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FORUM

A CLASH OF TONGUES:

NOTES ON AN OBSERVATION PLACEMENT

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Everyone has to have a name. And everyone has to come from somewhere, he tells me. My name is Julie Walsh, I tell him, and I come from Derbyshire. We move to a quiet area by the patio windows, away from the noise, where I thought it would be easier to talk. Ned is someone who knows very well what his present problem is. He's been involved with the law in one way or another since the year 840. He comes from a family of common officers and was himself in the courthouses when the very first laws were issued. As a child it was his role to write down the words that would later be distributed to make the law. He wrote down these words in the dictionary: he can remember this. But the olden days were different. There were picnics with women: louse leys / nitpicking / loose and low / picking lousy women / loose (k)nits / nits at picnics / loosely laid. Perhaps I didn't understand how it worked back then, he enquires. Communities were given the law through new words. Take, for example, 'Chopping boards': when a community only had the word 'table', they didn't have anything else to chop on. They had to be given the word 'chopping board' before they could know what it was. The police had to give them the word chopping board! Can I imagine that they were *that* stupid, he asks. Then there were the massacres in London. This was crucial because it was his job as a common officer – on a Tuesday though, not on a Wednesday, he tells me – to undertake to chop off all the heads of everyone in the streets. There was a ship with big glass jars in it – one with sugar, one with sand, one with sweets, one with sandwiches – the dead bodies dragged the ship down to the bottom of the river. It was a ship for the chopped up. But now the police are raping his son, torturing his ex-girlfriend, and he's powerless to stop them. He couldn't be more tense, he tells me. The police are using his son as a bag for

sex. They gag and bind and abuse him. There are all these children out there that you just cannot touch. One's got his nose: his child is sleeping on the cushions with his nose! He couldn't be more tense – that's the problem.

As I'm listening to Ned I'm also thinking about the noise on the ward: it has died down. I have my back to the other tables and I can't tell how many people are about. I am too cautious to turn around and look. Sitting with Ned is disturbing: I couldn't be more tense. Behind me I hear the sound of Rummikub tiles being rained on to a Formica table top to start another game. I want to extricate myself from my position with Ned by the patio windows; of course I do, this is not an easy conversation, but I don't want to risk offending him by walking away. More pressingly, I realise, I'm thinking about whether or not we're being observed. The windows aren't working to my advantage: there's too much sun and it's blinding me to the ward's activity. Are we duly 'evident'? If we are being observed, could this conversation possibly be deemed 'appropriate'? Ned says to me, 'give me a bag of chips and a walk on the beach rather than a gang rape any day'. I have the distinct impression that I'm being flirted with.

My encounter with Ned, from which the above is only a brief extract, takes place in the context of an 'observation placement' where I try to spend my time unobtrusively on an acute psychiatric ward: I listen a lot, I talk, I play board games. I should be able to walk away from Ned with ease. I wear an NHS blue ribbon around my neck which means that I can come and go freely. The irony of my scopophilia is not wasted on me.¹ For all my desire to observe, to study, and perhaps to come to know the raw material of psychosis, I am at my most involved, and indeed my most anxious, when I suspect that the tables have turned and I am the subject of another's gaze. The anxiety I feel throughout my exchange with Ned is no doubt connected to the intermittent menace in his self-presentation: Ned is a violent man and, as the panic alarm on my belt attests, I am ultimately grateful for the structures of observation to which we are both subjected. That said, I also feel a secondary unease that I attribute to something beyond the strangely intimate provocations of Ned's language.

When the French philosopher Michel Foucault documents the birth of the modern asylum, he identifies the operation of 'perpetual judgement' as one of the three governing principles that ensures its moral functioning. If the madman was to be brought to recognise and judge his madness, then he must successfully internalise the asylum's mechanisms of observation. Which is to say that he must submit to the functioning of the asylum as 'a sort of invisible tribunal in permanent session' (Foucault, 1961, 2001: 252). In my exchange with

Ned, I was by far the more vulnerable to what I imagined to be the hospital's machinations of observation and judgement; Ned, after all, was too preoccupied with the police's violation of his son to be worrying about his 'impression management' on the ward. I, on the other hand, suspected that my active courtship of such an explicit conversation would not be smiled upon by hospital staff. At best, I may be judged a little amateur; someone with a more developed instinct for self-preservation would surely have avoided the pitfalls of such a conversation in the open space of the ward. Less favourably, given that I had posed no challenges to Ned's presentation of the world – such as questioning certain historical anomalies in his narrative – I may be judged to have been colluding with the patient's paranoid fantasies, and fuelling his conviction that he must take arms against the forces that were infringing upon his family. Whilst I received no indication at any point on my placement that either of these judgements would be likely to prevail, I felt, nonetheless, seized by the injunction *to be seen to be being appropriate* over and above any concerns about the *actuality* of my appropriateness. My 'observation placement' was living up to its name.

Needless to say in the context of the hospital ward I was certainly not alone in my awareness of the importance of being seen. On several occasions I was taken aback by patients' appreciation of their embroilment in strategies of visibility: 'you've got to give the doctors what they want to see', or, 'how can they know you're better if you don't *show* them?' In practice this might involve being seen to be sufficiently present in the communal areas, or being seen to participate – of one's own volition – in group activities. For many, such strategising was simply the order of the day; it was, so to speak, as plain as the nose on your face. For Ned, however, such an appeal to reason would surely miss the point.

