

6 Jerome, or Death in the Life of the Obsessional

BY SERGE LECLAIRE

If there were even less snow than there is, and if I had pursued the task with more fervor, I could have presented you with a nice piece of work this evening, well constructed with the neat and clean lines of a temple portal, surrounded by grass and flowers. But you will excuse me, the work is still under construction and there is some rubbish on the lawn.

Already I think about the epigraph that will greet the visitor to this temple, and I will have to choose between the two texts that have been my guides.

“Above all, obsessionals need the possibility of death to resolve their conflicts,” wrote Freud in the case of the Rat Man. And you will remember this delectable sentence that we find a few lines above it: “. . . and in his imagination he constantly killed people in order to be able to express his sincere sympathy to their relatives.”

The other epigraph I extract arbitrarily from a seminar of May 1955. It begins with a question posed by Oedipus: “Is it when I am finally nothing that I become really a man?”

“It is there,” J. Lacan tells us, “that the next chapter begins: beyond the pleasure principle.”

Lacking an edifice, we need at least an outline. This is what I propose—a pencil mark on tracing paper, a blueprint. You be the judge.

In the first part of this report, we will talk of what we know, or at least of what we do. In the second I will try to reconstruct my dialogue with Jerome, taking care to replace my silences and my exclamations, my “yeahs” and my “hms” with more elaborate formulas. In a third part I will propose an outline that can guide our future work, if at that time we have the least desire to undertake another project like this one.

Serge Leclaire is a psychiatrist practicing psychoanalysis in Paris. This paper was first read before the Société Française de Psychanalyse on May 28, 1956. It was first published as “La Mort dans la vie de l’obsédé,” in the journal *La Psychanalyse* 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), pp. 111–40. It was republished as “Jérôme, ou la mort dans la vie de l’obsédé,” in Serge Leclaire, *Démasquer le réel* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), pp. 121–46.

Our knowledge begins with a story—a bit simplistic, a bit stupid—of the kind we hear from the couch or read in the paper.

It concerns an analyst of great renown, who hour after hour is generous enough to receive and to listen to his illustrious clients. One day he was a little weary and did not get up from his easy chair. A charming secretary, used to this, ushered each patient out at the end of his session. It was five o’clock, and the obsessional who was lying there was speaking a great deal. When the session was over, the patient, particularly satisfied with himself, concluded with these words: “I think this has been a good session.” Then, echoing the words habitually spoken by the analyst, he added, “We are going to leave things there.” He looked at the therapist, who appeared to be colder than usual; he seemed to be asleep. But no, he was very pale, really cold. The patient was concerned and summoned the secretary, who became agitated. They called a colleague, who ran right over, listened, and said that the analyst had died three hours earlier.

This story, known as the story of the five o’clock patient (thus avoiding using a name that would refer to what is in question), has been used to attack psychoanalysis. But why disdain it? Let us stop for a moment and ask ourselves about its meaning.

I agree that there are more witty stories, but this one has the merit of being “striking.” I do not know its origin for sure, but I would wager that it was born on the couch. Since its invention, I think that all the patients in the world have learned it or have reinvented it and told it as though it were theirs. I have heard that one day about five o’clock, while one of our master didacticians was relaxing, as one should at that time, cradled by the soft philosophical murmurings of his wise student, he stood up all of a sudden and, just at the punch line, scowled and said, “Aha, you find that funny?” to which the imperturbable student answered: “Yes, why?”

But enough of diversions. We know what it means to speak; let us analyze.

It is certain that the issue in the story is a particular form of the fantasy of the analyst’s death, and this appears with a remarkable constancy in our patients. What does this innocent fantasy signify, if we can put it that way? You know the answer as well as I do and as well as the patient does, for he no less than we is fully informed of what is written in our now classic literature. I will remind you, then, of the different keys that we habitually use to understand—if in fact it is a question of understanding—what our patient is telling us when he speaks of death.

In the first place, it is clear enough that in imagining us dead, he wants to kill us. “You want to kill me” is the response of those who understand. Those who are more clever will ask, “Haven’t you ever dreamed that your father had a

fatal accident?" or else they will employ a ruse: "You were imagining the other day that I had a beard like your father!" It is certain that with this story our patient manifests his aggressiveness in the transference and that he wishes for our death as he did that of his father—unless, of course, he fears it. Any informed patient will explain this to you himself.

The story of the five o'clock patient confirms other elements of our knowledge: for example, that the analyst is a gentleman who is often taciturn, says very little, and from time to time maintains a deathly silence. Freud reminds us of this in "The Theme of the Three Caskets": in dreams, muteness is the usual representation of death. Certain patients whose wit is especially pointed even insinuate that the psychoanalyst sleeps while they speak, and the story reminds us, as does the canon of Haydn, that sleep is a brief death.

