

Act and Psychosis

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I will approach my topic – the act and psychosis – by putting three cases before you, each of which appears to me exemplary in its own register. These cases will allow us to put psychosis, perversion, and finally neurosis into a successive sequence. The first case concerns a mad, even desperate, attempt to make a social link. In the second case, ritual foregrounds the articulation of the individual with the social by theatrics. The third case is drawn from the Freudian *doxa*, which Lacan took up again and developed. This third case allows me to show the operative distinction between the concepts of acting-out and passage to the act.

My first case concerns an act which occurred on November 19, 1978, in Jones-Town, a little tropical paradise in Guyana, Latin America, where the Reverend James Jones, founder of the sect “Temple of the People,” ordered the collective suicide of some one thousand members of the community. Suddenly, paradise became hell. If these suicides, properly

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speaking, accounted for the greatest number of deaths, many individuals were also assassinated. Many of the children who refused to drink the cyanide-laden orangeade were immobilized and injected with the poison. In an effort to better convince the mothers to choose death, nurses grabbed their children and, having injected them before their mothers’ eyes, threw them to the ground. Throughout these events, the Reverend Jones, seated on his chair elevated like a throne, repeated: “Follow me and you will be freed of your pain.”

It was in the company of the very last ones, for even the dogs, in their turn, had been injected, that Jones committed suicide with a bullet to his right temple. In a few hours, this Eden had toppled into horror. The dead body numbered 909.

The element that triggered this devastating, apocalyptic madness in the Reverend Jones was the symbolic order proposition of a Law which came in the form of an investigating committee from the state of California. The committee was represented by a Senator who had been alerted by the multiple complaints registered by some of the families of followers of the sect.

Days before the moment of this final drama, the daily life of Reverend Jones’s “terrestrial paradise” was one only in

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appearance, consecrated to the simple joys of gardening and handicraft. The faithful made holy oils and prayer vestments. In the photography lab, millions of portraits of the Reverend were printed for sale in the U.S. Self-critical gatherings were held in public where the faithful confessed their omissions or evil thoughts for which they were, then, judged guilty. This ritual included the collective punishments of groups of up to one hundred people who, after having cleansed their hearts of their sins, were whipped in the presence of the other followers. Anyone who approached the pastor was obliged to call him “My Father” or “Master;” in return, he called his followers “My Children.”

Wanting to prove his power, he would suddenly demand, smiling all the while, that one of his followers put her hand in a pot of boiling water, as he said: “By my Grace, you will ignore the fear and the pain.”

He inflicted marathon sermons on the faithful, sermons which would last up to six hours. During the course of these sermons, he would continually announce the apocalypse and the massacre of all people of color by gas chamber. He would finish his homilies by praising the Very High – Karl Marx, Lenin, and Hitler.

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While he reserved the right to have sexual relations with all members of the sect, male or female indifferently, he forbade all sexual relations between spouses. When he learned of spousal relations through the public confessions, he ordered the “guilty parties” whipped.

For many years, Reverend Jones enjoyed the esteem and support of the highest personalities in the United States. Make no mistake about that. Vice-President Mondale declared in a letter to the pastor, “Your profound engagement, and that of your congregation, in the constitutional and social questions of our country is a great inspiration to me.” In a similar letter, the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare affirmed, “Your humanitarian principles and your interest in the protection of individual liberties have brought an extraordinary contribution to the development of human dignity.” And Senator Humphrey wrote, “Your work is positive and truly a Christian witness to what might be done to resolve the problems of our society.”

My second case concerning the act on the other side of the Pacific, on November 25th, 1970, in Tokyo. Kimitake Hiraoka, better known under the pseudonym of Mishima, along with one of his companions, committed Hari-Kari in the

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tradition of the Samurai. His last words, addressed to the officers present, urged for the revival of a martial tradition. For the Japanese, as you know, suicide performed in the rite of Seppuku, as practiced by Mishima, is the traditional right of a certain caste.

