

# Language gone mad

## A Lacanian study of mania

**Bart Rabaey**

**Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Stijn Vanheule**

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All the world's in want and is writing a letters. A letters from a person to a place about a thing. And all the world's on wish to be carrying a letters. A letters to a king about a treasure from a cat. When men want to write a letters. Ten men, ton men, pen men, pun men, wont to rise a ladder. And den men, dun men, fen men, fun men, hen men, hun men wend to raze a leader.

—James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Like some letter in cypher, the dream-inscription when scrutinized closely loses its first look of balderdash and takes on the aspect of a serious, intelligible message.

—James Sully, quoted in Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*

Mais cette lettre comment faut-il la prendre ici? Tout uniment, à la lettre.

—Jacques Lacan, *L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient*

Ich starrte in den Bildschirm. Die Lettern begannen zu tanzen, ganz sacht, das Flirren der Pixel vielleicht ein Effekt der Hitze. Ich las. Unmöglich, was sich da tat!

—Thomas Melle, *Die Welt im Rücken*

En of de letteren nu etteren of knetteren dan wel spetteren of schetteren, het is toch altijd dezelfde zever.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Ontbijt in het vilbeluik*



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—Vorst, September 2023

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# 1

## Introduction

In this chapter we provide a general introduction to this dissertation. We first introduce the research questions that orient us throughout this dissertation and we sketch our methodological framework: qualitative research based on testimonies of persons that have experienced mania. Our informants are experts-by-experience in our interview study and two writers who testified, in their autobiographical work and in interviews, about their experiences with mania. Next, we define the object of our inquiry, the phenomenon of mania. We situate it within the current psychiatric diagnostic understanding, and discuss the notion of *flight of ideas*. Then we introduce the Lacanian framework starting from which we will investigate mania. We give a brief overview of Lacan's comments on mania, in which we particularly note the element of language. We further discuss Lacan's notion of metonymy and Lacan's view of mania as a metonymic derailment of the signifying chain. We end the chapter with a short overview of the chapters.

# 1. Setting the Stage: Context and Research Questions

## 1.1. Introduction

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, there is a dearth of theorizing on the phenomenon of mania and the diagnosis of *manic depression* or *bipolar disorder*. This dissertation is a contribution towards remedying that lack through an attempt at engaging with the phenomenon of mania from a Lacanian point of view.

Several authors note that mania, manic depression or bipolar disorder<sup>1</sup> have received little attention in psychoanalytic writing (Assoun, 2010; Czermak, 1998/2012; Etzersdorfer & Schell, 2006; Lucas, 1998; Pao, 1971) with interest especially waning since the 1970s (Jackson, 1993; Ventimiglia, 2018).<sup>2</sup> In a systematic search for available clinical studies on psychoanalytic treatment of bipolar disorder or manic depression published from 1990 to 2021, Stefana et al. (2022) report only finding 21 articles (containing 26 single-case reports and no quantitative studies). Our own search of the Web of Science database confirms the scarcity for journal articles or studies discussing mania, manic depression, or bipolar disorder especially from a Lacanian framework. Even the broadest searches, combining these terms with ‘Lacan’ gives remarkably few hits (5, 7 and 8 for the respective terms), two of which are chapters from this dissertation (Chapter 2 and 5). Some of these do not refer to clinical mania, merely mention mania or manic depression, or are historical studies on diagnosis. In a review of journal articles discussing clinical cases or vignettes of psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy with patients affected by bipolar disorder or manic depression, Stefana et al. (2023) report finding 24 articles discussing 29 cases. They note how half of these articles do not discuss disorder-specific features. Tellingly, the only two Lacanian case studies included in the review report on treatment of a patient with “a psychiatric diagnosis of bipolar affective disorder” (Georgaca, 2001, p. 176) or “suffering from manic-depressive psychosis” (Vanheule, 2017, p. 388), yet the treatment is not discussed in terms specific to manic depression or bipolar disorder, but in terms of Lacan’s structural diagnosis of psychosis.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Section 2.2 for an elaboration on our use of the terms manic depression and bipolar disorder.

<sup>2</sup> Speculating about a possible cause for this waning psychoanalytic interest, several hypotheses have been put forward such as the rise of mood stabilizing drugs (Ventimiglia, 2018), the need for more hospitalized care (Jackson, 1993), or psychoanalysis not being an evidence-based and recommended form of treatment for bipolar disorder, therefore analysts are less likely to receive these patients (Stefana et al., 2023).

<sup>3</sup> We return to this point in Chapter 6, Section 2.

The psychiatric perspective<sup>4</sup> on mania and on bipolar disorder conceptualizes mania as a biological or neurological problem with medication as the main course of treatment (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007). The psychological perspective mainly focuses on recognizing and managing symptoms and is often limited to psychoeducation (Swartz & Swanson, 2014). The phenomenological perspective is concerned with the subjective experience of mania, e.g., Binswanger's (1964/2012) reflections on the manic mode of being-in-the-world. Each of these approaches has unique perspectives on causes and potential remedies for mania.<sup>5</sup> In our reading, the Lacanian view on mania is unique as it understands mania as a phenomenon of language. For Lacan (1966/2006), subjective experience is an effect of language and disturbances in language functioning have an effect on the subject. In this dissertation we investigate how the derailing language in mania impacts the experience of the subject. Throughout the chapters we explore the merits of this perspective that views mania as a phenomenon of language and speech. We explore what this particular point of view implies for our understanding of mania, the experience of mania, and the aftermath and processes of recovery from mania. Moreover, we explore how this perspective might open up new ways of conceptualizing recovery and rehabilitation.

Since Lacan did not develop an elaborate theory on mania, nor expressed any opinion on how to situate it diagnostically (Leader, 2015), we cannot start from Lacan's *theory on mania*, but will have to construct it throughout this study building on the scattered remarks throughout Lacan's work. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation we will build on different elements from Lacanian theory to elaborate his remarks on mania.<sup>6</sup>

When mania is discussed in psychoanalytic literature, it is often within the context of melancholia (Assoun, 2010; e.g., see Laurent, 1988/2015), and with the assumption that mania is a defense mechanism or a reaction against a state of depression or melancholia (Pao, 1968; Ventimiglia, 2018). According to Assoun (2010) there is a marginalization and undervaluation of the question of mania within psychoanalytic theory, which leaves the

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<sup>4</sup>Of course we are generalizing here, there is no such thing as 'the psychiatric perspective,' 'the psychological perspective' or even 'the Lacanian perspective.'

<sup>5</sup>For example, based on a contemporary phenomenological conceptualization of mania as a centrifugal dispersion of the lived body and a temporal desynchronization (Fuchs, 2014), or a speeding up of bodily and mental states (Ghaemi, 2013), Fuchs (2001) proposes a "resynchronization therapy" (p. 185).

<sup>6</sup>In this chapter we start from Lacan's view on the relationship between language and subjectivity to make sense of what happens in mania when language derails. This is elaborated further in Chapter 3 and 4. In Chapter 2, we apply Lacan's double mirror model to the processes of identification involved in recovering from experiences of mania. In Chapter 5 we explore the implications of manic language for Lacan's views on language itself.

question of mania underdeveloped.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, similar comments can be made about the phenomenological approach to mania<sup>8</sup> and the psychiatric approach.<sup>9</sup> Specific to our research project is, apart from the particular focus on mania as a language phenomenon, that we investigate the phenomenon of mania in its own right.<sup>10</sup>

Lacan's comments on mania suggest that mania is to be situated in the realm of psychosis, as one of the possible effects of foreclosure (Leader, 2013; Soler, 2002). Yet, we do not start our investigation from the clinical structures within which mania might manifest itself, but from mania as a phenomenon of language. By focusing on mania, we bypass discussion concerning melancholia versus manic depression and concerning where to situate mania in a Lacanian nosological framework.<sup>11</sup> We return to the question of the place of mania and manic depression within the realm of psychosis in Chapter 5 and 6.

## 1.2. Research Questions

The overall research questions throughout this dissertation are: (1) 'Can a Lacanian view on mania help us understand the experience of mania?' and (2) 'Can a Lacanian point of view contribute to the understanding of processes of recovery from mania?'

The first question translates to whether Lacanian theory can be elaborated to conceptualize the experience of mania. Throughout our chapters, we choose to do this not starting from

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<sup>7</sup>The opening statement of his book is that the psychoanalytic statute of mania is still to be determined [“le statut psychoanalytique de la manie reste à établir”] (Assoun, 2010, p. 7).

<sup>8</sup>Affective conditions and mania have been relatively neglected compared to the schizophrenic disorders (Sass & Pienkos, 2013, 2015), melancholia has received more attention than mania (Cottet, 2008; Fuchs, 2014) and when manic depression is discussed, depression always receives more attention—often double the number of pages—than mania (e.g., see Fernandez, 2014; Fuchs 2014, 2019).

<sup>9</sup>Brémaud (2017) makes similar remarks concerning a relative neglect of mania in psychiatric literature.

<sup>10</sup>Likewise, voices within psychiatry and phenomenology are increasingly arguing for a consideration of mania in its own light, instead of starting from depression. Fernandez (2016) self-critically questions phenomenological assumptions such as Fuchs' statement “mania is obviously the antithesis of depression” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 411). Within a psychiatric outlook, Koukopoulos & Ghaemi (2009) argue for the primacy of mania, stating: “depression is a consequence of the excitatory processes of mania” (p. 125), or “the price of mania is depression” (Ghaemi, 2013, p. 807; see also Ghaemi & Vohringer, 2017; Koukopoulos, 2006).

<sup>11</sup>In the Lacanian field, some authors argue for considering mania as one of the possible ways in which unbound jouissance can manifest itself in psychosis (e.g., Maleval, in Miller, 2008), others consider mania as a phenomenon within the clinical structure of melancholia (e.g., Laurent, 1988/2015), others argue for a more structural view of manic depression as a specific clinical entity (e.g., Arce Ross, 2009). As Leader (2015) remarks, Lacan himself made no comments on manic depression as a nosological entity, and made only a few references to melancholia in his written work and seminars—although he did make use of the diagnosis of melancholia in his clinical presentations (Leader, 2023).

Lacan's structuralist view on psychosis<sup>12</sup>, but from his remarks on manic language phenomena.

The second question comprises the questions what a Lacanian point of view can add to the understanding of processes involved in recovery from manic episodes. In Chapter 2 we explore the experience of a number of experts-by-experience on recovery from manic episodes, and in Chapter 3 and 4 we explore more idiosyncratic responses to mania. Further, we consider whether the Lacanian perspective on mania opens up new avenues for thinking about recovery (see Chapter 6).

By investigating these research questions we do not necessarily aim to understand what mania 'is' within a Lacanian framework, but rather what it 'does' and how it affects the subject. The logical next question is then what strategies and practices for coping with and recovery from mania can be developed from a Lacanian outlook.

### 1.3. Method

Our method is conceptual and qualitative in the sense that we combine Lacanian theory with the examination of interviews and autobiographical testimonies. We aim to develop a Lacanian conceptualization of mania in dialogue with first-person experiences of mania. We aim to take the subjective dimension of manic phenomena into account—an overlooked aspect in a psychiatric or neurological view of bipolar disorder—but not without a theoretical framework that helps us to understand these.

We start our investigations from what patients are able to tell us about their experience. In Chapter 2 we report on an interview study with 18 people who testify about their experiences of mania. In Chapter 3 and 4, two literary case studies, we engage with two authors who have written and testified in interviews on their experience of mania. In Chapter 3 we study the literary work of J.M.H. Berckmans and in Chapter 4 we discuss the autobiographical and literary work of Thomas Melle. In these three clinical chapters we engage in an interpretative dialogue between testimonies and narratives about experiences of mania and a Lacanian understanding of language and subjectivity applied to mania. Chapter 5 is a more conceptual study investigating the implications of manic language for Lacan's views on language.

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<sup>12</sup> The structure of psychosis is an implicit assumption in Chapter 2 and 4, and is more explicitly discussed in Chapters 3 and 5. We get back to this point in Chapter 6.

In the three clinical studies we do not solely focus on the content of what the participants of our interview study tell us or what the writers write about (or discuss in interviews) concerning their experiences of mania and their recovery processes. We also explore the function that discussing and writing about their experiences has for them, utilizing our Lacanian framework for interpretation. In that sense, we take the performative function of writing (or talking) about oneself into account (Van Goidsenhoven, 2017). In Chapter 2, we consider the role of the narrative of being bipolar in how individuals understand themselves and make retrospective sense of their manic experiences. In the case of J.M.H. Berckmans, we investigate his testimonies concerning his struggles with language and consider how his writing practice can be considered a form of treatment. Our discussion of Thomas Melle starts from his autobiographical book, where the writing of the book and the construction of its narrative are an explicit theme.

Multiple authors have engaged with autobiographical accounts of psychopathology and advocate the value of doing so (e.g., see Brenner, 2021; Maleval, 2009; Van Goidsenhoven, 2017). A recurring critique of using autobiographical accounts is that they necessarily involve (re-)constructions, which can impose order and logic onto experiences of madness that may not have been present (e.g., Kusters, 2016), or that certain conditions affect one's narrative capacities (Gallagher & Cole, 2011). The interesting thing about Thomas Melle's autobiographical account is that it explicitly engages with these questions and that he discusses the aims and effects of his narrative reconstruction in his work and in interviews.

In our literary case studies, we have avoided the pitfall of retrospective diagnosis and interpretation—in contrast to, for example, Jamison's (1993) work, which can be critiqued along these lines—by discussing two writers who explicitly discussed their experience of madness, their symptoms, their diagnosis and what it meant to them. These literary case studies are not conceptualized as interpretations of these authors' work as the product of a manic or bipolar writer. Rather, these studies are discussions within a Lacanian framework about these authors' experiences of mania, how they talk and write about these experiences, and their own statements regarding how their writing practices relate to these experiences.

The methodology for the interview study is described in Chapter 2, Section 3.2. Here we describe in more detail our methodology in the literary case studies of Berckmans and Melle in Chapter 3 and 4. In both chapters we discuss these authors' experiences of mania, how



these impact language and how this relates to their writing strategies. In the case of both authors, we did not conduct a systematic analysis of specific texts. Instead, we engaged with their entire written oeuvre, along with their own statements and reflections on the role that writing plays in their life and how writing relates to their manic-depressive experiences.<sup>13</sup> Our psychoanalytic approach to research adds the single case perspective as a methodological tool (Hinshelwood, 2013; Meganck et al., 2017), allowing for an in-depth investigation of the logic of a single individual case.<sup>14</sup>

The analysis in Chapter 2 is based on interviews, while in Chapter 3 and 4 we incorporate written texts as a source of information. Apart from interviews—one of psychology and phenomenology's primary sources of information<sup>15</sup>—psychoanalysis adds writing as a prominent data source, specifically concerning the study of psychosis (André, 2011; Maleval, 1994; see also Freud, 1911; Lacan, 2005/2016).<sup>16</sup> We relied on three sources of data for our analyses: the written oeuvre of these authors, their press interviews and the secondary literature (reviews, commentaries and some scholarly analyses).

We immersed ourselves in the work of these authors by studying their complete oeuvre, still manageable in scope for both authors.<sup>17</sup> Next to the literary work itself, we undertook a thorough review of the reception of this literary work. This consists mostly of reviews and commentaries as only a few journal articles analyzing their work have been published for both authors. Since Berckmans has remained relatively obscure, and Melle only achieved major literary success after the publication of his autobiography, we were able to consult most, if not all, of the secondary literature, literary criticism and reviews on these authors. We read and watched interviews with these authors, primarily from written press sources, often coinciding

<sup>13</sup> Examples of research that is more rigorous in research methodology but arguably more conceptually dubious are Cantos' (2012) analysis of lexical profiles of Edgar Allan Poe's tales—which the author then links to supposed mood states—and Esmaeelpour & Sasani's (2015) study of the appearance of semantic fields in the letters of Sadegh Hedayat—the authors use this linguistic analysis to diagnose mood episodes.

<sup>14</sup> As an alternative to the more prevalent aggregation of individual perspectives in the psychological research tools of randomized control trials, questionnaires and statistical analysis, and in the psychological and phenomenological research tool of the interview study.

<sup>15</sup> Psychology's primary source of information is people's own conscious reflection on themselves, whether it is gathered by quantitative measures such as questionnaires or more qualitative measures such as interviews. For phenomenology we can add what is maybe the ultimate phenomenological source of information: eavesdropping (see Chapter 6, Section 3.2).

<sup>16</sup> Interviews, soliciting people's conscious reflection on themselves, mainly target the realm of the imaginary, with a focus on the ego-narrative. The psychoanalytic interest in writing as a data source, adds a focus on the real of language, whether it is situated in the workings of the letter or in the jouissance of language.

<sup>17</sup> We did not seek access to Berckmans' archive of unpublished work mentioned by Ceustermans (2018), and we didn't manage to consult all of Melle's plays.

with new publications or the performance of a play in Melle's case. For the study on Melle, several speeches he gave at the occasion of a literary award (particularly Melle, 2017a), were relevant additional sources of information. For the chapter on Berckmans, Jammaer's (2018) documentary proved insightful. To collect this data, we conducted extensive internet searches for potential sources, stumbled upon some media appearances, and consulted scientific databases such as *Web of Science* and *Scopus*. Additionally, we searched press databases for interviews, comments and reviews.<sup>18</sup> We also checked the reference list of journal articles for further relevant sources and managed to access most of the mentioned interviews and publications.<sup>19</sup>

While immersing ourselves in the writings and analyses of these authors' work, we developed our Lacanian understanding of mania as a phenomenon of speech and language. This implies we read parts of these authors' work through a Lacanian lens, while at the same time our reading of these authors influenced our interpretation of Lacan. Both chapters were developed in dialogue with promoter and co-author of the *American Imago* article on Melle, Stijn Vanheule. A brief note on this process.

In Chapter 3, we observed how Berckmans' work displayed a very particular way of using and treating language.<sup>20</sup> This became clear through reading his work and was particularly prominent in comments, reviews and scholarly analyses. This seemed to align remarkably well with Lacan's description of manic language as driven by derailing metonymy. As discussed in the chapter, our in-depth study of Berckmans' writing procedure added nuance to this idea. We further analyzed Berckmans' literary work and the function writing had for Berckmans through Maleval's (1994) framework of the different functions of writing in psychosis, along with Stevens & Bryssinck's (2018) adaptation of this framework.<sup>21</sup> This

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<sup>18</sup> For Berckmans the *Gopress* (now *Belgapress*) database of Flemish newspapers and journals was particularly relevant, for Melle we accessed German newspapers and journals through the *Nexis Uni* database (thanks to the library of the Artevelde Hogeschool).

<sup>19</sup> For access to Berckmans' press interviews the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR) proved an invaluable resource.

<sup>20</sup> Our interest in Berckmans was sparked by a chance encounter with a then recently published collection of his stories (Berckmans, 2018) where we were struck by the 'madness' of his language. His books are long out of stock and somewhat collector's items now. The collection was accompanied by a biography (Ceustermans, 2018) which confirmed our 'diagnosis' and lead to a further engagement with his work.

<sup>21</sup> Maleval (1994) distinguishes between the deposition, encryption and dumping of jouissance as relevant functions of writing. Stevens & Bryssinck (2018) formulate the distinction between Maleval's deposition and encryption of jouissance, as the distinction between 'impossible writing' and 'writing the impossible.'

analysis led to the development of two main functions of writing, which we discussed in the chapter: treating language and fictionalizing reality.

For Chapter 4, our starting point was Melle's (2016) autobiography *The World at my Back*.<sup>22</sup> What struck us was not so much how language appeared in Melle's work nor how it was received but, more importantly, Melle's descriptions of his experiences of mania as a phenomenon occurring at the level of language (as described in Chapter 4, Section 2) that tallies quite well with Lacan's understanding of mania as metonymically derailing language. Furthermore, Melle's discussions about how his writing related to his manic experiences and the role of writing at different stages of his career expanded our understanding of the role of writing for Berckmans and opened up further avenues for thinking about language in mania. Moreover, Melle's remarks on the process of identity reconstruction added further nuance to the findings from our interview study in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 3, given Berckmans himself did not extensively elaborate on the function of writing for him, we interpreted his writing practice using Maleval's (1994) distinctions. However, in Chapter 4, we started from Melle's (2016) own theorizing and reflections on the function of his writing and its role in his recovery. Starting from Melle's remarks in his autobiography, we engaged in a double process of retrospectively examining his early work and earlier statements in interviews and prospectively exploring some of Melle's later work and discussions where he commented on and looked back at his autobiographical work.

We compiled a detailed report, mainly following a chronological order, which included notable passages from Melle's literary work related to his manic experiences, statements from interviews at the time of publication, passages from his autobiography where he recounted certain events and commented on earlier fictional versions of these events and experiences, interviews looking back on the autobiographical work and commenting on its role and impact, as well as further statements from lectures and comments made during a theater piece on the process of writing his autobiography and his experience during the press tour following its publication (Melle, 2018).

This report was subsequently discussed at the following guidance committee meeting, whose members' contribution to the chapter we gratefully acknowledge, particularly Lieven

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<sup>22</sup> Actually, initially we read the Dutch translation, *Met de wereld in de rug* (Melle, 2016/2017b), we subsequently read and further analyzed the original version, *Die Welt im Rücken* (Melle, 2016), only recently was it translated to English as *The World at my Back* (Melle, 2016/2023).

Jonckheere's reading of *Die Welt im Rücken* was inspirational for the further development of our analysis. This report subsequently went through several revisions, based on further discussions with co-author Stijn Vanheule, and evolved from a chronological overview of Melle's evolving writing strategies and style to a more thematic analysis of the different functions of writing.<sup>23</sup> This resulted in the construction of eight themes or writing strategies, most of which were explicitly recognized and discussed by Melle himself.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. Mania, Bipolar Disorder and Language

Before we delve into a Lacanian perspective on mania and further engage with the research questions, we will first define mania and situate it within the current psychiatric diagnostic framework.

### 2.1. Mania

First we describe the topic of our investigation, the experience of mania. As a starting point, we turn to the DSM definition of mania.

In the DSM-5, a manic episode is part of the diagnosis of *bipolar I disorder* and is defined as:

A distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood and abnormally and persistently increased goal-directed activity or energy, lasting at least 1 week and present most of the day, nearly every day (or any duration if hospitalization is necessary). (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124)

And accompanied by at least three<sup>25</sup> of the following symptoms: inflated self-esteem or grandiosity, decreased need for sleep, more talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking, flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing, distractibility, increase in goal-directed activity or psychomotor agitation, excessive involvement in activities that have

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<sup>23</sup> The iterative process we went through is akin to the iterations described for the generation of themes from narrative data in more typical qualitative data analysis, such as Braun & Clarke's (2006) description of thematic analysis and Smith et al.'s (2009) procedures of interpretative phenomenological analysis.

<sup>24</sup> The eight themes/writing strategies are the eight subsections in Chapter 4, Section 3: *Postmodern Play; Literary Doubles; Narrating the Unspeakable; Restoring Subject and Ego; Artificial Authenticity; Outsourcing the Illness; The New Realism; and Writing, Not Speech.*

<sup>25</sup> To be exact: "During the period of mood disturbance and increased energy or activity, three (or more) of the following symptoms (four if the mood is only irritable) are present to a significant degree and represent a noticeable change from usual behavior" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124).

a high potential for painful consequences. A further qualification is that “the mood disturbance is sufficiently severe to cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning or to necessitate hospitalization to prevent harm to self or others, or there are psychotic features” (p. 124).<sup>26</sup>

A hypomanic episode consists of the same symptoms<sup>27</sup> though does not necessary last as long, “at least 4 consecutive days” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124), and causes less impairment.<sup>28</sup>

Goodwin & Jamison (2007) give the following textbook description of mania: “Manic states are typically characterized by heightened mood, more and faster speech, quicker thought, brisker physical and mental activity levels, greater energy (with a corresponding decreased need for sleep), irritability, perceptual acuity, paranoia, heightened sexuality, and impulsivity” (p. 32). Referring to classic psychiatric descriptions they classify symptoms into three affected domains: mood, cognition and perception, and activity and behavior. They summarize the effects in these domains as: exalted mood, accelerated thought and increased activity (see Bleuler, 1923/1924; Kraepelin, 1921).<sup>29</sup> Ghaemi (2013), a phenomenologically inspired psychiatrist, gives the following definition: “Mania is a mental state centrally characterized by psychomotor activation, creativity, and lack of insight. It is biologically based, and primarily characterized by psychomotor activation, with mood changes being secondary and epiphenomenal” (p. 817). A notable aspect of mania is its volatility, the manic’s affective tonality is unstable, and can quickly shift from joy to tears and from lamentations to anger (Ey et al., 2010).

Jaspers (1959/1963) gives a striking description:

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<sup>26</sup> A disqualifier is added: “The episode is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication, other treatment) or to another medical condition” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124).

<sup>27</sup> The description differs slightly, to qualify as a hypomanic episode there needs to be “increased activity or energy” instead of the manic “goal-directed activity or energy” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124).

<sup>28</sup> There needs to be “an unequivocal change in functioning that is uncharacteristic of the individual when not symptomatic” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 125), that is “observable by others,” but does not “cause marked impairment in social or occupational functioning or to necessitate hospitalization. If there are psychotic features, the episode is, by definition, manic” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 125).

<sup>29</sup> Of the three general areas of functioning that are affected by mania—mood, cognition and perception, and activity and behavior—our Lacanian focus on mania as a phenomenon of language and speech is situated mainly within ‘cognition and perception’ and somewhat neglects the aspect of mood and of energy and activity. We return to this in the Discussion in Chapter 6.

Pure mania is characterized by a primary, unmotivated and superabundant hilarity and euphoria, by psychic change towards a flight of ideas and an increase in possible associations. The feeling of delight in life is accompanied by an increase in instinctual activities: increased sexuality, increased desire to move about; pressure of talk and pressure of activity which will mount from mere vividness of gesture to states of agitated excitement. The psychic activity characterized by flight of ideas lends an initial liveliness to everything undertaken but it lacks staying-power and is changeable. All intruding stimuli and any new possibility will distract the patient's attention. The massive associations at his disposal come spontaneously and uncalled for. They make him witty and sparkling; they also make it impossible for him to maintain any determining tendency and render him at the same time superficial and confused. Physically and mentally he feels that he is extremely healthy and strong. He thinks his abilities are outstanding. With unfailing optimism the patient will contemplate all things around him, the whole world and his own future in the rosiest of lights. Everything is as bright and happy as can be. His ideas and thoughts all agree on this point most harmoniously; to any other idea he is wholly inaccessible. (p. 596)

The notion of *mania* has a long history, the term appears in classical Greece (Marneros & Angst, 2002; Shorter, 2005), but as Berrios (2008) points out, the concept has shifted throughout history, and the current understanding only appeared recently: "At the end of the eighteenth century, it was tantamount to insanity or madness; at the end of the nineteenth century it referred to *elated hyperactivity* with or without psychotic symptoms" (p. 367). This should caution against a reading of history from the vantage point of the present. On the other hand, based on a review of psychiatric textbooks, Kendler (2016) concludes that "the clinical construct of mania has been relatively stable in western psychiatry since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (p. 1013).

## 2.2. Bipolar Disorder

In the DSM-5, mania is a component of the diagnosis of *bipolar I disorder*, which is a quite common and severe diagnosis.<sup>30</sup> Clemente et al. (2015) estimate a worldwide lifetime

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<sup>30</sup> There is considerable disagreement whether bipolar disorder is actually overdiagnosed or underdiagnosed (see: Kelly, 2018; Smith et al., 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2008).

prevalence ranging from 1.06% to 1.56%, affecting more than one percent of the global population (Grande et al., 2016; Moreira et al. 2017). Individuals diagnosed with bipolar disorder face a significantly elevated risk of suicide, with a 20 to 30–fold higher risk compared to the general population (Plans et al., 2019). Up to one in three patients are likely to attempt suicide at some point (Novick et al., 2010; Tondo et al., 2016). Lifetime psychotic symptoms are present in over half of the patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder (Chakrabarti & Singh, 2022).

