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The Case and the Signifier

Generalization in Freud's *Rat Man*

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ABSTRACT: Exploring Freud's *Rat Man* case, this piece analyses the chain of signification that emerges in Freud's articulation of the rat-related signifiers through which his patient's neurosis is expressed. Two central concerns guide my reflection: (i) to question the divide between the individual and the social by showing how signifiers are one of the ways in which the symbolic inscribes itself onto the subject; (ii) to discuss how the case study as method proposes generalizations based on a singularity.

KEYWORDS: Case study; Case method; *Rat Man*; Freud, Sigmund; Psychoanalysis; Signifier; Generalization; Obsessional neurosis

The Case and the Signifier

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IRACEMA DULLEY

This piece explores Sigmund Freud's 'Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (1909)', a.k.a. the Rat Man case.¹ In this classical case study, Freud describes the articulation of the symptoms of his patient Ernst Lanzer, a twenty-nine-year-old upper-middle-class lawyer from Vienna who is given the epithet of Paul. Through the reception of Freud's description in psychoanalysis, the Rat Man became a paradigmatic case of obsessional neurosis. Yet, Jacques Lacan draws our attention to the fact that 'the main interest of this case lies in its particularity.'² As the Rat Man case reduces obsessional neurosis to a particular instantiation of it — that of Paul's subjectivity —, it simultaneously leaves open the scope of its generalization to the extent

* I thank Cheryl Schmitz, José Jakousi Castañeda Vázquez, Xenia Chiaramonte, Christopher Chamberlin, Jakob Schillinger, Daniel Barber, and Christoph Holzhey for their comments on previous versions of this text.

1 Sigmund Freud, 'Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (1909)', in Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and others, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), x (1955), pp. 153–318. Sigmund Freud, 'Bemerkungen über einen Fall von Zwangsneurose', in Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, 17 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1940–52), VII: *Werke aus den Jahren 1906–1909* (1941), pp. 380–463.

2 Jacques Lacan, 'Le mythe individuel du névrosé', *Ornicar?*, 17–18 (1979), pp. 289–307 (p. 295). All English translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

that it points to singularity as constitutive of subjectivity. In this essay, I propose that the particularity that makes this case study suitable to become paradigmatic is the clarity obtained from the reductiveness with which Freud articulates the chain of signification related to Paul's symptoms in his case description. This seems to have happened through linguistic contagion.

Two central concerns guide my reflection: (i) to question the divide between the individual and the social by showing how signifiers are one of the ways in which the symbolic, that is, language as the Other, inscribes itself onto the subject; and (ii) to discuss how the case study as method proposes generalizations based on a singularity. In order to do so, I investigate both the description of obsessional neurosis proposed by Freud in his 1909 publication and the manuscript containing the notes that he produced during Paul's treatment.³ The manuscript, one of the few that survived Freud's habit of destroying his notes after his texts were published, is of interest because his notes contain signifiers that are either absent from or not fully explored in his account of the case in 1909. Thus, although it is not possible to return to the scene of analysis itself, through the combination of Freud's notes with his case description one can reconstitute how Freud articulates the chain of signifiers that, according to him, articulated Paul's symptoms in speech even though Paul's capacity to hear the signifiers he uttered only emerged in the course of his analysis. This essay shows how, many decades before Lacan proposed that the meaning of the signifier is not fixed ('le signifiant ne signifie absolument rien'),⁴ Freud used transference to draw on the metaphorical malleability of language in neurosis and thereby to displace the fixation that happens in the reduction of signification by the symptom.

3 Sigmund Freud, *L'homme aux rats: journal d'une analyse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974). The complete manuscript was published in the German original and its French translation by Elza Ribeiro Hawelka with the collaboration of Pierre Hawelka and the authorization of Anna Freud. In this publication, the German original is published side-by-side with the French translation in a text that has a French title (*L'homme aux rats: journal d'une analyse*). Quotes are from the German original and translations are mine.

4 Jacques Lacan, 'Ouverture à la section clinique', *Ornicar?*, 9 (1977), pp. 7-14 (p. 7).

THE CASE: UNVEILING GENERALIZATION

The case points to the possibility of generalization while retaining the idea that, since what it portrays is a singularity, it also resists generalization. As Lauren Berlant affirms, ‘as genre, the case hovers about the singular, the general, and the normative.’⁵ The Rat Man case does not claim to contain all the features of obsessional neurosis; nor does it claim to state unequivocally what it is. Yet, to the extent that it names and describes a configuration of symptoms, it establishes a unit of analysis (obsessional neurosis as instantiated in Paul) in relation to which one can discuss both its conclusions and the way in which this unit of analysis is circumscribed. The case makes it possible to include in the narrative the aspects that one thinks constitute its most relevant features without necessarily excluding the existence of other relevant but unexplored ones. It is ‘actuarial’, i.e. it ‘bear[s] the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from.’⁶ Thus, it implies that something like it has existed in the past and will probably exist in the future. It can serve as a parameter for elucidation to the extent that it is exemplary: as ‘an instance of something’, the case ‘is a genre that organizes singularities into exemplary, intelligible patterns, enmeshing realist claims [...] with analytic aims.’⁷

According to Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel, the case points in the direction of the laws of the general and the universal without dissolving into them.⁸ In presenting the way in which a particular signifier — *Ratte* — makes obsessional neurosis apprehensible in Paul’s speech, Freud’s case makes the general claim that a singular chain of signifiers articulates the obsessional neurosis of particular subjects. In this process, Rat Man acquires the opacity and malleability of a signifier. As a deictic, it ‘blindly directs the attention towards its referent without ever being able to completely define it’: Rat Man, as a proper name, allows the different understandings of those who are

5 Lauren Berlant, ‘On the Case’, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.4 (2007), pp. 663–72 (p. 664).

6 *Ibid.*, p. 666.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 670.

8 Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel, *Penser par cas* (Paris: Enquête, 2005), p. 12 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsehess.19921>>.

familiar with this Freudian case to be indexed to it.⁹ Yet, if a case is ‘the exploration and deepening of the properties of a *singularity* accessible to the observation’ with the purpose of ‘extracting from it an argumentation of more general import, the conclusions of which could be reused to ground other intelligibilities or justify other decisions’, comparison becomes an implicit procedure.¹⁰ In its self-referentiality, the case generalizes through its singularity.¹¹ The articulation of signifiers that gives expression to the Rat Man’s subjectivity is singular. Yet, it is generalizable that the configuration of a particular chain of signifiers occurs in the constitution of singular subjects — and this is something one verifies by comparing cases qua singularities that are both exceptional and exemplary.

