

Fragments sur le symptôme, l'acting-out et le passage à l'acte
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Here I present the relevant elements of three cases, studied during the course of the year, with the aim of examining the determinism of what might be called the "point of acting."

Bernard C. was referred to me by an investigating judge before whom he had just appeared. The judge, noting his dazed appearance and confused explanations, had concluded that he was dealing with a pathological problem. The following events had occurred: a fire (caused by old newspapers burning in a cupboard) was called; the fire department and the police were summoned. A man came forward, claiming to be the arsonist. He was taken to the magistrate.

This man could say nothing about the determinism of his action, nor could he find any reason for it. He had been seized by it, and, he said, had—like an automaton—set the fire. In his unconscious state, he offered no explanations, nothing subjective, nothing problematized, nothing embarrassed or entangled except his perplexity at his own act, which seemed incomprehensible to him.

However, his history showed that he had already attempted suicide once by hanging, but the rope had broken. A second time by turning on the gas, but his mother intervened in time. And this time, by trying—that's all he remembered—to inhale the smoke of burning newspapers. In short, on three occasions, he had attempted suicide, without knowing why, and in a particular way, since it was by inhalation and asphyxiation.

Now, this man was divorced from a wife who periodically provoked him about the children she had custody of (provoking-

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signification in the mode of acting-out: they are my phallus; I'll show you—and if I so choose—I'll give it to you. Moreover, she placed particular emphasis on the question: in what way are you a father to your children? Or again: what is it, exactly, that makes you a father¹? The three suicide attempts occurred within the hours immediately following the moment when—instead of handing the children over to him—she refused to do so, hurling at him the very question we have just mentioned.

Let us note the following—a detail that emerged only after a lengthy period of analytic work: her father had suffered from tuberculosis and was frequently hospitalized. This father died when our patient was three years old; the child was standing at his father's bedside when the man passed away right before his eyes, succumbing to a sudden, massive pulmonary hemorrhage. A father who died by pulmonary flooding—by asphyxiation.

Thus: our patient, in his turn, becomes a father; and when his wife—by withholding the children upon whom he relies to recognize himself within that paternal function—addresses him with the

question, "What is it, exactly, that makes you a father?" he responds automatically with this: "A father is one who dies via the respiratory tract." There is no suicidal intentionality here whatsoever—only a direct, automatic, and acted-out response to a question touching upon a point that, for him, had remained unsymbolized. It is a summoning of a father whose impending death held no promise of life—but rather of a father whose very life was a bearer of death. Not a spokesperson, but a lethal absence—an absence to which the son responds with a word that instantly shatters him: "I am dying." It is a rejected, unsymbolizable word—a word that makes its return in the form of an act at the very moment his wife reiterates her own acting-out, thereby impinging upon that very point which, for him, remains inaccessible. From that moment on, our man no longer relied on anything save for the enactment of a "function out of circuit"—one intervening in the realm of the Real precisely through the interplay of its own failure; an enactment realized through suicide by asphyxiation. He thereby tipped over to the side of that which suffocates—to the side of object *a*—through an act of provocation—"man to man," if you will allow me the expression—that is to say, through a dual provocation: one directed by a $-\phi$ at a $-\phi$ incapable of being staged. In place of the minus-phi ($-\phi$) there emerges the ultimate mortal anguish associated with the organ that obstructs the flow of libido.

As is typically the case, this phenomenon possesses the structure of a sentence—a sentence in which one of the constituent propositions remains inarticulate. Consequently, this sentence continues to unfold within the realm of the Real, taking the form either of a hallucination, of a specific course of action, or indeed of both.

In short: our task is to decipher—to read within these actions—the words they implicitly contain; and, simultaneously, to discern that sense of disinheritance they convey—a disinheritance that, with every passing moment, casts the subject ever further away from the very possibility of grasping them, even as he mechanically attempts to reclaim them as his own.

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In our case, let us also heed this terrible lament: "Father, do you not see that, like you, I am suffocating?" Is a father, then, nothing more than this—this oppression, this rarefaction of the air? Simultaneously—yet in opposition to such an assertion—there emerges the conviction that a father must be something else entirely. But in the very act of rejecting the memory of the father who died by asphyxiation, what exactly does this "something else" prove to be? And if this unknown quantity—this *x*—has never been given, is not present, then the enigma takes on its full acuity, revealing its truly brutal nature.

