

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF OBSESSIONAL NEUROSIS IN FREUD AND LACAN

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PART I

DIE ABWEHR-NEUROPSYCHOSEN

In a manuscript dated January 1894 under the title *Die Abwehr-neuropsychosen* Freud assembled in one nosological entity next to hysteria, the manifestations of obsessions and phobias, of *Zwangsvorstellungen*, and *Zwangsaffecte*, obsessional representations and obsessional affects—*Zwang* being the word for either compulsion or obsession—and tried to give the first explanation that his psychoanalytic theory and clinical experience could provide him with as to the origin and the meaning of these manifestations. He gave them consequently the name of *Zwangsnervose*, neurosis of obsessions, in his other paper directly published in French in the *Revue Neurologique* (IV, 6) in 1896 under the title *L'hérédité et l'étiologie des névroses*. In four papers, as a whole, dating from the period between 1894-1896—the third one was called *Obsessions et Phobies*, and was directly published in French in 1895 in the same *Revue Neurologique*, and the fourth one was called *Neue Bemerkungen über die Abwehr-neuropsychosen*—a new nosological entity was born and given its name and credentials by the psychoanalytic theory: Obsessional neurosis.¹

Of course, these phenomena, as were impulses, compulsive thoughts, ceremonials, doubts, obsessive fears, were known to psychiatrists for a long time, since Pinel and Esquirol in late 18th century France and well into the 19th century with Beard in America talking of “morbid fears” in “neurasthenia” and Magnan in France evoking “hereditary degeneracy”. Their character of “mixing the uncanny with lucidity” was reflected in the different names they were given: *monomanies raisonnantes* (Esquirol), *manies sans délire* (Pinel) or, on the contrary, *délire partiel*, *délire émotif* (Morel), *vertige mental* (Lasegue), *folie du doute* (Falret), or *délire de toucher*. Pierre Janet, finally, united all these manifestations in one group which he called “a depressive psychoneurosis with a lessening of the function of reality”, or *psychasthénie*. A deficiency on the level of the “reality function” explained for him the phenomena of this neurosis which he placed next to hysteria. Mental ruminations, inability to experience a feeling as related to a situation, asceticism, religious scruples, etc. were the symptoms of this second neurosis.²

For Freud, however, the origin and aetiology of this new neurosis is totally different.

¹ Freud S., *Die Abwehr-neuropsychosen* 1894 GW 1. (All four texts from the French edition, *Bibliothèque de Psychanalyse, Névrose, Psychose et Perversion*, by Laplanche, Paris, PUF, 1973).

^{1b} *Obsessions et phobies*, 1895, first published in French in *La Revue Neurologique*, III 2.

^{1c} *L'hérédité et l'étiologie des névroses*, first published in French in *La Revue Neurologique*, IV 6.

^{1d} *Neue Bemerkungen über die Abwehr-neuropsychosen*, 1896, GW 1.

² *Hystérie et Obsession: Les structures cliniques de la névrose et la direction de la cure*. (Recueil des rapports de la 4e Rencontre Internationale, Paris 14-17 Janvier, 1986) Particularly the article by JJ.Gorog, G.Miller, and M.L.Susini, *Le symptôme obsessionnel*.

Like hysteria, it results from a mechanism of defence, *Abwehr*, against an incompatible (*unverträglich*) or unbearable (*unerträglich*) idea, but while in hysteria the affect of anxiety accompanying the resurgence of this idea is undergoing a translation into a somatic symptom (conversion), in obsessional neurosis the same affect is displaced onto an innocuous or insignificant representation, in this way taking the character of absurdity and meaninglessness which is characteristic of obsessions, as the intensity of the affect is disproportionate to the importance of the idea it transfers to. As for the representation, either it remains in consciousness but is weakened or sometimes it is repressed as well. Freud is uncertain whether or not to accept repression as the main and sole defence mechanism for the two neuroses. If the memory of the trauma or the incompatible idea is forgotten (repressed) in hysteria, it seems that it often remains in consciousness in obsessional neurosis, but with no emotional weight, which means it is deprived of its affect and it does not attract any attention. The characteristic of obsessional neurosis is thus for Freud a “false connection” between the affect and an insignificant idea which for this reason becomes inexplicably compulsive, and it seems that it is rather the mechanism of this link, the process of this primary defence, which is repressed, unconscious.