Mishima staged his death with a theatrical prelude. Dressed in the old style costume of an officer of the imperial guard, he harangued a certain number of military officials. The ritual proceeds in the following manner: The first cut to the stomach is followed by a decapitation executed by the second samurai. This second samurai, in a second moment, opens his own stomach, and a third samurai cuts off his head. This is where the tragedy of November 25th, 1970, stopped. The first samurai accomplished only a suicide, the second a murder followed by a suicide, the third only a murder.

Castration, the gaze, and putting to death are the three moments necessary to the spectacle. The three concur to give cadence to games of the gaze, respiration, and apostrophes. The play of the gaze is trapped between the spectators and actors. *As for speaking, there is none.*

Mishima's fantasy had been to die young, in his prime. His whole life and his literary *oeuvre* had served to prepare

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him for this act; the supreme affirmation of the absolute supremacy of the immortal signifier over the mortal body.

It is not without significance that Mishima's imaginary model had been the image of a Christian martyr: Saint Sebastian. He evokes this saint in a particularly suggestive manner in his writings, using these terms:

On this day, in the very instant that I cast my eyes on this image, all my being was set trembling with a pagan joy. My blood boiled, my loins swelled as if under the effect of anger. The monstrous part of my person, which had been ready to burst, waited for me to make use of it, with an ardor until then unknown, reproaching me for my ignorance, panting with indignation. My hands, entirely unconsciously, began to make a gesture that they had never been taught. I felt something secret and radiant leap to the attack, coming from behind me. Suddenly, the thing gushed, bringing a blinding drunkenness.

This was my first ejaculation. It also marked the awkward and completely unpremeditated debut of my bad habits.

Elsewhere, he writes of kamikaze pilots:

In this way, in the beauty of the suicidal escadrilles, one recognizes beauty not only in the spiritual sense, but, for some men, equally in an ultra-erotic sense.

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For a long time I have dreamed of the instant in which this speck in the sky might contain my own existence. What a mode of existence; what magnificent pleasure! What could have possibly been a more luminous insult to an obstinately sedentary mind? As it glittered, slitting open the immense blue curtain, quick as a dagger; who wouldn't want to be this sword in the firmament!

In the act of Seppuku, Mishima could pass from imagining *jouissance* to the impossible real in it.

In the case of the Reverend Jones, we are at the meeting point between individual psychosis and social madness, at the point where they respond to each other, where they develop extremely close types of discourse. It is the point where the delirious metaphor of individual psychosis can still make a social link, in a monstrous fashion, certainly, but in a manner that can take on all the appearances of normality. It is the point where one can fool oneself, where one is in the normal in the sense of being ever more normal, more monstrously normal. And, indeed, what difference is there, except one of scale, between Hitler and Nazi Germany, and the Reverend Jones and his sect?

Equally, with Mishima, we are at the junction of the individual and the social. There, also, individual psychosis joins up, in a particularly exemplary gesture, the determinant func-

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tion of the kamikazes' giving their lives for the Fatherland and the Emperor. The Fatherland takes on the attributes of the Greek God, Chronos, who devoured his own children.

Lacan's reworking of a case Freud developed in his 1920 article entitled "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" will allow us to make the distinction between acting-out and passage to the act which we have seen in the cases of Reverend Jones and Mishima. I will remind you briefly of the coordinates essential to understanding this case that Freud gives us: A young woman, beautiful and intelligent, from a family highly placed in society, had excited the displeasure and worry of her parents by the tenderness with which she pursued a "woman of the world," some ten years older than she. One day, the father met his daughter on the street in the company of this woman whom he knew by sight. He crossed the street in front of them, casting a furious gaze on them both, which presaged no good. Immediately afterward, the young woman tore herself from the arm of her companion, stepped over a parapet, and threw herself on the train tracks below.

Lacan notes that the interpretation Freud gives of the word *neiderkommen*, to fall, is not exhausted by the analogy of giving birth, but that *neiderkommen* is essential in describing

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this subject's unexpectedly putting herself in relation with what she is as object *a*.

