

HYSTERIA AND SINTHOME

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I have begun from your work theme of this year: the clinic of hysteria. It so happens that what teaches the analyst is, on the one hand, Freud, Lacan and a few others who have known how to invent in psychoanalysis and, on the other hand, those patients whose speech [parole analysante] constitutes for the analyst a real pregnant with knowledge. For some years now, I have been taught by a hysterical patient on the relation between the hysterical symptom and the feminine position. The particularity of this case lies in that it demands a reflection on the question of the definition and limits of the hysterical symptom, whilst remaining articulated to that which represents its structure, namely the question of the woman.

The Freudian and Lacanian clinic, a structural clinic, rests on the structural opposition between neurosis, psychosis and perversion: the hysterical symptom finds there the conditions of its mechanism as well as its function. However, in the mid '70s Lacan, who no longer indexed himself on a differential clinic but also introduced the perspective of the borromean knots, produces new statements on the symptom. He went so far as to take up again an ancient spelling, that of "sinthome", to conceptualise that which, of the symptom, does not allow itself to be reduced to structural determination, that is to say to "langagement" [langagière].

By virtue of the type of symptom that prevails in her psychical organisation and in her treatment, this patient led me to envisage the possibility of introducing the sinthome, in a hysterical problematic, by way of a working hypothesis.

In effect, it is from Joyce, and therefore from psychosis and writing in the clinic of knotting, that Lacan introduced this concept.

Is it possible to introduce it in the clinic of hysteria, defined by the parameters of the structural clinic? What openings does this introduction allow for in the hysterical question about the feminine as no longer articulated merely in relation to the phallus, but also to the not-all?

I am going to start by giving you a few co-ordinates on the progressive definition of the symptom.

Let's reduce this definition to the essential by drawing an opposition with the symptom as ciphering and deciphering of the unconscious, namely as articulated from the signifiers which form the chain constituting the subject. By the ciphering in the symptom, these signifiers exercise a function of fixation of jouissance. This is what makes Lacan say, following Freud, that there is a jouissance in the symptom - a phallic jouissance in the hysterical symptom in hysteria. This first definition articulates the symptom with the function of the signifier in neurosis. Thus, this definition finds its foundation in the functioning of the signifying chain and, in this sense, it seems more precise to speak, in the case of some manifestations of psychosis, of 'psychotic phenomena' rather than 'psychotic symptoms'. This is exactly how Lacan expresses it in Seminar III. This symptom as ciphering, articulated through the signifying chain S1-S2, is an ordering of the signifier, possibly an extraction or a substitution of a privileged signifier, which allows for a localisation of jouissance and opens it to signification. The deciphering of the symptom is

correlative to a jouissance linked to the appearance, to the emergence of the signification of this symptom. It is a jouissance of the same type as in lapsus and wit. The symptom would be of the same order but it would attach the particular mode of enjoyment [jouir] of the signifier to a subject. It is therefore liable to interpretation, as it is made of the same fabric and plays on the same equivocation of the signifiers, on their elision, on their substitution. A symptom is constructed like a metaphor.

In the mid '70s, especially in the Seminar R.S.I. and also in all the very difficult writings devoted to Joyce, Lacan speaks of the symptom in a way that is not without relation [rapport], and yet is slightly different. He speaks of it as a function and writes it $f(x)$, a function that this time no longer refers to a signifier, or to a signifying chain, but to a letter. Were we to write the symptom as he then does, (x) would be that which can be rendered of the unconscious by a letter. You see that the letter is of the order of writing, whilst the signifier is of the order of the spoken and implies the possibility of equivocation which produces the jouissance I mentioned, the jouissance of deciphering, the jouissance of sense. The letter excludes this. As soon as you write down a pun, it vanishes. So, (x) is that which can be rendered of the unconscious by a letter. In the letter, 'self-identity' ['l'identité de soi à soi'] is isolated from any quality.

