voices off: enter the Freudian School

Peter Gunn[1]

"I've been an inconvenience since being conceived". These are words which, when written down, and with a slight grammatical adjustment to memorialise the 'I', might serve as an inscription on a gravestone. Perhaps it is for that reason that, in hearing these words spoken, though only once, I was inclined to hear them as determinative.

The setting was the meeting room of the psychiatric unit of a major teaching hospital. This was not a meeting in the usual sense although there was no doubting the formality of the occasion, a formality already announced by the denomination, *The Presentation of Patients*.

I cannot identify the speaker by name. Indeed, as the 'I' who is saying this to you neither can I identify the speaker by that same letter, 'I'. As a substitute I will use another letter, K.

By calling him K I could be said to be reducing him to no more than a tag. Yet, by the sound it makes this particular tag does keep some fidelity to the version of his father's name that, we were told, had been applied to him from an early age. And, just by stating this, I am already taking the risk of identifying him as a man.

Nevertheless, in supplanting his name by this tag, with the literary allusions that it carries, I am suggesting the fatality in which this man seemed already determined to find himself. We had been told by his psychiatrist-in-training that some days before being brought to the hospital he had found himself walking towards a well-recognised landmark. This is, it appears, the only place to go if you are determined to jump.

Those in the room were a peculiar inmixing of the inside and the outside: staff and students already at the hospital and those of us, analysts and analysts-in-formation, who were there from *The Freudian School of Melbourne*. Set somewhat apart from the positions of K and the analyst, we were there to function as an audience, but in the strict sense of the word. Although not there as part of the performance we were, at the same time, not there just to observe. An activity was demanded of us. We were there to attend; to use an archaism, we were there to harken to what was being said.

Now it has to be said that in coming to this room to speak K had not taken the initiative; he had been invited. Nevertheless, he had, it seems, agreed to do so. Why? That is, what was it that drew him to come and speak given that, right from the start, in his conception, he was already an inconvenience? Could this have something to do with the effect of these others who had taken the trouble to come from outside and listen to what he had to say?

All of these were unknown to him but, even before they had shown their faces, they had already been made known by way of a name, *The Freudian School*. The allusions carried by this double-barrelled name re-presents a place of knowledge. This is a place which, in differentiating itself from that of the hospital, supports the foregoing of precipitate conclusions; it presents a place of knowledge, but from another place. Perhaps then, in being invited to say something in such an heterodox milieu, K was accorded recognition, recognition that he too had knowledge from elsewhere that he wanted to impart.

But surely, to accord recognition to K in this way is to risk compounding the fatality by which he believed himself to be borne. It is precisely in order to avoid such a termination that the analyst had to take up his position with K as differentiated from that of the audience. In so doing the analyst holds any such determination of knowledge in suspense. Only in this way can he listen to what K is saying in his terms, terms which, though they pertain to the fatality of the knowledge which he wishes to deliver, are at the same time peculiar to the place from where he speaks. Beyond any deliverance, this is what K's words convey.

This brings me the structure of the subject in its relation to madness.

* * *

The madness of which I am speaking is not that of the patient but of the subject; the subject as such, inasmuch as it resists reduction, including, for example, to the description psychotic. This madness is, in the first instance, that which is endemic to what Lacan calls the speaking animal. This is the madness of the subject, whether psychotic or neurotic, inasmuch as there functions, albeit, in the end, in different ways according to the structure, the certainty of the *it speaks*.

This madness is the effect of the speaking subject being 'schizo', split; split inasmuch as it is subject to language and, more specifically, to the signifier. It is the certainty of the signifier in speaking for the subject, speaking for it for another signifier, which can go as far as to raise the question of the subject's very existence.

This madness can manifest itself most floridly when the subject is obliged to have dealings with others. This applies even in the case of one as eminent as Freud. As Lacan says at one point when discussing Freud's analysis of his dreams,

> Freud […] when he doubts – for they are his dreams – and it is he who, at the outset, is assured that a thought is there which is the unconscious, which means that it reveals itself as absent, and that it is to this place which he appeals when he deals with others: the *I think* through which the subject reveals itself. In short, he is sure that this thought is there with all his *I am*, on its own, so long, and this is the leap, someone thinks in his place.[2]

It was through the analysis of his dreams that Freud demonstrated that the subject in question is the subject of the unconscious. In the moment of *thinking*, which is equivalent to saying the moment of *speaking*, and most especially the moment of speaking to an other, the *I am*, the viewpoint on which the conscious subject grounds its existence, is negated. The *I am* is not all there is; it is only there provided there is an other that thinks in his place.

This *I am*, the ego, is thus found to be a charade, albeit a necessary charade. Without knowing it, the neurotic supports the charade of the existence of his *I* by referring it to the authority of an other. This mechanism is in fact foundational to the structure of the subject, or at least it is for that of the neurotic subject.

This mechanism is what Freud called primary identification. Primary identification provides the subject with the support necessary for his *I think*, given that the existence of his *I* is put in question by the *It thinks*. It is this *It thinks* or, equivalently, this *It speaks*, which Freud named as the unconscious.