The fact that Freud considers this case a successful one is an exception.¹² His Dora case, for instance, is presented as an example of failed management of transference that led to the patient interrupting her treatment.¹³ In the Rat Man case, Freud claims not to fully grasp the mechanisms that lead to the formation of obsessional neurosis in this and other cases despite having been able to cure it. This notwithstanding, through his simultaneous consideration of other cases

9 Ibid., p. 12.

10 Ibid., p. 9, their emphasis.

11 Susan Wells, ‘Freud’s Rat Man and the Case Study: Genre in Three Keys’, *New Literary History*, 34.2 (2003), pp. 353–66 (p. 357).

12 In *Freud and the Rat Man* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), Patrick Mahony disagrees on the effectiveness of the treatment in his analysis of transference in the Rat Man case (p. 129), whereas in *Rat Man: Freud’s 1909 Case* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), Stuart Schneiderman considers the treatment to have been effective despite the fact that the analysis was interrupted. Both point to Freud’s refusal to deal with the role of the mother in the structuring of Paul’s symptoms. I would suspend judgment on the question of effectiveness, not only because what cure is remains uncertain to the extent that defining it would depend on an impossible definition of normality, but also because Ernst Lanzer died in WWI a couple of years after the end of his treatment. Yet, I would argue that the capacity he acquired to hear his own signifiers in the course of analysis did displace his symptom — the fact that he got married to Gisela and regained his capacity to work is one of the indexes thereof. For different assessments of Freud’s treatment of Paul, see Jerome Beigler, ‘A Commentary on Freud’s Treatment of the Rat Man’, *Annual of Psychoanalysis*, 3 (1975), pp. 271–85 and Samuel Lipton, ‘The Advantages of Freud’s Technique as Shown in his Analysis of the Rat Man’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 58 (1977), pp. 255–73.

13 Sigmund Freud, ‘Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (1905 [1901])’, in Freud, *The Standard Edition*, VII (1953), pp. 1–122.

of obsessional neurosis, he attempts to generalize on ‘the genesis and finer psychological mechanism of obsessional processes’ by means of implicit comparison.¹⁴ As his conclusions are presented as ‘some disconnected statements of an aphoristic character’ — a characteristic Freud ascribes to obsessional discourse in general —, he recognizes the limited scope of his generalizations.¹⁵ This remark makes one wonder how much the disconnected character of aphorisms bears a resemblance to the aleatoric laws that govern obsessional neurosis. That is, if one considers with Lacan that the analyst is a symptom,¹⁶ to what extent does Freud’s account mime the operation of obsessional neurosis? As will become clear in what follows, Freud’s account of the case is pervaded by rat-related signifiers that seem to have entered it through obsessional contagion.

According to Freud, Paul sought treatment after having read a few pages of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Paul said he was impressed by Freud’s ‘explanation of some curious verbal associations’ (Aufklärung sonderbarer Wortverknüpfungen) in that work.¹⁷ Thus, it seems that the patient’s transference with Freud, based on which he attributed to the psychoanalyst the capacity to deal with the causes that lead to paralysis in his life, was related to Freud’s capacity to explain the strange association of words through which the patient’s symptoms — ‘fears’ (Befürchtungen), ‘compulsive impulses’ (Zwangsimpulse), and ‘prohibitions’ (Verbote) — were articulated.¹⁸ According to Freud, the unconscious is expressed in language differently in each kind of neurosis: while the language of hysteria leads to conversion into bodily symptoms, in obsessional neurosis the meaning of the patient’s spoken language is to be discovered behind the veil of generalization and indeterminateness.

This is what Freud says regarding the way in which generalization operates in obsessional neurosis — the example refers to Paul’s simultaneous fear of and wish for his father’s death:

14 Freud, ‘Notes upon a Case’, p. 155.

15 Ibid.

16 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1973–), xxiii: *Le Sinthome (1975–1976)* (2005).

17 Freud, ‘Notes upon a Case’, p. 159; ‘Bemerkungen’, p. 385.

18 Ibid., p. 158; p. 384.

Side by side with the obsessive wish, and intimately associated with it, was an obsessive fear: every time he had a wish of this kind he could not help fearing that something dreadful would happen. This something dreadful was already clothed in a characteristic indeterminateness [Unbestimmtheit] which was thenceforward to be an invariable feature of every manifestation of the neurosis. But in a child it is not hard to discover what it is that is veiled behind an indeterminateness of this kind. If the patient can once be induced to give a particular instance in place of the vague generalities [verschwommenen Allgemeinheiten] which characterize an obsessional neurosis, it may be confidently assumed that the instance is the original and actual thing which has tried to hide itself behind the generalization [Verallgemeinerung]. Our present patient's obsessive fear, therefore, when restored to its original meaning, would run as follows: 'If I have this wish to see a woman naked, my father will be bound to die.'¹⁹

Thus, according to Freud, the idiom of generalization serves as a veil to the patient's actual wish: Paul says 'something dreadful' could happen when he actually means that his father could die. For Freud, the difference between this procedure and what one finds in hysteria is not only of the order of sexuality, but also of the order of language:

The language of an obsessional neurosis — the means by which it expresses its secret thoughts — is, as it were, only a dialect of the language of hysteria; but it is a dialect in which we ought to be able to find our way about more easily, since it is more nearly related to the forms of expression adopted by our conscious thought than is the language of hysteria. Above all, it does not involve the leap from a mental process to a somatic innervation — hysterical conversion — which can never be fully comprehensible to us.²⁰

Freud seems to be saying that differently from hysteria, in which conversion inscribes the symptom onto the body (as Lacan would put it,

19 Ibid., p. 163; pp. 388–89.

20 Ibid., pp. 156–57. Freud relates that patients suffering from obsessional neurosis have an early interest in and beginning of sexual activity, which is absent in the constitution of hysteria. This corresponds to the coupling of hysteria with a shock related to the experience of passive presexual stimulation experienced as disgusting and the coupling of obsessional neurosis with active presexual activity experienced as pleasant (Mahony, *Freud and the Rat Man*). Yet, this opposition is undone if one considers this quoted passage, in which obsessionalism is understood to be 'a dialect of hysteria', i.e., hysteria of a certain kind.

the signifier as metaphor), obsessional neurosis manifests itself mostly at the level of spoken language (the signifier as metonymy). When Freud says that obsessional neurosis is a dialect whose meaning is easier to grasp because it is 'more nearly related to the forms of expression adopted by our conscious thought', one wonders whether the majestic plural refers to Freud himself. In Freud's conception of language, language bears a homological, that is, representational, relation to the world — his reality principle resides in this supposition.²¹ Thus, he conceives of language in the constative mode, that is, in the mode in which statements are judged to be true or false descriptions of a world external to language.²² Yet, Freud recognizes that the relationship between language and its supposed referents is not straightforward. For while the language of hysteria leads to conversion into bodily symptoms, in obsessional neurosis the meaning of the patient's spoken language is to be discovered behind the veil of generalization.