Often Jerome talks to me about that—about sleep, that is; I will tell you more later. But Jerome himself can fall asleep on the couch when, out of breath he renounces reason in order to stop his "echo chamber" from resonating. (That is his name for his *cavum*, whose permeability concerns him a great deal.) A long sigh and a pause suspend his vocalized commentary on his images. I sigh also, relieved (in silence), and I open my second ear: for the last two weeks he has been doing everything he can (monotonously droning on) to make me fall asleep. Then the word "crocodile" comes to him, like that, out of thin air; and he does not know why. Yes, it is crocodile leather, and he does not like it. He remembers a documentary film. In it there is a crocodile that seems to be asleep, floating like a dead tree trunk, and then in an instant it opens its jaws and swallows a black man in less time than we need to say it. . . . Naturally, Jerome did not see the scene of "incorporation"; it was cut out of the film. But he knows that the imperturbable filmmaker kept his camera fixed on this scene and ate it all up with his glass eye, not missing a morsel of the action.

The moral is: playing dead can permit one to eat the other.

Crocodile . . . , yes. Crocodile leather like that which is on your notebook; I do not like this leather.

So be it, perhaps I am the crocodile. But after all, and here we touch on identification, why should it not be he, the patient, who is the dead tree trunk, sagely lying down, sometimes silent, even asleep, like the analyst? Why would this inert and menacing thing not be he?

We know that the analyst keeps silent, but he also has patients who play dead. . . . and who say so. This game can continue for a long time.

Happily, tradition says that the imperturbable analyst has the last word. To demonstrate this I will tell you another story that I think I was one of the first of

our group to hear. It will be very instructive. An analyst, very experienced, has the technique of repeating the last word of his patient's phrase, until one day he echoes the "kerplunk" that concludes the ultimate acting out.

We seem to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the analyst should have the last word. The example of the crocodile is nonetheless interesting, for it conjures up around silence, sleep, and death a series of themes familiar to the interpreter: objectification, "anality" (I refer to the black man), ambivalence, identification, aggressiveness-passiveness, incorporation, and voyeurism. Each of these keys could guide us in formulating an interpretation that would retain the value of a mythic explanation.

Until now I have wanted to do nothing more than remind you of the frequency and banality of these fantasies of the death of the analyst—which patient has never put you in an auto accident?—and evoke at the same time our most common ways of understanding what relates to death.

It would seem that when the practicing analyst hears the word "death" or finds it symbolized in his patient's discourse, he appeals automatically to one of the following three keys: desire and fear of death, identification with the dead, or symbolic representation of death.

Then, according to his taste or his humor, he interprets it of necessity in one or the other of the three registers designated by the keys. Let us again look closely at each of these three perspectives.

First, desire and fear of death. What is principally in question is a desire to murder, desire to murder the father, that is to say, to bring about a death. Everyone nowadays knows, after the shortest period of analysis, that he has desired to kill his father and to sleep with his mother. We will return to this point, which is of major importance. Freud reminds us in *Totem and Taboo*¹ that in obsessional neurosis, "at the root of the prohibition there is invariably a hostile impulse—against someone the patient loves—wish that that person should die." He also tells us that the fear of one's own death and then of the death of others is only the consequence of this evil desire.

"We admit," he writes, "that this tendency to kill really exists."

Thus the tendency to kill, which was immediately confused with aggressiveness, constitutes the root of everything related to this perspective: murder of the father, fear of one's own and the other's death, neurotic fear of death, and guilt related to the evil desire.

Under a second heading we can group everything related to the theme of

1. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, S.E. 13, p. 72.

identification with the dead. The Freudian source is *Totem and Taboo*, and especially "Mourning and Melancholy."² For the moment, however, what concerns us is best found in a text by Fenichel that summarizes the common psychoanalytic "knowledge": "All of this gives evidence of an identification with the dead person, subjectively perceived as an oral incorporation occurring on the same level as in psychotic depression but of lesser intensity." And "in summary it may be stated that mourning is characterized by an ambivalent introjection of the lost object. . . ." In this perspective we can surely probe the meaning of the concept of identification. We speak unhesitatingly of identification with a dead parent, a brother, or a sister. We could also study (beyond mythological illustration), everything that is covered by the notion of introjection: introjection and incorporation, partial introjection, alliance of the introjected object with the ego or the superego, a whole series of problems that we leave to one side today.

We will not stop, either, to question the work of mourning, on which D. Lagache has contributed an ethnological study that follows the Freudian tradition faithfully.³ He has promised us the clinical complement very shortly.⁴

Finally, under a third heading, we gather everything that psychoanalytic experience has taught us about the symbolic equivalences for death: thus as we have already mentioned, there are silence, sleep, immobility, but there are also references to "the other side," to the "beyond" or "other shore" of the river, and to the kingdom of the dead. The dead are laid out, as corpses, more or less gnawed away at, and as we see in statues from the end of the fifteenth century, there are skeleton, skull, sickle, and chariot. We would add to this what we have learned about funeral rites. But again, we will not follow this path today.

If I neglect such enticing subjects, if I only make fleeting reference to what you were perhaps waiting to hear about, this is because psychoanalysts, with the exception of Freud, have been principally interested in the *theme* of death, as though what mattered was to veil death in thematizing it. But we propose this evening to reintroduce the *question* of death, as it is posed for the obsessional.

Some will think that this is a mere quibble over terms and that the question of death can only be the theme of a dissertation: this much is certainly evident. But it is precisely this veiling of the question that we want to avoid. I admit that the difficulty begins here.

We tend to use all our force to put death to the side, to eliminate it from our lives. We have tried to throw a *veil of silence* over it, and we have even imagined

a proverb, "To think about something as though it were death" (which means that one does not think about it at all). Freud wrote this in 1915 in "Considerations on War and Death."