In phenomenological, psychoanalytic, and certain psychiatric writings, there is a preference for the notion of *manic depression* instead of *bipolar disorder* (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Leader, 2013). One of the major textbooks on the topic, authored by Goodwin & Jamison (2007), is titled *Manic-Depressive Illness* with the subtitle *Bipolar Disorders and Recurrent Depression*.<sup>31</sup>

We will not go into the history of the concept of bipolar disorder, but a brief overview of the historical conceptualizations of manic depression and bipolar disorder is warranted.<sup>32</sup>

Kraepelin (1921) grouped several symptoms under the term *manic-depressive insanity* and distinguished two major syndromes within the field of psychosis: *manic-depressive insanity* and *dementia praecox*, which would later become known as *schizophrenia* (Greene, 2007). Kraepelin's conceptualization remains influential to this day (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007), although it is not uncontested (Jablensky, 1999). It was Kraepelin's diagnostic construct that was incorporated in the first edition of the DSM (Mason et al., 2016).<sup>33</sup>

In the DSM-I (American Psychiatric Association, 1952), mania was classified as part of the *manic depressive reaction, manic type*, which was categorized as one of the *affective reactions*

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<sup>31</sup> We will use manic depression and bipolar disorder interchangeably, mainly using the terms used by the researchers, participants or writers under discussion: the participants in the study in Chapter 2 use the term bipolar disorder, J.M.H. Berckmans only uses manic depression, Thomas Melle uses both, with a preference for manic depression, and in Chapter 5, in line with the Lacanian literature, we use manic depression and manic-depressive psychosis.

<sup>32</sup> See Marneros & Angst (2002) for a reading that situates *bipolar disorder* in classical Greece, and Healy (2008, 2010) for a critique of such a reading. Healy (2008) also describes the intimate connection between the rise of the diagnosis of *bipolar disorder* and the marketing efforts of the pharmaceutical industry. See Leader (2013) for similar critiques. Healy (2010) qualifies the notion of bipolar disorder as “more a brand than a well-grounded scientific term” (p. 6). Less polemic histories can be found in Berrios (2008) and Shorter (2005).

<sup>33</sup> Some of Kraepelin's influences and precursors were Falret's circular madness [*folie circulaire*] (Sedler, 1983) and Baillarger's double form madness [*folie à double forme*] (Haustgen & Akiskal, 2006). In Leader's (2015) view, Kraepelin's diagnostic is overinclusive and reductive, undoing the careful observations of his predecessors.

(distinguished from *schizophrenic* and *paranoid reactions*) within the *psychotic disorders*.<sup>34</sup> The *affective reactions* were defined as conditions “characterized by a primary, severe, disorder of mood, with resultant disturbance of thought and behavior, in consonance with the affect” (American Psychiatric Association, 1952, p. 24). The *manic depressive reactions* “comprise the psychotic reactions which fundamentally are marked by severe mood swings” (p. 25) and *mania* is “characterized by elation or irritability, with overtalkativeness, flight of ideas, and increased motor activity” (p. 25).

In the DSM-II (American Psychiatric Association, 1968), psychoses were categorized into *schizophrenia*, *major affective disorders*, *paranoid states* and *other psychoses*. Within the *major affective disorders (affective psychoses)* category, various types of *manic-depressive illness (manic, depressed and circular type)* were included. *Major affective disorders (affective psychoses)* are “characterized by a single disorder of mood, either extreme depression or elation, that dominates the mental life of the patient and is responsible for whatever loss of contact he has with his environment” (American Psychiatric Association, 1968, p. 35). *Manic-depressive illnesses (manic-depressive psychoses)* are “marked by severe mood swings” (p. 36) and the manic episodes within the *manic type* are “characterized by excessive elation, irritability, talkativeness, flight of ideas, and accelerated speech and motor activity” (p. 36).

In DSM-I and DSM-II, mania was firmly situated within the category of psychoses. This, however, changed in DSM-III, which marked a significant turning point toward the current psychiatric understanding of mania. The 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) renamed *manic depressive illness* or *psychosis* to *bipolar disorder*; introduced specific diagnostic criteria and the notion of *hypomania* (Mason et al., 2016).

The *bipolar* concept was developed by Leonhard who distinguished major affective illness into unipolar and bipolar types (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007). Hypomania is defined as “a clinical syndrome that is similar to—but not as severe as—that described by the term *mania* or *manic episode*” (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 207).<sup>35</sup> In DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) the category of *affective disorders* is distinguished from

<sup>34</sup> The text explains: “manic depressive reaction is synonymous with the term manic depressive psychosis” (American Psychiatric Association, 1952, p. 25).

<sup>35</sup> Ghaemi (2013) points out that there are no *hypomanic* symptoms, mania and hypomania refer to episode definitions: “if one has a few manic symptoms, and not severely, then one can speak of a hypomanic episode. If one has more manic symptoms, and more severely, then one speaks of a manic episode” (p. 813).



*psychotic disorders* (now several categories) and this new category of *major affective disorders* consists of *bipolar disorder* and *major depression*. *Bipolar disorder* is further subdivided in *mixed*, *manic*, or *depressed*.<sup>36</sup> Ghaemi (2013) critiques this as a shift away from a conception of the episodic, cyclical nature of the manic-depressive illness towards a narrow focus on the polarity of mood, thereby misrecognizing the central element of recurrence.

In DSM-III, the essential feature for diagnosing the *bipolar disorder* type of *major affective disorder* is a manic episode. A *manic episode* is defined as:

a distinct period when the predominant mood is either elevated, expansive, or irritable and when there are associated symptoms of the manic syndrome. These symptoms include hyperactivity, pressure of speech, flight of ideas, inflated self-esteem, decreased need for sleep, distractibility, and excessive involvement in activities that have a high potential for painful consequences, which is not recognized. (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 206)

Diagnostic criteria for a manic episode are roughly similar to those in DSM-5.<sup>37</sup>

DSM-III marks a shift from situating mania within the psychoses towards a conception of mania as mainly a phenomenon of mood, a shift further consolidated in DSM-IV with the renaming of the overall category to *mood disorders*. In DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) the previous category of *affective disorders* is renamed *mood disorders* and the *bipolar disorders* further subdivided into *bipolar I disorder*, *bipolar II disorder*, *cyclothymic disorder*, and *bipolar disorder NOS*.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mixed states, broadly defined as “the simultaneous presence of depressive and manic symptoms” (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007) are a common occurrence, arguably more common than pure manic and depressive states (Ghaemi, 2013). This was already noted by Kraepelin (1921) who described several types such as *depressive or anxious mania*, *excited or agitated depression*, or *depression with flight of ideas*. For Goodwin & Jamison (2007), mixed states are “a complex and often confusing aspect of the clinical presentation of bipolar illness” (p. 72), complicating the distinction between mania and depression. Fernandez (2014) argues the notion of mixed states is an “artefact of inaccurate diagnostic constructs” (p. 415) that overly emphasize mood. (In his phenomenological reasoning a particular mood is merely the consequence of *Befindlichkeit*, how one is attuned to the world.)

<sup>37</sup> As discussed in Section 2.1.

<sup>38</sup> The difference between the subtypes is characterized as follows: “Bipolar I Disorder is characterized by one or more Manic or Mixed Episodes, usually accompanied by Major Depressive Episodes” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 317); “Bipolar II Disorder is characterized by one or more Major Depressive Episodes accompanied by at least one Hypomanic Episode” (p. 318); “Cyclothymic Disorder is characterized by at least 2 years of numerous periods of hypomanic symptoms that do not meet criteria for a Manic Episode and numerous periods of depressive symptoms that do not meet criteria for a Major Depressive Episode” (p. 318).

In the 5<sup>th</sup> and current edition of the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) the criteria for all episodes—manic, hypomanic and depressed—remain generally the same yet there is “a minor but important adjustment” to the criteria for a manic episode (Mason et al., 2016, p. 6). In DSM-IV the main description for a manic episode is “a distinct period of abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 332). DSM-5 adds “and abnormally and persistently increased goal-directed activity or energy” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124).<sup>39</sup> This adjustment to the main definition of mania moves away from a singular focus on mood and acknowledges a second of the three classically distinguished domains affected by mania—mood, cognition and perception, and activity and behavior (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Kraepelin, 1921). The relevance of the addition of elevation of activation as a core element of mania is justified and confirmed by subsequent research (see Scott et al., 2017) and is in line with authors who consider psychomotor activation as the core symptom of mania and mood as secondary (e.g., Ghaemi, 2013).

Additionally, there is a shift in the classification categories; now, *bipolar and related disorders* are its own category, distinct from *depressive disorders*. It is argued that:

*Bipolar and related disorders* are separated from the *depressive disorders* in DSM-5 and placed between the chapters on *schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorders*<sup>40</sup> and *depressive disorders* in recognition of their place as a bridge between the two diagnostic classes in terms of symptomatology, family history, and genetics. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 123)

Mason et al. (2016) see the move to separate chapters as stressing that *bipolar disorder* and *depression* are “truly separate diseases” (p. 7). We could also interpret it as a further step away from the strict focus on mood and a step towards (again) situating bipolar disorder, and mania, as a phenomenon within the realm of psychosis.

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<sup>39</sup> See Section 2.1 for the DSM-5 definition with the necessary accompanying symptoms, these remain generally the same between DSM-IV and DSM-5.

<sup>40</sup> In DSM-IV the psychotic disorders were grouped under the major category *schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

## 2.3. Language vs. Mood

This little historical sketch is relevant as a Lacanian perspective does not consider mania as a problem of mood or energy, but strictly speaking as a problem of language and discourse (André, 1993; Leader, 2013; Soler, 2002).<sup>41</sup> This is in line with Lacan's general view of psychotic phenomena (and of psychopathology and even subjectivity in general) as phenomena of language (Fink, 1995; Vanheule, 2011). According to Laurent (2011), the general tendency in contemporary psychiatry accentuates troubles of mood rather than those of language, since mood is more amenable to intervention by medication, and the consideration of language necessitates considering matters such as speech and subjective experience.<sup>42</sup> From a Lacanian point of view, the exclusive focus on the dimension of mood or energy within contemporary psychiatry situates these outside of any consideration of psychical causality (Cottet, 2008) and clouds the importance of language for understanding manic depression (Sauvagnat, 1997). A Lacanian perspective offers an interesting counterpoint to this singular focus on mood.<sup>43</sup> The Lacanian perspective—with its emphasis on language—focuses on only one of the three classically distinguished domains affected by mania—mood, cognition and perception, and activity and behavior (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Kraepelin, 1921).<sup>44</sup>

As we further discuss in Chapter 5, the aspect of language is present in psychiatric descriptions of mania and in the DSM descriptions. A few examples, before we turn to a Lacanian look at mania.

Bleuler (1923/1924) describes manic thought as follows:

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<sup>41</sup> This is not unique to a Lacanian point of view. The phenomenological psychiatrist Rümke (1971), for instance, stated that manic-depressive psychosis is least of all a disease of the affect, and Ghaemi (2013) writes: “mania is not, primarily, driven by mood; it is driven by a speeding up of bodily and mental states: psychomotor activation” (p. 803). From a phenomenological point of view, Fernandez (2014) states mania should not be characterized by any particular mood but “by an enhanced or heightened capacity for finding ourselves situated in and attuned to the world” (p. 414), or “an amplification or intensification of *Befindlichkeit*” (p. 419).

<sup>42</sup> There is an extended literature of critical commentaries questioning the influence of pharmaceutical developments on the rise of the bipolar diagnosis (see Healy, 2008; Leader, 2013; Whitaker, 2010). E.g., Leader's (2013) comments on the pharmaceutical drive behind the “burgeoning of bipolar categories” (p. 4) and the “loosening of diagnostic boundaries” (p. 5).

<sup>43</sup> André (1993) points out the preference for the notion of affect over that of mood in Lacanian literature, which suggests a moral dimension and retains a link to the Other—to language—in contrast to the psychologizing understanding of mood as a merely intrapsychic phenomenon. For Lacan (1974/1987) affect is always related to language.

<sup>44</sup> In the current DSM-5 definition of mania only mood and activation are part of the core symptom of mania. Cognition and perception—and thereby language—are present in the additional symptoms.

The thinking of the manic is flighty. He jumps by by-paths from one subject to another, and cannot adhere to anything. With this the ideas run along very easily and involuntarily, even so freely that it may be felt as unpleasant by the patient. (p. 466)

Kraepelin (1921) in discussing the symptom of *flight of ideas* describes this almost as an autonomously moving language process. He describes a train of ideas where patients do not follow a train of thought, but jump from one series of ideas to the next, and coherence is gradually lost in the flight of ideas where thoughts intrude and impose themselves on patients, who can no longer gather their thoughts together. “In states of excitement they are not able to follow systematically a definite train of thought, but they continually jump from one series of ideas to a wholly different one and then let this one drop again immediately” (Kraepelin, 1921, p. 13) Patients’ speech is interpolated with “a great many side remarks which have only a very loose connection, or soon none at all, with the original subject” (p. 13) and interrupted by “continuous interpolations and incidental remarks” (p. 13). He continues:

The train of ideas is accordingly no longer dominated, as in normal people, by a general idea, which at the time admits only one definite direction of thought-association and inhibits all secondary and chance ideas. Therefore, at every moment the ideas favored by general habits of thought gain the upper hand, and not those required by the whole connection. It thus comes to digression from one idea to others similar or frequently associated with it, without regard to the goal of the original train of thought. The coherence of thinking relaxes more and more; there arises that disorder which we have come to know as confusion with flight of ideas. (pp. 13–14)

And adds:

An object, on which their eyes fall, anything written, a chance noise, a word, which sounds in their ears, is immediately woven into their talk and may call forth a series of similar ideas which often are only associated by habits of speech or are related by sound. (p. 14)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Although Kraepelin (1921) considered this an epiphenomenon of patients’ heightened distractibility and excitability. The quote continues: “The capacity to observe and to perceive is by no means raised thereby. Rather do the patients perceive as a rule only very superficially and inaccurately, and they do not take themselves up specially with what goes on around them. But when they notice anything, their train of thought is immediately influenced by it and generally also their flow of talk; they express their perception in words and let themselves be aimlessly driven along by the impulse given by it.” (pp. 14–15).

By way of illustration of flight of ideas, a few classic examples. Jaspers (1959/1963), quotes a patient's reply to the question whether she had changed at all in the last year:

She said "Yes, I was dumb and numb then but not deaf, I know Mrs. Ida Teff, she is dead, probably an appendicitis; I don't know whether she lost her sight, sightless Hesse, His Highness of Hesse, sister Louisa, His Highness of Baden, buried and dead on September the twenty-eighth 1907, when I get back, red-gold-red ..." (p. 209)<sup>46</sup>

Some often quoted examples provided by Cutting (1997) are: "Dr Malmberg you are an ice woman an iceberg a lettuce" (p. 481), and "I'll never be sick like a tailor even though my dad was a tailor even though my dad was a sailor" (p. 481).

Kraepelin (1921) further remarks that patients with flight of ideas "are by no means rich in ideas but only rich in words" (p. 18). Progressively, stock language takes over: "forms of speech, which have been learned as such, combinations of words, corresponding sounds and rhymes, usurp more and more the place of the substantive connection of ideas" (p. 31) and there is an increase of "pure clang-associations, in which every trace of an inner relation of ideas has vanished, assonances and rhymes, even though quite senseless" (pp. 31–32). Binswanger (1964/2012) notes how "words are no longer used in accord with their meanings, but simply strung together on the basis of their sounds" (p. 200).

In the DSM-5 we encounter the following description:

Speech can be rapid, pressured, loud, and difficult to interrupt. Individuals may talk continuously and without regard for others' wishes to communicate, often in an intrusive manner or without concern for the relevance of what is said. Speech is sometimes characterized by jokes, puns, amusing irrelevancies, and theatricality, with dramatic mannerisms, singing, and excessive gesturing. ... Frequently there is flight of ideas evidenced by a nearly continuous flow of accelerated speech, with abrupt shifts from one topic to another. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 128)

A relevant clinical phenomenon concerning manic episodes is that these follow a particular course. A typical episode sets on gradually, starting as mild hypomania and developing over

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<sup>46</sup> Since the translation loses some of the rhyme, here is the original quote from Jaspers (1923): "Sie antwortete auf die Frage, ob sie im letzten Jahre anders geworden sei: 'Ja, da war ich stumm und dumm, aber nicht taub, ich kenne die Ida Daube, die ist tot, wahrscheinlich an Blinddarmentzündung, ich weiß nicht, ob sie blind war; blinder Hesse, Großherzog von Hessen, die Schwester Luise, Großherzog von Baden, der Mann ist gestorben am 28. September 1907, wie ich zurückgekommen bin, ja rot gold rot -'" (p. 102).

time into full blown mania, with possible elements of paranoia or feelings of persecution (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007).<sup>47</sup> Jamison's (1995) autobiographical account describes the onset and course of her manic episodes as follows. She describes a hypomanic onset:

I was a senior in high school when I had my first attack of manic-depressive illness; once the siege began, I lost my mind rather rapidly. At first, everything seemed so easy. I raced about like a crazed weasel, bubbling with plans and enthusiasms, immersed in sports, and staying up all night, night after night, out with friends, reading everything that wasn't nailed down, filling manuscript books with poems and fragments of plays, and making expansive, completely unrealistic, plans for my future. The world was filled with pleasure and promise; I felt great. Not just great, I felt *really* great. I felt I could do anything, that no task was too difficult. My mind seemed clear, fabulously focused, and able to make intuitive mathematical leaps that had up to that point entirely eluded me. ... not only did everything make perfect sense, but it all began to fit into a marvelous kind of cosmic relatedness. (Jamison, 1995, pp. 36–37)

In the manic phase that follows, everything is going great, better than ever even, until it all becomes too much to bear:

My thoughts were so fast that I couldn't remember the beginning of a sentence halfway through. Fragments of ideas, images, sentences raced around and around in my mind like the tigers in a children's story. Finally, like those tigers, they became meaningless melted pools. Nothing once familiar to me was familiar. I wanted desperately to slow down but could not. Nothing helped—not running around a parking lot for hours on end or swimming for miles. My energy level was untouched by anything I did. Sex became too intense for pleasure, and during it I would feel my mind encased by black lines of light that were terrifying to me. My delusions centered on the slow painful deaths of all the green plants in the world—vine by vine, stem by stem, leaf by leaf they died and I could do nothing to save them. Their screams were cacophonous. Increasingly, all of my images were black and decaying. (Jamison, 1995, pp. 82–83)

The manic phase is usually followed by a deep depression:

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<sup>47</sup> Although there is great clinical variation in the speed and periodicity of these stages, the transition between states can happen almost instantly or very gradually, and can occur multiple times or only once (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007).

Now, all of a sudden, my mind had turned on me. ... It was incapable of concentrated thought and turned time and again to the subject of death: I was going to die, what difference did anything make? Life's run was only a short and meaningless one, why live? I was totally exhausted and could scarcely pull myself out of bed in the mornings. It took me twice as long to walk anywhere as it ordinarily did, and I wore the same clothes over and over again, as it was otherwise too much of an effort to make a decision about what to put on. ... Each day I awoke deeply tired. ... I dragged exhausted mind and body around a local cemetery, ruminating about how long each of its inhabitants had lived before the final moment. I sat on the graves writing long, dreary, morbid poems, convinced that my brain and body were rotting, that everyone knew and no one would say. (Jamison, 1995, p. 38)

In our reading, these descriptions can as accurately be characterized as an acceleration of language up to the point of breaking down, than as merely an elevation of mood or an increase in activity.<sup>48</sup> This point will be developed further in the next section.

### 3. A Lacanian View on Mania

Although manic depression, and later bipolar disorder, has remained an important psychiatric diagnostic category, it has never received much attention from psychoanalysis. Mania as a clinical phenomenon is addressed in Freud's thinking about melancholia (Girard & Picco, 2015).<sup>49</sup> When Lacan mentions mania he does so without situating it in a specific clinical category (Leader, 2015).

Since a Lacanian understanding of mania solves some of the impasses of a Freudian approach, we first discuss Freud's understanding of mania. But we keep our discussion brief since Lacan's remarks on mania do not take Freud's attempts at integrating mania into his metapsychology as a point of departure.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Exemplified in the following phrases from the quoted passages: "reading everything that wasn't nailed down, filling manuscript books with poems and fragments of plays" (Jamison, 1995, p. 36), "my thoughts were so fast that I couldn't remember the beginning of a sentence halfway through. Fragments of ideas, images, sentences raced around and around in my mind" (p. 82).

<sup>49</sup> Kraepelin similarly struggled with the relation of melancholia to manic depression, initially he included melancholia in his broad integrated category of manic-depressive insanity (Kraepelin, 1921), a view he later came to question (Trede et al., 2005).

<sup>50</sup> More detailed accounts of Freud's conceptualization of melancholia and mania throughout his oeuvre can be found in Assoun (2010) and Rabaey (2021).

### 3.1. Freud on Mania

#### *Freud's Theorizing on Melancholia and Mania*

Freud only briefly touched on the subject of mania, always within the context of melancholia (Girard & Picco, 2015). The main texts where Freud discusses melancholia and mania are *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1917), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud, 1921) and, to a lesser extent, *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1923).

Freud is always very tentative and careful when discussing mania, his remarks are full of disqualifiers such as stating that his observations are “limited to a small number of cases” (Freud, 1917, p. 243), and his explanations “drop all claim to general validity” (p. 243). He concludes a passage on mania with “thus the state of things is somewhat obscure” (Freud, 1921, p. 133) and states about his reasoning that it “certainly sounds plausible, but in the first place it is too indefinite, and, secondly, it gives rise to more new problems and doubts than we can answer” (Freud, 1917, p. 255). The last mention in his oeuvre of melancholia and mania concludes with the statement that these conditions are “rich in unsolved riddles!” (Freud, 1933, p. 61). Freud is also candid about his limited experience with patients suffering from melancholia and mania.<sup>51</sup>

We summarize Freud's reasoning on melancholia in *Mourning and Melancholia*. Freud (1917) states that, analogous to the work of mourning, the melancholic state is a consequence of withdrawing object-libido from a lost object. Only in melancholia, it is not clear what this lost object is. At the same time, the ego identifies with this lost object, and it is this identification of the ego with the lost object that Freud refers to with the famous formula “the

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<sup>51</sup> Freud had, as a psychoanalyst in private practice, limited experience with the phenomenon of mania (Vieira, 1993), although it was not completely unfamiliar to him (Augusta, 2021). In *On psychotherapy* Freud (1905) briefly mentions “once making an attempt at psychotherapy with a woman who had passed the greater part of her life in a state alternating between mania and melancholia” (p. 265). In Freud's (1918) case study of ‘the Wolf Man’ he states that “the patient spent a long time in German sanatoria, and was at that period classified in the most authoritative quarters as a case of ‘manic-depressive insanity’” (p. 4), a diagnosis Freud does not agree with—he follows with a remark on clinical psychiatry's labeling of patients with “multifarious and shifting diagnoses” (p. 4). The most well-known case of manic depression Freud treated is that of the young homosexual man J.v.T., who was in treatment with Freud from 1907 to 1911. In 1909, Freud referred him to Binswanger's Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen due to the risk of suicide. There were subsequent admissions in 1910 and 1911 as well (May, 2018). The case of J.v.T. is sporadically and briefly mentioned in the correspondence between Freud and Binswanger, where Freud introduces him in the referral letter as a respected intellectual in Vienna (Fichtner, 2003). These exchanges are limited to descriptions of the progression of the patient's condition and arrangements for admission and discharge, there are no theoretical considerations on melancholia, mania, or manic-depressive illness and the patient does not appear in Freud's published writings.



shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (p. 249). Subsequently, the ego undergoes reproaches directed at the object, which manifest as self-reproaches in melancholia. In line with this reasoning, mania is thought of as a triumph over the melancholic state. What exactly is being triumphed over (the loss of the object, the grief over the loss, or the object itself) is not clear, but it is a victory nonetheless: where the ego is defeated in melancholia, it triumphs in mania.

Freud (1921) further discusses the problem of mania in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. He states that the significance of the distinction between the ego and the ego-ideal is crucial for the psychology of the psychoses. Here he picks up the thread from *Mourning and Melancholia*. Whereas it was not yet clear for Freud then what the ego was triumphing over, he now answers that it is triumphing over the ego-ideal. Freud (1921) argues that the psychic differentiation that follows the original self-sufficient narcissism, such as the separation of the ego-ideal and the ego, cannot be borne for long and has to be undone from time to time. He refers to cultural practices where restrictions are temporarily lifted, such as festivals, Saturnalia, and the carnival, all examples of “excesses provided by law” (p. 131) that owe their cheerful character to the release they bring from limitations and prohibitions. The intrapsychic version of this is the withdrawal of the commands of the ego-ideal. The ego-ideal:

comprises the sum of all the limitations in which the ego has to acquiesce, and for that reason the abrogation of the ideal would necessarily be a magnificent festival for the ego, which might then once again feel satisfied with itself. There is always a feeling of triumph when something in the ego coincides with the ego-ideal. (p. 131)

Freud (1921) now understands mania as follows:

in cases of mania the ego and the ego-ideal have fused together, so that the person, in a mood of triumph and self-satisfaction, disturbed by no self-criticism, can enjoy the abolition of his inhibitions, his feelings of consideration for others, and his self-reproaches. (p. 132)

Freud’s (1921) views on melancholia here are in line with the ideas presented in *Mourning and Melancholia*. The reproachful part is specified here as the ego-ideal, the evaluative and repressive agency formed throughout development. Following this, Freud can also specify what is triumphed over in mania: the same ego-ideal. Mania is here a resistance of the ego

against the ego-ideal. As an explanatory mechanism for mania, Freud proposes that the commands and prohibitions of the ego-ideal are withdrawn and that the ego temporarily merges with the ego-ideal, resulting in the manic feeling of triumph and disinhibition.

In later discussions, such as in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1923) revisits melancholia in light of the death drive, although he does not extend this reasoning to his conception of mania. The main development in *The Ego and the Id* is that the evaluating instance, now called the superego, changes in nature: it becomes a more complex agency rooted in the drives of the Id. Freud now attributes melancholic self-reproaches to the ruthless operation of the death drive. Freud (1923) describes melancholia as follows:

What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct, and in fact it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death, if the latter does not fend off its tyrant in time by the change round into mania. (p. 53)

This leads to a conception of melancholia that is much more aggressive, irrational and destructive than previously elaborated. Mania is briefly mentioned merely as a defense against this tyranny of the superego.

### ***Critical Reviews of Freud's Understanding of Mania***

As Soler (2002) notes, *Mourning and Melancholia* raises the clinical question of mania but provides few answers. Regardless of the theoretical elegance and metapsychological coherence of Freud's reasoning on melancholia and mania, the main point of critique, from a Lacanian perspective, is that the notion of *triumph* understates the experience of mania (Melman, 2011; Vertzman & Coelho, 2019). While the description of mania as a cheerful celebration of disinhibition and liberation from constraints may apply to the initial hypomanic phase of a manic state, Freud cannot account for the overwhelming, destructive power of a full-blown manic episode (Soler, 2002).<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, Czermak (1998/2012) takes issue with Freud's description of mania as a "magnificent festival for the ego" (Freud, 1917, p. 131) or as an experience of triumph, such as in "the triumph of a manic state of mind" (Freud, 1921, p. 258). Czermak (1998/2012) states it is not the subject triumphing or feasting; there is nothing ludic for the subject. The

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<sup>52</sup> From a contrasting point of view, Assoun (2010) considers the current understandings of mania within bipolar disorder as guilty of viewing the manic as a pleasure seeking libertine; and he pleads for a return to Freud's attempt at understanding the psychological mechanism of mania.

subject is not playing, but rather is the plaything of the Other, of language, and is delivered to the feast of the Other.<sup>53</sup> According to Brémaud (2017), a Lacanian understanding of mania starts from the experience of mania as one of being helplessly delivered to and overwhelmed by mania.

Gillibert (1978) posits that Freud limits himself to a melancholic explanation of mania—mania is a triumph over melancholia—without fully developing a theory of mania. Girard & Picco (2015) argue that Freud treated mania in a stepmotherly fashion, in the shadow of his thinking about melancholia. According to Leader (2015), manic depression has its own specificity and should not simply be understood within a reasoning on melancholia. Vertzman & Coelho (2019) agree that mania cannot be fully understood within the logic of melancholia, and aspects of mania are ignored within psychoanalysis. The lack of interest in mania from psychoanalysis, according to these authors, leads to stereotypical views, of which the equation between mania and happiness is just one example. Indeed, it is striking how Freud does not take into account the madness and frenzy of mania. Kalita (2021) concludes that “Freud’s formulations about mania seem to have failed the test of time” (p. 149).

Elsewhere we concluded a review of Freud’s theorizing on mania as follows: while mania is recurrently addressed in almost every theoretical turn in Freud’s oeuvre, it remains primarily a theoretical concern rather than a clinical one and mania consistently highlights the limits of his theory (Rabaey, 2021). According to Soler (2002), Freud’s understanding of mania leads to an impasse. She qualifies Freud’s neglect to update his views on mania with his new conception of the death drive, as he did for melancholia, a failure.

