

Sitting there saying nothing.

What is involved in the Psychoanalytic Act?

To arrive at a preliminary definition of the Psychoanalytic Act¹ as described by Lacan in his seminar of 1967-1968 we have to begin by coming to terms with endings, with all their equivocations. There are four such endings which underline this seminar. I will briefly mention three and then say something about the ending appropriate for our psychoanalytic purpose- that which Freud calls Analysis Terminable and Interminable. The other endings are: The end of Metaphysics, the end of Theology and the end of Science.

With regard to the first one, Lacan warns us not to jump too hastily into the metaphysical question because after all, philosophy has tried over the centuries to recuperate our original being there (in the world) and it's ensuing loss. There are many examples of pretending to deal with this loss "there is for example, looking elsewhere and specifically turning ones gaze towards meaning and to make of the subject this entity that is called the human spirit, to put it before discourse"².

¹ Lacan. J. The Psychoanalytic Act. 1967-1968. Trans.Gallagher.C.Book XV

²Lacan. J. Crucial Problems For Psychoanalysis. 1964-1965.Trans.Gallagher.C.Book XII

One of the reasons for not jumping too quickly into the Metaphysical question is because of Freud's fundamental discovery which has turned traditional Metaphysics on its head. Indeed, traditional Metaphysics came up against this wall which Freud introduces as this other thing, which is that to be in the good is not always satisfying. Freud's initial discovery was to have spelt out the unconscious. Need we remind ourselves that the coming into the world of the first stages of psychoanalysis, is the stumbling – the slip, the losing of the thread. Freud said to his subjects “speak and we will see what knowledge you encounter and whether or not you accept it or reject it-we will see what is going to happen”³. What he found there is not that the living individual chases after satisfaction that is important, what Freud found is that, there is a status of enjoyment which is dissatisfaction, which he called Beyond the Pleasure Principle and which is the very basis of repetition. Repetition is what essentially determines that which we are dealing with in the exploration of unconscious. How can any therapy (psychoanalytic or

³ Lacan. J. Psychoanalysis Upside-Down. The Reverse Side Of Psychoanalysis 1969-1970
Trans. Gallagher. C Book XVII Session 11:2:70

otherwise) which does not take full account of this repetition, which Lacan defines as “the commemoration of an eruption of enjoyment in the unconscious” how can any therapy begin to deal with this most personal and most perennial of problems if it does not take on board this notion of repetition?

Freud is at pains to remind us that “we have been struck by the fact that the forgotten and repressed experiences of childhood are reproduced during the work of analysis in dreams and reactions, particularly in those occurring in the transference, although their revival runs counter to the interest of the pleasure principle. We have explained this by supposing that in these cases a compulsion to repeat is overcoming even the pleasure principle. Outside analysis, too, something similar can be observed. There are people in whose lives the same reactions are perpetually being repeated uncorrected, to their own detriment, or others who seem to be pursued by a relentless fate, though closer investigation teaches us that they are unwittingly bringing this fate on themselves”⁴.

⁴ Anxiety And Instinctual Life. New Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalysis And Other Works. S.E. VOL. XXII pp106-107.

With regard to the end of Theology, in other words, when we are dealing with the Divine dimension, and generally that of the spirit this question turns around the following “what do we suppose to be there already before we discover it”⁵ In fact, the proper study of Theology- by this Lacan means going back to texts that we have allowed to become dust covered, might introduce something rather more serious into the question than that of sheer fundamental fanaticism on every side.

Concerning the end of Science- we must not forget it's futile dimension. But here Lacan defines “futile” (as described by Ovid) where that means a vase that leaks. If that vessel leaks, then God only knows where it will end as we see clearly today with all the advances for good or ill made in science. Perhaps, the most important difference between Science and Psychoanalysis is that Science wants the Real to disappear, whereas Psychoanalysis tries to give the Real its proper dimension with regard to the subject. This in turn implies putting the Symbolic and the Imaginary in their proper places also. Fascinating as these three endings are in themselves as they could lead to deeper questioning, the end of psychoanalysis, as

⁵ Op.cit.session 15:11:67

Lacan continually reminds us throughout this seminar, already contains within itself something different, because “beginning to be a psychoanalyst as everyone knows begins at the end of a psychoanalysis. We must start from this point which is accepted by everyone in psychoanalysis”⁶.