It was also Freud who a few years later introduced a concept that most analysts have reduced to the uselessness of a theoretical excrescence that can only disturb a nice and simple practice. Even today there are those who believe in the death drive only in the same way that they believed in Santa Claus, in reverence to the fancy and the obstinacy of the old man.

But here we arrive at a point beyond our knowledge.

Let us stop then and start on another tack.

We return to our everyday experience.

For a moment I thought I would follow a friend's suggestion and examine the clinical application of the function of the dummy in bridge.⁵ I renounced this, first, because I feared it would not be a sufficiently "serious" subject for a scientific meeting, and second, because I am a terrible bridge player. This, I admit, is regrettable. Reflect for an instant on the exemplary function of this dummy: incontestably, to use the terms of J. Lacan, he is the fourth person, whose presence is blinding; he is laid out, entirely exposed, closed, finished, complete; he is the only person we see in such a state of nakedness. He is the dead, but it is precisely because he is seen as laid out and complete that the play is organized around him. He is the declarer's partner, and the defenders are situated in relation to him, playing on his strength or weakness—because he has strength and weakness, even when dead—depending on whether the living defender plays before or after him.

We will leave the bridge table and return to the couch.

One day Jerome was in good humor and was talking about the artful way the English had of ridding themselves of their assassins. In England they hang them. . . . You know the feelings that ordinarily accompany these capital themes, but most striking to Jerome are the judge's words when he passes sentence: ". . . is condemned to be hanged by the neck until dead."

"Well," Jerome adds, "for me it is as though someone had said to me one day, 'You will live until dead.'"

Jerome lives under the weight of this condemnation. If it is obvious that all of us will live until dead, it is no less strange to hear it recalled when we would rather forget about it. Hearing it as a death sentence is even more surprising, as though it had been addressed to Adam himself in the garden of Eden, when Eve

5. [In French the word for the dummy in bridge is *le mort*, which literally means "dead man."]

2. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholy," *S.E.* 14, pp. 243–58.

3. "Le Travail du deuil," in *Revue française de psychanalyse* 4 (1938), pp. 693–708.

4. ["Deuil pathologique," in *La Psychanalyse* 2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), pp. 45–74.]

was the one who ate the apple. Then, the Bible says, "their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked." And the Eternal in his anger said to man, "It is through work that you will draw your food all the days of your life . . . until you return to the soil from which you came. . . ." Adam knew it because God told him: "You will not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for the day you eat of it, that day you will die." Now why does Jerome think of himself as condemned like Adam: *You will live until dead?* And why does he live in a perpetual dungeon, expiating his life unto death? This is one question I have asked myself, and others who have been interested in the world of the obsessional have asked it, too.

Certainly we can find in Jerome the theme of the death of the father, fully developed. He lived his first years in the shadow of his father's absence. Jerome's father was fighting the Germans at the time. He killed in order not to be killed, and Jerome's mother feared for her husband's life, naturally enough. The father came back from the war, gassed, tired, and diminished, although alive enough to give Jerome a little sister three years later. His sister was born as black as a negress . . . or as black as something else. Her abundant black hair fascinated everyone. Jerome would have much preferred to see her dead; she was an object to put in a box or to burn, and he has reported numerous fantasies attesting to this. Later he killed her in his memory, purely and simply by forgetting her. This we found after a few months of analysis.

It is no less evident that Jerome's progress was marked by his taking the form, appearance, and voice of his father, this *instead of becoming his son, as he would surely have wished*. Thus he told of a particularly dramatic scene: he was twelve or thirteen and had found an old revolver. There was a discussion at dinner, a dispute with his father, who broke down in tears. That day Jerome swore to himself never to oppose his father for the rest of his life.

Finally, during the first year of analysis, Jerome lost his father, who had for a long time been dying of cancer. Jerome was resigned, sometimes anxious, as he awaited this end. Looking at his father on his deathbed, he noticed one last time how well he had succeeded in reproducing his father's image. The father was buried in the family crypt, which our patient had straightened up beforehand, by reducing the number of corpses there.

We will not stop here to draw a hasty conclusion.

I would rather like to take this opportunity to analyze the attitude of Jerome before the corpse, and to do so I will take a childhood dream that Jerome brought me during the first month of analysis. The dream had impressed him a great deal, and it seems that he has never forgotten it. During the rest of the treatment

we had occasion to return to it several times, precisely as a touchstone or nodal point, which will always have an irreducibly mysterious aspect.

We find ourselves in a vast room surrounded by a covered gallery that leads to a loggia: the atmosphere is chiaroscuro. Borne by four men an open sarcophagus advances; up close we clearly see a perfectly conserved mummy in its wrappings. But suddenly, as the procession advances, *the mummy liquefies*. All that is left in the sarcophagus is a red juice whose horrifying aspect is veiled by the certainty that these are but the unguents that had served to embalm the body.

Such is the dream of the mummy.

We are going to linger a while with this dream, using it to pursue the analysis of the implacable condemnation to live.

Jerome says that this dream is very old. He brings it to me with all the objectivity and indifference of an impartial observer; has he dreamed it several times, or has he remembered it many times to feed his fantasies? He cannot say.