One cannot dismiss the fact that this melancholic subject is described as always having a propensity to "balance herself on the window sill." The window, insofar as it recalls the limit between the scene and the street, indicates to us what is signified by this act in which, in some way the subject returns to that fundamental exclusion she first felt at the very moment when the conjunction of desire and the Law is conjugated in the *absolute* of the subject. In this case, it is not enough to say that the father had cast an irritated look to understand how her passage to the act of jumping was brought about. There is something in this act that plumbs the very bottom of the relation to structure. The Law is, indeed, the desire of the father and there is only one Law of the Father, that of an absolute phallus. No doubt, resentment and vengeance took this form: She is my woman, and, since I cannot be your subject/wife and you my object, I am that which supports, which creates, the idealized relation to what is insufficient in myself, that which has been pushed back or repressed. The two conditions of the passage to the act were, as such, realized.

What comes to the subject at this moment is her abso-

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lute identification with the *petit a* to which she reduces herself. This confrontation with the desire of her father -- a basis on which everything in her conduct is constructed -- with this Law which presents itself in the gaze of her father, is that by which she feels definitively identified and, at the same time, rejected, thrown out of the scene. Only the "letting oneself [herself] fall" can be realized or accomplished.

If there is a distinction to be brought about at the level of the act -- a consideration of whether there is acting-out or passage to the act -- it does not come from knowing if there is a simulation or not, for, finally, when the act succeeds, it never comes from the *semblant* itself. The distinction to be made passes, rather, between acting-out and the passage to the act.

In the acting-out, one is still in the dimension of an appeal, an appeal made to the Name-of-the-Father in the Other. The appeal or demand is a request for interpretation, a call made to the Other, asking the Other to put the subject into the symbolic again. In acting-out, it is the Ideal Ego which has acted.

In the passage to the act, there is identification with the *jouissance* of the Other. The subject wants to recuperate his lack, as introduced by the signifying cut in identifying with the object *a* as waste, refuse. He or she falls upon the object *a* after

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having crossed the screen of the fantasy through the hole of the losenge [*poignon*].¹⁰ Refusing to be the barred subject, the split subject, he or she bursts the screen of the losenge to become the object *a*. It is the triumph of ignorance, of not wanting to know (what castration is about).

Above all, the act manifests the will of the subject beyond alienation. Alienation is general. What alienation means is that the subject is lacking in the signifying chain, the subject disappears under the signifier.

The subject is a Being only in his disappearance. It is the common fate. But the one who commits suicide is not a subject of alienation. He or she is a want-to-be, the supreme affirmation of Being. Posing the question of how to act with his other Being, this subject acts with his lack. Suicide is a certain manner of separating oneself from the signifying chain. It is in this way that it rests on a passion of ignorance which is nothing more than the passion to separate from the signifying chain which articulates a knowledge (S1 S2). The ignorance in question is to ignore the very knowledge the chain implies. A passion of ignorance means acting in such a way that that something will not change again. The one who commits suicide refuses to disappear under the phallic bar. By acting voluntarily, he prefers to use what life he has to act on Be-

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ing. He prefers to disappear for having refused the alienation that implies his status as subject. Through radical separation, he refuses the common alienation. *Jouissance* is separation. *Jouissance* through the *petit bout phallique* [little phallic end or opening], makes the organ enjoy, while the one who commits suicide aims at a total *jouissance*, a *jouissance* infinitely liberated from phallic shackles. He recuperates his lack, what Lacan called the *objet petit a*, but in a logical attempt that is not at all desperate, unlike the young homosexual woman's act of jumping.

Very early on in his teaching, Lacan became interested in the question of the act in psychosis. One of his first works in psychiatry, even before he encountered psychoanalysis, was on "The Unmotivated Crimes of Schizophrenia." Shortly thereafter, during the period when he frequented the surrealist circles and contemporaneous with his dissertation and his encounter with psychoanalysis, he became interested in the legal proceedings concerning the Papin sisters. In this period, at the beginning of the 1930s, in effect, the medical and legal experts who concluded that all responsibility rested with accused raised a wave of indignation in the field of the psychiatry of that epoch. Dr. Logre mounted the battlements in drafting

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a refutation for the defense, done according to the rules of the experts commissioned by the prosecution who had concluded that there was no sign of either delirium or detectable dementia in the testimony of the accused, the Papin sister.

