

Schreber's Lack of Lack¹

Charles Melman

This paper deals with the problematic relation in psychosis to what Lacan calls "the big Other". Referring to contemporary clinical examples, it argues that the world's loss of meaning in Schreber was due to a lack of the lack that causes desire and that this was precipitated when he had no Name-of-the-Father to which to refer himself and he lost his subjective domicile in the locus of that lack, the big Other.

Keywords: psychosis; Name-of-the-Father; lack; Other; Schreber

Thank you for your invitation. I would like to compliment Jane, Helen and Barry for their very interesting remarks, and I will try to add a few elements.

I think first of all that the Irish know in their very bones what the Name-of-the-Father is – the father is above all a name, a signifier. It is Irish (*sic*). The Irish know how the lack of this signifier did not allow them to be recognised in the field of reality, put men in the position of being emasculated and women of not being honoured, and how they were obliged to repress their original tongue.

The Name-of-the-Father, as we shall see presently, always has essential consequences, and in particular in this precise case to people or fill the unconscious with a whole language, a whole tongue, not of repressed elements, but a positive language that has been given to us. And that situation has many consequences because, at the same time, the place of the Other is no longer Other, but is inhabited by our ancestors and, as we know, it is from that place that we receive our own message. So then if the Other is not a foreign language or an original tongue, what is it? We encounter the dimension of the Other every time we lie on a couch and begin to speak.

¹ This extemporaneous talk was given at a meeting in April 2008 at Milltown Institute, Dublin, where Helen Sheehan, Jane Nolan, Barry O'Donnell and Caitriona Brownlea gave an account of their cartel's work on psychosis. The consecutive translation by Cormac Gallagher has been slightly modified by him for publication here.

What is the essential difference between psychotherapy and psychoanalysis? In psychotherapy I am addressing myself to an interlocutor. When I lie on the couch, I do not know who I am talking to. I do not know what I want of him. I do not know what I want for him. I do not know who he is. And nevertheless he is essential, because he is the one who organises my whole demand and also all my symptoms.

What Freud discovered with the notion of the unconscious is that in each one of us there is a text that we do not know anything about, and whose messages nevertheless organise our lives, organise our desires, organise our thinking, organise or order our destiny, or fate. That power is constituted simply or uniquely from a text whose elements appear in consciousness when they are interpreted and allow me to understand what my desire is. This unconscious structured like a language, to take up Lacan's formula, is not a given positive tongue.

The great discussion between Freud and Jung is that Jung said that everyone had in his unconscious a paternal reference that was not the same for everyone. But Freud said that the structure of the unconscious, when it is not linked to historical circumstances which have led to repressing the Name-of-the-Father, that unconscious has no specific paternity and that is why Lacan calls it the "Other". Not the "stranger", but a text that is structured like a language which is not one of the positive languages with which we communicate and which does not have a fixed, determined paternal reference.

A French psychiatrist called De Clérambault, who was Lacan's master – Lacan says he was his only master in psychiatry – has described a symptom that is not rare among psychotics which is called "mental automatism". Mental automatism can be seen without hallucinations simply by the fact that, in the case of the sick person, thoughts unfold in a spontaneous and automatic way and are imposed on the sick person at the same time as he articulates them. But what obviously interested Lacan in this symptom was to see how this chain of unconscious language was liable in the case of psychosis to manifest itself as such, and the way in which along another path Freud was able to show that everyone has as a determining factor this unconscious chain which is the place from which he is commanded or ordered.

In a few weeks I have to go to the city of Fez in Morocco for a cultural meeting and the theme I am proposing to them in Morocco is: "Why do I love a text?". This is a phenomenon that we see in our culture. We know that Greek culture was organised or referenced to the text. It was not a written text. Homer was not written. But all Greeks recognise themselves with reference to and love for this text. We know indeed how our religion is the religion of the Book. Of course we tend to think that it should have an author, but what we love above all is the text. And we fight about one or other term in this text. We see precisely in a country like Morocco that the reference to the text is not only a cultural but a political reference and we can do nothing about that. I am saying this to refer these phenomena to the dependence of each one of us on the text of our unconscious. And in the transference it is the supposed author of this text that we love or hate.

Before evoking Schreber more directly, which is today's theme, I would like to make a remark about a term we often use but which remains obscure: the term "castration". At the end of his life, Lacan said he did not even know what it meant, but we should all the same make an effort to try and understand what it means. Castration means that because of our submission to the laws of language, because it is the waste products of language that fill our unconscious, that people our unconscious, and because of our dependence on the laws of language, we are confronted with the system of signifiers that ceaselessly refer from one to the other, organising our desire around an object which, because of the phenomenon of the signifier, is never there. Because all we have to satisfy us is the signifier.

