myth to the Oedipus story turns out to be very convenient. The story of Oedipus, in fact, lends itself to an articulation in different stages of identification, as so many initiation rites. The first stage of identification is one of incorporation, with the masochistic trait that attributes a "paternal" value to the object taken from the maternal body. The second, marked by the trait of "oneness" that grants access to the social group and, last, hysterical identification to fantasy, which introduces the subject, on the pattern of hysteria, to the human reality of desire, as desire of the Other.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the first two patterns of identification, we should immediately point out how everyday clinical observation belies such an Oedipal course. The hystericization of the subject and the formation of the symptom as subjective metaphor is not a constant feature of experience. Be it said, in passing, that it is precisely for this reason that "mental disorder" resists those who perceive it as an illness (interpretation does not bring about recovery).

Instead of grasping the shift of the symptom towards a substitute, a metaphor supplied by the social Other to a subject in the lurch, many psychoanalysts keep peering into the so-called pre-Oedipal position, to track a metaphorical origin of the symptom. They do so because they see the Oedipus complex as a developmental pattern, for they are unable to see the subject other than as genetically determined.

At this point, the teaching of Lacan puts us back on the tracks. It enables us to formulate the adolescent borderline in terms that diverge from those elicited by the theory of the different stages of identification.

Starting from the structural theory of drive, Lacan shows how the relation of the subject with the Other of language experiences two logical periods, alienation and separation. This structure allows us to turn around the evolutionist viewpoint. Thus, for example, it is not only the child that prolongs himself into the adult (the

unconscious), but it is already at conception and during foetal life that we can track back the “adult” structure of human desire, inasmuch as it constitutes the child.

Thus, the modern vicissitudes of adolescence will not be ascribed to such a borderline position between child and adult, but to two movements: alienation of need within the demand of the Other and, therefore, within knowledge; separation from such a demand and such knowledge. The second movement markedly pertains to the moment of adolescence. Not because it comes second, but just because within the subject-Other dialectic, separation appears not as a compulsory choice, a condition for survival, but merely as a leap into the unknown, a point of no return. At this point, the problem of responsibility comes into play: for psychoanalysts, responsibility has to do with the real and not with cultural alternatives.

It is only if one conceives the Oedipus complex as an expression of the dialectics between identification to the object of desire (maternal) and paternal identification to the signifier, that one is in a position to see, in a different light from the one cast by the borderline theory, what turns out to be a shortcoming of the paternal function. The Oedipus complex only brings to light the fact that the subject is two-sided: one side is the object cause of desire and the other is its signifying covering (improperly called narcissistic object). It is on that side that we must distinguish the neurotic phantasy from the father substitute. In other words, we will have to single out in the mother’s discourse the difficulty encountered by the son on the way to paternal sublimation and, more precisely, the position occupied by the son in the desire of the mother. This position can be the fetish of the father.

One would otherwise be in no position to understand why psychosis so often breaks out at the close of adolescence. There is a point of no return in the childish game, in the repetition. The symbolic order makes each one of us one of the Danaïdes, who must keep pouring water in the vase, but the repetition is not merely to wash away from one’s own body the deadly *jouissance* of the Other. The symbolic, in its turn, is lacking, which authorises a recovery of *jouissance*. The topology of the *objet petit a* is, therefore, of paramount importance to articulate something of youth’s discontent, without reducing its function to the narcissistic one.

Lacan helps us correct the major flaw in this brand of psychoanalysis that pointlessly persists in resorting to the tools of interpretation to force out the symptoms of youth. In *The Direction of the Treatment*, Lacan breaks up the symptom, in its signifying dimension, into two component parts:

1. Effects that answer from the subject to the demand addressed to him from the plane of the Other (for example, “eat your soup”, answer: anorexia).
2. Effects of the subject, who takes up a position in the symptom by way of a *jouissance* that denounces the incidence of the phantasy in the symptom.

The mechanism that leads to the formation of the symptom is two-fold:

1. The subject experiences the truth of the demand of the Other.
2. The subject’s position is determined in relation to this truth effect. For the adolescent, the solution chosen in childhood no longer works and calls for a reshuffle.

