

Death and Resurrection of the Hysteric

The hysteric, through whom Freud found, with the “talking cure”, the path to the analytical cure, is dead. Banished from the DSM’s psychiatric categories, by virtue of nominalism there are no more hysterics today.

The return by way of the epidemic

And yet, as we could see in a recent American press article published in *Courrier International*, after 9/11 and the rumors about terrorists spreading anthrax, young people – especially young women – teenagers in American colleges, were plagued with itching and rashes for which no medical cause could be found. The hysteric, a subject suppressed by prevailing mental health policies, has come back by way of massive epidemics – we could add to this kind of epidemic the increasingly frequent current eating disorders. This form of epidemic in the hysteric shows the fundamental role of identification that defines, as Freud showed so precisely, the essential way the hysteric functions.

The fact that these are physical symptoms only underlines the location proper to the return of the repressed in the hysteric. So, far from being dead, the hysteric is very much alive. The political dimension that has always accompanied the hysteric, is more present than ever: from the singular act of defying the lie of bourgeois morality, the hysteric has moved, thanks to being an object of repression, in the direction of planetary truth. She can be responding to a consumerist craze through an impressive forced weight-loss born from a desire to be thin, or she can be titillating the worry about sanitary security specific to developed societies.

What has become of the hysteric in the analytical field opened by Freud? The study days of the *École de la Cause Freudienne* in 2001, where we saw psychoanalysts publicly discuss cases, showed that something is missing: this category of differential diagnosis, essential to the clinical discussion of neurosis, seems to have retreated – at least in discourse. The decline of hysteria? What is not yet clearly apparent in our work in the Lacanian orientation has already become dominant in the IPA, where the hysteric seems obsolete. Yet, references to hysteria remained important for Lacan, even in his last teachings. Why?

Firstly because most of Lacan’s Seminars, like his *Écrits*, make of Freud’s hysteria cases, Dora or the Belle Bouchère, an essential part of the clinical practice, to the extent of producing a mathematical formula of the hysteric’s fantasy. After the turning point operated by the logic of sexualization and the borromean clinic, the hysteric continues to teach Lacan about psychoanalysis.

A radical and scandalous solution

The first determining element is the raising of hysteria to the category of a discourse. We know that Lacan modeled four discourses, among them the discourse of the hysteric, closely linked to analytical discourse.

This modification from a clinical category to a discourse is discussed by Lacan in his seminar *L'envers de la psychanalyse*; he reformulates the data of civilization's discontents in the light of the current events of the 1970s and the advances of his teachings. He reinterprets Freud's rapport with hysteria and what knowledge he was able to extract from it for psychoanalysis: the wound the hysteric feels from phallic deprivation cannot be compensated by the satisfaction that the carrier (of the phallus) could get from pacifying her. It is, on the contrary, revived by its presence in the form of the regret that causes this wound. It is from this point on that one understands that the hysteric symbolizes primary dissatisfaction¹. This is why she is a spokesperson for a radical solution: she chooses desire through dissatisfaction; and scandalous: she objects to the idea of happiness in the phallus, preferring to leave the object to someone else. Of course in this way she contributes to reinforcing what she denounces. In doing so, she reveals what is for her a truth: in speaking beings, the game of desire is based on phallic exclusion.

A specific jouissance of the lack

Hysterics taught psychoanalysis that all discourse only sustains itself from a position of jouissance, by manifesting itself in transference. Speech, insofar as it is a link, is a device of jouissance; that is the truth the hysteric discovers in psychoanalytical investigation. The discourse of the hysteric is ordered by a specific jouissance, that of lack. Freud extracts the master signifiers from the oedipal theory of psychoanalysis, but at the same time he encounters a question that stops him short: what does a woman want?