Lacan reformulated Freud's unconscious in a variety of ways in order to emphasise that it is an effect of the speaking being's subjection to the symbolic structure of language. In one such

formulation the unconscious is the discourse of the (big) Other. It is this Other which imposes the *It thinks* from outside.

It is however, also this Other which, by way of the mechanism which Freud called primary identification, provides the neurotic subject with that illusory but necessary point of perspective called the ego. However bizarre or painful the thoughts which the Other inflicts might be, in his dealings with the (little) other the neurotic subject has the capacity to recognise that these remain *his* thoughts. This remains the case even if, at the same time, he (consciously) denies them.

Lacan also produced a variety of linguistic reformulations of primary identification, one of which posits it as being based on the functioning of the signifier in its primordial form. As always with Lacan this is based on a close reading of Freud. One of the most important texts here is the famous Letter 52 to Fliess in which Freud gives one of his first accounts of repression. The letter is an attempt to show how, for what Freud at this point called the psychoneuroses, the memories of certain early sexual experiences become subject to inhibition and are repressed and yet continue to have effects as unconscious memories. Lacan comments:

> [Freud] admits the existence of this field I am calling that of the primordial signifier. Everything that he subsequently says in this letter about the dynamics of the three great neuropsychoses that he applies himself to – hysteria, obsessional neurosis, paranoia – presupposes the existence of this primordial stage […].
>
> In order to understand this, consider something that Freud is constantly pointing out, namely that one has to assume a prior, and at least partial, organization of language in order for memory and historicization to work. The memory phenomena that Freud is interested in are always language phenomena. In other words, one already has to have the signifying material to make anything signify at all.[3]

For Lacan in the case of the psychoses, and in particular in the case of paranoia, this field of the primordial signifier does not function. The field exists but it is ineffectual for the subject; it is, as Lacan terms it, foreclosed.

In his article, *On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis*, Lacan famously returns to one of his own clinical presentations to give an illustration of the effect of this foreclosure. It is not necessary to go into the case in detail here.[4] Lacan's focus is on what this patient says in the interview about an altercation involving a neighbour. In response to her saying "I've just been to the pork butcher's" she alleged that this man responded by saying "Sow!".

It is important to mention that this man was married and was also the lover of another, female, neighbour. This other neighbour had previously had a relationship with the patient and her mother which they had experienced as intrusively intimate. Since breaking off this relationship both daughter and mother had been alleging that this woman was also hurling abuse at them.

In the exchange with this one of the other sex the woman was confronted, as we all are, by her own message but in inverted form. What Lacan proposes however is that, lacking the triangulation which the Other provides, in this situation she is, as he puts it, imprisoned in the dyadic relationship.

She had indeed just been to the pork butcher's. In saying this however, she was doing more than just reporting that fact. As the 'I' speaking she was, potentially, implicated in the *It speaks* of her own unconscious desire. As Lacan suggests, in its allusion, perhaps to the desire of that other woman who had been her intimate and was now her interlocutor's paramour, this desire, like all desire, returned to her as *It speaks*. It came therefore from beyond her immediate interlocutor, addressing itself to her from the discourse of the big Other.

Thus, however much of an insult this 'Sow!' might have been, there was in this encounter the possibility of her hearing it returned to her not by her interlocutor but by her own enunciation; her own act of speaking. What she would then have heard coming back to address her would have been, by association, the insinuation which her own words were carrying.

For this woman however the possibility of this implication was foreclosed. At the outset she lacked the symbolic 'I' with which to support the insinuation doubling back, even if only to deny it by that mechanism which Freud called repression. In substitution for that 'I' she was locked into an unspeakable position by that appellation 'Sow!'.

Rather than being the rejection of a verbal assault however, her hallucination was the effect of the foreclosure of the position in which that 'Sow!' would retroactively have placed her. That place, the place of the name, was already unspeakable because it was excluded. As Lacan formulates it, that very position was already rejected into the Real.[5] The hallucination of the insult as appearing to come from the other immediately in front of her was the effect of that rejection.

Now it is true that Lacan tells us that this was in fact a case of paranoia. But what Lacan stresses about this diagnosis is its subordination to the discourse of the subject. Following Freud, Lacan demands that, first of all, the psychoanalyst listen and that he listen, furthermore, with suspended attention. This suspension suspends any understanding of what is being said, including the understanding prescribed by diagnostic categorisation and, along with that, treatment.

Diagnostic understanding does have its place, but what this suspension privileges is the particular place of the subject: the mode of this subject's *It speaks*. What is required at the outset is, as Lacan describes it,

> […] complete, albeit enlightened, submission to the patient's properly subjective positions, positions which are all too often forced by being reduced in the doctor/patient dialogue to the morbid process, thus increasing the difficulty of fathoming them due to a not unjustified reticence on the subject's part.[6]

It is by this submission that the psychoanalyst takes his share of responsibility for the production of the patient's non-sensical symptom which, in the very moment of speaking to the analyst, he presents with his *It speaks*:

> A subject is a psychoanalyst, not as a scholar barricaded behind categories in the midst of which he tries his hardest to construct the drawers into which he will be able to put the symptoms that he registers in his patient, psychotic, neurotic or other, but insofar as he enters into the signifying operation […].[7]

* * *

Let us return now to K.