The symptom is then that which enables the subject to write his identity as not defined by significations and not correlated to a sense. Such is self-identity, which precisely implies an identity without the necessity of going from S1 to S2 to S3 - S4 - S5. It is self-identical: One. From then on, there is no longer any possibility of sliding, if you like. But, by the same token, the link is a type of progressive opaqueness [opacification], of solidification of being. This is why he refers to this tie as a knotting that tightens up, and not as circulation of sense, as is the case with metaphor. It is a one that fixes the subject as identical to himself. Lacan adds that the letter writes the one of the unconscious, that is to say the one of a signifier which, transformed into a letter, has an effect of condensation of a jouissance that, this time, is not a jouissance of deciphering but rather a jouissance of fixity. In the letter we take into account something which is no longer ciphered/ deciphered in the unconscious, that something which precisely escapes ciphering/deciphering, and rather emerges in the Real. Thus it is from the case of Joyce, from which Lacan puts forward the hypothesis of the psychotic structure, that he produces this definition of the sinthome evidenced in the clinic of supplementation [suppléance]. There is a reversal in the Freudian hysteria regarding the symptom as metaphor. But also in neurosis, all is not reducible to the response of the Other. What I call the response of the Other is the fact that the unconscious is ciphered/ deciphered. If it is ciphered, it is obvious that there has to be an Other in play, a code, and this coded Other is the name of the unconscious. We could say that in neurosis, the symptom, as I defined it in the first approach, is the ciphered message of the response of the Other to the question of the Subject, to the question that the Subject poses for itself about its existence or gender. It is a response of the Other which implies the function of the father and, therefore, of phallic jouissance. In the last instance it is possible to reduce the hysterical symptom, which is articulated in relation to the father, to a phallic signification which confers upon it this power of equivocation. But in l'Étourdit, Lacan emphasises that it [hysterical symptom] is not all response to the Other. Something in the hysterical symptom sends Lacan back to the definition of the symptom that he elaborates with reference to Joyce in relation to the psychotic structure. In the hysterical symptom, likewise, this part which eludes the response of the Other is a response to the Real.

In neurosis, this response of the real remains articulable to an Other which implies castration, while in psychosis, this response of the Real does not include castration, that is to say an empty place. The symptom is not all response of the unconscious (of the Other) but a response of the Real; this Real is

articulated with $S(\)$, with an Other of the empty place, of castration, or, as Lacan says at this time, 'of castrations'.

In a conference entitled *La troisième*, he also affirms that "one cannot speak of castration in the singular, but only of castrations in the plural". Admittedly, one can interpret this formulation as accounting for the difference between symbolic, imaginary and real castrations, namely for modalities of castration. However, the fact of pluralising castration implies a relativisation of the very strict opposition between foreclosure and repression. I am not saying that the difference between neurosis and psychosis is of no use. It is absolutely crucial, but a certain number of problems which arise in the clinic demand that we have at our disposal a possibility of constructing models [modélisation] to be able to account for certain aspects of the clinic of neuroses and psychoses. In *La troisième*, Lacan proposes such a writing in the framework of the clinic of knots.

Phallic *jouissance* is situated at the junction of the symbolic and the real and Lacan places the symptom, in the new sense he just gave to it, in the extension of this circle. The symptom concerns that which moves from the symbolic to the real. This response of the real is that which differentiates this new definition of the symptom of phallic *jouissance*, which interpreted the symptom in the classical metaphoric sense. We are dealing with what links S and R, whereas, in the classical hysterical symptom, its orientation was from S to I, towards the imaginary in the sense:

- of the body in the somatic phenomena,

- of significations, of the *jouissance* of significations in the deciphering, significations being more on the side of the imaginary register.

On the contrary, in this moulding the symptom leans towards the Real. That is what I wanted to set up as the framework for the case I am going to discuss. My question will be as follows: if Lacan says that it is a letter - (x) in the formula $f(x)$ - which condenses *jouissance* for a given subject, in the case of this patient it is an image. Under what condition is an image a letter?

The case is that of a young woman, now in her thirties, who, impelled by a certain number of relationship and professional problems, has been coming to see me for the past four years. She was not able to get over her failure following a competitive examination, and her love relation became unbearable. She was imprecise about her symptoms, apart from saying that for some time now she had not been able to reach orgasm [*jouir*] with her partner. Her clinical picture was dominated by anguish which seizes her mostly when it gets dark. She then has to go home or be in company. I am only going to give you a few elements from this case, elements which are necessary to tackle the clinical question I am posing.

This young woman has two brothers, and is the only daughter of a Jewish family from North Africa which had emigrated to France. She herself was born in France. She has a father whom she describes at first in a twofold way: he is an extremely religious man, very strict on the principles of the Jewish religion. At the same time, he cheated on his wife all his life, leading a hectic extrafamilial love life characterised by the fact that his mistresses, whom he fairly regularly introduced to his daughter, were not Jewish. This father was very violent with her, as well as with the mother, and she still remembers being beaten by him with a belt. She recalls lively debates at the table; so vibrant was the discussion that

one could never eat without a dictionary. She was constantly criticised by her father for being fat and ugly. In the course of time I realised that her father was probably paranoid. His fits of violence were sufficiently strong for him one day to have wanted to kill her and her mother with a shotgun.