He does remember that this dream preceded or followed a visit to the department of Egyptian antiquities at the Louvre; he had for a long time desired to have a mummy. Moreover, Egyptian history interests him, as does anything else that can clarify the problem of *origins*. Jerome likes family trees and grand historical syntheses. He wants to know precisely of what lineage he is the final term, the result. He regrets not having a gallery of ancestors whose portraits he can see, so why not Ramses II, who is the mummy.

He also evokes the mysterious subterranean passages of the pyramids; we must add that when he was twelve he was very interested in walking through catacombs and grottoes. He always dreams of subterranean cities and tastes an anxiety born of perplexity when in his fantasy he finds himself at some subterranean crossroads where seven mysterious doors open.

But he has talked to me most often about the surprise and satisfaction he feels in contemplating the mummy in its human appearance; witness to a vertiginous past, immobile, protected, conserved, it is the very image of that which endures.

In another dream he represented the source of his fascination: in an enormous grotto he discovered a splendid black marble statue of a laid-out corpse, and he was ecstatic contemplating it. It was the very image of the perfection of a realized, definitive form, a form that ignores time. In another dream he saw a warrior who had found the ideal protection: he was transformed into a man covered with a tar, a perfect weather-resistant armor, and—what is sometimes more useful—he could resist murderous projectiles.

Jerome often asks himself about motion, and the image of the mummy

animated by those who carry it represents for him the excellence of passive movement, where one is entirely submitted to others.

This would evidently be the place to talk about the complex movements of a man in a train, and especially of a man in his car; every automobile trip, Jerome says, represents the possibility of a fatal accident at the same time that it gives the satisfaction of finding oneself in an enclosed space. But it would take too long here to discuss man's motor complex or his motor. I prefer looking at the suggestive image that Jerome brings me: "For me to keep going, I must turn at 3,000 rpms." And when he says "for me to keep going," he expresses his concern that this coherence, the unity that he holds onto, will dissolve itself into a state that will not merely be fragmentation. Turning at 3,000 rpms is for him a vital necessity because he thinks that this rhythm gives him the appearance and properties of a solid. "If I stop for an instant," another patient told me, "*I am afraid I will turn to dust*," and he adds, "this dust that we are made of."

Whether it concerns the constraint of internal movement or the passivity of external motility, of one's displacement in space, this movement, which is called the image of life, is always suffered.

And so it goes for the rest of Jerome's life. He lives by proxy: he loves to organize—this is his job—and to activate the companies he visits, to organize meetings and trips, to stage events. He is ready for everything, providing he does not participate in the event itself. Like Iconepherous, whose fantasy of the enchanted city I reported elsewhere,⁶ he is alive only when inside the walls of the city, and his horror before the real is sacred. "I was next to a lake," Jerome tells me one day. "The place was lovely, but I was insensitive to it. Believe me, I am more moved by a beautiful postcard or by the photos of my trip."

You might say, why remind us of what we know to exist in every obsessional: their taste for statues, their problems with cars, or their taking vacations with a Leica? It is precisely because we know this too well.

Thus on a hot day when the air is immobile, the water games of a sleepy park seem to be painted garlands. But if the wind rises, you will think, if only for an instant, that an indiscrete eraser has distorted the linear ordering of the drawing, before you remember that these games are an animated movement.

Nothing appears to be more immobile than Iconepherous's city of Jerome's subterranean passages. There is wall after wall with steel doors that open and close like clockwork. Nothing enters without being controlled, predigested, ready to be assimilated into this universe of forms. It is at the heart of this world that we

6. Serge Leclair, "La fonction imaginaire du double dans la névrose obsessionnelle," in *Entretiens psychiatriques* 4 (Paris: Editions de l'Arche, 1958), pp. 193–220.

find the sarcophagus as the ultimate jewel case; it is open, we see the mummy, the corpse that has retained its human appearance, and it is beautiful, reassuring, nicely enveloped in cloths.

Watch out, Jerome told me, we are at the edge of the unnamable; only a frail bag of skin separates him from horror. This is what he tells me even more clearly in a more recent dream that I offer to you without preanalysis:

A man is standing, on the bridge of a ship, and he will be killed '*because he knows*.' I leave so as not to be seen. I am annoyed because the corpse will be discovered, and I will have said nothing; his datebook, similar to mine, remains with his things. Then his bloated corpse is found in the middle of a boat filled with water and mud. They try to get him out, but those who are carrying him are hampered by a labyrinth of wooden planks. They bring him from one side of the boat to the other. He is bloated, stiff, blackened, and very ugly to see, and he stinks. At any moment he may fall apart. Impossible to get out. The corpse blocks the way out of the labyrinth. I am nauseous and ready to vomit. I wake up with my body twisted.

At the heart of this world we find a fragile bag of skin, ready to fall apart.

Now, if we have reached this place, it is because we knew how to wait and because we did not try to understand too much on the way. We could have been diverted during long sessions by dreams and fantasies of scattered members, of hands and feet cut off, of ovens and rancid odors. There were plenty of penises, cut off by a father whom Jerome would have liked to see as menacing. All of this was intended for the psychoanalyst, who is supposed to find it terrific. For our part we talked about it courteously, correctly, indifferently; his anxiety was not there.

