

LACAN AND THE PROBLEMATICS OF NARCISSISM

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Abstract

Narcissism, says Lacan, is an inherent characteristic of human subjectivity that rests upon the primary narcissistic identifications characteristic of the mirror stage. Unlike Kohut, who in his later works argued for the recognition of a particular nosological category, that of the so-called narcissistic disorders, Lacan asserts the opposite - *that all mental disorders are essentially narcissistic*. What distinguishes them is not the presence or absence of narcissism, but the different relations that the subject can develop to narcissism itself. Psychoticism and neuroticism are both narcissistic in their own ways. Put simply, all these disorders are essentially narcissistic, because what lies at their essence is the relationship between the imaginary and the symbolic order. Psychoticism leads to the loss of subjectivity in the realm of early non-integrated (narcissistic) identifications, while neuroticism is characterized by insufficient distancing. But in both cases, what is crucial is the fundamental transformation that marks the destiny of the subject, a transformation that the subject undergoes by taking the image of the other by means of the mirror stage.

Key words: Lacan, mirror stage, narcissism, neuroses, psychoses.

ЛАКАН И ПРОБЛЕМАТИКА НАРЦИЗМА

Апстракт

Нарцизам је, вели Лакан, неминовна карактеристика човекове субјективности која почива на примарним нарцистичким идентификацијама карактеристичним за стадијум огледала. За разлику од Кохута који се у својим познијим радовима залагао за признавање некакве специфичне нозолошке категорије, тзв. нарцистичких поремећаја, Лакан тврди супротно – *сви су психички поремећаји битно нарцистички*. Оно што их међусобно разграничава није присуство или одсуство нарцизма, већ различити односи које субјекат може заузети у односу на исти тај нарцизам. И неуротично и психотично су на себи својствен начин нарцистички. Сви наведени поремећаји су у својој суштини нарцистички, јер се у њиховој суштини налази однос између поретка имагинарног и симболичког. Психотицизам води губљењу субјективности у свету раних неинтегрисаних (нарцистичких) поистовећивања, док се код неуритичног јавља недовољно дистанцирање. Али, у оба сличаја, кључни је суштин-

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ски преображај који је судбина субјекта кроз усвајање слике другог, посредством стадијума огледала.

Кључне речи: Лакан, стадијум огледала, нарцизам, неурозе, психозе.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing Lacan's understanding of narcissism, taking into account only a short text found somewhere at the beginning of *Ecrits* (Lacan, 2004) would not suffice. That text was communicated by Lacan in July 1947 at a congress in Zurich, and in itself it is no more than a "communique" in the true sense of the word. Indeed, it is a mere sketch, an outline, a series of notes intended for the audience of the day - an audience which was presumably sufficiently familiar with Lacan's work to date. So at the very beginning we are giving directions, as Lacan is known to have been a very prolific author. There are other texts that we consider relevant for the subject, the one entitled "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis" from 1948, as well as notes on Lacan's seminars held in the 1950s (Lacan 1988, 2004).

Only by having all of the preceding in mind can we give necessary consideration to the *mirror stage* and the impact of this theory on psychoanalysis. In a nutshell, what Lacan brings into the fore is *identification*; identification as a process; as a series of successive identifications, rather than some more or less static state.

Lacan, in the mentioned Zurich communique, says:

"It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as *an identification* in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely the transformation that takes place in (*chez*) the subject when he assumes an image - an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity's term *imago*." (Lacan, 2004: 76)

This means that what Lacan wants to bring to our attention is the connection which in his view clearly exists between the concepts, but also the processes of identification and transformation. All that has been said so far brings up the question: *what is it that is being transformed through the process of identification and what kind of transformation is it?* Lacan answers the latter part of the question in the above quotation. As we have already said, what happens is a transformation that takes place "in the subject when he assumes an image." But in order to answer the first part of the question, we have to stop for a while and briefly address some more or less familiar, but certainly necessary assumptions and facts that Lacan refers to.

Let us start from the very beginning of the formation of the subject *in statu nascendi*. The child is born immature. Lacan stresses the

neurological status of the newborn baby. Because the process of myelination is not yet finished, the nervous system of the child is not *centralized* in the most proper sense of the word. The dynamics of neural discharge are distributed across the body, which further makes movement or sensation coordination impossible. Hence Lacan's conclusion that the baby's self is not whole, but fragmented (Lacan, 2004).

