

OBSESSION: THE DESIRE OF TANTALUS¹

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The contradiction of pure desire

In many regards, *Seminar V* stands as a crucial moment in Lacan's oeuvre. Moving from the general assumption that the unconscious is structured like a language – that it fundamentally consists of repressed signifying chains² – it is in *Seminar V* that he provides his most extensive updating of Freud's Oedipus complex (in terms of both individual ontogenesis and universal structure), as well as of the latter's psychoanalytic approach to the formations of the unconscious (especially jokes and dreams). It is also here that Lacan first develops his well-known 'graph of desire', which goes together with a careful dialectical differentiation of the notions of need, demand, love, and desire.³ Commentators have explored, at least in part, all these aspects of *Seminar V* (Chiesa 2007; Dor 1998; Evans 1996; Fink 1995). But, surprisingly, what has so far been mostly overlooked is the fact that the final third of this Seminar is devoted to a punctual clinical application of the densely theoretical lessons that precede it. For Lacan, it is a matter of putting into practice the dialectic of desire and demand in the day-to-day treatment of neuroses (Lacan 1998: 399).

In this article, I aim at providing an in-depth reading of two lessons from *Seminar V* (XXII and XXIII) that explicitly focus on the obsessional neurotic's desire. I will also draw on the following lessons (XXIV to XXVIII), where obsession remains one of the leitmotifs. Lacan defines obsessional desire as marked by a 'profound contradiction' and as eventually an 'impasse' (ibid 401-02, 485, 494). On the one hand, the obsessional looks for his desire in a

¹ An earlier version of the first half of this article is forthcoming in C. Owens and N. Chekurova (eds.), *Studying Lacan's Seminars IV and V* (London: Karnac Books, 2018).

² 'That there are in the unconscious signifying chains which subsist as such, and which from there structure, act on the organism, influence what appears from the outside as a symptom, this is the basis of analytic experience' (Lacan 1998: 410).

³ As Moustapha Safouan puts it, 'The Formations of the Unconscious represents the end of a stage in Lacan's teaching' – that of his linguistic 'return to Freud'. 'Had he left us only these first five seminars, we should already attribute him a considerable oeuvre' (Safouan 2001: 105). We also have to bear in mind that four of Lacan's seminal *Écrits* were drafted during *Seminar V* and rely on it: 'On a Question Prior to any Possible Treatment of Psychosis', 'The Youth of Gide', 'The Signification of the Phallus', and 'The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power'.

‘beyond’ that corresponds with ‘desire as such’ (ibid 393, 400). On the other hand, this very movement is inextricable from an attempted ‘destruction of the Other’ and, more specifically, of his desire (ibid 401-03, 468, 472, 484). Commenting on Maurice Bouvet, and criticising him, Lacan argues that the analyst should always bear in mind this general contradiction when, in directing the cure, he observes the phenomenology of obsessional desire, and its revolving around a set of recurrent destructive behaviours – if not symptoms – traditionally explained by psychoanalytic literature in connection with incorporation, aggressiveness, sadistic fantasies, not to mention guilt.⁴

Lacan’s most basic point in *Seminar VI* is that both obsessional and hysterical neuroses revolve as such around a problematic subjective orientation towards *sexual* desire (ibid 396, 406, 383-84). It would not be inaccurate to suggest that he generally understands desire as located *in between* need and demand.⁵ Against superficial accusations of ‘idealism’, Lacan does not deny the existence of sexual need on a level that, for the sake of simplification, we could call ‘natural’ or ‘instinctual’. In the case of *Homo sapiens*, need is, however, always already filtered, fragmented, and isolated by language. In other words, need cannot be separated from the dimension of *demand* as something that structurally exceeds it. This is already witnessed to by the fact that the incessant demands of a child tend not to stop when he is granted access to the objects he demands, that is, when he is satisfied of his needs (which, for psychoanalysis, invariably involve a sexual element). Demand thus eventually amounts to an unconditional demand *for love*: ‘Demand is fundamentally a demand for love – a demand for nothing, no particular satisfaction’, but for what the Other ‘brings by means of his pure and simple response to the demand’ (ibid 381).

In this context, on the one hand, desire originates from the unconditional horizon opened by

⁴ I will not deal in detail with Lacan’s critique of Bouvet’s case studies. Suffice it to say that the latter would miss not only the contradiction on which the obsessional as a subject is as such structured but also, in close relation to this, his failure to undergo castration. Bouvet would simply achieve a temporary alleviation of the symptoms (ibid 447) by bringing the patient’s alleged ‘desire of phallic possession’ (ibid 451) out in the open and thus replacing ‘aggressive incorporation’ with a respectful ‘acceptance’ of the object thanks to a phantasmatic absorption of, or identification with, the analyst’s phallus (ibid 389-90, 435). The ‘falseness’ of this solution would be proved by the patient’s subsequent acting-out (ibid 436, 447). In short, Bouvet’s treatment would ‘sanction’ the obsessional’s pre-existing fantasy (ibid 446) twisting it towards ‘genital maturity’ and ‘satisfaction’ (416, 447). I also wish to specify that this article focuses on the clinical aspects of *Seminar V* to the extent that, for Lacan, the treatment of neurosis presupposes the recognition of obsession and hysteria as unconscious ‘modes of subjectivation’ (ibid 395, 431) on which the entire phenomenology of neurotic behaviours and symptoms is based. I will not tackle Lacan’s – quite sporadic but precious – remarks on the direction of the cure (e.g. the handling of the transference; its distance from suggestion; the positive role of resistance; the actual coordinates of regression; etc. – ibid 443-45, 434, 413-14).

⁵ Quite explicitly, ‘desire takes its place and organises itself [...] in between the call for satisfaction and the demand for love’ (ibid 406).

the demand for love; it amounts to a desire for desire. More precisely, desire turns the unconditionality of demand into an ‘absolute condition’ – absolute in the sense that it has ‘no measure or proportion with the need for any object whatsoever’ (ibid 382). On the other hand, desire nevertheless *recuperates* the sexual content of need, which is bypassed by the pure demand for love, within the same linguistic horizon. Throughout *Seminar V* desire is indeed often qualified as ‘sexual desire’.⁶ Commentators usually underestimate this second characteristic of desire but Lacan could not be more adamant about it: ‘Desire [...] is not simply sexual instinct’ yet ‘of course’ it ‘does not eliminate the existence of tendencies’ (ibid 374); ‘Desire [...] is located beyond demand’ in that it ‘*gives back* the margin of deviation marked by the incidence of the signifier on need’ (ibid 381, my emphasis); even more conclusively, ‘in relation to the demand for love, *sexual need becomes desire* [...] How could we produce our desires if we did not borrow their primordial matter from our needs?’ (ibid 382-83, my emphasis).

In the lesson that introduces his discussion of obsession, Lacan reiterates that desire lies in ‘a field beyond demand’ (ibid 393). It is precisely in this beyond – to be understood as a negation, or sublation, of the negation carried out by demand with respect to need – that desire emerges as ‘sexual desire’ (ibid). To stress a distinction without which the entire treatment of neuroses in *Seminar V* would remain obscure, desire is not only beyond demand as a specific demand for the satisfaction of a particular need (as seen, demand itself is already beyond this level; hence here it would be impossible to distinguish desire from demand). Desire is first and foremost beyond demand as a demand essentially determined by the *desexualised* demand for love – again, desire recovers sexual need in the very linguistic field that the demand for love opens beyond sexual need.

