

Signifiers in the Real: from Schreber to the Wolf Man

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How and where does the real disclose itself in the experience of psychosis? I raise the question because it is very much at stake in the question of the real unconscious, this enigmatic concept bequeathed to us by Lacan in his last written document. I have chosen to return to the early period of his teaching and commence with a brief quotation from *Seminar V, Formations of the Unconscious*:

Hallucinations are phenomena *structured* at the level of signifiers. One cannot, not even for an instant, think about the *organization* of these hallucinations without seeing that the first thing to be emphasized in the phenomenon is that it's a phenomenon of signifiers. . . .

. . . what characterizes the hallucinatory satisfaction of desire is that it is *formed* in the domain of signifiers and that, as such, it implies a locus of the Other. . . . [N]ot necessarily an Other [but] a locus of the Other, insofar as it is necessary for the position of the instance [agency] of signifiers (SV, 221).

These comments were made by Lacan early 1958 when he was writing his Schreber paper that would be published in vol. 4 of *La Psychanalyse* in 1959.

I invite you to note carefully what Lacan is saying. He is stressing that the signifier gives hallucinations their form, their organisation, their structure. He is not making a claim about the *content* of hallucinations (much of which is imaginary), but only about the *form* in which that content is presented; and he is observing that this form is structured by signifiers. The form of hallucinations is structured by the signifier. First point.

Second point: what is foreclosed from the symbolic reappears in the real. Now, what is *foreclosed* from the symbolic cannot have the *structure* of the symbolic. And since hallucinations are the archetypal manner in which what is foreclosed reappears in the real, hallucinations cannot have the structure of the symbolic.

I hope you can see the dilemma. On the one hand, the content of hallucinations is structured by the symbolic. On the other, because what reappears in hallucinations has been foreclosed from the symbolic, it simply obvious that it cannot have the structure of the symbolic. I would like to show that this is a dilemma in appearance only.

As we know, the structure of the symbolic is given by the laws of the signifier, which are primarily condensation and displacement, and they give shape or structure to the return of the repressed in formations of the unconscious: dreams, slips, jokes and so on and so on. None of these formations of the unconscious manifest themselves in psychosis.

Nevertheless, what paranoid psychosis makes apparent, and it is a point that Lacan often repeats, is that the structure of the real is determined by the signifier. This is particularly apparent in discussions of Schreber, where we never encounter the real except as structured by the signifier. As Lacan so convincingly demonstrates, while there is no quilting (*capitonnage*) between signifier and signifier, nevertheless the code consists of messages about the code (Schreber's *Grundsprache*), on the one hand, and messages are reduced to what in the code indicates the message, on the other. While specific to psychosis, these phenomena nevertheless remain phenomena of signifiers. In other words, the real of Schreber's hallucinations is structured by the signifier. And this is very much Lacan's point.

Moreover, a delusion in paranoid psychosis is the product of a “long and painful . . . discursive organisation” of elementary phenomena. And while elementary phenomena are *pre-signifying*, as Lacan says, they are pre-signifying *signifiers*, since elementary phenomena are nothing but signifiers in the real.

We also know that whereas elementary phenomena are pre-signifying, the delusion that is encountered in paranoid psychosis is the end result of a long and painful *discursive* process. As such, it must necessarily pass via the Other. Even if this Other is a depleted Other from which the signifier the Name-of-the-Father has been foreclosed, the construction of a delusion is nevertheless the result of a passage via the symbolic Other.

In other words, in the evolution of a paranoid delusion, what exists in the real comes to be organized in a way in which the structure of signifiers is always discernible. Or, in other words again, the paranoid delusion of a Schreber is a *symbolised real*.

Conclusion: no encounter with the real unmediated by the symbolic is any more possible in psychosis than in neurosis.

This reasoning is entirely consistent with a comment by Lacan later in *Seminar V*:

The forms of psychosis from the most benign to the extreme state of dissolution present us with a pure and simple discourse of the Other (SV, 481)

And yet, the phenomena that “reappear in the real” have been rejected from the symbolic and, at least in their raw state, are not regulated by the laws of the signifier.

So, where do we find these phenomena in their “raw state”? Is there anywhere where the signifier in the real is presented to us in non-discursive form? Luckily, there is. The Wolf Man’s hallucination as a child is a case in point, and it is discussed in “Response to Jean Hyppolite” and more recently brought to our attention by JA Miller. It is a non-psychotic hallucination, as Lacan says. It might be true that in later life the Wolf Man is psychotic, but there is no psychosis present when this hallucination occurs off and on and off during his sixth year (Lacan, incorrectly, says his fifth).

The Wolf Man’s childhood hallucination is a non-psychotic hallucination, as I say, but the really valuable thing about it is that it is a hallucination unmediated by the symbolic. And so what we see is the following four features: its appearance is erratic; it is “lawless” or, better, “unlawlike” (i.e. not regulated by the laws of language) in its occurrence; it cannot be communicated; and it is not located in reality space.

The “massively symbolic” content of the hallucination does not exist for the subject. Since castration is foreclosed, he remains fixated on an *imaginary* feminine position. This means that he has no access to any meaning that his hallucination, coming to him from the real, might carry with respect to castration.

This is an indication that the signifiers that reappear in the real in their “raw state” lack the symbolic articulations that interweave them with other signifiers to constitute a world. We could put it like this. When a signifier is regulated by metaphor and metonymy, it is “in the symbolic”; when a signifier appears as an enigma, it is a signifier in the real. And we now see an affinity between the Wolf Man’s solipsistic isolation and the enigma Schreber encounters at the time of the triggering of his psychosis. In both cases, the signifier in the real is a raw and brute phenomenon, profoundly enigmatic in its status.

I propose that this is how to reconcile the thesis that what is foreclosed from the symbolic reappears in the real with the claim that hallucinations are structured by the symbolic. The moment of mute incommunicability (he cannot speak of it to his nanny) and the enigma that confuses Schreber are moments of encounter with the signifier in the real.