The hysteric's answer to this question is "a master over whom to reign" as Dora shows. But is what she wants what she desires? On this, Freud was deceived. Certainly, she wants a master and she is looking for an ideal father, but what she desires is to unveil his impotence in order to allow the triumph, that is to put in the place of truth, of knowledge about the master-father's impotence. The hysteric is the one who reveals the impotence of the signifier-master, his semblant, and at the same time she incarnates feminine jouissance as jouissance of being deprived by the mother, by the Other woman. These are the last two points brought to light by clinical practice with hysterics, women or men biologically speaking. On these two points precisely, Freud - as Lacan points out - does not follow these "Golden Mouths". He stops listening to them and puts in place of their words the Oedipus myth with the strength of the paternal function - which is not exactly what they are saying - and which is frankly opposed to the myth of Totem and Taboo.

The Lacanian orientation, on the contrary, in a radical way from the 70s on, does not shrink from the scandal of the hysteric's discourse that it prefers to the Freudian myth of the Father. The beyond of the Oedipus complex, in the logic of sexuation as well as in the borromean clinic of the sinthome, takes the hysteric literally, according to the interpretative principle "those are your words, not mine". To follow the logic of the hysteric's mode of jouissance implies sacrificing the dream of happiness through the phallus and the universality of the paternal meaning. Moving from the enunciation of the "all women"

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This has three consequences.

The *first* is to renew the definition of hysteria. On June 16th, 1971 in the Seminar "D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant", Lacan said: "To the question, what is a hysteric? The answer of the analyst's

1 J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XVII, L'envers de la psychanalyse*, Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 84.

discourse is “you’ll see”, you’ll see by watching where she takes us”. She pushes us to define the phallus as semblant and to approach the impossible of the sexual relation.

The *second*, clinical, is that this redefinition of hysteria, starting with the idea of discourse, permits passing beyond penis envy, the blocking point of those Freudian cures, which is only the meaning given by Freud to the desire unsatisfied by phallic meaning.

Because the hysteric is also capable of doing what Lacan calls the “all man”, that the “all man himself, through imagination”. The hysteric does not need an analysis for this. She does not expect to obtain this phallus from analytical treatment since, from the start she conceives of herself as castrated, because that is not without enjoyment. No, the result of analytical treatment for her is to leave the statement “all women” which is dearer to her than any partner, and which needs to be differentiated from “all the women” in order for her to become *a woman*, that is to say, in Lacan’s terms in June 9th, 1971 course, not to use the “not more than one of her being for all possible situations”. This is a fundamental acquisition that modifies the direction of the cure in analysis.

The *third* consequence is this new view of the feminine position, indicated negatively by the hysteric, who, in order to act as man, is not in a viril protest.

The denunciation of the “state-supported” sexual relation

The hysteric’s speech is one of protest: it served as support for the feminist protest movement but, more generally, it is a revolt against the law of symbolic exchange. This is why it can be considered as a model. All discourse that is ordered around an attempt to reduce the impossible of the sexual relation to master-signifiers, can give rise to the hysteric’s response; it tries to make her being known by establishing it outside the law, by equating herself to a sign of the limit of language. On May 19th, 1971, Lacan shows that as soon as the sexual rapport is, according to his own expression, “state-supported”, that is, as soon as one tries to contain it in master-signifiers, (which has the effect of revealing the fictional structure of truth) there comes an enunciation that makes evident the “marked deficiency of a certain kind of almost arbitrary fictitious promotion of the sexual rapport”.

The hysteric tries to make herself the subject of the letter of denunciation of this state-supported status. For a while this letter was written with her body in a theatrical way which was always striking. In this same lesson Lacan adds: “hysterics are those who *tell the truth* about the sexual relation. It is hard to imagine how psychoanalysis would have found its way without them”. But the advent of analytical discourse, in founding this truth on knowledge – that of the unconscious – made them relinquish the theatrical dimension that was their way of occupying the space that had been left empty of the sexual rapport. So today the sexual non-rapport does not shock anyone anymore, modern hysterics don’t use it any longer to tame the master. They use images instead.

This demonstration by Lacan permits us to delineate, and even to anticipate, the new political modalities of the hysteric’s discourse, as a model response to all forms of state support, to any appearance of new master-signifiers.