Lacan became impassioned and developed arguments in favor of the thesis of paranoia in an article which appeared in issue number 3 of the Surrealist journal, *Le Minotaure*, in December 1933. This article was taken up again in an appendix to his dissertation when it was reprinted in 1975 under the title: “*Motifs du Crime paranoïaque: Le Crime des Soeurs Papin*” [Motives of Paranoid Crime: The Crime of the Papin Sisters]. This article followed very shortly after the publication of his dissertation: “*De la Psychose Paranoïaque dans ses Rapports avec la Personnalité*” [Paranoid Psychosis in its Relation with the Personality]. There also, it was a question of responding to a resounding news item – the case of Aimée – expect that in this case Lacan was in direct contact with the accused. He had the occasion to develop at length his thesis on the relation between the act and the paranoid personality. He demonstrated the unconscious slope of the drive in the psychotic act and noted the soothing effect which resulted from its appeasement. The delirium vanishes with the realization of the unconscious

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aims of the act.

Lacan’s dissertation is inscribed in the axis of the work of the psychoanalytic school of Berlin, beginning notably with the work of Alexander Staub. His thesis shows the sometimes devastating role of the superego, and that, in the framework of psychosis, the consequences can lead all the way to the act of homicide. It is a matter, then, in psychoanalysis, of provoking a liberating reaction on the bias of appeasing the superego’s driving force. The concept of paranoid self-punishment is elaborated by Lacan who notes, incidentally, that self-punishing drives comprise another slope than that of the act which can put the brakes on impulses. In his thesis, one sees another dimension of the act which spreads out in two directions, starting with an erotomanic address, such as the one made by Aimée to the Prince of Wales. Such address only experiences itself as efficaciously heard, however, on the condition of getting a reception that does not lead her toward subsequent phases, such as Clerambault described perfectly, those of resentment and rancor which can once again push the subject toward the act of murder.

The other direction, the other modality of the act which Lacan posits, is that of writing, of literary creation. There was

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a certain naiveté to Aimée’s writing, even if André Breton, in his studies of psychopathological art, found certain literary qualities in her work. In any case, writing was an activity which permitted, so it seemed to Aimée, her literary evolution over a number of years. In a moderate situation, such a literary evolution would have allowed one to take into account her psychotic structure.

Thus, one has a germ of what will ultimately be elaborated in the theory of psychosis Lacan developed in his later writings: “On a Question preliminary to any possible Treatment of Psychosis,” and The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III, The Psychoses, passing through the Seminar on the Psychoanalytic Act. He, and his students along with him, took these two orientations as making up the essential axis of any possible treatment of psychosis: Erotomania is the first orientation which, in its transference dimension, permits the analyst to specify what there is of a transference in psychosis. And writing, which Lacan developed forty years later through the case of James Joyce in his seminar on the Sinthome, forms the second orientation.

But it was the binary opposition of alienation-separation which finally allowed Lacan to better set at play what is

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operating in the dimension of the act. While the act is on this side of separation as a response to alienation, alienation, *alienus*, is on the side of feeling a stranger to oneself, *unheimlich*. It is the common fate. In psychosis, there is, rather, a question of the stranger *in* oneself, the disquieting strangeness of elementary phenomena or the delirium of persecution. If separation cannot be made through the intervention of the symbolic, such an intervention has not come about, then it reappears in the real. In effect, if the neurotic acts with the symbolic as a barrier to the real of *jouissance*, the psychotic acts in an essentially imaginary dimension, in an imaginary tar trap linked to the default of the incidence of the Name-of-the-Father which, in psychosis, is translated by phenomena linked, as Lacan has explained, to a topical regression to the mirror stage.

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Notes

1. Lacan chose the French word *poinçon* (punch, as in paper-punch) to name the symbol used to denote alienation and separation in the mathemes for drive ($\$D$) and fantasy ($\a). Typically, this has been translated into English by the word *lozenge*, which loses the sense of being something that pierces, an important implication for the effect of alienation and separation in Lacan’s elucidation of the drives and fantasy. I refer the reader to Chapter 16, “The Subject and the Other: Alienation,” in Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, NY: Norton, 1977, pp. 203-215. [Translator’s Note]

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