We see this culminate in the third suicide attempt—the fire. It is not merely a cry of "Father, do you not see that I am burning?"; it is, just as powerfully, "Father, I am truly burning—all the more so because I remain unaware that I burn, even though this is no dream." Unable to dream that I am burning in the face of this question, it is the question itself that burns me for real. All that remains of the father is this fire—a fire that is, in essence, divine: a father is a flame within which I burn, and which consumes me. If I am to die amidst the smoke, it is because this flame draws me in—a flame from which I sought to draw life, yet which, in the event, reveals itself to be a mortal fire.

François G. sought to be "initiated." This quest for initiation—which led him to frequent various esoteric sects and their intellectual gurus—stemmed from a profound sense of an essential defect within himself, causing him to experience his very existence as one of utter exclusion. We came to know him at a time when his psychosis was fully manifest and advanced. He had just been hospitalized following a fall from a second-story window—an incident that left him with thirteen fractures and necessitated long months of intensive care and surgery. This fall had occurred at a time when the very notion of suicide was utterly foreign to him. In the instant preceding the act, any inclination of that nature was entirely absent.

What had happened? His initiatory quest—which we might describe as a quest for the Name-of-the-Father, that is, for that which introduces one to discourse and the social bond—had carried him, through various encounters with "initiates" and amidst a "wild" transference, toward an idea that had become obsessive: "I must transcend myself." This he attempted to do—albeit in a forced manner—through his confrontational outbursts or through his writing. And then, just as he reached the very acme of the inner insistence of this imperative—an imperative inextricably linked to his specific sense of deprivation—he left his home with that very phrase echoing in his mind. He passed through a corridor flanked by a balcony and a glass canopy. Then, without knowing why—a state he would later describe as "hypnosis"—he sat down on the ledge and let himself fall... What, precisely, had transpired within that state of "hypnosis"? That famous phrase:

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"I must surpass myself" had been transformed into "surpass yourself." The "I," incapable of enunciative assumption, had been invaded, replaced by the imperative of "it is necessary," an impersonal, indefinite, and truly nailing imperative. The invasion of the entire pathetic sentence it had taken had completely bent it to the injunction, by the imperative mode, simultaneous with the character of xeno-estrangement—but in this mode, it had changed space. This space had been reversed: from a metaphorical space where the symbol still operates, into a demetaphorized space, starting from this threshold that was an "I" eclipsed in the symbolic, and reducing it to this object (*a*) animated by the archaic booming voice; "I" eclipsed on the threshold of this reversal of Lacan that made it cross, surpass the balcony, its framing.

So, leap, then, through the paper hoop of the fantasy "I must surpass myself," where the "must" pierces the screen of conjunction to make the "I" the object that surpasses this edge to which it has assimilated itself, in order to propel it into the beyond where Thanatos reigns. The hoop to be surpassed becomes the balcony that frames the empty space where, like the object, it comes to inscribe itself, propelled, projected, by a command that has occupied the place of the unbarred subject, to bar it with this balcony rail that makes it fall. The "surpass oneself," now "surpass yourself," thus takes on its full signification.

The dream of an imaginary crossing, lacking symbolic support, has become a crossing of the real. *Niederkommen*. This crossing of the balcony, this transcendence, is that of the never-completed cut where the subject becomes this fallen part abandoned to the Other, but then, in its incarnation of (*a*), it becomes the real part, the collapse of the subject into the object to be evacuated in order to animate the signifying chain.

When our patient lets himself slide from the glass-roofed balcony, it is also a way of returning from this fundamental exclusion in which he feels himself. It is a modality of reintegration of the failing framework that he tries to fill, but in trying to fill it, he passes through it. From then on, it is in the real that the cut is rearticulated, becoming the balcony, the framework of the fantasy: a balcony surrounded by a glass roof, and the subject himself: object (*a*) returning in this real.

Finally, let us note in such a case the inversion of an aspiration toward an unattainable Ideal into a murderous imperative, where motor skills are demonstrated under the dependence of the signifying articulation. An ideal that asserts, in the automatism of the act, what its truth is: he who becomes the object to which everyone aspires, excludes himself from

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that which constitutes a world—for this world, he becomes it. He then becomes a universe. ONE. He disidentifies himself.

This is an essential aspect that can be appreciated through the study of Cotard's syndrome²—as well as what is indicated therein, within the fullness of the asphere: the necessity to produce a hole, to eject the washer of the object *a*; an ejection occurs in the purest, most automatic mode. This is the case with the suicide of many melancholics. We then witness the triggering of an act whose sudden, instantaneous, and unpredictable nature constitutes the entire danger of such cases.