Nevertheless, in Soler’s (2002) perspective, despite Freud’s reasoning on mania leading to an impasse, he did introduce a fruitful line of reasoning by considering the affect of mania not as a primary phenomenon but as an effect, as the consequence of a preceding cause, namely one of the vicissitudes of the libido. As Assoun (2010) discusses, the value of Freud’s approach to mania lies in the shift from focusing on mood to taking the drives into consideration. Mood is considered as nothing more than a drive thermometer, a consequence

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<sup>53</sup> Soler (2002) similarly reproaches Ey of taking mania too lightly and considering it too festive when he describes mania as playing and enjoying [*“jouer et jouir”*] (Ey, 1954, p. 93) or as an unleashing and a frenzied surge of unrestrained or orgiastic desires [*“un déchainement et un élan endiable des désirs effrenés ou orgiaques”*] (Ey et al., 2010, p. 163). She states the manic is not a player nor a sensualist [*“le maniaque n’est ni un joueur, ni un jouisseur”*] (Soler, 2002, p. 87).

of the vicissitudes of the libido. In Freud's (1917) view, mood is not a cause but rather an element to be explained:

The popular view likes to assume that a person in a manic state of this kind finds such delight in movement and action because he is so 'cheerful.' This false connection must of course be put right. The fact is that the economic condition in the subject's mind referred to above has been fulfilled, and this is the reason why he is in such high spirits on the one hand and so uninhibited in action on the other. (p. 254)

In Freud's (1917) reasoning, one does not become active and enterprising because one is in a good mood; rather, it's because psychic energy is released, leading to a cheerful mood and unrestrained actions. Freud's approach to mania attempts to sketch the metapsychological portrait of mania by situating it in the dialectic between ego and object. It is precisely this dialectic, this intrapsychic consideration, that the notion of bipolar mood disorders, with its one-sided emphasis on mood, tends to avoid (Assoun, 2010).

### ***Post-Freudian Developments***

In an overview of Freudian and post-Freudian attempts to situate mania into Freudian metapsychology, Ventimiglia (2018) states that mania is "a thorny, still rather uncertain topic in Freud's account of the affective disorders" (p. 1). Girard & Picco (2015) point out the unclear status of mania in Freudian and post-Freudian thought with varying terms ranging from the manic *moment*, the manic *position*, manic *recovery*, manic *movement*, to manic *defense*. Various authors note the contrast between the abundant Freudian literature on melancholia and the relative marginalization of mania (Assoun, 2010; Lambotte, 2003; Laurent, 1988; Vertzman & Coelho, 2019).<sup>54</sup>

According to Soler (2002), Freud's impasses carried over into the theoretical developments of later psychoanalysts who do not search for a structural explanation of the phenomena of mania, but limit themselves to explanations that consider mania as uninhibited pleasure, rather than being swept away by overwhelming drives.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> According to Cohen et al. (1954): "The manic aspect of the manic-depressive psychosis has on the whole elicited less attention on the part of psychoanalysts than has the depressed aspect, probably because the manic patient does not so frequently seek therapeutic help" (p. 109).

<sup>55</sup> In Soler's (2002) view it is only with Lacan's understanding of the clinical structure of psychosis and the conceptualization of mania as one of the possible effects of foreclosure that mania can be made sense of (see also Leader, 2013).

Since our Lacanian framework has little in common with—and often even diametrically opposes other post-Freudian developments (Fink, 2004)—we will not discuss the divergent theoretical standpoints on mania proposed by authors such as Abraham, Fenichel, Rado, Klein, Deutsch, Lewin, Jacobson, and Kohut.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.2. A Lacanian Framework: The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real

In this section, as a conceptual beacon to hold on to throughout our journey, we introduce Lacan's general framework of the *imaginary*, the *symbolic*, and the *real*. In the next section, we will delve into Lacan's comments on mania, mention some Lacanian authors developing these comments, and take a closer look at Lacan's qualification of mania as the infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain.

Before we turn to Lacan's understanding of mania as a phenomenon of language, we explain Lacan's use of the concepts of the *imaginary*, the *symbolic*, and the *real*. Lacan uses these concepts throughout his oeuvre to designate distinct realms or modes of human experience. While his stance on the relative importance of each of these and the relationship between them evolves throughout his teaching, the realms themselves remain more or less stable. To summarize: the imaginary is the register of the ego-narrative and the body image; the symbolic is the register of language and the signifier; the real is the register of jouissance and corporeal drive energy. Throughout Lacan's oeuvre, there is a shift in emphasis from the imaginary in the thirties and the forties, to the symbolic in the fifties, to the real in the sixties and eventually to the knotting of the three registers in the seventies.

In Lacan's early work, he focuses on the imaginary realm of human experience, the register of the *imaginary*. During the 1930s, he developed the idea of the mirror stage, in which he theorized that identification with an image (a mirror image or the image of others) is a constitutive moment in identity formation. This process constitutes the body image, which would otherwise remain fragmented, and lays the groundwork for the ego-narrative. Imaginary identifications aim at creating a complete and consistent self-image. Lacan

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<sup>56</sup> For an overview of post-Freudian developments on mania, see: Etzersdorfer & Schell (2006), Jackson (1993), or Ventimiglia (2018). Goodwin & Jamison (2007) include a brief overview of some of the post-Freudian psychoanalytic understanding of mania and bipolar disorder. The review by Stefana et al. (2023) of the psychoanalytical literature on bipolar disorder illustrates just how diverse and divergent the different post-Freudian theoretical strands are. For an extensive review of German post-Freudian publications from 1915 to 1940, see Kipp & Stolzenburg (2000).

(1966/2006) referred to this as an act of misrecognition. At this stage, Lacan often highlighted the relevance of the image and the identification with other members of the species in the animal kingdom.

In the 1950s, the register of the *symbolic* gained prominence. Influenced by contemporary structuralist and linguist thought, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan (1966/2006) expanded upon the previous idea of the mirror stage, creating the double mirror model. Here, language complements, complicates and traverses the imaginary identification (Lacan, 1975b). The symbolic order refers to language, along with its organizing structure and law. In the double mirror model, language becomes the principal mirror in which we both see and misrecognize ourselves. Lacan stresses that understanding human experience requires acknowledging that subjective experience is founded on and structured by language (Lacan, 1978). For Lacan, the registers of the symbolic and the imaginary are intertwined and influence one another.

From the 1960s onwards, with a significant turning point in his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar in 1962–1963 (Lacan, 2004), Lacan began to give more importance to the register of the *real*. The real encompasses that which resists being captured by the image and escapes being circumscribed by the symbolic. It is the register of jouissance and bodily drive energy. Each turning point in Lacan's thought offers a new perspective on the unconscious. The accent on the imaginary focuses on imago's and identifications, the symbolic era defines the unconscious as structured like a language, emphasizing the workings of the signifier, while the accent on the real adds a dimension beyond meaning and sense, focusing on libidinous fixations.

Starting from the 1970s, Lacan considers all registers to be equally important and focuses his theorizing on how these registers are intertwined or *knotted*. He further complicates the distinction between the realms by assuming that language is also affected by the drive, that the symbolic is tainted by the real, a notion captured in the concept of *lalangue* or *llanguage* (Lacan, 1975a).

### 3.3. Lacan on Mania

In this section we list Lacan's comments on mania, mention some Lacanian authors developing these comments and take a closer look at Lacan's qualification of mania as the

infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain. In the next section we review Lacan's concept of metonymy.

### ***Three Remarks on Mania***

As mentioned earlier, mania has received relatively little attention in psychoanalytic literature, and the same goes for Lacanian theorizing. Lacan himself devotes only a few remarks on mania. Fridman & Millas (1997) note how mania is conspicuously absent in Lacan's theorizing. Yet Laurent (in Miller, 1997) remarks how, akin to Freud, Lacan briefly revisits mania whenever his thought takes a theoretical turn.<sup>57</sup> Still, Fridman & Millas (1997) point out that Lacan's remarks on mania are often elliptical, with expressions as 'manic excitation,' 'what is called mania,' and 'as it is called in psychiatry,' suggesting a certain hesitancy about its relevance to psychoanalysis.

In Lacan's oeuvre, we encounter only three references to mania.<sup>58</sup> In *Seminar 10* Lacan describes (2004/2014) the manic subject as being delivered to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain:

Let's specify right away that what is at issue in mania is the non-function of *a* and not simply its misrecognition. No *a* comes to ballast the subject and this delivers him, in a way without any possibility of freedom, to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain (p. 336)<sup>59</sup>

We will discuss this quote and its interpretation extensively in the following sections. The second reference is found in *Television*, where Lacan (1974/1987), while discussing psychosis

<sup>57</sup> Even if "the brevity of Lacan's comments on mood disorders ... is matched only by that of Freud" (Laurent, 1988/2015, p. 145).

<sup>58</sup> Strictly speaking, there are a few more. For completionists, we mention them here, without discussing them further. There are a few early references to manic depression. In his doctoral dissertation Lacan (1932/1973) devotes a section to a discussion of the clinical relationship of paranoid psychosis with disorders of mood in manic-depressive psychosis: *Rapports cliniques et pathogéniques de la psychose paranoïaque avec les troubles de l'humeur de la psychose maniaco-dépressive* (pp. 108–114). In *Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu*, a text from 1938, Lacan (2001) mentions certain affective, so-called cyclothymic disorders which he then assumes to be regulated by a biological rhythm, while nevertheless being related to the phenomena of defeat and triumph in narcissism. On several occasions Lacan uses terms like *transitory hypomania*, *quasi-manic*, *hypomanic*, and *rather manic-depressive* while discussing the matter of the end of an analytic cure and criticizing the notion that this should result in an identification with the analyst (See Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 357; 1998/2017a, p. 464; 2001, p. 253, p. 487). Remarkably, Lacan was not the first to link the transference relationship to manic states (see Coriat, 1939).

<sup>59</sup> "Dans la manie, précisons tout de suite que c'est la non-fonction de *a* qui est en cause, et non pas simplement sa méconnaissance. Le sujet n'y est lésé par aucun *a*, ce qui le livre, quelquefois sans aucune possibilité de liberté, à la métonymie pure, infinie et ludique, de la chaîne signifiante" (Lacan, 2004, p. 388).

as a rejection of the unconscious, links manic excitation to the return to the real of that which was rejected, language:

And if ever this weakness, as reject of the unconscious, ends in psychosis, there follows the return to the real of that which is rejected, that is, language; it is the manic excitation through which such a return becomes fatal. (p. 26)<sup>60</sup>

We refer to this comment in Chapters 3 and 5. In *Seminar 23*, Lacan (2005/2016) discusses James Joyce's writing and compares Joyce's language treatment in *Finnegans Wake* to what happens to language in mania: "Mania is indeed what Joyce's last work looks like ... namely *Finnegans Wake*" (p. 4). This is discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

To preview our discussions of these citations: Lacan's comment in *Seminar 10* situates mania in the derailing of the signifying chain, the comments in *Television* and *Seminar 23* add the jouissance—or the real—of language, *llanguage*.

In our view, although Lacan only touches upon the phenomenon of mania on a few occasions, it is remarkable how his seemingly scattered and scarcely elaborated comments on mania all consider mania as a phenomenon of language rather than, for example, as a phenomenon of mood or as a thought disorder.<sup>61</sup> In the quoted references, Lacan describes the manic individual as being delivered to the "metonymy of the signifying chain," qualifies manic excitation as an instance of "the return to the real of ... language," and compares mania to the near destruction of the English language that Joyce practices in *Finnegans Wake*. To be even more specific, not only do all Lacan's remarks on mania focus on language, and seem to consider mania as a phenomenon taking place in or happening to language, as Vanclooster (2001) remarks, each of Lacan's references to mania always specifically refers to the classic psychiatric symptom of *flight of ideas*.

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<sup>60</sup> "Et ce qui s'ensuit pour peu que cette lâcheté, d'être rejet de l'inconscient, aille à la psychose, c'est le retour dans le réel de ce qui est rejeté, du langage; c'est l'excitation maniaque par quoi ce retour se fait mortel" (Lacan, 1974, p. 39).

<sup>61</sup> While all Lacan's comments on mania refer to language, we could also approach the comment in *Television* about "manic excitation" as pointing to the bodily manifestation of jouissance and relate it to mania's core symptom of "abnormally and persistently increased goal-directed activity or energy" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124).



***Mania in Lacania***

Although mania or manic depression has not been prominent in Lacanian theorizing, a few authors have elaborated on Lacan's initial remarks. Before we delve into our own elaboration of Lacan's view of mania, we will briefly mention some of the relevant works and authors who have developed this Lacanian work on mania. These authors will serve as conversation partners throughout the dissertation.<sup>62</sup> This is not a complete overview; we will specifically focus our attention on those authors who emphasize the linguistic aspects of mania and comment on or apply Lacan's comments regarding mania.

Some notable works include: an often cited article by Laurent (1988/2015) which discusses mania in the context of melancholia; Soler's chapter on mania (2002) which offers an overview and critique of Freud's thought on mania and discusses a Lacanian view of mania starting from Lacan's *Television*; André's (1993) extended case study and theoretical discussion in *L'imposture perverse*; Czermak's (1998/2012) discussion of mania in his study on psychosis; Brémaud's (2017) historical overview of the understanding of mania in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century French psychiatric thought followed by a concise review of Lacan's understanding of mania; Leader's (2015) discussion on the specificity of manic-depressive psychosis. Furthermore, we'd like to point to a discussion on the manic version of Lacan's notion death of the subject by Fridman & Millas (1997); Cottet's (2008) psychoanalytical reading of a case of Binswanger<sup>63</sup> and the ensuing discussion in Miller (2008), and some interesting works by Sauvagnat (1997, 1999, 2000).

We should also mention the work of Arce Ross (2009), an extended study on manic depression and an attempt at building a novel theory of manic depression within Lacan's theory on psychosis; and Leader's (2013) critical discussion of the bipolar diagnosis and his extended plea for considering the sense and meaning of manic symptoms and the logic behind the shift between mood states.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> We thank Wim Galle and Lieven Jonckheere for suggesting some of these.

<sup>63</sup> The case of Olga Blum, from Binswanger (1960/1987), a series of phenomenological case studies on melancholia and mania.

<sup>64</sup> Both authors argue for a theoretical elaboration of manic depression, but do so in a way that is isolated from other developments, which makes their views hard to integrate or align with those of the others discussed. Arce Ross's (2009) frequent use of original concepts such as *manic foreclosure*, *white factors*, and *delusion of death* make him hard to converse with. Leader (2013) sometimes leans towards a psychologizing or neuroticizing interpretation of manic depression.

Some notable case studies are: Assoun's (2010) study of Ferdinand Cheval, a French mailman and outsider-artist; Vanheule's (2019) discussion of the case of Daniel Johnston; Lippi's (2019) musical account of mania, conceptualizing the treatment as the installation of a rhythm; Christaki-Gadbin's (2003) study discussing discourse and time and describing treatment as devising ways to punctuate the uninterrupted manic flow of words by introducing the element of rhythm; Jonckheere's (2003) report on a case of manic depression in private psychoanalytic practice; and Galle's (2023) reflections on a case in an institutional setting.

Several of these Lacanian authors develop the notion of mania as impacting the subject through the workings of the signifying chain (André, 1993; Brémaud, 2017; Christaki-Gadbin, 2003; Czermak, 1998/2012; Lippi, 2019; Soler, 2002).

### ***The Ludic Metonymy of the Signifying Chain***

As a starting point for elaborating a Lacanian view of mania, we discuss Lacan's remark on mania in his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Anxiety*, which is one of the very few remarks Lacan makes about mania directly (as opposed to referring to 'manic excitation,' 'what is called mania,' etc.). Lacan (2004/2014) states:

Let's specify right away that what is at issue in mania is the non-function of *a* and not simply its misrecognition. No *a* comes to ballast the subject and this delivers him, in a way without any possibility of freedom, to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain. (p. 336)<sup>65</sup>

In this short remark, Lacan (2004/2014) densely encapsulates an elaborate perspective on language and subjectivity and a theory regarding their disruption in mania. To put it briefly, in mania, language derails and as a consequence the subject finds itself at the mercy of this derailing language, eventually undermining the experience of subjectivity itself.

To explain the notion of 'consequence' here, a brief remark on Lacan's understanding of the relationship between language and subject is necessary. According to Lacan (1966/2006), subjectivity is a consequence, an effect of using language. For Lacan, subjectivity is always a

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<sup>65</sup> In the French original: "Dans la manie, précisons tout de suite que c'est la non-fonction de *a* qui est en cause, et non pas simplement sa méconnaissance. Le sujet n'y est lesté par aucun *a*, ce qui le livre, quelquefois sans aucune possibilité de liberté, à la métonymie pure, infinie et ludique, de la chaîne signifiante" (Lacan, 2004, p. 388). There's a remarkable omission in the translation of the word 'quelquefois,' as a qualifier for 'sans aucune possibilité de liberté,' so it should actually be 'at times without any possibility of freedom' or 'sometimes without any possibility of freedom.'

phenomenon within and of language. It is in language that one constitutes oneself as a subject. Subjectivity, in Lacan's view, is an effect of discourse and speech and is to be understood as an ongoing process, as always arising anew. For Lacan, language is not merely an instrument for communication; it is rather an almost autonomous force, an independent realm that operates through us and that has as effect the simultaneous creation of meaning and of subjectivity. Lacan (1975a) also describes language as parasitic. It is not just something we employ; it is something that uses us. In common thought, we tend to assume that a disturbed subject produces disturbed language: a manic subject produces manic language. However, Lacanian theory on subjectivity reverses this logic. Thus, in this line of reasoning, peculiarities in subjective experience can be considered as a consequence of peculiarities at the level of language.<sup>66</sup>

In this chapter we will unpack the meaning and implications of this remark in a theoretical way, by relating it to Lacan's views on the relation between language and the subject.<sup>67</sup> We will first elaborate Lacan's understanding of metonymy, in order to understand Lacan's qualification of manic language as *the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain* at the mercy of which the manic subject finds itself *without any possibility of freedom*. Next we discuss how Lacan relates metonymy to the object *a* and explore how the non-functioning of the object *a* in mania is responsible for the metonymic derailment of the signifying chain. We can then come to understand Lacan's view of mania as an uncoupling of the object *a* and the signifying chain, with consequences for both language and jouissance. Language—no longer weighed down by the object *a*—takes off in a metonymic derailment; and jouissance—no longer moored or anchored by language—erupts in manic excitation and agitation.

Before delving into metonymy, it is important to clarify that Lacan's description of *being delivered to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain* serves as his way of

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<sup>66</sup> In this sense Lacan's understanding often diametrically opposes other explanations. For example Fuchs (2014) sees the manic 'flight of ideas' as a consequence of the centrifugal dispersion of the lived body and the manic desynchronization. In a Lacanian understanding the 'flight of ideas' would be considered the cause instead of the consequence.

<sup>67</sup> Each of the following chapters can be viewed as exploring the implications of this point of view from a different angle. In Chapter 2 we explore the consequence of the experience of mania on the sense of identity following a manic episode and some narrative recovery strategies. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the experience of language derailing and the particular strategies of recovery and of treating language employed by writers J.M.H. Berckmans and Thomas Melle. In Chapter 5 we explore the implications of manic language—namely, that it is possible for language to derail in this way—for Lacan's views on language itself.

describing the *flight of ideas* (see also: Vanclooster, 2001). Alongside an exalted mood and pressure of activity, flight of ideas is one of mania's primary symptoms (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007). In the DSM-5, flight of ideas is defined as follows: "A nearly continuous flow of accelerated speech with abrupt changes from topic to topic that are usually based on understandable associations, distracting stimuli, or plays on words. When the condition is severe, speech may be disorganized and incoherent" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 821). The notion of flight of ideas suggests a thought process, but it is primarily described as a continuous and unstoppable flow of words rather than an abundance of ideas. It points to a process of language rather than one of thought.<sup>68</sup> We can view flight of ideas as a process related to the signifier, driven by the material aspects of language such as sound, rhyme, clang-associations, stock combinations of words, etc., rather than by the sequencing of ideas or the generation of meaning. Within Lacanian terms, we propose to call it *flight of signifiers*. What exactly occurs at the level of the signifier in this flight is what Lacan describes with the expression *the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain*.

### 3.4. Metonymy

Before we further unpack Lacan's qualification of mania as being delivered to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain, we first discuss the concept of metonymy, one of the major concepts in Lacan's understanding of mania, in this section.

#### *Metonymy in Rhetoric*

In classical rhetoric, metonymy is considered a figure of speech. The term *metonymy* comes from the Greek term *metonymia*, meaning *change of name*. Wachowski (2019) offers a broad definition: it's a figure of speech where the name of something is substituted for that of another thing that is related. Other definitions include: "using one entity to refer to another that is related to it" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 36), or: "a figure in which one word is substituted for another on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation" (Martin, 1993, p. 783). An example is *the trains are on strike* where *trains* metonymically refers to *the drivers of the trains who are on strike* (Littlemore, 2015) or *reading Lacan* for *reading works written (or spoken in this case) by Lacan*. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) explain how metonymy

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<sup>68</sup> This argument is expanded on and discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

primarily serves a referential function, “it allows us to use one entity to stand for another” (p. 37).

Cognitive linguists broaden this by considering metonymy as a cognitive phenomenon instead of a pure linguistic one, as a way of thinking rather than a figure of speech. Metonymy is then defined as “a cognitive and linguistic process whereby one thing is used to refer to something else, to which it is closely related in some way” (Littlemore, 2015, p. 5). Littlemore (2015) considers metonymy as hidden shortcuts in language and discusses metonymic thinking as a method for condensing large amounts of information.

Similar to metaphor, metonymy involves the substitution of words. The classic distinction between metonymy and metaphor is based on the relatedness between the two elements. The difference with metaphor is generally considered to be that metonymy happens between related elements, such as: trains and drivers, whereas metaphor involves a comparison between two unrelated entities, such as ‘my heart is a chapel,’ or ‘all the world’s a stage.’

Metaphor is typically based on similarity—my heart resembles a chapel because for both goes that the Lord is always there; or the world is similar to a stage because all the men and women are merely players. In contrast, metonymy is based on contiguity, proximity, the fact of being adjacent or neighboring—train drivers are often near trains. Forsyth (2013) summarizes: “metaphor is when two things are connected because they are similar, metonymy is when two things are connected because they are really physically connected” (p. 135). A metaphor “usually involves some sort of comparison between two unrelated entities” (Littlemore, 2015, p. 5) whereas metonymy happens between related entities. Although the matter of relatedness is not as unambiguous, and neither is the dividing line between metaphor and metonymy.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) attempt to address the confusion by differentiating metonymy as happening within one domain versus metaphor as spanning over two domains. In metaphor, concepts from one domain reference the immediate subject matter in another domain. Dirven (2003) states that metonymy “can associate all kinds of elements which have a ‘natural’ link with each other” (p. 82), while metaphor always requires a shift to a figurative meaning.

In classic rhetoric, metaphor is a trope based on analogy, where one word is used in place of another when the two signifieds resemble each other, while in metonymy, substitutions are

based on contiguity: as in when the part is used for the whole, or the container for the contained (Raser, 2011).

### ***Jakobson's Metonymy***

The way Lacan employs metonymy goes beyond its use as a figure of speech or a mode of thinking. To grasp Lacan's utilization of metonymy, we must turn to Jakobson. As Miller (2104) explains, Lacan encountered the notions of metaphor and metonymy through Jakobson's 1956 article *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances* and immediately applied these concepts to his developing theory of subjectivity grounded in speech and language. Lacan (1981/1993) first discussed the concepts of metaphor and metonymy in his seminar on the psychoses, where he developed the notion of the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father. In his subsequent two seminars, he would develop the notion of desire as metonymy (Lacan, 1998/2017a; 1994/2020).

Before we discuss Lacan's particular twist to Jakobson's concepts<sup>69</sup>, we should first examine Jakobson's particular twist to these concepts. Jakobson's use of the terms metaphor and metonymy is already a significant departure from its use in classical rhetoric (Raser, 2011). Jakobson (1956/1987) deserves credit for broadening the scope of metaphor and metonymy, extending them from mere figures of speech to general principles of organization of symbolic elements.<sup>70</sup>

Jakobson (1956/1987) builds upon de Saussure's idea that speech is a matter of selection and combination of linguistic units. He observes that either of these capacities (for combination or selection) can be affected independently of one another and result in a specific

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<sup>69</sup> Most commentators remark how Lacan immediately shifts or transforms the linguistic concepts he adopts (e.g., Grigg, 2008; Kress-Rosen, 1981; Laurent, 2013). Kress-Rosen (1981) remarks how Lacan adopts the conceptual apparatus of linguistics, while at the same time using them in a way incompatible with their linguistic definitions. Nancy & Lacoue-Labarthe (1992) state about Lacan's adoption of Jakobson's metaphor and metonymy that in Lacan's use they lost "their characteristics as complementary 'aspects' of language (whose respective preponderance may vary, according to literary genre, for example) and have become two autonomous entities" (p. 115). Lemaire (1977) remarks that Lacan's definitions of these are wider and looser. Matheson (2020) remarks that Lacan's understanding of metaphor and metonymy doesn't have much to do with their use in rhetoric because for Lacan these describe the grammar of the unconscious rather than its rhetoric. Lacan later distances himself explicitly from linguistics and puts forward the term *linguisterie* (Lacan, 1975a, p. 20), which can be translated as *linguistricks* (Lacan, 1975/1998, p. 15) or as *linguistrickery* or *linguisteria* (Nobus, 2004, p. 198). In *Radiophonie* Lacan (2001) talks about *Lacanian* metaphor and metonymy and distinguishes linguistic metonymy from psychoanalytic metonymy.

<sup>70</sup> Dirven (2003) remarks that Jakobson's "epoch-making short paper ... triggered virtually a whole structuralist school of its own in French literary criticism and in anthropology" (p. 76) but is hardly referenced in linguistic discussions of metaphor and metonymy.

type of aphasia. When lexical choice (selection) is impaired, the aphasic individual often uses a word related by contiguity to the intended word. Conversely, when the capacity for connecting (combination) lexical terms is impaired, the aphasic individual often proceeds through similarity. Jakobson then links these fundamental operations to two figures of speech: metonymy (based on contiguity) and metaphor (based on similarity). These figures of speech become prominent or impossible, depending on the particular type of aphasia.

For Jakobson (1956/1987), metaphor and metonymy are two semantic lines along which a discourse can develop, two styles of verbal behavior, two complementary principles with which words can be connected in discourse. Words can be connected metaphorically, based on similarity, or metonymically, based on contiguity. In speech the processes of metaphor and metonymy are operative at the same time, but one of them can be more prominent, the preference revealing the influence of a cultural pattern, personal style, and verbal predilections and preferences. Jakobson further expands the scope of metaphor and metonymy from figures of speech to two general principles along which symbolic systems can function and considers this dichotomy “to be of primal significance and consequence for all verbal behavior and for human behavior in general” (p. 112). He calls this the “bipolar structure of language (or other semiotic systems)” (p. 111). For Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy are metalinguistic operations that are at work in any symbolic process: painting, styles of cinema (these can be more metonymic or metaphoric), literature (he associates poetry with metaphoric processes, and realism with a predominance of metonymy), dreams, magic rites, etc.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Metonymy in L'instance de la Lettre***

The main text where Lacan (1966/2006) discusses his particular understanding of metaphor and metonymy is *L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis*

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<sup>71</sup> For Jakobson (1956/1987), romanticism and poetry in general are closely linked with metaphor, while realism and prose in general are intimately connected to metonymy and forwarded essentially by contiguity. He states: “it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so-called Realist trend. ... Following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time” (p. 111). We return to this in Chapter 4, Section 3.7 when discussing Thomas Melle’s *new realism*.

