

Let Cold Fires Burn

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Introductory aphanisis

Psychoanalytic truths are difficult; hence Freud's apocryphal statement about psychoanalysis as the plague and all that Jungian jazz. How does this continue to surprise me as an analyst—even after continued attempts to discredit Freud, all the while absorbing some of his truths into common sense and everyday vernacular—when I confront some kind of hard kernel of resistance is perhaps an important question I should ask myself? In a sense, it should be comforting that there's still resistance. If there wasn't, we psychoanalysts would all probably be out of work, which we could see as having fulfilled our role in civilization. *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*. All has become. All is there. My surprise means I am well inside this fantasy of *aphanisis*.

Life as an analyst in a supposedly democratic country in the 21st century provides more than enough evidence that the current state of civilized sexual morality and modern nervous illness is anything close to making psychoanalysts disappear into obsolescence. The overt war between the sexes, the debate over sexual identity, the question of sexual violence, the rise of suicide skewing towards women for the first time, all point to problems that psychoanalysis should be equipped to address. Nevertheless, very few psychoanalysts are speaking to this contemporary knot. I'm not. I am.

Take #MeToo, where the question of trauma (especially sexual trauma), the relation between the sexes (especially in its violent forms), sexuality (especially phallic male sexuality) meets with a question about identity, testimony, consent, censorship, and justice. Do we really have nothing to say here? What kind of justice would the psychoanalyst imagine

when it comes to questions of sex and sexual violence? Doesn't this, after all, touch on Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory, and questions raised generation after generation about a feminist Freud? The psychoanalysts must be afraid. I'm afraid. I prefer the fantasy of the end of psychoanalysis.

I have written elsewhere supporting the #MeToo movement¹ for its capacity to link narratives of sexual abuse, most often by women, sending them bounding through the virtual arena like wildfire. I praised the movement as movement, and also for placing what is Real in the abuse of power as sexual coercion into multilayered scenes, fighting spectacle with spectacle, because these kinds of indictments always turned into a legal spectacle, framed and controlled by men. Thus, in its grassroots activism, #MeToo ceased to be solely or simply spectacle itself—it became sheer quanta as evidence. Psychoanalysis is certainly close to these kinds of techniques of interpretation, no less the overhaul of what counts as proof. Psychoanalysis is also certainly a proponent of sexual abstinence in the workplace in order that the most freedom can be rendered possible.

I would, however, like to take a different approach, gauging some of the problems with respect to a clinical know-how with those who have suffered from trauma. Concerns about testimony, veracity, and justice are handled in session differently than what takes place in the public arena. In a sense, I want to attempt to square a disconnect that I feel between supporting #MeToo as a movement, its political counter to the reality of sexual violence and the silencing of victims, and levying some concerns with #MeToo as a clinical psychoanalyst.

One way of highlighting the disjunction could be through the name itself—#MeToo as the adding of one “me” to another “me” to gain political traction, a diachronic logic of speed and force, is different from what takes place in psychoanalysis where saying “me too” is at odds with an aim at the singularity of discourse by a patient in a process of subjectivation or self-authorization. An “I” alone, not a me; and certainly not a me with other “me’s”.

Freud's classic statement about hysterics was that they suffer mainly

¹ Kyoo Lee and Jamieson Webster, “The Formal Ethics of Metonymy#metoo,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 19, no. 4 (October–December 2019): 249-253.

from reminiscences.² These reminiscences were originally linked to memories of sexual trauma or abuse. Eventually, this causal model was discarded by Freud in favor of a more complex vision of psychic forces, less unidirectional, less oriented to the archeological model of the mind. I do not think he disavowed the reality of abuse, but rather saw through working with patients that reminiscences, or hysteria more generally, was not simply hiding some truth of abuse in the depths of the mind.