During this defensive process it is not only the content of the original incompatible idea which is being replaced. The affect itself is being transformed. It becomes doubt, remorse or anger in the place of the usual anxiety, which is sometimes preserved, however.

The replaced or repressed representation is an event or incident which took place in early childhood, involved the child’s libidinal life and, contrary to the hysteric’s trauma, was experienced with pleasure and survived for a while as such in the child’s memory. Freud maintained for a while an opposition between an early passive sexual experience (seduction) in hysteria and an active one involving aggression and pleasure from the child’s side in the formation of obsessional neurosis. He later wrote (in *The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis, a contribution to the problem of choice of neurosis*, 1913), that he did not support this distinction anymore. In the meantime the so-called theory of seduction, although not totally abandoned, was replaced in Freud’s primary considerations by the child’s own phantasmatic activities and object choices, which are now related to the “stages” of his libidinal development. In *The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis*, it is during the pregenital, namely the anal erotic/sadistic stage that a fixation of the libidinal development takes place, so strong that, although later stages are reached, events of life can cause a regression to this early anal erotic stage so characteristic of obsessional neurosis.³

Often an obsessional neurosis runs throughout the individual’s life. Obsessions are but deformed self-reproaches for a sexual activity experienced as pleasure in the past. They are primary symptoms of defence, they cause reaction-formations such as scrupulousness, shame, self-distrust, self-suspicion, etc. which form the obsessional’s character, i.e, his ego. But defences can fail and memories can return, in which case secondary defences, the obsessional symptoms proper, become necessary. They are a compromise between the repressed and the repressing idea; they can be found in rituals of protection and fending off the dangerous thoughts whose sexual character is usually disregarded or misrecognised.

³ *The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis*, PFL, vol 10.

In this way obsessive thinking parasites on the mind; replacing either totally or partially the original sexual wish-representations, we have ruminations, checkings and rituals which generate unpleasure, unease and a feeling of the uncanny. The obsessional is burdened with uncertainty about the important issues of life, with indecisiveness, doubts.

The original affect of anxiety can be transformed into any other form of anxiety, social anxiety, hypochondriacal anxiety, religious anxiety, phobias. We can have compulsive acts, *Zwangshandlungen*, and ceremonials, superstitions, fussiness, etc.

In some more severe cases no obsessive ideas represent the repressed memories, but only remain the secondary defences. We have in this case a fixation of ceremonials, a general *folie de doute*, the existence of an eccentric character determined by phobias.

A final observation is that the obsessional does not adhere to his obsessive scenarios, that he preserves his doubt and uncertainty about the protective efficiency of his rituals.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), *The Ego and the Id* (1923), *The Economic Problem of Masochism* (1924) and *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), Freud enriched the theory of obsessional neurosis with concepts such as the compulsion to repetition and primary masochism and attributed an increasingly important role to the super-ego in the formations of anxiety and guilt in obsessional neurosis.⁴

PART II

NOTES UPON A CASE OF OBSESSIONAL NEUROSI: THE RAT MAN

In the paper on *The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis*, written in 1913, Freud asks the question of the choice of neurosis to which he attempts to give an answer through what he called his “new bit of theory” of “points of fixation” in an early “pregenital” stage of libidinal development, and also stresses the important role of the “ego instincts”, such as hostility and hate, the “instinct of mastery” and the “instinct of knowledge” are contributing to sadism or replace it, and are all prominent in the obsessional’s relation to any object. In the order of development “hate is the precursor of love” says Freud and nowhere better is this to be seen than in the case of the Rat Man.⁵

The Rat Man is Freud’s most detailed account of an obsessional neurosis; it saw the light of publication in 1909, but oral accounts of the case were given by Freud at regular intervals during the Wednesday meetings of the Vienna Psycho-analytical society while the treatment was still going on. It lasted for about one year (October 1907-1908). Dr Lehrs, alias Rat Man, 29 years old, went to see Freud in Autumn 1907 to complain of obsessive ideas which had been bothering him for about four

⁴ *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, PFL, Vol 10.