It erupted in another place, as you can guess. We were in the fifth month of analysis when one day he was speaking about "incommunicability," of the hiatus separating two bodies. The words we use to communicate are only vibrations of sounds: he feels himself isolated, void, cold, immured without anything truthful to say. To see his father die, he confided later, to see suffering flesh, even in the movies, to hear a cry (which is not speech) from someone complaining of his agony—all this is simply intolerable. This day he had spoken to me in a tone that was between reporting and confessing, emotionless. He was wishing to be entirely transformed through analysis so that he could accede to communication; this was his only true speech, and it was heard.

Leaving my office, he was going to see his wife, who had just been operated on for a spinal problem. But on the street he was literally thrown to the ground by an atrocious pain in his belly, in the middle of his intestines. He got up and

collapsed on a bench, silent; his entire being was called into question, and for a brief instant he saw himself dying. Then, surmounting his pain, he split himself from it, according to a familiar technique, and dragged himself to the hospital where his wife was. The doctor examined him and concluded that he had had an attack of nephritic colic, all the time admiring the patient's courage. There was no antecedent, and the x rays showed nothing. There was no repetition of the incident.

He told me about this incident at the next session.

One day he was seized by horror after having almost fallen asleep during a session. The noise of a motorcycle passing under the window made him jump up; he felt it as a force breaking out of and tearing his stomach. He continued to evoke the times when he awoke by jumping in the air. If he does not feel reassembled, together, in one piece, he is invaded by panic.

In his dreams also, abandoning the traditional theme of castration, he saw an open coffin containing his dead father, who revived for an instant to say to him, "Look, it's you."

Nonetheless, as I have told you, Jerome was not "impressionable": he had devoted himself without hesitation to reducing the number of corpses in the family crypt. A corpse is nothing but a thing, an object like another, he tells me. Fresh corpse or dust, it is of no matter to him; but the intermediary stages are literally intolerable. When he felt himself captured, he saw them as frozen masses piled up like boards. "It left me cold," he added.

But the atrocity he imagines to be the worst is finding all of a sudden, in opening a closet, a formless thing, an unknown, unidentified object that surprises you before it can be named "corpse." He adds that he can look at a pyramid of corpses in full daylight, but discovering one of them in a cave or crypt, a nameless thing with an uncertain form suddenly revealed by the light of his lamp, is precisely what he must avoid at all costs.

I agree that these are not pleasant subjects, and you will excuse me for having quoted Jerome textually. Clinical work, for which we are so avid, is demanding!

So we find ourselves faced with the purple unguents that served to embalm Ramses II.

I will spare you more crude images after I have noted a time when Jerome stepped off a streetcar only to put his foot down and slip, not in what you think, but on a pile of tripe. For him this evoked the picture of a fetus soaking in a bottle. . . . We'll stop there.

Now we can understand a little better what is surrounded by the ramparts of the city and the steel doors of the subterranean galleries. *Perhaps it is not outside*

of these walls that the threat of a seductive creature or of a judge with giant scissors is to be found. . . . The pile of stones evokes well enough the sepulchre.

At the least, to express ourselves in a brief formula, remember this. If someone should ask you one day on your oral exams during the second stage of the third year of the seven-year course of study at the psychoanalytic institute—if someone should ask you, concerning defense mechanisms, "What is the function of the cloths that wrap a mummy?" you must respond without hesitation, "These cloths are the object of the obsessional's constant attention when he is afraid of being liquefied."

Now we are on familiar ground. You will tell me that we have known for a long time all the horror man feels when faced with the corpse of his counterpart. You are right, and I will add that Jerome knew it as well as you do before his analysis, and he knew it in the same way that someone else knows before his analysis that he was jealous of his brother and that he was passionately in love with his mother.

Perhaps you are thinking that we could have broached the question of death from another angle, without drawing on the corpse? Possibly, but I am not so sure as you, and in any case we must recognize that the path we follow is the one Jerome pointed out to us during his analysis.

A question now remains: why does this horror at the decomposition of the corpse—to us this seems to be a natural and common feeling—why is it invested with such particular interest at the heart of Jerome's fantasies, at the center of his analysis? We will leave this question open for the time being. But it is important to show by this fragment of an analysis the nature of the fright that inhabits someone who sees himself as condemned "to live until dead."

Freud has shown in his analysis of the "uncanny" that such a fright approaches anxiety. And we ought to recognize that in analytic literature the fundamental anxiety over death seems often to have been abandoned in favor of the "original" anxiety of the birth trauma.

Now we have uncovered a formative image, a pole of attraction or repulsion that Jerome discovers to be the knot of his being. That his image may be shown to have the same destiny as the mummy uncovered, exposed, and then dissolved—this is what the analyst can hope for. Now that it is exposed before us, let us learn from it.

We will go back to the familiar theme of the stone figure covering the tomb. Enormous masses of stone have been carved into great monoliths. The tomb, perfectly sealed, opens into a grotto that one enters through a subterranean passage with an opening in a vague landscape surrounded by waste. . . . To a certain extent this dream is associated by Jerome with the memory of an incom-

prehensible anger that seized him when he was prohibited from climbing for an instant on the altar of the black Virgin under the cathedral choir.