To enable us to test the truth of that assertion we have to ask ourselves even more fundamental questions, the most important being- what grounds the psychoanalytic act? It begins with a simple proposition, it is profoundly concerned with the suffering subject or if I may borrow Lacan’s term the “incarnate” suffering subject. So does every other therapy one may well argue. For Lacan this proposition is followed by another simple assertion that the “psychoanalytic act concerns very directly and in the first place, those who do not make a profession out of it”⁷. Psychoanalysis is a different discourse and one cannot make a profession out of a discourse. It is interesting to note that it is in those circles where people are most attached to maintaining its status socially, that questions are repeated time and time again, as to whether analysis in itself is well founded or illusory. In fact, psychoanalytic societies mask the truth of what is

⁶ Op.cit. Session:10:1:68

⁷ Ibid.Session:22.11:67

involved in the Psychoanalytic Act, especially in those societies concerned directly with training, because, after all there is no Science of virtue. Or, in other words can virtue be taught? As to what is learned in the teaching of Psychoanalysis is another matter. After all, when we are teaching we try not to lose the thread of what we are saying, we try to keep to the text- to keep the information flowing- whereas during a psychoanalysis, it's when we lose the thread of what we are saying that things liven up. So, psychoanalysis is founded on an initial rupture, a break, a dehiscence, a failure at the heart of things. How can one make a profession out of that? Teaching is a profession, but it is not a psychoanalytic act, nor does it form part of the psychoanalytic Act.

If someone takes his courage in his hands and decides to speak to a Psychoanalyst this person hopes that something is going to happen. Psychoanalysis anchors its work on this firm position, or to quote Lacan “they know that something is going to happen, that might be qualified as miraculous, if one understands this term with reference to ‘mirare’ which at the extreme could mean to be astonished”⁸.

⁸ Op.cit.Session VI:1:65

One of the elements which distinguishes the Psychoanalytic Act from other therapies is that lightning flashes are not enough – eureka moments are not enough to disentangle the web of suffering with which the analysand is engaged. The subject is literally tied up in knots, of his symptoms, his history – of the discourse which founded him before he was born. There is something which, remains assured in the Psychoanalytic Act which Lacan reminds us is associated with what he calls “the effects of unknotting – the unknotting of things charged with sense which cannot be unknotted by any other means, this is the solid ground on which the psychoanalytic camp is established”⁹.

In other words, during an analysis, something is installed in the subjective. There is a reversal, a turning inside out – outside in, which cannot be resolved by reasonable and logical dialogue. As Lacan puts it “the subject must become – only can he – that is the question?” You are all familiar with Carl Roger’s “On becoming a Person”¹⁰ – “to be that self which one truly is” – “a therapist view of the good life” – “what it means to become a person and so on”. What Rogers maintains is that what basically

⁹ Ibid. Session VI:1:65

¹⁰ Rogers. C.R On Becoming A Person. A Therapist’s View Of Psychotherapy. Constable & Robinson. London. 1967. P108

each person is saying is who am I really? “How can I get in touch with this real self-underlying all my surface behaviour”. This becoming a “self” – Lacan notes that there is no Freudian theory to correspond to this self. We do not make a self - - not even with the help of the analyst as is suggested by Rogers and Winnicott – among others. Rather perhaps at this point “Perhaps there may be a little too much self-esteem getting in the game”¹¹. In other words too much ego which Lacan points to elsewhere as being, “The ego, isn’t even the place, the indication, the rallying point, the organising centre of the subject. It’s profoundly dissymmetrical to it”¹².

Rather, the question which puts the subject on the path of his desire, is what do you want, or, to be more precise, during a psychoanalysis that “what do you want?, is the one which best leads him to the path of his own desire- providing he sets out, with the help of the skills of a partner known as a psychoanalyst, to reformulate it, even without knowing it, as what does he want of me?”¹³

For Lacan, on the contrary, a radical conversion has to take place. By this, he means a radical conversion with regard to knowledge. This is a very difficult and very dangerous road to travel and

¹¹ Op.cit.Session:17:1:68

¹² Lacan. J.The Psychoses. 1955-1956. Trans.Grigg..R Book III.P.241

¹³ Lacan.J Subversion Of The Subject And Dialectic Of Desire In Ecrits- A Selection Trans. Sheridan .A. Tavistock. London. 1977. P.312

the only way through is down and vice versa. This happens or may happen, through what Lacan calls the manipulation of transference. Outside this manipulation of transference there is no psychoanalytic act. So, that the psychoanalytic act is something that is quite essentially linked to the function of transference. This obviously has to do not only with the very presence of the analyst but also with the desire of the analyst.

So, to begin again (and in the words of Beckett to “fail even better”) our starting point is the subject who speaks and there is already a pointer in the fact that it is the analysand who does all the talking - most of the time. Of course, the analyst replies sometimes with words, but when Lacan says that psychoanalysis is a discourse without words, I understand this to mean the desire of the analyst is already a reply. What analysis shows, is that the subject who speaks, this subject does not speak in order to tell his thoughts, The fact that he emits sounds, be they raucous or sweet, these sounds first determined his thoughts to such a degree and in such an original fashion that to quote Lacan “he carries the trace of it on his skin like a branded animal”¹⁴. In other words, he is spoken, he is

¹⁴ Op.Cit. Session 6:1:65

spoken by his forgetting, which of course, in Freudian terms is not a forgetting. It is a form of memory that has disappeared through a hole in language and so, “there are produced the substitutions, the slippages – the avoidances that one has to deal with when one is on the path, on the track of the determination of the subject and its unknotting”¹⁵.

