

## The optimism of symbolism

In his book on George Boole<sup>1</sup>, S. B. Diagne points out that one of the foundations of Boole's work is what he calls "the optimism of symbolism," an optimism that can be found throughout the development of formal logic systems that have followed one another to the present day. "The optimism of symbolism" consists, when setting up a writing system, in accepting that certain stages of calculation are uninterpretable in terms of meaning, even if this means rediscovering the meaning at the end of purely formal, mechanical operations guided by rules that could, at a stretch, be described as typographical. This is also what happens in ordinary algebra when, after setting up a problem in equations, we move on to solving these equations without worrying about the meaning of the different letters, unknowns, or parameters we are manipulating. Meaning only reappears at the end of the calculation, when it comes to interpreting the result.

Lacan, in his use of mathematical notation, certainly practiced this "optimism of the symbolic." In many of his seminars, he meticulously developed the formal articulations of his writings before giving indications, often allusive or even enigmatic, as to the meaning to be given to these manipulations. This is particularly true of his work on the Borromean knot.

It seems to me that it is up to those who follow him to put these abstract structures to work and to verify (or discuss) their relevance, specifying, if possible, how they should be used. This justifies a renewed examination of Borromean clinical practice.

Thus:

The floating attention recommended by Freud to analysts as a response to the analytical rule prescribed to the analysand allows – in principle – at least two ranges to be heard simultaneously in the score of what is said in the treatment. Like the melodies of the different voices in a fugue, the patient's discourse constantly intertwines:

- the melody of meaning, of what is understood, with its stumbles, its non sequiturs, its inconsistencies,
- the "material" melody of the signifier, where we hear a succession of phonemes, rhythms, tones, and the volume of the voice, what we might call the "*walking bass*" of the analysand's speech.

Of these two lines of thought, one always prevails over the other, is favored, comes to the fore, while the other temporarily recedes into the background. This alternation occurs independently of any calculation, and everything suggests that these successive periods of prevalence of one or the other line are a manifestation of the structure. A kind of *fort-da*, in short.

Does the Borromean knot allow us to account for these prevalences? Probably not, if by "accounting" we mean matching the writings of the knot with specific clinical data.

On the other hand, and this is what we would like to try to illustrate in what follows, it may allow us to question in a new way the manifestations of the structure in the course of a session or a cure, and also to revisit the question of what we are entitled to call an "event" during a session or a cure.

When can we say—always after the fact, of course—"something happened there"?

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<sup>1</sup> Souleymane Bachir Diagne: Georges Boole, "L'oiseau de nuit en plein jour" (The Night Bird in Broad Daylight), Belin Paris, 1989

A first observation concerns a fact about writing that is well known to anyone who has ever tried to draw a knot on a piece of paper: If we simply draw a zigzag line, lifting the pencil each time the line intersects itself, no matter how complicated the resulting figure may be, we will never obtain the drawing of a knot, but only the drawing of a pile of string (Figure 1a). If you want to represent a knot, it is essential to anticipate at least once the future passage of the line in front of (i.e., above) the line you are drawing (Figure 1b).



Any drawing of a knot or braid must take into account this necessary anticipation, which, in our view, is very similar to that which is at work in any utterance. The two lines mentioned above are both subject to this double effect:

- The meaning only becomes clear at the end of the sentence, even if it was already present at the beginning (this can be likened to the programmatic dreams at the start of treatment, which contain all the essential themes of the treatment, but in an uninterpretable way).
- The "*walking bass*" is also subject to retroactive effects: it includes verses and choruses, repetitions, and any alteration in its articulation must be understood as something to come.

A second observation is that if we accept, as a first approximation,

- to consider the line of what is given to be understood as that of the imaginary
- to consider the line of the signifier in its materiality as that of the symbolic

It is clear that what happens on one is not independent of what happens on the other.

The two lines are interconnected. However, they are not strictly correlated: what is said about one cannot be deduced from what is said about the other. The Borromean knot suggests to us here, "like a ring on a finger," that this articulation is constituted by the knotting with a third line, the line of the real, which would then be the reason for the cohesion of the whole. The line of the real of desire at work in the snapshot of the cure, where we can see, for example, the transference in statements such as: "I suddenly realize that you are there."

The Borromean knot was initially proposed as the formalization of what Lacan called "a knot of language" <sup>2</sup>based on the specific statement "I ask you to refuse what I offer you because it is not that." It seems to me that we can see here a reversal and a possible generalization of this proposition: couldn't any statement—at least in analysis—be understood as the materialization of a Borromean knot, where the three lines intertwine, passing alternately to the foreground, and where the analysand and the analyst are equally caught up, albeit in different positions, which would then need to be specified?