Freud<sup>72</sup> from 1957<sup>73</sup> where he adopts and transforms Jakobson's notions of metaphor and metonymy and relates them to Freud's concepts of condensation and displacement.<sup>74</sup> For Lacan the signifier precedes signification, and the signifier operates in a realm of its own, independent of the signified. Although crediting Saussure for what Lacan calls the algorithm of "signifier over signified" (p. 415), Lacan's formula is actually an overturning of de Saussure's notion of the sign.<sup>75</sup> Lacan (1966/2006) opposes "the illusion that the signifier serves [*répond à*] the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to

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<sup>72</sup> The title presents some challenges for translating and understanding, more specifically how to translate *instance* and what is meant by *la lettre*. The French *instance* has been variously translated as *insistence* (by Miel in Lacan, 1957/1966b), *agency* (by Sheridan in Lacan, 1966/1989), and *instance* (by Fink in Lacan, 1966/2006), each of these convey some relevant aspect of Lacan's use of *instance*. *Agency* suggests the active nature of the letter, *insistence* conveys the autonomous quality of this agency (Muller & Richardson, 1982). *Instance* is also Lacan's equivalent for Freud's *Instanz*, translated in the *Standard Edition* as *agency* (and referring to the agencies of the id, ego, and superego) (Sheridan, in Lacan, 1966/1989). *L'instance* also means *entreaty*, *solicitation*, *urgency*, *earnestness* (Muller & Richardson, 1982) and contains the idea of an *acting upon* (Sheridan, in Lacan, 1966/1989). Fink (in Lacan, 1966/2006) explains "*instance* also implies a power or authority (as when we speak of a Court of the First Instance), and an *insistent*, urgent force, activity, or intervention" (p. 761), further, it "can take on virtually all of the meanings of *instance* in English (urgent or earnest solicitation, entreaty or instigation, insistence, lawsuit or prosecution, argument, example or case, and exception); in addition, it can mean authority as well as agency" (p. 807). Lacan (2017b) himself later explained that for him "instance resonates both at the level of judicature and at the level of insistence, where it brings to the surface the modulus that I defined as an instant, at the level of a certain logic" (p. 20). *La lettre* is translated easily enough as *the letter*; although the way Lacan uses 'the letter' here is not that self-evident. Lacan (1966/2006) defines, after quipping we need to take the letter *à la lettre*, literally, the letter as follows: "By *letter* I designate the material medium [*support*] that concrete discourse borrows from language" (p. 413). He later states the letter is "the essentially localized structure of the signifier" (p. 418). Fink (2004) attempts to clarify Lacan's use of *the letter*: "the definition of the letter thus provided in this paper seems to lie somewhere between the signifier and its microstructure (which is materialized or re-presented by type or printed characters without being equated with them), somewhere between the signifier and the position within a word that remains the same despite the variability of the phoneme that occupies that place at any particular moment in time" (p. 79). However, he concludes: "Lacan's 'definition' of the letter ... continues to insist in its opacity" (p. 79). Later, in his 18<sup>th</sup> seminar, Lacan (2007) formulates the distinction between the signifier and the letter as follows; he situates the letter as belonging to the dimension of the real and the signifier to the dimension of the symbolic and states that it is for good reason he wrote *L'instance de la lettre* and not *L'instance du signifiant*. Actually, later on in *L'instance* Lacan (1966/2006) does use the expression "the instance of the signifier" (p. 426).

<sup>73</sup> *L'instance de la lettre* is a landmark text midway between 1953's *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Lacan, 1966/2006)—where Lacan develops the notion of language as the symbolic order—and the 1972–73 seminar *Encore* (Lacan, 1975/1998)—where language, as *llanguage*, appears as a parasitic force of dysregulation. The notion of language in *L'instance* situates itself in between those two extremes, language is no longer a force of order, but is not yet a force of disorder driven by *jouissance*. Language's potential for disorder in *L'instance* comes from the mechanics of the signifying chain, here driven by metonymy and metaphor (Miller, 2011). Lacan's view of metonymy evolves with his view of language. When Lacan (1966/2006) mentions metonymy in *Function and Field* it is when he argues psychoanalysis should follow Freud's lead in considering the *text* of the dream and focusing on the rhetoric of its *telling*, where metonymy is one of the figures of semantic condensation. Illustrative for the later view is Lacan's (2001) remark in 1970's *Radiophonie*, Lacan mentions the passion of the signifier and discusses metonymy as operating from a metabolism of *jouissance*.

<sup>74</sup> Stewart (1985) comments that in *L'instance*, Lacan "compared, in an unusually coherent fashion, psychoanalytic concepts and linguistic principles" (p. 351).



justify [*repondre de*] its existence in terms of any signification whatsoever” (p. 416). The essential quality of the signifier is that its structure comes about through articulation. Lacan’s stance in *L’instance* is that it is only through articulation, through the selection and combination of signifiers in discourse<sup>76</sup> that meaning appears in a signifying chain.<sup>77</sup> Adopting Jakobson, Lacan views metonymy and metaphor as two aspects relevant to the creation of meaning in the signifying chain, he calls it the “signifying game of metonymy and metaphor” (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 430).<sup>78</sup>

Lacan discusses metonymy as “the properly signifying function” (p. 421) and refers to the famous example of *thirty sails on the horizon*, referring metonymically to *thirty ships*. For Lacan, the necessary connection between *sails* and *ships* is not to be found in reality but in the signifier: “the connection between ship and sail is nowhere other than in the signifier, and ... metonymy is based on the word-to-word nature of this connection” (p. 421). For Lacan, the principle of metonymy is responsible for the connection of one word to the following, for the flow of words, the forward motion of discourse, the chaining up of signifiers. This is the diachronic dimension of language. Lacan now understands discourse as a continuous metonymy (Martin, 1993).

<sup>75</sup> Lacan adopts de Saussure’s (1916/1974) notion of the arbitrariness of the connection between signifier and signified. The sign is defined by de Saussure (1916/1974) as follows: “the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (p. 66). He adds: “I propose to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]” (1916/1974, pp. 66–67). Lacan interprets this as pointing to the autonomy of the signifier in relation to the signified (Dor, 1998). According to Chandler (2017), in de Saussure’s view “the signifier and the signified can be distinguished for analytical purposes, Saussure defines them as wholly interdependent, neither pre-existing the other” (p. 13). In Chandler’s view structuralists’ embracing of the primacy of the signifier is not so much an adoption as a radical transformation of de Saussure’s model of the sign.

<sup>76</sup> Lacan adopts de Saussure’s notions here.

<sup>77</sup> Again a notion adopted from de Saussure. Lacan defines a signifying chain as: “links by which a necklace [*or a chain*] firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links” (p. 418). The original reads: “anneaux dont le collier se scelle dans l’anneau d’un autre collier fait d’anneaux” (Lacan, 1966a, p. 502).

<sup>78</sup> Lacan expands the use of Jakobson’s concepts of metaphor and metonymy even further into his conceptualization of psychoanalysis. Lacan also sees the operations of metonymy and metaphor on the signifier as the underlying mechanisms responsible for desire and the symptom. He states that metaphor is “the very mechanism by which symptoms, in the analytic sense, are determined” (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 431), and explains the workings of desire by the fact of being caught “in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else” (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 431). Lacan stresses that these statements are not figures of speech, the symptom is a metaphor because it is determined by the mechanism of metaphor at the level of the signifying chain, the same goes for desire and metonymy. He states “if the symptom is a metaphor, it is not a metaphor to say so, any more than it is to say that man’s desire is a metonymy. For the symptom is a metaphor, whether one likes to admit it or not, just as desire is a metonymy, even if man scoffs at the idea” (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 439).

The metonymic chaining up of signifiers, however, does not generate meaning; the independence of signifier and signified accounts for “an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 419)<sup>79</sup> or the “indefinite sliding of signification” (p. 681).<sup>80</sup> This means that meaning is in suspense and keeps slipping. This sliding is potentially infinite, Lacan later defines metonymy as: “the possibility of the infinite sliding of signifiers owing to [*sous*] the continuity of the signifying chain” (Lacan, 1991/2015, p. 169).<sup>81</sup>

The complementary principle at work in the generation of meaning is metaphor: the substitution of one signifier for another where one signifier “has replaced the other by taking the other’s place in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present by virtue of its (metonymic) connection to the rest of the chain” (p. 422). Lacan’s formula for metaphor is: “one word for another” (p. 422). Lacan discusses metaphor by introducing the well-known example of Victor Hugo: “his sheaf was neither miserly nor hateful” (p. 422), where *his sheaf* metaphorically refers to *Booz*, the protagonist of the poem.<sup>82</sup> Again, the connection between *his sheaf* and *Booz* is only to be found in the signifying chain, it refers back to him “because it replaces him in the signifying chain” (p. 422). Lacan (1966/2006) defines metaphoric structure as follows: “it is in the substitution of signifier for signifier that a signification effect is produced that is poetic or creative, in other words, that brings the signification in question into existence” (p. 429). He adds that metaphor is responsible for “the emergence of signification” (p. 429) and for “the passage of the signifier into the signified” (p. 429).

So while the operation of metonymy provides the word-to-word connection of signifiers, the diachronic dimension of language; metaphor provides the creative spark of meaning through the substitution of one word for another, this is the synchronic dimension of language.

<sup>79</sup> “Un glissement incessant du signifié sous le signifiant” (Lacan, 1966a, p. 502).

<sup>80</sup> This expression is from *The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious*. Lacan (1966a) calls it “le glissement autrement indéfini de la signification” (p. 805), Sheridan translates this as “the otherwise endless movement (glissement) of the signification” (Lacan, 1966/1989, p. 231) which Murphy (2014), interestingly, but erroneously, quotes as “an otherwise endless *metonymic* movement of signification” (p. 252).

<sup>81</sup> “La possibilité du glissement indéfini des signifiants sous la continuité de la chaîne signifiante” (Lacan, 1991, p. 206).

<sup>82</sup> According to the classic rhetoric views on metaphor and metonymy, this would be an example of metonymy (Raser, 2011), although Lacan (1966/2006) in a later reprisal of this example in *Metaphor of the Subject* says his sheaf does not metaphorically refer to Booz, but to the phallus, thus deeming it a metaphor (Grigg, 2008).

Lacan states that “metaphor is situated at the precise point at which meaning is produced in nonmeaning” (p. 423).<sup>83</sup>

For Lacan (1966/2006), metonymy is the primary operation on which metaphor intervenes, metonymy is the ongoing chaining up of signifiers, with the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier, while metaphor creates button ties, generates meaning and creates the dimension of the subject. The way metaphor intervenes in the ongoing metonymic chain of signifiers, is by creating “button ties [*points de capiton*]” (p. 419).<sup>84</sup> It is “the ‘button tie’ [*point de capiton*] by which the signifier stops the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification” (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 681), by forging a link between signifier and signified.

Before we further explore the process of signification, we first discuss what Lacan’s notion of metonymy inherits from Freud’s notion of displacement.

### ***Freud’s Displacement***

In *L’instance de la lettre*, Lacan (1966/2006) expands on Jakobson’s conception of metonymy as the diachronic axis of discourse, the sequencing and connecting of one word to the following. Metonymy is considered responsible for the flow of words, the forward motion of discourse, the chaining up of signifiers. Lacan further infuses it with Freud’s (1900a) notion of *displacement*, interpreted by Lacan as the principle of the movement of libidinal charge between signifiers. Lacan (1966/2006) refers to Freud’s (1900b) *The Interpretation of Dreams*, stating that what is at stake there is also “the letter of discourse” (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 424). For Lacan (1966/2006), the importance of language, or “the instance of the signifier” (p. 426)<sup>85</sup> is an overlooked aspect in discussing Freud’s unconscious.<sup>86</sup> He connects Freud’s notion of the dream as a rebus to “the instance in the dream of the same ‘literating’ (in other

<sup>83</sup> Lacan (1966/2006) builds on Jakobson’s remark on the link between realism and metonymy and states: “all ‘realism’ in creation derives its virtue from metonymy” (p. 430). He adds that “access to meaning is granted only to the double elbow of metaphor” (p. 430) owing to the fact that the signifier and the signified of Saussure’s algorithm “are not in the same plane, and man was deluding himself in believing he was situated in their common axis, which is nowhere” (p. 431).

<sup>84</sup> Fink (in Lacan, 1966/2006) defines ‘button tie’ as “a stitch used by an upholsterer to secure a button to fabric and stuffing, for example, to prevent the stuffing from moving” (p. 808). Grigg (in Lacan 1981/1993) translates *point de capiton* as “quilting point” (p. 258).

<sup>85</sup> “L’instance du signifiant” (Lacan, 1966a, p. 513), Sheridan translates as “the agency of the signifier” (Lacan, 1966/1989, p. 123).

<sup>86</sup> Lacan points out how Freud, in his early works of discovering the unconscious, is concerned with the workings of language. For instance, in deciphering the dream, Freud (1900b) writes, we need to “replace each separate element by a syllable or word that can be represented by that element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance. A dream is a picture-puzzle of this sort” (p. 278).

words, phonemic) structure in which the signifier is articulated and analyzed in discourse” (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 424).<sup>87</sup> Lacan (1966/2006) states it is linguistic structure that is responsible for the “signifierness of dreams” (p. 424).<sup>88</sup>

Lacan (1966/2006) connects the two fundamental operations of language, the “two aspects of the signifier’s impact on the signified” (p. 425), metonymy and metaphor, to the two mechanisms by which Freud (1900b) describes the translation of dream-thoughts into dream-content in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: displacement (*Verschiebung*) and condensation (*Verdichtung*). Lacan connects metonymy to displacement and metaphor to condensation.<sup>89</sup> Lacan (1966/2006) wonders: “what distinguishes these two mechanisms, which play a privileged role in the dream-work, *Traumarbeit*, from their homologous function in discourse?” (p. 425) and answers: “nothing” (p. 425).<sup>90</sup> For Lacan, Freud’s laws of the unconscious (displacement and condensation) are exactly those in language (metonymy and metaphor). So before we continue Lacan’s reasoning in *L’instance*, we take a quick look at Freud’s development of displacement and condensation.

Freud (1900b) considers the dream-content as a “a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression” (p. 277) and likens the dream-content to “a pictographic script” and “a picture-puzzle, a rebus” (Freud, 1900b, p. 277). Freud (1900b) describes the mechanisms by which dream-thoughts are translated to and expressed in dream-content: “dream-condensation and dream-displacement” (Freud, 1900b, p. 310).<sup>91</sup> Freud describes “a work of condensation” (Freud, 1900b, p. 279)<sup>92</sup> whereby new connections are made “as it were, loop-lines or short-circuits, made possible by the existence of other and deeper-lying

<sup>87</sup> “L’instance dans le rêve de cette même structure littéraire (autrement dit phonématique) où s’articule et s’analyse le signifiant dans le discours” (Lacan, 1966a, p. 510). Sheridan translates “the agency in the dream” (Lacan, 1966/1989, p. 121).

<sup>88</sup> “La signifiante du rêve” (Lacan, 1966a, p. 510).

<sup>89</sup> The link with Freud’s mechanisms of dream formation is actually already mentioned by Jakobson (1956/1987) himself, although he connects it differently than Lacan. Jakobson connects metonymy to both Freud’s *displacement* and *condensation*, and metaphor to Freud’s *identification* and *symbolism*. “Thus in an inquiry into the structure of dreams, the decisive question is whether the symbols and the temporal sequences used are based on contiguity (Freud’s metonymic ‘displacement’ and synecdochic ‘condensation’) or on similarity (Freud’s ‘identification and symbolism’)” (Jakobson, 1956/1987 p. 113).

<sup>90</sup> Actually, he adds “except a condition imposed upon the signifying material, called *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*, which must be translated as *consideration of the means of staging*” (p. 425).

<sup>91</sup> “Traum Verdichtung und Traum Verschiebung” (Freud, 1900a, p. 315). Freud adds a further mechanism, that of translating the dream-thoughts into images, “the means of representation in dreams” (Freud, 1900b, p. 310).

<sup>92</sup> “Verdichtungsarbeit” (Freud, 1900a, p. 284).

connecting paths” (Freud, 1900b, p. 286).<sup>93</sup> Freud’s condensation (which Lacan equates to metaphor) is responsible for making new connections, synthesizing multiple latent thoughts into one single image or idea that refers to all of these.

Freud describes “the work of displacement” (Freud, 1900b, p. 305)<sup>94</sup> whereby the dream can be “as it were, differently centered from the dream-thoughts—its content has different elements as its central point” (Freud, 1900b, p. 305)<sup>95</sup>. This way dreams can give an “impression of displacement” (Freud, 1900b, p. 306).<sup>96</sup> Freud’s notion of displacement (which Lacan equates to metonymy) describes the process by which the libidinal charge that is attached to one idea is transferred to another idea. Or, in Lacan’s interpretation: from one signifier to another. Freud (1900b) explains the process of displacement further as the process by which “elements which have a high psychological value” (p. 307) are stripped “of their intensity” (p. 307) which is then displaced onto “elements of low psychological value” (p. 307) this is a process of “transference and displacement of psychological intensities” (p. 307)<sup>97</sup>, and this explains “the difference between the text of the dream-content and that of the dreamthoughts” (p. 308). Thus:

essential elements, charged, as they are, with intense interest, may be treated as though they were of small value, and their place may be taken in the dream by other elements, of whose small value in the dream-thoughts there can be no question. (p. 306)

Freud states that the determining factor for this process is not how relevant certain elements are, their psychological intensity, but the “greater or less degree of multiplicity of their determination” (p. 306)<sup>98</sup> which is how connected the elements are to other elements. So, for Freud the process of displacement is based on how connected the elements are to other elements. For Lacan, the connected elements between which this displacement of psychological intensity happens are signifiers. In this context, we can consider connectedness as another term for contiguity.

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<sup>93</sup> “Gleichsam Nebenschließungen Kurzschlüsse, ermöglicht durch den Bestand anderer und tiefer liegender Verbindungswege” (Freud, 1900a, p. 286).

<sup>94</sup> “Die Verschiebungsarbeit” (Freud, 1900a, p. 310).

<sup>95</sup> “Gleichsam anderszentriert, sein Inhalt um andere Elemente als Mittelpunkt geordnet als die Traumgedanken” (Freud, 1900a, p. 310).

<sup>96</sup> “Einen verschobenen Eindruck” (Freud, 1900a, p. 311).

<sup>97</sup> “Eine Übertragung und Verschiebung der psychischen Intensitäten” (Freud, 1900a, p. 313).

<sup>98</sup> “Die mehr oder minder vielseitige Determinierung derselben” (Freud, 1900a, p. 312).

Freud (1900b) considers these processes, condensation and displacement, as evidence of what he calls the primary process.<sup>99</sup> For Freud (1900b), the primary process is the part of mental life that is not guided by reason, ratio, or intentionality but that happens on a rather automatic, unconscious level. This realm of the mind is not concerned with meaningful relations between elements; meaning is a product of the secondary process, the conscious, more rational mind. In the unconscious, Freud explains, primary psychical processes rule, these are not bound by reason, rationality, conscious intention, etc. Freud describes how psychical energy (or psychical value, or cathexis) is bound, or fixed in the conscious mind, which means attached to elements, ideas, words; and is much more mobile in the unconscious, thus moves freely between elements, ideas, words. Actually, this process of movement follows the laws of displacement and condensation. In a later text, *The unconscious*, Freud (1915) states that in the unconscious,

the cathectic intensities are much more mobile. By the process of *displacement* one idea may surrender to another its whole quota of cathexis; by the process of *condensation* it may appropriate the whole cathexis of several other ideas. I have proposed to regard these two processes as distinguishing marks of the so-called *primary psychical process*. (p. 186)

In the conscious mind (or in what Freud then calls the preconscious) the *secondary process* is dominant. When the results of these primary process operations appear in consciousness “it appears ‘comic’ and excites laughter” (p. 186). This will return in Lacan’s qualification of the manic metonymy as *ludic*.

Interesting for Lacan’s (1966/2006) interpretation of Freud here, is that Freud describes the processes of condensation and displacement as unconscious mechanisms, as processes happening at the level of the signifier. In Lacan’s reading, Freud’s unconscious is to be understood as “a chain of signifiers that repeats and insists somewhere (on another stage or in a different scene, as he wrote)” (p. 676).<sup>100</sup> Lacan (1966/2006) later summarizes his view as follows, he equates the laws that govern Freud’s other scene, the scene of the unconscious, with the basic laws of language, which are at play “at the level of the chain of materially

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<sup>99</sup> Freud (1900b) calls these processes *primary* because of their “chronological priority” (p. 603), because “it is only during the course of life that the secondary processes unfold, and come to inhibit and overlay the primary ones” (p. 603).

<sup>100</sup> “Une chaîne de signifiants qui quelque part (sur une autre scène, écrit-il) se répète et insiste” (Lacan, 1966a, p. 799).

unstable elements that constitutes language” (p. 578) and work by way of “the double play of combination and substitution in the signifier, according to the two axes for generating the signified, metonymy and metaphor” (p. 578).<sup>101</sup>

### ***Lacan’s Theory of the Subject***

Before we discuss the role of the object *a* in metonymy and what happens to metonymy in mania, we briefly summarize Lacan’s perspectives (at the time of *L’instance*) on how meaning and subjectivity are produced.<sup>102</sup> According to Lacan (1966/2006), both meaning and subjectivity emerge through the articulation of discourse, the chaining together of signifiers. This process involves the double workings of anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain. There is a forward motion in language, stringing signifiers together, this happens in a linear fashion: words follow words follow words in chains of signifiers. This corresponds to what Lacan terms the metonymic side of language. It introduces an element of anticipation: meaning is anticipated, but remains in suspense until the final word arrives. In contrast, retroaction is the retroactive movement of articulating a message, where later signifiers determine the meaning of previous ones. A message is created through the process of punctuation, which is how signification is achieved. Punctuation creates button ties in discourse, by forging a link between signifier and signified, thus creating meaning (Vanheule, 2011). In *L’instance* this is referred to as the metaphoric side of language.

Simultaneously, as meaning is generated, the dimension of the subject emerges, and Lacan views this as an effect of language use. Button ties in speech create messages that attribute qualities to the speaker, thereby pinning down subjectivity via speech. While a message is produced; meanings or signifieds are attributed to the speaker, which define and determine the ego.

In Lacan’s (1966/2006) perspective, subjectivity arises as a consequence of linking signifiers in chains, hence his definition of the signifier as “what represents the subject to another signifier” (p. 694). According to Lacan, the subject is not the instance producing speech, but rather its consequence. It is through hearing one’s own speech that presumptions

<sup>101</sup> In a later formulation, Lacan (1966/2006) states: “the mechanisms described by Freud as those of the primary process, by which the unconscious is governed, correspond exactly to the functions this school of linguistics believes determine the most radical axes of the effects of language, namely metaphor and metonymy—in other words, the effects of the substitution and combination of signifiers in the synchronic and diachronic dimensions, respectively, in which they appear in discourse” (pp. 676–677).

<sup>102</sup> This is elaborated further in Chapters 4 and 5.

about one's identity are formed. André (1993) states that punctuation fixates meaning and gives the subject *his domicile in discourse*, his residence in speech.<sup>103</sup>

The dimension of the subject is related to the notion of deixis, which can be defined as lexical items and grammatical forms that anchor speech to specific elements such as a speaker, a listener, a location (Rosenbaum & Sonne, 1986). These are the elements in an utterance that refer to me, here, now, addressing you. Without deixis, language lacks ties to specific speakers or listeners. This is related to what Lacan (1966/2006) calls 'the split between the enunciating subject [*sujet de l'énonciation*] and the subject of the statement [*sujet de l'énoncé*]' (p. 650)<sup>104</sup> or the gap between "the 'enunciating subject' and the 'enunciated subject'" (Vanheule, 2011, p. 48).<sup>105</sup>

### ***Metonymy and Object a***

Before we turn to manic metonymy, we first explore how metonymy relates to the object *a*. Metonymy represents the forward movement of language, involving the displacement of libidinal charge between contiguous signifiers. What anchors this process, according to Lacan, is the object *a*.<sup>106</sup> Lacan (1970/1977) elaborates on the relation between metonymy and the object *a* in his preface to Lemaire's (1970/1977) book: "the object *a* is the pivot around which every turn of phrase unfolds in its metonymy" (p. xiv).<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103</sup> "Son domicile dans le discours" (André, 1993, p. 283).

<sup>104</sup> Fink (in Lacan, 1966/2006) explains: "*le sujet de l'énoncé* has been rendered here as 'the subject of the statement,' while *le sujet de l'énonciation* has been rendered as 'the enunciating subject.' The latter could also be rendered as 'subject of (the) enunciation.'" (p. 835).

<sup>105</sup> "The enunciated subject refers to the subject as it is defined and described via the actually produced signifying chain. It is the collection of different signifieds that characterize the I of the speaker. The enunciating subject refers to the evolving aspect of the subject" (Vanheule, 2011, p. 48). Vanheule (2011) explains the link with metonymy as follows: "Metonymy takes place within the diachronic linking of signifiers in a chain, where one signifier evokes another because of a thematic connection at the level of the signified" (p. 52). "Through metonymy the speaking subject is connoted, without actually being defined in its identity" (p. 54). The role of metaphor: "with respect to subjectivity the effect of metaphor is such that the subject, which was connoted and fading until then, is identified and denoted" (Vanheule, 2011, p. 56). "At the level of the signified, a metaphor attributes predicates or characteristics to the subject, and tells us something about the identity of the person that is presented via speech. Metaphors name the enunciating subject and create an enunciated subject. This naming creates a mode of personal identity and inscribes the subject in a network of social relations" (p. 56).

<sup>106</sup> The object *a* is one of Lacan's concepts that functions as a theoretical button tie between his conceptualizations of the different registers, here between the symbolic and the real. When Lacan wrote *L'instance de la lettre* (in 1957) he did not yet use the concept of the object *a*. By the time of *Seminar 10* (in 1962–63) Lacan (2004/2014) opposes his previous notion of the subject as determined by the signifier to what he now calls the "subject of jouissance" (p. 173), thereby accentuating "the libidinous corporeality of being" (Vanheule, 2011, p. 127), that is not determined by the signifier.

<sup>107</sup> The original reads: "l'objet *a* est le pivot dont se déroule en sa métonymie chaque tour de phrase" (Lacan, 2001, p. 402).



Lacan (2004/2014) develops the concept of the object *a* during his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar. Rather than offering a straightforward definition, he circumscribes it in a number of ways. Lacan characterizes the object *a* as a remainder of the operation of being inscribed in the order of the signifier, the entry into the realm of language. This operation involves as a mathematical division, where a hypothetical pre-language-subject is divided by the Other, by language, transforming it into a divided subject, a subject of the signifier. From this point forward, language mediates one's relationships with others, oneself, the body, and more. Lacan identifies a remainder in this process, a leftover, which he terms the object *a*. Additionally, he describes the object *a* as a certain quantity of libido that escapes the economy of exchange between corporeal libido and object libido<sup>108</sup>; referring to it as “the rock that Freud speaks of, the final irreducible reserve of libido” (p. 107). Lacan posits that the object *a* functions as the cause of desire, around which desire metonymically revolves, the pivotal object that always eludes but functions simultaneously as engine and anchor for the subject.

Thus understood, the object *a* serves as a limitation to the metonymic sliding of the signifying chain. By incarnating an unattainable point of jouissance and the drive, it serves as an anchor for speech, around which the process of metonymic displacement revolves. To put it differently: the object *a* represents a certain amount of libido or psychical intensity, that cannot be displaced from one signifier to another. Instead, it provides an anchor, a mooring, around which the process of metonymic displacement circles.

Laurent (2013) elucidates Lacan's use of metonymy here as follow: “metonymy is approached as the contamination of the signifier by the drives” (p. 102). Therefore, if the object *a* functions as the pivot around which every turn of phrase unfolds in its metonymy, then this is what imparts a certain weight to signifiers, and anchors them.

### 3.5. Manic Metonymy

After discussing metonymy in the previous section, we will now return to Lacan's comments on mania. According to Lacan, in mania the object *a* does not function. As a result, no object *a* comes to ballast, or anchor, the subject, causing the metonymy of the signifying chain to run off on its own. Lacan's understanding of mania as characterized by the non-

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<sup>108</sup> Which is how Freud (1914) describes the movement of libido between subject and object in *On narcissism: An introduction*. Or as Lacan (2004/2014) describes it: “a communicating oscillation is played out which Freud designates as the reversibility of the libido of one's own body into object libido” (p. 86).

functioning of the object *a* which delivers the subject to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain, thus implies an uncoupling of object *a* and metonymy. This has consequences for both language and jouissance. Language—no longer weighed down by the object *a*—takes off in a metonymic derailment, the flight of signifiers.<sup>109</sup> Jouissance—no longer moored or anchored by language—erupts in manic excitation and agitation, mania’s exalted mood and pressure of activity. We understand the manic elation as the release of jouissance, no longer regulated by castration and the constraints of the symbolic order, which overwhelms the subject (Brémaud, 2017). This jouissance, the release of the ballast of speech, accounts for the excitation and agitation of the manic experience, and, no longer regulated by the convention of the symbolic, problematizes meaning and sense (Fridman & Millas, 1997).