As for the mother, she is a woman with whom the patient has an easy-going relationship. She is more of a type of kind woman, very oppressed by her husband, particularly in that when there is a crisis between the father and the mother (from the beginning), it is the body of the mother that he attacks. He would not refrain from describing, in no matter how crude and violent words, the horror she arouses in him: she is 'dirty', 'filthy', she is a 'gaping hole'. The house is treated in the same way: it is never clean enough. The tyranny of the father over the mother bears as much on her body as on the housework.

I want to stress a little the relation to the father. In the session of January 1975 of R.S.I., Lacan again takes up the question of the father in terms which must be related to what Lacan says about the father in the last part of Preliminary Question, a crucial text for the structural differentiation between neurosis and psychosis, since it lays out the notion of the foreclosure of the Name of the Father. And yet, already in this text of *Ecrits*, Lacan evokes the paternal ravage roughly in the same terms as in 1975.

This 'ravage', however, is not about the Name of the Father, that is to say the paternal function, but about, let's call him, the father of reality. Lacan evokes the father of the psychotic in saying that this relation to the father is ravaging when this father incarnates, or tries to incarnate, the law, when he, as a living person, identifies himself with the ideals.

This short passage from *Ecrits* is extraordinarily lyrical. In it, Lacan enumerates all paternal ideals. One can feel his hatred for the ideals of salubrity, health and moral hygiene, for 'virtuous Fathers' [Pères-la-vertu], of whom Schreber's father is evidently the model for him. This father figure, the father incarnating the living and ferocious ideal, the father in his mode of *jouissance* or, again, the singular 'version' of a paternal *jouissance*, is taken up again in R.S.I.. In it Lacan returns to the fact that some 'versions of the father' have 'foreclosing effects'. One can affirm a difference between general foreclosure of the Name of the Father and the foreclosing effects of a version of the father, that is to say, of a version of his *jouissance*, precisely not *père-versely* oriented. These foreclosing effects are the consequence of certain particular forms of paternal *jouissance*. They affect the subject without touching on the quilting point of the function. Perhaps we could juxtapose this expression 'foreclosing effects' with the one which pluralises the Names of the Father, and consider psychical spaces as differently affected by these effects.

For this patient, her father had a similar - localised - effect, and, that this effect should be localised probably stems from the fact that, in the face of the ideals he pretended to incarnate, he nevertheless showed her a contradiction: ideals of 'judaicity' and yet gentile mistresses; in the face of *jouissance*, of his incarnation of the Law, the hidden door of a desire outside the law subsisted.

The analytical work considerably modified the conditions of this patient's life: there are therapeutic effects manifest at the level of her work-inhibition, for today she has interest in the creative work she is engaged in: she writes and is published, which was earlier both wished for and impossible to fulfil. She got married and was thus able to inscribe her relationship to a man in a symbolic frame, although in very specific conditions, while before she was fully indexed on a fantasy, which made her identify man with torturer. On the point of view of 'love and work' she is more satisfied. But on the other

hand, there is an element which did not budge. It concerns a particular phenomenon which is at the origin of the anguish that seizes her at nightfall, and which she confessed after a year of analysis by way of digression during a session. This, let us call it a symptom, is the following: in the street, in the gutters, on the pavement, and also at home, she sees dead animals. These cadavers are for her a considerable cause of anguish. No signification is associated with it, and these visions remain for her perfectly enigmatic.

She was able to re-find the origin of this symptom which affects the perception of reality. It was the year she was preparing herself for a very difficult entrance examination to which her father attached the greatest importance and, therefore, she herself considered it as a way of being recognised by him. One winter morning, when it was still dark, she was on her way to a preparation class and saw in the square the cadaver of an animal spiked onto the rails of a fence. It turned out to be a dog run over by a car. Although she did not linger over it, the dog gave her the impression of being merely a fleshless skin, a fur. Having glanced at it, she ran off in horror. Since then, although in an irregular fashion, but particularly after her failure at the said examination, any obscure shape at nightfall - such as strips of fabric used to direct water in gutters, remains of cardboard or paper glimpsed on a pavement or a street - may give rise to a similar vision. Notwithstanding any element extracted from the subject's history, I would like to show how these visions are not psychotic hallucinations, even though Lacan's formulation "what did not come to life in the symbolic appears in the real"¹ could be perfectly suitable, as the patient demonstrates an effect of the real, in both her anguish and the void of signification which accompanies the vision.