Thus, as the utterance unfolds, our three lines, R, S, and I, intertwine, each passing alternately above one, below the other, but this is a crucial point: not

<sup>2</sup> ... Or worse, lesson 5

No matter what. The Borromean knot does indeed have certain constraints (see technical appendix).

First constraint: since the knot is Borromean, if one circle overlaps a second, it is necessarily overlapped by the third: if, during a certain utterance, the imaginary line comes to the fore and the symbolic line is obscured, then, necessarily, we must expect that the real line will in turn obscure the imaginary line somewhere. This could be a way of accounting for *acting out*.

If, on the other hand, the imaginary line coming to the fore obscures the real line this time, it is the symbolic line that we can expect to overcome (obscure) the imaginary line at certain points, which could be understood as a formulation of the return of the repressed. In no case can any line overcome the other two at the same time; this is the basic constraint of the knot.

Here we give only two of the six possible approaches to weaving the three lines. All of them seem worth exploring further. This would in fact mean returning to the task, as M. Darmon has already begun to do,<sup>(3)</sup> of describing the sequence proposed by Lacan in his 1953 lecture Real, Symbolic, Imaginary to describe the course of the cure, but with the tools he proposed two decades later.

In any case, the result would be that certain moments in a treatment (or even certain treatments) are either of the "RSI" type or of the "RIS" type, and that the two are mutually exclusive. The transition from one type to the other occurs—as the structure indicates—through a "crêpe" reversal operation that remains to be interpreted clinically: Is such a transformation possible during a treatment? During a session? Does it fall under interpretation, or even the pass, or should it be considered as characterizing a cure and only possible during a second round?

The same question arises for other transformations that allow us to move from one flattening of the knot to another.

For example, *what* about ring reversal? This transformation preserves the order (RSI or RIS) but changes the gyros of the knot<sup>4</sup>. But in doing so, it also disrupts the places proposed by Lacan for the signifiers he associates with the knot: object *a*, Meaning, Phallic Enjoyment, Other Enjoyment, Inhibition, symptom, anxiety. What event corresponds to such an upheaval? It is clear that it will not be the same depending on which ring we choose to turn, even if the knot resulting from the operation is the same.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Darmon, *Essays on Lacanian Topology* (New edition 2004) p354-5 The sequence comprises 9 "events" and is written as: rS-rI-iI-iR-iS-sS-sI-sR-rR.

<sup>4</sup> But what clinical meaning can be given to the gyri? It seems to us that only writing the knot in the form of a braid can shed light on this question: the braid describing a left-handed knot and that of a right-handed knot do not start at the same place, even if the order (RSI or RIS) is the same.

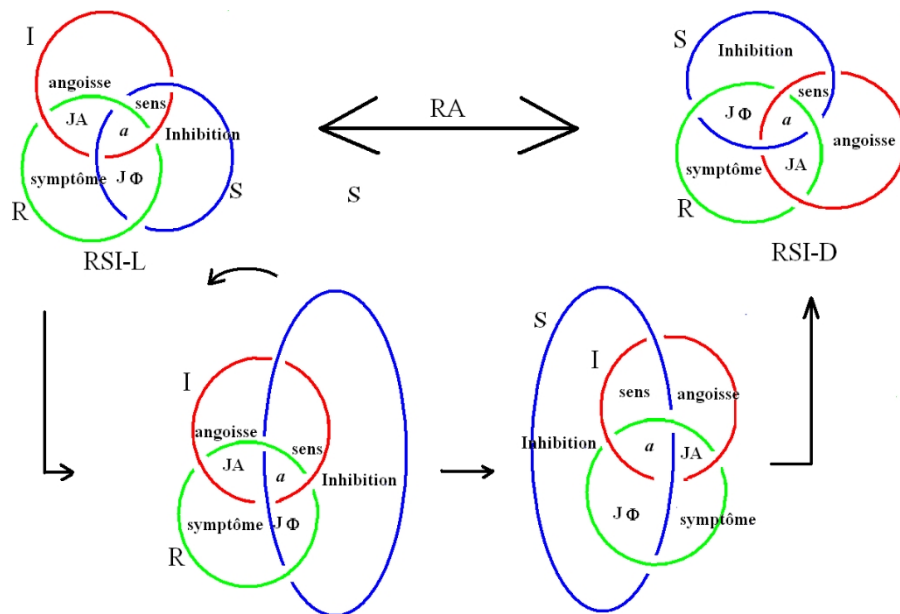


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows an example of the transition from an RSI-L node to an RSI-D node by reversing the symbolic ring. At the level of the node's writing, we observe an exchange between:

Other Enjoyment and object  $a$  at the intersection between the Imaginary and Real circles  
Anxiety and meaning in the Imaginary circle  
Phallic jouissance and symptom in the Real circle. Only inhibition remains in its place.

