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The Real and Psychopathology

Introduction

Up to now, I have largely been concerned with articulating the complex, theoretical relationship between Lacan’s concept of the Real and the wider concerns of his metapsychology. In approaching these questions, I have tended to downplay or bracket what is perhaps the most familiar aspect of psychoanalysis as a praxis, namely its approach to psychopathology and the exploration of mental illness. Even when, in Chapter 2, the question of psychosis was central to my wider exploration of the valences of the material signifier, the specifically psychopathological implications of psychosis as a categorization of mental suffering were left to one side. In this chapter, by contrast, I will move the question of psychopathology to centre stage. Through an investigation of the ways in which Lacan conceives the relationship between hystera, obsessional neurosis and perversion, I will highlight the centrality in each of a particular relation to the Real and to the signifier, conceived as split between its state of being in-relation and of being in-isolation.

I hope to show how it is obsessional neurosis, when taken as a structure, as a relation of the subject to the Real and the signifier, that acts as an especially lucid exemplification of Lacan’s more general theory of the subject. While it has often been argued that it is hysteria, especially through its highlighting of the routing of desire through the desire of the Other, that best captures the general logic of Lacan’s account of psychoanalytic being, I will emphasize, in contrast, the intricate dialectic in obsessional neurosis between a submission to the law of the phallus and a nostalgia for the imbroglio of primary narcissism and the Imaginary dual relation, traits central to Lacanian subjectivity more generally. Furthermore, I will argue that a sustained examination of the
logic of obsessional neurosis affords us a new understanding of how Lacan theoretically relates the two facets of the signifier I have termed, in previous chapters, the signifier-in-relation and the signifier-in-isolation. Obsessional neurosis, I will argue, effects a subjective balance between the signifier-in-isolation, present in the subject as vehicle of the urge to withdraw from the primacy of the phallus and its transition from demand to desire, and the signifier-in-relation, corresponding to the recognition in the obsessional neurotic of the insurmountability of the Symbolic Law and the inevitable production of sense and meaning. My reading here will provide the necessary prelude to my reflections in Chapter 5 on Lacan's materialist rereading of the symptom in his Seminar 23, whereby the symptom becomes the central element in a revised account of the psychoanalytic subject, with the unmeaning of jouissance providing the underpinning to the relativity of signification.

By identifying psychopathological categories as structures, as particular ways in which the subject relates to the Real, desire, jouissance and the signifier, Lacan seeks to demedicalize psychoanalytic discourse. Just as his conceptualization of the Real has, I have argued, wide ranging consequences for any philosophical interrogation of the limits of language and of subjectivity more generally, so too does his revisioning of clinical praxis have implications that far exceed the limits of the consulting room, especially in the ways that his metapsychological speculations exceed and decompose traditional limits between ontology, epistemology and ethics. In the previous chapter, I showed how, through his elaboration of the logic of objet petit a in its relation to the subject as a breach in the symbolic chain, and through his formulas of sexuation, Lacan proposes an internally differentiated theory of the psyche, predicated on differing conceptions of spatial and logical totality. My reading of psychopathological structures in this chapter should be taken both as a supplement and revision to the more fundamental or general conceptualizations explored in Chapter 3 where Lacan's arguments were shown to provide a general theoretical horizon for psychoanalytic subjectivity, which, by the early 1970s, had become divided into alternate, sexuated modes. The elaboration of specific psychopathological structures here aims to connect more intimately with the ongoing movements of desire and signification that subsist within the more general subjective spaces explored in the previous chapter, although with the potential for a particular structure to tarry with and potentially alter the horizon it is dialectically related to.

In my reading of Lacanian hysteria, I return to Seminar 3 where Lacan innovatively reads the paradigmatic categories of psychopathology