The real does not respond to the law of the father

Like the analyst, the hysteric only has the unconscious in order to consist. It is the common ground between the hysteric and the analyst, “the hysteric and me” as Lacan puts it, is that the unconscious of the hysteric

is sustained by love for the father when, after an analysis, the master-signifier unveils its link, not to the father but to the mode of enjoyment determined by the object. In other words, in hysteria, the symbolic includes the two other dimensions, which also happens in an analysis that requires a hysterization. But in order for an analysis to lead to the analytical discourse as such, it is necessary for the symbolic to lose this privilege, for the knotting of the three dimensions to be restored, for the imaginary and the real to no longer be included in “the practice of psychoanalysis itself”.

So, while the hysteric needs meaning in order not to put her unconscious in the position of the truth to which she sacrifices herself, psychoanalysis, paradoxically, objects, showing that meaning is always a mode of enjoyment, that the real does not answer to the law of the father and that the unconscious is not different from the conscious.

Dead, the hysteric? Certainly not. She has changed with the times and unveils a new politics that no longer consists of supporting the sexual rapport. But she only has the analyst as a partner worthy of her, who because he is not a master, escapes her design. That way he can reveal the value of the symptom, that is to say protesting a desire which is irreducible to the discourse of science on sex.

Translated by Francesca Pollock

The Clinic of Detail and Hysteria

In clinical practice, one necessarily has recourse to differential clinical diagnosis, – this is my thesis*. There is an advantage in speaking of hysteria relative to obsessional neurosis and speaking of obsessional neurosis relative to hysteria. Indeed, there is a dialectic between hysteria and obsessional neurosis that allows us to see that, for Lacan, there is a dialectic man/woman. There where Hegel invented the master slave dialectic, Freud added something new in considering that the dialectic must be re-thought, reformulated, re-conceptualized, from what I call the man/woman dialectic. This is what I would like to bring to the fore today, speaking more particularly about hysteria.

The clinical position

From the moment one draws support from a clinical case, on fragments of clinical cases, a question arises which concerns the way in which one speaks about it. When a psychoanalyst speaks of a clinical case, of fragments of a clinical case, the right way to speak about it is to put his own clinical position into question. In other words, an ethical problem is posed from the moment that one speaks about clinical aspects. And this ethical problem must be dealt with from the following – that the referent of the comments on these clinical aspects is not the patient, but the analyst.

In order to show what I wish to make patent, – that is to say, that Lacan chose to speak about hysteria from the point of view of the dialectic – and to say that *hysteria is a dialectic*, I will be taking as point of departure two clinical case fragments. I will then comment on the chapter in Seminar XVII, *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, in which Lacan speaks about the hysteric in relation to the man, of taking advantage of the man in some way, as if he were saying that it's not possible to speak about the position of a feminine subject except by means of the man, except with this tool. For Lacan, if hysteria corresponds to a dialectic, in other words to a contradiction, well, then the hysterical contradiction is not the same thing as the feminine contradiction. To make this patent, I will refer not only to the Seminar *L'envers de la psychanalyse* but also to a passage in "Radiophonie".

So, I am going to evoke, bring to the fore the problem that is posed, according to me, as soon as one speaks of clinical practice with the hysteric. In his text "The Signification of the Phallus"¹, Lacan, evoking, in his way, the war between men and women, highlights an essential difference between men and women when he affirms that for women there is a convergence on the same object between love and desire, whereas for men there is a divergence.

* Original French text established by Zoé Verhame-Bouillin and Marie-Hélène Doguet-Dziomba from P. Naveau's intervention at the E.C.F. on 7 February 2002. The original French text was re-read by the author.

1 J. Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus", *Écrits: A Selection*, Trans. Bruce Fink, Norton, New York, 2002, p. 279-280.