He is dreaming of being structured like this tomb. And nothing can be safe enough to protect him from the disquieting fragility of this “bag of skin” to which he sees himself reduced when, like Adam, *he sees that he is naked*. Shell of tar or armored room, closed field of his capture or subterranean chamber, the intimacy of the analyst’s office, tomb, mausoleum, cathedral constructed on a crypt—nothing will ever be heavy enough, hermetic enough, well enough constructed, to hide what he must not see, to prevent the intrusion of what must be maintained and hidden.

Thus, bringing his tomb with him, Jerome lies down on my couch.

When he opens it enough to speak to me from beyond the tomb, he has only one ambition, which is to persuade me that *the die is cast*.

Is he not already in the tomb? or almost, imprisoned until death ensues? He does not cease to tell me that he has no future but a past to “liquidate,” a lost time to catch up on. Listen to him: “I want for once to be up to date; I want to liquidate all the files that have piled up on the left side of my desk, finally to be able to breathe. When I succeed, anxiety grabs me and I have to find another unfinished task quickly. I exhaust myself in catching up on my lateness, the work that I undertake ought already to have been finished. I have no free time; *there are no Sundays for me*.”

Whether or not it is a question of identification, it is certain that Jerome *wishes he were already dead*, and especially that *he lives as though he were already dead*.

He is the end of a line, he cannot have children, he is the finish, the conclusion, *already ended*; there is no future for him, and the life that remains is already filled with tasks to accomplish, files to classify, affairs to liquidate, problems to bring up to date. On his trips everything is paid in advance. The only time he feels himself alive is at night in his car, when he discovers in the opening created by his headlights a road that promises new and mortal perils . . . a little like analysis.

Iconepherous, even more categorically than Jerome, affirmed that “the die is cast,” that his universe was closed, terminated, definitively organized. Aside from that, it is too late, and in any case he has nothing to add. On that he concludes, “And that’s everything.”

Happily, they all know that their presence on the couch affirms—very discreetly—the contrary, and signifies to us that a door is open and that their statement about the conclusion is an appeal to whoever knows how to hear it.

Jerome expresses his desire and his fear otherwise than by automobile imag-

ery. Thus he says, in voyeuristic terms: “How do you want me to get out of this? I am like a man who cannot find his lost glasses, since without them he cannot see. . . . It is true that someone who is wearing them cannot see them either. . . .” Or he comments upon his waiting, “I am like a blind man who wants to know what he will see before he gets his sight back.”

Or he expresses himself philosophically: “*I want to find the possibility of utilizing all my possibilities*.”

Perhaps I will have the opportunity at another meeting to tell you about Jerome’s case in a more systematic fashion and to speak of its positive evolution. For today I limit myself to the central theme of death formulated in the “you will live until dead.” I will close my case with this *desire* to find the possibility of utilizing all these possibilities.

With these words Jerome proposes the category of the possible to our analytic experience, and on that basis I will formulate the notion that the *obsessional structure can be conceived of as the repeated refusal of the possibility of one’s own death*.

This refusal is equivalent to a falsely anticipated acceptance that would make the one who supports it into something already finished.

This is surely the place to look at our epigraph again (“above all, obsessionals need the possibility of death to resolve their conflicts”) and to understand it against the backdrop of another of Freud’s reflections. “Our unconscious does not believe in the possibility of its own death.” Freud adds a remark we will return to, namely, that the *unconscious does not know negation*.

Finally, this would be the occasion to meditate in Heideggerian terms on “our possibility, absolutely own, unconditional, insurmountable,” precisely the possibility of “the impossibility of existence as such,” which can be summarized in these words: “The possibility of my death reveals to me my possible impossibility and even the possible impossibility of all human existence in general.”

Perhaps you think that with these words we are leaving the realm of sound clinical work. It is . . . possible. I would simply hope that this brief glimpse will introduce you to the true dimension of the possible and of death for the obsessional.

For the moment I can do no better than to resituate the problem we confront. We know that through symptoms, questions are posed.

I will compare Jerome’s dream with the fantasy of Isabelle, who is a hysteric. An anguishing, almost unbearable question emerges for Isabelle at the limit of a feeling of depersonalization through a strange and invading coenesthetic experience. She is like a ribbon of colored paper, like the ribbons at last night’s party

that she unrolled into a garland while she was throwing confetti. Instead of unrolling a disk of ribbon, someone pressed its center, and it became a fragile cone or crater that now moves as though advancing and retracting. Isabelle is submerged in her anxiety. An evening's ribbon, fragile colored paper, poses, through its inner hollow or its outer form, Isabelle's question.

Jerome is very different. His wrappings are his mummy. When he was four, while hiding himself at his mother's breast, he said to her, "Call me 'my pet.'"⁷ Call me "my pet" and I will be happy, and to make "my pet's" happiness last, he became dead as my pet and as mummy.

Certainly, everyone knows that the mummy, in the dictionary of dreams, can also signify "penis" and can evoke the image of the bandaged organ of a late circumcision. I had previously found this sense in the analysis of Victor, a hysteric whose father lived his last months in a plaster cast. Victor was, at the age of seven, circumcised at the same time as his brother, under the eyes of his mother, an inconsolable widow.