Hysteria was formal symptom or structural system whose symbolic expression needed to be analyzed for its tangle of memories, traumas, fantasies, and hidden sexual desires, which prevented the subject from appearing in their own discourse. Freud spread the mechanism of reminiscing into a radical rejection of reality present in hysteria as much as in delusion:

The transposing of material from a forgotten past on to the present or on to an expectation of the future is indeed a habitual occurrence in neurotics no less than in psychotics.... Just as our construction is only effective because it recovers a fragment of lost experience, so the delusion owes its convincing power to the element of historical truth which it inserts in the place of the rejected reality. In this way a proposition which I originally asserted only of hysteria would apply also to delusions—namely, that those who are subject to them are suffering from their own reminiscences.³

Hysteria, in a sense, means to disappear behind speech whose function is a rejection of reality. Of course, trauma makes us disappear behind our speech and memories as a kind of reminiscing, but holding fast to the question of abuse is also a kind of disappearance, a kind of rejection. Public testimony, the media blitz that often surrounds it, the chorus of affirmation, also forces the subject to disappear. So many exits.

Psychoanalysis, Freud says in this late essay on constructions, seeks only an element of historical truth, a kernel that touches on the rejection of reality that is forcing its way into the present or onto an unreasonable expectation of the future. This kernel of truth is enough, and enough to stay

² See Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter SE), Vol. II, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 2.

³ Freud, "Constructions in Analysis," SEXXXIII, 268.

the violent exit strategy. What is also fascinating is the way in which a 'rejection of reality' and reminiscing are combined and then generalized to both hysteria and paranoia or delusions. Perhaps we might think of this structure in light of our current 'post-truth' landscape.

Psychoanalysis places its work in the register of speech in a particular relationship of transference between doctor and patient. This moves psychoanalysis out of the domain of history or legality or even politics, maybe even feminist politics or questions of justice. While psychoanalysis might contribute to the discourse that shape ideas in these domains, this contribution must be understood as distinct from what takes place in its work with patients. I'm not certain if I'm being too severe, but for the purposes of this paper, I think the extreme characterization as divide is necessary for the moment.

Our duty as psychoanalysts is to continue to find the way to keep discourse as open as possible and to approach this thing called "reality." Lacan of course renamed reality as the Real. This direction of treatment is one way to understand Freud's abandonment of the seduction hypothesis as necessary. #MeToo has genuinely opened up a space where culturally we had scotomized the reality of sexual violence. But there is a risk of closure. I'm worried both about the way the #MeToo discourse can reify and instrumentalize trauma. Turn it into discourse.

As a psychoanalyst it is difficult to speak with any sense of universality — every case is different and differently handled. However, there are issues that we treat with great caution, especially the question of validating or giving veridical reality to our patients' narratives. Who are we to do so, especially as a figure situated in the transference? Why this question, as a question, now? At the moment of the evocation of scenes of sexual abuse, we take caution if asked to side with the patient against the abuser. And, in complex sexual relationships, we would exercise extreme caution when it comes to the question of blame, or any morality, in the sphere of sex.

These matters aren't handled blithely. Close attention to what is said is an attempt to find the way to support the act of continuing to say as much as possible and in as many contradictory ways as is needed. The fantasies, identifications or counter-identifications, and contradictory bodily feelings, must also be given room, in addition to the memories and scenes that can present themselves in analysis. As an analyst, I have lived through several

moments in which a patient has demanded that I do more than witness what was coming to the surface, asking that I act as a force of validation or verification of the patient as abused, especially as an act of recognition set against the acts of the abuser.

These moments in treatment were incredibly difficult, volatile. To have to refuse to do so was almost unbearable and I was left with a lot of self-interrogation and doubt. But I felt some force of instrumentalization of the trauma itself arising as a demand that I take up a role of authority that I had never otherwise assumed. Why? And why in this way? Why this extreme demand for the analyst's presence? Interestingly, the demand was specifically directed at me and the patient appeared to disappear into the demand itself.

In no way did I prevent the patient from going to seek legal recourse, nor corroboration of the events with others, especially family members. In no way did I deny the events as real. I just did not affirm that I knew with certainty that the patient was, in reality, abused. The question of the abuse, of whether I would verify the story as true, took center stage in one treatment at a certain late moment of analysis, a moment when the question of termination was very present.