Lacan qualifies *manic metonymy* as the subject being delivered to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain (*la métonymie pure, infinie et ludique*). Pure metonymy is metonymy as utter slippage, only marked by the sequencing of signifiers, not weighed down by sense or meaning, unhindered by the weight of the object *a*. According to Brémaud (2017), this pure metonymy attacks grammar, syntax, and the relation between signifier and signified. It is metonymy untainted by metaphor, untempered by button ties. So metonymy without interruption, hence, infinite metonymy. In this context, there is nothing stopping the chaining up of signifiers; there is no intervening process of metaphor, punctuation or retroactive signification, only endless sliding and slippage (Christaki-Gadbin, 2003). Manic language consists of purely the associative, forward moving, metonymic aspect of language.

Ludic metonymy can be understood as a manifestation of the primary process. In Freudian terms, primary process associations come to the forefront in cases of mania. The primary process corresponds to the mode of thinking (or, in Lacan’s terms, the mode of chaining up signifiers) associated with the unconscious, where psychical energy flows freely, unhindered by meaning and sense. Connections are established based on the material intricacies of language itself, such as rhyme and clang associations, rather than with the intention of

<sup>109</sup> Miller (1993/2002) describes the effect of mania on speech as follows: “let us also note that what one calls mania in the psychiatric clinic is the case where the object *a* does not function, in other words it is a case of logical inconsistency, and which goes hand in hand with the glimpsed inexistence of the Other—since what is at stake here is a statement [*dit*] which does not pose as truth” (p. 20). “Notons encore que ce que l’on appelle manie dans la clinique psychiatrique, c’est le cas où l’objet *a* ne fonctionne pas, c’est-à-dire un cas d’inconsistance logique, et qui va de pair avec l’inexistence aperçue de l’Autre—puisqu’il s’agit là d’un dit qui ne se pose pas en vérité” (Miller, 1993, p. 12).

conveying a coherent message. In primary process thinking, meaning is unstable, constantly slipping and fleeting. As a consequence of mania's un-quilting<sup>110</sup>, everything passes through the grinder of wordplay-that-is-not-wordplay<sup>111</sup>, often, even one's own name—the essential quilting point (Czermak (1988/2012).

Lacan further qualifies the way the subject is being delivered to this *manic metonymy*, this manic *flight of signifiers* as *in a way without any possibility of freedom*. Although Lacan qualifies the metonymic slipping as ludic, it is clear that for the manic person the experience is one of horror, rather than pleasure. The ludic quality pertains to metonymy itself, not the subject. The endlessness of being in the grip of this infinite carousel of primary process language only adds to the horror.

In the *flight of signifiers*, signifiers follow one another without logic or reason (except primary process logic, which is unreason by definition) and there is no possibility for the subject to intervene. The subject can no longer anticipate what will be said and, when looking back, cannot retroactively make sense of what has been said. This disturbs not only the process of generating meaning but also affects the experience of subjectivity. What disappears in the metonymic slipping of the signifying chain is precisely the experience of mastery over one's language. This results in the feeling that some crazy, uncontrollable force is speaking, rather than I as a subject am speaking. In this state, the subject is *lost in articulation* or, as Brémaud (2017) puts it, the manic subject is displaced, “un sujet en déplacement” (p. 642). In Laurent's (1988/2015) words: a subject “dispersed in the flight of ideas” (p. 147). André (1993) characterizes the subjective position of the manic as having no fixed abode<sup>112</sup>, no residence in speech. He states that only punctuation fixates meaning and therefore can provide the subject with a domicile in discourse<sup>113</sup>, a residence in speech. Soler (2002) understands the abundance of manic phenomena as a defect of the quilting point. André (1993) notes that mania disrupts the processes of anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain. In manic speech, there is only anticipation at work, with no retroaction or punctuation. Desmoulins (in Miller, 1997) adds that we can understand mania as a disorder of the signifying chain, of

<sup>110</sup> “Un décapitonnage” (Czermak, 1998/2012, p. 165).

<sup>111</sup> “La moulinette de ‘jeux de mots’ qui n’en sont pas” (Czermak, 1998/2012, p. 165).

<sup>112</sup> “Un sujet sans domicile fixe” (André, 1993, p. 276).

<sup>113</sup> “Son domicile dans le discours” (André, 1993, p. 283).

punctuation, and therefore of the quilting point.<sup>114</sup> Czermak (1998/2012) describes mania as un-quilting.<sup>115</sup>

Throughout his work, Lacan stresses man's submission to the mechanisms of language. For example, in *Seminar on The Purloined Letter*, Lacan (1966/2006) states that "the signifier's displacement determines subjects' acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate ... and: everything pertaining to the psychological pregiven follows willy-nilly the signifier's train" (p. 21). This places the agency firmly on the side of *the signifier's displacement* and *the signifier's train*. In *Seminar 23*, Lacan (2005/2016) states, "we believe we say what we want, but. ... We are spoken" (p. 142).<sup>116</sup>

Lacan's description of the manic subject as being delivered to the metonymy of the signifying chain without any possibility of freedom suggests that there is some degree of freedom for the non-manic subject. Even in Lacan's most deterministic enslaved-to-the-signifier statements, there seems to be some wiggle room for the agency of the subject. But this is not the case for the manic subject, who is truly caught in the metonymic derailment of the signifier's train or the signifying chain. In *L'instance*, Lacan (1966/2006) characterizes the relation to the signifier as *the moorings of one's being*.<sup>117</sup> In mania, language does not fulfill this function of mooring, or anchoring. The manic subject is always on the verge of disappearing or being displaced due to the metonymically sliding slippery slope of signification.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>114</sup> "Une maladie de la chaîne signifiante, de la ponctuation, donc du point de capiton" (Desmoulins, in Miller, 1997, p. 110).

<sup>115</sup> "Un décapitonage" (Czermak, 1998/2012, p. 165).

<sup>116</sup> The full quote is: "Such are the happenstances that drive us from pillar to post, and from which we shape our destiny, for we are the ones who weave it thus. We shape our own destiny from them because we speak. We believe we say what we want, but it's what the others wanted, more particularly our family, *qui nous parle*. You should hear this *nous* as a direct object. We are spoken, and, because of this, from the happenstances that drive us, we form something textured" (Lacan, 2005/2016, p. 142). "Ce sont les hasards qui nous poussent à droite et à gauche, et dont nous faisons notre destin, car c'est nous qui le tressons comme tel. Nous en faisons notre destin, parce que nous parlons. Nous croyons que nous disons ce que nous voulons, mais c'est ce qu'ont voulu les autres, plus particulièrement notre famille, qui nous parle. Entendez là ce nous comme un complément direct. Nous sommes parlés, et, à cause de ça, nous faisons, des hasards qui nous poussent, quelque chose de tramé" (Lacan, 2005, p. 162).

<sup>117</sup> "Les amarres de son être" (Lacan, 1966a, p. 527). The full quote is: "It is by touching, however lightly, on man's relation to the signifier ... that one changes the course of his history by modifying the moorings of his being" (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 438). "C'est qu'à toucher si peu que ce soit à la relation de l'homme au signifiant ... on change le cours de son histoire en modifiant les amarres de son être" (Lacan, 1966a, p. 527).

<sup>118</sup> A made up example to illustrate this. When introducing metonymy, Lacan cites the classic example of a fleet of thirty sails which metonymically refer to thirty boats. Of course before one can finish saying thirty sails, the manic is already on his way to buy a sailboat, has enlisted in a marine navigation course, donned himself with a captain's hat, started a petition to save the ocean and clean the dirty seals and overturned his closet looking for a

Lacanian authors describe the manic subject as being displaced (Brémaud, 2017)<sup>119</sup>, dispersed in the infinity of language (Soler, 2002), dispersed in the flight of ideas (Laurent, 1988/2015), wandering in life as in discourse (André, 1993), shattered by a radical form of dispersion in language (Fridman & Millas, 1997)<sup>120</sup>, released in the signifying chain without a safety net (Brémaud, 2017)<sup>121</sup>, out of reach of the signifying network (Vieira, 1993)<sup>122</sup>, the plaything of the Other, of language (Czermak, 1998/2012), the plaything of non-vectorized time (Christaki-Gadbin, 2003), and even as having completely disappeared (Vieira, 1993) or as dead (Fridman & Millas, 1997).<sup>123</sup>

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation we will investigate how this Lacanian conceptualization contributes to our understanding of mania, its effects on the subject and whether it can point to particular strategies of stabilization and recovery.

## 4. Overview of the Chapters

This dissertation is a collection of four published articles all relating to our general research question concerning the development of a Lacanian view on mania, and a general discussion in the final chapter.<sup>124</sup> The chapters include an interview study (Chapter 2), two literary case studies (Chapter 3 and 4), one conceptual article (Chapter 5) and the general discussion (Chapter 6).

A note on the order of the chapters: instead of placing the conceptual and theoretical article (Chapter 5, *Lacan and the Language of Mania*) at the beginning and presenting the other chapters as applications of the theory, we chose the current order since it represents the trajectory of our research the past few years. It also provides a more accurate representation of how the studies helped shape our conceptual understanding of mania within a Lacanian framework. We did not start from a complete Lacanian theory of mania that we then applied

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swimsuit... Only to wonder in the aftermath: what was I thinking.

<sup>119</sup> “Un sujet en déplacement” (Brémaud, 2017, p. 642).

<sup>120</sup> “Atomisé par une forme radicalisée d’éparpillement dans le langage” (Fridman & Millas, 1997, p. 92).

<sup>121</sup> “Comme lâché sans filet dans la chaîne signifiante” (Brémaud, 2017, p. 641).

<sup>122</sup> “Hors réseau signifiant” (Vieira, 1993, p. 6).

<sup>123</sup> Lacan’s notion of *the death of the subject* indicates the moment a subject is no longer represented by the signifier, is no longer embedded in signification, and is being invaded by jouissance (Fridman & Millas, 1997). Desmoulins (in Miller, 1997) specifies that we should understand the death of the subject, rather as an unfolding of the signifying chain without the effect of a subject, since it is punctuation that creates the subject.

<sup>124</sup> Although each chapter contributes to the general research question from a different angle, a certain amount of repetition between the various chapters was unavoidable.

to various cases. Instead, we began with a few scattered remarks and elaborated on them throughout their application in the studies. Throughout our clinical studies, we investigated the implications of Lacan's understanding of language for mania, and in the conceptual study, we investigated the implications of Lacan's understanding of mania for language. So, instead of using Lacan's remarks on mania as a starting point for a theory of mania, we discussed them as elements for a theory of language. Another argument for the current order is that Chapter 4, the study of Melle, nicely ties together the themes of Chapter 2 and 3, and remedies some of their limitations.<sup>125</sup>

In Chapter 2, *Mania in the Mirror*, we report on a qualitative interview study involving 18 individuals with experiences of mania. We interviewed them about their experiences, and while the interviews had a broad scope, they proved more informative about the process of recovery than the experience of mania as such. We conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, resulting in six themes that depict a trajectory of identity construction. The first part of the results describes the steps participants took in living with their manic experiences. Subsequently, we interpret the results using Lacan's model of the double mirror, which offers a theoretical perspective on identity and subjectivity concerning the relationship between drives, drive-regulation and identification. In terms of Lacan's model, we describe the recovery trajectory as a process of gaining mastery over manic experiences through the development of ways to represent the drive and by adopting a shared narrative about it.

Our main focus here is on the reconstruction of the ego after being shattered by the experience of mania and how, for the participants in this study, adopting a narrative about being bipolar contributed to their recovery.

In Chapter 3, *The Crackle of the Letter*, we discuss the literary work of the Flemish writer J.M.H. Berckmans in light of his lifelong struggle with manic depression. Berckmans' body of work reflects his ongoing struggle with the dysregulation of language. Through his writing, Berckmans develops various strategies to address this linguistic dysregulation. On the one hand, he aims to mitigate the metonymic derailment of the signifying chain, and on the other,

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<sup>125</sup> While it could be argued that starting with Chapter 5 would clearly present the Lacanian point of view of starting from the symbolic and language (while Chapter 2 is more situated within the imaginary and ego-narrative, and Chapter 3 and 4 add the dimension of the real of language and the knotting of the three registers), we choose stick to our 'chronological' presentation. The reader less versed in Lacanian theory might benefit from reading Chapter 5 first. The reader more at home in the field of phenomenology than in that of Lacanian psychoanalysis might start with the discussion with Binswanger in Chapter 6, Section 3.

he seeks to experience himself as both the subject and author of his words. Berckmans treats language through a meticulous process of writing and rewriting, what he describes as ‘mutilating’ and ‘hacking’ at language. Simultaneously, his writing allows him to fictionalize his immediate surroundings, which he refers to as the *graphy* of his life. Furthermore, we discuss the successive forms of address throughout his work: from the abstract reader, to the notating secretary and the addressees of his letters.

In Chapter 3, the focus shifts from the disruption and reconstruction of the ego-narrative to the workings of language in both the experience of mania—the manic derailment of language—and the strategies of recovery developed by Berckmans—his language treatment.

In Chapter 4, titled *The Writing of Mania*, we discuss the work of German author Thomas Melle in relation to his manic-depressive experiences. Melle’s autobiographical book *The World at My Back* demonstrates how a dysregulation of language is essential to understanding the nature of his manic episodes. Furthermore, Melle explains how he turned to writing literature as a response to challenges posed by his manic experiences. In this chapter, we explore this link in detail. First, we investigate the specific dysregulations of language observed during Melle’s manic episodes. Based on *The World at My Back*, three characteristic language disruptions are discerned in the course of his manic episodes: first, language disintegrates, then narrative consistency breaks down, finally there is a collapse of subject and ego. Subsequently, we discuss the literary strategies of recovery that Melle employs across his oeuvre and how these address the three aspects of language disruption. We identify eight literary strategies, that cluster into three broad genres: implicitly autobiographical fiction, explicitly fictional autobiography, and, eventually, *new realism*. Drawing from Lacan’s insights, we discuss how Melle’s literary strategies aim at remedying a significant issue that accompanies his manic experiences: the workings of language itself. During and in the wake of his autobiographic writing, Melle develops ways of treating language, keeping language in check and eventually restoring his faith in language. We explore Melle’s writing practice and relate it to Lacan’s concept of the *sinthome*.<sup>126</sup>

This chapter serves as a bridge between the two primary themes of the preceding chapters: the reconstructing of the ego-narrative and the treatment of language. These themes are explicitly addressed by Melle himself in his book and in interviews about his work.

<sup>126</sup> The concept of the *sinthome* is briefly mentioned in Chapter 3, but is discussed more extensively in Chapter 4 and is returned to in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 5, titled *Lacan and the Language of Mania*, we discuss manic language phenomena within a Lacanian framework. While Lacan only briefly touches upon the phenomenon of mania in his works, his scattered and scarcely elaborated comments provide the basis for developing a coherent perspective on mania as a language-related phenomenon. First, we reframe the concept of *flight of ideas* as a phenomenon of the signifier rather than the signified, emphasizing its connection to language rather than ideas. We propose the term *flight of signifiers* to describe this phenomenon. Subsequently, we elaborate Lacan's comments on mania. Lacan (2004/2014) qualifies the manic subject as being delivered to the endless metonymy of the signifying chain. He describes manic excitation as a return to the real of language (Lacan, 1974/1987). In both cases, Lacan situates mania within the realm of psychosis and views it as a form of language that has gone mad. We then discuss Lacan's (1975/1998) notion of *llanguage* as a parasitic force of dysregulation and its implications for Lacan's (2005/2016) understanding of manic language. Manic language, according to this perspective, no longer represents language gone mad but reveals the underlying madness of *llanguage* lurking beneath the surface of language.

After utilizing Lacan's framework to engage in a dialogue with the manic experience and recovery strategies in the preceding chapters, Chapter 5 shifts its focus to Lacanian theory and investigates what Lacan's consecutive remarks on mania unveil about his conceptions of language as such.

In our sixth and final chapter, we discuss the overarching themes that permeate the various chapters of this dissertation. We do so utilizing Lacan's framework of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. Furthermore, we engage in a discussion that intersects with Binswanger's phenomenological account of *flight of ideas*, addressing some nosological and therapeutical implications of our study. Finally, we reflect on the study's limitations and propose potential avenues for further research.



## 5. References

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# 2

## **Mania in the Mirror. A Qualitative Study of Recovery From Mania Within a Lacanian Psychoanalytic Framework**

The aim of this study<sup>127</sup> is to contribute to the understanding of recovery from and dealing with experiences of mania within a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework and to build on existing Lacanian theory to clarify processes of identification involved in recovering from experiences of mania. Based on a qualitative interview study including 18 individuals with experiences of mania, we undertook a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, resulting in six themes that form a trajectory of identity construction. The first part of the results provides a thematic description of the steps participants took in regard to living with their manic experiences. Subsequently, we interpret the results of the initial bottom-up thematic analysis using Lacan's model of the double mirror, a theoretical model of identity and subjectivity concerning the relationship between drives, drive-regulation and identification. In terms of Lacan's model, we describe the trajectory of recovery as one of gaining mastery over manic experiences by developing ways of representing the drive and by adopting and further developing a shared narrative about the drive.

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## 1. Introduction

Manic episodes have a severely disturbing impact on people's sense of identity (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007). Some effects are generic and also occur in other major psychiatric disorders (Charmaz, 1995) or are a consequence of receiving a diagnosis (Michalak et al., 2011; Proudfoot et al., 2009). However, bipolar disorder involves additional identity-related challenges (Inder et al., 2008), since manic experiences and fluctuating mood states create confusing and contradictory experiences (Inder et al., 2011), resulting in self-doubt and questions like 'who is the real me?' (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Proudfoot et al., 2009).

This issue has not been considered in detail in psychoanalytic theory, although psychoanalytic theory has situated mania within its metapsychology ever since Freud's (1917) remarks in *Mourning and Melancholia* (for an overview: Ventimiglia, 2018).

In this paper, we discuss the subjective experience of mania from a Lacanian perspective, using Lacan's theory of identification. Within a qualitative research design, we first conduct a thematic analysis of interview narratives from participants with experiences of mania. We examine the impact of mania on participants' self-experience and study how they attempt to recover. Subsequently we interpret these results from the perspective of Lacanian theory. In seminars from the early fifties, Lacan (1975, 1978) discusses how experiences of subjectivity and identifications originate from the interplay between drives, ego, language and the Other. He describes this process, in particular, using his so-called double mirror model. Assuming that, in manic episodes, drive impulses overwhelm the ego and disrupt the functioning of language, we consider this model as particularly relevant for studying the subjective experience of psychopathology, such as the impact of mania on people's sense of identity. However, Lacan never applied this model to mania. Indeed, within the Lacanian field, few studies have focused on mania (e.g., Leader, 2013, 2015).

Compared to other psychiatric disorders, there has been relatively little qualitative research into the impact of bipolar disorder (Crowe et al., 2012), and even less with a specific focus on identity (Dyga, 2019) or on the subjective experience of living with bipolar disorder (Proudfoot et al., 2009). In current research, the experience of disruption and discontinuity at the level of identity is a common theme. In a review of the relationship between bipolar disorder and self-experience, Ironside et al. (2019) conclude that people with bipolar disorder

are faced with unique identity challenges such as a struggle to maintain continuity of experience and concerns about the implications of inconsistent behaviors and emotional states. Another review concludes, “bipolar disorder significantly impedes forming and maintaining a relatively stable identity” (Dyga, 2019, p. 704). These shifting experiences might lead to confusion, contradiction and self-doubt (Inder et al., 2008, 2011), which necessitates a process of identity re-negotiation (Chapman, 2002; Inder et al., 2011; Michalak et al., 2011). Typically, this research mostly deals with processes of accepting and living with the diagnosis of bipolar disorder and less with the impact of manic experiences as such.

The process through which individuals with experiences of mania develop a more integrated sense of identity has been studied less frequently. Fernandez et al. (2014) indicate that recovery from mania necessitates renegotiating and reclaiming identity through the following interconnected processes: acceptance of the bipolar disorder, reclaiming control through self-help strategies, connecting and identifying with others, and redefining identity in relation to recovery. These processes are described as dynamic and cyclical and as requiring an active role (Chapman, 2002; Fernandez et al., 2014; Michalak et al., 2011). Yet, how manic experiences and related process of recovery *alter identifications* and *change the relation between drive and ego* has not been elucidated. Our qualitative study aims at examining this process in detail.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

We interviewed 18 people about their experiences of mania, the impact of these experiences on their lives and the ways they cope with these experiences. We recruited participants through an advertisement on the website of a local patient organization. While no diagnostic requirements were formulated, most participants reported having been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, type I. One person, Olga, reported having been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, type II, for reasons of never having been psychotic, but she reported multiple episodes of acute mania that required hospitalization. Luke said his diagnosis was currently under revision and might be changed from bipolar disorder, type I, to schizo-affective disorder. He was the only participant hospitalized at the time of the interview (see Table 1).

## CHAPTER 2

*Table 1. Participant Characteristics*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>(Hypo)manic in last year</i>
Annie	f	47	administrative worker	No
Bea	f	46	school secretary	Yes
Cindy	f	40	enrolled in a training program for experts by experience	No
Dave	m	49	employed as an expert by experience in a psychiatric hospital	No
Ellen	f	41	unemployed	Yes
Frank	m	44	nurse	No
George	m	62	social worker	Yes
Holly	f	50	housekeeper	No
Jeff	m	45	IT-consultant	No
Keira	f	23	student	Yes
Luke	m	56	unemployed	Yes
Mary	f	58	retired, active as a volunteer in a patient organization	No
Nina	f	37	high school teacher	No
Olga	f	31	police officer	No
Peggy	f	42	volunteer worker	Yes
Quirina	f	50	employed as an expert by experience in a psychiatric hospital	No
Tori	f	32	community guard	Yes
Ulrik	m	41	unemployed	Yes

The male to female ratio of our sample is 6 to 12, and the age range is from 23 to 62, with an average of 44. All were white Caucasians. Some participants reported having been free of manic symptom for years, while for others it remains an on-going struggle. Most participants had experienced symptoms and sometimes multiple hospitalizations before being diagnosed as bipolar. All but two participants were currently under psychiatric care and taking medication (Annie and Peggy were not, but had been in the past). Some participants reported

having had a single manic and psychotic episode (Annie, Frank, Jeff) and a few reported multiple hypomanic episodes and recurrent mood fluctuations never requiring hospitalization (Bea, Holly, Keira), however, most experienced several manic and depressive episodes severe enough to require hospitalization. Three participants reported having been hospitalized multiple times for periods of up to a year (Luke, Peggy, Tori). Some participants strongly identified with the bipolar label and are proud of their work as an expert by experience (Cindy, Dave, Mary, Quirina) or of being active in a patient organization (Annie, Ellen, George, Holly). Appendix A provides a short narrative description of each participant.

## **2.2. Interviews and Data Analysis**

All participants were interviewed by the first author, using a semi-structured interview. Interviews focused on the subjective experience of the participant and on the personal process of interpreting and dealing with their experience (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were asked to talk about their experiences with mania, the impact these experiences had on their lives and the approaches they had developed to cope. Participants were encouraged to talk about aspects they found personally relevant and were also asked to describe their most recent manic episode in detail. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted in one sitting and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As a starting point for our analysis, we conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts. The framework of Smith et. al (2009) provided us with an interpretative methodology focusing on subjective experience, and it was theoretically flexible enough to be suitable for a subsequent discussion within our psychoanalytic frame of reference. Following methodological guidelines from Braun & Clarke (2006), Dierckx de Casterlé et al. (2012) and Smith et al. (2009), each interview was examined multiple times, and a written report was made for each participant, outlining their narrative. We subsequently coded the interviews in detail, outlining and comparing codes and grouping them into common themes. In this iterative process, we went back and forth between the individual narratives, the codes from the case-by-case analysis and emerging themes. After a number of important turning points described by participants were selected as relevant themes (in the result section: ‘the bipolar diagnosis,’ and ‘assuming responsibility’), further analysis was conducted to establish an overall chronological trajectory. Findings were discussed between the authors, and interviews

were re-examined to check if themes accurately captured the interview data and if the themes we identified actually represented participants' trajectories. After the results were presented and discussed within our research group, the final trajectory of six stages was deemed to be the best fit. While we stayed close to the experiences and the narratives of participants at this stage of our analysis, the selection and construction of themes was guided by our research question concerning the topic of identity.

In a second stage, we situated these themes within a Lacanian theoretical framework. In doing so, we used Lacan's model of the double mirror, of which a brief overview will be given in the results section. The resulting interpretation does not build on previously existing formulations about mania within Lacanian theory. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory does not hold specific assumptions about the relationship between experiences of mania and identity. In our view, the model of the double mirror provides us with a framework to think about identity and serves as a lens to look at our results, without imposing specific assumptions on our data. Our goal in using Lacanian theory is twofold. First, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of some of the processes of identity-construction that participants describe engaging in. Second, by applying Lacanian theory to these experiences, we aim to contribute to the further elaboration and development of this theory.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Thematic Analysis

Our thematic analysis resulted in six themes, describing a trajectory from the disruptive experience of mania to the development of a personalized "bipolar identity." We first give a descriptive account of these themes, then we give a brief overview of Lacan's model of the double mirror, with which we subsequently interpret our results.

Table 2. Overview of themes, illustrated with a relevant quote

	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Quotes</i>
1	The disruptive experience of mania	"I'm not myself anymore"
2	The bipolar diagnosis	"Finally, an explanation"
3	Adopting a bipolar narrative	"In retrospect, I realized it was bipolar disorder"



4	Assuming responsibility	“I don’t want to be like that”
5	Keeping an eye on oneself	“I observe myself a lot more”
6	Personalizing the narrative	“By becoming ill, I became who I am”

### ***Theme 1. The Disruptive Experience of Mania***

All participants experienced manic episodes as a break in usual functioning, as a disruption of their sense of control, leading to shame and questions about their true identity. Participants were able to describe their manic episodes by talking about the things they did, but could not explain what compelled them to act the way they did. Some had difficulties describing their actions as theirs. They were aware that they were acting strangely, yet didn’t understand why, and qualified these actions as strange and alien. For example, Dave called his manic actions “really abnormal behavior” and Ellen described herself as “doing the craziest things.” Olga said about her actions during a manic episode: “I’m not myself anymore, it’s like it is another person.”

Crucially, it was not so much the oddness of certain behaviors that was most significant, but the fact that it was strange to them. For example, Mary stated, “It is an urge, and you can’t stop it. It’s indescribable, the kind of pressure that it is.” Holly said, “Something other than me drove me to do things ... something out of my control.” She described it as

doing things rashly, without having any control over it. You don’t have any control over what you do. Something enters your mind and you just do it, and somewhere you feel it’s not right and still you do it. ... You just can’t stop it, there is no brake on it, you just do it.

Dave said, “I’ve done things in manic periods that I would otherwise never do,” and firmly stated, “That’s not who I am.”

### ***Theme 2. The Bipolar Diagnosis***

Even though, within our sample, the trajectories leading up to a diagnosis diverged, for nearly all participants the moment of being diagnosed was a significant turning point. Participants stated that having a name for what overwhelmed them was important and was mainly associated with relief. It provided them with language to describe themselves and

helped them understand themselves better. Bea said, “It was somewhat of a relief to discover there was a name for it ... that it’s a psychological condition that can be explained.” Cindy said, “I sighed with relief, finally an explanation, finally I know why I always fluctuate like that.” Having a diagnosis for their condition helped them to overcome shame regarding some of their actions and to explain themselves to others.

### ***Theme 3. Adopting a Bipolar Narrative***

For most participants, the bipolar diagnosis initiated a process of identification and of reframing one’s disruptive experiences as symptoms of the disorder. The process starts with applying standard narratives about ‘being bipolar’ to past experiences, and with reframing memories by reappraising the past with a new understanding. For example, Quirina explained, “What I thought was a character trait, in retrospect, I realized it was bipolar disorder.” Most participants redefined certain events from their past as having been manic episodes. Typically, participants described a period of intense research about the disorder. Cindy explained,

I wanted to have more information about this and at first, I was like, I don’t want medication, I want information ... then I came home, read lots of books about it, watched lots of documentaries about it ... gaining knowledge.

In this way, what started out as an experience of disruption without explanation is incorporated into an available standard narrative. This retrospectively shifts the experience from being weird to being a particular case of a known condition: bipolar disorder. This initiates a process of identification, of adopting the identity, that consists in educating oneself about the diagnosis by reading self-help books, biographies, leaflets, etc. and by seeking out others who have had the same experiences. Participants compared their experiences with external information and descriptions, resulting in recognition. Mary explained it as follows: “I didn’t know what bipolar disorder was ... I began googling and doing research ... and only then I came to see, the more I read about it, alright, I do recognize myself in it.” In this step of the identification process, participants described adopting a new vocabulary and exploring novel narrative ways of framing experiences. Recognition and confirmation of these new narratives by significant others and peers was crucial.

