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Book review: the subject of psychosis: a Lacanian perspective

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The subject of psychosis: A Lacanian perspective, by Stijn Vanheule, London & New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011, 208 pp., (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-230276642

Two recent Palgrave-Macmillan titles, Stijn Vanheule's *The Subject of Psychosis* and Calum Neill's *Lacanian Ethics and the Assumption of Subjectivity* have considerably raised the bar in the field of Lacanian studies. Both are expository texts, and both have the effect of illuminating key Lacanian postulates that have remained woolly and under-defined in volume after volume of introductory texts. I focus here on Vanheule's book, which is a systematic engagement with the topic of psychosis as it emerges in different theoretical forms throughout Lacan's long career. Vanheule's study is an invaluable handbook for psychoanalytic clinicians working with psychosis, and it proves particularly adept at explicating a series of vital concepts (the phallus, the Name-of-the-Father, foreclosure and the paternal metaphor amongst others), which prove crucial in grasping Lacan's early theorization of the causal factors underlying psychotic structure. In order to emphasize the strengths of Vanheule's exposition, I want to take up the strand of his exposition at the book's third chapter, where the author outlines the various theoretical components that Lacan assembles in the late 1950's as a way of understanding psychosis in relation to the non-assumption of the paternal metaphor.

As is well known, the question of desire and its potential signifiers lies at the heart of much Lacanian theorization and practice. The question of desire is apparent in the child's earliest experiences of their primary caregiver (whom we shall refer to here, for the sake of convenience as 'the mother'). The child is concerned with what draws the mother's attention, indeed, with what might signify her desire aside from and beyond themselves. The child is, in other words, preoccupied with this cognitive task of assigning meaning to the mother's presence and absence. Many questions emerge here: 'Why does she go away?', 'What draws her attention away from me?', 'How will I know when she will come back?' These are pressing concerns, even if not of an overtly conscious or obviously rational sort. There is thus a rudimentary sense of maternal desire, and yet there is no adequate answer, or 'working hypothesis' to account for what this desire might be. The lack of a clear signifier for the desire of the other is, furthermore, anxiety-inducing, certainly so inasmuch as

the little subject is in a position of an object that can observe the mother's coming and going, with little understanding or control of these events.

As Vanheule makes clear, the question of what might delimit and structure the mother's seemingly enigmatic whims becomes a vital question for the child. Here it becomes necessary to introduce two important Freudian-Lacanian concepts: the phallus, and the Name-of-the-Father. The phallus provides a working hypothesis of what it is the mother wants. Initially this is a somewhat vague object, a sketchy image, hence the idea of the 'imaginary phallus' – something that connotes the mother's desire, and that is often, although by no means exclusively, associated with the mother's partner. One should immediately stress however that this 'object' or image changes, it is never static, never encapsulated by one single thing, because the mother's desire or, indeed, her lack, which amounts to much the same - varies, even if certain apparent patterns or consistencies may be detected. Also worthwhile stressing here is that the child itself – depending of course on the circumstances of its birth, family and parental care – seems at times able to occupy this imaginary position, as image of the mother's desire, even if this is never for quite as long as the child might ideally like.

What Lacan terms the Name-of-the-Father refers to the influence of cultural and social law within the family, something which is often, particularly in patriarchal societies, associated with the actual figure of the father. Given that Lacan thinks of the Name-of-the-Father as a *signifier* – and a crucial one at that, it is in many ways the cornerstone that anchors the symbolic order and enables it to function – this paternal function need not be held by someone that we would recognize as a father in the most literal sense. Vanheule is quick to qualify the Lacanian concept of the father:

the father is...a symbolic function to which all group members – mother, father and child – are subjected. It provides the human beings with an internalized compass of culturally and socially viable principles, and facilitates understanding of the (*m*)other as well as the behaviour of *significant others*.... the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father principally names the desire of the mother...and by doing so, the position of the child is elucidated (p. 61).

The paternal metaphor thus names the process of a very particular substitution, namely that of the desire of the mother for the Name-of-the-Father. It is worth underlining the vexing and enigmatic quality of the desire of the mother which is only temporarily stabilized with the hypothesis of the 'imaginary phallus' something which proves an impermanent and ultimately unworkable 'solution' to the problem at hand. The Name-of-the-Father is what comes to supplant – indeed, to *repress* – the desire of the mother; it may be understood as the emerging function of naming and prohibition that introduces and sustains social law within the family. Henceforth, the mother's desire, which to reiterate, is strongly repressed (at least in non-psychotic subjects); it is thoroughly over-written by that conduit of social and cultural norms that Lacan dubs the Name-of-the-Father. We come to appreciate thus Lacan's terminological choice in referring to the *paternal metaphor*, in which the naming and prohibiting function of the symbolic agency of paternity comes to operate. In short: it is now the Name-of-the-Father, rather than the endless questioning of the mother's desire, that becomes the 'navigational system' through which the rules and designations of desire are negotiated.

Importantly, the phallus – increasingly less a single idealized object or image, and ever more a *signifier* of what the mother and others desire – is still a part of this picture, but it operates now in the context of the symbolic domain, in which rules of cultural exchange and the function of names and social roles becomes increasingly clear and refined. Clearly, all of this represents a sea-change for the functioning of desire; desire is now structured and informed by the symbolic, which means by the rules of exchange, the taboos, roles and key signifiers of the social group in which the subject finds themselves. In an exemplary passage, worth quoting at length, Vanheule specifies this operation and its various ramifications:

the Name-of-the-Father substitutes [for]... the Mother's Desire, and leads to the creation of new signification...the paternal signifier comes as a substitute for the maternal signifier and, in this process of substitution, desire is subjected to the broad context of the Symbolic, that is, to the structure and exchange of the social group. The Name-of-the-Father is the signifier of culture and taboo by means of which cultural taboos...are imposed as the context within

which the subject and Other interact. By replacing the signifier of maternal desire with the Name-of-the-Father, maternal desire loses its enigmatic quality. Henceforth it is a signifier that can be interpreted in terms of the commonly accepted ways people relate to each other. The paternal signifier incorporates the maternal signifier in the Symbolic and subjects it to law...the signifier of maternal desire is integrated in a normative discourse on how people should interact (p. 60).