I had always been there to witness a testimony of the events and to explore it in as much detail as possible, which I didn't believe that I could do adequately if I was to be the guarantor of truth. Truth is not in my hands, nor even is it in the patient's hands from a psychoanalytic perspective. It is on the side of the act of speaking, and on the side of the unconscious, which only appears here and there, never in a full way. One could say that this demand was the purest resistance to the continuation of analysis itself. It was the end of analysis just as analysis was at its end.

Is it possible that the sudden resistance that seemed to point to the end of analysis was a result of touching on the radical "non-rapport" between the sexes, as Lacan called it? Or, to put it in plainer speech, is the end of analysis the experience of something real in sexuality, sometimes experienced as an impossibility, other times experienced as violence? Freud also named this the 'bedrock of castration' and spoke of patients hitting bedrock and running headfirst in the other direction, into the waters of extreme negative transference, a rejection of psychoanalysis as a gift from the analyst, the analyst then taking on the image of the traumatizing parent. What is traumatizing is always the encounter with sexuality as such,

something we first confusingly experience from our caregivers. And if we accept even a fraction of these speculations, could we think of where we are as a civilization as caught in this moment that is touching this point, increasing resistance, as we harken to the end? But if so, then to what end, or the end of what?

Reminiscing in a case of paranoia

This case was haunted from the very beginning by a question of belief. She articulated desperately, at times angrily, how much she needed to believe that I believed her, to indicate that we shared the same beliefs and asked that I validate what she was saying as the truth. She would push very hard at this point in the treatment. She told me that she was a compulsive liar as a child, that she would lie in order to see if the adults believed her or not, and if they didn't, what they would do, what punishments would they meet out. But, she got lost in her own lies. Still does. She needed something from me with respect to this question about truth.

During the course of treatment she became quite paranoid and had to be hospitalized, her eroto-manic delusion crystallizing around a woman-persecutor. This happened after a strange confluence of events: she had come to treatment because she didn't understand why she had an abortion simply because the baby's father asked her to, after which he promptly left her. She then had a severe car accident which left her with unbearable migraines. Then, her sister was hit by a car and killed. Subsequently, she developed a paranoid fantasy about a woman who had been involved with her neighbor.

To an extent, this woman was a stand-in for an eroto-manic relationship with myself, which she guarded, but which she revealed to me from time to time—namely her beliefs about me. The question certainly changed drastically from this need for me to believe her, to her certainty regarding a truth about the two of us. Again, after a strange confluence of events, almost in a dream-like manner, she voiced the way she had come to some ideas about myself and our relationship.

Prior to her hospitalization, she saw me at a park with a blonde man. I didn't see her. She thought that I had and that I was ignoring her. I said somewhat calmly that I hadn't seen her. She asked me if I was on a date. I

looked at her quizzically. She said that the guy looked like he was really into me. About a year later, after her hospitalization, I arrived to my office with a male colleague, who also happened to have blonde hair. She decided that these were the same two men, that I was in a relationship with this man, and that I had lied to her on the first occasion.

The reason this was so upsetting to her in particular was because she believed that we were in a pact to be together without men. She insisted that when she had asked me about the man in the park that I had said that he was “nobody”. She was incredibly volatile—calling me a liar, a whore, weak and pathetic. We passed through the moment with me showing concern, interest, but staying shy of saying much.

What she would also come to tell me was that she believed we were psychic twins and that one day the two of us were going to be together. This was close in form to her delusion about the other woman who also ‘led her on,’ ‘wire-tapped her house,’ ‘was in special psychic communication with her body,’ condensing her intense feelings of love and hate. While this figure of the woman loomed large, there were always these shadowy “nobody” men.

In a fascinating move, as her family was accusing her of being schizophrenic, she cc’d me on an email to all of her family members on her father’s side. The email accused her father of having intercourse with her 174 times as a child based on an image she had of him serving her his penis covered in mustard like a hotdog—a repressed childhood memory that she felt she recovered. I was brought in to verify to her family that he had abused her.

Nevertheless, there was an important kernel of truth that I recognized in other parts of the letter which seemed to frame the recent events in treatment and which we had recently begun discussing: she had been seduced by her father’s mistress as a young girl and they carried on a secret relationship. The mistress wrote letters saying that she thought when she grew up she was going to be a famous dancer and would attend her recitals. Once the father divorced the mother and married his mistress, she dropped my patient and then acted as a wedge between her father and her. We were able to speak about this in a quite moving fashion which seemed to calm the question about the men and de-solidify the paranoid persecutory fantasy centered on this other woman.

