

## Metalepsis Seminar • Virtual Session 13

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what, exactly, is a proliferation of signifiers?

### METALEPSIS SEMINARIANS, 9-ERS, AND AUXILIARY MEMBERS



### \* it's us, basically

Something *allows* a proliferation of signifiers — we call it a "master signifier" and note that it is fundamentally a symmetry, a "reversed predication," that calms a turbulent condition among signifiers and allows a "smooth flow," a continuous chain of predications, idealized in the idea of a hierarchical continuity from the biggest and most important issues to the smallest details.

NOW do you see what's happening? We're talking about discourse, in terms of the regulated flow that, in the language of Lucretius, is vulnerable to the *clinamen* turbulence created by Eros.

A smooth flow guaranteed by a master signifier (a primary reversal of predication, which we model as the "enthymeme" where a "middle term" comes in, does its job, and then "vanishes," is modulated in one of four primary ways — the Hysteric, the University, the Master, and Analysis. This past week, Claudio Sgarbi and I witnessed the performance of an actual hysteric, an academic so driven by the need for recognition that she entrapped an audience for an hour and a half, making us think there would be a panel discussion but in fact she had five "readers" simply chant from the text of her book, which she was selling. Every statement included a long list of experts who supported her views and in some cases directly and personally endorsed her work. There are other details that are "too surplus" to mention here.

The hysteric seeks to calm turbulence by a master signifier — what in this case? Working from the primary suppression of one term of the binary signifier that dominated, we concluded that it was in fact the man-woman sexuation binary that was central. Of this, the term "man" was suppressed, and in fact this term continued to haunt the proliferation of signifiers. To counter the upward threat of this haunting (think of the shark in the film *Jaws*), a squadron of "footnotes" was literally deployed, in the downward position that footnotes traditionally occupy, to stop the echo, metonymically radiating from below.

Academics are truly those driven to proliferate signifiers. We are all, in fact, encouraged to publish, and those who publish a lot are in fact rewarded, promoted, made famous. We have to

back engineer the proliferations of those who "seek to address the public" (this is the technical description of the psychosis known as "mania") to see how they (1) quell turbulence, usually by employing one of the four major formats of discourse, and (2) counter the "haunting" by the weak member of the binary signifier they have invoked.

In this way we get back to the "utopia" that is supporting discourse — the hopeful reunion of two opposites (man/woman, nature/culture, humanists/instrumentalists, life/death ...) — and see what they really propose to do. In the IDEOLOGICAL case, the polarities construct a scale, and the proposal is about finding some middle point that satisfies the need for a "fair and balanced" view. But, as with all ideologies, this solution must be imposed. It is really concealing the proliferation of signifiers, which continue to POSTPONE the solution into an indefinite future. The speaker does not want the solution — it is problematic in the extreme — but rather wants to continue to benefit from the proliferation of signifiers/predications, i.e. to continue talking.

By finding the master signifier, we look for what appears and then disappears, i.e. the phallic function. Anything works. The speaker Claudio and I witnessed brought along her nearly 3-year-old child, who is still breast feeding. She nursed him four times during the lecture, quite a record, even though the child seemed to prefer the muffin he had in his hand. This prop, which appeared and disappeared, was the master signifier that enabled discourse to continue despite the *énonciation*, the speech act, being periodically deployed. The (little) master signifier's gender, "man," solved the puzzle of how the discourse of this hysteric was true to that of many other hysterics, i.e. "haunted by a man," and was able to be countered by other men (her sources were almost all men) sent down in the form of footnotes.

This critique avoids forcing the issue of consensus, or agreeing or disagreeing with the content (*énoncé*) of the talk, but as with every talk, there is "more being said." The silent program of discourse has to do with the primal repression of the weak term of the binary signifier, the phallic employment of this weak term, and the resistance to the haunting (eternal return/apophrades) of this missing/repressed term.

## \* it's effective!

Let's not overlook the fact that such proliferations of signifiers are often extremely effective. First of all, as a FORM of discourse, they "lock in" a structure that is compelling enough to carry across any gaps of logic or fact. The holes are covered by symptoms, which we can model through Lacan's *mathème* for fantasy:  $\$ \diamond a$ . The Real is held at bay with the construction of an imaginary spatial-temporal cocoon to protect the discourse from (basically) the Eros of invasion and turbulence. In our hysterical academic's case, Eros was substituted by the "little man" who asked (or was prompted to ask) for his mother's breast every 15 minutes.

A little man does no real harm, eh? Easy enough to put in some "big men" to ward off the threat of the primally repressed signifier. We cannot avoid noting that binary signifiers tend to be examples of each other. All cultures tend to model life/death, day/night, good/bad in ways that mesh together. We sexuate the universe, but sometimes the sky gets to be male, other times female. It doesn't seem to matter how it's sorted out, the key is that binary signifiers tend to be open to conflation. HENCE, we have the mystery of chirality: the left-right of everything. Without chirality, the enigma of sexuation and gendering remains obscure. WITH chirality, we can move from binary signification to primal suppression, to the formation of the master signifier with its phallic appearance/disappearance routine, to the proliferation of signifiers, the defense of the flow of these signifiers with fantasy symptoms, the apotropaic measures taken against the metonymic haunting of the repressed, death-driven repressed component of the binary pair, and the ...