Lacan emphasises the end of psychoanalysis as being the determining point for the beginning of being “something” of a psychoanalyst because the end supposes a certain relation of the truth of the subject in a deferred fashion (what Freud calls a *nachträglichkeit* fashion). Freud himself had already encountered this question in his 1937 paper to which I’ve already referred, *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*. This truth relation with which the subject is engaged, that which the Americans call the biological question is usually translated as “the rock of castration”. This truth operation which is supposed at the end of an analysis may be translated as an incarnation of I am not what nor where I thought I was. This total reversal of subjectivity, which Lacan, following Freud, also calls castration, is based on a certain re-orientation of the drive. The subject has to pass through what Lacan calls the “sexual cycle” in order to become a subject. This necessarily

¹⁵ Ibid.Session:6:1:65

involves his relationship with Otherness and what he has to endure in order to do this. Freud calls this the choice of neurosis. This loss which is essentially a kind of death may be reconciled with Eros, because of the existence of the signifier, especially during the course of an analysis.

The Psychoanalytic Act says something and because of this it has consequences. It certainly puts things in question, but, because there is “something” of the psychoanalyst can we not say that it puts in question, among other things, “Civilisation and its Discontents”? In other words, we learn how to deal with our own suffering – we understand it’s history and the part we played or continue to play in it.

Freud reminds us “human life in common is only made possible if a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals”¹⁶. So – therefore (and this I pose as a question) can we not say also that it puts into question what it is to be human, that is to live and work collectively. After all, Freud considered the work of psychoanalysis to be a *kulturarbeit* - a work of culture, “not unlike

¹⁶ Freud.S. Civilization And Its Discontents.SE. Vol. XXI. P95

the draining of the Zuider Zee”¹⁷. For Freud, the work of culture takes place within analysis, and because of this it may be one of the outcomes of an analysis. This happens, or may happen, according to Freud because it helps towards overcoming the “associability of neurosis”¹⁸ – in others words towards overcoming the discontents in culture.

Yet – and here we must be aware, Lacan draws our attention to the fact that psychoanalysts themselves find it difficult to say what is specific about the collective work with which we are engaged. He is quick to dispel the notion that to be a psychoanalyst is to be something of an élite, something to casually drop at a soireé. He says “it is fashionable at least in certain circles to call ourself a psychoanalyst. It is also fashionable for the said psychoanalyst to adopt certain positions so that there is a certain way for the psychoanalyst to centre himself, to savour something that ends up in this position of taking cover. They call it listening, they call it the clinic. Do not be attached to any of them, whether one expresses it in

¹⁷ Freud.S.Dissection Of The Personality In New Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalsis And Other Works S.E VOL XXII P.80

¹⁸ Rath.C.D.Efforts Therapeutiques Et Travail Civilisateur, Kulturarbeit in La Revue Lacanienne.Juin 2008 pp38-42

terms of instinct, of behaviour, of genesis, of Lacanian topology.---
All of this is fundamentally a hypochondrical enjoyment”¹⁹

For Lacan – “there is no one psychoanalysed. There is someone who has been a psychoanalysand, from which there results only a subject who has been made aware of what he cannot think of as constitutive of any of his own actions”²⁰. In other words, at this point, analysis becomes interminable, in that psychoanalysis becomes a way of life- a style of living.

Psychoanalysis takes place with a psychoanalyst. This is meant in the Aristotelian sense, in the instrumental sense, a psychoanalyst is the instrument, the means by which psychoanalysis is carried out. So, we may deduce from this, that a psychoanalyst is used, is made use of. As Lacan puts it “he who at the end of a training analysis takes up, as I might say, the challenge of this act, we cannot omit that it is knowing what his analyst has become in the accomplishment of this act namely this residue, this rubbish, this rejected thing”²¹.

¹⁹ Op.cit.session:31:1:68

²⁰ Ibid.session:20:3:68

²¹ Ibid.session:10:1:68

In this way, the limits of psychoanalysis become quite well defined, whereas the limits of psychotherapy remain uncertain. Everyone knows the diversity of styles that it evokes. Lacan puts it succinctly “at the horizon, at the limit of such practises we will have the general notion of what are called - - techniques of the body. At the other end, we will have - - - (that which)

people are happy to pinpoint in our epoch as Indian techniques or again what are called the different forms of yoga. At the other extreme (we have) Samaritan help, which confusedly loses itself in the field in the abyss of the elevation of the soul”²²

In case the limits of psychoanalysis remain confusing for people, Lacan once again clears the way by insisting: “Psychoanalysis may accompany the analysand to the ecstatic limit of the ‘Thou art that’, in which is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but, unfortunately it is not within our power as practitioners to lead him to that point, where the real journey begins”²³.

Helen Sheehan
6 Annsbrook
Clonskeagh
Dublin 14
26th November 2012

²²Ibid.Session:13:3:68

²³ Lacan.J. The Mirror Stage As Formative Of The Function Of The I As Revealed In Psychoanalytic Experience. In Ecrits.Op.Cit. P7.