In a footnote, Freud attempts to generalize the way in which 'names and words' are employed by obsessive and hysterical subjects. His contrastive generalization depends on a comparison of degree:

Names and words [Namen und Worten] are not nearly so frequently or so recklessly employed in obsessional neuroses as in hysteria for the purpose of establishing a connection [Verknüpfung] between unconscious thoughts (whether they are impulses or phantasies) and symptoms.²³

Hysteria is said to employ *more* 'names and words' to connect symptoms to the unconscious, whereas obsessional neurosis would employ *fewer*. Yet, Freud's observation is made in relation to a situation in which names and words play a crucial role. Paul starts to be concerned about his weight after meeting a man he considered a competitor for Gisela's love, whose nickname was Dick, which in German means 'fat' as an adjective. After this attempted generalization, in which Freud claims that the example he gave is a somewhat rare one, he contradicts himself as he offers one more empirical instance in which a signifier

21 Susan Gal, 'Politics of Translation', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 44 (2015), pp. 225–40.

22 John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Mary Pratt, 'Ideology and Speech Act Theory', *Poetics Today*, 7.1 (1986), pp. 59–72.

23 Freud, 'Notes upon a Case', p. 189; 'Bemerkungen', p. 411.

(in this case a related one) operates in the same way in another case of obsessional neurosis:

I happen, however, to recollect another instance in which the very same name, Richard, was similarly used by a patient whom I analysed a long time since. After a quarrel with his brother he began brooding over the best means of getting rid of his fortune, and declaring that he did not want to have anything more to do with money, and so on. His brother was called Richard, and 'richard' is the French for 'a rich man'.²⁴

One could say that just as behind Paul's generalizations there is an attempt to disguise his simultaneous fear of and desire for the death of people towards whom his feelings are ambivalent, behind Freud's generalizations on obsessional neurosis one finds the Rat Man case.²⁵ Yet, Freud's move is an ingenuous one: in presenting obsessional neurosis in the form of a case study that lays the ground for generalization, he both unveils the singularities on which his generalizations draw (the case that he describes and the other cases he mentions in footnotes) and points to the veil of generalization through which obsessional neurosis is constituted as a generalizable phenomenon. The example thus emerges as the singularity that generalization seeks to veil. According to Freud, this very procedure — that of producing a generalization based on singularities that are not always made explicit

24 Ibid.

25 Freud centres these wishes on the figure of the father, but his notes also reveal Paul's mother and Gisela's grandmother as the objects of similar wishes (Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 156). For an assessment of the role of female figures in Paul's neurosis, see Ruth Abraham and K. H. Blacker, 'The Rat Man Revisited: Comments on Maternal Influences', *International Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, 9 (1982–1983), pp. 705–27. Freud's notes indeed reveal that Paul's mother was a domineering figure who controlled his money (Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 182). I agree with Schneiderman's interpretation that Paul's oscillation between the richer cousin and the cousin he loved is related not only to the fact that Paul interiorized his mother's interpretation that his father chose her over the poorer woman he loved but also to Paul's oscillation between his sisters, who appear in Freud's notes as early objects of his desire (Schneiderman, *Rat Man*; Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, pp. 140–42, 164, and 246). The governess who is mentioned as Paul's first seducer and is remembered by her 'masculine-sounding' last name, Rudolf, also appears to have been a domineering woman — which also calls into question Freud's affirmation that obsessional neurosis is related to the early enjoyment of an active sexual role. Béla Grunberger ('Some Reflections on the Rat Man', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 47 (1966), pp. 160–68 (p. 162)) points to Paul's 'hesitat[ion] [...] over his desire to identify with the anal-sadistic mother' and Beigler ('A Commentary', p. 273) to his 'intense identification' with his mother.

— also characterizes obsessional neurosis. Freud's procedure bears a strange familiarity with that of his patient but differs from it in that the disclosure of his method renders the similarity between their procedures ironic.

Just like the rat-related signifiers employed in chain by Paul articulate his symptoms, Freud's naming and description of the Rat Man case constitute it as a paradigmatic case of obsessional neurosis. 'Rat Man' (Rattenmann) is the epithet given by Freud to both the case and the individual at its core.²⁶ This act of naming brings to the fore the torture method by which Paul was disturbed and the centrality of the rat-related signifiers in the articulation of his symptoms. Naming the case after the rat that obsessively occupied Paul's thoughts approximates him to the animal he feared. Implicitly, the compulsion that characterizes obsession is thus compared to the rat whose means of escaping from its own conundrum implies trying, but failing, to escape. This is why Lacan affirms that the case receives its name from a fantasy.²⁷

The Rat Man is singularized through the making proper of that which was originally a common name or, better said, two common names: 'rat' (Ratte) and 'man' (Mann). In this juxtaposition, the autonomy of man as human is questioned by the contagion of animality that emerges when this man is said to be of the rat kind: *Rattenmann* can be translated as (i) 'Rat Man', that is, a man who is a rat; (ii) 'the man of rats', that is, the man who has something to do with rats ('l'homme aux rats', as the case is known in French); (iii) through approximated homophony, it can also mean 'the indebted man', for *Ratenmann*, 'installment man', points to debt of a postponed kind, postponement being one of the effects of debt in Paul's life.²⁸ Whereas for Freud Paul's neurosis revolves around his paralysis by doubt and indecision, Lacan relates it to debt:²⁹ Paul's unpayable debt to his

26 The epithet already appears in a letter sent to C. G. Jung in 1909.

27 Lacan, 'Le mythe'.

28 *Rattenmännchen*, the diminutive of *Rattenmann*, is used in reference to male rats (I thank Jakob Schillinger for this insight). This signifier does not appear in Freud's account but resonates the association between rats and children discussed below.

29 Lacan, 'Le mythe'. On the role of debt in obsessional neurosis, see Moustapha Safouan, 'The Signification of Debt in Obsessional Neurosis', pp. 77–82, and Charles Melman, 'The Rat Man', in *Obsessional Neurosis: Lacanian Perspectives*, ed. by Astrid Gessert (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 83–92 as well as Martha N. Evans, 'Introduction to

father; the debt of his father towards the friend who saved his father from ruin after his father gambled away the military's money (which is rearticulated in Paul's imaginary as his debt to one of his colleagues); his father's indebtedness to his mother, a rich woman, to whom his father owed his upward social mobility; Paul's guilt over the suicide of a woman whose love he dismissed. The automatism of repetition in Paul's compulsions and thoughts, overdetermined by the paralysing manifestation of debt in the form of guilt, fear, and compulsion, bears a strange resemblance to the instinctual nature of rats. This resemblance is captured in the name Freud attributed to this case.