⁵ *The Rat Man*, PFL, Vol 9.

years, but which were present on and off throughout his entire life. It was an outburst of these obsessive thoughts which led him to see Freud.

The circumstances surrounding the crisis were as follows: Dr Lehrs, who was taking part in some military manoeuvres as a reserve officer at the time, “was keen to show the regular officers that he had not only learnt a good deal (he was a lawyer) but could stand a good deal too”. One day during a short march and a halt he lost his pince-nez. He also heard the description of a horrific corporal punishment told by one of the officers, whom he qualified as having a predilection for telling stories of cruelty. When during a session he himself described the punishment under Freud’s insistence and help, the latter did not fail to note the strange expression on his face which he qualified as “the horror of a pleasure of his own of which himself was unaware”. While hearing the description of the punishment of the rats, the patient said to Freud that “at the moment the idea flashed through his mind that this was happening to a person who was very dear to him”, and to Freud’s insistent direct questioning he replied that “the punishment was carried out impersonally as it were and the person was the lady he admired”.

Although the story told by the cruel captain was not a fantasy of the Rat Man, it functions as such, in the sense that it constitutes a scenario triggering off the “great obsessional fear” (symptom), namely the punishment of the rats being imposed on his two beloved persons, the lady and also his father, as manifested in a slip of the tongue. As in the fantasy of “*a child is being beaten*” told during the analysis of some women patients of Freud, the punishment is originally carried out impersonally, although the part played by —and pleasure supposed of— the cruel captain standing for the cruel father of the Rat Man is part of the material that comes up in the analysis consequently. Behind the recent event there was a history of compulsive thoughts and acts related to sexual wishes, fears of punishment by his father, dead for a few years now, and acts of defiance of the same father.

After this event follows an avalanche of compulsions, an ambivalence or rather a conflict between two contradictory commandments —to pay or not to pay the money for a new pince-nez to the officer (Lieutenant A) who —as he knew but forgot— had nonetheless never advanced the money for it, the complicated strategy of a journey to pay back this money to the person it was wrongly assumed to be owed to (Lieutenant B), in order to finally return to Vienna without having done anything of the sort and, with the help of a friend, to send the money to the person it was really owed to, the poor girl of the post office in Z. All this gives an idea of the “labyrinths” in which the obsessional loses his way, according to Lacan’s expression.^{6 a+b}

Behind this imaginary scenario Freud discovers the symbolic determinations, which commanded the Rat Man’s life even before he was born. As Lacan puts it, in the pact that presided over his parents marriage Freud finds intermingled the conditions for this scenario, “of honour saved just about, of love’s betrayal, of social compromise and of debt prescribed”. Above all we see how Freud opens this sequence of the symbolic with an interpretation, which although not concordant with the facts, centers the case on “the father complex” and obsessional neurosis around the question of an

^{6 a+b} Lacan J., *Fonction et Champ de la Parole et du Langage*, pp. 278-28, *La Psychanalyse et son Enseignement*, pp. 452-454.

absolute Other.^{6c}

Perhaps Freud would have not been so attentive to the weight of this prohibition attributed by him to the father of the Rat Man and to the mark of impossibility it leaves on desire, had he not himself faced a similar prohibition in his early love surges for an identically named “Gisela” and had he not replied by the opposite.^{6d}

But there are all sorts of things here, in this sequence, where we find a quaternary of the fantasy, the symptom, the object and *jouissance* of the Rat Man. These are Lacan’s terms and help us to “lay out” a neurosis, and there is also this question of the Other as personified in obsessional neurosis by the dead father, a Master or Death himself.