Here is what I came to understand: the belief that she wanted from me wasn’t a question of truth as in a veracity, neither about the blonde man,

or her father (indeed, we can hear both the desire that they be declared nothing and nobody, almost emptied of subjectivity, while also being situated as everything and everybody), nor even about myself and this other woman as proxy to the mistress. What she seemed to desire was to re-establish a relationship to the object that had held her together—namely, her identification with the mistress—who had afforded her a measure of distance with respect to her father (and her mother) just before she lost everything. This is what she reminisced in treatment with me following the series of harrowing losses, which, on the extreme end, became a delusion and a repetition in the transference.

What paranoia can teach us about the signifier “He”

Let me take a detour into some of Lacan’s thinking on paranoia and paranoia in hysteria to elucidate the stakes. Lacan begins his seminar on *The Psychoses* by pointing out that while schizophrenia was the main focus for psychiatry, paranoia retained Freud’s privileged interest when it came to psychosis. Paranoia is like a knot in Freudian theory and a resistant nucleus, in particular because all questions of biology, culture, character, are challenged by the diagnosis and its genesis or etiology. While someone like Kraepelin would speak of paranoia as “distinguished from the others because it is characterized by the gradual development of internal causes and according to a progressive evolution of a stable delusional system that is impossible to disturb and establishes itself with total preservation of clarity and order in thought, will, and action,”⁴ Lacan is quick to point out that this isn’t the case at all. If one looks at the course of paranoia, there are surges, many variations, and if there is an order and clarity, we must ask what kind of order and what kind of clarity is to be found (indeed this is what Lacan sets out to do), because it most certainly doesn’t have to do with any order to thought, will, or action, which have no order. The discourse of psychiatry, Lacan says, is clearly mad if it thinks this, and indeed when it describes the

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 17. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.

paranoid character — read any one of them, he says — “you will see the most wonderful descriptions of the behavior of everyone” (19).

On the other hand, what *is* fascinating to Lacan about delusion or paranoia is that there is a fertile moment that becomes, for the psychotic person, a frightening fall into madness. In what composes the delusion, we can find certain elementary phenomena whose composition, motivation, and thematization, have the same “structuring force” as a whole and in its parts. There is a nucleus, a “parasitic point” inside the personality, around which the subject constructs something that is “destined to envelop and enclose it like a cyst, and, also attempts to integrate it, explain it” (19). The delusion reproduces itself and therefore reproduces its own constitutive force, meaning that its structure is “irreducible to anything other than itself.” It is this self-generative force that Lacan feels has been so profoundly misrecognized.

Truth then, in the case of paranoia, is not hidden as it is neurosis. The paranoia is provided with the elements of its own understanding, and in essence becomes a question of understanding — that it understands, how it understands, what it understands, meaning that meaning is referred to as such: “What is the subject saying, specifically at a certain period of his delusion? That there is meaning. What meaning he doesn’t know, but it comes to the foreground, it asserts itself, and for him its perfectly understandable” (21). Even when what is understood can’t entirely be articulated, it is clear that it is understood. You are always within the reach of understanding, and this is when illusion starts to emerge — “since it’s a question of understanding, we understand. Well, no, precisely not” (21).

It is for this reason that much of Lacan’s contribution to psychoanalytic praxis is “against understanding” or oriented towards what he called “non-knowledge.” The certainty with respect to meaning of the paranoiac is precisely not the position of the psychoanalyst. All the tropes and idioms concerning the value of “not knowing” and “tolerating ambiguity” file in here, but I think Lacan’s point is more radical. The original synthesis of the ego, what we call primary narcissism, makes that ego an alter-ego, makes the ego other. This alienation means that human desire is constructed around a center which is the other in so far as it gives the subject unity, and the object is the object of the other’s desire.