SINGULARITY AND THE SIGNIFIER

As already stated, my reading of the work of the signifier in the Rat Man case is based on the chain of signification found in the case and in Freud's notes. As far as the relationship between the utterances proffered in the analytic setting and the publication of the case in writing is concerned, the psychoanalytic case stands in between what Lacan calls *énonciation* and *énoncé*, for the signifiers that appear in the case were once uttered but have been reduced to writing. Whereas the *énoncé*, i.e. that which is uttered, can be fixated in writing, the *énonciation*, i.e. the performative act of uttering as it happens in analysis, is not transposable to the written form. Yet, the chain of signification that emerged in the analysis of Paul can be retraced through Freud's writing, in which the Lacanian concept of the signifier is absent but the role of *Wortlaut* (roughly translatable as 'wording') in the articulation of neurosis is underlined.

What are the effects of the chain of signifiers mobilized in the Rat Man case? The work of the signifier in analysis depends on its being voiced in the psychoanalytic situation. In the latter, through transference, the subject emerges as it articulates the chain of signification that constitutes it. Thus, in relation to the dynamic situation of analysis, the articulation of a chain of signification in the case study might appear as

Jacques Lacan's Lecture: 'The Neurotic's Individual Myth', *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 48.3 (1979), pp. 386–404. Evans highlights how the institution of the name of the father entails the connection between the subject and the symbolic through an unpayable debt.

a reduction of the transferential work through which Paul emerged as a subject to an empty and opaque chain of signification. Yet, as the analytical process is fixated in writing, this chain of signification appears to be made up of signifiers that, in their opacity, are simultaneously subjective and social, singular and generalizable.

As already mentioned, it is impossible to have direct access to the work of the signifier as it happened in Paul's analysis through Freud's text. Writing indexes the situation in which signifiers were uttered (*énonciation*) but halts the potential for flotation that resides in the act of speaking, for writing reduces signifiers to meaning as it fixates them (thus transforming them into *énoncé*). Yet, this question can be displaced if one thinks of the chain of signifiers that emerges in the Rat Man case as a production resulting from the encounter of the unconscious of Paul and the unconscious of Freud mediated through the German language, the medium through which contagion was possible. In this case, the opposition between the written and the oral, the individual and the social, is blurred, for spacing and displacement in time characterize the work of the signifier in both its oral and written instantiations.³⁰ In what follows, transference appears as the medium for transposing the work of the signifier through which Paul emerged as a subject in the analytic setting into a chain of signification made up of opaque signifiers that are simultaneously subjective and social, singular and generalizable, and can therefore be displaced as they float.

In Freud's case, the rat-related chain of signification articulates Paul's symptoms: doubt, indecision, paralysis. It operates in a reductive mode to the extent that the way in which signifiers are articulated overdetermines the possibilities of action and experience of this particular subject. And yet, the emergence of this specific articulation of signifiers in the course of Paul's analysis is the condition of possibility for their displacement — and their displacement, to the extent that it relies on analysis, i.e. on the encounter with Freud's unconscious, is social. After Lacan, one can advance the claim that this is the reason why Freud could consider Paul to be 'cured', that is, relieved of these specific symptoms. The chain of signifiers articulated by Paul reveals

30 Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61–171.

what Lacan calls the ‘individual myth of the neurotic’ to which his symptoms are connected. Through transference with Freud, in whom the signifiers voiced by Paul resonate *nachträglich* (afterwards or a posteriori), i.e. can be attached to different signifieds as they are allowed to float through Freud’s *Deutung* (‘interpretation’ or, more literally, ‘indication’), the fixity of their relation to his symptom is undone. Let us explore the particularity of the chain of signifiers the case mobilizes and its relationship to ‘the individual myth of the neurotic’.

In the beginning of his narrative, Freud poses the following question:

What can have been the meaning of the child’s idea that if he had this lascivious wish [of seeing a woman naked] his father would be bound to die? Was it sheer nonsense? Or are there means of understanding the words and of perceiving them as a necessary consequence of earlier events and premises?³¹

In the original in German, Freud speaks not of ‘words’ but of a ‘sentence’: ‘Ist das barer Unsinn, oder gibt es Wege, diesen Satz zu verstehen, ihn als notwendiges Ergebnis früherer Vorgänge und Voraussetzungen zu erfassen?’³² This combination of words is indeed not only a sentence in the grammatical sense, as implied by the German *Satz*, but also one in the legal sense if one thinks of a legal sentence in English. Thus, the rules that guide the Rat Man’s ‘individual myth’ articulate the relationship between language and the law frequently pointed at in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The language in which this injunction is articulated produces effects: Paul’s desire to see a naked female body leads to his fear (and wish) that his father, who stood in the way of the concretization of his desire, might die. Paralysis in his life is related to this sentence, in both senses of the word. One more sentence is to be added to it — the one pronounced by Paul’s father in the childhood scene recounted by his mother, in which upon being beaten by his father for having bitten his nurse, Paul calls his father the names of various objects. His father’s reaction is to stop beating him and pronounce the following sentence directed at Paul’s mother:

31 Freud, ‘Notes upon a Case’, p. 164.

32 Freud, ‘Bemerkungen’, p. 389.

‘The child will grow up to be either a great man or a great criminal!’³³ Where Freud and his commentators have usually seen in this scene Paul’s imperfect mastery of language, for Stuart Schneiderman this sentence both puts Paul in the position of an object that is talked about and points to the centrality of the mother, for whom the father might have been a decorative object in the house like the ones Paul named.³⁴

‘A captain with a Czech name’ is presented by Freud as the person who unleashed the worsening of Paul’s symptoms by telling him about a ‘horrible punishment used in the East’: ‘the criminal [der Verurteilte] was tied up ... [...] a pot was turned upside down on his buttocks ... some *rats* were put into it ... and they ... [...] *bored their way in* ...’³⁵ Paul, who accused himself of being a ‘criminal’ to both the friend who advised him to be treated and to Freud, was unable to complete the sentence he uttered only with much difficulty, having the analyst fill in the gap by naming the victim’s anus. Paul feared that this punishment might be inflicted on the woman he loved and on his father, although the latter was deceased. To avoid that this fantasy might happen, he adopted two ‘defensive measures’ (*Abwehrmassregel*): a ‘but’ (in German, *aber*, later modified to *abér*, a signifier whose sound approximates *Abwehr*, ‘defense’) accompanied by a gesture of repudiation, and the phrase ‘whatever are you thinking of?’ (*Was fällt dir denn ein?*).³⁶ Here, the distinction between word and gesture collapses as both are reduced to the status of a ritual of avoidance in which signifiers that were part of his analysis seem to take part (analysis is thus literally transformed into a defense mechanism). As in magic, the performative juxtaposition of words and their effects is to be contrasted with ‘the peculiar indeterminateness of all his remarks’ (*die eigentümliche Un-*