To put it in a somewhat crude fashion, according to Lacan, neurotics fail to appropriately assume the dialectical beyond of demand as the field of sexual desire. Because of this they experience all sort of concrete difficulties in relating sexually to their counterparts. The least we can say is that such a failure involves a certain confusion of demand with desire to the detriment of the latter, as well as an insufficient appreciation of the fact that the field of desire stands primarily as the field of the Other’s desire, whose inscrutability cannot be reduced to the logic of demand and response. The desire of the subject as a subject split by language – and hence unconscious – is famously for Lacan the desire of the other (as desiring the other, being

⁶ In later Seminars this will be articulated in terms of the *drive*.

recognised by him, and ideally occupying his place), but in turn it more structurally depends on the *Other's* desire (initially in the guise of the Mother's desire) as the cipher of the *Other's own Spaltung* (ibid 394). The *Other*, which ultimately consists of the impersonal locus of speech and the battery of signifiers as the presupposition for intersubjectivity, is itself split in the sense that language cannot fully represent sex: 'Insofar as the human being is caught in the signifying dialectic, there is something that does not work' with respect to 'finding the other sex' (ibid 381; 383). This anthropo-ontological disharmony is at bottom what the neurotic cannot cope with – *not even unconsciously*, unlike 'complete'-as-split human subjects, Lacan banters at one point (ibid 394). In other words, as we shall see later on, the neurotic does not undergo castration, that is, the ontogenetic symbolic operation through which the *Other's Spaltung*, or inconsistency, is signifierised as such.

Lacan considers both hysteria and obsessional neurosis. In the case of hysteria, the subject can find a foothold, support, or prop [*point de appui*] for her desire only by short-circuiting it with the very inscrutability of the *Other's* desire (ibid 396). The latter is thus in turn 'supported' as an 'enigmatic point' but also eclipsed in that the hysteric attempts (in vain) to reduce it to *her* desire as related to an imaginary counterpart (or *øther*) (ibid 397, 407). As Lacan will put it in later Seminars, the *Other's* desire therefore turns into a desire for the *Other* to be One, an alleged Master, with which the hysteric *identifies* in order to be herself One. This also means that the hysteric's emphasis on the *Other's* desire as an indecipherable *x* – her being 'on the level of the *Other*' (ibid 400) – does not serve the *opposition* between demand and desire as its beyond, but, on the contrary, endeavours to accommodate desire on the plane of the demand for love (ibid 397).

In the case of obsession, the subject assumes a different relation to the *Other's* desire, which Lacan deems to be slightly more complicated (ibid 398). While the hysteric 'searches for her desire in the *Other's* desire' – as the desire she attributes to the *Other* only to limit it – the obsessional evidently 'pushes through *his* desire above all else' (ibid 401, my emphasis). Like the hysteric and every other subject, the obsessional is constituted as a subject only by orienting himself towards desire; but what he aims at is 'desire as such', his own desire 'in a pure state' (ibid 400-01). This causes a 'negation' and even an attempted 'destruction' of the *Other*, on the levels of both demand and desire (ibid). Most importantly, given that the subject's desire necessarily depends on the *Other's* desire, to which alone pertains the title of desire as such, it follows that the obsessional relation to desire is structured like a 'profound contradiction' (ibid 401). The obsessional aims at desire as such *without* the *Other's* desire, that is, without *desire*

as such. To put it plainly, he desires a desire that would really be his desire. We are dealing with ‘the desire to have one’s desire’ (ibid 430) and thus to make One as a subject. Or better, following the more comprehensive formula of *Seminar XVI*, the obsessional *contradictorily* aspires to *be One in the field of the Other* (Lacan 2006: 253, 260).

In order to explain obsessional subjectivity, Lacan resumes and develops his definition of desire as ‘beyond demand’ (Lacan 1998: 400). As seen, on the one hand, desire goes beyond demand in that it recuperates the sexual need that the demand for love marginalised, and in this sense negated.⁷ Here we may say that desire *drives* sexual need back to the subject as a linguistic subject, by means of a negation of negation. Yet, on the other hand, desire surpasses demand also insofar as it transforms the ‘unconditional’ character of the demand for love into something ‘absolute’ (or better, an ‘absolute condition’). This is the side of desire that, when isolated as not dialectically articulated with the recuperation of sexual need, accounts for obsessional subjectivity – which is why Lacan speaks of ‘pure’ desire with respect to the obsessional.

Lacan introduces his argument by focusing on ‘a child who will become an obsessional’ (ibid 400). For the sake of simplification, he considers the future obsessional’s peculiar kind of demands at an ontogenetic stage at which desire is still embryonic. While other children demand *x*, and then *y*, and then *z* as contingent variables that only sustain the demand for love, the future obsessional presents a ‘fixed idea’ (ibid). He demands *x* (or *y*, or *z*) in such an insistent way that his parents find it ‘unbearable’ (ibid 401). This child already goes beyond demand in that he ‘negates the element of otherness included in the demand for love’ (ibid). To expand on Lacan, what matters to the future obsessional is not the demand for love – ‘It is not this or that I need; I demand to be loved’ – where demand still relates negatively to the satisfaction of a particular need dependent on the Other. Rather, what matters to him is precisely the fixed idea – ‘I absolutely want *that!* I am not demanding to be loved’ – where demand is in turn negated, or, better its unconditional character ‘persists’ only as ‘transferred to *need*’ *in language* (ibid 400, my emphasis).

This re-emergence of need in desire should not surprise us if, with Lacan, we understand desire as a negation of demand’s negation of need. However, the problem for the adult obsessional

⁷ From this perspective, Lacan can also speak – somewhat confusingly – of desire as ‘falling short of’ or ‘on this side of demand’ [*en deça de la demande*], since as demand for love demand ‘goes beyond all the satisfactions it calls for’ and aims at ‘the Other’s being’ (ibid 406).

is that the negation of demand's negation of need exclusively coalesces as what Lacan very pertinently calls at one point the '*absolute form of need*', and not as a dialectical articulation of sexual need in language. In obsession, 'desire is the absolute form of need, of need passed to the state of absolute condition, to the extent that it is beyond the unconditional demand [*exigence*] for love' (ibid 401, my emphasis). The future obsessional's 'I *absolutely* want that!' prefigures the adult obsessional's 'desire *as such*', which cannot be appropriated, and as always elusive is thus at odds with sexual desire.

Let me restate this crucial point. The obsessional's desire as 'pure' desire is not strictly speaking a *sexual* desire. Or, it is a sexual desire that unfailingly privileges *desire* over the sexual object, even when it finds it after long detours. In *Seminar V* Lacan unpacks this issue by dwelling at length on the obsessional's 'contradiction' with regard to desire. As seen, the obsessional's promotion of his desire, as desire as such, is 'internally' (ibid 401) contradicted by the fact that it goes together with an attempted destruction of the Other, on which desire inevitably depends. As evident in the example of the child who will become an obsessional, the Other is already vehemently negated on the level of demand, in the name of a nascent desire as beyond demand. But Lacan does not fail to remind us that 'desire as such necessitates the support of the Other', and, more specifically, of the Other's desire: 'The Other's desire is not one of the ways of access to the subject's desire, it is rather tout-court the place of desire' (ibid 402). This contradiction generates a veritable 'impasse', Lacan says, for the adult obsessional's desire (ibid).

While the future obsessional – contradictorily enough – directly expresses his desire by means of an unbearable demand, which still requires the Other albeit as negated, the adult obsessional – whose entire subjectivity amounts to a contradiction – represses his desire's fundamentally destructive nature and substitutes it with a host of apparently non-aggressive demands to his counterparts, or 'good intentions', which Lacan also calls 'obsessional culture' (ibid 417, 402). Yet the obsessional continues to be 'inhabited', and even 'infested' (ibid 402), by pure desire as a desire for the destruction of the Other. In the course of the treatment, if the transference is handled correctly, obsessional culture 'does not last long' (ibid). Outside of the psychoanalytic cabinet, the impasse of the obsessional's desire resurfaces most clearly when, 'from time to time, taking his courage in his hands' (ibid), the obsessional sets off to look for the sexual *object* of his desire. What regularly happens in these rare circumstances is that, first, the obsessional does not recover it easily, and, second, he 'incurs in the most extraordinary accidents' (ibid), which immensely complicate his approach to the object.

