

Ana Tomljenović, PhD candidate
Department of Comparative Literature
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Zagreb

Scientific delusions

Playing with the popular idea according to which the paranoid is a gloomy figure overcome by distrust¹, a man to whom the world is a great cause of concern, François Roustang, in the title of his paper, raises a clinically and theoretically relevant question: how to make a paranoid laugh? (Roustang, 1987). Although the dismal face of the diseased can seem an epiphenomenon, the case studies of Roustang's analytical experience indicate that the giggle of the patient is a necessary requirement: once the paranoid jokes at the expense of his own system of reasoning, i.e. once he has realised how comical he is with his self-importance and certainty, the psychoanalyst has successfully concluded his therapy (usp. *ibid.*, 709). However, in order to someday provoke the laughter in those who do not at all feel like joking around, the analyst needs, suggests the author, to start with self-ridicule – if he laughs at his own ideas and beliefs, including the most serious, scientific ones, there is a chance that in the future his patient will overcome the misconception that he has to be able to understand everything (usp. *ibid.*, 713). Otherwise, the psychoanalytic method cannot be effective because it is

¹ Lacan claims that a paranoid is described as „a nasty person, an intolerant one, a bad-humored type, proud, mistrustful, irritable, and who overestimated himself“ (Lacan, *S III*, 4).

no different from the paranoid structure of thought – in which the solution precedes the riddle and in which the answers are, although complex and deeply hidden, unfailingly correct – so the miserable patient remains imprisoned in his delusion that he gets the joke. Since the psychotic epistemic certainty resembles the scientific one so much – from their common intellectual greed characterized by the process of unmasking superficial illusions to developing, one way or another, founded claims that are afterwards taken as unquestionably valid² - psychoanalysts have from early on recognized their own sad-clever double in the paranoid.

Ever since Freud noticed that there is an uncanny similarity between the psychoanalytic scientific project and the psychotic configuration of knowledge, such as the one presented by Daniel Paul Schreber in his famous confessions entitled *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* psychoanalysis has, to a great extent, examined its epistemological dilemmas in the mirror of Schreber's systematically elaborated delusions. The fact that Freud identified in many respects with the German judge gone crazy³ is testified by his letter from the period when he was working on his paper *Psychoanalytic Remarks on an Autobiographically Described Case of Paranoia* in which Freud admits that he deems the imbalance of his own thoughts as entirely possible: „I am only Schreber, nothing but Schreber“ (Freud, cit. in Crapanzano, 742). Although in this discussion Freud did not fail

² Does psychoanalysis, Roustang wonders, not show symptoms of paranoia considering it „claims to have the last word in every discussion, the decisive explanation in every interpretation, the universal key to opening and closing every problem?“ (Roustang, 708).

³ The reason behind this partly stems from the fact that psychoanalysis, especially in its beginnings, seemed an imaginative folly, as convincing and provable as Schreber's supernatural world order.

to mention that he is aware of the „striking conformity“ (Freud, 66) between his theory of the libido and certain principles of the „theological and psychological system of Dr. Schreber“ (ibid., 13), he left it to others to assess whose research theses, his or Schreber's, belong to the domain of psychopathology:

„remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe“ (ibid., 67).

Relying on Freud's observation of the cognitive vicinity of the psychotic and the scientist, Lacan points to Schreber's enviable erudition and suggests that Schreber's method of interpretation seems well-known to him from analytical paradigms: „I would even say he's a good classical psychiatrist“ (Lacan, *S III*, 125). Moreover, in his programmatic semi-serious style of presentation, Lacan diagnoses the entire corpus of psychiatric studies about paranoid psychosis with paranoia. „It can almost be said“, he claims, „that there is no more apparent and visible discourse of madness than the psychiatrist's - and precisely on the subject of paranoia“ (ibid., 19). He does not, however, recognize a Schreberian handwriting only in those psychiatrists who made an inventory of symptoms with the aim of creating a neat template according to which, as in a jigsaw puzzle, their clinical meaning would be put together - Lacan deems the paranoid mechanism to be immanent to science⁴ insofar as it is reflected in the

⁴ Lacan claims there are „paranoid affinities between all knowledge of objects as such“ (Lacan, *S III*, 39).

investigative defence from uncertainty of knowledge, a defence with which any incentive for laughter is eliminated.