33 Freud, ‘Notes upon a Case’, p. 205.

34 Schneiderman, *Rat Man*.

35 Freud, ‘Notes upon a Case’, p. 166; ‘Bemerkungen’, pp. 391–92.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 167; p. 392. Mahony associates the stress placed on the last syllable of the word with Paul’s anal fixation. He brilliantly reads the contamination of defense by drive in time as he foregrounds the ambiguity contained in the conjunction *aber*, both disjunction (but) and conjunction (again). The same seems to be the case in the ‘apotropaic formula’ *Glej(i)samen*, which Paul employed to prevent evil from happening to Gisela as he masturbated thinking of her. In this formula, Gisela’s name is coupled to *Samen*, sperm, hinting at the possibility of producing children (Mahony, *Freud and the Rat Man*, pp. 58–59). Yet, the addition of *ohne Ratten* (Freud, *L’homme aux rats*, p. 176) to the formula undoes this imaginary action.

bestimmtheit aller seiner Reden).³⁷ Such indeterminateness, which Freud also associates with Paul's tendency to vaguely generalize, was overdetermined by the singular articulation of a chain of signifiers.

This strange juxtaposition of language, gesture, and the magical effects of their conjunction is followed, in Freud's case, by Paul's account of his debt. His account brings to the fore one aspect Freud presents as central to obsessional neurosis: the '*mésalliance* [...] between an affect and its ideational content' (eine Mesalliance zwischen Vorstellungsinhalt und Affekt).³⁸ During his military exercises, Paul received a pair of glasses that had been paid for by someone else. He was therefore to reimburse this person. He rationally knew that he merely had to send the payment to the woman who worked at the post office. Yet, in his mind, he came up with a myriad of complicated forms of repaying this debt in order to follow the self-imposed command that he should pay a specific colleague, in a phantasmatic instantiation of his father's unpaid debt to his friend. Thus, a situation that could have easily been solved gave rise to Paul's state of anguish. Freud recognizes the role of chance and wording in the unleashing of Paul's neurosis both in his notes and in the case description:

Now it happened by chance — for chance may play a part in the formation of a symptom, just as the wording may help in the making of a joke — that one of his father's little adventures had an important element in common with the captain's request. His father, in his capacity as non-commissioned officer, had control over a small sum of money and had on one occasion lost it at cards. (Thus he had been a '*Spielratte*' [literally 'game rat'; gambler].) He would have found himself in a serious position if one of his comrades had not advanced him the amount.³⁹

Paul's father now appears in the position of the rat, and the kind of rat he is said to be — a 'game rat' (a gambler) — is one determined by debt. It so happened that the captain who had told Paul the story of the rat torture also mistakenly told him that he was to reimburse one of his comrades (a 'Kamerad') who had paid for his glasses — 'Kamerad'

37 Freud, 'Notes upon a Case', p. 167; 'Bemerkungen', p. 392.

38 Ibid., p. 175; p. 399.

39 Freud, 'Notes upon a Case', p. 210; 'Bemerkungen', p. 430. For Freud's discussion of chance and wording, see Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 216.

being another word in which the rat insinuates itself through homophony, establishing the bond between the gambler and the friend who saved his reputation as a bond between rats.⁴⁰ Paul's extreme affective reaction was unleashed by this chance happening: a person who Paul thought to be violent articulated two signifiers of the chain that was connected to the configuration of his symptoms. As the captain reminds Paul of the debt he unwillingly acquired when someone paid for his glasses, Paul is put in a similar position to his father — a position he associates with rats. He does not know whether his father ever managed to pay the debt that haunts him. Moreover, to his father's debt towards his friend is added his father's debt towards Paul's mother. This debt, which is replicated in the suggestion by Paul's mother that he marry a well-off cousin instead of the poor woman he loved, is connected to Paul's obsessional complex through the word *heiraten*, in German, 'to marry'. Through marriage, he would reproduce his father's action and thus become indebted like his father, a *Spielratte*, a man whose actions of gambling and marrying up are connected, in Paul's spoken unconscious, to the parasitical being of the rat: both tormentor and victim.

Freud is very clear about the fact that in this case, association is also related to the sound of words, not only to their content. Although the writing of the case might have the effect of congealing words, when Freud speaks of *Wortlaut* he is pointing to both the articulation of ideas and the dynamic character of sound in speech: He speaks of the 'Wortbrücke Raten-Ratten', that is, of a 'verbal bridge' between these two words.⁴¹ For Freud, cure would follow the discovery of the unconscious content (*Vorstellung*) that lies at the origin of this heightened affective load, whereas for Lacan this affect is related to the signifier.⁴² Since signifiers float, the relationship between affect and signifier can undergo a short-circuit in the course of analysis through which fixation in the coupling of signifier and affect is undone. That is, there is no ori-

40 The word *Kamerad* is to be found in Freud, 'Bemerkungen', p. 430.

41 Freud, 'Notes upon a Case', p. 213; 'Bemerkungen', p. 433.

42 Lacan is frequently credited with a re-reading of Freud in which the unconscious is thought of as being structured as a language. Although Freud did not engage with the linguistic turn, I agree with Lacan's affirmation in 'Ouverture à la section clinique' that the centrality of language is already to be found in Freud.

ginal content to be excavated; there are relations whose displacement can occur as they are repeated in speech. There is no concept of the signifier in Freud, but the 'symbolic' does make an adjectival appearance: 'rats had acquired a series of symbolic meanings, to which, during the period which followed, fresh ones were continually being added' (die Ratten hatten [...] eine Reihe von symbolischen Bedeutungen erworben, zu welchen in der Folgezeit immer neue hinzutraten).⁴³ It is thus the 'verbal bridge' that connects installments (*Raten*) and debt to rats (*Ratten*) and torture that unleashes Paul's 'anal erotism', which Freud connects to imaginary anal penetration. Although not present in the case description, one more signifier is mentioned by Freud in the meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society on 8 April 1908, the first occasion on which he presented the case while still working on it: *raten*, as Freud states that Paul 'admits that he does not distinguish between *Ratten* (rats) and *raten* (to guess)'.⁴⁴