I propose to present two fragments of cases of feminine hysteria that are characterized, on the contrary, by the fact that there is a divergence between love and desire. This divergence can, relative to the masculine partner, be articulated in this way: “I love him but I don’t desire him”. I will show, as Lacan indicates in his “Introduction à l’édition allemande des *Écrits*”², that there is no meaning common [*sens commun*] to hysteria. We are concerned here with feminine subjects who both complain about their husband. They do not desire him, they question themselves about what they themselves call their frigidity and, at the same time, put in question the love they have for him. In this way, these two women both have the feeling of being enclosed in an impasse from which there is no way out. They live this disagreeable situation, one in war, and the other in betrayal.

I

The war between love and desire

The first patient goes as far as saying that this absence of desire for her husband constitutes, for her, a veritable torture both physical and psychic. She does not desire him, but she does not think about anything else. “This point of non-desire that I have come to”, she says, “is at the same time a point of non-return”. “A limit has really been reached”, she insists, “I can’t force myself to make love to him if I don’t feel like it”. She emphasizes this expression that carries a negation: “I don’t feel like it!” Her husband criticizes her for this – she does not desire him. But the criticisms that they address to each other are not situated on the same level. He criticizes her for not desiring him, she criticizes him for not loving her. They had a child together and they would really like to have another. This second child would be, were he to give it to her, the proof of love that she expects from him. It would be thanks to this child that she would be sure, she says, that he loves her. The proof of love is, she pointed out, the condition of love. In this respect, this is her torment, she is not sure that her husband loves her.

A dream comes to tell her that this child that she desires is, in fact, the child that her father didn’t give her. It is the child her father gave to his wife and not to her, his daughter. For in this dream, she takes the place of this other woman to whom her father gave a child. In this way, she usurps the envied place. She comments on this usurpation, affirming that the obstacle is the father, for it is he who, by not giving her what she demands, stands in the way of the satisfaction of her desire. Thus, the important thing for her is not that she wants to take the place of the other woman, but that it is to this other woman that the father gives something precious. It is by means of this shift of emphasis, which allows a kind of lie to be heard that she expresses her wish. The symptom of her life as a woman, that is to say, the bedrock that lies across her path, is the father that satisfies the other woman’s desire. Indeed, she describes her father as having the traits of a powerful man, a man who has had many women in his life and who, she knows this because he has confided in her on this point, is concerned about his virility.

From this, she draws the consequence that, in the eyes of her father, a woman is a woman only in the sexual act. A woman is only worth something for her father, she says, in so far as she is an object of possession, only if she reassures him of his virility, which he is not sure about. This rivalry between her and other women became even stronger from the moment when her father, getting carried away, said to her one day, she was then eighteen, “If you weren’t my daughter, you could’ve been my wife.” So the analyst intervened to make her notice that, having pronounced these surprising words, her father had given her a privileged place. She immediately retorted that these inappropriate words of her father showed that, for him, a woman is necessarily lowered to the rank of a pure sexual object, whether it be accessible or inaccessible.

2 J. Lacan, “Introduction à l’édition l’allemande des *Écrits*”, *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 2001, p. 557.

One day, however, her father is anxious and calls her on the telephone. He had just learnt that he was suffering from a serious illness and that this illness threatened to make him impotent. She exclaimed to herself that she at last had her revenge. Her father had fallen from high and had bitten the dust. His telephone call bothered her. He was asking her to reassure him. She replied to him that she couldn't do anything for him. This event, her father's illness, gave rise to a radical change for her. When her father was powerful and arrogant she hated him. But now that he was weak and impotent, touched right to the core of his virility, she loves him, as, for her, there is no alternative. It is she who says it like this, "It is either submission or domination." Either one is the master or one is the slave. The war between men and women takes, in this case, the form of a war between love and desire.

To accept to be an object of desire for a man is equivalent, for this patient, to submission. Thus, she refuses to be an object that one throws in the dustbin once one has made use of it. Her hatred of men drives her to refuse her husband. She fights with her body. Her body, she says, is the only weapon she has at her disposal. To refuse is to escape from her husband, to separate herself from him by making herself absolutely inaccessible. She says that she does not admire this man, that she is no longer attracted by him. What he is has no more value for her than what he has. She holds him in contempt. As she notes, his image has been smashed into a thousand pieces.