Judging by how Lacan describes its development, paranoia is set in motion by ignorance, the perception of lack in the order of the signifier – its trigger is „an initial experience of an enigma“ (Grigg, 58). The intellectual curiosity of the individual with a psychotic personality structure gradually intensifies to the overriding engrossment with the desire to untie the knot, to understand everything completely. However, the more he persists in his intention to comprehend what lies behind and beyond, the evidently feigned and curtailed, the symbolic plan of representation, his disposition worsens – and eventually all he is left with is to sullenly „attest to the existence of a defect in the order of the universe, a disfunctioning in the world.“ (Apollon, Bergeron, Cantin, 216). Having reached the same dissatisfying conclusion as the psychoanalyst – since „to be a psychoanalyst is simply to open your eyes to the evident fact that nothing malfunctions more than human reality“ (Lacan, *S III*, 82) – the paranoid refuses to stop at the psychoanalytic conclusion and decides to embark on the undertaking of reinstating the disrupted order. In order to „to repair the world of language“ (Apollon, 120) – that is ruled by a permanent disorder because the Thing is not in its place – the paranoid must lay the foundation of its structure, create an order of meaning of which the world is in dire need. Having discovered who and what is hiding under the symbolic delusion, the paranoid begins to apply the all-encompassing process through which he „converts nothing into something“ (Carr, 282) which is why he constantly introduces corrections

and amendments, tries to seal and smooth out the cracked surface of the signifying order. Within his system of thought, the entire symbolic knowledge is questioned and everyone is subject to reexamination, with the exception of the notion itself that meaning does exist⁵. Certain that he himself can clear everything up, the paranoid rarely opts for therapy, but, on the other hand, he writes frequently and comprehensively in order to present the new, other or underground knowledge that he laboured so hard to discover. Indeed, psychoanalytic reception has given exceptional significance to the paranoid, especially Schreber's discoveries. The importance of Schreber's autobiography does not manifest itself in the content of the knowledge that he presents in his papers, but in the lack-in-knowledge that the paranoia brings to light, „precisely that which other neurotics hide away as a secret“ (Freud, 3). Namely, the paranoid patients „want to reveal what cannot be revealed, what by definition persists in its opacity, but instead they unwittingly expose the fact that nonobject is inimical to critical exposure“ (Carr, 284). In other words, psychoanalytic theory has used Schreber's confessions as a valuable testimony of the other stage of knowledge, negative knowledge or non-knowledge, on account of which, after all, to all of us sober ones the world of language seems turned inside out.

Having demonstrated the flip- side of the impulse for comprehension, and to what extent, in its radical form, meaning can make us go astray, the clinical documents of Schreber's model of knowledge represent to Lacan a warning to every interpretation

⁵ As Lacan refers to Schreber's case, even when he doubts to what the sign refers, he is always entirely certain that it refers to something (usp. Lacan, *S III*, 78).

that it will – if it aims at being serious – get stuck in the paranoid process of turning over into meaning. This is why Lacan decided, as if he is at the same time struggling with a Schreber inside himself, to establish a psychoanalytic method of interpretation in opposition to the paranoid hermeneutical practice: he completely liberates it of the obligation to comprehend, even if it no longer belongs to the domain of science. „You understand, you are wrong“ (Lacan, *S III*, 48) – that was the telling warning of the teacher of the knowledge lost in advance, a teaching he named *linguisterie*. Namely, the counterpoint to the paranoid discourse of science is located, according to Lacan, in the discourse of hysteria, which „pushes knowledge to its limits“ (Wajeman, 85), to the inconceivable and inexpressible, repeatedly indicating that no answer can be the right one. The hysterical articulation of knowledge is most clearly evident in Lacan's paradoxical requirement through which the authority of the 1st person of knowledge is undermined: „I ask you to refuse what I am offering you, because that's not it“ (Lacan, *S XX*, 126). Combining hysteria and the science of language, Lacan's concept evokes – as suggested by the English translators Bruce Fink and François Raffoul, whose translation of the term is „linguistricks“ or „linguistrickery“ (usp. Lacan, *S XX*, 15) – a scientific approach to an immanently trivial subject: linguistic deceptions and tricks. In this way, psychoanalysis suggests that the language riddle, the one that haunts the paranoid like a plague and from which he hides behind his phantasmatic shield of certainty, has a funny side as well. Terrified by the idea that tricks of the symbolic effect of language represent a well played swindle, the paranoid tries to reify the lack-in-words, the lack