Once the subject is a speaking subject, this other becomes Other capital O, meaning that meaning is *also* alien — language being Other to us,

something that is imposed upon us from the outside. If paranoid knowledge is knowledge founded in an original egoic alienation, founded on the rivalry and jealousy of the symmetrical relation between other and other, ego and ego, it is only this third, the Other, language and the symbolic, that intervenes in order to overcome this rivalrous and competitive ground. "Speech is always a pact, an agreement, people get on with one another, they agree — this is yours, this is mine, this is this, that is that" (39). But the aggressive character of primitive competition leaves its mark on discourse.

Fascinatingly, Lacan points out that when Freud says that the paranoid "loves his delusion as himself" (254), you cannot fail to hear the reference to the biblical command to "love thy neighbor as thyself" both in the sense of the pact and the rivalry that is just below the surface. Indeed, it is the sentence "I (a man) love him (a man)" that comes to form the grammatical tenses of the psychoses for Freud — paranoia, where the verb is negated such that I don't love him, I hate him, he hates me, making up the persecutory phenomena; erotomania where the object is negated, I don't love him, I love her, she loves me, marking the insistence of the eroto-manic delusion; delusional jealousy where the subject is negated, I don't love him, she loves him, knowledge of motivations of the object of love; and finally megalomania which negates the entire sentence, I don't love him, I don't love anyone, I love only myself.⁵ This last megalomaniac sentence, to a certain extent, is true of the entire structure of psychoses, which is why Freud called them, at one point, the narcissistic neuroses or narcissistic psychopathologies.

While one might say that it is the narcissism, the delusion of grandeur, that is the most operative in the structure of the psychoses, Lacan is quick to make a subtle and necessary distinction. The problem really concerns the "he" of the "he hates me," which Lacan says is a signifier, too primitive, that appears in the external world (Schreber's rapist who becomes the "fleeting-improvised-men" [274] that haunt the world around him). What we are seeing is that "in effect, this *he* is multiplied, neutralized, emptied, or so it seems, of subjectivity. The persecutory phenomenon takes on the character of indefinitely repeated signs, and the persecutor, to the extent that he is its support, is no longer anything more than the shadow of

⁵ See Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia," SEXXII, 3-82.

the persecutory object” (90). He, Lacan says, is the most primitive signifier. We have no idea what it signifies and because of this, it is (or has been), quite strong.

This last statement is profound, not only because it bears in it the famous statement of Freud’s regarding melancholia — “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego”⁶ — but it also indicates the axis around which the contemporary question we have about men, masculinity, the return of white supremacy from incels to Jordan Peterson to Trump, seem to turn, together with the counter-attack embodied in the #MeToo movement. The “he” is being multiplied, neutralized, *and* emptied of subjectivity. There is an attempt to render “man” nothing, much as he becomes the ‘sign’ or ‘shadow’ of the persecutory object, the Absolute subject. Man is considered at once synonymous with the substance granting of Patriarchy and absolutely fragile, empty. There is an increasing insistence on the meaning of what a man is, despite the emptiness or stereotypy of these meanings, perhaps because the point is to empty or neutralize it as a signifier.

The pact between people with respect to speech, one that allows for agreement and difference, feels at a highpoint in its erosion. We also seem saturated with volatile questions that disorient, are given to lashing-out, kinetically caught in a spiral of demand. At the same time, we see a rise in discourses that purport to understand with certainty, that give the meaning of meaning, even if that meaning is about what is fake, who is liar, what needs to be brought to justice. I think my patient’s focus on “belief” here is the hinge point between the insistence of a question and the appeal to certainty.

Fascinatingly, Lacan immediately moves into a discussion of hysteria. He says we need to distinguish between paranoid moments in hysteria and paranoia itself, since they most certainly both involve the question of psychical appraisal (if I may put it this way) of the question of “he” and the “he hates me” that is nonetheless present in the “I love him.” Also, what this has to do with “The Woman” and women.

⁶ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” SEXIV, 249.