For Lacan, it is not sufficient to account for these accidents in terms of the prohibiting agency of the superego, which would put a leash on the aggressive tendencies. In addition to that, we witness here to something much more structural that concerns again the contradictory status of obsessional desire and is perceived even consciously in the ‘psychology’ of the obsessional subject (ibid). Namely, the more an object plays the role of the sexual object of desire, the more the obsessional experiences a ‘decrease of libidinal tension’ in moving towards it (ibid 402, 412). This is consonant with the fact that the obsessional aims at ‘desire as such’, a desire for desire that is devoid of objects because it is itself its own object, or, as Lacan helpfully puts it, a ‘desire in its constitution as desire’ (ibid 402), a desire constantly in the making and eventually aimed at making One. As for the destructive aspect of such a pure desire, predictably, whenever the obsessional manages to reach the sexual object (not without debasing it – ibid 468), the attempt to eradicate the Other’s desire immediately turns into a ‘disappearance’ of the subject’s own desire: ‘At the moment he has this object of his desire, for [the obsessional] nothing exists any longer’ (ibid 402-03).

The obsessional can thus only subjectivise himself as ‘a Tantalus’, self- condemned to eternal non-satisfaction all the more satisfaction appears to be within his grasp (ibid 412).

Obsessional behaviours

Starting from the end of the first lesson on obsession and throughout the second Lacan draws on the structural contradiction and subsequent impasse of the obsessional’s desire in order to elucidate what he himself designates as typical obsessional ‘behaviours’ (ibid 403, 419-20, 474-75). The discussion centres on four ordinary and readily observable phenomena: the obsessional’s overall abiding by the practical imperative ‘Do not do to others what you would not wish to be done to yourself’ in everyday life (ibid 416-17); the mutual implication of his continuous asking for permission and having it refused (ibid 412-15); the ‘performance aspect’ of the obsessional’s activities, that is, his ‘exploits’ (ibid 403, 417-20); and the ultimate proof he requests to corroborate an otherwise temporary and occasional ‘passionate love’ (ibid 421).

Here one cannot but be struck by how all these ‘cultured’ behaviours – especially the first two – appear to assuage the obsessional’s aggressive tendencies aimed at destroying the Other. At the beginning of lesson XXIII, Lacan unequivocally states that the obsessional’s ‘access to [his] desire’ is based on a ‘*dependence* on the Other’, to an extent unmatched even by the hysteric (ibid 407, my emphasis). At first sight, this is quite stunning considering that in the previous

lesson he contrasted the obsessional's pushing through his desire against the Other with the hysteric's initial being on the level of the Other. Lacan's basic argument becomes clear if we understand that the adult obsessional manages to sustain his unconscious 'desire as such' to the detriment of the Other's desire only by 'preserving at all costs' (ibid 419) the Other through *demand*, in a way that is at least partly conscious. The attempted and never successful eradication of the Other's desire as irreducible to signification (as 'real', using Lacan's later terminology) for the sake of the subject's absolute desire structurally necessitates the desperate 'maintenance of the Other' as the locus 'where things are articulated in terms of signifiers' (ibid, see also: 471-2).⁸ Because otherwise the obsessional would have nowhere else to 'show' his desire (ibid 403, my emphasis), Lacan hints in passing, as confirmed on the few occasions in which he openly embraces it as directed against the o/Other only to see it decrease and disappear.

Obsession as a structural contradiction between 'desire as such' and the destruction of the Other's desire (on which desire as such relies) thus also manifests two contradictory sides in its very phenomenology. The behaviours I listed above – all originating from an inaccurate dialecticization of need, demand, and desire – make such a contradiction increasingly evident and unbearable.

1. *'Do not do to others what you would not wish to be done to yourself'*. Up to a point, the obsessional effectively camouflages his destructive intentions and his desire with them. On this level, orchestrated as a 'moralising standpoint' (ibid 416), he by and large relates to the Other as an *other*, or imaginary counterpart, and endeavours to reduce desire to a reciprocal recognition of demands. He accordingly tends to altruistically submit to the other's demands. But precisely because of his avoidance of the unbridgeable gap between demand and desire, he also at the same time contradictorily demands that his *desire* be recognised by the other. That is, the obsessional asks the other to '*consent*' to his desire (ibid). Given the latter's being beyond demand, consent cannot, however, be obtained, as it would have to be granted 'in a fashion completely different from the response to a demand' (ibid). Consent is an 'illusion', a 'fantasy'; this state of affairs is even within the conscious reach of the obsessional, yet he prefers to 'elude the problem' (ibid). He does so by soon turning the good intentions of the 'It is enough to reach an agreement [...] to find happiness in life' into a far less uplifting 'Do not

⁸ In the terms of *Seminar XVI*, the obsessional can try to keep at bay the *inconsistency* of the Other as real only by overestimating its *consistency* as symbolic. As I have argued elsewhere, K., the protagonist of Kafka's *The Castle*, is a beautiful example of this.

do to others what you would not wish to be done to yourself' (ibid 416-17). This second motto should in turn be read as an already rather disturbing 'It is enough not to inflict on others the frustrations of which one has oneself been the object' (ibid 416). All in all, the obsessional concretely lives most of his existence following the *ambivalent* principle 'Spare the other!' (ibid 417). His symptoms – 'a whole series of ceremonials, precautions, detours' but also of 'tricks, schemes, and intrigues [*manigances*]' (ibid) – should be led back to it.⁹

2. *Permission / Refusal*. The obsessional is always asking the other for permission. He is vividly aware of that when he describes his symptoms. Evidently, 'to ask [continuously] for permission, is precisely to have as a subject a certain [peculiar] relationship with one's demand' (ibid 412), which obscures one's desire. Placing oneself in 'the most extreme dependence' on the other insofar as he speaks – and thus on the *Other* as the locus of the signifying articulation – is here clearly meant to '*reinstate* the Other' – or preserve and maintain him – on the level of demand precisely to the extent that the obsessional subject contradictorily puts him 'in question' and 'in danger' on the level of desire (ibid, my emphasis). Again, for the obsessional his desire as 'desire as such' goes together with the attempted elimination of the Other's desire, which would, however, also bring about the disappearance of the subject's own desire. Asking for permission should therefore somehow compensate for this predicament. Yet, with a further dialectical twist that surpasses the dimension of the demand for a direct 'agreement' – soon to be moderated by the categorical imperative – what is actually pursued in the request for permission is nothing else than *refusal*. For the obsessional, 'refusal and permission imply each other' (ibid 413). The obsessional concretely puts himself in situations where asking for permission solicits refusal (for instance, by repeating his request in order to specify it or to receive a confirmation that the permission has been granted).¹⁰ Paradoxically, this is what allows him to overcome the frustration-control level to which the failure of a straightforward 'agreement' with the other consigned him; the 'pact' that is now being refused is in fact given against the background of what he – wrongly – perceives as a 'promise' (that *his* desire may eventually be recognised; that he may be One in the field of the Other) (ibid). This is sufficient for the obsessional's 'desire as such', or desire to have one's desire, to be

⁹ Lacan adds two important clinical specifications. First, directing the treatment of the obsessional along the lines of respectful 'oblativity' as a correct access to 'genital maturity' only reinforces his already oblativity fantasy and, at best, displaces the symptoms (ibid 416). Second, and in relation to this, if it could ever be really implemented, the categorical imperative 'Do not do to others what you would not wish to be done to yourself' would assuredly be completely beside the point 'when it is a question of a realisation such as a sexual union' (ibid 417). In brief, sex can never be fully consensual. This most topical and ideological matter would require a book of its own – especially when read in conjunction with the nowadays equally pervasive 'tolerant' principle 'Spare the other!'