The father’s debt was double, to the officer who saved him from a shameful degradation and to the poor girl he loved and betrayed. The obsessional scenario serves as a metaphor and substitutes Lieutenant A for the officer and the girl of the post-office for the father’s abandoned love. In the place of the Other, there is the cruel captain whose order “to pay the money back” the Rat Man is compelled to obey and again to rebel against. Behind the cruel captain lies the figure of the punishing father and beyond him Freud in the transference.

It has also been noted how the Rat Man had an idealized object of love —the lady, his poor cousin— a love consummation of which was marked by prohibition, and where his desire of having children was also marked by impossibility, and some sexual relations of a casual nature where the sexual object seems to be debased. These sexual encounters happened rarely and quite late in his life as a young man.

What is also put in evidence by Freud is the hostility with which the love object is often treated, and mistrusted; the Rat Man’s ambivalence in a word, and how a complex process of thought paralyzes and spoils his act.

PART III

HAMLET OR THE TRAGEDY OF DESIRE

Unlike Freud, Lacan did not publish any great clinical cases, except at the beginning, the case of Aimée, the subject of his thesis on Paranoia (1932). His re-readings and lengthy comments on Freud’s five great cases early in his teaching have remained classics of the kind. As with the other neuroses and psychosis, he offered us a new insight into obsessional neurosis, particularly with the analysis of the tragedy of *Hamlet*, during his seminar on *Desire and its Interpretation*, in 1958-59. He called Hamlet “the tragedy of desire” and one of which the enigma and mystery preoccupied authors and analysts alike.

Hamlet is not a clinical case, but a character, in the sense of a character in the theatre of course, who serves as a demonstration, useful to the analyst, of what the structure of desire in the obsessional is; although sometimes Lacan compares this

^{6c} Lacan J., *La Direction de la Cure et les Principes de son Pouvoir*, pp. 597-8, and pp. 630-3.

^{6d} Lacan J., *Les Variantes de la Cure Type*, pp. 353-5.

structure to the unsatisfied desire of the hysteric, the hysteric who does not know what he/she wants, where to place their desire. But let us say that Lacan opts for likening the structure of desire in Hamlet to the desire of the obsessional.

It is quite a cliché now for Lacanian analysts to say, after Lacan, that desire is an “unsatisfied desire” in the hysteric, an “impossible” one in the obsessional. Desire’s structure is to be the desire of the Other and Lacan in the seminar quoted above uses the famous “graph of desire” to demonstrate how through speech and language desire, demand, message and code are articulated in the unconscious.^{7 a+b}

But, if in both neuroses the structure of desire is basically the same, there are differences of subjective position. If the hysteric betrays her desire, in both senses, showing it in another of her own sex, the lady, while she remains in suffering facing the Other, the obsessional with manoeuvres and tricks hides his desire behind the “veil of Maia”, as Lacan put it, and offers a show of “a thousand exploits” for the benefit of an Other who is supposed to enjoy it; exploits and tricks whose final objective is to deceive death, the ultimate master, with whom the obsessional has a stake concerning desire.

The symptom of the obsessional receives a name, it is called procrastination, leaving everything for tomorrow, preferring to wait instead of realizing something of desire, and this is what happens to Hamlet in relation to the act which is awaited from him. Analytical explanation has it that it is Hamlet’s unconscious desire for his mother which makes this act repugnant to him and makes him delay it. His scruples, Hamlet’s symptom, regarding the act are to be understood in relation to this desire, as the memory of it and of his oedipal desire to kill his father, awakened by the dead father’s revelations, make him feel guilty of the crime he has to punish. This is put in parallel with the tragedy of Oedipus by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Chapter V, 4) and by Ernest Jones in an article from 1910 (in *Journal of American Psychology*, *The Oedipus complex, as an explanation of the Hamlet mystery*).