However, two points are worth noting: no other is implicated in the phenomenon, neither semblable nor persecutor. One could argue that it is easier to bring to light this reference to the other in the case where the hallucination is verbal, for the effects of subjective attribution organise in it the signifying distribution. It is therefore fitting to refer here rather to the paradigm of the visual hallucination of the Wolf Man. From this point of view, these visions of cadavers, dead and deflated animals, just like the cut finger of the Wolf Man, would have to be placed in the perspective of a possible assumption of castration contaminated by the foreclosure. In fact, its sexual signification is no longer manifest, but rather what is precisely manifest in the Wolf Man is an imaginary captation of the primordial trauma. And yet, the structure of the vision is different: the mute vision of his own finger cut by the subject himself situates castration outside the possibilities of symbolisation by the subject, outside speech, and with no mediation being directly inscribed on his body, in a topological regression to the visual form of the body proper. In the case of our patient's vision of the dead animal, it does not concern her own body, the body which remains out of play. Nor does it concern an absence or a mutilation but the presence of an object, a living contaminated, which is not a semblable and which, as we will see, can mobilise signifiers. In the case of another patient, the apparent similarity with the Wolf Man is even stronger. She told me the tale, kept silent so far, of a childhood memory: one day at mass, in a subjective atmosphere of elevated mystical spirituality, she saw, in the thurible swung by the priest, the body of a dead child - an enigmatic vision she nevertheless found repellent at the time for its cruelty, and preferred to keep it secret lest she was found mad. In both cases the vision is one of death, involving an object distinct from the body of the subject, an object not aimed at the body, for it is precisely nihilated by the signifier and, therefore, belongs, in this capacity, to the symbolic order. All the same, it still concerns an invasion of the field of reality by the Real which, as such, breaks into it. Hers is a vision which does not however include a persecutory other, leaving her own body out of play. At the time of the first vision, it was clearly a skin [peau] that was at

stake, animal skin framing a void, neither mutilation nor semblable. There is no doubt that the associations may cause some phallic significations of the phenomenon to emerge.

Thus, the triggering is situated in relation with, on the one hand, the ego-ideal (in this case the image she wants to impress on her father by succeeding at the exam) and, on the other hand, it involves an encounter with a real which we will be careful not to understand as being naturally propitious to the triggering of horror. In effect, it seems that the associations are the only definite guideline we have. They follow several directions. The patient is led to speak of all these elements including those of the triggering of the trouble at a time when, precisely, it no longer occurs in the street but only, in the same conditions regarding darkness, at home. All this happens in a period of literary creation thus linked to her work of writing. She remarks on this alternation of inside-outside, home-street. Well, what does she write? Poetry which resonates with *peau* [skin] that covers and separates an inside from an outside. It is precisely the question of the skin covering, or not, the flesh, which she was faced with at the time of this first encounter with the cadaver of the dead animal, and which she rejected in an "I don't want to know anything about it". Moreover, she points out that all her adolescence unfolded against the backdrop of skin problems, the latter being a cause of suffering and making her challenge her image during that time. Finally, the poetical texts she then wrote are entitled *Meat*, and are an attempt to knot, if we can risk to say so, the soul to the flesh: this flesh which in the animal is never guilty.

Some of her other associations concern certain contemporary poets and present them as evoking, in their work, the importance of the moments of contemplation of cadavers in the morgue. All these chains go in the direction of tightening around a signifying pair, on the one hand, skin/fur, and on the other, meat/flesh. The disturbance of perception is therefore organised there by the signifying chain, and demonstrates some possibilities of metaphorical equivocation. At the moment of poetical creation, these visions, although still scary, are lived through with less anguish, and are thus endured more easily in as much as they come to counterpoint a writing which transforms these vague perceptive forms into letters. On the other hand, this vagueness seems linked to a disturbance of vision which could then be detected by doctors. If this diagnosis, which puts the organic problem into play, accounts for these chiaroscuro moments in which the visions appear, it does nothing to explain their content.

Apart from I(A), the ego-ideal implied by the father, these visual perceptions thus imply the signifying pair: skin [*peau*], the signifier referring to i(a), the unified narcissistic image of the signifying body, and flesh [*chair*], evoking sexuality in the form of fornication in its least idealised aspect, namely under the face of the prostitute (-j), and at the same time an unnameable object veiled by the skin (object a). The circumstances of the development of this disturbance as of its first occurrence have to do in effect with her love relationship with a man, which was quite a complex one. As regards the idea that this young woman has of her friend, she associates him, to her great sorrow, as well as great fascination, with the commerce of prostitutes, and poses through him the question of her own relation to the other woman, namely the prostitute. Let's stress of course the *tué* [killed] in the signifier *prostituée* that the flesh of the dead animal comes to imaginise.

