

**PSYCHOANALYTICAL  
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the European School of Psychoanalysis**

***FANTASY AND  
CASTRATION***

# PSYCHOANALYTICAL NOTEBOOKS

A biannual publication of the London Circle of  
the European School of Psychoanalysis

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## CONTENTS

Editorial		5
<b>LACANIAN ORIENTATION</b>		
Jacques-Alain Miller	<i>The Sinthome, a Mixture of Symptom and Fantasy</i>	9
<b>ON FANTASY</b>		
Eric Laurent	<i>Feminine Positions of Being</i>	33
Pierre Naveau	<i>To Let Oneself be Maltreated: Event and Fantasy</i>	59
<b>THE CLINIC AND CASTRATION</b>		
Pierre Skriabine	<i>Aporias of a Sacrifice Accomplished</i>	71
Catherine Bonningue	<i>Family Secret and Castration</i>	81
Jean-Luc Monnier	<i>The Act of the Cut</i>	89
<b>THE SUPEREGO AND THE LETTER</b>		
Bogdan Wolf	<i>Heidegger's Voice and the Superego</i>	95
Sophie Marret	<i>Lewis Carroll: the Symbol and the Letter</i>	109
Penny Georgiou	<i>Lacan's Hamlet</i>	133
Previous issues		144

## THE CLINIC AND CASTRATION

# APORIAS OF A SACRIFICE ACCOMPLISHED

**Pierre Skriabine**

The neurotic subject necessarily entangles himself in his relation to the phallus. He gets caught up in it so thoroughly that he makes himself at one and the same time the author and the actor of a structural historiette — bound to be comical since it concerns the phallus — which presents itself as *nonsense*.

Lacan has isolated the frame of this *nonsense* of the neurotic in some brilliant paragraphs which conclude *The Subversion of the Subject*.<sup>1</sup> There he unveils the fundamental confusion which is that of the neurotic before negation and which leads him to become frozen in an inextricable impasse in relation to castration. He requires the time of an analysis to have the chance to disentangle the constitutive stages, before he consents at last to drop the illusion with which he sustained himself.

We will examine here, in the light of Lacan's indications, the logical structure of this impasse that the neurotic constructs confronted with his castration, having underlined the structural aporia of castration, as evaluated by Lacan in his teachings at the beginning of the 70's.

### ***First aporia: the bifidity of castration***

We recall first the lacanian reformulation of the freudian concept of castration.

There cannot be a subject without lack, without his very existence, in so far as it is correlative by its nature as effect of the signifier, being paid for by an irreducible loss. The fact that, by the process of symbolisation which operates the taking up of the body in the signifier, this body finds itself emptied of pri-

mordial *jouissance*, the *jouissance* of the Thing: the signifier interposes, screens. Access to the Thing, to the referent, becomes irremediably impossible. That is castration: there is no inscription in language, in the 'human world', there is no subject but at the price of a loss, that of immediate relation, in other words without the intermediation of the signifier, to the Thing itself. We recognise there a structural necessity.

This operation is however not without remainder: the remainder of *jouissance* which subsists in the margins, at the borders of the cut body, mortified by the signifier and thus having become a symbolic body.

The result is a subject divided by the signifier, a barred subject who can only be represented by a signifier for another signifier. This subject, at a stroke, lacks structurally the signifier which names him. This empty subject also lacks the being that would ballast him. This subject, lacking being and signifier, is from now on caught up in a *jouissance* subjected to the signifier.

"Castration is the real operation introduced by the incidence of the signifier whatever that might be, into the sexual relation",<sup>2</sup> Lacan notes in 1970 in *L'Envers de la psychoanalyse*. Being taken up in language displaces biological sexuality towards the signifier, organising it in relation to a unique referent, the phallus, male organ passed to the rank of signifier. Accordingly it is castration which is the operation that institutes the symbolic phallus and installs its function.

Its correlative is the inexistence of the sexual relation: the effect of language on the living is to cast *jouissance* into a *ready made* instrument, the signifier, and from then on the sole *jouissance* permitted must either bow before the pre-eminence of the phallus in the forms of phallic *jouissance*, *jouissance* of speech, or co-ordinate itself with the remainder left over by the signifying operation, but remains no less marked by this operation, in other words, the object *a*, *jouissance* which is, as Lacan emphasises in *Encore*,<sup>3</sup> a-sexual. Would-be sexual *Jouissance* is ren-

dered inaccessible by language, fundamentally blocked, banished beneath the statute of *jouissance* barred to one who speaks.

What remains for the subject is phallic *jouissance*, this 'other satisfaction, the satisfaction of speech',<sup>4</sup> which is fundamentally *jouissance* of the organ, "which is to say", Lacan also notes in *Encore*, "that it does not relate to the Other as such"<sup>5</sup> — the Other here being the Other sex. It therefore concerns fundamentally an autarkical *jouissance* that Lacan can accordingly designate the '*jouissance* of the idiot'.