TRANSFERENCE AS RATEN

Freud associates the rat with the penis based on the fact that 'rats are carriers of dangerous infectious diseases' and being in the army was associated with the possibility of acquiring syphilis.⁴⁵ It is unclear from his case account whether this association was established by the patient or by himself, but the notes reveal that it was Freud who interpreted that a rat was a penis, following which Paul developed a sequence of Oedipal associations.⁴⁶ In the case notes, Freud clearly states: 'rats mean fear of syphilis' (*Ratten bedeutet Syphilis-Angst*).⁴⁷ For Patrick Mahony, the association between rat and penis points to

43 The references for this and the next quote are: Freud, 'Notes upon a Case', p. 213; 'Bemerkungen', p. 432.

44 Mahony, *Freud and the Rat Man*, p. 80. Otto Rank, who wrote a brief report of Freud's presentation on the occasion, does not make any reference to the role played by language in obsessional neurosis. Instead, he highlights the role played by the coexistence of feelings of love and hate towards the same person and its manifestation in the forms of obsession, doubt, and a paralysis of will. It might be the case that the role of language in the manifestation of Paul's symptoms had not yet been articulated by Freud. See Otto Rank, 'Bericht über die I. private Psychoanalytische Vereinigung in Salzburg am 27. April 1908', *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse*, 1.3 (1910), pp. 125–26.

45 Freud, 'Notes upon a Case', p. 214.

46 Beigler, 'A Commentary', p. 278.

47 Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 166.

Paul's ambivalence, castration anxiety, and fear of success.⁴⁸ This also appears in Freud's notes, in which Paul's dream of having a tooth extracted is interpreted by Freud as castration and Paul's loss of his glasses — which, according to Schneiderman, enabled him to exercise his voyeurism — as establishing an association between loss of erection and cowardice.⁴⁹ In line with his downplaying of female figures in the case analysis, Freud leaves out of the case description the association between rat as penis and Paul's mother's braid, which he used to hold as a child and which he designated as a 'Rattenschweif' (a rat's tail).⁵⁰ It was probably the phallic character of Paul's mother — who was similar to Freud's own mother in that respect, this being a possible reason for her elision from the case description — that contributed to Paul's development of the theory that sexual intercourse happens through the anus.⁵¹ This is probably why he came to the conclusion, also absent from the case description and written down only in the notes, that 'to be married consists of showing each other one's buttocks' (*verheiratet sein besteht darin, dass man sich gegenseitig den Po zeige*) — a conclusion to which Paul came as he saw his mother's buttocks while lying in bed with her.⁵²

It is the sound of *rat*, in German, that promotes the association between rats (*Ratten*), debt (implicit in *Raten*, 'installments'), and marriage (*heiraten*). There is one German word that is not mentioned by Freud as a relevant signifier but would easily fit into this chain of associations and could be related to Paul's transference: *Rat*, that is, 'advice',⁵³ which can also mean a way out of a difficult situation — in this case, Paul's identification with both the criminal and the rat.⁵⁴ Freud, as a *Berater* or *Ratgeber*, i.e. advisor, stood in a hierarchical relation to Paul, who usually looked up to him as the person who could put an end

48 Mahony, *Freud and the Rat Man*, p. 53.

49 Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 248. Schneiderman, *Rat Man*.

50 Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, pp. 172 and 134.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 234.

53 However, 'to give advice' (*Rat geben*) appears in Freud's notes (Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 236).

54 This also seems to be the case in Frederick Wertz's depiction of Paul as a 'jailed criminal' in 'Freud's Case of the Rat Man Revisited: An Existential-Phenomenological and Socio-Historical Analysis', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 34.1 (2003), pp. 47–78.

to his neurosis. This relationship, both friendly — Freud sounds very similar to *Freund*, ‘friend’ in German — and hierarchical, is hinted at by Freud as he discusses how transference places him in the position of Paul’s father. This is made clear through a further association between rats and children: Paul pitied rats out of his own identification with them since childhood, when he was violently punished by his father for biting someone. Yet, as will become clear below, Freud also occupied a hierarchically subordinate position in transference despite not having acknowledged this in the case description.⁵⁵

In Paul’s speech, rats also stand for children. Freud says that as Paul was talking about the Rat-Wife in Ibsen’s *Little Eyolf*, who in Freud’s notes is identified with Paul’s mother, it ‘became impossible to escape the inference that in many of the shapes assumed by his obsessional deliria rats had another meaning still — namely, that of *children*’.⁵⁶ This is, according to Freud, the original reason why Paul identified with the rat: a sharpened-teeth animal that can bite but is persecuted by humans with cruelty. He pitied rats out of his own identification with them since childhood, and the reason for his indecision as to whether he should marry (*heiraten*) the woman he loved was connected to the rat complex in one more way: he loved children and she had undergone an operation that made her incapable of bearing any. Yet, at the same time, Freud’s notes also reveal that since Paul did not identify with his father’s choice of marrying up, he also did not want to ‘betray’ (*verraten*) the woman he loved.⁵⁷ Simultaneously, as an ambivalent son, he reproached himself for not having ‘advised’ (*zuraten*) his father to take care of his health as much as he thought he should.⁵⁸

There are further transference associations connected to the rat-related chain of signification that Freud does not explore. In Freud’s interpretation, the rat is also connected to money, a relation that appears in transference as Paul comes up with a ‘rat currency’ to calculate the price of his analysis sessions: ‘Soviel Gulden soviele Ratten’, that is, ‘So many florins, so many rats’.⁵⁹ This association acquires sex-

55 The fact that one of Freud’s children was also called Ernst might have played a role in Freud’s understanding of his place in transference as that of the father.