¹⁰ This point remains implicit in Lacan's reasoning, but I think it directly follows from it.

tentatively *articulated* in the guise of a contradiction; at this stage, all ‘he *needs* [is] an *unsatisfied* desire’ (ibid 415, my emphases).¹¹ In other words, here the obsessional partly ‘solves the problem of his desire’s evanescence by turning it into a *forbidden* desire’, as ‘supported by the Other’s *interdiction*’ (i.e. the refusal) (ibid, my emphases). But this status quo unavoidably remains itself ‘ambiguous’ (ibid); desire is accessed by the obsessional only as an *unsatisfied* desire sustained by the Other’s interdiction; he thus desires more and more to make it performatively *present* to the Other and against him.

3. *The exploit*. The obsessional ‘inflicts on himself all sorts of particularly difficult and testing tasks’; more to the point, he ‘very brilliantly’ succeeds in carrying them out (ibid 418). For the obsessional, ‘work is powerful’; he would much deserve a ‘little holiday’ (ibid), during which he could do what he wishes, but work is actually there to liberate him from the time of rest, which he considers as time lost. On a first level, the exploit appears to be quite openly aggressive. It addresses the counterpart or imaginary other seen as an ‘adversary’ – e.g. the slacker colleague – whom the obsessional ‘seems to defy’ (ibid 419). In this sense, the exploit amounts to a ‘won performance’, or a ‘sprint’ (ibid 418). But, on closer inspection, the ‘prowess’ of the exploit evidences nothing more than a ‘sport game’ and always remains ‘fictitious’ (ibid 419). The obsessional merely ‘plays with the other’ (ibid). In other words, he is not a Hegelian master involved in a struggle to death. The ‘risks’ he takes are always ‘limited’¹² – which is why, thanks to a ‘wise economy’, he thrives in the confrontational exploit as what he, often consciously, desires to do (ibid 418). However, on a second and more fundamental level, the exploit is addressed to the Other as a ‘spectator’, who ‘keeps the score’ (ibid 419). Here lies the ‘real danger’ (ibid) for the obsessional as the contradiction and impasse of his desire take centre stage again and more strikingly. On the one hand, the obsessional demands the Other – the locus of signification – to recognise his aggressive desire as conveyed by the exploit; he demands that his remarkable achievements be ‘witnessed to’, ‘registered’, and thus ‘realised’ as ‘well deserved’ (ibid) – something the negated counterpart could never grant him. Yet, on the other hand, and more importantly, the obsessional’s desire as ‘desire as such’ cannot at all be symbolically contented with a ‘little reward’ (ibid 418) (in Lacan’s French, the *petite couronne*, or coronet, of a ‘Good job!’, we may add). Beyond his dialectic of permission and refusal, which privileges refusal in order to articulate desire as unsatisfied desire, the obsessional also more daringly and antinomically tries to obtain *permission* from the Other for his *desire* to be *presented* as such precisely through the lack of

¹¹ The use of ‘need’ in this context is, for what we have said, far from coincidental.

¹² In this sense, the obsessional ‘opposes absolute virility’ (ibid 403).

satisfaction. To put it bluntly, what he is after is not, or not only, a work promotion (which would simply reignite and escalate the exploit), but a paradoxical promotion and acknowledgement on the part of the Other of the subject's *desire at work*, of a desire both always in the making and destructively oriented towards being One in the field of the Other. The aggressive exploit as a victorious albeit short-lived defiance of the other thus soon turns into a deadlocked challenge to the Other's desire. 'In the exploit the subject dominates and even domesticates' the 'fundamental anxiety' (ibid) caused by the enigmatic character of the Other's desire; yet, at the same time, in having to register the exploit, and more generally 'inscribe his history' of feats, the obsessional ends up trying to 'validate' his pure desire in the very disputed place of the Other, which he no less zealously strives to maintain (ibid 419). Insubordinate bravery gives way to an adhesion to 'everything that is of the verbal order, the order of computation, recapitulation, inscription, and even falsification' (ibid). The impasse of obsessional desire means that ultimately defiance betrays a 'defence mechanism' (ibid 420) and the endeavour to performatively display the subject's desire as such calls for nothing else than an – impossible – reinforcement of the 'Other's presence' (ibid).

4. *The proof of love.* As seen, obsessional desire as 'desire as such' and 'pure' desire lies by definition beyond the demand for love. However, the obsessional is in equal measure contradictorily prone to the *proof* of love (the obsessional's desire 'is beyond the unconditioned exigency of love, of which on occasion it can come to be the test [*épreuve*]' (ibid 401).¹³ The proof of love stands as the point at which the impasse of the obsessional's desire emerges most neatly as the return of the repressed. It occurs on the unusual occasions when the obsessional subject attempts to reach the sexual object, and the more he approaches it the more he experiences a decrease of libidinal tension. In order to avert the imminent disappearance of his desire, which the possession of the sexual object as the supposed destruction of the Other's desire structurally entails, the obsessional stages the proof of love. Here the subject does not only asks the other/Other to give him 'what is beyond every possible satisfaction, his very being' (ibid 406) – which amounts to love tout-court, that is, giving what one does not have, as aimed at in the demand for love. Rather, the obsessional passionately requests this 'essential presentification' (ibid) of the Other to prove, or certify in the verbal order, the presence of the subject's own being of desire *at the very moment of its utmost destructive exposure as concomitant evanescence*. We could provisionally phrase this as 'Give me what you do *not* have, your being, so that *I* can finally be the want-to-be (*manque-à-être*) I

¹³ Lacan only hints at this in *Seminar V*.

am!'. At bottom, the subject is here asking the other/Other *permission to destroy* him – as a desiring being. Of course, such a request causes for the obsessional all sorts of 'extraordinary accidents' *vis-à-vis* the sexual object, which nonetheless prevents him from 'not existing any longer' – as instead happens when he possesses the sexual object.

Later in *Seminar V*, Lacan summarises the contradiction inherent to the obsessional behaviours we have described so far through the humoristic formula 'To be or not...', interrupted and incessantly repeated since the subject has in the meantime forgotten what follows (which he nonetheless unconsciously utters as forgotten by means of repetition). The obsessional wants *to be* his desire, but, faced with the lack of a foothold on it ('or not'), he always falls back into a unilateral compromise with the Other that represses desire ('...'), only to start again the same movement through this very repression: 'To be or not...', and the chap scratches his head in order to be able to continue, "to be or not..., to be or not..., to be or not...", etc.' (ibid 474).

What we have designated as the 'proof of love' amounts to a final and frantic effort to enunciate this botched formula as the full-fledged Shakespearean question 'to be or not to be?', and to solve it positively in terms of being.¹⁴ 'I am not where I am (my always elusive desire) but there where I should be I am no longer (my desire's disappearance). Am I? Tell me that I am!'. Interestingly, at one point, Lacan speaks in this regard of a specific instance in which *desire* itself, not demand, 'calls for an absolute response' (ibid 406) – the 'You are!' never to be given.