Structural incompatibility, therefore, between phallic functioning and sexual *jouissance*. Also Lacan stresses that "It is in so far as the phallic function does not function — that it is a 'saying no' to phallic primacy — that the sexual relation has a chance"<sup>6</sup> — or at least that this relation might be, on the horizon, supposable. Thus the speaking being will no longer have access to the Other sex, in other words, to a hypothetical sexual *jouissance*, except by what survives as a fault, as a de-completion of this process of passage to the sexual obliged to pass through the defiles of the signifier. "*Jouissance* that could be called sexual, which would not be of a semblant of the sexual", Lacan notes again, "this is marked by the index [...] of castration".<sup>7</sup>

In other words, castration works here as a 'saying no' to the pre-eminence of the phallic semblant.

Such is the apparent aporia, apparent bifidity of castration.

On one hand it objects to the pre-eminence of the phallus, and Lacan formulates it on this side under the double form of exception and of 'not-all'.

On the other hand it signifies simultaneously that each speaking being is submitted to the phallic function and that his *jouissance* passes over to the riddle of the signifier. *Jouissance* is thus organised around the phallus, which implies that sexual *jouissance* be, because of this, structurally flawed and here we

find the inaugural loss correlative to the take up in language. Lacan formulates this rule of the pre-eminence of the phallus under the forms of 'for all' and 'one by one'.

These two apparently contradictory faces of castration are none the less bound together as are the tables of sexuation: an inaugural 'No' to the phallus has to be formulated in order to formulate the pre-eminence of its function.

We note here, concerning this question of *jouissance*, the counterpoint articulation indicated by the bifidity of the superego: simultaneously demanding the renunciation of *jouissance* in so far as it is drive *jouissance*, and push-to-*jouissance* from the moment when this can be separated from the drive, and that it no longer presents itself except as a *jouissance* to plug castration. The imperative of superego *jouissance*, "Enjoy!" the renunciation of *jouissance*" expresses the paradigm.

It is this gluttony of the superego, following Lacan's term, that the neurotic lends to the Other as demand for sacrifice and will to *jouissance* in relation to it.

### **Second aporia: The nonsense of the neurotic**

Lacan indicates at several points, notably in *L'Etourdit*,<sup>8</sup> that it is the hole that structures. Lack is in fact necessary to the subject for him to sustain himself in the registers of real, symbolic and imaginary which constitute his reality as speaking being. This lack consented to as the price of speech, the subject is attached to it: it represents effectively the counterpoint of his choice of alienation, of his original *Bejahung* concerning the reality of castration.

Thus Lacan writes in *The Subversion of the Subject*, castration, as forced choice of the symbolic, as refusal of would-be sexual *jouissance*, and also as imaginary function — all this the neurotic has suffered from the start. Nevertheless he denies it, "but despite appearances he is attached to this castration".<sup>9</sup>

Effectively the neurotic subject reaps a triple benefit from

castration: at the symbolic level he obtains in exchange access to language, to the Law of desire and to the universe of discourse; on the imaginary plane, the illusions of meaning, the mirages of fantasy, the delights of the games of imposing presence and of power are offered to him in return for consented loss; and for what there is of *jouissance*, the path without history of phallic *jouissance* ready to be matched to the signifier is found wide open in front of him. Better still, in what remains of the trick by which castration has operated the substitution of phallic *jouissance* for a hypothetical sexual *jouissance*, in this remainder the subject founds and finds his irreducible difference, otherwise called his symptom. To all these marvels castration is his right of entry. Thus effectively he is attached to it. But nevertheless he denies it.

There is in fact a price to pay, of which the neurotic wants to know nothing. From the moment when he consents to castration, the subject, as Lacan points out, is Name-less,\* caught in an infinite quest, in the metonymy of his identifications, for the missing signifier, the one which could at last name him. The privileged form of his "I don't want to know anything about it" is sometimes, as Lacan has equally underlined, the cult of the strong ego with which the neurotic tries to cover his subjective misery and the insufficiency of his own name, which can push him for example to want to make himself a name at any price. But the subject can just as soon on the contrary find a way to sustain himself by putting forward his 'Name-less'.

Castration puts into play a narcissistic wound for the neurotic that imaginary threat and frustration focussed on the penis incarnate in the first place. The forms that the subject finds to ward off this insupportable are also multiple. Sometimes masking the libidinal attainment by masquerade or social games, sometimes making himself the insignia of his narcissistic fall,

\* *Sans-Nom* (nameless) is homophonic with *son nom* (his-name). The double entendre in the French term is lost in English [TN].

the neurotic subject has also invented a socialised collective rite which allows him to operate the passage from this imaginary castration to symbolic castration: the real subtraction, in the symbolic operation of circumcision, of the pound of flesh taken from the body and offered to the *jouissance* of the Other is the paradigm, transforming imaginary loss suffered into a sacrifice with consent.