I do not think that Jerome's mummy, the one in whose wrappings he tries to contain the waves of his anxiety, is equivalent to Victor's bandaged organ or that either of them is equivalent to Isabelle's ribbon.

The question Isabelle poses, through the inner hollow or the outer form, while spreading out her anxiety, can be formulated in our sober language: *am I a man or a woman?*

The question Jerome poses, while containing his fright as well as he can between the marble statue and the formless liquid, can be articulated: *am I dead or alive?*

I think you can see that while Isabelle speaks of her sexuality, Jerome speaks of his existence. This is the way that J. Lacan has defined the questions of the hysteric and the obsessional neurotic. We have in the mouths of Isabelle and Jerome two great questions that many other patients have asked: am I man or woman? am I subject or object?

These are questions, or if you prefer, *symptoms*. At the beginning of *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, Freud tells us: "The main characteristic of the formation of symptoms has long since been studied and, I hope, established beyond dispute. The symptom is a sign of and a substitute for a [drive] satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; . . ."⁸

What are the drives that have remained unsatisfied?

7. [In French "my pet" (*ma mie*) is almost a homophone of "mummy" (*momie*).]

8. Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), S.E. 20, p. 91.

After long hesitations and vacillations we have decided to assume the existence of only two basic [drives], Eros and the destructive [drive]. . . . The aim of the first of these is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus. . . ; the aim of the second is, on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things. In the case of the destructive [drive] we may suppose that its final aim is to lead what is living into an inorganic state. For this reason we call it the death [drive].

I am quoting Freud from the *Outline*; he continues:

The analogy of our two basic [drives] extends from the sphere of living things to the pair of opposing forces—attraction and repulsion—which rule in the inorganic world, and he adds in a footnote, this picture of the basic forces or [drives] which still arouses so much opposition among analysts was already familiar to the philosopher Empedocles of Acragas.⁹

I have quoted you this text of 1938 in preference to others more Freudian, dating from 1920 and 1921, because it bears the mark of a resolve that eighteen years of struggle against so many analysts could only strengthen.

The history of psychoanalysis shows this struggle. Freud said, "There is no difficulty in finding a representative of Eros; but we must be grateful that we can find a representative of the elusive death [drive] in the [drive] of destruction, to which hate points the way."¹⁰

It seems to me that this is precisely where Jerome comes to help us gain a more or less concrete idea of the death drive and the dynamics of obsessional neurosis.

When Jerome amuses himself by making himself into a corpse, when he isolates and protects himself, when he annuls or fragments himself into a collection of members or bones, does he not show us this force that tends toward the stability of the inorganic, represented by the marble statue or, less surely, by "my pet mummy"? There is no need for a greater unity than this, since as a piece of stone, he will be conserved.

Jerome sees himself as a statue or a mummy because he wants to endure and even to be eternal. Time is like a landscape for him, like the one he contemplated during his vacation. He does not really see it, but he does rejoice when he sees the photo he has taken. He does not live in the present, and continually

9. Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940 [1938]), S.E. 23, pp. 148–49.

10. Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), S.E. 19, p. 42.

says so. What he does is to *mark time*. In this context you will understand that the past is easier to handle than a future that hardly ever exists as such. Jerome is convinced that his death will not arrest clock time, and that is what matters for him. He has a truly spatialized time that keeps life suspended or framed. Within this time, death is the marker of a frontier that has virtually already been attained.

The patient's eternal loves, stronger than death, are also enclosed in this space. How can we not mention in this context the religious attitude that resembles obsessional neurosis in more than one way?

Fear of death is their common horizon. If Freud is especially insistent on this point in *Totem and Taboo*, on the "Thou shalt not kill" as responding to some "natural" desire, we can consider that the two ways of accommodating death, that of the obsessional and that of religion, make it the end of a stage of an adventure that must be pursued in the beyond.

The clock time of Jerome's life is filled. All that remains is for him to finish the work that has accumulated; this does not leave him any free time. Like someone who sees his end approaching, Jerome has to put his life in order over and over again. This spatialized, rigorously ordered world sustains, extends, supports, and constitutes Jerome's body—as the pyramids contain mummies. He has many times told us as much unambiguously. And I am convinced that this spatialization of time, this *freezing of becoming*, is in part the work of the death drive. You will understand that in such an atmosphere the processes of identification acquire a sort of corpselike rigidity, with an animation that can only come from a perpetual play of mirrors.

One detail is striking here. Jerome, who lives in a great necropolis and passes his time measuring and ordering the living things he encounters, has one great preoccupation: he wants to bring life back into religious practices. He struggles against the sclerosis of part of the clergy; he participates in the movement to renew the liturgy and militates for these beliefs politically. It is important to make others live and draw some profit for himself by proxy, as a puppeteer would, to use his words.

Some are still surprised that the analysis of an obsessional neurotic takes such a long time. How could it be otherwise for those who are already in the eternity of perpetual motion?

You know how much this concern for perpetual motion touches the heart of the obsessional; it would be pleasant for us to stop there, but I prefer for the moment to take you through one of the subterranean secret passages that lead to the heart of the pyramid.