Interpretation applies to (1), while the psychoanalytical act is concerned with (2).

The difficulty that stands in the way of the young person is nothing but the last act of a play, in which the child was the symptom of the parents and was blanketed by a tissue of lies. What comes to a head, takes the form of a tug-of-war between two miscognitions (*méconnaissance*). The young person is in no position to assert a truth he does not recognize as his, while, at the same time, standing up against the lies of his parents.

Thus, what Freud linked to the bi-phasic development of human sexuality takes on greater relevance: the relevance of the real, necessarily involved in adolescent masturbation, as distinct from infantile masturbation. And the real attached to the first falling in love, and to the first disappointment, for from that moment on, the theme of one's own death must be enshrined in the body of the young person, and the analyst is called upon to chart the clinic of this incorporation. In the last instance the young person is the figure of psychoanalysis, of the passage analytical treatment comes down to. Can the analyst turn a crisis of identity into an identity-crisis for the subject?

The Identity Crisis of the Psychotherapist

The crisis of human identity markedly affects the modes of perceiving the psychoanalyst within the cultural environment in which he operates. The novelty introduced by Lacan is summed up by the sentence "there is some analyst" (*"Il y a de l'analyste"*), by which the analyst is understood not as subjective function but as the logic of the discourse. The psychotherapist has grown accustomed to being recognized as the proponent of a psychical causality that went against, or was added to, the natural causality diagnosed by the doctor. Today, this will no longer do. For some time now, psychical causality has been widely admitted, to the point that "social sciences", and in particular psychology, have granted it the status of a science (first through the university, then the State).

By acquiring universal validity, psychical causality loses its grasp on the single cases it should deal with. Besides, psychical causality was not discovered by Freud; rather, it is a product of modernity and, more to the point, of Kantian philosophy. Psychoanalysis came only as its prototype application, as a therapy through, and of, language.

The therapeutic efficacy of talking is related to human alienation, which Freud developed in his theory of drives. The object of need is within the reach of the subject insofar as it already bears the mark of the discourse of the Other. Speech places human beings in subjection to the order of the signifier, which is made even more dramatic in a highly technological society like ours. The steady rise of anorexia and bulimia cases testifies to this phenomenon. Freud's discovery shows that the signifying order introduced by speech, goes beyond the laws of speech itself, because it amounts to a demand for recognition, and puts its trust in the laws of language, namely metaphor and metonymy. Youth's discontent is a discontent with the metaphor called upon to make up for the inability of the Other, language, to name the subject. Where a subjective metaphor is missing, only imaginary identifications remain.

Identifications amount to little more than "being like". If they lend the person a semblance of unity, while still dissimulating the subject in the person, identifications may allow it to exist, but not to have a name, to be an adult, that is, to be responsible.

How to remedy the inability of the Other to name the subject? How does the subject find his unity? The child was content with the values he found in the Other (Daddy,

Mummy, teachers, etc.) and for the rest (“What does my mother want?”) a self-deluding fairy tale would do the trick. To explain encounters between the sexes and his own origin, the child fashioned a phantasy in which one could recognise the nascent features of the four objects around which the drive revolves: oral and anal objects (Freud) and look and voice (Lacan). Such a phantasy screened off the real of his origin, and was then relegated to the attic, where roving among identifications and playing with the signifier appeared more to his liking.

Things become more complex with the adolescent, because these identifications that worked as a therapy to the child no longer work. The real of *jouissance* emerges on his body (puberty). He no longer plays with the signifying partner; he even refuses the game and its rules altogether. He then dusts off the phantasy he had relegated and enters in direct contact with the object that is its cornerstone. Reality is no longer perceived from the ideal window of the paternal or the maternal Other, but from his own dormer window, fashioned by the object of his phantasy proper.

The adolescent thus has a new partner. He is no longer in relation with signifiers but with the object of the Other. If identifications favour socialisation, the phantasy object favours antisocial behaviour. The object opens a hole in the ozone layer, in the network of signifiers that regulated *jouissance*. The adolescent believes he has found in the Other of sex, drugs, violence, what secures him supreme *jouissance*.