The Montpellier Conference on "Formalization and Clinical Practice" led me to present a case of psychotic language disturbances³, which served to demonstrate that, in such instances, the subject equates himself with the object *a*—and, by extension, with the cut itself—whereas in neurosis, a topological duplicity of the subject is observed, wherein he is simultaneously counted and discounted. This brings us to a momentous question: if the subject's implication in his demand brings his fantasy into play, how is it possible—in certain cases of neurosis—to transition from $S \diamond a$ to $S \Leftrightarrow (a) \Leftrightarrow /$? In short: how can one drive someone mad? This question, therefore, bears upon the nature of the "surgery" that renders such an operation possible.

The cases previously evoked already reveal certain open aspects of phenomena that neurosis ordinarily presents in a "covered" mode.

The difficulty, in the realm of psychosis, in assessing the status of "points of action" lies precisely in the fact that we are dealing with psychoses—that is to say, cases in which the very nature of transference—even when handled with prudence and appropriate guidance by a practitioner well-versed in clinical experience—assumes a "wild," uninterpretable character. One may encounter cases of psychosis—treated by a psychoanalyst without any technical error—which, solely through the triggering power of transference, culminate in acts that are both uncontrollable and uninterpretable. The structure of psychosis—much like that of the transference occurring within it—can determine these events, regarding which Lacan remarked: "One would hesitate to label them as acting-out." We grasp the reason why: at times, they appear to combine elements characteristic of a *passage à l'acte* with those specific to

acting-out. In psychosis, whatever phallic induction may exist within the Imaginary realm maintains—under specific solicitations—a peculiar and dangerous proximity of reversion with the object *a*. Furthermore, if *acting-out* can only be adequately defined within the coordinates of analytic practice, psychosis is—if only for the aforementioned reason—that

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which lies at the limit. Although entirely within the field of psychoanalysis. Finally, this is fundamental—the structure of the act and the symptom can collide there. I am trying to situate this gaping space opened by Lacan's formulas: acting-out as a psychotic equivalent and the one where he states that in cases of psychosis, one will hesitate to speak of acting-out.

In cases of psychosis, it must be emphasized that one can appreciate how act and symptom, that is to say—where applicable, act and hallucination—can truly symphysize, one merging into the other; and to the point where, from this conjunction, a new type of disjunction can emerge: that of the voice from speech, inarticulate speech that can reappear in an act that the body articulates in the real of its movement. Pure voice, commanding conduct⁴. It is from this point that it would then be possible to advance into the essential distinctions and dimensions of the act-out.

I now turn to Pierre C. We have recalled how the distinction between symptom, acting-out, and acting out can only truly be resolved within the framework of psychoanalytic trigonometry.

It is noteworthy that in his case, the following special sequence occurred—thanks to which I was able to gain insight into the status of his act-outs:

1) I received him at the hospital for a psychoanalytic consultation, referred by a fellow psychiatrist, perplexed as to what should be done for this distraught man. At that time, I had no idea what status to give to his exhibitions, but I considered that he should undergo psychoanalysis. He suffers from obsessive-compulsive neurosis.

2) I referred him to a psychoanalyst with whom he began a cure.

3) I saw him again later, after he had indeed undergone psychoanalysis. This time, he asked for my help in court. It was only then that I thought I was able to distinguish in his case the symptom, the acting out, and the behavior itself.

No doubt I could have elaborated on these aspects at greater length; I believe this should suffice, as a contribution to the debate, in other words, as something that is being presented.

Pierre C. was accused of having exposed himself for the first time in

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a restaurant—of which he retained no memory—and having subsequently pulled his car over, he exposed himself in front of a woman. Consequently, the legal troubles that had stemmed from the first incident—which he now remembered perfectly—were compounded by this second one. It was at this moment that I met him for the first time.

Later, then, this man returned to see me to recount what he had been able to analyze and to ask for my help.

Regarding what was termed the "first exhibition," the following events had taken place: a construction site foreman, he was having lunch with a contractor—his superior—before whom he felt himself yielding in a dispute that pitted them against one another, and to whom he was attempting to stand his ground; all the while, he had—quite mechanically—begun alternately opening and closing his fly. One can already appreciate the extent to which he was engaged in this struggle through his relationship to the phallus. Now, in that restaurant, a little girl remarked to her mother: "Look, Mommy, the gentleman is showing himself." A simple observation. Not an interpretation—that came from the mother, who screamed "Scandal!" while pointing her finger at him. The man, panic-stricken, discovered that his fly was open and that the entire restaurant was watching him. Leaping up, he jumped into his car and fled. The very next day—his license plate number having been noted down—the police appeared at his home: a formal complaint had been filed by the child's mother. Police intimidation—coupled with falsely reassuring remarks along the lines of, "Just confess; you'll get off easy"—combined with the panic of having his home invaded and the distress of his wife, who was utterly blindsided by the events, drove him to confess to an act of indecent exposure that, in reality, wasn't truly one—even if, on an unconscious level, it was indeed the question of the phallus that he had laid upon the restaurant table. As the complaint for public indecency proceeded through the courts, the anxiety of judgment loomed ever closer, bringing with it the specter of judicial punishment. It was then that—upon spotting a female parking enforcement officer, and without consciously knowing what he was doing (for at that moment, the entire situation struck him as incomprehensible and absurd)—he pulled his car over, unzipped his fly, and—this time for real, in broad daylight, right under the officer's nose—exposed his genitals.