#### ***Theme 4. Assuming Responsibility***

Subsequently, participants described how a descriptive use of the diagnosis changed into a story about taking responsibility for symptoms. The narrative changed from ‘I’m bipolar, I can’t help myself’ to ‘I’m not going along with my symptoms anymore.’ They came to view manic episodes as events that they can control to some extent.

Participants discussed how characteristic turning points concerned a confrontation with a loved one or an authority figure, or with a particularly unpleasant consequence of a manic episode. Ellen explained how a violent rape she experienced by a man she’d been wooing for months during a long manic phase made her seek out treatment. For Tori, the shift from “just giving in to it to fighting against it” came after a long manic period followed by a long, exhausting stay in a psychiatric hospital. For Dave the turning point was an emotional confrontation with his sister during his most recent hospital stay. He said,

That’s been a wake-up call for me. That confrontation, like, you behave like this when you are manic, and you are so different from how you normally are. ... And that difference, that I’m actually, just like another person, and not a nice person to be with, that made me realist that I don’t want to be like that.

Interestingly, a number of participants mentioned how it was the no-nonsense attitude or the intervention of a healthcare worker pointing out their own responsibility that helped bring about this shift in accountability.

At this step in the trajectory, people spoke of previous manic episodes as something they “went along with” (Quirina) or something they “just let run its course” (Peggy), as something they passively underwent. Participants described this shift as challenging, since it involves acknowledging responsibility for something they had, up to that point, considered themselves to be the passive victim of. A number of participants explained how, at a certain point, they realized they had been using their diagnosis as an excuse not to take responsibility. Dave said, “I often said, yeah well, I can’t do anything about it because I have a bipolar disorder.”

#### ***Theme 5. Keeping an Eye on Oneself***

Most participants made lifestyle changes as part of keeping manic episodes in check, but the main element they all discussed was keeping a close watch on themselves. Most described being very aware that they might at some point become manic again and watching out for

signals: “You can be well advanced in a process of recovery, but I’ll never be as naive as to think it won’t happen to me anymore, no way” (Cindy). They pointed to techniques such as consciously tracking mood, writing down activities, confessing to their partner the number of activities that they engaged in daily, etc. Mary explained,

Every day I register my mood, and when I go down a little, I can see immediately, like, OK, what did I do that day and what is going on. ... It means a lot to me, it helps a lot, it’s really something that gives me a grip on things. ... I am stable now. By really paying attention to it, I observe myself a lot more if I do something, like, how do I feel about this. ... While before I wasn’t as aware of these things. ... So, like, that, I had to learn all that by reading things in books, as a result of which I started looking at myself.

The way participants reflected on the importance of actively keeping an eye on themselves suggests that these techniques (consciously tracking mood, writing down activities, confessing to their partner, etc.) were instrumental in helping them draw conclusions about their own mental state.

Often, observing oneself involves the help of others. Ellen described the important role her partner plays as “someone who limits you and keeps an eye on you.” Most participants said that they undertook specific actions at times when they recognized a manic episode coming on, to prevent it from developing into full-blown mania. All but one of our participants were currently taking medication and described it as an important factor in maintaining stability, but the typical stance was that medication in itself is not sufficient and that it also involves actively monitoring themselves.

### ***Theme 6. Personalizing the Narrative***

The last step in the trajectory is the process of constructing a personal meaning and purpose out of manic experiences. Indeed, several participants described how they eventually came to view their manic episodes as having a personal meaning and expressing an inner truth that they didn’t realize or couldn’t express at the time. They connected manic experiences to personal issues and retrospectively thought of these as a meaningful part of their life story. Some struggled in trying to figure out what their manic episodes told them about their life, while others had more definite explanations. For example, Bea explained how she saw her most recent manic episode as almost coming to help her through some difficult circumstances

at work where she needed the energy and the excessive confidence to protect herself. Frank told us, “That’s how I make sense of it now, that I really needed that manic episode to leave my ex ... because otherwise I wouldn’t have done it.”

A number of participants explained how being bipolar had become a positive aspect of themselves and of their history. For example, Annie said, “By becoming ill I became who I am. ... If I hadn’t gone through that experience I think I would be someone completely different today. ... I would have never become who I am now.” Participants also described making their bipolar diagnosis into something meaningful by helping others who had similar experiences, for example by being active in a patient organization. Here, participants talked about themselves as mastering their bipolar disorder. Dave said,

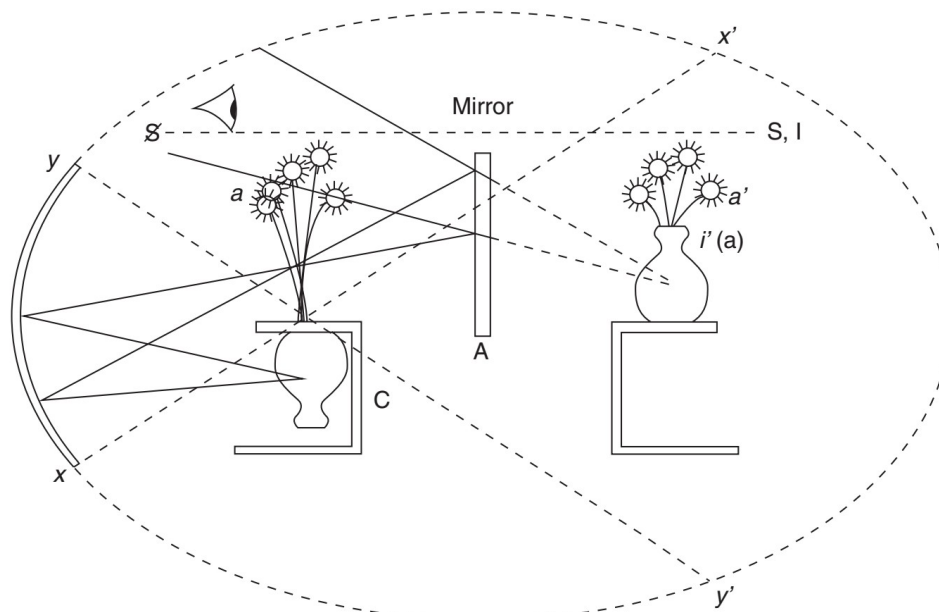
In my work as an expert by experience, I regularly tell my recovery story, and then I also talk about my manic and depressive episodes, but my final sentence is always that in spite of having a bipolar disorder you can still lead a very satisfied and rich life, in spite of the condition or the disorder.

### **3.2. Theoretical Interpretation**

These results provide a thematic description of steps our participants typically took in living with their manic experiences. While interesting as such, we believe that this descriptive trajectory cannot be separated from a broader process of changes in how the participants reconstructed their identity. Theoretically, their stepwise trajectory reflects an identification process, which can be fruitfully highlighted using Lacan’s double mirror model.

Lacan’s double mirror model [Figure 1] outlines the structure of how identifications constitute a subject’s ego, ideal ego, and ego-ideal, and how mental life is mediated by language use in relation to others (for a detailed discussion, see Vanheule, 2011). According to Lacan, language is a mirror in which we look for our own identity in relation to others.

Figure 1. Lacan's Double Mirror Model (Hook et al., 2020, p. 277)



With his double mirror model, Lacan explains how language-based identifications play a crucial function in integrating fragmented self-experiences. Initially, self-experience is disintegrated. Drives originating in the body push self-perception in multiple and often contradictory directions. By building mental images, we overcome this disjointed experience and try to develop a relatively stable image about ourselves, the ego. The ego is an anticipated and fictive wholeness that is always again challenged by drive impulses. Lacan's double mirror model starts from his earlier theory of the mirror stage, where the integrating and constitutive effects of identifying with an image—in an act of misrecognition—are discussed, but adds the idea that language is the principal mirror in which we see—and misrecognize—ourselves. Technically, this model builds on an optical experiment by the French physician Bouasse, but Lacan uses it to metaphorically situate his line of conceptual reasoning: each symbol represents a psychoanalytic concept. The left side of the figure represents disintegrated self-experience and the right side the integrated self-image that comes into being by looking at oneself in the mirror of language.

At the left, the symbol \$ represents the divided subject. In Lacan's view language cannot exactly describe who we are. On the contrary, linguistic articulation itself creates a lack in self-experience, which defines the place where subjectivity needs to be situated: in the interval between the words (or as Lacan says: signifiers) by means of which we try to represent ourselves and the world. In stark contrast with this dimension of symbolic lack, people at an imaginary level are engaged in a constant process of trying to see who they are. They do so by constructing images that would define their ego. In the model, the eye represents this self-observation. The plane mirror (A) represents the symbolic Other (in French: *Autre*), Lacan's term for language and discourse. The idea is that people use the mirror of language (A) to project an image, with the aim of seeing who they are, as ego, which misrecognizes their subjective division. In our reading of Lacan's model, narratives are crucial in this process of misrecognition: it is by telling stories about themselves and others that people construct mental images through which they hope to clarify who they are. The flowers (a), in their turn, represent the drives. In Lacan's view, drives are sensations originating from the body, about which spontaneous instinctual knowledge is lacking. Originally, drives are not integrated or mastered at all, but experienced as uncontrollable turbulence.

The right side depicts what the eye sees in the mirror of language. Here we find i'(a), the ideal ego. Self-observation is not neutral but, in Lacan's view, always 'orthopaedic.' It is guided by integrating disjointed experiences in a Gestalt-like totalizing image, which invariably misrecognizes lack and bears witness to idealization. Also on the right, Lacan situates S, the virtual subject that is no longer marked by lack and is to be situated at the level of the ego-ideal (I). In the model, the distinction between ideal ego and ego-ideal is crucial. The ideal ego is the idealized image about oneself. Identification with this ideal is called 'imaginary identification.' An ego-ideal, by contrast, is a single word or piece of discourse that has been distilled from the discourse of others and that functions as a guiding principle for defining oneself. This installs a norm for what one will subsequently want to be. Identification with such core symbolic elements is called 'symbolic identification.' Lacan states that ego-ideals hold the mirror of language in its vertical position. Without guiding ego-ideals, language does not function as a mirror in which one can construct an idealized version of oneself. For example, if an individual believes that 'fairness' is an important value in life

## CHAPTER 2

(with fairness as an example of an ego-ideal), he or she will use language to build images and narratives of himself or herself as a ‘fair individual.’ The latter is the ideal ego. Note that Lacan does not depict the ego as a concept in his model, in our reading the ego is always ‘under construction,’ a continuous process of integration, misrecognition, identification, that is driven by the tension between the drive and the divided subject on the one hand, and the ideal ego and the ego-ideal on the other hand. This narrative process of ego construction or identity formation is what is at stake here.

We should note that the double mirror model is not Lacan’s final model of drives and subjectivity. Later on in his work, he deconstructs and ultimately abandons it, indicating that drives can only be partially reflected in language (Lacan, 2004/2014). A substantial part of the drive, called the object *a*, forever escapes representation and continually runs counter to a complete or definitive conception of identity (Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2009). At this later stage in his work, Lacan (2004/2014) emphasizes the limits of images and of language to represent and master the drives. Even though, in Lacan’s reasoning, the object *a* is an insistent piece of leftover libido that cannot be represented, it does have an important function. It not only constitutes a dynamic of change in the heart of the ego but also functions as a limit to the elaboration of representations, which provides freedom.

Before turning to the results of our interview study, there is one further note on Lacan and mania to be considered: Lacan’s own contributions toward an understanding of mania are limited to just a few remarks (Lacan, 1974, 2004/2014). These have been somewhat theoretically elaborated in the literature (see Brémaud, 2017; Leader, 2013, 2015; Soler, 2002), but the subjective experience of manic symptoms has not been discussed in detail within Lacanian psychoanalysis. In his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar, Lacan (2004/2014) makes his most explicit statement about mania, declaring, “what is at issue in mania is the non-function of *a* and not simply its misrecognition” (p. 336). This quote suggests that, in mania, the process of representing or mirroring the drive is hampered. Representations fail to introduce a lack in the domain of the drive, as a result of which language use, ego functioning and drive gratification go adrift, all of which will challenge subjective experience.

Now we turn to the six themes of our thematic analysis and discuss this trajectory through the lens of Lacan’s model. Interpreted with Lacan’s model of identification, it reflects a



process of gaining mastery over mania by developing ways of representing and controlling the drive that goes adrift, and by constructing a narrative “bipolar ego.”

In terms of the double mirror, the first step of our descriptive model—‘the disruptive experience of mania’—reflects a disturbance by drive impulses. In a state of overdrive, restless urges overwhelm the ego and disrupt the functioning of language, which, in its turn, cannot be used to master the impulses. At such moments, the dimension of the subject is erased, and reduced to a passive spectator that cannot stop the urges from overwhelming the ego. As a result, actions are qualified as ego-dystonic, as not belonging to one’s identity narrative. In periods of mania, people observe aspects of themselves that they don’t recognize: I’m doing it, but that’s not who I am.

The next theme—‘being diagnosed as bipolar’—constitutes a point of recognition in the mirror of the Other, which initiates the process of capturing mania with language. Although this is a clear example of reification (Hyman, 2010), where the name of a phenomenon is assumed to be its explanation, being diagnosed was mainly associated with relief. Such diagnosis functions as a clarifying mirror-image that delineates the ego-dystonic drive impulses overwhelming the ego and language use. This is the start of a process of narrative elaboration that reconstructs the ego. The initial naming of the bipolar condition is elaborated by adopting standard narratives about bipolarity, resulting in a comparison between one’s own experiences and available narratives. Through this identification process, individuals actively reshape their identity narrative and hence their ego. They adopt a new vocabulary and explore novel narrative ways of mirroring their experiences. Participants described how it was important that significant others and peers confirmed and recognized this new identity. The narrative of ‘being bipolar’ thus functions as a new ego, i.e., a self-image that promises understanding and control, in an anticipatory act of misrecognition.

In the third step—‘assuming responsibility’—identification also installs a particular norm to measure up to. Living with mania is no longer only a matter of describing oneself as a bipolar patient, but of measuring oneself against a normative standard (ego-ideal) and actively striving to be like that (ideal ego). This entails assuming responsibility for one’s symptoms and reclaiming agency and accountability by actively adopting images of self-control. In Lacan’s double mirror model, it is precisely this link between subject and ego-ideal that keeps

the mirror upright and allows for a continuous self-experience and a consistently reflected self-image or ideal ego.

In our view, the use of observation and registration techniques (see the theme, ‘keeping an eye on oneself’), installs an observing eye to actively monitor an individual’s drive impulses in terms of the ideal of controlling bipolar disorder. Since this observing eye is crucial to the narrative construction of the bipolar identity or bipolar ego, we could rename this theme as ‘keeping an I on oneself.’<sup>128</sup> Participants described how they monitored their drive activity by leaving marks and traces. Only by checking such external representations, and interpreting these as reflections of drive impulses, were they able to draw conclusions about their inner state. Only then did the manic experience become part of their subjective experience, did it really belong to them, and were they able to intervene upon it. Representing drive impulses by means of language enabled them to integrate these into their narrative self-representations and into the mental image of themselves.

The subsequent theme of ‘personalizing the narrative’ consists in further consolidating the ideal ego by developing a narrative that bears witness to self-mastery, such that all subjective division would be undone (‘S’ in the double mirror model). After a process that primarily involves identification with the bipolar narrative, here a certain degree of separation from the standard narrative is established through developing a more personalized version of it.

## 4. Discussion

Based on 18 qualitative research interviews, we studied how manic experiences and a related process of recovery alter identifications and change the relation between drive and ego. Starting from Lacan’s theory of identification as described in his double mirror model, we discussed the initial experience of mania in terms of drive impulses overwhelming the ego and disrupting the functioning of language: the mirror of language fails to capture the impulse. As a result, people see themselves doing things they don’t identify with, leading to shame and surprise. The subsequent trajectory of recovery consists of an attempt to repair this disruption and to adopt a new narrative that makes the drive impulse representable and integrates it into one’s identity. Through imaginary identification with standard descriptions of manic behavior and related challenges, participants adopted a bipolar identity. Mania-related

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<sup>128</sup> We kindly thank *Reviewer #3* for that suggestion.

words and narratives function as a mirror in which past and prior self-narratives are reconsidered. The importance and reparatory function of such illness narratives has been recognized for various psychiatric and medical conditions (Charmaz, 1995), but is also particularly relevant in the context of mania, since it repairs the continuity of self-experience. We also observed that the idea of controlling one's manic impulses subsequently functions as an ego-ideal that provides further protection against being overwhelmed by new manic episodes, and which installs the ideal ego of a person who is in control again.

In an interesting discussion on the paradoxes of the complex and often contradictory model of selfhood that people with bipolar disorder employ, Weiner (2011) questions the assumptions of management techniques such as mood and life charting. She states that these presuppose a "true, coherent, and enduring self that is fully distinguishable from the disease" (p. 462) and that they imply that the disease can be made manageable through measuring techniques. On the basis of our analysis, we would argue that these techniques function less as ways of measuring but rather as ways of expressing. Their main function is to make drive impulses representable, so they can be integrated into the self-narrative or ideal ego. Once integrated, they can be acted upon.

In our literature review, we noticed that research tends to focus on the experience of living with bipolar disorder and less on the manic experience itself. While we tried to solicit participants' descriptions about their manic experiences, it was remarkable how most had difficulties describing their manic experiences. Participants could describe their actions and consequences, and the disruptive impact of the experience, but had difficulty grasping this experience from the inside. Participants had great difficulties capturing the experience of mania in language and relied more on general descriptions of manic behavior and of being bipolar. They tended to switch away from the first-person perspective and used phrases like "It is an urge and you can't stop it" (Mary), or "Something enters your mind and you just do it" (Holly). This likely illustrates the ego-dystonic nature of the manic impulse. Since the experience of mania is so disturbing to one's ability to represent oneself and one's actions in language, it should not come as a surprise that capturing this experience in language is difficult and that participants tended to rely on standard narratives.

Speaking about the reparatory trajectory they went through after their manic experiences was easier for the participants than talking about the experience itself. The recovery process

entailed adopting and elaborating a narrative construction about being bipolar. Such an illness narrative functions as a shared myth about mastering the drive. Through the adoption of such a narrative, the participants' experiences became understandable, manageable and could be shared with others. Such an optimistic perspective contradicts Lacan's stance, which states that, ultimately, something about the drive, something he called the object *a*, always escapes representation. The shared bipolar myth of mastering the drive seems to entail the belief that, in the end, the drive can be represented and thereby brought under control. In the model of the double mirror, we find this in S, the virtual subject who is no longer divided, the subject who can entertain the illusion of having completely mastered the drives. Yet, perhaps the strength of people's belief in such myth reflects the insisting necessity to contain the drive.

Our results need to be understood with some caveats and limitations. First of all, the trajectory of identification we outlined is not a strictly chronological, nor a strictly necessary path for each of our participants. For some participants, the stages we described formed a chronological sequence in the order they are here presented; for others, the order was somewhat different; for still others, not all themes were as present or as important. Some steps obviously require previous ones, but while some steps were explicit turning points for some participants, for others they were implicit and hardly mentioned. For example, some participants unambiguously ascribed their experiences to genetics and biology and did not engage in the process of making sense of them. Some participants were only able to control their manic symptoms after a confrontation urged them to assume responsibility, while others monitored themselves without much reflection and compared it to managing diabetes.

Our research confirms previous research on the importance of an identity narrative (e.g., Fernandez et al., 2014) but adds a crucial reference to the drive in manic episodes. In mania, the drive disrupts the ego, and in the trajectory of recovery, the bipolar narrative reconstructs the ego by adding strategies for controlling the drive. In addition, we described some of the intermediate steps between diagnosis and the construction of a bipolar identity. The relevance of assuming personal responsibility has been noted before (e.g., Jönsson et al., 2008; Morton et al., 2018), but we added the specific relevance of normative ideals that underlie the ego-narrative and the guiding role of the striving towards such norms.

Although our results describe and make sense of some important mechanisms and processes of identification in the assumption of the bipolar identity, it cannot be ruled out that

our results are applicable only to a subset of persons with bipolar disorder. Recruitment may have biased our sample towards a strong diagnostic identification. There are surely other trajectories that respond to the particular identity-related challenges of dealing with symptoms of mania. Further research can aim to identify and describe these.

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# 3

## The Crackle of the Letter. On J.M.H. Berckmans' Manic Language Treatment

In this chapter<sup>129</sup>, we discuss the literary oeuvre of the Flemish writer J.M.H. Berckmans (1953–2008) in light of his lifelong struggle with manic depression. From a Lacanian point of view, we understand the linguistic aspects of mania as a flight-of-signifiers, a metonymic derailment of the signifying chain. Berckmans' oeuvre attests to an ongoing struggle with language running wild. Through writing, Berckmans develops a number of strategies to counter this linguistic dysregulation. On the one hand, his writing tempers the metonymic derailment of the signifying chain, and on the other, it effectuates the experience of being both the subject and the author of his own words. Berckmans handles language through a meticulous process of writing and rewriting, which he refers to as mutilating and hacking at language. Simultaneously, through writing, he establishes a process of fictionalizing his immediate surroundings, which he labels the graphy of his life. Furthermore, we discuss the successive forms of address throughout his work, ranging from the abstract reader to the notating secretary and the addressees of his letters. We can consider Berckmans' practice of writing as a *sinthomatic* invention, an artful, creative, and highly singular solution for the manic derailment of language to which he was susceptible.

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<sup>129</sup> This chapter is a translation and slight reworking of: Rabaey, B. (2020). Het knetteren van de letteren. Over de manische taalbehandeling van J.M.H. Berckmans. *Psychoanalytische Perspectieven*, 38(3), 285–320. The translation was revised by Emma Acke.

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter, we examine the literary oeuvre of the Flemish writer J.M.H. Berckmans (1953–2008) in the context of his lifelong struggle with manic depression. Madness is a significant theme for Berckmans, both in his personal life and in his work. Not only do his books bear witness to his struggle with madness, in interviews he frequently discusses his mental health issues.

We do not primarily consider manic depression here as a mood disorder characterized by alternations between feeling excessively good, mania, and feeling excessively bad, depression. From a Lacanian point of view, we consider manic depression as a specific relation to language. In Berckmans' oeuvre, we encounter his struggle with language alongside various strategies he employs in an attempt to master the dysregulation of language. We will argue that the manic symptom of *flight of ideas* is a phenomenon of the signifier, which we refer to as *flight of signifiers*, and that in his writing Berckmans develops a number of strategies that aim to counteract precisely this flight of signifiers. In his oeuvre and interviews, Berckmans often discusses language and his relationship to it. The question of language and how to treat it sometimes seems to be his greatest concern. Berckmans bears witness to both sides of the manic-depressive language problem. On one hand, there is the manic side, where the parasitic aspect of language, marked by overwhelming jouissance, predominates and the signifying chain goes adrift in an endless, metonymic flight, undermining the experience of subjectivity. Berckmans manages to exert some control over this aspect through his writing. On the other hand, there is the depressive or melancholic side, where jouissance is completely petrified, glued to the signifier instead of circulating between signifiers. At such moments, language appears lifeless, leaving the subject equally lifeless. This frequently occurs to Berckmans upon completing a book, often leading to his admission to a psychiatric hospital due to severe depression.

In this study we do not attempt a psycho-biographical interpretation of Berckmans' literary oeuvre, nor do we focus on the content of his stories, but rather on their structural aspect, by which we mean: the relationship to language they bear witness to.

Apart from the linguistic aspects of manic depression, there are, of course, other elements such as the unrestrained, impulsive tendency to action, unbridled energy, pressure of speech

on one hand and the wordless depression and catatonia on the other, which we will not explore here. In addition to the literary solutions employed by Berckmans, a number of other solutions also brought him some stability during certain periods of his life, including the relationship to his wife, his successful job as a shoe importer in Italy, and a number of important friendships. However, these aspects are not the primary focus of our study. Similarly, we will not extensively address other strategies he employed to cope with his struggles, such as his drinking and drug use, and his eventual physical self-neglect and starvation.

We begin with a brief sketch of Berckmans' life, followed by a discussion of how various literary critics have analyzed and discussed Berckmans' work and his particular use of language. Subsequently, we will formulate a few starting points for a Lacanian approach to mania and manic depression. Our investigation will primarily focus on the diverse functions Berckmans' writing served for him and the different forms of writing he invented for himself.<sup>130</sup>

## 2. Life and Work of J.M.H. Berckmans

The road is long for those who walk in circles.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Tranen voor Coltrane. Fundamenten*<sup>131</sup>

Berckmans' oeuvre is often regarded as a testimony from the margins, an authentic account of a life lived in poverty. Although he is sometimes reduced to a chronicler of life at the fringes of society (Polis, 2008), his oeuvre can equally be considered as a painful lament by someone who finds no place within the social bond, remaining fundamentally isolated and only minimally able to participate in the shared discourse of society. In interviews, Berckmans regularly laments his aversion to the world, stating: 'I am disgusted by the world, by society,

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<sup>130</sup> Berckmans' work has never been translated to English; therefore, the quotes from his works in this study are our own translations. We put translations of direct quotes from his books and interviews in single quotes. Since Berckmans' work is replete with puns, double meanings, and a playfulness with rhyme and sound, akin to Joyce's later work, it can be considered equally 'untranslatable.' This is why we have opted to include the original Dutch quotations in footnotes. Another testimony to Berckmans' untranslatability is the absence of any attempts thus far to translate his work into any other language. The only exceptions are a Slovenian translation of a collection of his work, *Berckmans' beste* [*Best of Berckmans*] (Berckmans, 1997a), which was translated as *Berckmansove najboljše* (Berckmans, 2013) and a French translation of a text from *Het zomert in Barakstad* [*It Summers in Barrack City*] (Berckmans, 1993): *Polonaise pour la piétaille* (Berckmans, 1993/2000b).

<sup>131</sup> "De weg is lang voor wie in cirkels loopt" (Berckmans, 1977).

and by people' (Cornet, 1995)<sup>132</sup>, and 'They make me throw up. I can't stand people, I have no business with them' (Deer, 1995).<sup>133</sup> Only writing provides him with a somewhat stable identity and a minimal place in the world. For a comprehensive biography of Berckmans, we refer to Ceustermans (2018b). Drawing from that biography and a number of interviews with Berckmans, we will briefly sketch a few elements to illustrate the interconnectedness of madness and writing for Berckmans. His life is marked by manic depression, which is said to also afflict his brother, father and paternal aunt and uncle. Berckmans sometimes refers to it as the curse of the Berckmanses (Ceustermans, 2018b). He says: 'It is a family trait: in our family we have several cases of suicide and various types of insanity' (Adriaens, 1991).<sup>134</sup>

Berckmans' literary career began almost simultaneously with his first encounter with psychiatry. It was during a first manic breakdown, at the age of twenty, that he started to write his first novel. He was admitted to a psychiatric institution, having been briefly hospitalized a year earlier during a suicidal crisis, where he continues to write his novel. It was during his time in the institution that he adopted the pen name J.M.H. Berckmans, in admiration of the manic-depressive Dutch writer J.M.A. Biesheuvel (Hellemans, 1990). This admission marked the beginning of a period of frequent hospitalizations, as Berckmans himself stated: 'Between the ages of 19 and 25, I wandered from one institution to another' (Adriaens, 1991).<sup>135</sup> His debut novel *Geschiedenis van de revolutie [History of the Revolution]*, was published in 1977, remaining his only novel as he later shifted to writing short stories. The book presentation went largely unnoticed and was deeply disappointing for Berckmans, leading him to voluntarily admit himself to the hospital the following day. He would come to repeat this pattern of publication, followed by disappointment and hospitalization many times over for the rest of his literary life.

A number of stable and quiet years followed for Berckmans. He met a woman, got married and began working in a shoe shop. Through his persuasion, his boss sent him to Italy as a delegate for shoe import, and he moved there with his wife. Living in Italy, Berckmans thrived as a successful shoe trader for several years. During this period he hardly writes.

<sup>132</sup> "Ik ben door de wereld gedegouteerd, én door de maatschappij, én door de mensen" (Cornet, 1995).

<sup>133</sup> "Ik kots ervan. Ik moet de mensen niet hebben, ik heb geen zaken met de mensen" (Herten, 1995, p. 45).

<sup>134</sup> "Het is een familietrekje: bij ons komen verschillende zelfmoorden en vormen van krankzinnigheid voor" (Adriaens, 1991, p. 163).

<sup>135</sup> "Tussen mijn negentiende en vijfentwintigste heb ik van de ene instelling naar de andere gezworven" (Adriaens, 1991, p. 164).