Castration is also the renunciation of the *jouissance* of the Thing, implying the emptying of a *jouissance* linked with being to the profit of a *jouissance* coupled to language. As Lacan notes, the neurotic knows himself well in the end as “what there is that is the most superficial to make exist, a lack-of-being or a ‘too-much’.”<sup>10</sup> But he finds a way to recover this bit of being in what retains the trace and constitutes the particular mark for him of this operation of substitution of *jouissances* realised by the signifier. It is effectively the singular way in which, for each one, something has failed in his inscription in language which, for him, constitutes this irreducible remainder, which is what for the subject is most his own, in other words his difference with which he can at last, in the register of the object, come to identify himself. This difference, this irreducible remainder to which the subject is attached as to the apple of his eye — but without knowing it — it is this that analysis allows him to circumscribe and to know as the correlative of his castration.

The negation, the *Verneinung*, the manoeuvre proper to the neurotic and the mark of the after-effects of his inaugural ‘saying yes’ to castration, unveils its economic foundation through these remarks. We remember that Freud strongly emphasised the importance of the economic aspect in psychic processes. The neurotic is well aware of all the benefits he gains from castration and is resolutely attached to it. But he wants to believe that he has lost nothing in exchange. It is even easier in fact for the subject to accept the loss implied by his castration, precisely because he denies it. According to the popular expression: he

wants the butter and the money for the butter; at least he satisfies himself with the belief that he has both. And he does precisely believe it and there is the root of his logical error. Such is the somewhat sordid foundation of his position.

To resume the neurotic’s thought processes and logical slips:

- 1) He has consented to castration, to the structural loss that constitutes the price of his entry into language, and basically he knows very well the consequences of this choice, albeit a forced one.
- 2) This loss, with the benefits that it carries, its what he has; and he is absolutely attached to it.
- 3) Retrospectively he denies the reality of this loss (*Verneinung*) and protects himself from it with his “I don’t want to know anything about it”, coming to believe in having lost nothing and misunderstanding that castration is something to which he has already submitted. In this manoeuvre we find his first error.
- 4) The corollary, since he denies the loss to which he already consented, is in that he finds himself indebted to the Other for the tribute that he would have omitted to pay: there is the second logical slippage of neurotic, who, according to Lacan, now believes that the Other wants his castration. He erects in this way a superegoic, therefore enjoying, Other who demands of him the sacrifice of what he has, that is, his castration.
- 5) To sacrifice his castration is to sacrifice his difference, as Lacan points out. To give his loss to the Other is for the subject to make a loss of himself, a fall of *jouissance* constituting an object *a* for the Other, susceptible to serving the *jouissance* of the Other.
- 6) The Other is therefore constituted straight away by the neurotic as an Other who surely exists and enjoys as such what the subject gives up to its greed. But Lacan reminds us in *The*

*Subversion of the Subject*, that the Other does not exist; the Other with which the neurotic — who certainly doesn't perceive it — has to do, is itself barred. It also lacks. There resides the neurotic's third deception, not to see that the Other only exists marked by lack — and therefore as Other of desire. Not recognising this, Lacan insists, the subject can only realise himself as object submitted to the will of the Other or resisting it beneath the banner of the hopeless narcissism of the lost Cause.

Tragic impasse, but also fabulous *nonsense*: "to be summoned to give what he no longer has to an Other who demands nothing from him and who, in addition, doesn't exist" — such is the account of the exploit to which the neurotic subject binds himself who, when a perspective without obstacles is offered, hurries to build the labyrinth in which he will lose himself and be stuck.

Echoing the famous aphorism of the knife without a blade of which the sleeve is missing, the Rat Man fabricated for himself a false debt impossible to repay. The neurotic uses a relation to castration which recalls another well known British *nonsense*: a traveller gets off the train feeling unwell because he was not sitting facing the direction of the train. To the friends who came to welcome him, who said that he should have asked a passenger sitting opposite to change places with him, since no one would have minded, the unhappy man objected that that was exactly the problem since none of the seats facing him was occupied.

This logical impasse is simply the effect of the snare to which the neurotic ties himself, and in which neurosis precisely consists: a logical fault. The dignity of the neurotic subject, indefatigable Sisypus, consists in the treatment of exhausting, repetition after repetition, the aporias in which he is enmeshed, until the surprise of a crossing makes him realise at last the inanity and the comedy of the position he had held and which,

again without his knowing it, has just fallen.

Translated by Heather Menzies

1. J. Lacan, *Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire* in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan, Routledge, London, 1977, p. 323-4 [p.826-7].
2. J. Lacan, *Le Seminaire XVII: L'Envers de la psychanalyse*, Seuil, Paris, 1991 p.149.
3. J. Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore*, trans. B. Fink, Norton, London, 1998, p. 127.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.
6. J. Lacan, *Le savoir du psychanalyste, Entretiens de Sainte-Anne* (1971-72) lesson of January 6<sup>th</sup> 1972, unpublished. Also *Seminar XX: Encore op. cit.* p. 72.
7. *Ibid.*
8. J. Lacan, *L'Etourdit* in *Scilicet* No 4, Seuil, Paris, 1973 p. 40.
9. J. Lacan, *Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire* in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan, Routledge, London, 1977, p. 323-4 [p.826-7].
10. *Ibid.* It is only in this way that the paths of desire would be able to open themselves for him in analysis.

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