Thus, she puts her finger on the sore point of the inevitable misunderstanding, "He doesn't understand me, I don't understand him, we don't understand each other." The conflict between them is permanent, and she doesn't hesitate to provoke him. Here the analyst intervenes, "This is going to finish badly." She recognizes that she tries to corner her husband. Being such a coward, will he have the courage to leave her? Her husband, finding himself in this situation with no way out, should leave her. If he doesn't leave her, she says, it is because he loves her, that he is not ready to break the link between them. The paradox of this position of warrior is that she hates men all the more since she would like to have been one of them and have their attributes. She wants to deprive the man's desire for satisfaction because it is impossible for him to satisfy her own desire. She has revenge; it is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. She does not obtain *jouissance* by means of man's desire, since she refuses to go via this path, for she risks satisfying it. But she obtains *jouissance* from the negation of this desire.

The analyst intervenes, "For you, in fact, it is fundamentally a question of being a man." And between the lines: you want to be a man. The only thing that matters, indeed, for you is to be a warrior, to be the dominant male who seizes women by force like an object, who uses it, and who, after having used it, abandons it, like a piece of rubbish. "I don't want to be a man, I want to be a woman", she protests. She then reveals that the idea that she could write a letter to her father had come to mind, to tell him that she is unhappy because of him, because of what he is, because of what he said to her. The fact of having thought about writing this letter produced an effect on her. She said to her husband, "After all, I make you pay for someone else, you pay for my father, but you're not my father." To which her husband replied, "It's time you noticed, I'm happy to hear you say it."

At this juncture, their son left to go on holiday. She considers this an important point, since until then, her husband had always refused for their son to go on holiday without his parents. Here the analyst intervenes to say to the patient, "You're the father and your husband is the mother, that's why he doesn't manage to separate his son from his mother." This intervention of the analyst led to a violent reaction on the part of the patient. She threatened her husband, "If I happen to come across a man who attracts me, I'll leave you without a moment's hesitation."

The ungraspable object

Her husband then, in his own way, gets his own back. He says to her, to see what effect it would have, that he would like to have another child. She understood this to be a strategy that her husband had assembled to get around the problem of his impotence. She replied to him that she no longer considered the child he would give her as a gift, a sign of love, and that she had mourned this desired child. But she took her husband's clumsy maneuver as a declaration of love, "He loves me, I no longer doubt it."

However, she can only notice the damage the war between love and desire has provoked. She distanced herself from him, she is far from him, and their desires no longer meet. When he wants to, she doesn't, and when she wants to, he doesn't. She feels guilty for this missed encounter between their desires. Here the analyst intervenes, "If you feel guilty, it's because there is something you're not saying. If you're not happy, why don't you tell him? You speak about yourself like a *belle endormie*. You have to put your cards on the table. What are you waiting for to lay out frankly the problem of desire between you?" The patient replied to the analyst's intervention by saying, "So, what's he waiting for, to catch me?" Doesn't this astonishing reaction of the patient indicate how the jouissance of privation is linked to that drive which consists, for a subject, of slipping away, of making itself the ungraspable object? It would seem that the feminine subject is, hence, divided between two jouissances articulated to two variations of the position of precious object, one that consists in offering oneself and one that amounts to, in fact, refusing oneself. That which one would like to have and doesn't have, the inaccessible object, it is she, the patient.

II

The betrayal or the unpunished fault of the father

I am proposing a second clinical case fragment, this time placed, not under the sign of war, but of betrayal. This other feminine subject cheats on her husband, she has a lover who is younger than she. She thus discovers that she is not frigid, that she is able to obtain jouissance from the sexual act. It took a long time before she accepted to reveal to the analyst the existence of this affair. The analyst had to insist. She wanted to hide it from him.

The analyst had the feeling that the patient was keeping him at a distance, that she was not telling him what she was thinking. He told her, "What's not working is that you keep the analyst at a distance by not telling him what comes to mind." When she makes love with her husband, she says, she does not experience any jouissance and, because of this, she holds a grudge against him. He deprives her of this jouissance. After intercourse, she is obliged to masturbate and, in order to do so, has recourse to masturbatory fantasies. She gives two versions: in some, she is passive, in others she is active.