56 Freud, ‘Notes upon a Case’, p. 215.

57 Freud, *L’homme aux rats*, p. 194.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

59 Freud, ‘Notes upon a Case’, p. 213. ‘Bemerkungen’, p. 433.

ual meaning as Paul associates Freud's name with 'Freudenhauſ' (a brothel):⁶⁰ the ſessions were conducted in the analyſt's home; one of his daughters appears in Paul's dream and deliria as having feces (i.e. money) in the place of her eyes and is aſſimilated to the rat complex in the poſition of the richer woman Paul's mother wanted him to marry; one of Paul's dreams inſtantiates his childhood fantaſy that children are produced through the contact between the anuſes of the parents: it pictures a coitus between Freud's wife and Freud's mother in which their anuſes are united by a herring, the ſame fiſh Paul was ſerved and reſuſed to eat when he was offered a meal at Freud's houſe.⁶¹

As Ruth Abraham and K. H. Blacker ſuſpect, deſpite Freud's tendency to ſee himſelf as occupying the poſition of Paul's father in tranſference, the aſſociation between *Gulden* and *Ratten* actually put him in the poſition of a prostitute, 'certainly a reflection of [Paul's] attitude toward his own women-dominated houſe, with his mother viewed as the Madame who charges her fee.'⁶² It was indeed the caſe that the perſon who put preſſure on Paul for him to marry the richer couſin and was in charge of the money he inherited upon his father's death was his mother, with whom he ſeems to have identified Freud. To the extent that Paul's delirium about the price of the ſeſſion — 'Soviel Gulden ſoviel Ratten' — alſo appears as Paul conſiders how much money he needs to diſbuſe to have ſex with his lover, it points to the fact that he ſees the price of the analyſis ſeſſion as equivalent to the price of a ſeſſion of ſexual intercourse.⁶³

Freud occupies the poſition of a prostitute in a different way as he tries to gueſſ — in German, *raten* or *erraten* — in order to fill in the gaps in Paul's narrative. As Paul mentions the narrative that unleashed the criſis that led him to ſeek Freud, he puts the analyſt in the poſition of the torturer who will puniſh the 'criminal' (Paul), ſomething that is marked by him calling Freud 'Captain' (Hauptmann).⁶⁴ Mahony propoſes to ſee this ſcene of analyſis as one of 'acting in':

60 Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 158.

61 For an appreciation of the impact of Freud's feeding Paul on his analyſis, ſee Beigler, 'A Commentary'.

62 Abraham and Blacker, 'Rat Man Revisited', p. 718.

63 Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, pp. 190–92.

64 Freud, 'Notes upon a Caſe', p. 169; 'Bemerkungen', p. 394.

the very mimetic manner of the Rat Man's expression turned it from being a discourse that simply narrates to one that enacts, performs; its very style and delivery *in* and *through* themselves constituted an enactive meaning. To be more specific: after initially voicing his resistance, the Rat Man went on, for one long uninterrupted paragraph in Freud's text, to introduce the narrative setting of the rat torture. With that accomplished, his gaping delivery elicited Freud's narrative participation in a complementary movement of thrust and counterthrust.⁶⁵

In Mahony's reading, Freud's guessing of the missing signifiers in this scene is the equivalent of the anal penetration that Paul both feared and desired: a 'verbal happening' in which 'the Rat man multiplied holes in his sentences which Freud filled with correct guessing — *erraten*.'⁶⁶ Freud recognized the sexual component of this session but did not explore anality in his case description as much as he explored other aspects of obsessionality. As far as transference is concerned, his silence on the matter fits well with his striving towards the sublimation of homosexuality. The same kind of defensiveness seems to contagiously affect Mahony's language as he speaks of 'anal rape in lexical installments' where one might also have asked whether this was not a mutually enjoyable (in the Lacanian sense) situation.⁶⁷ This notwithstanding, I agree with Mahony that as Paul paid in rats, he both submitted to Freud and treated him as a prostitute.⁶⁸ Here the signifier *Unrat*, absent from both the case and the notes, but still implied as the imperfect opposite of *Rat*, points to the analyst's position as rest, waste, and excess — which Freud acknowledges in the notes as he affirms 'but I cannot guess' (*ich kann aber nicht erraten [sic]*).⁶⁹ From this position, which supposes the acceptance of castration, it becomes visible that the only alternative to anguish is to relinquish the fantasies that lead to imaginary castration: Paul's conundrum as Rat Man lies in his incapacity to choose, that is, to relinquish (*entrateten*).

As a guessing prostitute, Freud was, according to Mahony, looking for 'the locality at which the repressed breaks through' in obsessional

65 Mahony, *Freud and the Rat Man*, p. 103, his emphasis.

66 *Ibid.*, pp. 104 and 105.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

69 Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 158.

neurosis, which is 'word presentation and not the concept attached to it'.⁷⁰ Thus, for Mahony, obsessional ideas are said to unite 'the most disparate things under a single word with multiple meanings': Through words that are ambiguous, 'obsessional ideas are clothed in a characteristic verbal vagueness in order to permit such multiple development.'⁷¹ That is, the vagueness of obsessional discourse is related to the way in which different ideas can be organized around the materiality and opacity of the signifier: *Wortlaut*.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: *WORTLAUT*, THE SUBJECT, AND THE SOCIAL

Freud calls the reader's attention to the role of wording in the chance articulation of Paul's neurosis: 'It was almost as though Fate, when the captain told him his story, had been putting him through an association test: she had called out a "complex stimulus-word" [...], and he had reacted to it with his obsessional idea' (*Das Schicksal hatte ihm in der Erzählung des Hauptmannes sozusagen ein Komplexreizwort zugerufen, und er versäumte nicht, mit seiner Zwangsidee darauf zu reagieren*).⁷² Paul does not hear the rat-related chain of signifiers before analysis although he is the one who articulates it. This is because, paradoxically, 'the patients themselves do not know the wording [*Wortlaut*] of their own obsessional ideas' (*die Kranken den Wortlaut ihrer eigenen Zwangsvorstellungen nicht kennen*).⁷³ They do not know the wording of their ideas, but place value in how they sound: 'words have value for him' (*Worte haben Wert für ihn*).⁷⁴ In his notes, Freud associates Paul's interrogation of death with the sound of the word *sterben* as he reproduces the scene in which the patient asks this question: 'What does death mean? As if the sound of the word should tell him' (*Was heißt denn 'sterben'? Als ob der Laut des Wortes es ihm sagen müßte*).⁷⁵ The centrality of death and the desire to control it is also related to rats in Paul's speech as he 'wishes people rats' (*jeman-*

70 Mahony, *Freud and the Rat Man*, p. 287.

71 *Ibid.*, pp. 287 and 288.

72 Freud, 'Notes upon a Case', p. 216; 'Bemerkungen', p. 435.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 223; p. 441.

74 Freud, *L'homme aux rats*, p. 216.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 202.

dem Ratten wünschen), that is, wants them to die, whenever they force him to make a decision.⁷⁶

The fixed and partially unrecognized articulation of signifiers that is connected to the fully functioning neurosis is destabilized during the work of analysis, when ‘the patient, who has hitherto turned his eyes away in terror from his own pathological productions, begins to attend to them and obtains a clearer and more detailed view of them.’⁷⁷ This idea is in itself not new to those familiar with the psychoanalytical technique. What is of special interest to our discussion is how one of the precepts of obsessional thought attributed by Freud to his patients guides his own analysis of the case. It is the extraordinary character of the articulation of signifiers that express Paul’s symptoms that allows Freud to articulate his generalizations on obsessional neurosis. Like his obsessive patient, Freud generalizes based on one example. Yet, to the extent that this is brought to the fore, the case remains open to being displaced by other cases labeled as cases of obsessional neurosis. The singularity of the Rat Man case relates to the fact that in it the role played by signifiers in the dialect spoken by the subject as he articulates his neurosis is especially clear. Through the depiction of this singularity, Freud is able to state that this occurs in obsessional neurosis in general as he implicitly compares this case with other cases and chooses it for its exemplary character.