Because of the subject's assumption of *the* question 'to be or not to be?' in the proof of love, Lacan also tends to closely associate its request for an absolute response with *acting out* (ibid 421). Although the proof of love functions as a last barrier that protects the obsessional subject from the most extreme consequence of acting out, that is, the disappearance of his desire as soon as he secures the object, it also shares with acting out a concrete reference to a 'material' sexual object (ibid) – which is otherwise avoided by the obsessional.¹⁵ Yet like the categorical imperative, the search for refusal, and the exploit, the proof of love is a symptomatic

¹⁴ We should recall that Lacan's lengthy analysis of *Hamlet* in *Seminar VI* dwells on obsession, although he thinks that its protagonist cannot be limited to this kind of subjectivity.

¹⁵ This is the case in spite of the fact that what is primarily at stake in both acting out and the vicissitudes surrounding the subject's request for the proof of love is *not* the material sexual object. In this sense, Lacan speaks of this kind of passionate love as not focusing on a partial object but as being itself a '*partial love*' (ibid 421, my emphasis); what we are dealing with is *desire* through love. Along similar lines, elsewhere in *Seminar V* Lacan also highlights the strong connection between acting out and a '*problematic falling in love*' (ibid 447, my emphasis).

compromise eventually aimed at ‘pleasing’ the Other (ibid), albeit in the radical form of asking for a *permission* to destroy him. Acting out stands instead as an *active* ‘attempt at solving the problem of demand and desire’ (ibid 420), by exacerbating it and bringing it into the open in the guise of an enigmatic signifier, the phallus.

Against their customary psychoanalytic definition as ‘bungled actions’, for Lacan all the above-mentioned obsessional behaviours are actually ‘successful acts’, in that they ‘clearly let transpire a tendency’ (ibid) – namely, the obsessional’s pure desire as contradictorily articulated in demand with respect to its attempted destruction of the Other’s desire. In opposition to these ‘illusory solutions’ – and independently of whether it finally appropriates the object or eventually succumbs to the proof of love – acting out consists of a veritable bungled action that works as a positive ‘hint’ for the analyst (ibid). It is a, strictly speaking, ‘paradoxical act’ that ‘reveals that every relationship [the obsessional has] to demand is fundamentally inadequate’, since it does not allow him ‘to access the effective reality of the signifier’s effect on him, that is to say, to put himself on the level of the castration complex’ (ibid 421).

Two broad and crucial issues remain to be explored at this point. First, we need to investigate the precise coordinates and reasons of the obsessional’s inability to undergo castration due to the particular role the phallus assumes for him in fantasy. Lacan’s very first reference to obsession in *Seminar V* already clearly delineates the crux of the matter: in obsession, the phallus ‘as an *imaginary* element’ (ϕ) is ‘prevalent’, whereas castration requires the phallus to be fully unfolded as a *signifier*, that is, turned into a *symbol* (Φ) (ibid 385, my emphasis). Second and in relation to this, we have to assess the scope and limits of the psychoanalytic solution to this impasse as advanced in *Seminar V*. On the one hand, the aim of psychoanalysis is to promote the obsessional’s ‘acceptance’ of castration as a ‘signifying function’ (ibid 437) that overcomes his structural and unconscious fantasy. Yet, on the other, castration ‘can be articulated in the consciousness of the subject only up to a certain point’ (ibid 394) – and this applies to each and every subject, not only obsessionals or neurotics in general.

The phallus, castration, and the aim of the psychoanalytic treatment of obsession

Seminar V provides one of the most detailed, albeit far from systematic, explanations of the phallus, which lies at the core of Lacanian theory and practice. By means of this notion Lacan intends to clarify what psychoanalysis has traditionally understood as ‘object relation’, ‘phallic object’, and – with specific regard to obsession – ‘distance from the object’ precisely in terms

of the dialectic of demand and desire we have considered earlier (ibid 443, 387). Lacan's starting point is straightforward: the phallus is not, or not simply, a 'part-object' (ibid 388, 392), that is, an object (e.g. the breast) towards which the sexual instinct, or need, is directed without targeting a whole person as an object. Part-objects are rather *derived* from the phallus. In this sense (i.e. not being reducible to a part-object), the phallus should first of all be conceived of as a '*privileged object*' (ibid 388) that is *both an image and a signifier*. The phallic image fundamentally relies on the image of a 'particular organ' (ibid), the erect penis, independently of the fact that it can be associated with a vast array of other related images – for instance, most evidently, the turgid breast of an attractive woman or the standing figure of a whole person. As an 'image of power' (ibid 487), or plus, the phallic image is already as such a *signifying* image in that it always evokes its opposite, or minus. Detumescence inevitably follows from tumescence; the turgid breast looks sagging after lactation; the imposing person we revere and fear will sooner or later sit on a toilet and slip on a banana peel.

However, this signifying alternation (+/-) could not alone sustain itself and would vanish as a direct consequence of its continuous reversibility. Here in fact a plus invariably involves a minus and vice versa, + - + -, etc., with no possibility of isolating them as discrete differential elements. Thanks to a retroactive temporality, roughly corresponding to the various ontogenetic stages of the Oedipus complex and its resolution, the signifying image or imaginary phallus ϕ must thus first be grouped into a series of oppositional signifying couples, +/- +/- +/-, etc. (here/there day/night alive/dead, etc.), and then circumscribed as a set in which these elementary couples give way to signifiers in the strict sense of the term. But eventually this set can nevertheless only account for the fact that (phallic) signifierness is *not* totalisable, namely, that the Other qua the impersonal locus of the battery of signifiers never makes One (as the fusional unity of + and - in a supreme +). Such a delimitation of the imaginary phallus through incompleteness, whereby ϕ still lies at the basis of every signifier (as the now discrete opposition between a given signifier and the remaining signifiers in the battery that differ from it), is accomplished in castration through the symbolic phallus Φ .

In the same lessons of *Seminar Vin* in which he discusses obsession, Lacan therefore defines the symbolic phallus as the 'unique and privileged signifier' that 'designates the effect of the signifier as such [i.e. signifierness] on the signified' (ibid 450). More precisely, such a 'particular signifier', Φ , designates the signifier's effect on the signified by turning 'the *set of signifiers*' itself into 'a signified' (ibid 393, my emphases). This signified amounts to nothing else than the mutual implication of signification, or meaning, and its *incompleteness* as the

structural ‘wound’ of the human subject (ibid 450). In Lacan’s algebra, castration is thus written as $S(\mathcal{A})$, where Φ is the signifier S of the barred Other as the incompleteness of signification.

In line with this, Φ also stands for the ‘signifier of *desire*’ tout-court (ibid 393, my emphasis). That is, Φ is the signifier of the *Other’s* desire as an enigmatic x irreducible to signification. The field of desire as beyond demand corresponds to the field where Φ *signifies* the Other’s desire as \mathcal{A} by putting it into brackets (\mathcal{A}) – i.e. by creating a set out of \mathcal{A} . Yet, with the same movement, the Other’s desire is also put into place and established only as *irreducible* to signification – i.e. as barred. In this sense, Φ is both a ‘point of balance’ (ibid 406) and – as irreducible to signification – something the neurotic cannot come to terms with.

Consequently, as Lacan eloquently puts it, castration first and foremost *means* that ‘the Other is castrated’ (ibid 436), split, and inconsistent – or better, inconsistently ‘*structured by a Spaltung*’ (ibid 394, my emphases) – but by the same token also *desiring*. Castration should be seen as a structural law, ‘the law of the Other’ (ibid 436), on the basis of which the subject can position his desire as sexual desire. However, again, this is the law of a wound; the subject can be sexuated only if he accepts his own castration, namely, the fact that it is structurally impossible for him to be the *imaginary phallus* that would fulfil the Other’s desire (in order to be *himself One* in the field of the Other).