Then the mirror stage comes to the scene. A transformation takes place in the very essence of the human being, in his very foundation. By assuming the *imago* of a whole and caring other, most often the mother, the subject *in statu nascendi* abandons his primary chaos and seeks himself. He seeks wholeness and coordination in the compact gestalt of the Other. According to Lacan, his compensatory response is as follows: the child tends to compensate for his own impotence by looking for itself in the other. By doing so, it achieves imaginary wholeness of the self and the resulting body coordination. The imaginary coordination precedes body coordination. The imaginary coordination precedes the real one, that which is not based on identification, but on the maturation of nerve structures. This makes it easier for the subject *in statu nascendi* to be completely overwhelmed by his own chaos (Lacan, 2004).

The child invests his libido in the *imago of the other*, which then becomes a matrix within which the ego will develop in which the subject loses itself. The subject *in statu nascendi* loses himself because what lies at the heart of the matrix are a series of genuine *successive identifications with an other*. Therefore, according to Lacan, the ego becomes an introject - the object of narcissistic love (Lacan, 2004).

Alienation is thus at the very heart of the transformation. A newborn baby, who is yet to become a subject (hence the term *subject in statu nascendi*), becomes a subject, paradoxically, by alienating from himself. As something alien is taken as the basis for self-consciousness, there lies a loss in the innermost core of the subject (Lacan, 2004).

At the very root of the genesis of the ego the *imago of an other*. It represents the basic matrix on the basis of which, by a series of successive identifications, the ego is formed over time. The ego is essentially an other, or as Lacan often paraphrased Rimbaud: *I is an other*. The ego is an object rather than a subject (more precisely - the object of the narcissistic libidinal relationship); it is not a real force the psychoanalyst should put his trust in. Or rather, that's what Lacan thought. Being an imaginary creation, the ego is the place of oversight and alienation. In the ego, the truth of the subject is alienated from the subject, for he has lost himself in the other.

The subject who has passed through the mirror stage and assumed his mirror image as his own must, through a symbolic intervention of the Father, take his place in the symbolic order. That entails another alienation, but this time from the narcissistic, phantasmatic fusion

with the image of the other. The subject's psychoanalytic status - *normality, neuroticism, or psychoticism* - depends on the position that the subject will assume in the symbolic order, with all of these in relation to the primary narcissistic identifications.

The intervention of the Father, which, as noted above, results in the subject's entering in the symbolic order, is illustrated by the so-called Borromean knot representing the intertwining of three orders: real, imaginary and symbolic. The entire subsequent destiny of the subject can be represented and understood using that model (Jevremović, 2000)¹.

Unlike Kohut (Kohut, 1978), who in his later works argued for the recognition of a particular nosological category – the so-called narcissistic disorders – Lacan asserts the opposite: that *all mental disorders are essentially narcissistic*. What distinguishes them from one another is not the presence or absence of narcissism, but rather the different relationships that the subject can develop in relation to narcissism. Psychoticism and neuroticism are both narcissistic in their own way. Put simply, all these disorders are essentially narcissistic, because what lies at their essence is the relationship between the imaginary and the symbolic.

The question then is to what extent the symbolic subject is independent from the narcissistic order of the imaginary. Absolute independence in that sense is clearly impossible. The point of intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic can represent the place where the neurotic symptom originates and puts down roots, in which case neurosis can certainly be said to have developed.

Neurosis is further characterized by the loss of the symbolic referentiality of a signifier, a functional unit of the symbolic order. The direct link between the signifier and the signified is broken, and the repressed signifier is shifted to the level of the signified. The signifier is replaced by the whole chain of new metaphorical-metonymic transformations of the original meaning. In this way the imaginary, narcissistic to a greater or lesser extent, disturbs the fluidity of the general flow of the symbolic.

LACAN AND THE NEUROTIC SYMPTOM

The ego says Lacan, is an element of the neurotic symptom. The neurotic, whether he/she is hysterical or obsessional, through the mediation of his/her ego raises a question (that is, more precisely, avoids raising it). The questions, in the case of a male hysteric, is: *Who am I? Am I a man or a woman? Am I capable of procreating?* Questions raised by women suffering from hysterical symptoms (like Freud's patient Dora) are: *How is it to be a woman? What is the female sexual organ like?*

¹ More on this cf. Jevremović P. (2000). *Lacan i psihoanaliza*. Beograd: Plato.

