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How a Psychotic Subject Comes to Speech

All speech calls for a reply

This article attempts to discern the point I have come to in my reading of what is psychosis. The stake is to let oneself be instructed on the structure, which is to say, on what determines the position of a subject in his/her existence. It is about letting oneself be taken or rather surprised by what psychosis might want to make understood.

Whether it sees itself as an instrument of healing, of training or of exploration in depth, psychoanalysis has only a single medium: the patient's speech. That this is self-evident is no excuse for our neglecting it. And all speech calls for a reply.¹

These words written by Jacques Lacan when he cut to the quick of the subject in «The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis» will serve as cornerstone in this reflection on the psychotic subject's relation to the Other and the place in which speech is lodged in psychosis.

To speak calls on jouis-sense

Fernand is a young, schizophrenic subject of thirteen. The Other's intrusion on his body is permanent and very distressing. To pass beside him is enough to make him feel threatened. He must then defend himself with violent kicking. I asked him why he did this, asking the question so he would attempt to give an explanation. But irremediably, by way

of a response, I only got «I don't know, I don't know...» The question of why? calls on sense, it attempts to produce signification where there isn't any for Fernand, where there is a hole. In this moment, everything happens as if proven, directly in the body.

During an internship in clinical psychiatry, I met a paranoid patient. He was a regular fixture at the clinic, presenting a low-grade delusion covered by alcohol. When the morbid ideas invading him got to be a bit too much, he would demand asylum in the hospital where medication would smother the anxiety and the exterior menace. The doctor supervising my internship asked me to meet with him for interviews. The patient accepted and told me from the start that he felt himself watched all the time and rejected by people met in the bars he frequented the most often. This began, he said, the day he cut his hair off very short. There were things in what he said that I didn't understand, that didn't seem self-evident to me, that even seemed illogical. In brief, I didn't understand anything and asked him to explain it to me. So, I made him speak. The effects of this invitation were not long in coming. The request for explanation entailed a delirious profusion of the interpretive type. Soon, everything was a sign for him: a gesture, a word said or retained, a glance shot or avoided. If, at the beginning, this was limited to two or three habitual bars, now it became the organization of a network which circulated his photo throughout the town. There were even infiltrations into the clinic. Soon, the idea that he was condemned to death surged up and became a certitude. In these moments, he was overwhelmed, remaining fixed in his bed and refusing to see me. And it led, one day, to his asking me for drugs to end his life.

These two clinical sequences show, it seems to me, that to push a psychotic subject to talk has either no effect or it has disastrous effects. This is due to the hole in sense for the schizophrenic or too much sense in paranoia. In setting out from this, the question I asked myself goes to the very heart of what Lacan said. If speech is the medium of psychoanalysis, does working with a psychotic subject define itself in «making them talk?» If an institution like Courtil or a psychiatric clinic receives psychotics, is it to talk?

A concept which grasps what, in the psychotic experience, confronts the subject with horror and confines him to the ineffable must be introduced here. It is the experience of *jouissance*. The subject is subjected to or vehiculed by the Other's *jouissance*. The Other wants something of him which is certainly not for his good. I think that it is even at the core of this encounter between the subject and the Other's *jouissance* that one must act; not in the form of «making them speak,» but, as we say at Courtil, in the form of an intervention. I will try to illustrate this with two clinical sketches.

Giving a chance to speech

Return an instant to Fernand. What a surprise I had when, to the question of a colleague who asked him, not «why» he struck, but «who» pushed him to do it, he responded: «The Pope.» We then could propose to him that the Pope had to stay in Rome, thus allowing him to calm down. What happened here if not that Fernand came to name under whose thumb he was being held, if you will. Fernand situated the Other, gave it a place. It is essential, for this in a way condenses the *jouissance* which otherwise circulates everywhere in an anarchistic fashion. Fernand proposed a signifier that belongs to him, which localized just a little bit the *jouissance*. It allowed the intervenant to act on the Other by sending it back where it came from. Here, one easily grasps how the question of sense, of «understanding» is displaced. There is nothing to understand. The Pope is a master signifier that doesn't hark back to anything.

Lucian is fourteen. He showed up at Courtil with a delusional certitude: someone had assassinated his father. He said that a friend stabbed him to death during a dispute. He affirms, moreover, that they had discovered the assassin the moment his mother met another man. He also accuses his mother of being responsible for his father's death, and even of having killed him. At first, he presented a persecutive relation to the girls of the group. They were thieves. They whispered behind his back and designated to him the girls that wanted to kiss him. When he learned that Leonce was going to move into the neighboring group, Lucian decreed that she was his fiancée. Meetings between Leonce and Lucian quickly became a drama. Lucian was confronted with the game of desire that this young lady staged. He lacked the phallic signification to parry against what would quickly be transformed into unbearable caprice and persecution. She became the cause of all his unhappiness.

One evening, I met Lucian, who faced a closed door. For a long time, he hurled himself against the door and the walls to join Leonce. I said to him, «You know, I'm the one who forbid her to come bother you.» This put an immediate stop to his agitations, and he left. He reappeared a few minutes later and started talking. First, he threatened me for what I'd said to Leonce. Then, to my great astonishment, he sat down and confided in me all that preoccupied him. For Lucian, to bar this too-complete Other by saying no to the *jouissance* to which he was the offering, appeased him and cleared a little space for the subject to slide in and deposit his signifiers. As Francois Leguil says in an article on the presentation of cases,

[it is a question of permitting] someone who, for a reason, has been reduced to the catastrophic silence of insurmountable pathologies, to begin to discern what has happened to him in order that he might distance himself

a little and find, in this distance from the horror, the occasion which will give a little chance to speech.²

That's what I believe I've learned at Courtil. It isn't about putting oneself in that position Anne Lysy critiques in her article on «Intervention and interpretation,» which is that of the parrot in the Adventures of Tintin who tirelessly responds, «Hello. I'm listening.»³ It's about intervening. The intervenant is the position of the one who comes between the subject and the Other, who comes to manage the jouissance which invades the subject. «The psychotic proposes his jouissance to the psychoanalyst so that this latter establish the rules for it,» Michel Silvestre posits in *Demain la psychanalyse*.⁴

The position of the intervenant

Jacques Lacan invites us to respond. «All speech calls for a reply,» he wrote.⁵ I think that the intervention, such as it is articulated here, is a response: not a response to the subject, but a response addressed to the Other in that, in psychosis, it is the Other that must be treated. It must be added that it isn't about making just any old response; the response is elaborated setting out from the subject's signifiers. Again, I evoked the term 'intervenant' as a position, not as an individual. I think that, in effect, we have an interest in making it a function. It implies a certain detachment on the part of the person working in the institutional setting. Of course, it remains to give this its logic.

¹ Jacques Lacan. «The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis.» *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan, Norton, 1977; p. 40.

² Francois Leguil. «L'expérience énigmatique des psychoses dans les présentations cliniques.» *La Cause freudienne* #23: feb., 1993; p. 37.

³ Anne Lysy-Stevens. «Intervention et interprétation.» *Les feuillets du Courtil* #4: feb. 1993; p. 34.

⁴ Michel Silvestre. «Transfert et interprétation dans les psychoses.» *Demain la psychanalyse*. Paris: Seuil, 1993; p. 207.

⁵ Jacques Lacan. *Op. cit.*