According to Lacan, castration thus orchestrates the passage from a ‘dialectic of being’ (or better, trying to be) the phallus to one of ‘having’ it; this dialectic is valid for both sexes (ibid 458). More precisely, it is only through castration that man and woman can symbolically emerge as such – as sexuated subjects – with regard to their desire ‘beyond demand’. Ontogenetically, castration puts a stop to the child’s attempt at being the imaginary phallus of the m-Other. Independently of the child’s anatomical sex, the ‘original desire’ amounts to a ‘I want to be what the mother desires’ and ‘in order to be it’, that is, φ , ‘I have to *destroy* what is [...] the object of her desire’ (ibid 454, my emphasis) – that is, the imaginary counterpart of the child (at this stage, especially the imaginary father) as the supposed embodiment of the mother’s φ .

Already in *Seminar V*, Lacan heavily criticises Freud on this point. The initial issue at stake in castration is not whether one has it (boys) or not (girls) but ‘recognising one is *not* the phallus’

(ibid 453, my emphasis). Having it or not having it then follows from this recognition. Such an acknowledgement (of the impossibility of being the imaginary phallus of the mother) constitutes the ‘ultimate signifying relation’ – that is, Φ as the S of S (\mathcal{A}) or ‘law of the Other’. Why is this the ultimate signifying relation? Because it ‘solves [for the child] the imaginary impasse’ generated by the role that the image of the phallus takes on at the (proto-)signifying level, that is, the continuous reversibility of ϕ as $+ - + -$, etc. On this basis the child can be sexuated symbolically as either a man who has the phallus (+) or a woman who does not have it (-).

But Lacan also importantly adds that man ‘can have the phallus only against the background of not having it’, while woman ‘does not have it only against the background of having it’ (ibid 452). This complication is only hinted at in *Seminar V* in the context of his discussion of obsession and will fully be developed with the formulas of sexuation of the early 1970s. However, it provides us with a first attempt at explaining why castration is never really successful and ϕ is sublated by Φ but never eradicated. In short, on the side of man, having the phallus as being castrated by Φ contradictorily involves that there nevertheless exists one mythical man, the Father, who *is* the ϕ (as supreme +) men do *not* have.¹⁶ On the side of woman, not having the phallus as being castrated by Φ entails having the not-having man does not have, which is why woman undecidably also ‘appears to *be* the phallus’ ϕ for man (that is, the – *as +* man should have to be a Father) (ibid 454, my emphasis). In *Seminar VI* Lacan will indeed say that woman *is* the phallus without having it. In *Seminars XIX* and *XX* he will crucially specify that, for the same reason, she has a privileged relation to the contradiction between man and the phallus.¹⁷

With specific regard to the aim of the psychoanalytic treatment of obsession, in *Seminar V* Lacan clearly spells out that it is overall a matter of ‘showing [the obsessional] what really is his relation to the phallus *as the signifier of the Other’s desire*’, that is, as Φ (ibid 472, my emphasis). Primarily, the obsessional does not accept that castration as enacted by Φ corresponds to the ‘signifier’s effect on the Other’ – to the ‘mark that befalls’ the Other; the bar of \mathcal{A} – (ibid 464) whereby the Other’s desire can only be delimited (\mathcal{A}) as irreducible to

¹⁶ In terms of the later Lacan, this Father is *equally* symbolic, real, and imaginary. Symbolic, in that he follows from the structural ‘law of the Other’ or castration as a dead father; real, since in contradicting this law he at the same time stands as its inherent deadlock; imaginary, because he also obviously represents a mirage of completeness.

¹⁷ This is expressed in *Seminar XX* as Φ . For a detailed investigation of all these issues, see Chiesa, 2016, especially Chapters 1 and 4.

signification. From this perspective, the obsessional would literally want to come to *terms* with the Other, that is, transform the latter's desire into a decipherable *message* – which would, however, inevitably destroy desire, both the Other's and the subject's. But all the obsessional achieves in doing so is a perpetuation of the child's vain efforts to be the imaginary phallus of the Other's desire (ibid 452), in order to ultimately be himself One in the field of the Other. From here also follows the prevalence of the obsessional's destructive tendencies towards the *other* (the imaginary counterpart *qua* rival) as what allegedly occupies the place of the object of the Other's desire. In this second sense, the objective of the psychoanalytic treatment of obsessionals is to make them assume that 'You are yourself what you want to destroy, since you yourself want to be the phallus' as ϕ (ibid 454).

Lacan is adamant that, in spite of producing such a terrible deadlock, obsession should always be distinguished from psychosis and cannot turn into it – unlike what other psychoanalytic schools claim (ibid 389-90). We are in fact dealing with two fundamentally different modes of subjectivation. The psychotic is totally 'unable to grasp' (ibid 484) the Other's desire as structured by Φ in castration; the Other's desire thus remains a mere hole in the battery of signifiers and is perceived as a malignantly omnipotent agency that tends towards the 'destruction of the world' (ibid 389). Lacan concedes that, in a certain sense, for the obsessional too 'there is no big Other' – as S (\mathbb{A}) – 'insofar as it is a question of desire' (ibid 403). Yet, at the same time, the obsessional manages to construct a peculiar relationship 'at a distance' with desire (ibid 468), which the psychotic never achieves.

That is to say, in striving 'to annul the Other's desire' the obsessional's *Verneinung* also *articulates the Other's desire as negated* (ibid 484). This does not only mean that, as seen, all concrete behaviours aimed at destroying the o/Other are ambivalently supplemented on the level of demand by 'good intentions' (or in terms of 'pathological' symptoms, by repetitive and coercive 'formulas' or rituals 'of compensation') designed to preserve the Other (ibid 484-85). It especially means that the annulment itself cannot but be always paradoxically *formulated* as a '*demand* for death' (ibid 484, my emphasis); in the demand for the Other's death, the attempted destruction of the Other's desire – which would also involve the subject's own disappearance – expresses *as such* the structural, albeit thwarted and unconscious, articulation of (the subject's) *desire* (as ultimately dependent on the Other's desire). This is perhaps the most crucial dimension of what throughout these lessons Lacan calls the 'contradiction' of obsessional desire (ibid 485, 494-95).

To the extent that, unlike the psychotic, the obsessional somehow succeeds in stabilising desire – not without running the risk that the *demand* for death will turn into a death of *demand*, i.e. a complete ‘inability to speak’ one’s desire due to its contradictory status (ibid 495) – the main problem in the obsessional’s failure to undergo castration rests not so much with the Other’s desire but with the symbolic phallus. As Lacan has it, Φ , as ‘what *marks* the place of the Other’s desire’ and only thus allows the subject to *sexuate* his desire, is what is ‘very especially annulled’ by the obsessional’s *Verneinung* (ibid 485, my emphasis). It is here that psychoanalysis must intervene. The third, final, and most conclusive description of the aim of the psychoanalytic treatment of obsession in *Seminar V* is accordingly presented by Lacan as a passage from ‘I am the phallus’ (φ) to ‘[I am] submitted to the necessity that the phallus occupies a certain place’ (as Φ , or S in S (\mathcal{A})) (ibid 486).¹⁸

Obsessional fantasy and the universality of fantasy

To put it differently, and summarising Lacan’s at times quite convoluted arguments, the *question* ‘to be or *not to be* φ ?’ *does* after all exist for the obsessional. Otherwise, he would be a psychotic. But the obsessional does not really answer it with Φ , as not-being φ . As only obliquely shown by the ‘compensatory’ moments of his aggressive behaviours (i.e. the demand for a straightforward *agreement*; the belief in the *promise*; the verbal *validation* of the exploit) and openly displayed in the proof of love (negatively) and acting out (positively), the obsessional senses that his desire ‘as such’ as oriented towards the destruction of the other/Other (in order to be One) can be sustained, always more contradictorily, only by ‘pleasing’ the Other – i.e. by attempting to be *his* phallus. Most importantly, the obsessional also senses that the *inconsistency* of the Other’s desire is in excess of *any* negotiation and cannot be pleased (not even by accepting to be impregnated by God himself in order to regenerate the destroyed world, like Schreber does...). Yet, according to *Seminar V* at least, instead of renouncing to be the Other’s φ , and consequently installing Φ , the obsessional responds the question ‘to be or not to be φ ?’ with the alternative response of *fantasy* (ibid 446), which is what tentatively grounds and manages to support – at the cost of great ‘suffering’ (ibid 468) – desire as informing all his contradictory behaviours.