In the first version, she gives herself over to the caprice of many men, she is thus nothing more than a "piece of flesh." The formula of the fantasy is articulated in this way, "They get off on me, they do what they want to me." In the second version it is she who is active and takes charge.. She is there to give pleasure to men according to their wishes. The common trait between these two versions of the fantasy is that there is a man who orders what is to be done and who watches. The "gaze" plays a central role in her fantasies. The man who watches in this way satisfies the function of being the master of desire. The patient admits that her fantasies, which she cannot manage to do without, disgust her. She would like to be able to do without them, but she cannot. These fantasies, in which she is maltreated, beaten and lowered to the rank of servant of the master of desire, are thus linked to her husband's incapacity to make her orgasm. The

sexual partner's impotence is, henceforth, the condition of fantasmatic jouissance. In fact, she stages fantasies of staging.

The analyst interprets this solitude of jouissance that she wonders about, "In these fantasies, you lend your body to this staging, to the extent that", said the analyst, "the voice of a *Thy will be done* resonates." She loves her husband, she says, but she doesn't desire him. She would like to find peace at last, but she recognizes that she looks for war. She would like him to speak, but, as soon as he speaks, she cuts him off. What he says is not what she would like him to say to her. The misunderstanding is radical, the situation is cruel, they do not speak to each other any longer. She says the link between them is breaking up. So, she cheats on him.

The master of desire

She herself realizes that her lover is a poor young man who gets the satisfaction of stealing from her husband what is most precious to him – his wife. She says that she desires the virility of this young man. But, at the same time, the fact that he is stealing reveals that he cheats in the game played by three players. The fact that the patient herself asks the question of the lie with regard to her betrayal – What does this hide? Is she not lying to herself? Where can all this be leading? – and this has, as a consequence, that the analyst does not encourage her to pursue this path. She feels it and says to him, "In fact, you're asking me not to leave my husband." This "You're asking me not to leave my husband" must be emphasized. It is a demand for a demand, for she adds, "And me, I'm wondering what I have to do, leave him or not." In fact, she would like the analyst to make the decision for her, and that, in so doing, there would be nothing left for her but to submit to this decision.

Here, we find again the mode of jouissance according to which the demand of the Other is questioned in fantasies. Hence, the analyst intervenes, "You're asking the analyst to be the master of desire who occupies a privileged place in these fantasies." She complains about this husband who does not desire her as she is and desires her only in so far as she would be other than she is. For example, he would like her to allow herself to partake in his erotic fantasies, but she does not consent to it. Her husband disgusts her. She notices that they are both unhappy and that they are condemned, each one on his own side, to obtain jouissance from their own fantasies.

All conversation has become impossible between them. Their bond is thus really on the point of rupture. She says it in these terms, "I have the impression that I've already left him and at the same time that I haven't yet left him." The analyst intervenes, "Has she spoken to her husband? Has she questioned him on his desire?" She and her husband no longer have sexual intercourse. She asked him how he could bear this abstinence. He replied to her that he got by without her. She did not want to know what he was alluding to, the misunderstanding seems thus irreversible. She then speaks of her betrayal, saying that to escape this conjugal hell she has decided to take the plunge. She notes that, in spite of this, the sky has not fallen in on her head and that the gods have not punished her for this adultery.

Her father cheated on her mother with numerous women. She thinks that her mother would have wanted him to be punished for this betrayal. Yet, this fault has remained unpunished. The patient then realizes that by means of this hazardous affair, she is identifying with her father. She cheats on her husband with a younger man, just like her father had wanted to cheat on her mother by trying to seduce younger women. The analyst interprets this acting out, the affair in question, by saying to her, "It's as if you wanted to say to your father: *Father, can't you see I'm burning? I too am burning, I burn from this fault that I'm committing like you.*" The patient then added that she had also wanted to challenge her father. Then she