To fully understand the type of subject we are confronted with, we should not rush to the question: “What is to be done?”; we must study the calling card exhibited by the young. It should not be seen as a symptom, but as an acting-out, that is, as a demand.

The acting-out is the staging of something the subject plays under the gaze of the Other and such staging acts out the phantasy. The subject shows in deeds what he is unable to express in words, and adopts, by so doing, a position of command, of strength. During his demonstration, the subject relishes the spectacle of the difficulty he puts the Other in. At the same time, the acting-out follows the course of demand, for it implies the presence of the Other, the operator. There is a hint at a transference, a call for interpretation (as, for example, in attempted suicides).

We talk about acting-out and not about symptoms, because a symptom is self-reliant and does not require the gaze of the Other to reach *jouissance*. Anorexia and violence are, instead, the two constants of acting-out. Whenever language, through metonymy, carries us from one signifier to the other, the adolescent grinds to an abrupt halt on the object “nothing”, precisely to denounce the inability of the signifier to take care of his *jouissance*. The *jouissance* of violence is linked to the destruction of what belongs to the order of the signifier, and to its reduction to nothing.

The object staged by acting-out provokes embarrassment, anxiety, subjective splitting on the part of the clinicians. That is where the presence of the analyst diverges from the position of the educator.

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Parents, teachers, etc. tend to resort to the super-ego, to values, to come out of the division they are being put in. They conjure up the powers of identification. With the result that the demonstrative act is turned into a social and institutional symptom. Which, in turn, leads the young into repeating the acting-out and identifying with the

social symptom (here, drug addiction stands as the paradigm of repetition).

Sizing up acting-out as demand is an altogether different strategy that grants larger room for manoeuvring. From the moment demand has emerged - that is, when we have modified the relation of the young person with the real of his act - we can start using what Lacan called "the discretionary power of the listener". Though the adolescent may seem in a position of strength, the fact that he is the one who demands, places power in the hands of he who answers.

Our answer will have to spare the subject, not reduce him to the object of his phantasy; it will have to wrongfoot him. The hysterical structure of provocation shows powerful resourcefulness in questioning the desire of the Other. We must therefore be equally resourceful and able to surprise them with a stance that leads them to wonder about our own desire. The analyst's answer will strike as paradoxical because it will identify neither with the super-ego nor with its victim. It will just ignore the content, the enunciation of the adolescent, to take into account the subject and his "wanting to say", his enunciating.

The enigma they throw at the clinician boomerangs. Which puts them even more in a position of demand. The answers meant to instill doubt blow up the stratification these subjects have built up around their *jouissance*. They get caught in the desire of the Other to the point that they cannot find any more *jouissance* in showing off their own object. They can, then, start desiring again.

Youth's discontent lies in the difficulty of fitting in with an emerging discourse. Lacan notes that from Freud onwards, scientific discourse has developed so dramatically that it has transformed the typical discourse, made by the capitalist, the master. For the modern capitalist, the signifier as One has changed positions with the subject: S_1/S . The S_1 as enigma is no longer master, thus annihilating discourse as social fabric.

The desire of the analyst that fleshes out the features of the *objet petit a*, that is, the real of the symptom entrusted to the analyst as subject supposed to know (SSK) fashioned by the demand for analysis, is a stronger desire than the desire to be the boss (which we could call desire of the therapist). It is a unique desire to know: I do not know and therefore you should speak.

The "power" of the father is the reverse of the discourse of the analyst, though the latter indirectly suggests it. For the analyst, the father is no longer the boss. Even when he renounces deciphering, the analyst retains a desire to know. It is precisely the enigma of such desire that may touch off the *père-version* of the subject and free him from the ideals of others.

The aim is to bring the subject back into being, to the core of his truth, which is laid down in discourse as lacking and lost from the beginning; bring him back to a desire which does not stem from the Other but is already there, which is what the subject refuses to admit.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Écrits, p. 855.

² Écrits, p.855 (translated by us).

³ Écrits, p. 851 (translated by us).

⁴ J.Lacan, "Del discorso psicoanalitico", in *Lacan in Italia*, La Salamandra, Milan 1978, p.198.