Dora's two dreams, Lacan goes on to say, are rather transparent in that respect. The man and the woman wondering *what it is to be a woman* (which may seem weird, to say the least), is a result of the dialectic of the imaginary and the symbolic in the Oedipus complex situation (Lacan, 1993).

Freud attributed the dissymmetry in the Oedipus complex in girls and boys to anatomical differences in the structure of the genital organs. This dissymmetry, says Lacan, is not caused by anatomical differences, but, as Freud's theory on the Oedipus complex reveals, the true root cause of this dissymmetry is located in the symbolic register, that is, it is the effect of the phallic signifier (Lacan, 1993). Lacan says:

There is no symbolization of woman's sex as such...In any case, the symbolization is not the same, it doesn't have the same source or the same mode of access as the symbolization of man's sex. And this is because the imaginary only furnishes an absence where elsewhere there is a highly prevalent symbol (Lacan 1993: 176).

For a woman, the resolution of the Oedipus complex is not accomplished by the identification with the mother (in a way symmetrical to boy's identification with the father), but by imaginary identification with the paternal object, which assigns her an extra *detour*. The prevalence of the phallic Gestalt during the mirror stage (which produces the Oedipus complex) forces the woman to make a detour via identification with the father and to follow the same path as the boy for a while (Lacan, 1993).

If for the girl, as much as for the boy, the castration complex has a pivotal role in the Oedipus complex, that is so precisely because the phallus is a symbol to which there is no equivalent, no correspondent. It is a matter of a *dissymmetry in the signifier* which determine the paths for the resolution of the Oedipus complex and results in the symbolic castration in the case of both sexes (Lacan, 1993).

In order for the (sexual) function of man and woman to be symbolized, it must be shifted (removed) from the domain of the imaginary and situated in the domain of the symbolic. It is a precondition for a man to be masculinized and for a woman to fully accept her feminine function.

The interweaving of the imaginary and the symbolic explains the role of the ego in the structure of the neurotic symptom. According to Lacan, in the case of Dora, Freud wondered *what Dora desired*, instead of asking *who desires in Dora*. Finally, Freud realized that in the quartet consisting of Dora, her father, Herr. K. and Frau K. – it was actually Frau K. that Dora was interested in. The fact that Frau K. becomes the object of Dora's desire is a consequence of Dora's identification with Herr K. Herr K is Dora's ego, her imaginary counterpart. Lacan says:

When Dora finds herself 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." (Lacan, 1993: 178).

The question raised by the male hysteric relates to a phantasy of pregnancy: *Am I or am I not capable of procreating?* That question, says Lacan, has to do with an *imaginary anatomy*, that is, specular identifications belonging to the imaginary register. The subject's ability to convey the question via language indicates that he is situated in the symbolic order. Questions *What am I?* and *Am I?* are located at the level of the Other.

LACAN AND THE OTHER

Unlike the neurotic subject, who reaches the level of symbolic mediation, the psychotic fails to do so. He fails to find support in the symbolic order which would enable him to distance himself from the narcissistic, the imaginary. While the neurotic succeeds, more or less laboriously, to distance itself from the imaginary, psychoticism does not. Due to the foreclosure of the Name of the Father, the psychotic subject drowns in the imaginary and gets lost in it.

A structural defect in the case of psychosis (which distinguishes it from neurosis) should be sought in the absence of the Name-of-the-Father in the place of the Other, that is, in the failure of the paternal metaphor. What is missing in psychosis is the primordial act of affirmation, *Bejahung*. According to Freud, *Bejahung* precedes negation, *Verneinung*, because it enables the registration of the repressed signifier in the text of the symbolic unconscious. As Freud's texts suggest, especially his Letter 52 to Flies, the primordial *Bejahung* bears on the signifier. In psychosis, the Name-of-the-Father is foreclosed. *Verwerfung* takes place, which further gives rise to a hole in the Other, the unconscious. "At the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is summoned... a pure and simple hole may answer in the Other" (Lacan, 2004: 207). The foreclosure of the signifier results in the subject being stuck in the narcissistic, mirror relation with the mother. This then "sets off a cascade of reworkings of the signifier... until the level is reached at which signifier and signified are stabilized in the delusional metaphor" (Lacan, 2004: 207).

In other words, in psychosis there occurs a fall into the imaginary and the loss of differentiation. In Schreber's case, topographical regression to the mirror stage results in phantasies of emasculation and being transformed into a woman.