Ceustermans (2018b) describes how in 1983 both literature and restlessness resurfaced in Berckmans' life. One of his older stories was published in the magazine *De Brakke Hond*, he was invited to give a lecture and was hailed as a promising young writer. Berckmans started writing again. During this period, he became increasingly restless, drank more alcohol, and engaged in sexual excesses. Marital troubles escalated, Berckmans quit his job and started his own shoe business. For Ceustermans (2018b) the question remains unanswered whether the writing caused this chaos or was an attempt at defusing it. He ponders: the more powerful Berckmans' stories are, the more chaotic his existence is, so it seems. Or is it the other way around? For the first time in years Berckmans consults a psychiatrist again.

In 1986, Berckmans and his wife returned to Belgium. Berckmans experienced a manic period during which he wrote multiple stories, but also spent most of his money and accumulated enormous debts due to an ill-fated venture as a concert promoter. As a result, he was briefly admitted to a mental hospital. This was followed by period of depression during which he hardly wrote anything. However, from 1988 onward, he started writing again, with increasingly explicit autobiographical focus. In 1989, several of his stories were published in literary magazines, and his first collection of short stories, *Vergeet niet wat de zevenslaper zei* [*Remember What the Dormouse Said*] was published. From that point on, Berckmans would go on to publish a collection of short stories almost every year.

We can trace Berckmans' further existence through his books: his struggles with poverty, debts, social services, alcohol, the death of his parents. Berckmans' remaining life is marked by recurring periods of deep depression during which he ceases to write. He was regularly hospitalized during these periods and often stayed with his parents, where he slept on the couch (his wife has left him in the meantime). These episodes alternated with more active periods of writing and engaging in other activities. The completion of a book was often followed by a period of depression. When a book was well received, this often heralded a productive period of obsessive writing. According to Ceustermans (2018b) starting a new book for Berckmans was associated with revival and with getting a grip on life again.

Towards the end of the nineties, both of his parents died within a short span of time. Berckmans' mourning found expression in his books through touching laments and letters to his parents. From that point on, Berckmans frequently suffered from physical ailments such as problems with his lungs and smoker's leg which sometimes kept him confined to his home,

which he aggravates through malnutrition and excessive drinking. Hospitalizations for alcohol withdrawal or rehabilitation became frequent, often at the insistence of his environment. Perishing, starving, wasting away, and withering are keywords in his writings from that period. ‘A Kromsky doesn’t just die. A Kromsky wastes away no a Kromsky withers away. From poverty and hardship and from commiserating the consumption in his lungs and the bulges in his duodenum’ (Berckmans, 2000a).<sup>136</sup> J.M.H. Berckmans passed away in 2008 at the age of 54. He was found dead on the sofa by a friend.

### 3. Berckmans’ Singular Language

#### 3.1. Literary Criticism

From the perspective of literary criticism the most remarkable aspect of Berckmans’ writing is his idiosyncratic use of language. As several critics have noted, throughout Berckmans oeuvre, the formal manipulation of language gradually intensifies to the point where it becomes almost completely devoid of meaning, approaching pure nonsense (de Vos, 2004; Van der Straeten, 2003). The critical response to this development is divided, receiving both praise and vehement dislike. As his oeuvre progresses, the latter response increasingly dominates.

From his early stories onward, Berckmans’ use of language stands out. Critics laud the idiosyncratic rhythm of his prose (Weverbergh, 1992) and the imploring, repetitive cadence (Hellemans, 1994). Van Erkelens (1996) notes how each sentence has rhythm and melody, and describes Berckmans’ work as prose that rhymes, thunders, groans, and reverberates throughout the reader’s mind. Warren (1996), on the other hand, labels the same work as downright blather.

Goeman (2000) describes *Ontbijt in het vilbeluik* [*Breakfast at the Knackery*] (Berckmans, 1997) as a grandiose nihilistic jumble. Jacobs (1997) calls it a curious, and alienating mixture of prose and primitive poetry. He states these texts are no longer stories, but rather litanies of rottenness and disgust, erupting from language itself, full of desperate rhymes and chanted scatologies, rising up from the bottom of the cesspool, from a low-down prophet of doom up

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<sup>136</sup> “Een Kromsky gaat niet gewoon dood. Een Kromsky verrekt nee een Kromsky crepeert. Van armoe en ontbering en van het zetten van de nering naar de tering in z’n longen en de boebels in z’n twaalfvingerige darm” (Berckmans, 2000a, p. 83).

to his neck in shit and muck. He continues by remarking that everything goes out the window: plot, logic, even the very last sense of shame, and not in the least the words themselves. Berckmans twists, what he himself calls, ‘this bizarre ramshacklely language’ into almost impossible turns, he forces verbs into non-existent conjugations, and even lapses into infantile rhyme when necessary to express himself, all in an attempt to bear witness to his living environment, which is gradually being conjured to mythological dimensions (Jacobs, 1997). Osstyn (1997), referring to the same book, describes Berckmans as Flanders’ most deeply fallen writer who has now finally crossed a line where no one can follow him anymore.

With the publication of Berckmans’ subsequent books, the critical aversion steadily increases until an almost unanimous chorus of negative criticism resounds. Jacobs (1998) speaks of silly rhymes, moaning and downright gibberish. According to Goeman (2000) Berckmans’ language and style have become completely hermetic and inaccessible to the uninitiated. For Hellemans (2001), Berckmans lost his psychologically and literary footing by falling in love with his own verbal diarrhea. His books are described as: a hodgepodge of fragmentary blather (Osstyn, 2000), monomaniacal and incomprehensible lispings (Schouten, 2002), a scatological mishmash of words (Pieters, 2018), free jazz drivel containing gratuitous associations and insipid rhyming (Peeters, 2008). Only occasionally does a more positive note emerge, such as Hellemans’ (2001) comment that Berckmans serves up shreds of the same language music that make him so distinctly unique from his debut onward.

### **3.2. Language Music and Social Criticism**

A number of authors who discuss Berckmans’ oeuvre reject the all-too-easy interpretation of his work as simply an authentic testimony from the margin, as this fails to take into account the literary form. These same authors criticize the interpretation of his work as merely an expression of his mental illness (Buelens, 2006; Demeyer, 2011; Kregting, 2001).

Some analyses approach Berckmans’ literature through the lens of music. Kregting (2001) considers Berckmans’ language production as distinctly musical and more specifically as a literary variant of jazz. Kregting analyzes several fragments and points out the stylistic elements that drive the text, such as rhyme, alliteration, sound and meaning associations, allusions, and quotations. Kregting argues that the text is shaped by typical jazz techniques, including local repetitions and variations induced by each other and existing melodies.

Buelens (2006) also analyzes Berckmans' writing by referring to musical structures. He emphasizes not only the numerous quotations and references to culture (both high and low, scented and soiled) but also the musicality of the text itself, including rhythm and sound patterns that propel the text. In addition to the jazz analogies discussed by Kregting (2001), Buelens (2006) argues that Berckmans' writing also reflects elements of popular music such as blues schemes.

Demeyer (2011) argues that Berckmans' manipulation of language is not only a result of musical influences, but also serves as a deliberate tool for social critique. He highlights how Berckmans challenges and questions various norms and conventions through his treatment of language. Berckmans violates literary conventions, breaks with the traditional form of chronicle and autobiography, disregards narrative development, and disrupts the system of the indication of time. Demeyer notes how the convention of language itself is undermined. Certain signs are repeated so often in entirely different contexts that their content becomes detached from the linguistic sign. According to Demeyer, this undermines the structures of power and ideology contained in language and challenges the conventions and norms embedded in established discourse. Ultimately, this serves as a way of dealing with the inability to express the hopelessness of existence on the fringes of society within conventional language structures. In order to describe the horror and misery of his marginalized existence and surroundings, Berckmans has to disrupt language. Similarly, in Kregting's (2001) analysis, Berckmans' use of language is seen as having revolutionary qualities, representing a revolt against society and traditional literature. However, it is not entirely clear whether it is Berckmans who is disrupting language or if it is language that is disrupting Berckmans. Even when these authors consider Berckmans' specific use of language, they implicitly assume that these are deliberate strategies deployed for purposes beyond the treatment of language itself.

Kregting (2001) rightly remarks that Berckmans' musical handling of language has consequences for the psychologization of his work and for the conventional interpretation of it as an authentic testimony from the fringes.

### **3.3. Berckmans' "Madness"**

Despite Berckmans' emphasis on the theme of madness and insanity in both his writing and interviews, many analyses of his work tend to overlook or even avoid this topic. De



Cleene (2012) is one of the few authors who openly addresses the theme of madness and insanity in Berckmans' work. He points out that most previous analyses of Berckmans' oeuvre often concentrate either on the perceived authenticity of his portrayal of life on the margins of society or on the influence of jazz and jazz structures on his texts. De Cleene (2012) undertakes a discourse analysis to explore the function of madness within the image of the author 'J.M.H. Berckmans.' He highlights how the author and his work are intertwined. In interviews, for instance, Berckmans discusses elements of his own history, which also appear in his books as the adventures of his protagonist. The position of the writer is also problematized in his books. In *Bericht uit Klein Konstantinopel [Message From Little Konstantinopel]* (Berckmans, 1996), for example, Pafke is a character about whom a first-person narrator reports, but there are also fragments suggesting that the narrator is called Pafke. During this period, Berckmans stated in an interview: 'I am not 'J.M.H. Berckmans, writer,' to my closest friends and family I am just *Pafke, the most complete cracker*, and that's all I want to be as well' (Tilkin, 1997).<sup>137</sup> De Cleene (2012) interprets Berckmans' emphasis on madness as a means of aligning himself with the cultural archetype of the *poète maudit*. He argues that the portrayal of madness in Berckmans' work functions as an authenticity claim and is employed as a rhetorical strategy. According to De Cleene, Berckmans' emphasis on madness is a form of self-positioning, self-profiling, and the adoption of a specific persona, while also functioning as a literary trope. This aspect is evident both in Berckmans' own work and in how it is received by others, both contributing to the fictional portrayal of madness. De Cleene particularly denounces the one-sided labeling of Berckmans as a 'mad' writer. According to him, the notion of Berckmans' madness says more about the way the literary world processed and reduced Berckmans' discourse than about any essential psychological characteristic of the author.

The views of literary criticism on Berckmans often tend to overlook the aspect of madness in his oeuvre, likely due to concerns about reducing his work to that of a psychiatric case. This concern is somewhat valid, since the role of literary criticism is to assess literature on its literary qualities. However, in doing so, a relevant aspect of his work remains unexamined which may hinder our understanding of the singular language treatment Berckmans invents for his unique case. In our analysis we will investigate the way Berckmans' writing practice is

<sup>137</sup> "Ik ben niet 'J.M.H. Berckmans, schrijver.' Voor mijn beste vrienden en familie ben ik gewoon Pafke, het meest complete mafke. Dat is ook het enige wat ik wil zijn" (Tilkin, 1997, p. 199).

a way of dealing with his manic-depressive troubles, which, in our Lacanian understanding, manifest as troubles with language. Our focus on Berckmans' madness is by no means meant to reduce his work to a symptom of a disorder, or to treat it as symptomatic writing. Rather, we explore his writing as *sinthomatic*, that is not so much the expression of a disorder, but rather an artistic, creative and highly singular solution for the manic derailment of language.<sup>138</sup> This perspective does not undermine the literary merits of his work, but rather uncovers an additional dimension of genius within it. Alongside its literary merits, Berckmans' writing also held a clinical value for him.

### 3.4. A Surface Analysis

Despite the variations in appreciation and interpretation of Berckmans' literary work among the aforementioned authors, they all concur that significant linguistic disruptions occur on the surface level of language, at the level of the signifier. Demeyer (2011) refers to Berckmans' disorganization of language, de Vos (2004) describes it as a grammatical shredding. Berckmans' language has been depicted as stripped from any attempt at making sense (Demeyer, 2011) or as language that has been emptied of meaning (Kregting, 2001). In a tribute, writer Elvis Peeters states that in *Ontbijt in het vilbeluik*, Berckmans serves us the sheer surface of language, the pure vehicle of communication, and it is up to us to excavate *what* is being said (Peeters, 2018). Buelens (2006) describes Berckmans' work as a kind of *Finnegans Wake* from the gutter. Van der Straeten (2003) states that Berckmans, in a furious rage, disintegrates language and consequently deconstructs the meaning of everything, words no longer refer to reality, but rather become empty signs, structural elements with which one can juggle to one's heart's content, employing musical principles such as repetition, association and modulation.

The authors discussed here unanimously agree that Berckmans' writing often revolves around playing with language rather than conveying meaning. In the following section, we will focus on the surface level of language and examine how Berckmans treats the signifier. Hellemans (2001) regards Berckmans as the author who has gone the farthest in articulating his own madness in Flemish literature. Here, we, indeed, consider Berckmans' oeuvre as an articulation of his madness; however, we perceive this not so much as a testimony about his

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<sup>138</sup> The notion of the *sinthome* is elaborated in Chapter 4, Section 4.

life but as a literal account of his struggle with the letter, a reflection of his battle with language.

## 4. A Lacanian View of Mania

### 4.1. Language in Mania

Kraepelin (1921) first classified several clinical phenomena under the term *manic-depressive insanity* in 1899. In his description of the clinical phenomenon of mania, he mentions various linguistic phenomena. Alongside the exalted mood and pressure of activity, Kraepelin describes the *flight of ideas* and the *pressure of speech* as fundamental symptoms. According to him, these symptoms stem from a heightened sensitivity to stimuli and an increased urge to act. Leader (2013) challenges this psychiatric perspective and argues for a reversal of its viewpoint. While the classic psychiatric view perceives the pressure of speech and the flight of ideas as a consequence of an elated, disinhibited mood, Leader (2013) contends that it is, in fact, the unchaining of language and speech that leads to the elated mood: “It’s not the mood that allows them to speak, but the speaking that liberates the mood” (p. 21).

Sauvagnat (2000) discusses the relationship between various elementary phenomena and different forms of psychotic functioning. The notion of elementary phenomena refers here to Lacan’s description of the initial, often linguistic, phenomena occurring at the onset of a psychotic episode. This can also be linked to De Clérambault’s theory of mental automatism, which likewise refers to phenomena taking place at the level of the signifying chain (Vanheule, 2018). Sauvagnat (2000) proposes to consider the symptom described by classical psychiatry as *flight of ideas* as the elementary phenomenon of manic-depressive psychosis. He suggests understanding both the manic *flight of ideas* and the melancholic *thought inhibition* as instances of an intrusion of the real into the symbolic. Both phenomena occur at the level of the signifying chain rather than at the level of sense and meaning, and they could be more accurately characterized as *flight of signifiers* and *inhibition of signifiers* rather than *flight of ideas* and *thought inhibition*. Leader (2013) proposes to label this phenomenon as a *flight of words*, instead of *flight of ideas*. Following Lacan’s perspective, we would propose using the term *flight of signifiers*.

Kraepelin (1921) describes the linguistic symptoms of manic pressure of speech and flight of ideas as follows: patients speak more and hurried, with the logical connections and the content of what they express fading into the background. There is an increase in the use of learned phrases and fixed word combinations, as well as the emergence of clang associations and meaningless rhyme. As a manic episode progresses, these symptoms escalate to the point of pure sound associations, where ideas are completely absent and it approaches pure nonsense. Patients talk and scream loudly, make noises, howl, whistle, string together disjointed sentences, rhyme, associate by sound, and mix different languages, etc. until eventually, all coherence and meaning vanishes, leaving only pure nonsense. According to Leader (2013), we can interpret this evolution of a manic episode as an increasing disintegration of the coherence of the signifying chain.

Lacan only makes a few remarks on mania throughout his teachings. Each remark, however, contains interesting suggestions for developing a conception of mania as a specifically linguistic phenomenon.

## 4.2. Lacan's Structural View on Psychosis

Since the 1950s, Lacan has developed the distinction between neurosis and psychosis based on their distinct relationship with language and cultural conventions. He elaborates this distinction through the concept of the *Name-of-the-Father* in his 3<sup>rd</sup> seminar, *The Psychoses* (Lacan, 1981/1993) and in his text *On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis* (Lacan, 1966/2006). The Name-of-the-Father serves as Lacan's metaphor for how the neurotic individual employs language and convention to give meaning to the enigmatic aspects of both the Other and their own drives, understanding these as subjected to a certain lawfulness. In contrast, Lacan theorizes that psychosis involves the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father and that the psychotic individual is, as it were, left to his own devices to find ways of dealing with drive-related and existential issues.

In his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Anxiety*, Lacan (2004/2014) further elaborates the distinction between neurosis and psychosis by introducing the concept of the object *a*. Lacan indicates that the drive-related, bodily aspects of human functioning cannot be completely mastered by language and convention, but that there is always a residue that remains beyond linguistic mastery: the object *a*. According to Lacan, for neurotics, the object *a* is situated in the Other

and becomes the cause of desire. When confronted with drive-related and existential issues, neurotics always pass through the Other and through language as a means of processing these issues. In contrast, Lacan (1967) argues that psychotics have their cause, their object *a*, in their pockets. When confronted with drive-related and existential issues, psychotics cannot access the Other and rely on language in the same way neurotics do. In both neurotic and psychotic functioning, the object *a* is understood as a remainder, a residual piece of bodily drive or *jouissance*, that remains unregulated by the symbolic and language. Nonetheless, it serves as a point of fixation for this unregulated *jouissance* and, therefore, provides a certain level of order.

### 4.3. Flight of Signifiers

In his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar, Lacan (2004/2014) distinguishes various forms of psychotic functioning based on different relationships with the object *a*. In schizophrenia, the object *a* and thus *jouissance*, manifests in the body that is experienced as fragmented. In paranoia and erotomania, the object *a* emerges in the Other, who is perceived as persecutory and threatening. As for mania, Lacan (2004/2014) clarifies:

Let's specify right away that what is at issue in mania is the non-function of *a* and not simply its misrecognition. No *a* comes to ballast the subject and this delivers him, in a way without any possibility of freedom, to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain. (p. 336)

Thus understood, the object *a* provides a limitation to the metonymic sliding of the signifying chain. The object *a* incarnates an unattainable point of *jouissance* and the drive, this anchors speech, which circles around this unattainable point. In cases where this object ceases to function, as Lacan argues occurs in mania, language runs wild. Geldhof (2014) explains that in the case of neurosis, the object *a* is the locus of the button tie, imparting *weight* to the spoken word. In this sense, the signifying chain always returns to the same point. However, in mania, this function is disrupted. By employing the term 'button tie,' Lacan indicates the interconnection between signifier and signified.<sup>139</sup> This connection is not inherent but rather established through convention. In Lacan's theories from the fifties, it is

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<sup>139</sup> Lacan's term is *point de capiton*, translated as *quilting point* by Grigg (in Lacan, 1981/1993) and as *button tie* by Fink (in Lacan, 1966/2006).

the Name-of-the-Father that serves as such a button tie. However, in his work from the 1960s, Lacan situates the function of the button tie in the object *a* (Geldhof, 2014). When the object *a* fails to function, there are no button ties and language derails at the level of the signifying chain. Both Soler (2002) and Brémaud (2017) associate various manic symptoms with the absence or dysfunction of button ties. Soler (2002) states that the multitude of manic phenomena can be organized and comprehended as a defect of the button ties. According to Brémaud (2017), several traits typically associated with mania, such as euphoria, excitement, and flight of ideas, should be considered as elementary psychotic phenomena resulting from the absence of button ties in the signifying chain (Brémaud, 2017).

Without button ties, no meaning is produced as signifiers merely follow one another in an endless sequence, where *jouissance* leaps from signifier to signifier. The signifying chain runs wild and *jouissance* roams free in a metonymic sliding—or flight—from signifier to signifier. This is why we propose the term *flight of signifiers* instead of *flight of ideas*. The driving force behind this process is not a succession of ideas, but rather the absence of button ties at the level of the signifying chain. The problem lies precisely in the failure of language, in manic functioning, to convert drive-related impressions into coherent ideas (Vanheule, 2019). And just as the unending series of successive signifiers without button ties fails to establish a stable meaning, no subject appears either.

The distinguishing characteristic of manic psychotic functioning lies in its inherent instability. Alongside the typical manic linguistic phenomena, we also encounter physical phenomena: patients experience a physical drive that rushes them forward, sometimes resembling the disturbing bodily experiences of schizophrenia. Paranoid phenomena are often present as well: as a manic episode progresses, and the manic individual feels addressed by everything he encounters, a paranoid delusion frequently heralds the culmination of a manic episode. And inevitable, it seems, there is always a shift to the depressive side, where we observe melancholic phenomena, sometimes verging on catatonia. Although these melancholic symptoms may appear less fixed than in typical cases of melancholia (Leader, 2013). Lacan's (2004/2014) remark regarding the non-functioning of the object *a* can also be interpreted as suggesting that in manic-depressive functioning, bodily *jouissance* is not situated in a fixed place but rather pops up in various places: excessive *jouissance* can manifest in the body, language, or the Other. There exists, as it were, a looser relationship to

the object *a*, allowing for greater mobility. Geldhof (2014) states that the subject of melancholy is radically anchored to the object *a*, whereas the subject of mania has become fundamentally detached from it.

In a later text, *Television*, Lacan (1974/1987) qualifies manic excitation as an instance of “the return to the real of that which is rejected, that is, language” (p. 26). Mahieu (2008) argues, in a discussion of Henry Ey’s (1952) classic study on mania *Étude N° 21*, that Lacan’s reflections on mania are consistent with Ey’s dichotomy. Ey distinguishes, on the one hand, the bodily aspect of mania, excitation, which Lacan (1974/1987) discusses in *Television*, and on the other hand the linguistic side, the flight of ideas, to which Lacan’s (2004/2014) remark in the 10<sup>th</sup> seminar refers. In our discussion, we will primarily focus on the linguistic dimension of mania.

Drawing from Lacan’s remarks in *Seminar 10* and *Television*, Brémaud (2017) summarizes Lacan’s views on mania as follows: the jouissance that returns to the real, in the context of mania, comes to be localized not in the body or within a persecutory Other, but rather within the signifying chain itself, in the pure metonymy of the signifying chain. What is specific to mania is that jouissance emerges in language itself. The subject—if we can still speak of a subject in such moments—is at the mercy of the sheer metonymic sequence of the signifying chain, of the flight of signifiers. The challenge in navigating such manic experiences, therefore, lies in setting a limit to this incessantly slipping metonymy and overwhelming jouissance (Vanheule, 2019).

#### 4.4. Manic Llanguage

In Lacan’s teaching from the 1950’s, he considers language as being in opposition to jouissance, a means to channel and limit jouissance. However, in the 1970’s from his 20<sup>th</sup> seminar onward, Lacan comes to perceive language itself as affected with jouissance and as a source of dysregulation and chaos. Language is no longer understood as something capable of curbing jouissance and limiting drive-related aspects of human experience, but rather as permeated by the drive and as a force of jouissance.

For this mad, jouissance-laden aspect of language, Lacan (1975) introduced the neologism *lalangue* in his 20<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Encore*. The neologism *lalangue* can be translated in English as *llanguage* (Lacan, 1975/1989). With *llanguage*, Lacan designates the libidinally charged and

nonsensical flow of sounds that the child initially encounters in its interactions with the Other. Over time, meaning and sense become intertwined with this initial flow of sounds, leading to the construction of language from and upon llanguage.

Miller (2005b) states that the initial encounter with llanguage is always traumatic for everyone. The sound of llanguage is never harmonious, it is not attuned to anyone, and this disharmony cannot be bandaged, mended, or cured. Llanguage turns the one it comes to inhabit, and who will come to speak it, into a sickly being, an invalid. All one can do with it, is create an oeuvre. In his 23<sup>rd</sup> seminar, Lacan (2005/2016) mentions mania while discussing James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. He refers to Sollers (1975) who argues that Joyce, through constant references to other languages within the English language, reconfigured the English language in a way that it no longer exists in its own right. Sollers uses the neologism *l'élanguages*<sup>140</sup> to designate Joyce's language treatment. Lacan (2005/2016) states:

I suppose he thereby means to designate something like the elation that we are told lies at the root of a sort of sinthome<sup>141</sup> that in psychiatry we call mania. Mania is indeed what Joyce's last work looks like ... namely *Finnegans Wake*. (p. 4)

Lacan compares Joyce's language treatment in *Finnegans Wake* to what happens to language in mania. Miller (2005a) comments on this and suggests that we can view Joyce's work in *Finnegans Wake* as an illustration of how language is overwhelmed and destroyed by a surge of llanguage. Miller states we can speak of mania whenever language moves towards its own decomposition or dissolution. Thereby the order of language reveals itself to be decomposed, undone, and filled with echoes that it raises, homophonically, in other languages.

Lacan (2005/2016) discusses how, for Joyce, the act of writing and his treatment of language (as well as the construction of his writer's ego) function as attempted solutions, ways of coping with various linguistic and bodily phenomena he was experiencing. The language treatment in *Finnegans Wake*, therefore, serves as a way of trying to control and mitigate the encroachment and welling up of llanguage.

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<sup>140</sup> A contraction of *élan*—rapture—and *les langues*—the languages, and alluding to *élanguer*—to remove the tongue (Grigg, in Lacan, 1989).

<sup>141</sup> This should probably be 'symptom.' See Harari (1995) for a discussion on the potential symptom/sinthome confusion in transcribing Lacan's spoken teachings.



#### 4.5. Language Enjoying Itself

The common thread in Lacan's remarks about mania is the view that in mania, *jouissance* is situated located within language itself. Either because the object *a* no longer functions and *jouissance* is no longer anchored, or because the drive-infused side of language itself, language, is no longer restrained by language, allowing the parasitic nature of language (or language) to have free rein. As a result, speaking, thinking, and language as a whole go awry, leaving the subject adrift in its slipstream, or even absent altogether. The metonymic side of language, characterized by the pure sequential connection of signifiers, gets the upper hand, while the metaphoric side, where a signifier refers to another signifier and meaning and subjectivity emerge, is absent in this context.

As a manic episode progresses, the metonymic side progressively intensifies leading to the degeneration of thought and speech into pure associative nonsense, speech without a subject. The transition to the melancholic pole of manic depression can also be understood as a linguistic phenomenon within the signifying chain. While mania is marked by the abundant presence of *jouissance* in language, obliterating meaning, in melancholy *jouissance* is petrified. The circulation of *jouissance* ceases, and meaning becomes massive. In mania, words lose their meaning, and there is only the metonymic sliding from signifier to signifier, the flight of signifiers. In melancholy, however, words regain their crushing weight of meaning, and there is barely any metonymic movement between signifiers (Leader, 2013). In mania, the metonymic chaining up of signifiers derails and no meaning or subject appears between the signifiers, resulting in speech without subject. In melancholy, the metonymic process comes to a halt, exerting deadening impact on the experience of subjectivity.

Having outlined the Lacanian perspective on mania as a phenomenon at the level of the signifying chain, we will now explore how we can interpret Berckmans' writing as a sustained defense against the metonymic derailing of language. From a Lacanian understanding of mania, we can understand this as an attempt at treatment on the level of the signifier, the linguistic realm where manic language derailment is situated.

## 5. The Multiple Functions of Writing for Berckmans

### 5.1. Berckmans and the Necessity of Writing

I have a very hard time functioning psychologically... At least, there's a book again, eh, there's a book again.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Interview De Morgen*<sup>142</sup>

We want to write but the ink is frozen and we can only write the woe. To speak the woe is presently impossible.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Slecht nieuws voor doctor Paf de Pierennaai*<sup>143</sup>

I have to write, and I really do have to write the wretchedness.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Je kan geen twintig zijn op suikerheuvel*<sup>144</sup>

In almost every interview and in many of his books, Berckmans stresses the absolute necessity of writing for him. His remarks in a 1993 television interview are illustrative in this respect. Seated at the bar of Café De Raaf, Berckmans fulminates about how maddening his loneliness is and how the ugliness and banality of the world fill him with despair. He explains how his writing is the sole means by which he endures his loneliness, anxiety and despair, the only thing that allows him survive (Coenen, 1993). Berckmans explicitly links his writing to his battle with manic depression, stating: 'Manic-depressive psychosis. ... All my books are battles with manic depression: I've won' (Vandendaele, 1996).<sup>145</sup> He explains: 'As long as I write my required number of pages each day, my mind remains somewhat balanced. It is only when writing fails me that I start to destabilize' (Adriaens, 1991)<sup>146</sup>; 'Organizing and structuring my despair and the chaos, the immense chaos, more than enough reason for doing what I do' (Berckmans, 1994)<sup>147</sup>; 'In fact, I only keep writing simply to organize my life, because if I don't, I go mad. And I've already been mad, I know what it's like to be mad. I

<sup>142</sup> "Ik functioneer psychisch heel moeilijk... Maar kom, 't boek is er weer hè, 't boek is er weer" (Berckmans, in Jacobs, 2000).