I told you that Jerome was putting his life in order; his analysis, according to

him, was supposed to help him finally to arrange his affairs. But there is one question that has troubled him since he was ten. At this time he was afraid he would die in his sleep and tried to imagine how the world would continue to turn without him. This was the occasion for interminable, deliciously anguishing fantasies. But another question added itself to his daydreams: *and if I had never been born?*

If I had never been born, if I had never taken form and body, solidity and consistency, if I had remained merely an unsatisfied desire, a formless liquid. . . ? With this question, anxiety pressed upon him and vertigo seized him; it was difficult for him to pursue the representation of a world into which he had never been born. But, he asked himself suddenly, have I really been born? Am I really alive?

There again we are at the doorstep of the labyrinth, at the entrance of the pyramid. Or else, to use a more recent image, Jerome is like a general who knows perfectly the layout of the city he has under siege, the city he must take. He knows it all, all that he must do to succeed. . . but he remains immobile like a statue. Thus the death drive stops a general and prevents him from *act-tacking*.

Jerome's fundamental question and the "comic" anxiety that accompanies it permit us to reformulate the obsessional's question in a more lively light, *to be or not to be*.

Jerome was not a general, but more a second lieutenant, yet he was a good soldier. He had authority, he understood his men—a little too well, perhaps—and he paid with his own person. He was an excellent captive for five years and never thought of escaping. He organized lectures, put on shows, and was fully alive.

But one day, in a great disorder, Jerome was freed, and for a time he wandered on the road looking for an organized center. There he had a terrifying encounter. On the same road, walking from the other direction, *a man* came to meet him; he had a military air, with a composite uniform that designated him as neither friend nor foe. . . Jerome had some food and a gun; the other man had the same. Jerome was thinking very quickly, as if in a whirlpool; he slowed down, stopped for a second, started up again; the other approached, he also seemed to hesitate. Around them the countryside was deserted. The other's face was bearded; is he human? They were barely five yards from each other, and the other opened his mouth: he was a German and he was in hiding. Good, he wants nothing. Each continued his journey. Now they were back to back, and Jerome was transfixed by his fright. He thought, Surely he will shoot me to prevent me from turning him in, to take my clothing, my food. He dared neither to turn around nor to run. . . He waited and walked. . .

Thus Jerome encountered a man alone.

He had many dreams about this incident. He found himself faced with a great hairy brute who got on his nerves by not paying attention. They were going to fight. They agreed to a fight to the death, but . . . it was for the fun of it. It's all right, he said to another German who threatened him with his gun. It's all right if you kill me, but be nice about it, don't get angry. And talking about another, similar incident, he specified, It wasn't his weapon that scared me but the angry expression on his face.

On this road Jerome discovered that he was alone, without protection, that he had not been able to bring his tomb along.

If it is horrible to see a corpse liquefy in an open coffin, it is no less frightening for Jerome to see a living man when he himself is outside his tomb.

It is perhaps not necessary for me to tell you that I was never able to lead Jerome into that open field where he did not speak from the grave but truly kept silent!

I think we have here the beginnings of a theory of the relation of the obsessional with his counterpart. For the time being we can summarize it with a few images. Here are three typical situations that can sometimes guide our practice.

First, Jerome's speech is always "deferred"—this is not his expression—from inside his pyramid. It is useless to answer him "directly," he can only receive what we say if it is deferred.

Second, Jerome transforms you into a dead tree trunk, he opens the boards of his coffin and speaks to you—but only if you play dead. If you speak, the prison closes up again.

Third, you encounter each other face to face because by accident he has forgotten to close up his prison after you have responded (as in the preceding instance). Even in this situation, it is useless for you to exert yourself, for him it is "for fun," not "for real."

If these images are too simple, I will attenuate their overly rigorous quality with another dream in which Jerome condensed his question. This is also an old nightmare; he kills someone by holding him affectionately by the neck and beating his skull in. But the victim does not die, and when he is in pretty bad shape, he asks to live. . . . Is it too late?

Our technical rules can often be formulated in pictures like this. Under the pretext of talking about technique, I would remind you also of the fantasy of the crocodile that I mentioned above. This permits me to say that practically, and in the concrete experience of the session, if the obsessional wants to be dead, the analyst, as Lacan recalls in his discourse at Vienna ("The Freudian Thing"),

must himself play dead. In so doing and in knowing what he is doing, he uses the correct technique with the obsessional. This technique permits the patient to raise the cover of his tomb ever so slightly and *to risk an eye before risking a word*.

It is time to come to the point and to reconsider our discourse one last time before it slides into the abyss of reflective silence, to flourish or to be dissolved.

But in fact, to come to what point? That of neglected problems or of questions we have opened?

I have led you on a visit of our construction site and have told some stories about obsessionals. I have spoken of death, time, possibility, and negation. You have seen crocodiles, mummies, pyramids, and soaking fetuses.

Perhaps it was necessary or perhaps it was a sacrilege to lift the veil that Freud talks about, which covers death with silence.

Let us leave the disorder of the theater wings and stop for a while on the other side of the stage, on the side of the audience.

Let us lower the curtain.

And now, waiting for it to rise again on the show that we promised, which you have not seen, we will draw on its canvas the image of that which is being prepared on the other side, a kind of allegory that summarizes the drama being rehearsed. . . . Imagine what we have painted: *Oedipus, at the crossroads, plays the part of the sphinx*.