Hysteria revisited through paranoia

Lacan takes us quickly to Freud's Dora⁷ whose analysis turns around the question of her object of love that she keeps carefully shrouded. It is famously Freud's misrecognition of who her true object of love is that led to the case's failed cure and early termination. Lacan begins:

The history, as you know, is that of a minuet for four characters, Dora, her father Herr K and Frau K. Dora in fact uses Herr K as her ego, in that it is by means of him that she is effectively able to support her relationship with Frau K.... It's only Herr K's mediation that enables Dora to sustain a bearable relationship. While this mediating fourth person is essential for maintaining the situation, this is not because the object of her affection is the same sex as herself [I (a woman) love her (a woman)], but because she has the most profoundly motivated relationship of identification and rivalry with her father, further motivated by the fact that the mother is a person completely obliterated in the parental couple (91).

This is how Lacan understands the instigating event that led to a disequilibrium that developed into a persecutory syndrome with respect to her father. It is the scene by the lake when Herr K attempts to seduce her that is important — and mind you, this case runs like a #MeToo situation, with Herr K sexually coercing young house-maids, with him pressing his erect penis into Dora when she was a young girl, with him threatening her and keeping the keys to her room, and turning the tables on her, saying she was an impure girl who would not have garnered his affection. We could see this not simply as a trauma or series of trauma, but a trauma that is situated as a trauma by virtue of a “fertile” moment tied not to events, but in fact Herr K's saying to Dora, “My wife means nothing to me.” “Everything,” Lacan says, “then happened as if she had answered to him — So, what can you be to me, then?” (91). The “nothing” appears again. This time as something she sees coming from the man about women, to which Dora will make her reply — “you are nothing to me.”

Dora, who had been complicit in the arrangement of this little quadrangle of people, suddenly began making demands, declaring that her

⁷ See Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” SEVII, 1-122.

father wanted to “prostitute her and surrender her to Herr K in exchange for maintaining his ambiguous relation with the latter’s wife” (91). Freud even remarks that she herself understood that this was somewhat of an exaggeration, but that she could sometimes think of nothing else, including separating her father from his mistress. Freud calls this a super-valent thought designed to block out all others, designed to obscure the truth. This is important for understanding the kind of demands around allegations that can arise in a treatment.

Lacan’s contention is that some kind of distance that had helped Dora collapse, and her paranoid thoughts were designed to re-establish a necessary distance. Sometimes this distance took actual form as compulsively running away from these three figures, at other times by dreaming of revenge against her father and separating him from his mistress, or, eventually, after taking some distance from the affairs, desiring to establish the “truth” of what was taking place amongst the four parties, who didn’t want to fully acknowledge what was going on.

The question of distance is important for Lacan when it comes to ego-ego relations which boil down to an “it’s either me or him” — this impossible rivalry that seems like an apt description of our two-party political system at this point. But what is this distance? In the animal kingdom, it appears in relation to the image of the other, and Lacan points to the fact that there is a threshold where the animal immediately has to decide if the other is like oneself, and also whether they are an enemy or a potential mate. There is always a threshold where the image of the other is taken in.

Beyond the threshold, the animal could care less. Sometimes, he says, there is a fascinating in-between point, just shy of the boundary, where a decision can’t yet be made, where the erotic manifestations of negativity are put on full display — the stickleback fish digs holes, birds preen, some animals bury themselves in the ground or decorate and tend to nests, while others deploy a decoy of some kind or another to buy time. It’s a fantastic moment of displacement! This mechanism of displacement, this erotic negativity that “impregnates his surroundings” is as close as we get to the signifier in the animal kingdom, what arises there to mediate a question about the other — who are they? what do they want? What do I want?

Lacan returns to hysteria and goes into a famous case of male hysteria that involved a pregnancy fantasy: “What is at issue for our subject

is the question — *What am I?*, or *Am I?*, a relation of being, a fundamental signifier. It is to the extent that this question was aroused as symbolic, and not reactivated as imaginary, that the decompensation of his neurosis was triggered and his symptoms became organized. Whatever their qualities, their nature, the material from which they are borrowed, his symptoms have the value of being a formulation, a reformulation, or even an insistence, of this question” (170). It turns out the question for this patient that insisted in his symptoms concerned procreation — What is creation? Can I procreate? And while the patient takes up a feminine position as part of his insistence on the question, Lacan is quick to contrast this with Schreber for whom, while he also felt as if he was to become God’s spouse and repopulate the world, it wasn’t a question.