## \* matter of the sinthome

You see now how we are, Lacanians that we are, in the repair business. The Borromeo knot of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real is broken (i.e. there are gaps in the signifying chain created by ideology, covered over by symptoms/fantasies, usually aimed to postpone the "solution" to the "problem" the proliferation has generated). So, the damage goes unnoticed. Unnoticed, that is, until the Lacanian sinthome comes along. This repairs the damage between the Symbolic and the Real. It is a "wake up call," rather literally!

We are in the sinthome business.

Of course, as academics, we have to be in some sense also anti-academics. We have to deconstruct our own proliferation of signifiers, renounce our generative process so to speak, and begin acting in a "psychotic" way. This is the famous forced choice of ideology, the "anxiety" component of the  $\diamond$  of fantasy, the choice between being and speaking. By choosing the sinthome, we in effect choose "being," but we have to work this out sinthomatically, with our own proliferation of signifiers.

Here is the case of why we must be idiots.

Our paradox is that we must (1) continue writing/speaking, while at the same time we must also (2) renounce the forced choice of ideology. We have to face up to the necessity of psychosis in any resolution of this conflict. We in effect move into a "Tiresius" position. Remember this blind prophet? He/she (note the indefinite gender — like Crazy Kat!) "saw what he/she should not have seen — the coupling of two snakes in a temple. Have you seen this before? Take a look at the dipintura in the front of Vico's *The New Science*!!! This is the caduceus of Askepius, the father-figure of all physicians, who took two vials of blood from the slain Medusa. Blood on the RIGHT SIDE of her body could raise the dead, that from the LEFT, was a deadly poison. TWO poisons, so to speak, just as the bottle of Pommard from Sebastian's wine cellar in *Notorious* could kill or release Alicia, if we follow through with the master signifier, lock/key, which appears and disappears in the scenes.

The caduceus is also the scepter of Hermes, crosser and creator of boundaries. Hmmm. You must now see how this whole business of ideology trying to make a continuum between two opposites, life and death for example, is and must be HERMETICALLY interrogated. The gap that is papered over by the symptom must be re-investigated by the sinthome. The "cold case file" must be re-opened by ... idiots.

Welcome to the club.

The necessity of psychosis is something that James Joyce accepted knowingly, and his perversion — pére-version — involved the RECONSTRUCTION of an "artificial father." We know the name of this father. It was "Giambattista Vico," disguised in the text as ...

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... the hero of *Finnegans Wake*. HCE = "here comes everybody" (one interpretation; there are others). Marco Frascari, of course, constructed Carlo Scarpa using the number 11. We all have fathers to reconstruct (mine is Vico, also Roussel, Borges, Cassirer ... ). Swapping and sharing fathers is not problem — brothers! sisters! On the brother side we have the notion of affiliation, the process by which the imaginary father works through a "brotherhood" able to constitute a dissensus of discourse. Gender does not limit membership, everyone affiliates. "Sisterhood" is an even more important matter. Falsifying the etymology somewhat, we can compare the Germanic sis-ter to the Latin sister that supports from an exterior location — the "sister beam" in construction is the prosthetic beam used to reinforce a weaker beam.

Vattimo's idea of weak thinking become a bit clearer if we couple it with the notion of a sister hors, defined by Park in his essay. We proliferate our signifiers (i.e. write our dissertations and theses and books) by sistering up to a weakness in discourse, understanding this weakness in terms of a diagnosis of symptoms, finding the cure to the double poison (the binary signifier, whose terms are dangerously merged by ideology), through the escape device of the sinthome.

What the hell ... !!!! Yes, this is a bit thick. But, consider the important part of Notorious. In case you have forgotten, this is the distance between the stair and the door of the convertible waiting outside to take Alicia to the hospital. Devlin is in the company of Sebastian and his super-ego mother. They face the brotherhood of Naziis, and Devlin realizes the trick of Odysseus, who must also make a fast run to the boat. Devlin must be the "nobody," but he must have planted this trick earlier in the game. The trick involves the binary signifier, key/lock. Sebastian has ideologically controlled things with his key, forced an elaborate scheme to make the key appear and disappear, shown his own thoughts by looking at the key and the lock of the cellar door, etc.

But, he had not counted on the car door. This is the device that freezes out Sebastian and condemns him to destruction at the hands of his Nazi colleagues. This sinthome has repaired the damage of the signifying chain (the double agent investigation of Devlin and Alicia) by weaving over and under the Real and the Symbolic. The sister hors, the prosthetic device, is that which literally carried Alicia out the door, i.e. Devlin.

Go back to Bloom and look at his six terms (askesis, demon, clinamen, tessera, apophrades, kenosis) in terms of the chirality, binary signification, master signification, and symptoms in the signifying chain. Remember that metalepsis is the name for this process! Do your homework so that, in advance of your own proliferation of signifiers — your own "unlimited semiosis" — you can learn to act like an idiot! — a "Nobody"!



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