Psychosis within the Logic of Knotting and Linking

The logic of connection

From Seminars XIX (1971–2) and XX (1972–3) a remarkable change can be discerned in how Lacan conceptualizes the relationship between the registers of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Whereas in his earlier work a dialectical logic on the relation between these registers was predominant, in the 1970s Lacan begins to discuss this relationship within a triangular or three-dimensional logic. Henceforth aims to conceptualize how the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary mutually connect.

In his earlier dialectical approach, two registers were each time opposed to one another, the Symbolic being the main point of reflection on human functioning. During the 1950s, Lacan was mainly interested in the relationship between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, where he assumed that the actual meaning and content of mental representations should not be the main focus of attention. What is important is the interplay between signifiers and the way reality is constructed according to the law. Guided by the idea of a foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, psychosis was understood in terms of the absence of the crucial signifier that embodied the law. As a result of foreclosure, phallic meaning is not generated in the dialectical tension between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and thus questions concerning identity and personal existence that operate at the level of the unconscious do not give rise to an articulation of the subject in terms of desire. Instead, such questions overwhelm the subject from without via hallucinations and elementary phenomena.

In the 1960s the dialectical tension between the Real and the Symbolic came to hold a prominent place for Lacan. Still starting from a
primacy of the Symbolic, his interest concerns the way in which speech transforms corporeal jouissance, and the question of how the object $a$ takes shape in the dialectics between the Real and the Symbolic. The object $a$ represents both the impact and the powerlessness of language in relation to the drive. At this time psychosis was still studied in terms of the foreclosure of a signifier, but instead of being thought of as an inherently unique signifier, the Name-of-the-Father was conceptualized as a uniquely used signifier. In psychosis the object $a$ is not separated from the subject, nor is it integrated in the ego or in the subject: as a mere element of strangeness, the object $a$ is manifested in reality.

In the 1970s, this dialectical view on the relation between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary is replaced by an approach that focuses on the *intermingling* and *connection* between the three registers. At the basis of this change, Lacan’s view on the functioning of language shifts somewhat. Before the 1970s Lacan was guided by the Hegelian belief that ‘the word is the murder of the thing’ (Lacan, 1956c; Miller, 2002a) and that the signifier brings structure to jouissance by introducing it to the Symbolic. At this point he makes a conjunction between both, which brings him to define ‘a jouissance of the signifier’ (Miller, 2007c, p. 72). Crucial concepts Lacan uses to illustrate jouissance in speech are ‘lalangue’ and ‘parlêtre’. These French neologisms are often left untranslated, but could be translated as ‘llanguage’ (Lacan, 1972–3) or ‘thetongue’ and ‘speakingbeing’, respectively. Through these concepts Lacan stresses the libidinous aspect of language. In his work prior to the 1970s, Lacan saw the signifier as a differential element through which the subject and the world are represented. What he subsequently adds is that, apart from the meaning they entail, signifiers are also laden with the drive. To speak, even when there is nothing to say, or to remain silent, even when something should be said, implies a jouissance that cannot be elucidated via structuralist theories. Hence Lacan turned to a new set of constructs that allow him to trace a mode of drive gratification that has nothing to do with the message speech conveys, but with the *act* of enunciation itself. Taking both aspects of speech together, in Seminar XX Lacan (1972–3) suggests that each signifier carries both structure and drive: On the one hand a signifier is nothing but ‘a difference from another signifier’, on the other hand it is a sign of jouissance (Lacan, 1972–3, p. 142); a sign that refers to the speaker’s being.

By introducing the concept ‘llanguage’ or ‘thetongue’ Lacan indicates that, apart from its inherent structure, language has a radical non-signified or private quality. This is expressed in the phonetic and