When Jane was talking a few minutes ago about her patient, she spoke about the phenomenon of perplexity: what is perplexity? Perplexity begins when people no longer know the meaning or the sense of words or the meaning of things. I no longer know what I need to say or what I want to say, or what the word represents. And this phenomenon of perplexity occurs when the meaning of language, which is established by the lack of the object of desire, when this meaning starts to vacillate, in other words when castration is missing, when the deficit of this missing object, when the lack of this lack makes itself felt. Castration is a matter of our organising the meaning of our world around the lack of the object that causes our desire. Perplexity comes then when we have a lack of this lack.

A clinical example: there are phenomena that we know well, for example, puerperal psychosis. We have all met, in the clinic, women who have just given birth and who are so happy to have their baby and who become psychotic. It sometimes lasts a few weeks and generally it diminishes spontaneously. It is almost an experimental psychosis. When the object that was the foundation of the desire of this woman is there, there is produced this unexpected phenomenon, a moment of psychosis.

Castration gives the symbolic dimension of language. This means that every signifier is a symbol of what? The symbol of a lack. In other words, never will my desire be fulfilled, except in circumstances that I have mentioned which are very particular ones. So the symbolic role of language is very precise. The signifier is the symbol of the lack of my desire being satisfied. When people spoke to Lacan about the rights of man, he said the only right of man was to desire in vain. This is an essential point and which clearly concerns – I am not going to develop it here – the whole question of the end of the psychoanalytic treatment.

I would like to bring up again, before going on to President Schreber, the question so well articulated by Barry. This is the question of “the place”. Because what can be called the domicile of the subject is, in the big Other, the locus of that lack, the place where the Other fails to respond to my desire. This constitutes the stability of the world of home, of “home sweet home”. Today there is a new symptom that you often see among the young. They refuse to have a home. They never know whether the place where they are is their place. They refuse a domicile, a home, as if they have refused to understand that to dwell in a fixed home, which is not just a space, but also a subjective domicile, is to accept this lack in the Other, which is the same as accepting castration.

A young doctor set up with his wife and his children in a lovely place. He had a lovely clientele and everybody loved him. He was a good doctor, nice. He could not stay at home. He loved his wife and his children. So he went off replacing doctors hundreds or thousands of miles from there. And in those new places, since he was a very good worker, they used to say “why don't you come over and set yourself up here?”. And once they said that, he cleared off. I have known many adult men who are inhabited by this same symptom, that is, the refusal of a fixed home. And the effacing or erasing of this domicile marks one entry point into psychosis.

What was one of the features of Schreber? It was his fear of what he called "soul murder". In other words, that his subjectivity would disappear, would vanish. In the big Other, the place that he occupied would be abolished. You can easily imagine his anxiety at being present to that perpetual threat to his own existence. Which Lacan calls, as you know, "existence" because it is in his external place that the subject holds himself, can hold his place.

One of the questions that Schreber asks us is the condition of the outbreak of the psychosis. He becomes mad, this very brilliant man, an accomplished jurist who is very much appreciated by his superiors. He becomes mad at the very moment when he is named to a place, President of the Appeal Court, where he no longer has a superior. He no longer has an authority to refer to. It is as if having reached this position, what Lacan isolated as the paternal agency had disappeared for him because he now occupied the supreme place. For him, it was at the moment when this superior authority disappeared that his outbreaks of insomnia began.

Insomnia is a very frequent phenomenon that we do not study that much. Insomnia begins when the relationship you have with the big Other has become problematic or uncertain. Because when I close my eyes and I accept this abolition of my consciousness, I am giving myself over or I am entrusting myself to the big Other. He is the one who is going to help me to get through the night. And we know – I am not going to go into the question of dreams – that what happens then puts him in an unfortunate or an unhappy relationship with the big Other. It could be for a banal reason: I have not finished my work or I have had some dispute with my surroundings or companions. I have not been able to explain myself to those around me as I wanted to, so I can get into a difficult spot. It can be difficult for me to confide myself to or to trust in sleep. That would be a very substantial field of investigation, but it is obviously not our subject today.

It does concern what is called the sudden death of very young children, "cot deaths". A very mysterious phenomenon. A baby who has no organic anomaly, full strength, just dies and we ask what happened. There are a whole series of domains on which we as psychoanalysts could do some very interesting work.

I know, for example, patients who have difficulty sleeping and sleeping tablets do not do anything for them. I give them a very simple recipe sometimes. If they have a tape or a disc, not of a song but of a voice, for example these books that are read by actors for people who are blind. They put on the disc and listen to this novel or this story. In other words, they go to sleep with this sympathetic or reassuring voice and material. I am giving you this recipe because it works. It works and it is not all that toxic.

Anyway, Schreber's psychosis begins with his insomnia. He can no longer trust the big Other, despite the considerable doses of chloral that Professor Flechsig was giving him. So here is another interesting question: what was happening between Schreber and Flechsig? Because there was a massive transference from Schreber onto Flechsig, Flechsig who appeared to Schreber not just as "the subject supposed to knowledge (*au savoir*)", in other words, the knowledge in the unconscious to which a subject is supposed. So subject of the unconscious. Why did this transference not have a positive impact on Schreber, since when a psychotic has a positive transference onto a doctor this already is a way into a possible treatment? No doubt because Flechsig had wanted too much to incarnate in reality this subject supposed to knowledge, not in the real but in reality. That was why he very quickly became a persecutor.