For in the field of the imaginary, a gap had already recently opened up for him in response to the absence of the symbolic metaphor, a gap that could only find a way to be

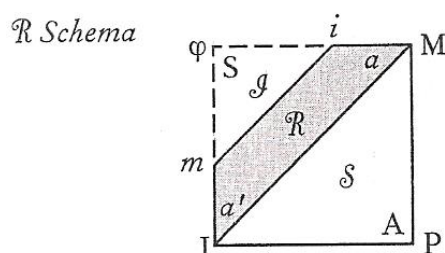
eliminated in the carrying out of *Entmannung* (emasculatation). (Lacan, 2004: 196).

Unable to be the phallus the mother desires, the subject becomes the woman that men desire.

Schreber's acceptance of his transformation into a woman by which mankind will be redeemed, that is, his megalomania, was not a strategy for coping with his homosexuality (as Freud thought).² Rather, his acceptance suggests that Schreber as the subject had died. In his *Memoirs* we find a number of indications of *the symbolic death* of the subject owing to the foreclosure of the phallic signifier. One such indication are the voices telling Schreber that he is "a leprous corpse leading another leprous corpse." This statement, which suggests the existence of the subject's counterpart, is an indication of his regression to the mirror stage. "A brilliant description, it must be admitted, of the identity reduced to being faced with its mental counterpart" (Lacan, 2004: 199).

In Schreber's case, says Lacan, the imaginary structure has two aspects. The first is Schreber's transsexual practice, that is, the pleasure he takes in looking at his image in the mirror, when "nothing on his body suggested that he was a man." The second is Schreber's feminisation leading to divine copulation. Lacan maintained that by means of these phantasies the subject sought to remove the disturbance in the triadic structure belonging to the imaginary order.

Lacan attempts to formalise this process in diagrams. First, he introduces the *R Schema*, which represents the outcome of normal development, and subsequently the *L Schema*, representing psychotic organisation.



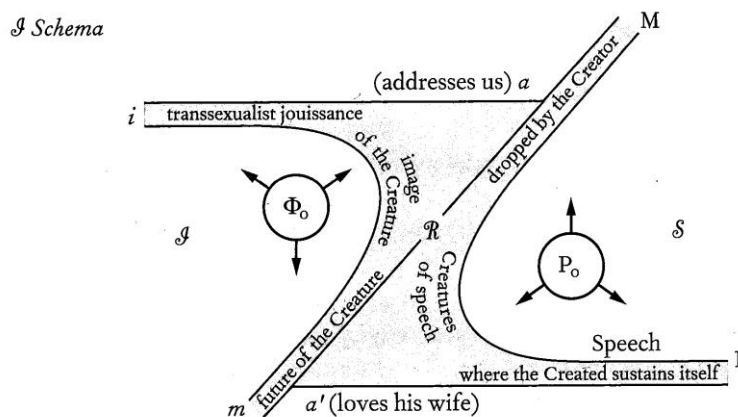
1. R Shema: A – the Other ; I – the imaginary; I – the ego ideal; M – the signifier of the primordial object (mother); P – position in the Other of the Name-of-the-Father; S – the subject; S – the symbolic; R – the real; F – the phallus (imaginary object); i – the specular image; m - ego; a – the object of the lower case a; a' – identification of child's ego with the ego ideal.

² More on Freud's understanding of the psychodynamics of paranoia cf. Freud, S. (2003). *Paranoja i homoseksualnost*. Beograd: Ćigoja.

According to Lacan, the *R* Schema:

Allows us to show the relations that refer not to preoedipal stages—which are not, of course, non-existent, but are analytically unthinkable (as is sufficiently obvious in Melanie Klein’s faltering but not altogether misguided work)—but to the pregenital stages insofar as they are organised by the retroactive effect of the Oedipus complex. (Lacan, 2004: 187)

When the Name-of-the-Father is foreclosed, it brings about a disturbance of triadic relations at the symbolic register level and a corresponding disturbance of triadic relations at the imaginary register level. Lacan presents this process in the *L* Schema:



The hole caused by the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father is represented in the schema by a hyperbole. On one side of the hole, at the level of symbolic relations, the ego ideal takes the place of the Other. On the other side of the hole, the mother’s place is substituted by the creative power of god, “the divine Other.” In the field of imaginary relations, it corresponds to a disturbance caused by the substitution of the subject for its specular image.

In this way, the phallus that has been foreclosed is reintroduced, in a disguised form, at the edge of this hole. This is manifested as the subject’s transvestite *jouissance* in front of the mirror and as Schreber’s phantasy of being transformed into a woman through which he will become a phallus for god (Lacan, 2004; Muller and Richardson, 1985).