¹⁸ Lacan adds that this is how Freud’s *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* should be interpreted (ibid).

The obsessional's fantasy is fundamentally repressed in the unconscious. It thus stands as Lacan's re-elaboration of the so-called 'distance from the object' – more specifically, in terms of a *relation* 'at a distance' with desire – but as such it also provides him with the 'semblance of a foothold' (ibid 403) for his – destructive and otherwise self-effacing – desire.

Lacan seems to accept Freud's ontogenetic tenet according to which obsession first originates as a precocious 'detachment of the destructive tendencies' due to the *active* role the child assumes in a 'primitive [sexual] trauma' that is for him pleasurable (ibid 399, 467). These tendencies are, however, always linguistically entwined with demand and its frustration; that is, it does not make sense to postulate the existence of 'primordial aggressive drives' as meta-psychological expressions of a 'nature turned against itself' (ibid 494). Lacan also appears to subscribe in part to the mainstream post-Freudian idea that the libidinal life of the adult obsessional is thereby dictated by sadistic fantasies. But, in line with the above, he strongly contends that these sadistic fantasies should not be considered as 'a sort of blind image of the destructive instinct [...] where the subject as one might say [...] all of a sudden sees red in front of the prey' (ibid 409). On the contrary, sadistic fantasies are themselves inextricable from language, or signifierness. More to the point, they are first and foremost an inaccessible structured 'scenario', and even a 'history', in which the desiring subject brings *himself* into play as *barred* (i.e. as always already split by language on the level of demand) *vis-à-vis* an object (the object *a*) (ibid). The object in question is, again, nothing else than the phallus ϕ (ibid 403, 448) – associated in conscious life with a rival counterpart – that the subject tends to destroy in order to be at its place, but which is nonetheless as such aggressively maintained or preserved, since its destruction would also involve the subject's own disappearance.

Lacan can thus polemically conclude that calling this complex structure 'sadistic fantasy' is just an oversimplified label, which fails to recognise that it amounts to a mode of (repressed) subjectivation tout-court (ibid 411, 398-99). In tentatively, and contradictorily, stabilising the obsessional's evanescent desire, fantasy should rather be seen as a 'signifying organisation of the relation to the Other as such' in that it alleviates the fundamental difficulty the obsessional has with castration – that is, 'with the Other as the place where the signifier orders desire' (ibid 411, 405). In this context, Lacan also defines fantasy as 'an imaginary taken in a certain signifying function' (ibid 410). In other words, fantasy still somehow revolves around the lures of the phallic image, which is originally (phylogenetically if not ontogenetically) mediated from the penis as a 'form of life' (ibid 406) and begins to symbolise the speaking being's relation to sexual desire through a series of pluses and minuses.

At this stage, we should also admit that, in *Seminar V*, Lacan does not actually say much about how the obsessional's fantasy as a junction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic (but also the Real, since we are in the end dealing with the speaking being's impossibility of straightforwardly representing sex¹⁹) precisely works. We are told that fantasy 'allows [the obsessional] to preserve a certain position that avoids the collapse of desire' (ibid 435) – which, as seen, would follow from approaching the object too closely (ibid 412). But we are also told that, for the same reason, by structuring the relation to his desire only 'at a distance', fantasy also prevents him from 'recognising himself in relation to his desire' (ibid 411). Thirdly it is argued that all this involves for the subject a certain kind of identification with the object *a*, which is understood – in rapid succession and quite confusingly – as a 'phallic object', an imaginary other taken 'not as such' (but as ϕ), and also a 'unary trait' (ibid 435, 446). Yet Lacan does not explain what specifically the *stabilising* factor of the fantasy is if the latter amounts to a false alternative to castration.

We should here ask some crucial questions, which Lacan does not formulate in *Seminar V*. How can the continuous oscillation +/- of the phallic image be arranged and contained without the, more or less effective, intervention of Φ ? In the absence of Φ , why does the obsessional not instead criminally 'see red' and, acting out once and for all, self-destructively appropriate the object/prey? What kind of paradoxical satisfaction makes Tantalus opt to remain forever un nourished in the pool of water?

I think we encounter here, in a framework mostly devoted to clinical issues, the clearest limit of Lacan's theory of the subject as developed until the late 1950s. Undoubtedly, in *Seminar V* he has not yet elaborated a comprehensive notion of *jouissance*. But, in strict relation to this, I think that the limit at stake has first and foremost to do with his inability to fully assume the *universality of fantasy*, independently of the different configurations it can take according to different modes of subjectivation (obsessional neurosis, hysteria, and perversion²⁰). Conversely, Lacan is still unable to acknowledge the fact that *castration itself necessitates fantasy* – to the extent that, by Lacan's own admission, castration is never entirely accomplished, not even by those subjects which *Seminar V* continues to regard (reluctantly,

¹⁹ In this regard, in *Seminar V*, Lacan states that, because of language, *Homo sapiens* is not an 'immanent bearer of life' (ibid 406).

²⁰ I do not list psychosis here, since throughout Lacan's work psychosis is, strictly speaking, not a mode of subjectivation, but its failure.

implicitly, but also insistently) as ‘normal’. To put it more bluntly, here Lacan is not yet ready to openly concede that subjectivation as such goes together with the forced choice between neurosis and perversion (and their respective kinds of *jouissance*), as he will instead do in his later work, for which, despite individual variations in degree and symptoms, there is structurally no ‘man’ without *père-version* and no ‘woman’ without hysteria.²¹

In *Seminar V*, Lacan hesitantly touches on these issues on several occasions but does not solve them: ‘The subject remains a divided subject, which belongs to the very nature of the human subject. If he is no longer divided, he is mad’ (ibid 430-31); ‘The insertion of the human being [as such] into the dialectic of sexual desire is destined to be absolutely problematic’ (ibid 406); even more clearly, ‘the only difference between what is called a normal relation of desire and the neurotic is not simply [the] paradox of desire, because this paradox is fundamental, it is that the neurotic is open to the existence of this paradox as such’ (ibid 432).

However, in the very context of his treatment of obsession, Lacan interestingly provides a most instructive, and rare, discussion of how *castration itself requires an image* – one that bears ‘the mark of a lack’ – as a ‘support’ (ibid 464), or, we could add, some sort of phantasmatic inscription. This crucial point is dealt with rapidly in two only apparently distant passages of lessons XXV and XXVI. The first puts forward an audacious meta- psychological postulate; the second rephrases and specifies it clinically as a commentary on one of Bouvet’s case studies (mistaken and potentially dangerous in terms of the direction of the cure in Lacan’s opinion).

Lacan claims that individual animals are – or at least can be regarded by us – as *always already dead* with regard to the species to which they belong and which they perpetuate (ibid 464). The only (presumed but to the best of our knowledge irrefutable) exceptionality of *Homo sapiens* in this respect is that due to language’s deviation and refraction of sexual need – i.e., in short, what will retroactively constitute the whole dialectic of demand and desire – the speaking being can ‘apperceive [himself] as already dead’ (ibid). That is to say, we ‘apperceive [ourselves] as excluded from the *totality* of desires, as something limited, local [...] as only being one of those through whom life passes (ibid, my emphasis). In this general and meta-psychological context, castration is the actively subjectivising *symbolisation* of apperceiving oneself as already dead, precisely thanks to the striking through of ‘the specific organ’ – the penis –

²¹ In the late Lacan, this of course also complicates the status of obsession as a predominantly *masculine* (in symbolic terms) *neurosis*. On both *père-version* and the inextricability of the singularity of woman from hysteria as its sublated presupposition, see Chiesa 2016, especially Chapters 1 and 4.