There are these marvellous phenomena in Schreber: several suns in the heavens. We could interpret it like this: in the Other there is not just one home but several places from which there is talk coming at him, and which illuminate the heavens. It could be an illumination for those of us who are monotheistic, in other words who are convinced that it is from one place in the Other that we are spoken to. What happens in psychosis is that it is from several places that the voices are addressed to the subject.

One more point to end with. As we know, Freud attributes Schreber's psychosis to a repressed homosexuality which, in his encounters with Flechsig, overwhelmed him. Lacan on the other hand makes Schreber's homosexuality a consequence of the psychosis and even of psychosis in general, because it has as a consequence that it excludes the patient from the field of reality and exiles him into this Other place which is also the place, the locus, in which femininity is sustained. I apologise because I cannot develop this point now. But there is this effect of the "push towards the woman (*pousse à la femme*)" which is proper to every psychosis, which can

be attributed to this exile in which the patient finds himself by having been sent into the place of the Other.

I have a few psychotic patients in analysis. Thinking of one of them, a very nice, intelligent young man, where this symptom, this push towards being a woman, is absolutely obvious. How does Schreber find an improvement in this condition all by himself? By accepting, as we know, the feminine position assigned to him by his psychosis because he is not able to refer himself to a Name-of-the-Father. And he accepts to be "The woman" with all the paranoid ideas of grandeur that are attached to this new status. To accept this feminine position he must ceaselessly verify by being dressed in female clothes and being in front of a mirror. As if, he explains, he was respecting in this way the order of the world, while he actually was respecting the order of his psychosis. But it is on that condition, in other words, of having found a home in the Other, that the voices calm down or even disappear and he finds a peace which seems to him to be synonymous with cure.

It is very likely, as we know, that Schreber owed a lot of his condition to the exceptional character of his own father who is a big cultural figure in Germany. As you know, around Berlin you always find these Schreber Gardens. The father was concerned with the moral and the physical education of German workers and he thought that to fill up their leisure time they should have a little bit of a garden to cultivate fruit and veg. And the father was also the originator of physical therapy, physical exercises booklets with which to teach children to sit up straight – obviously I have not read them – with a whole system of apparatuses that means that Schreber's father was much more an educator than a father. We know that every time the father finds himself in the position of being more an educator than a father, the problems for the son are difficult.

Before finishing now I would like to say how much this text of Schreber is an extraordinary psychiatric observation. It is a work of art and still has much to teach us. I spent some time translating this text from German to French. If you take the two texts, the German and the English one, which is very good, you will find yourself enriched at every page. And you will have to salute the courage of a psychotic who told us all his symptoms with a rational determination, a constant appeal to rationality that deserves to be saluted.

Are there questions, comments?

Tom Dalzell: Thank you, Dr. Melman, for your talk. Freud, it seems to me, in his Schreber-text is very clear that there is a difference between dementia praecox and paranoia because there are two different fixation points, autoeroticism and narcissism. In Lacan, because of the one mechanism of foreclosure, does he do away with the difference between schizophrenia and paranoia, or does he maintain the difference?

Charles Melman: There is an essential difference which is that thanks to paranoia someone can be cured of schizophrenia. That is to say, he finds, thanks to paranoia the uniqueness of the place that he can occupy and a coherent rational system to explain the phenomena that surrounded him. So we can consider paranoia as a type of defence or cure for schizophrenia. But, as we know, the paranoiac defends himself enormously against the supposed attacks on his sexuality. He is always exposed to homosexual threats. The original phenomenon in the Schreber case is that he is reconciled to the world by accepting to be a woman. And if one follows Lacan's conceptualisation with the opposition between the One and the *objet petit a*, we see that the paranoiac is definitively attached to being One, to being unique, to being the only One, to being the One to whom the others owe everything, while Schreber accepts the position of the *objet petit a*, which makes him an absolutely original and particular type of paranoiac.

Patricia McCarthy: When you say there that Schreber uniquely held this place of *objet petit a*, do you mean as a woman?

Charles Melman: Yes. He becomes the object of universal desire; the unique object who is going to fecundate humanity, the world; the universal mother.

Cormac Gallagher: In *The Centre Will Not Hold*, Elyn Saks, who is schizophrenic, tells of an interview with the nuns of Notre Dame, where she was looking for a job. She talked to them about Schreber wanting to be changed into a woman to convert the world. And one of the nuns said: "What's wrong with that?"

Charles Melman: Voilà! I think I will leave things at this point and I thank you for your attention and your questions.

Address for Correspondence:

*Charles Melman,
L'Association Lacanienne Internationale,
25 rue de Lille,
75007 Paris.*