That anxiety and meaning are contiguous, that what makes sense can relieve anxiety or, on the contrary, amplify it, that there can be a passage from one to the other, this should come as no surprise to us, and was already at the beginning of the first analyses in Studies on Hysteria.

That during a course of treatment a symptom may be invested with phallic jouissance, or that, on the contrary, what was invested with this jouissance may suddenly appear as a pure and simple symptom, also seems familiar to us.

On the other hand, how Other Enjoyment and object  $a$  could be exchanged seems perfectly enigmatic to us.

It is clear that the interpretation of these exchanges is not unambiguous at the clinical level. What the knot allows us to conceive is that a single operation, the reversal of the symbolic ring, has these three exchanges as its simultaneous consequence. It remains to be seen what, in an interpretation, or more generally in an event occurring in a treatment, can be read as a "reversal of the symbolic ring."

This question can of course be applied to the other two reversals of the ring, but also to the other transformations at play (particularly RG).

As we can see, "symbolic optimism" essentially leads us to take Lacan's nodal writing seriously. We have limited ourselves to questioning this writing in an attempt to account for what happens in a cure, what constitutes an event, what can or cannot take place in an experience that implements the

laws of speech and language, and only these laws. Far from providing an answer, what the knot allows us to do is

- on the one hand, to shift our question by reformulating and multiplying it
- on the other hand, to eliminate certain conceivable occurrences that the node structure shows us to be impossible.

### **Technical appendix.**<sup>5</sup>

Consider the Borromean knot consisting of three distinct circles R (green), S (blue), and I (red). It can be flattened in four different ways:

R overlaps S, which overlaps I, clockwise (RSI-D) and counterclockwise (RSI-L) R overlaps I, which overlaps S, clockwise (RIS-D) and counterclockwise (RIS-L)

There are transformations that allow you to switch from one flat configuration to another:

RC: the "flip" preserves the dextral or levorotatory character but transforms RSI into RIS and vice versa

RA: Ring reversal transforms a dextrorotatory into a levorotatory and vice versa, but preserves what we agree to call the "order" of the node (whether it is RSI or RIS). Note that the transformation has the same result regardless of which ring is chosen for reversal.

RG: "global" reversal, analogous to the reversal of a sphere, which rejects the central sector of the knot to the outside and transforms both the gyre and the order. This operation explains Lacan's interest in the reversal of the sphere.

Id: identity, which transforms nothing and is the result of applying the same transformation twice in succession.

The four flattenings associated with the four transformations form a Klein group, shown in Figure 3.

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<sup>5</sup>Condensed formulation of the technical parts of several lessons from the seminars "The Names of the Father," RSI, and The Sinthome.

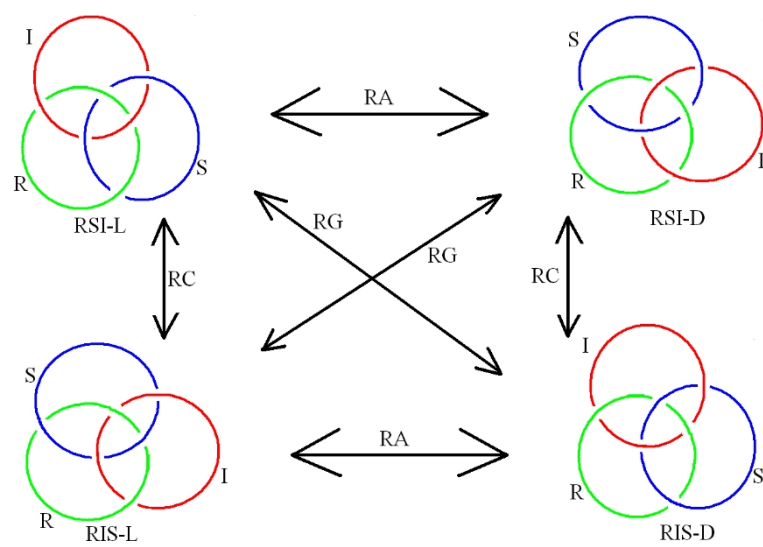


Figure 3