that irresistibly attracts clowns and poets. Of Schreber, namely, Lacan says: „while he may be a writer, he is no poet“ (Lacan, *S III*, 78).

According to Lacan, the discourse „characteristic of the registrar of paranoia usually blossom into literary production, in the sense in which literary simply means sheets of paper covered with writing“ (ibid., 77). Schreber's all-encompassing analysis was turned into a clinical document, not because its author is not a poet, but because he is scared to death by the uncertainty of the aesthetic impact of language. This is why Lacan, in an attempt to distinguish the psychoanalytic theory from the Schreberian script, was inclined to poetry. The self-declared „Góngora of psychoanalysis“ (Lacan, *E*, 468) – who admits to the influence of Mallarmé's poetry and Joyce's prose – forms his excessively manneristic expression through „the mixture of science and poetry“ (Nobus&Quinn, 78). More often than not, this has caused anger among his readership since it brings us to the paranoid impression that the author is intentionally concealing and hiding his true thought, that he refuses to convey his message clearly. However, as indicated by Lacan when he mentions the common expression „the word escapes me“ („le mot me manque“), we are wrong when we assume „that the word exists“ (Lacan, *S III*, 118). With his style of writing, Lacan is merely demonstrating what he supports in theory – he forces us to repeatedly stumble on incomprehension, to discover the non-knowledge and the non-seriousness of the world of language. He therefore transfers his teaching by subverting his 1st person authority: „when I told you things had to be taken seriously, it

was so that you would take precisely this point seriously, that you never take anything seriously“ (ibid., 83).

Bibliography

Apollon, Willy (1991) „Theory and Practice in the Psychoanalytic Treatment.“ In: *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, edited by Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher, New York and London: Routledge, 116-140.

Apollon, Willy, Danielle Bergeron, Lucy Cantin (2002) *After Lacan: Clinical Practice and the Subject of the Unconscious*, New York: SUNY Press.

Carr, Brian (2004) „Paranoid Interpretation, Desire's Nonobject, and Nella Larsen's *Passing*“ *PMLA* 119. 2., 282-295.

Crapanzano, Vincent (1998) „'Lacking Now Is Only The Leading Idea, That Is – We, the Rays, Have No Thoughts': Interlocutory Collapse in Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*“ , *Critical Inquiry* 24, 737-67.

Freud, Sigmund (2002) *The Schreber Case: Psychoanalytic Remarks on an Autobiographically Described Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)*, trans. Andrew Webber, New York: Penguin Books.

Grigg, Russell (1999) „From the Mechanism of Psychosis to the Universal Condition of the Symptom: On Foreclosure.“ In: *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, edited by Dany Nobus, New York: Other Press, 48-74.

Lacan, Jacques (2006) *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company.

Lacan, Jacques (1993) „*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan III: The Psychoses*“, 1955-56, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, New York and London: Routledge.

Lacan, Jacques (1999) „*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*“, 1972-1973, trans. Bruce Fink, New York, W.W. Norton & Company.

Nobus, Dany and Quinn, Malcom (2005) *Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid: Elements for a Psychoanalytic Epistemology*, London: Routledge.

Roustang, François (1987) „How do You Make a Paranoiac Laugh?“, *MLN* 102, 4, 707-718

Schreber, Daniel Paul (2000) *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, trans. Ida Macalpine and Richard A. Hunter, New York: New York Review Books.

Wajeman, Gérard (2003) „The hysteric's discourse.“ In: *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Vol. I: Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice*, edited by Slavoj Žižek. London and New York: Routledge.