For Schreber, it was an answer. And the answer was “he” or “God,” in the place where the subject vanishes in the projection. The subject disappears behind the grand “he”: “In the same way that Aristotle declared that one must not say, *Man thinks*, nor, *The soul thinks*, but, *Man thinks with his soul*, we shall say that the neurotic asks his neurotic question, his secret and muzzled question, with his ego. The Freudian typography of the ego shows us how a hysteric, or an obsessional, uses his or her ego in order to raise the question, that is, precisely in order not to raise it” (174). So what is the woman-hysteric asking? Her question is — what is it to be a woman? And in so far as she complains about men, or a man, it is because of an identification with him due to a fundamental dissymmetry in the paths of the little girl and the paths of the little boy with respect to the primary object — namely, the mother. But Lacan, who isn’t going to give in to some kind of anatomical-gender essentialism, is quick to point out that what Freud is speaking about is not a asymmetry in reality, but with respect to the signifier.

Dora is wondering — what is a woman? She is attempting to symbolize the female organ as such: “Her identification with the man, bearer of the penis, is for her on this occasion a means of approaching this definition that escapes her. She literally uses the penis as an imaginary instrument for apprehending what she hasn’t succeeded in symbolizing.... Becoming a woman and wondering what a woman is are two essentially different things. I would go even further — it’s because one doesn’t become one that one wonders and, up to a point, to wonder is the contrary of becoming one” (178). Wondering may even mean not being able to become anything, especially when there is an insistence on finding certain symbolic

coordinates for men, or a man, or fathers, or male leaders, in order to answer a question about one's own female sex.

Why? Because in the symbolic nothing explains creation, nothing explains life as such, and nothing explains sex, especially sexed reproduction — the signifier is incapable of providing an answer at any of these points or knots. One might suspect this is why Freud said that to wonder about the meaning of life is to already be neurotic. The signifier, essentially, signifies nothing, and the less it signifies, the more indestructible it is. In fact, the less it signifies the happier we are.

This is the real hinge of the difference between psychosis and hysteria, where the aim of psychosis is to insist on signification, on meaning. The neurotic on the other hand, while they can get close to paranoia, to insisting on an answer to their questions, the answer is there only as an insistence of the neurotic question itself. It is at this place that Lacan would like them to come to be: "There where it was, I shall become" — his way of translating Freud's *Wo es war, Soll ich werden*.

It is here where I have to ask after #MeToo: what can we say about this new iteration of the war between the sexes, these new manifestations of sex panic, new codes or morays for behavior meant to re-establish a pact of some kind? Isn't there a need for some kind of distance in this insistence on revealing the truth about the other? Has the "I love him" been thrown into negation under a "he hates me"? What about the proliferation and emptying of signification around the "he"? The hysterical insistence on a question about he and she and love and desire, which no doubt has profound effects, but is also in danger of collapsing into an answer, a paranoid answer, which arrives as an image of violence, presence, and the sheer negation of subjectivity.

Is then the question behind all of this — potentially hysterical — one that escapes, even as it structures these detournements? Is this not present in these treatments at the point where the subject vanishes into a demand, where the most critical points of signification around what it is to be a woman, to be a sexual woman, and to love, and even desire men, or women, were precisely bringing themselves to bear? Psychoanalysis gives the answer nothing, nothing real here, except what is Real, namely, the figure of separation. The question, reaching an intensity of insistence, a radical rejection of reality, is first an outbreak of persecutory super-valent actions and thought, and next — one can hope — a means to an end, or rather a means

to the end. Given that there is no answer, we have to invent something new here, at this degraded point that we have come to.

A moment of paranoia in a case of hysteria

In the late stages of an analysis, close to termination, a patient started rehashing memories of violent encounters with her father. She was furious with him and wanted to punish him with her absence, with the erasure of his last name, and with showing herself as breaking certain codes of Jewishness. At the same time, she was beginning a relationship with a man that was quite different from her previous ones—much more satisfying. There was a question about getting married again, and having children—something she had forsworn.

