

Signifiers in the Real: from Schreber to the Wolf Man
Russell Grigg

The field of psychosis may seem to be a paradoxical place to look for exploring the discussion on the nature of the real *insofar as it relates to the unconscious*. As Lacan says, that which is foreclosed from the symbolic reappears in the real – a thesis that is well illustrated by the young Wolf Man’s hallucination. Now, if something is foreclosed from the symbolic, it is *ipso facto* absent from the big Other as network of signifiers. But since the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, whatever is foreclosed from the symbolic is foreclosed from the unconscious.

This reasoning is based on the premise that the unconscious is what Miller calls the “transferential unconscious”, and what it brings to light – as we have seen over the past two days – is how different the transferential unconscious and the real unconscious are from one another. Indeed, so different are they that the question must arise of the use of the term “unconscious” in the two contexts. Or, to put this question in another way: what is the relationship between the *real* unconscious and the *transferential* unconscious? I will comment on this question later.

The question of how the real discloses itself in the experience of psychosis arises because it is very much at stake in the question of the real unconscious. Let me begin by returning, not to Lacan’s comments in his “Response to Hyppolite”, which date from 1956, but to a later remark from early 1958 made in his *Seminar V, Formations of the Unconscious*. Why this later comment is interesting is that at the time Lacan makes it he is writing up his Schreber paper for publication in vol. 4 of the Society’s journal, *La Psychanalyse*, which came out early 1959. Here is what he had to say:

Hallucinations are phenomena *structured* at the level of signifiers. One cannot, not even for an instant, think about the *organization* of these hallucinations without seeing that the first thing to be emphasized in the phenomenon is that it’s a phenomenon of signifiers. . . .

. . . what characterizes the hallucinatory satisfaction of desire is that it is *formed* in the domain of signifiers and that, as such, it implies a locus of the Other. . . . [N]ot necessarily an Other [but] a locus of the Other, insofar as it is necessary for the position of the instance [agency] of signifiers (SV, 221).

What needs to be stressed here is that even when what is foreclosed returns in the real, it is structured by signifiers. It could not be more clearly stated. But it also needs to be read carefully.

I invite you to note carefully what Lacan is saying. He is stressing that the signifier gives hallucinations their form, their organisation, their structure. He is not making a claim about the *content* of hallucinations (much of which is imaginary, as we know), but only about the *form* in which that content is presented; and he is observing that this form is structured by signifiers. The form of hallucinations is structured by the signifier. First point.

Nevertheless – and this is my second point – what is foreclosed from the symbolic reappears in the real. Now, what is *foreclosed* from the symbolic cannot have the *structure* of the symbolic. And since hallucinations are the archetypal manner in which what is foreclosed reappears in the real, hallucinations cannot have the structure of the symbolic.

I hope you can see the dilemma. On the one hand, the content of hallucinations is structured by the symbolic. On the other, because what reappears in hallucinations has been foreclosed from the symbolic, it is simply obvious that it cannot have the structure of the symbolic.

This looks like a simple contradiction. I would like to show that this contradiction is a contradiction in appearance only.

As we know, the structure of the symbolic is given by the laws of the signifier, which are primarily condensation and displacement, and they give shape or structure to the return of the repressed in formations of the unconscious: dreams, slips, jokes and so on and so on.

Nevertheless, what paranoid psychosis makes apparent, and it is a point that Lacan often repeats, is that the structure of the real is determined by the signifier. This is particularly apparent in discussions of Schreber, where we never encounter the real except as structured by the signifier. As Lacan demonstrates, convincingly, there is a failure of quilting (*capitonnage*) between signifier and signifier. What we have instead is, on the one hand, a code that consists of messages about the code itself (Schreber's *Grundsprache*), such as "All meaning cancels out". And, on the other hand, messages are reduced to what in the code indicates the message. These phenomena, which are specific to psychosis, nevertheless remain phenomena of signifiers. In other words, the real of Schreber's hallucinations is structured by the signifier. And this is exactly Lacan's point.

A separate but clearly related observation is that a delusion (as distinct from a hallucination) – a delusion in paranoid psychosis is the product of a "long and painful . . . discursive organisation" of elementary phenomena. That is to say, it is the end result of a long and painful *discursive* process. And, as a discursive process, it must necessarily pass via the Other. Even if this Other is a depleted Other from which the signifier the Name-of-the-Father has been foreclosed, the construction of a delusion is nevertheless the result of a passage via the symbolic Other.

And finally, while elementary phenomena are *pre-signifying*, as Lacan says, they are pre-signifying *signifiers*, since elementary phenomena are nothing but signifiers in the real.

If we take these three features of psychosis together: i/ the structure of the real is determined by signifiers; ii/ a delusion is organised discursively, and iii/ elementary phenomena are signifiers, then, in the evolution of a paranoid delusion, what ex-sists in the real comes to be organized in a way in which the structure of signifiers is always discernible. Or, in other words again, the paranoid delusion of a Schreber is a *symbolised real*.