‘where the thrust of life appears most sensibly’, and only temporarily, as an *image* that sticks out (ibid 464-65).²² Castration as a symbolic operation enacted by the phallus Φ amounts to the striking through of the phallic image ϕ . Φ is *nothing but this striking through as such*, that is, the signifier S that bars its imaginary support ϕ , where ϕ stands as the image of the supposed totality of desire from which we feel excluded. Since this supposed totality is structurally projected onto the field of the Other (as the mirage of the Other’s absolute enjoyment), the Other will be itself barred, and only thus circumscribed (as surplus enjoyment) in its inconsistency.

Lacan then goes on to show how this species-specific symbolization unfolds concretely in the individual fantasy (made conscious through the transference but otherwise repressed) of one of Bouvet’s obsessional patients. In one of her recurrent and compulsive symptoms, she overlaps the presence of Christ’s body in the sacramental bread – that is, according to her Catholic background, the ‘incarnation of the Word’, or *logos* as such (ibid 450) – with the image of the male sexual organ (ϕ). As she advances in her treatment, she then has a dream in which she pictures herself *crushing* the figure of Christ – as previously associated with ϕ – with her *kicks* (Φ). This movement from ϕ to Φ as the striking through of ϕ is at this point also reinforced in the patient’s daydreaming: ‘Every morning in order to get to work, I pass in front of an undertaker’s shop where four images of Christ on the cross are exposed. Looking at them I have the sensation that I am *walking [Φ] on their penises [ϕ]*’ (ibid 450-51).

For Lacan this scenario displays in the clearest fashion the replacement of ‘the subject’s relation to the embodied Word’, and, more precisely, to the alleged ‘*totality* of the Word’ (ibid 450, my emphasis) – since the incarnation of Christ *qua logos* not coincidentally appears alongside the phallic image ϕ which would complete it²³ – with the emergence of a ‘privileged signifier’, Φ , ‘that serves to designate the effect, the mark, the imprint, the wound of the signifier’s set insofar as it bears on the human subject, and insofar as through the agency of the signifier there are for him things which come to signify’ (ibid 450).

Lacan believes that Bouvet’s obsessional patient, encouraged by the psychoanalytic

²² ‘This is why it is the phallus, insofar as it represents the rise of the vital power, that takes place within the order of the signifiers to represent what is marked by the signifier – what, through the signifier, is struck by this essential caducity where, within the signifier itself, can be articulated this want-to-be of which the signifier introduces the dimension in the life of the subject’ (ibid).

²³ Lacan also mentions how the connection between the *logos* and the phallic image is further consolidated by the crucifix (ibid 451).

transference, is here desperately trying to carry out castration. The crushing, kicks, and walking on the penis (literally, the penis of the *logos*), should not be taken as an aggressive/sadistic attempt at ‘having the phallus and desiring to be a man’ (ibid 451) – as per a doxastic reading of so-called penis envy. The striking through instead applies to the patient’s own endeavour to renounce *being the phallus* φ (even though other fragments from the case history vividly show her ‘obsessional destruction’ as directed at her husband *qua* the perceived φ she would like to be – ibid 454). Bouvet’s wrong handling of the treatment does not allow him to realise all this. According to Lacan, the patient then reacts by acting out.

To sum up and conclude, I am not arguing that the image (φ barred, or $-\varphi$ as Lacan sometimes calls it) that functions as a support for the symbolic operation of castration is, strictly speaking, a fantasy. My overall claim is rather that given that no subject can thoroughly accomplish castration (i.e. fully acknowledge the inconsistency of the Other), which is thus ‘primarily repressed’ (ibid 465), castration is not simply a solution to ‘pathological’ Oedipal fantasies, but goes together with the *universal establishment* of a post-Oedipal ‘*fundamental*’ fantasy – in turn variously attuned to the neurotic and perverse modes of subjectivation, and itself repressed *because of* castration. This issue becomes most evident in the so-called diagrams of sexuation of *Seminar XX*, where both S (\mathbb{A}) and *a* – the formula of fantasy – figure as *non-eliminable* components of subjectivity.

My general point is also that, in *Seminar V*, Lacan’s stance in this regard is inconclusive. On the one hand, he still reluctantly clings to the idea of castration as an overcoming, or avoidance, of fantasy – which is thus confined to neurosis and perversion as ‘pathologies’ – and thereby, even more unenthusiastically, to the vague presupposition of a however convoluted ‘normality’. On the other hand, he is nonetheless somehow obliged by his own theory of demand and desire to admit the universality of fantasy. The latter transpires not only implicitly through the fact that castration itself requires an image but also explicitly in the graph of desire Lacan constructs and unpacks throughout *Seminar V*. Here fantasy is already presented as one of ‘the four legs on which a human subject constituted as such can normally be based’, and we are thus lead to conclude that the abnormality of fantasy is after all normal, or ‘normally’ abnormal (ibid 397).

I would suggest that what remains to be articulated in Lacan’s work of the 1960s and 1970s is the link between the scenario of castration (Φ ’s striking through of φ as it concomitantly bars

the Other) and the precise imaginary, symbolic, and *real* coordinates of the object *a* in the fundamental fantasy. *Seminar V* in fact considers the object *a* exclusively as imaginary, which makes it difficult if not impossible to distinguish it from ϕ (indeed defined here as a ‘phallic object’).²⁴

More to the point, Lacan will have to explain how ϕ barred intersects in the fundamental fantasy with the object *a qua lost* object. As already hinted in *Seminar VI*, insofar as he is always already split by language, the only chance the subject has to constitute himself as a desiring want-to-be is by paradoxically (and masochistically in a sense) mapping himself, that is, his split status, on the object he allegedly lost. *Seminar XI* will refer to this operation as ‘separation’. Moreover, as discussed in *Seminar XVI*, the subject supposes that the lost object is *enjoyed by the Other*. This very supposition – especially challenging for the neurotic, since it epitomises the subject’s structural *non-autonomy* – is what tries to compensate, in both fantasy and conscious life, for the truly unbearable incompleteness of the inconsistent Other as decreed by castration.

On an unconscious level that is not simply repressed but *grounds* as such subjectivity tout-court, and can therefore never truly be superseded, castration as an unfinished and ‘infinite’²⁵ process cannot do without the fantasy. ‘Castrated’ subjects are themselves obsessional, hysterical, or perverse depending on the various inflections of the object *a* in their fundamental fantasy. To put it bluntly, obsessives desire to be One in the field of the Other, that is, contradictorily desire to identify with their *own* desire in spite of its reliance on the Other’s desire. Hysterics desire the Other to be One, a Master, yet in identifying with this Master they desire to be *themselves* the One that would have done with his inconsistency. Perverts desire that the Other be himself One, not by identifying with the Other, but by identifying with what ‘*cork[s]* the hole in the Other’ (Lacan 2006: 253, my emphasis) and would thus complete it.

²⁴ On the proximity and difference between the object *a* and ϕ in Lacan’s later Seminars see Chiesa, 2016, especially Chapter 2.

²⁵ On this point, Lacan should have paid more attention to Freud’s insistence on the *unendlich* character of psychoanalysis – which, in *Seminar V*, he dismisses far too quickly (Lacan 1998: 453).

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