Still, Lacan is not totally satisfied with the reasons given for Hamlet’s scruples. He thinks that there is a difference between Oedipus and Hamlet which is not due to some “degeneracy of the moderns”. The difference for Lacan is that when the tragedy starts Oedipus “does not know” that he has accomplished the incestuous desire and crime and when he comes to know it, the catastrophe breaks in full. But in *Hamlet*, the father knows and so does Hamlet, and Hamlet may fear that he can find himself in the same place as his father “in the blossoms of his sin”; i.e, wake up an ancient desire, if he kills his uncle whom on the other hand he has every plausible reason to want to kill. But beyond that, says Lacan, Hamlet is “guilty of being Hamlet”; Hamlet cannot pay for something he has not committed. He has to make the culprit pay for it, but at the same time he has to die by the same blow himself. What is determining in the unconscious in order to place and find his desire for Hamlet, says Lacan, is not the desire for his mother, but the desire of his mother.

^{7 a+b} *Le Séminaire, No VI, Le Désir et son Interpretation*, unpublished, 1958-9, especially on Hamlet from 4 March 1959 to 29 April 1959. *La Subversion du Sujet et la Dialectique du Désir dans l’Inconscient Freudien*, pp. 793- 824, the graph, in particular the complete graph pp. 817. The graph was constructed in *Seminar V, Les Formations de l’Inconscient* and in *Seminar VI*.

In a pathetic scene with the queen, with pressing terms almost unbearable to her, as she complains, Hamlet implores her to regain some dignity, to take a moral path again: “You cannot call it love, for at your age the hey-day in the blood is tame, it’s humble...” In other words, says Lacan, “at your age, this should have calmed down a little.” This is Hamlet’s demand to his mother in the name not only of the law and of morality, says Lacan, but of something in which violence and almost cruelty is involved. Still at the end Hamlet is giving up to his mother’s desire, it is as if he says to her “do as you like”, as if her desire is something which cannot be lifted. What he seems to give up is his own desire —he has already rejected Ophelia— and therefore the possibility to act.

It seems that the solution of the obsessional’s desire does not lie with the Other, the one who could recognize desire, if the Other could answer the subject’s question concerning desire. This Other, in Hamlet, is only betrayal and fallacy. This Other does not know and cannot give anything back. The answer does not lie with the Other whom the obsessional constantly tries to maintain, in an ambivalent relentless fight from which only death can offer relief. It, rather, lies with the object which causes desire, object (a), and it is mourning which can elevate the lost object to the status of an object cause of desire, of an object not of envy or hatred, not *i(a)*, not an image involving totality and wholeness in the Other, but a sign of lack of being $-\varphi$ and a signifier of *jouissance* which is the signifier of the barred Other.

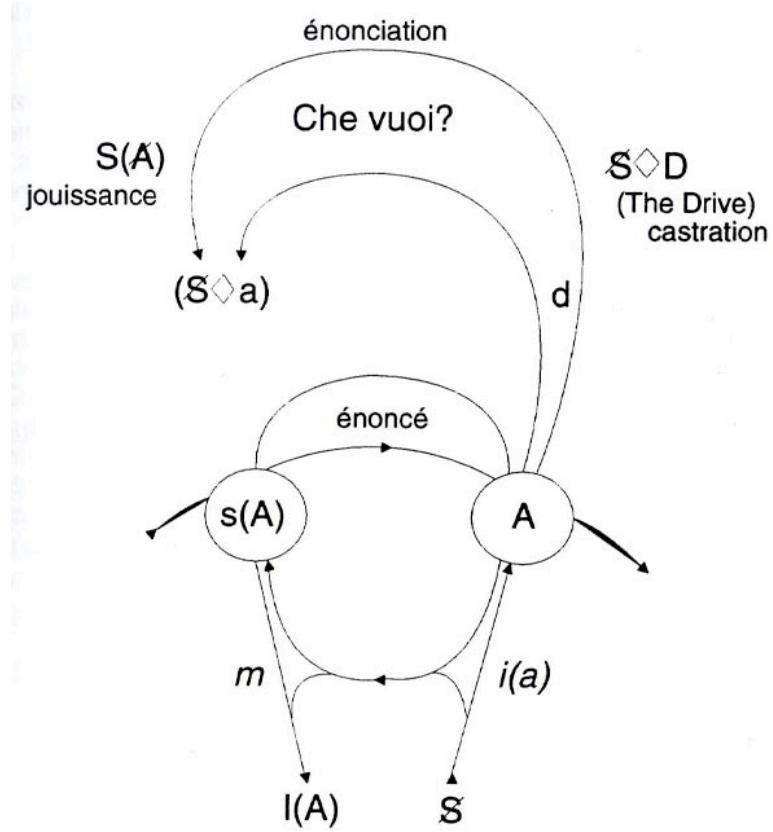
Hamlet, it is shown, can only assume the act which is expected from him and “makes him a man for a little while”, just before his own death, after mourning for the drowned Ophelia. And he can only mourn her when he sees the mourning he cannot bear to see as done by somebody else, in another, Laertes, her brother, which means that it is through Hamlet’s narcissistic identification to Laertes that an object has been constituted and mourned by him.