Conclusion: *No encounter with the real that is not mediated by the symbolic is possible in either psychosis or neurosis. Or, in other words: Every encounter with the real, whether in neurosis or psychosis, is mediated by the real.*

This reasoning is confirmed by a comment that Lacan makes later in *Seminar V*:

The forms of psychosis, from the most benign to the extreme state of dissolution, present us with a pure and simple discourse of the Other (SV, 481)

This all seems undeniable, and yet it is in contradiction with the thesis that phenomena that "reappear in the real" have been rejected from the symbolic and, at least in their raw state, are not regulated by the laws of the signifier.

So, where do we find these phenomena in their "raw state"? Is there anywhere where the signifier in the real is presented to us in non-discursive form? Luckily, there is. The Wolf Man's hallucination as a child is a case in point, and this is why the discussion in "Response to Jean Hyppolite", more recently brought to our attention by JA Miller, is so precious.

The first thing to note is that Lacan describes it as a non-psychotic hallucination. While it might be true that in later life the Wolf Man is psychotic, there is no psychosis present when this hallucination

occurs off and on and off during his sixth year (Lacan, incorrectly, says his fifth; at the time of the hallucination, the Wolf Man is already five years old). No psychosis is present – that is to say, there has been no triggering (*déclenchement*) of a psychosis. I believe that there is an onset of psychosis, and that it occurs between the time the Wolf Man was in analysis with Freud from 1910 to 1914 and the time he started his analysis with Ruth Mack Brunswick in 1926.

The Wolf Man's childhood hallucination is a non-psychotic hallucination, as I say, but the really valuable thing about it is that it is a hallucination unmediated by the symbolic.

- 1 The real “does not wait for the subject” or expect anything “from speech” (324,3). The subject experiences it in silence and either sees no need or is unable to communicate it.
- 2 The symbolic is present in hallucinations as a noise in which everything and nothing can be heard. It is, if I may misquote William James, a “booming, buzzing confusion”.
- 3 The irruption of the real is episodic, unpredictable and “lawless”, “sans loi”.
Two comments on translation are called for.
 - a. The French states that the real is “prêt à submerger de ses éclats ce que le ‘principe de réalité’ construit sous le nom de monde extérieur”.¹ The English version gives “ready to submerge with its *roar*” (324,3 my emphasis), but “de ses éclats” is to be taken in the sense, not of roar, but of fragments, splinters, shards or slivers. This is what Lacan will later call “bouts de réel”, bits of real.
 - b. To be consistent with the published edition of *The Sinthome*, I translated “sans loi” as lawless in Miller's Course. But “lawless” means anarchic, unruly, rebellious, and so on; the law in “lawless” is the legislated legal code of a society and someone is “lawless” when they systematically disobey the code. “Unlawlike”, the philosopher Nelson Goodman's term, is a better translation.
- 4 A hallucination is the appearance of what been foreclosed in the real in pure form. As such, it is radically different from the “interpretive phenomenon” (325,1) of paranoid delusions.

Furthermore, we should note that Lacan sets aside Freud's “scrupulous” uncovering of the thematic and biographical connections and the “whole symbolic richness” (325,3) of the hallucination because they inscribe the hallucination in a symbolic framework, which is what makes it possible to express and transmit the phenomenon in discourse. Although this is what Freud does, it is “not sufficient” to allow ourselves to be “fascinated” by semantic content. Understanding the narrative, Lacan says (325,5), can come at the expense of taking cognizance of the important fact that the hallucination reduces the Wolf Man to silence, incapable of speaking about it at the time. He is “arrested” by the “strangeness of the signified”, is incapable of communicating his feelings about it because “the real expects nothing from speech”. Nor does he protest or react, he is incapable of uttering a word, even though his nanny is there beside him. Furthermore (326), the hallucination is experienced outside of time, in a “temporal funnel”, as if, like Alice, he is spiralling down into another dimension which he then returns from without, moreover, any effort on his part.

And so what we see are the following four features: its appearance is erratic; it is “lawless” or, better, “unlawlike” (i.e. not regulated by the laws of language) in its occurrence; it cannot be communicated; and it is not located in reality space.

The “massively symbolic” content of the hallucination does not exist for the subject. Since castration is foreclosed, he remains fixated on an *imaginary* feminine position. This means that he has no

¹ *Écrits*, Seuil, 1966, p. 388.

access to any meaning that his hallucination, coming to him from the real, might carry with respect to castration.

This is an indication that the signifiers that reappear in the real in their “raw state” lack the symbolic articulations that interweave them with other signifiers to constitute a world. We could put it like this. When a signifier is regulated by metaphor and metonymy, it is “in the symbolic”; when a signifier appears as an enigma, it is a signifier in the real. And we now see an affinity between the Wolf Man’s solipsistic isolation and the enigma Schreber encounters at the time of the triggering of his psychosis. In both cases, the signifier in the real is a raw and brute phenomenon, profoundly enigmatic in its status.

I propose that this is how to reconcile the thesis that what is foreclosed from the symbolic reappears in the real with the claim that hallucinations are structured by the symbolic. The moment of mute incommunicability (he cannot speak of it to his nanny) and the enigma that confuses Schreber are moments of encounter with the signifier in the real.