According to John Forrester, the case, the ‘style of reasoning dominant in psychoanalysis’, opposes the Aristotelian idea that ‘there can only be a science of the universal and the necessary.’⁷⁸ Since practical wisdom, which is based on individuals, and therefore on particulars, is not considered knowledge in the Aristotelian tradition, no knowledge of individuals is possible. Yet, the syllogistic reasoning proposed by Aristotle depends on ‘an inductively derived generalization to further particulars.’⁷⁹ This proposition by Forrester comes from John Stuart Mill’s idea that the general is only necessary because people’s memory is insufficient and general propositions are derived from inferences that

76 Ibid., p. 222.

77 Ibid., p. 223.

78 John Forrester, *Thinking in Cases* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 4.

79 Ibid., p. 5.

involve only particulars. In Forrester's reading of Mill, 'reasoning is always from particulars to particulars, because the general form of a proposition, or the general class to which particulars belong, are simply names, or *marks* as he calls them, which we employ because of our fallible memories.'⁸⁰

Thus, the names employed in generalizing processes bear a relation of non-juxtaposition with the things they name, i.e. no relation of correspondence between labels and what they designate follows from the fact that they try to make up for the limitations of memory. The case study as method recognizes this fact to the extent that the scope of the generalization it claims remains open. As implied by Forrester, reasoning goes from particulars to generals (which are themselves particulars) and then back to particulars. This is to say that the insights it produces will be based on the possibility that they might be applicable in the next instance of a given named phenomenon, but whether this will be the case or not can only be decided in view of a particular situation. Since the 'permeability [of the case] invites corrective or amplifying uptake', the extent to which it might be generalizable in the future remains uncertain.⁸¹ It will be provisionally determined upon encountering another case.

As far as the relationship between the individual and the social or the particular and the general is concerned, one cannot tell beforehand in what ways it will be manifested in each case. However, one can expect it to be found in processes of subject constitution, for if the signifier 'represents a subject [...] for another signifier' and the signifier pertains to the realm of the symbolic, there is no such thing as an individual subject.⁸² Because subject constitution is both singular and social, it is not possible to fully distinguish the articulation of the rat-related chain of signification by Paul during analysis from its rendering in Freud's narrative. In Freud's notes, it is not always possible to differentiate Paul's speech from Freud's writing, and 'rat' as a core signifier seems to have emerged gradually during analysis: 'the rat story becomes more and more of a node' (die Rattengeschichte wird immer

80 Ibid., p. 6.

81 Wells, 'Freud's Rat Man', p. 363.

82 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 198.

mehr ein Knotenpunkt), Freud observed in his notes on 8 December 1907.⁸³ This is due (i) to the impossibility of accessing the ‘original’ scene, in which analysis took place and words were uttered, through a written text that tries to make sense of it a posteriori in order to propose a somewhat unified narrative of how obsessional neurosis operates and (ii) to the fact that signifiers pertain to the realm of the symbolic, and as such are social.

On 3 June 1909, Freud wrote a letter to C. G. Jung in which he stated: ‘I suddenly feel like writing about the Salzburg rat man.’ On 30 June of the same year, he told his then friend: ‘I am too deep into my rats’, while at the same time admitting that the case study he was writing was far from being an exact reproduction of what he actually found in the clinic.⁸⁴ Paul’s rats became Freud’s rats through the medium of language. Freud acknowledged this and joked about it with Jung, the friend from whom he expected recognition as he asked his opinion on the case in a letter from the same year. Jung not only reassured him that his manuscript was good but also shared with Freud his own considerations on rats. In the course of this exchange, Paul’s rats became Freud’s rats and then Jung’s rats — as Octave Mannoni reminds us, Freud’s *Deutung* of the connections between rats, syphilis, children, and penis in Paul’s analysis owes much to Jung’s archetype of the rat.⁸⁵

Paul’s signifiers articulate his symptoms in a very particular way, but in so doing reveal the general mechanism of obsessional neurosis. It is thus through the singular instantiation of obsessionality in Paul’s symptom that one can grasp its general, and therefore social, character. If the signifier does not mean anything, it is because its crystallization is as arbitrary as it is necessary.⁸⁶ Not meaning anything in particular, the

83 Freud, *L’homme aux rats*, p. 178.

84 These two quotes are to be found in Mahony, *Freud and the Rat Man*, p. 84. What follows is my translation of Freud’s remark to Jung concerning the distance between the case study and clinical experience: ‘What bungling are our reproductions, how wretchedly do we tear the great works of art of psychic nature’ (Was für Pfschereien sind unsere Reproduktionen, wie jämmerlich zerpflücken wir die großen Kunstwerke der psychischen Natur!), in Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, *Briefwechsel* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1984), p. 117.

85 Octave Mannoni, ‘L’homme aux rats’, *Les temps modernes*, 20.228 (1965), pp. 2028–47.

86 Lacan, ‘Ouverture’.

signifier is both material and opaque, and these characteristics make it possible for meaning to be both condensed in the chain of signification that articulates Paul's symptoms and displaced in analysis as Paul gradually hears the import of the sound of the words he articulates as he speaks about his symptoms.

Something similar seems to happen with the German word *Wortlaut*, the term employed by Freud to refer to Paul's phrasings. One might say that the erasure of sound and emphasis on wording in the common use of the German word *Wortlaut* points to a repression of the materiality of this signifier that is similar to the one occurring in obsessional neurosis, in which one utters an idea but does not listen to what its sound implies. Paul did not perceive the import of the related signifiers he articulated because (and although) they were at the surface of his discourse. Similarly, *Wortlaut* contains in its materiality the importance of sound to wording that its use tends to erase. *Nachträglich*, one can hear in Freud's *Wortlaut* echoes of the materiality of Lacan's signifier. For like the signifier, theorization, and thus generalization, is also social.

Iracema Dulley, 'The Case and the Signifier: Generalization in Freud's *Rat Man*', in *The Case for Reduction*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger, *Cultural Inquiry*, 25 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 13–37 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_02>

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