What he grasped of his predicament, when he returned to see me, was this: having already confessed—and knowing he was on the verge of being convicted for an offense he had not committed—he had told himself (unconsciously): "If that's how it is, I'll show them—show them what I'm truly capable of. And since I'm going to be punished anyway, I might as well make the offense I'm being punished for a reality."

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He had therefore acted according to what we know well: guilt precedes the wrongdoing. A classic medico-legal problem. In this instance, the guilt lay with the obsessed man, installed as his mother's incestuous little phallus, with her complicity. And the fact that a mother should suddenly, in the difficult masculine relationship between this man and another man, denounce him, eject him from this position of being the imaginary phallus, had catapulted him into flight. Imaginary phallus or nothing. This woman had offered a kind of savage interpretation of Pierre C.'s position, simultaneously denouncing its incestuous nature, and—in the horror of a guilt stemming from the original sin revealed to all—had expelled him from the generalized denunciatory gaze: a shift to the position of the object (*a*) offered to $-\phi$ —which itself takes on the value of an archaic superego, a booming voice aided by the universal gaze: (*a*) against (*a*), in short. And, if he had confessed to the police, it was precisely because he had imagined himself

guilty and at fault, deserving the punishment of one who, by desiring the mother beyond what the law permits, causes it to transgress within the Oedipus complex. So, in his confession, he had demanded punishment, the castration he had never experienced, but which, being enshrined in the Penal Code and thus proving inadequate to its purpose, had driven him to actual exhibitionism: since he was going to do it anyway, he might as well go all the way, and since he was going to be punished anyway, it might as well be for an offense stipulated by the Code, and—still while he was at it—the flagrant offense might as well be witnessed by a woman: which is called killing two birds with one stone, since he was then unconsciously calling for the female contract police officer to come in place of the place where his mother should have been: to acknowledge the desire for her, but to forbid it as well as to punish it. Let us even add, to kill three birds with one stone, the third being: "I am showing you that I am a man." "If I bring up this case, it is to try to fully appreciate an essential aspect of what Lacan calls 'acting-out': in the seminar on 'The Object Relation,' when he was discussing these 'exemplary' cases, 'these are explosions, even sometimes alternations with the fetishism of a truly reactive exhibitionism,' he added: 'Similarly, in our observations, we have some very interesting cases where we see the subject, insofar as he has attempted, under certain conditions of artificial realization of the real, to access a full relationship, the subject, precisely at that moment, expresses through his acting-out, that is to say, on the imaginary plane, what was symbolically latent in the situation.' Shortly afterward, he spoke of this subject who attempts, for the first time—

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at the passing of an international train—to conclude: what is this all about? "Simply to demonstrate that he was capable—just as he had been on a previous occasion—of actual sexual intercourse; and who, within the very next hour, proceeds to exhibit himself as if engaged in a normal relationship⁵."

In the case I have just outlined, one can observe a series of acts of self-coercion: first, the one to which he subjects himself at the dinner table while discussing business with a superior—an attempt to hold his ground, to demonstrate his capabilities, an effort to offer up his "pound of flesh." Then comes the act of disavowal: the exclamation to which the mother's scandalized shriek lends significance—a shriek that focuses the gaze of the superego upon our protagonist, thereby doubly ejecting him:

1) from the virile position he is attempting to assume—with difficulty, as his fumbling with his fly clearly demonstrates, yet a position he is attempting to assume nonetheless;

2) from the position of the imaginary phallus he had previously occupied in relation to his own mother—insofar as, at this precise moment, a mother figure brutally tears him away from that role, thereby imposing upon him:

3) a headlong flight—a flight that is threefold:

1) from the contractor—another man, a superior;

2) from the woman;

3) and finally, from the tribunal of the superego, immediately convened by the circumstances. This tribunal is embodied in the "policeman's eye"; Pierre C. proceeds to confess to an offense he has committed only on an Oedipal level, and solely in accordance with his mother's desire. Brutally ousted from his original position, he no longer knows where he stands—save within the guilt of a transgression whose true origins remain repressed. Finally, in a quest for an *posteriori* justification for the punishment he knows is imminent, he responds with: "If that's how it is, then fine—I'll give you a real show!" An argument addressed, ultimately, to his mother: "You wanted it, you got it..."—all while positioning her, under the guise of the restaurant's proprietress, in a stance where she was compelled to say "no" to him, thereby bringing into play the "separating third party."