Discussing the relationship between language and speech in various forms of pathology, Lacan argues that in psychosis *the subject is objectified in a speech which is devoid of the dialectic*, so it is *spoken instead of speaking*. For example, one night Ahriman, a lower god, addressed Schreber calling him: “Wretch!” In verbal hallucinations the

subject's speech is located in the object lowercase *a*, its imaginary counterpart, its image in the mirror (Lacan, 2004).

The collapse of the symbolic order leads to the collapse of borders and the fragmentation of the inner world. Its direct consequence is Schreber's constituting of a fragmented outside world and notions of the divine. In Schreberian theology, god is not a unique, but a divided being with an agglomeration of disparate, contradictory qualities. God is omnipotent and vulnerable at the same time. He is both the creator of all existing things and an egotistic being. The curious Schreberian god chooses Schreber both as the object of his destruction and as a being he will fertilise so that he and other human beings can attain eternal life. Schreber also described the splitting up of the soul of his doctor, Flechsig. Parts of his soul kept multiplying until they became such a nuisance that god struck them with a ray which only one or two of Flechsig's souls survived. Schreber's notion of god and Flechsig's soul, as M. Klein (1977) points out, is caused by the disintegration and projection of parts of the self. In this way, a narcissistic universe is created, made up of a myriad of objects merged with parts of the subject's self.

CONCLUSION

Thus, neurosis and psychosis draw their roots from the same reality, that of narcissism. They differ from each other in the structure of interrelations between the narcissistic and the symbolic. Narcissism, to stress once again, is an inherent feature of human subjectivity that has its roots in the primary narcissistic identifications characteristic of the mirror stage. Psychoticism leads to the loss of subjectivity in the realm of early non-integrated (narcissistic) identifications, while in neuroticism there is insufficient distancing. But, as we can see, in both cases the key element is the fundamental transformation that marks the destiny of the subject, which takes place in the subject when he takes an image of the Other by means of the *mirror stage*.

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ЛАКАН И ПРОБЛЕМАТИКА НАРЦИЗМА

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Резиме

За Лаканово разумевање нарцизма, потребно имати у виду текстове објављене у Списима и семинаре одржане педесетих година. Лакан скреће пажњу на везу између појмова поистовећивања и преображавања. До преображаја долази у самој суштини људског бића. Компензаторна реакција лежи у дететовој тежњи да компензује сопствену немоћ тражећи себе у другом. Субјекат у настајању свој либидо инвестира у имаго другог који потом постаје матрица у оквиру које ће се развијати Ја у којем субјекат губи себе (отуђујући се од себе). Ја по Лакану добија статус страног тела-објекта нарцистичке љубави. Субјекат посредством стадијума огледала, усвајајући сопствену слику у огледалу, посредством симболичке интервенције Оца, заузима своје место у симболичком поретку. Ово је још једно отуђење, овог пута од нарцистичке стопљености са имагом другог. Од положаја који субјекат заузима у симболичком поретку зависи његов статус: нормалност, неуротичност и психотичност. Кохут се залагао за признавање специфичне нозолошке категорије (нарцистички поремећај) док Лакан тврди супротно – сви су психички поремећаји битно нарцистички. Тачка пресека имагинарног и симболичког представља исходите неуротичног симптома. Неурозу карактерише губитак симболичке референце означитеља, веза између означитеља и означеног је прекинута, а потиснути означитељ се спушта на ниво означеног. На тај начин имагинарно ремети флуидност општег тока симболичког. Психотицизам, с друге стране, не успева да у симболичком поретку нађе ослонац који би му омогућио дистанцирање од нарцистичког. Психотични субјекат се, услед изопштавања имена оца, утапа у имагинарном и губи се у њему. Структурни дефект овде треба тражити у одсуству Имена Оца на месту Другог, у неуспеху очинске метафоре. Код психозе долази до пада у имагинарно и губитка диференцијације. Разматрајући однос између говора и језика у различитим облицима патологије, Лакан тврди да је у случају психозе субјекат одређен у говору без оног у самом говору дијалектичког, те да је он ту говорен наместо уместо да говори. Дакле, и неуроза и психоза у свом корену имају исту стварност нарцизма. У оба случаја, кључни је преображај који суштински одређује субјекта и то посредством усвајање слике другог, тј. посредством стадијума огледала.