So, the tragedy of Hamlet ends with himself dying amongst so many other deaths. Between Ophelia’s death and his own, “*entre-deux morts*” as Lacan put it, Hamlet has found his own desire and the possibility to accomplish his act. But what a waste.

PART IV

THE GRAPH OF DESIRE

The question to the Other concerning desire is to be situated simultaneously on the two levels of conscious and unconscious discourse (*énoncé* and *énonciation*). On the first level of conscious discourse the demand to the Other (line of *énoncé*, vector towards A) returns to the subject as a message in terms of the signified of the Other, *s(A)*, “I am who I am” is the reply of the queen to Hamlet. His symptom, i.e, his scruples and hesitations as a result of defence is also to be situated here. Concerning his desire Hamlet falls back in the lower level of the first line, in the specular mirage of being the object of the Other’s desire, *i(a)*.



But, on the higher line, the demand is articulated with the drive in the unconscious and this makes a subject who does not know, a barred S, a “not I” of the subject facing the signifiers of this demand (what Lacan calls the “fading” of the subject). The Other as an unconscious, not knowing and inconsistent Other, gives the question back to the subject: *Che vuoi?* What do you want? This message concerns the subject’s desire. In other words, $S \diamond D$, the barred subject facing the demand in the unconscious, is the algorithm of the drive, introduces the drive as the treasure of the signifiers of unconscious demand and the desire they conceal, beyond and below need as articulated in conscious discourse. It is to be situated up on the right hand side of the graph.

The subject’s only possible reply is through the fantasy $S \diamond a$, and there as we said, is a fall of Hamlet towards the short-circuit of the imaginary in the first level, towards $i(a)$, because the object cause is not constituted by him as yet.

$S \diamond a$ means relation and cut, relation to an object and separation from this object, and this is what Lacan means when he talks about the importance of mourning in the constitution of an object, cause of desire, and this is only realized by Hamlet in the “*entre-deux-morts*” situation described above, between Ophelia’s death and his own.

As a result of this operation, the message concerning the Other at the level of the unconscious is the signifier of the barred Other, ie, a signifier is missing in the Other, the Other is incomplete, or in other words “there is not an Other of the Other”, the Other does not know, and cannot reply with a signifier which tells the subject and its desire. By abandoning the passion to keep the Other complete on the level of an imaginary identification to its lack, here the phallus, and by constituting the object as separate from its image as included in the desire of the Other, the obsessional can

realize symbolic castration, which is another meaning of $\$ \diamond D$, and the possibility of *jouissance*, the signifier of the barred Other, because what the obsessional does not accept is the castration of the Other.⁸

⁸ Roublef I., *Le Désir de l'Obsessionnel dans la perspective de Jacques Lacan*, in *Documents, Recherches et Travaux de l'École Freudienne de Paris*, 1963-4.