Our objective was, evidently, to identify—given that we began by evoking the "surgery" that effects the transition from $S \diamond a$ to $S \Leftrightarrow (a) \Leftrightarrow /$ —how the forcing of the Real reveals itself to be one of those surgical modes that trigger curious clinical effects, which we may encounter and, at times, even produce ourselves. And we shall have recognized—as both a symptom and a formation of the unconscious (in the sense of the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*)—the fumbling with the fly of his trousers at the restaurant; followed, as a *passage à l'acte*, by the frantic flight of the...

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restaurant: ejection of the object (*a*) that it has then become; finally, as a caricatured acting-out in the name of showing off to the Other, the exhibition before the policewoman: a parade of $-\phi$.

In short, this case exemplifies the reason why, whether on the side of *passage à l'acte* or acting out, it is always with one's own flesh that one has to settle one's debts. To the point, probably, of so-called psychosomatic phenomena, since they can not only circumscribe, extraterritorialize, or even exclude a bodily territory, but truly amputate it and—to recall the meaning of circumcision as symbolic circumscription—even if it is prescribed only as a preventive measure against this kind of event, it obviously does not prevent Jews or Gentiles from being afflicted by it. This proves that all goodwill, as well as all observance of legal prescriptions, cannot prevent the worst, since their function with regard to desire is diverted, sometimes reversed, or even completely rejected. A little attention would allow us to find in this a gateway to examining the rise of totalitarian and exclusionary regimes in the world: it is object (*a*) that conditions them. Lacan, moreover, suggested: "This domain, which I have barely touched upon, must be called by its name. This designation, precisely because it gives us the value of the different biblical texts, is essentially a correlation of what so many analysts have felt compelled, and sometimes not without success, to examine, namely, the sources of what is called anti-Semitic sentiment⁶." But this is a vast question that will require further development.

In fact, for the moment, let us note that if the question of the act is conditioned by that of identification, if the question of identification is conditioned by the place of the Other, if the question of the place of the Other is conditioned by what—this empty place—comes to occupy, we will perhaps understand how, when we make it haunted by the dead, primitive, murdered father, the one who never existed and therefore has no possible grave, we will understand how

this father comes to be too present in a place he never occupied because of his actual absence. This is why totems are made, because in the history of humanity—when they are not made, when the corpse (this nothingness whose value as an object we must remember (a)) is not in a tomb or embodied by a symbol before which one can meditate, knowing that the dead person is neutralized there, and this is the usual case in

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—If one can say—contained and under surveillance, then this dead man, lacking proper burial, is everywhere, fouling the very atmosphere. Foreclosed from the symbolic realm, he reappears within the real. Lucien Israël once reminded me of the name of a newspaper from the "dark years": *Je suis partout* ("I am everywhere"). Can psychoanalysis, amidst this madness, point toward a path distinct from that wherein love becomes inextricably bound to hate—specifically when the function of the mediator—that of the Name-of-the-Father—is called into question, and—as the case may be—tortured? This is, assuredly, one of its loftiest challenges. One cannot claim, however, that—at this moment in time—it has had the slightest impact in this regard. This is evidenced by the ordinary lives of psychoanalysts themselves—lives that map perfectly onto the prevailing forms of madness: those of the common discourse prescribed by that strange entity known as social morality, even as it actively counters precisely that which, within every human being, serves as the bearer of life.

Notes

1. One will observe, moreover, how—in such a conjuncture—a woman may adopt an imaginary masculine position.
2. M. Czermak, "Signification psychanalytique du syndrome de Cotard," in *Le Discours psychanalytique*, No. 10, March 1984.
3. M. Czermak, "Ployure du langage," in *Mi-dit: cahiers méridionaux de psychanalyse*, Nos. 2–3, June 1984, Montpellier.
4. On this point, one may refer to the concepts I attempted to delineate in:
"Autour du déclenchement des psychoses," *Ornicar*, No. 9, April 1977.
"Ployure du langage," in *Mi-dit: cahiers méridionaux de psychanalyse*, Nos. 2–3, June 1984, Montpellier.
5. J. Lacan, Seminar on "*The Object Relation*," January 30, 1957 (unpublished).
6. J. Lacan, Seminar on "*Anxiety*," May 8, 1963 (unpublished).