These 'visions' are thus not without relation to the symbolic, and are partly organised according to the principle of the return of the repressed as it is realised by these associative chains. Thus they have to do partly with repression and with the law of the father of the name.

They are precisely in relation with the father in the form of his fault: the whole childhood of the patient is marked by her encounters with the numerous mistresses of the father he always chose in opposition to, and even in contradiction with, the most sacred principles of the bigotry he imposed on his whole family. It is this fault which inscribes the father in a relation to the law which is after all quite banal in neurosis, placing his daughter in a position of rebellion and hysterical defiance in the face of the lie of the paternal order which, on the other hand, she absolutely supports.

And yet, something resists this phallicisation which would reduce this vision to a metaphor by producing a surplus of sense [plus de sens]. The persistence of the phenomenon, despite the work of association and interpretation, bears witness to this.

In the text of *Écrits, La psychanalyse et son enseignement* (p. 452), Lacan has in relation to the hysteric the following beautiful formulation: "In a relentless quest for what it is to be a woman she can but fool her desire, since this desire is the desire of the other, as she failed to satisfy the narcissistic identification which would have prepared her to satisfy the one and the other in the position of object". In effect, the difficulties of the narcissistic identification in this patient are patent: refusal of her own image, anger and immediate rejection of any bold person who dares to speak to her of her image, who shows, even in a discreet fashion, what interests him in it. He is either immediately referred to his rudeness or taken for a short ride after which he becomes an object of disgust concerning this or that part of his body, and is expelled from the field of desire [mis hors désir]. Incidentally, sexual desire is particularly fragile for her and does not come into the relation with her husband.

And yet she takes good care of her image, she is very beautiful and elegant and seems completely committed to incarnate the phallic mystery in her image.

The way in which the patient's father related to the mother of his children was such that the patient was sometimes caught in it: she has, with her mother, been the object of a rejection which, as far as she is concerned, manifested itself on at least one occasion in the form of a death threat. In addition, for this man the mother is defined as fundamentally dirty, messy, in her housekeeping as well as in her own appearance; the family has lost count of the scenes in which the father would have a go at her on this subject. Those scenes could end up with a very menacing violence. According to the repeated statements of her father, the body of her mother is a 'stinking hole'. Under the skin there is meat, such is the reverse of the phallic image. It is here that the hypothesis of the 'foreclosing effect' could be constructed. For the father, there is no access to the feminine through the fantasy. At each triggering of a crisis, he attacks the body of his wife as if it was his.

In these conditions, the mother could not be placed in the position of object-cause-of-desire by this father. There is only a void surrounded by fur, a beast, as no desire has come to humanise the feminine object.

We are putting forward the hypothesis that this singularity, this singular version of the father, had for this patient foreclosing effects regarding her possibility of symbolising the feminine. Of course, the signifier of the woman is foreclosed, but this does not prevent, quite the contrary it fosters, the imaginings and the metaphors of the feminine. Perhaps we could say that this impossibility to humanise the feminine, that is to say to give it the status of object a over -j for the father, had the consequence for this patient of

barring her access to her body by the signifier. This vision is linked to her incapacity to represent herself in a body. Well, in this patient, these images are linked to what matters more than anything else in the world: to write and publish poetry. I think I have already said that her texts orbit around the signifiers 'meat-flesh-carrion', and that she carried out research on a poet whose inspiration, he said, regularly impelled him to visit the morgue. The Medusa head is for her 'killed [tué] animal', 'non-licentious flesh'. Her visions are linked to her sinthome, writing. The foreclosing effect is to reject in the real the object she is for the other.

But the literary work comes by way of writing to give her a body capable of being named: $f(x)$, x being her poems (peau-aimé) and her verses. The search in poetry for a woman's name which identifies her serves as a supplementation [suppléer] to the incapacity of the name of the father to transmit a desire which would call the feminine as object into question. What is at stake for her is a solution to a problem which does not have one. She seeks by way of the sinthome to find the letter which would give her a feminine self-identity which is impossible to find.

In this way she counterbalances her visions that mobilise the image of a not-all phallicised body. Then the vision, symptom and the writing, sinthome, complement one another, and sure enough she was able to notice it, since these images of death are never more potent than when she is just about to write. For some time now, she herself has directed films on writers, but she finds this side of her activity interesting only in so far as the image is employed in the service of the written. The vision is therefore that which for her was not phallicised in the body, and the writing attempts to elevate this unsymbolisable point to the place of the name.

Translated by Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf.

This text was originally published in Filum No 11, Octobre 1997.

1. Réponse au commentaire de Jean Hyppolite sur la Verneinung de Freud in Ecrits, p. 388.

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