A transitory symptom arose. She had a very powerful orgasm, one unlike others, she said, and it had led to some confusion during sex. She thought that he had removed the condom, or that it broke and he didn't tell her. Even though this wasn't true—they checked—she then couldn't get the thought out of her head that he had lied to her somehow. She said she got the idea that he wanted to "cut and run." There was some feeling of him being too close, and yet also abandoning her, which terrified her and lay inside a feeling about him lying. Something was breaking.

Interestingly, she upped the ante on the wish that I would say that her father abused her. She recalled a difficult scene with him barging into the bathroom when she was a teenage girl, wrestling her in the shower. Was this physical abuse? Was there some sexual abuse that this memory was hiding? Or was it simply a moment that was too close? Inappropriate? Too over-excited? Could I just say what I thought this was. She was becoming more and more upset in session, saying that I was abusing her by not weighing in and threatened to leave the analysis.

I wondered with her why this was coming up now; stated that we had gone over these memories many times, in previous years, without this demand upon me and intense rage. I also asked what this had to do with where her current relationship was at, and this question which had been foreclosed, of her wanting to have children. She knew that she felt absorbed by this paranoid feeling that both he and I were doing something to her that

was embodied by this strange phrase — ‘cut and run.’ When she said it again, I heard cunt. She said she felt that we wanted to get off on her, use her, get our rocks off, and discard her like trash.

The night after this session, she spilled very hot soup on her vagina. She was in the shower washing, crying, burned, as if to return to the scene with her father. Holding herself in the shower, she felt hatred for herself as a woman thinking of herself as weak. She thought of the father inside of her, of her identification with him, at the same time that she was repudiating him, hating him for the power he had over her as a child. It is true that she returned to him again and again, or returned to her hatred of him rather and his imagined hatred of her — certainly a way of loving him. Maybe she would also like to cut and run? What does this have to do with ‘cunt’? The end of analysis was certainly beckoning.

Last words

Lacan, in the late seminar on Joyce titled *The Sinthome*, said that psychoanalysis had to avoid a slide into obscenity, into ‘hot flames’, and orient itself to the cold fire of the Real, somehow more sober, burning in the ‘non-rapport’ between the sexes. But you don’t get to the unimaginable temperatures of cold fire, this negativity, without first understanding its difference from heat that can be felt by virtue of its presence, imaginary or not.

This was the direction that analysis needed to be directed in its cure—the place where termination is felt as such. Something new might be invented at this place which he gave the name *sinthome*. Interestingly, while many think of the seminar on Joyce as about psychosis or paranoia, in fact there are many times that Lacan speaks about hysteria, about reminiscing, and about how Joyce’s epiphanies were structured like reminiscences, punctuating *Ulysses*, allowing him to write this book of all books and find a name for himself—literally become Joyce.

Become. I can’t find the right distance while I’m searching for the threshold. Erotic negativity looms as a work of cold fire. We are at such a moment. Hot soup. Blonde men. Hotdog. Sex panic. So many questions. Drowning in them and their answers. Too hot. What even is procreation at

this point in history? Why do it? What is a man for when there are sperm banks? Whatever. He is nobody. A shadow. She said he says, she is nothing. Down with the patriarchy. But the world is ending anyways?

There is a question about ends, including the end of analysis—this point of utter separation. Don't disappear. Leave the daydreaming behind. Stop transposing him for her, her for him. But, He *is* a liar. Lies allow him to cut and run in a world of enjoyment. Rape! Mistress! No rush here. Slow down.

It's already so hard to become anything these days, especially when nothing is the addendum to every line. Let's not hysterically materialize this hole. False hole. Some last words would be nice before they slide off the precipice into it. Do words last at all in an environment like this? Virtual ether. Volatile and flammable. The right place for a cold fire to begin burning. I'll let Lacan have the last say:

... there is no other answer to "What am I" at the level of the Other than "Let yourself be." And any hurrying in giving this answer, whatever it may be at the level of dignity, child or adult, is but something whereby I flee the meaning of this. What this adventure means, at the degraded point where we grasp it, is that what is at stake in every question formulated is not situated at the level of "What am I?" but at that of the Other, in the form that analytic practice allows us to unveil—namely, "What do you want?"⁸

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⁸ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII: Transference*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Polity, 2018), 241.