"I've been an inconvenience since being conceived". If we listen to what we suppose to be the meaning of these words of K, we could take them as self-diagnosing. That is, we could take them as his diagnosis of his self. What this understanding of his words invites us to do is to respond to him as someone who is a victim of history: his difficulties are due to his mother finding him an inconvenience when she became pregnant with him.

This approach locks in the dual relationship: ego diagnoses ego. In terms of the ethics of psychoanalysis this would amount to an abrogation of responsibility on both sides. The 'treatment' which such an understanding already sets up would allow K to supplant the inconvenient symptom of his own *It speaks* with the convenient guidance of the words of the stand-in.

However under-standing this might be, it would place K's interlocutor in the position of manager, or, to use a term to which K himself used towards the end of the interview, of mentor. In either case the analyst, so-called, would stand in the position of ideal. Given the persecutory opportunities which this straight and narrow arrangement would offer K he might well find that he is once again on the path to disposing of himself as inconvenient substitute.[8]

On the other hand, having heard some small divergence in K's speech the analyst might, for example, seek clarification. This might, in turn, allow K a moment of departure from what has always already been said. Such an hiatus would be the effect of the insinuation that, despite the determination of what he has to say, in speaking there is always something else to say. The analyst from *The Freudian School* might then come to constitute for K the possibility of some small departure from the script.[9]

Let us listen then to K's words suspending the understanding supplied by the ego. With "I've been an inconvenience since being conceived" we can hear "…inconvenience …being …conceived." If the removal of the I and the interpolation of the ellipses has the effect of making this opaque, the departure from the formulaic has the effect of directing us back to the question of the subject. This question is not one which is posed in the terms of a concluded history but rather by that very indetermination of the subject itself… in being… in language.

If K is to have any possibility of entry as subject it will be through the functioning of his own name in the encounter with an other. Starting as we did with the substitute name K, perhaps we can now say that this possibility, insinuated by the analyst, was augmented by those others from *The Freudian School* who took the trouble to come and listen. By supporting the subject's symptomatic *It speaks* what this arrangement promoted was the possibility of an in-mixing of that other name which, however inconvenient in its opacity, constitutes K's own conception.

If there is that possibility then it nevertheless remains the responsibility of that other known as the analyst, if there is to be one, to use any artifice he can to produce this symptomatic opaqueness, even if only fleetingly.[10]

References

[1] Analyst Member, *The Freudian School of Melbourne, School of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

[2] Lacan, Jacques. "Lesson of January 29, 1964". *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts Psychoanalysis*. Translated by the author. The translation offered here is less 'cleaned-up' than

the published English translation. To my ear it follows more closely Lacan's argument that it is in the subject's relation with others that his I think reveals his 'I' as a point of substitution.

[3] Lacan, Jacques. "Lesson of February 15, 1956". *The Psychoses, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III, 1955-1956*. Tr. Russell Grigg. London: W. W. Norton, London, 1993. 156. See also the lessons of April 11 and 18.

[4] See Lacan, Jacques. "On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis". *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Tr. Bruce Fink. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006: 447-449. I am also drawing on Lacan's previous discussion of the case in *The Psychoses* seminar, lesson of December 7, 1955.

[5] For an excellent and concise account of Lacan's Real see Gustavo Etkin, "Nothing Returns from the Real: The Structure of Psychosis". *Papers of The Freudian School of Melbourne* 16 (1995): 61-75.

[6] Lacan, Jacques. "On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis". *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Tr. Bruce Fink. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006. 447.

[7] Lacan, Jacques. "Lesson of May 5, 1965". *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis*. Tr. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished). Also see Erik Porge, "The Presentation of Patients: Charcot, Freud, Lacan, Today". *Papers of The Freudian School of Melbourne* 15 (1994): 163-177.

[8] Lacan's cogent analysis of the case of Schreber in his seminar *The Psychoses*, provides plenty of evidence of how, for the subject who is only a second copy of his identity, the ideal is at the same time persecutory. See for example the lesson of the January 18, 1956.

[9] In his paper "Transference and Speech in the Clinic of the Psychoses" (*Papers of The Freudian School of Melbourne* 16 (1995): 77-86) Gustavo Etkin demonstrates the value of marking difference in the treatment of psychosis. Etkin's focus is on the clinic of the psychoses, that is, as differentiated from the clinic neuroses, but whereas interventions such as cutting sense might be contra-indicated in the former, the marking of difference can be appropriate in both.

[10] Effectively this would be to weave the One of the Sinthome. In the case of paranoia, starting from the indifferent clover knotting of the three registers the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, the objective would be to re-structure that knot, even if only fleetingly, by weaving in the excluded real of the symptom as a fourth element, thereby lending a difference which is then peculiar to that whole. See Lacan's seminar *Le Sinthome*, especially the lesson of December 16, 1975, and also Gustavo Etkin, "Transference and Speech in the Clinic of the Psychoses". *Papers of The Freudian School of Melbourne* 16 (1995): 77-86.