In Foucault's assessment of the configuration of 'madness' as a site of discursive investment, he takes a notoriously conflicted view of the place of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud, Foucault concedes, must be given his due as the theorist who 'went back to madness at the level of its *language*, ... [and]... restored, in medical thought, the possibility of a dialogue with unreason' (Foucault, 1961, 2001: 188). To be sure, psychoanalysis cannot be exempted from the desire to *know* madness, and neither can its theorisations be disconnected from the logic of perpetual judgement. But what the Freudian project did, and what Foucault cannot but commend, is insist that 'madness' be listened to through the patient's idiosyncratic speech acts. The common slip of the tongue where you mean to say one thing but instead say another (and the more overtly Freudian slip where you mean to say one thing but instead say your mother) attest to the fact that desire – unconscious desire – speaks. In terms of

‘therapeutic’ intervention, then, Freud’s talking cure sought to unravel the knots of repressed (and often maddening) desire at the level of language. For Foucault, however, this ‘talking’ was all a little one-sided, and the psychoanalytic promise of an *exchange* – a true dialogue – was promptly refocused on the patient’s monologue, thus preventing psychoanalysis from posing a sufficient challenge to previous forms of psychiatric power. But, in fact, Foucault was less concerned to judge psychoanalysis’ contribution to the twentieth-century history of madness, than he was to examine the operation of power itself as it disciplines the modern subject through multiple and convergent cultural discourses (e.g. the medical, juridical, scientific, educational, therapeutic, and so on). Foucault prompts us to perceive that the modern disciplined subject can never stand outside the operations of power, or, to put it somewhat differently, he can not constitute himself in advance of the law.

Ned’s speech acts offer a wonderful illustration of some of these concerns. Most starkly perhaps, we see, via the absolute mobility of the linguistic signifier, the necessity of addressing ‘madness’ at the level of its language: the irreducible chain of associations that slides from *picnics in the olden days* to a verbal assault on *lousy nitpicking women*, or the collision between *the ship for the chopped up* and Ned’s evocation of the *chip shop* in his preference for a *bag of chips...rather than a gang rape*. These signifiers, which do not permit the assumption of a common or shared meaning, are the material through which the possibility of a dialogue with unreason might be approached. The ‘chopping board’ is also the term around which Ned constructs a presentation of the law as the authority which both gives the gift of words *and* threatens massacre. The story Ned tells of recording the words in the dictionary that would then be used to produce the law evokes a Foucauldian conception of power: power is never confined to a negative instance of repression, rather ‘it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse’ (Foucault, 1991: 61). Just as *communities had to be given the word ‘chopping board’ before they could know what it was*, so too is the juridical imaginary of Ned’s presentation established through the violent gift of language. I stress the violence of this act because the seemingly indiscriminate *chopping* that punctuates Ned’s speech points to the symbolic relation between language and castration: the imposition of language is necessary for the establishment of an ordered community – one in which the laws are known; words correspond to things; and the police do their job. However, as Ned attests, submission to the law, and the acceptance of another’s language, greatly infringes on the sovereignty of one’s personhood – *the police are violating his son and he’s powerless to stop them*. Since the year 840, then, Ned has worn these various

tensions: as a scribe, he authorised the letter of the law and documented the relationship between the word and the thing; as a common officer, he executed the law through his bloody street executions on Tuesdays; and as a modern subject, his self-governance has been starkly curtailed by the run-ins with the law that have, amongst other things, landed him in the custody of the state under the mental health act.

When one commits to speaking, one also submits to a realm that is not of one's own making. The symbolic realm of language is the privileged place where signification is negotiated; where the relationship between words and things is to be wrestled over between speaking subjects. With Ned in mind, I continue to be struck by the clash of tongues that occurs when the volatile and violent speech acts of certain patients are housed by the hospital's official and measured language of observation, assessment, and treatment. When, for example, in daily handover meetings, staff would take time to describe their impressions of the patients before the next shift would assume the duty of their care, Mr X might be summarised as having been '*appropriate* to ward staff', or Ms Y as '*evident* throughout the early evening'. As well as resonating with the anxiety I felt about *being seen to be being appropriate* in my engagements with patients, such expressions no doubt reflect the ideals of transparency and neutrality that hold sway in our current cultural and political discourses. In the contemporary moment, social institutions, perhaps none more so than the hospital, are renowned for their anodyne language, where to describe a discourse as anodyne is practically to accuse it of apathy (or as the OED has it 'unlikely to provoke a strong response; innocuous; inoffensive; vapid; bland'). To certain ears, such anodyne language may reflect, say, the increasing bureaucratisation of human experience, whereas to others such language ensures that the clinical apparatus of hospital care remains duly respectful of its capacity to do violence. Indeed, we might want to speculate that at the root of the move towards a *passionless* stance is a decidedly 'therapeutic' impulse; after all, 'anodyne' cures were originally those that had the power to assuage pain. On this reading, the commitment to keeping accounts of patients and their behaviour as neutral as possible coincides with the impulse to mitigate against offence. Which is to say that we make an appeal to 'value free' language lest we are seen to judge. In stark contrast, preoccupied as he is by thoughts of avenging injustice, Ned's discourse insists unequivocally that we shall be judged.

Leaving the hospital ward each week, I return my panic alarm to the nurses' station and activate the card key system that recognises my entitlement to exit the building. The CCTV unit above the main doors relays my picture to whoever is watching the internal

security screens in the reception office. With my departure duly noted, I walk down the footpaths amongst the single storey redbrick buildings and prefab bungalows half registering the signposts that remind me that everyone has to have a name, and everyone has to come from somewhere: Delius Ward, Bruce Castle Unit, Coniston Ward, Anderson House, Alice Reeves, Rowan Ward.

Notes

¹ Scopophilia is to be understood as ‘an inherent drive to look and to derive pleasure from looking’ (Moore and Fine, 1990: 172). For an account of the relation between scopophilia and the instinct for knowledge see part five of Freud’s second essay in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

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