

A cartel on trauma

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Each member has approached this theme from a different perspective. For my part, the work eventually diverged into two questions - separate, but connected - which are not strictly questions of trauma as such, but of what 'trauma' can signify.

The first part of the work centred around the place of desire for the traumatised subject. In the early meetings of our group, I read again Freud's study of the case of Emma. It may not be a case immediately associated with trauma - Emma's experience is not especially severe - but the conclusions that Freud draws from this case nonetheless pose a challenge to conceptions of trauma that are still held today. Trauma is often understood on the basis of a simple sequence: a past event and its present effects. Such a model would lead us to look for the traumatic aspect of a trauma in the objective terms of the traumatic event itself - the magnitude of its impact, the presence of common factors like violence or death - in order to account for the severity of its effects.

Freud introduces two problems here. The sequential premise of this model is complicated by his notion of *Nachträglichkeit* through which he is able to show, in the case of Emma, that there are *two* causal moments to the traumatic event. For Freud, the trauma is determined retroactively, not in terms of objective, external factors but in the uniquely subjective connection between these two moments. The counterpart to this argument can be found in his 1926 paper, 'Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety' in which Freud underlines the neurotic element in reactions to traumatic situations: "...for analysis shows that to the known real danger an unknown instinctual one is attached"². Drawing these two ideas together, we are left with the question of how the point of the trauma's origin touches the subject, not across the set of 'traumatic' categories, but in its obscure entanglement with her innermost desires.

In the second part of the year's work, I became interested in the very operation by which an aversion to this latter question can be maintained. If what is essential when approaching the topic of trauma is the singular meaning that the trauma holds for the subject, then the mere fact of a trauma alone becomes little more than the arch through which the real work of the treatment might pass. But this signifier - 'trauma' - is already assimilated in today's discourse, already ingrained in our vocabulary. It offers itself as a possible point of identification.

Lacan distinguishes between language as a fixed structure, a set of representations in which we are alienated, and the creative function of speech as that which makes the movement of meaning possible. It is precisely in this movement of meaning that the power of analysis resides. Where 'trauma' is taken up by subjects as an explanation in itself, in its medicalised fixity, we may recognise in it a turning away from speech, leaving unspoken what is truly at stake for a subject. The subject disappears under this signifier that it receives from the Other. Where the signifier is emptied of the subject, it risks becoming no longer an archway but a door that holds itself shut.

1. Member of a cartel on "Trauma and Urgent"- London.

2. Freud S.: 'Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety', *The Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud*. Vintage: 2001, p. 166.