One shouldn't of course delimit the ramifications of this operation simply to the familial domain. The instalment of the paternal operation has wider and more global effects, enabling the subject as it does "to understand what motivates human interrelations in general, and maternal desire in particular" (p. 61).

It is to Vanheule's credit that he is clear and specific in outlining that most enigmatic of Lacanian concepts, the phallus. He is likewise adept in explaining what is entailed in 'phallic signification'. The dimension of the Other is of considerable importance in this respect:

The Phallus should...be interpreted...in terms of desire...the confrontation with the Other quite brutally opens the dimension of desire in the subject. At first this dimension is puzzling, but with the Name-of-the-Father this confrontation produces the assumption that something must be causing desire. Phallus is the conceptual name Lacan gives to this presumed cause; the Phallus is the signifier the speaking subject searches for in pursuit of that which causes desire (p. 65).

[The Phallus, however, is a kind of negativity]...the signifier people search for in a Sisyphus-like way... As people search for what it is that determines desire, identification with signifiers or traits detected in the other takes place – signifiers that are seen as indications of that which causes desire. These symbolic identifications mark subjectivity. They make up the arsenal or signifiers that will be mobilized when questions of existence come to the fore. These signifiers can be thought of as phallic to the extent that they stand in for the ever known Phallus" (p. 65)

The phallus then, always necessarily linked to assumptions of what causes desire, indeed, to the signifiers of the desire of others, is a kind of mapping device. The endless search for and sensitivity to these various and often counter-posed trajectories of desire is never-ending, and it provides a means of coordination, a way of reading others and their various intersecting roles and directions within a social system. Understood in this way, as a symbolic function, precisely as signifier of desire, the phallus can stabilize the existence of the subject who is adept at reading signifiers of the desires of others and locating themselves accordingly. Such activity – and this is how I understand ‘phallic signification’ - provides a continually re-traced map, a complex network of criss-crossing hypotheses of desire with which we can place ourselves, gain our subjective and desiring coordinates in relation to that of others.

We can reformulate the above in slightly different terms (and here I paraphrase Vanheule’s lucid explanation). Each subject, whether neurotic or psychotic, is faced with a similar existential question: ‘Who am I?’, closely followed on by another, which questions one’s relation to the desire of the Other: ‘What do you want from me?’ Clearly, no immediately obvious answer to this question can be posed. The basic question can be broken down however, into three related questions concerning firstly, one’s sex; secondly one’s ‘contingency of being’; and thirdly ‘relational signifiers of love and procreation’. As Lacan explains, these key questions involve deliberation on the nature of one’s ‘sexed’ identity; on life and existence, and their meaning in relation to the prospects of death; and to bonds with others, be it in relations of love, parenthood and so on. This takes us to a cardinal distinction between neurosis and psychosis. For whereas

the instalment of the paternal metaphor introduces the [neurotic] individual to the social order, and via identifications even makes him a ‘co-owner’ of its conventions, such evolution is absent in psychosis and as a result the individual remains an outsider (p. 68)

As Vanheule argues, the installation of the Name-of-the-Father means that cultural conventions function as a background by means of which questions of desire and identity make sense. “In psychosis the absence of the paternal metaphor implies that the subject is not named in relation to maternal desire; in relation to questions of existence a gaping hole remains” (p. 68). That is to

say, the questions of ‘who am I?’ and ‘what do you want from me?’ cannot be answered in the conventional way. In psychosis then “[the] Name-of-the-Father fails to function as a basis for the individual to articulate a position as subject in relation to others” (p. 69).

Vanheule continues by noting that a consequence of this situation – the psychotic non-installation of the Name-of-the-Father – is that it becomes extremely difficult to make reliable interpretations of other people’s intentions. Drawing conclusions regards how to manage and position one’s self in terms of the desire of others is thus a terribly complicated and fraught process. Bluntly put: “no ‘phallic’ conclusions can be drawn about the desire of the other...In psychosis, the confrontation with the other produces confusion, as do intimate relationships” (p. 69).

This is not only an articulate and concise description, but one which seems absolute apposite regards clinical work with certain forms of psychosis (particularly, one might add, with schizophrenic forms of psychosis). In such cases the desire of others seems often to veer between absolute opacity and voracious and toxic forms which threaten to engulf them. The severity of this state of affairs is stressed by Vanheule:

the question of personal identity – ‘Who am I?’ – remains unanswered... Foreclosure [of the Name-of-the-Father] leaves ‘black holes’ at the level of a person’s identity...a framework for addressing questions of existence remains lacking...there is little to hold onto vis-à-vis one’s identity as a man or a woman, how to deal with love and sexuality, how to give shape to intergenerational relationships, or the purpose of life in the light of death...these questions cannot be answered in phallic terms, that is, in terms of what renders a person desirable in relation to others (p. 70).

This is a poignant conclusion, and one which does a brilliant job of conveying in a straightforward way of immediate relevance to clinical psychoanalytic practice, that which is densely and evasively compacted in Lacan’s own labyrinthine prose.

References

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