<sup>143</sup> "Wij willen schrijven maar de inkt is bevrozen en wij kunnen alleen nog schrijven de last. Spreken de last is thans onmogelijk" (Berckmans, 1998, p. 26).

<sup>144</sup> "Ik moet schrijven en ik moet wel degelijk schrijven de mottigheid" (Berckmans, 2006, p. 135).

<sup>145</sup> "Manisch-depressieve psychose. ... Al mijn boeken zijn gevechten met de manische depressie: ik heb gewonnen" (Vandendaele, 1996, p. 160).

<sup>146</sup> "Zolang ik mijn aantal bladzijden per dag haal, blijft mijn hoofd een beetje in evenwicht. Het is pas als het schrijven me niet lukt, dat ik begin te destabiliseren" (Adriaens, 1991, p. 162).

<sup>147</sup> "Mijn wanhoop en de chaos, de immense chaos organiseren en structureren, reden genoeg om te doen wat ik doe" (Berckmans, 1994, p. 156).

would rather not go mad again' (Deer, 1995).<sup>148</sup> In interviews, Berckmans frequently positions his writing as a defense against suicide, stating unequivocally: 'If I can't write anymore, I will commit suicide. For sure' (Verhoeven, 1993).<sup>149</sup> Moreover, it is the ongoing work as a writer that keeps this from happening—at least for the time being. He shares: 'I have experienced it before. Once, a suicide attempt. ... But I won't do it again. I think. Maybe later, who knows, but not for the time being. I still have work to do' (de Graeve, 1997).<sup>150</sup>

In what follows, we examine the specific ways in which his writing is crucial for Berckmans.

## 5.2. Psychosis and Writing

You guys remember me. I'm that cuckoo writer.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Rock & roll met Frieda Vindevogel*<sup>151</sup>

Maleval (1994) highlights the importance of creation as a stabilizing factor for psychotic functioning. In line with Freud's understanding of delusion as an attempt at healing, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the creative aspects involved in the work of psychic elaboration specific to psychosis. The hypothesis of the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father not only presupposes an initial and fundamental disorganization but also acknowledges the importance of a mental work of construction, of psychic elaboration that aims to address or repair the effects of the foreclosure. Maleval (1994) identifies this as a 'push-to-create'<sup>152</sup> inherent to the structure of psychosis. Specifically, Maleval suggests that literary production has a significant potential for contributing to recovery. Lippi, Lehaire & Petit (2016) and Stevens & Bryssinck (2018) also point to the restorative potential of creative writing.

Maleval (1994) describes several functions that writing can fulfill as a treatment for the experience of disordered *jouissance* in psychosis. He distinguishes between the deposition, encryption and dumping of *jouissance*.<sup>153</sup> The first function, the deposition of *jouissance*, refers to the act of writing itself, which helps to dispose some of the excessive *jouissance*.

<sup>148</sup> "Eigenlijk schrijf ik gewoon nog om mijn leven te organiseren, want anders word ik zot. En ik ben al zot geweest, ik weet wat het is om zot te zijn. Dat zou ik liever niet meer worden" (Herten, 1995, p. 49).

<sup>149</sup> "Als ik niet meer kan schrijven, pleeg ik zelfmoord. Zeker weten" (Verhoeven, 1993).

<sup>150</sup> "Ik heb het al meegemaakt. Eén keer een zelfmoordpoging. ... Maar dat doe ik niet meer. Denk ik. Misschien later, wie weet, maar voorlopig toch niet. Ik heb nog werk, he" (de Graeve, 1997, p. 27).

<sup>151</sup> "Jullie kennen me nog wel. Ik ben die kierewiete schrijver" (Berckmans, 1991, p. 51).

<sup>152</sup> Maleval's (1994) term is: *pousse-à-la-crétation*.

<sup>153</sup> Maleval's (1994) terms are: *le dépôt*, *le chiffage*, *le vidage de la jouissance*.

However, this practice only temporarily succeeds in disposing an excess of *jouissance* and often results in a practice that must be performed over and over. Hence the insistent necessity of certain writing practices for psychotic patients. The encryption of *jouissance* is the second function, where writing contributes to further elaborating delusions or providing meaning to intuitions and hallucinations. In this case, writing helps in the process of making enigmatic experiences intelligible. The third function is the dumping of *jouissance*, pointing out that through the separation of the written work, there is also a separation of *jouissance*. This separation can occur through publication or, in some cases, through destruction or giving away of the work, as some authors are inclined to do. Maleval advises caution, as both publication and destruction of a work can have disastrous consequences, such as periods of severe depression or even leading to the *passage-à-l'acte* of suicide. Stevens & Bryssinck (2018) add a fourth way to Maleval's series of how writing can serve as a treatment, which is through identification with the role of the writer, poet or artist.

Stevens & Bryssinck (2018) formulate the distinction between Maleval's (1994) first two functions of writing—the deposition and the encryption of *jouissance*—as the distinction between 'impossible writing' and 'writing the impossible.' In the case of impossible writing, language is not utilized as a means of communication. The Other and language are radically rejected, and authors rebel against language, through the frequent use of neologisms for example. This form of writing does not establish a social bond, but rather reinforces the exclusion. We can consider this writing as a formal intervention on language, where the focus is on the letter and the signifier, with meaning being subordinate. The second case, writing the impossible, more embedded in the symbolic realm and shared discourse. This writing attempts to assign meaning to experiences rather than being a direct outpouring of *jouissance*. This type of language treatment involves meaning, establishes a connection to the Other and holds greater potential for anchoring to the symbolic order and establishing a social bond with others. According to Stevens & Bryssinck (2018), 'writing the impossible' has more potential for the subject.

In what follows, we will explore how these two poles manifest in Berckmans' authorship. We will not elaborate on the function of publishing his works or on the importance of identifying with the role of the writer. First, we will discuss the formal treatment of language in Berckmans' writing, which takes place at the level of the letter and the signifier (5.3). Then,

we will discuss the role of writing in dealing with and making sense of his immediate environment, by way of fictionalizing reality, which occurs at the level of meaning and sense (5.4).

### 5.3. The Treatment of Language

And whether the letters fester or crackle or sputter or shriek, it's always the same bullshit anyway.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Ontbijt in het vilbeluik*<sup>154</sup>

You don't know what it is to write / you don't know that you have to write and cross out and arrange and scrape and file and veneer and polish until you become half insane / you don't know that / that you have to fiddle and fumble a hundred thousand times with every word before it's finally in its place / that you reread everything you write a hundred thousand times and even then you doubt it / whether it's any good / you don't know anything about that / the cancerous festering growth of letters and words and full stops and commas in your head / you don't know that / you have no feeling whatsoever for it.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Rock & roll met Frieda Vindevogel*<sup>155</sup>

#### **'Goddamn hard work'**

At first glance, Berckmans' books appear to be a pretty straightforward reflection of manic language. Kraepelin's (1921) descriptions of manic language productions align perfectly with the characteristics of Berckmans' writing discussed by literary critics (see *supra*). Berckmans' writing is associative, fragmentary, jumps from one subject to another, incorporates elements from his surroundings, is based on metonymic sliding rather than the production of meaning, is brimming with sound associations and rhyme, and often verges on complete nonsense. As Demeyer (2011) notes, the progression of sentences is not driven by content but by metonymy.

In interviews, Berckmans frequently discusses his writing practice and the challenges he faces with language. Despite the initial deceptive impression his texts may give,

<sup>154</sup> "En of de letteren nu etteren of knetteren dan wel spetteren of schetteren, het is toch altijd dezelfde zever" (Berckmans, 1997b, p. 28).

<sup>155</sup> "Jij weet niet wat schrijven is / jij weet niet dat je moet schrijven en schrappen en schikken en schaven en vijlen en fineren en politieren tot je half krankzinnig wordt / dat weet jij niet / dat je aan elk woord honderdduizend keer moet prutsen en frutselen voor het eindelijk op z'n plaats staat / dat je alles wat je schrijft honderdduizend keer herleest en dat je er dan nog aan twijfelt / of het wel goed is / daar weet jij niets van / het kankerende etterende gezwel van letters en woorden en punten en komma's in je hoofd / dat ken jij niet / daar heb jij geen affiniteit mee" (Berckmans, 1991, p. 69).

Berckmans' literary production is the result of a meticulous and arduous writing process. De Cleene (2012) highlights, the precision and thoroughness with which Berckmans approaches his writing process, paying attention to the smallest detail. In almost every interview, Berckmans emphasizes the laborious and strenuous job writing is for him. He states: 'The story I wrote for the most recent issue of *Nieuw Wereld Tijdschrift*, I tinkered with every word at least a hundred times. It really is a struggle, a fight—sometimes even a losing battle' (Adriaens, 1991)<sup>156</sup>; 'Do you know that I sometimes spend three weeks thinking about the word order of a single sentence? I am a compulsive writer: I can't live without it' (Vandendaele, 1996)<sup>157</sup>; 'Writing is goddamn hard work, a 75-page novella takes me six months' (de Graeve, 1997).<sup>158</sup> Ceustermans (2018b) compares Berckmans' writing process to that of a sculptor where he gradually sands away and eliminates elements from earlier, longer versions of stories until the final composition emerges. Berckmans himself describes the procedure of his writing as follows:

I write at my parents' house, at night, by hand. First I write everything down in large spiral notebooks without any order, and then I order it all on index cards. After that, there is a final ordering that then goes into the computer. It is a time-consuming method, but that is how I do it. (Vandendaele, 1996)<sup>159</sup>

Berckmans describes writing not only as a laborious process, but also as something he derives no pleasure from. When asked if he enjoys writing, he replies, 'Ugh, horrible, no! It hurts' (Deer, 1995).<sup>160</sup> Later he states:

<sup>156</sup> "Het verhaal van me dat in het jongste nummer van het *Nieuw Wereld Tijdschrift* staat, daarvan heb ik aan elk woord wel honderd keer geprutst. Het is echt boksen en vechten—tegen de bierkaai, soms" (Adriaens, 1991, p. 168).

<sup>157</sup> "Weet je dat ik soms drie weken nadenk over de woordvolgorde in één zin? Ik ben een dwangmatige schrijver: ik kan niet zonder" (Vandendaele, 1996, p. 161).

<sup>158</sup> "Schrijven is godverdomme heel hard werken, een half jaar aan een novelle van 75 pagina's" (de Graeve, 1997, p. 27).

<sup>159</sup> "Schrijven doe ik bij mijn ouders, 's nachts, met de hand. Eerst schrijf ik alles ongeordend in grote spiraalschriften op, en daarna ga ik alles rangschikken op steekkaarten. En daarna volgt er nog een definitieve rangschikking die dan in de pc gaat. 't Is een omslachtige methode, maar zo doe ik het" (Vandendaele, 1996, p. 157).

<sup>160</sup> "Oe, afschuwelijk, nee! Het doet pijn" (Herten, 1995, p. 49).

I do my own thing, you know, I'm very satisfied with that, and it occupies me in a very captivated way. Not in a pleasurable way because I don't find it pleasurable, it is difficult, very difficult, I find it very hard. It is really strenuous. (Jacobs, 2000)<sup>161</sup>

Yet, at the same time, Berckmans describes his writing as absolutely necessary and compelling, stating: 'To me, writing is the sole meaning of my existence. The rest is nonsense. Writing occupies me 24/7' (Verhoeven, 1993)<sup>162</sup>; 'I very often think that I am going to stop, that I'd rather waste away. I would *like to*, but I *can't*. I *have* to write, compulsively, obsessively' (Herten, 1995)<sup>163</sup>; 'I often think: Just stop it, boy, find a job while you still can, possibly...' (Jacobs, 2000).<sup>164</sup> We can but wonder: what exactly makes writing so necessary for Berckmans?

### ***'I mutilate, I hack at language'***

In an interview, Berckmans says:

Four years ago, I was still seriously manic and then seriously depressed, and that can come back; a psychosis like that can strike at any moment, but for the time being, I manage to write it under control. As long as I make it to my number of pages a day, my head remains somewhat balanced. It's only when the writing fails me that I begin to destabilize. (Adriaens, 1991)<sup>165</sup>

The notion of *writing it under control* is crucial here, as there appears to be something in his writing that keeps his psychosis and his manic episodes in check. In another statement regarding his writing, Berckmans reveals how this works, he states: 'I mutilate, I hack at language' (de Graeve, 1997).<sup>166</sup> In line with our earlier description of manic language as a

<sup>161</sup> "Ik doe mijn eigen ding, weetjewel, ik ben daar zeer tevreden over, en ik ben er op een heel geboeide manier mee bezig. Niet op een plezante manier, want ik vind het niet plezant, het is moeilijk, heel moeilijk, ik vind het heel zwaar. Het is zeer inspannend" (Jacobs, 2000).

<sup>162</sup> "Schrijven is voor mij de enige zin van het bestaan. De rest is flauwekul. Met schrijven ben ik 24 op 24 uur per dag bezig" (Verhoeven, 1993).

<sup>163</sup> "Ik denk heel dikwijls dat ik ermee ga ophouden, dat ik ga vegeteren. Ik zou het willen, maar ik kan het niet. Ik moet schrijven, dwangmatig, obsessieel" (Herten, 1995, p. 49).

<sup>164</sup> "Ik zit ook vaak te denken: 'Hou daar nu toch eens mee op jongen, zoek een job nu het nog kan, eventueel...'" (Jacobs, 2000).

<sup>165</sup> "Vier jaar geleden was ik nog zwaar manisch en vervolgens zwaar depressief, en dat kan terugkomen; zo'n psychose kan op ieder willekeurig moment toeslaan, maar voorlopig slaag ik erin het onder controle te schrijven. Zolang ik mijn aantal bladzijden per dag haal, blijft mijn hoofd een beetje in evenwicht. Het is pas als het schrijven me niet lukt, dat ik begin te destabiliseren" (Adriaens, 1991, p. 162).

<sup>166</sup> "Ik vermink, ik hak in de taal" (de Graeve, 1997, p. 26).

flight of signifiers, a metonymic sliding of the signifying chain, we can interpret Berckmans' meticulous writing, mutilating and hacking at language, as a way of countering this metonymic slippage and derailment. Vervoort (2015) describes Berckmans' writing as an attempt to defuse language. Berckmans seems to be passively subjected to language, and the act of writing and the meticulous editing and reworking grants him a certain mastery over language, imposing a limit on the endless metonymic flight of signifiers, and providing him a certain authorship over language.

***'I often write things without knowing what they mean'***

In any case, Berckmans is not primarily—if at all—concerned about the meaning of his texts. As he states: 'Now I'm making music with language. Writing is my way of making music. ... The rhythm and the sound of my sentences is more important than how exactly a story ends' (Verhoeven, 1993).<sup>167</sup> He further adds: 'You can chant these texts, you can sing them... That's what I aspire to more and more, which also means that I aim to get rid of content' (Vandendaele, 1996, p. 160).<sup>168</sup> Berckmans emphasizes that clarity or understanding of references in his work is of little importance, as long as they sound good: 'In Baxter there are references to things that people often don't understand, that are unclear, but that sound good. It is of little importance whether these are clear to the reader or not. It's what's written down, it's nicely put, it sounds good, and that's the most important' (Jacobs, 2000).<sup>169</sup> Moreover, Berckmans does not consider his writing as a reflection of his inner life either. When asked if he tries to share his innermost feelings with his readers<sup>170</sup>, he responds in a somewhat perplexed manner, saying: 'No, it's not like that. I just want to... Shit, what a complicated question you ask me, goddammit. Writing is necessary to give my existence a backbone. I write because otherwise, I'll waste away. If I don't write or make music or draw,

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<sup>167</sup> "Nu maak ik muziek met taal. Schrijven is mijn manier om muziek te maken. ... Het ritme, de klank van mijn zinnen zijn belangrijker dan hoe een verhaal precies eindigt" (Verhoeven, 1993).

<sup>168</sup> "Je kunt die teksten scanderen, je kunt ze zingen... Daar wil ik steeds meer naar toe, wat nu ook wil zeggen dat ik me van inhoud wil ontdoen" (Vandendaele, 1996, p. 160).

<sup>169</sup> "In Baxter staan verwijzingen naar dingen die mensen vaak niet begrijpen, ze zijn onduidelijk, maar ze klinken wel. Het is ook van weinig belang of ze nu duidelijk zijn voor de lezer of niet. Het staat er, het staat er mooi, het klinkt goed, en dat is het belangrijkste" (Jacobs, 2000).

<sup>170</sup> The question was: "Wil je per se je zielenroerselen delen met een lezerspubliek?" (Dierckx, 2000, p. 108).



I'm fucked. Without that, there's no point anymore' (Dierckx, 2000).<sup>171</sup> Ceustermans (2018b) notes that language itself is the story for Berckmans.

When asked about the meaning of his writing or about the intentions behind his words, Berckmans invariably responds in a somewhat perplexed manner. This reflects his experience of being subjected to language. Several statements from Berckmans in interviews illustrate this: 'I think that's a nice image. I don't express any conviction with it' (Cornet, 1995)<sup>172</sup>, 'I just happened to use the epithet *inglorious* for that because I find it poetic. I choose my epithets because of their poetic power. I frequently use images and words simply because I find that as a sequence of successive images or words, they have poetic power' (Cornet, 1995)<sup>173</sup>, 'That's something that came to mind. ... I often write things without knowing what they mean' (Cornet, 1995).<sup>174</sup>

### ***'It just keeps coming'***

Reviewers often note the diverse range of language that appears in Berckmans' texts. De Vos (2004) remarks how Berckmans incorporates various forms of language, including nursery rhymes, insipid jokes, dull bar talk, eclectic elevated language, hackneyed puns, quotations, gothic post-punk's profound platitudes, doggerel from Flemish schmaltz songs, meaningless lyrics from glitter rock, sleazy innuendos, parochial philosophy, unabashedly Flemish dialects. Berckmans himself says: 'Bible texts, song lyrics, children's songs, they enter my books naturally, I know them by heart. That's what my books ask for' (de Graeve, 1997).<sup>175</sup> Van Hulle (1997) states that Berckmans presents it as if he catches the language by surprise. Peeters (2008) describes it as follows: 'Berckmans uses everything he finds in his single-person flat: dialect, nursery rhymes, obscenities' Indeed, it seems as if Berckmans *writes off* everything that presents itself to him, or as he states, he *writes it under control*. It is

<sup>171</sup> "Nee, zo is het niet. Ik wil gewoon... Shit, nu stel je me daar zo'n ingewikkelde vraag, godverdomme. Schrijven dient om mijn bestaan een ruggegraat te geven. Ik schrijf want anders verrek ik. Als ik niet schrijf of muziek maak of teken, dan verrek ik. Zonder dat heeft het geen zin meer" (Dierckx, 2000, p. 108).

<sup>172</sup> "Ik vind dat een mooi beeld. Ik druk daar geen overtuiging mee uit" (Cornet, 1995).

<sup>173</sup> "Ik heb daar toevallig het epitheton *roemloos* voor gebruikt, omdat ik dat poëtisch vind. Ik kies mijn epitheta omwille van hun poëtische kracht. Ik gebruik heel vaak beelden en woorden, gewoon omdat ik vind dat ze als beelden of woorden die samen achter elkaar staan een poëtische kracht hebben" (Cornet, 1995).

<sup>174</sup> "Dat is iets wat mij te binnen schoot. ... Ik schrijf wel vaker dingen waarvan ik niet weet wat ze betekenen" (Cornet, 1995).

<sup>175</sup> "Bijbelteksten, songteksten, kinderliedjes, die komen er vanzelf in, ik ken ze vanbuiten. Mijn boeken vragen daarom" (de Graeve, 1997, p. 26).

as if language possesses a certain autonomy that Berckmans only manages to somewhat master indirectly. As he puts it:

The words crawl on the paper like a colony of red ants on a flat stone. They obey their blunt innate urge to march. They don't know where to and they don't know why. They just march. They say nothing. They don't sing. They are silent. They walk in a straight line and perfectly on the beat. They raise their heads and stare at you in bewilderment. They don't know what they mean and neither do you. They're naked. They're cold. They shiver. (Berckmans, 1990)<sup>176</sup>

Vervoort (2015) states that above all, Berckmans was someone who managed to beat the shit out of language in an inimitable way. Considering the almost autonomous *marching* of language that Berckmans attests to, which we can view as an instance of the manic flight of signifiers, and considering Berckmans' perplexity regarding his language productions, we have to reverse this proposition: it is language, or even llanguage, that beats the shit out of Berckmans. Berckmans' literary production is a sustained effort to defend himself against being subjected to this autonomous marching and pulsating of llanguage. In interviews, Berckmans describes writing as something that almost happens to him, as something that overpowers him: 'Come on, man, inspiration, what is that? ... It goes on and on and on and on. One book after another. ... Inspiration, that is not the problem. Technique is the problem. ... It just keeps coming' (Cornet, 1995).<sup>177</sup> He also says: 'I never make a sketch, I never make a preliminary study, I don't make anything. I just start' (de Graeve, 1997)<sup>178</sup> and:

On the other hand, I have no real intention with what I write, I just write what I write. I am not someone who necessarily wants to convey a message, I just write my stuff. And then afterwards I think, *what's this?*, but that's all there is to it. (Tilkin, 1997)<sup>179</sup>

<sup>176</sup> "De woorden kruipen over het papier als een kolonne rode mieren over een platte steen. Ze gehoorzamen aan hun botte aangeboren drang om te marcheren. Ze weten niet waarheen en ze weten niet waarom. Ze marcheren maar. Ze zeggen niets. Ze zingen niet. Ze zwijgen. Ze lopen stokstijf in het gelid en perfect in de maat. Ze heffen hun koppen en staren je verbijsterd aan. Ze weten niet wat ze betekenen en jij weet het evenmin. Ze zijn naakt. Ze hebben 't koud. Ze huiveren" (Berckmans, 1990, p. 128).

<sup>177</sup> "Allez jong, inspiratie, wat is dát? ... Dat gaat maar door en door en door en door. Het ene boek komt na het andere. ... Inspiratie, dat is het probleem niet. Techniek is het probleem. ... Het blijft maar komen" (Cornet, 1995).

<sup>178</sup> "Ik maak nooit een project, ik maak nooit een voorstudie, ik maak niks. Ik begin gewoon" (de Graeve, 1997, p. 26).

<sup>179</sup> "Anderzijds heb ik ook geen echte bedoeling met hetgeen ik schrijf, ik schrijf gewoon wat ik schrijf. Ik ben niet iemand die per se een boodschap wil overbrengen, ik schrijf gewoon mijn dingen. En dan denk ik achteraf wel, 'what's this?' maar meer is dat niet" (Tilkin, 1997, p. 198).

We can understand Berckmans' writing practice as an attempt to constrain the metonymic sliding of the signifying chain and, in addition to that, as an effort to position himself as the subject of his language productions. It is through his literary authorship that Berckmans partially succeeds in becoming the subject of his language utterances. This is facilitated by assigning the reader the role of the addressee of his language production. Providing an address for speech, addressing someone, is also a way of making oneself the subject of that speech by establishing a relation with a listener or reader. Leader (2013) stresses the importance of the addressee for the manic. Leader points out that a distinctive feature of manic language is its tendency to seek a specific audience or listener. We can interpret this as an attempt to counteract the disappearance of the subject within the flight of signifiers. Further on, we will explore the various forms of addressee that Berckmans employs in the ongoing development of his authorship and writing methods.

***'Nothing can be put into words anymore'***

We previously referred to Leader's (2013) comment on the progressive disintegration of the signifying chain during a manic episode. The complete disintegration of the signifying chain is an imminent threat Berckmans remains constantly vigilant about. In Berckmans' case, language emerges as an autonomous entity teetering on the edges of collapse. The theme of language disintegration frequently crops up in his books, both in relation to the language of others and his own language and thoughts. Language often appears as enigmatic and incomprehensible:

Sometimes you hear people laughing behind some sort of wall of sound, you don't know why they are laughing, you don't know what there is to laugh about, but they laugh, blaringly, all together, sometimes in a kind of Saul-Paul-vision you hear people talking at a table in the pub, on occasion you are in the pub, you don't know what they are talking about, you don't know what there is left to say at the end of the twentieth century, what kind of meaning words still have, whether grammar still makes some sense, and what kind of an absurd sense. A totally fucked up sense, perhaps. You try to listen but you don't hear anything, you hear everything and nothing, you hear the words but you don't understand them and everything eludes you. You remember nothing, nothing sticks in your mind. They

are words in the bleak, biting northwestern, which, when you turn the corner, blows ice-cold into your face. (Berckmans, 1995)<sup>180</sup>

His own mind as well is on the brink of collapse at times:

sitting, thinking, trying to think, formerly thoughts flew through your mind in words and you could still make something out of them, stringing them together, into some kind of hangman's rope, later they became syllables, now they are only letters, or pieces of letters, the leg of the p, the upper curl of a c, the heel of the q, you can no longer put anything into words anymore, and maybe that is the worst, perhaps that is the one and only metaphor, that nothing can be put into words anymore. (Berckmans, 1995)<sup>181</sup>

He writes: 'Meanwhile, only shreds of ever anxious, frightening thoughts, scraps, syllables, monosyllables, pieces of words never to be recognized again, reclining in the worn out armchair' (Berckmans, 1996).<sup>182</sup> And:

Neither do we in the spattery now speak of the burden, nor do we now speak of the poverty line, nor do we now speak words wrapped with barbed wire, from cancerous throats we now scream faltered phonemes and shattered morphemes, no longer eliciting even a glance. (Berckmans, 1998)<sup>183</sup>

But well, syntax changes again, syntax will change many more times, syntax is not one single thing, syntax consists of hundreds of systems ... I already told you, there is no grammar, there are only thousands, no tens of thousands of syntactic systems. In my mind.

<sup>180</sup> "Soms hoor je mensen lachen achter een soort van geluidsmuur, je weet niet waarom ze lachen, je weet niet wat er te lachen valt, maar ze lachen, loeihard, allemaal samen, soms in een soort van sauluspaulusvisioen hoor je mensen praten aan een tafeltje in de kroeg, je zit wel eens in de kroeg, je weet niet waarover ze praten, je weet ook niet wat er aan het einde van de twintigste eeuw nog te zeggen valt, wat voor zin de woorden nog hebben, of de grammatika nog enigerlei steek houdt, en wat voor absurde steek dan wel. Een van de bok gepoepte steek misschien. Je probeert te luisteren maar je hoort niets, je hoort alles en niets, je hoort de woorden maar je verstaat ze niet en alles ontgaat je. Niets onthou je, niets blijft je bij. Het zijn woorden in de gure, bitsige noordwester, die, als je de hoek omslaat, ijskoud in je gezicht blaast" (Berckmans, 1995, pp. 57–58).

<sup>181</sup> "Zitten, denken, proberen te denken, vroeger vlogen de gedachten in woorden door je hoofd en kon je er nog wat van maken, kon je er nog een touw aan vastknopen, een of ander soort van strop, later werden het lettergrepen, nu zijn het alleen nog maar letters, of stukjes van letters, het beentje van de p, het bovenste krulletje van een c, het hakje van de q, niks kan je nog in woorden vatten, en misschien is dat het ergste, misschien is dat de ene enkele metafoor, dat niks nog in woorden te vatten is" (Berckmans, 1995, p. 59).

<sup>182</sup> "Ondertussen slechts flarden van altijd even benauwde, beangstigende gedachten, brokstukken, lettergrepen, monosyllaben, stukken van nooit nog te herkennen woorden, onderuit in de versleten fauteuil" (Berckmans, 1996, p. 40).

<sup>183</sup> "Noch spreken wij in het spetserke nu nog over de last, noch spreken wij nu nog over de armoedegrens, noch spreken wij nu nog woorden met prikkeldraad rond, uit kankerkelen schreeuwen wij nu verhakkelde fonemen en bekakkelde morfemen, die geen blik meer doen opslaan" (Berckmans, 1998, p. 103).

... you notice that syntax systematically disappears, rhetoric seems to be already long extinct and it's just a matter of time until morphology goes up as well because then only phonology remains and finally there is only phonetics, a kind of very last final scream. (Berckmans, 2002)<sup>184</sup>

***'Without words and without sound'***

Jacobs (1997), in a review of *Ontbijt in het vilbeluik*, notes that for Berckmans there are only two possibilities further down this road: either the great silence or pure gibberish. These two extremes are indeed the poles between which Berckmans tries to hold his ground. Pure gibberish refers to the manic, associative, metonymic side of language that Berckmans tries to *write under control*. On the other hand, the great silence represents the periods of depression, which Ceustermans (2018b) labels as a time without words. The fear of the great silence, the keeping quiet, the inability to speak are recurring themes in his books. The faltering voice, the throat unable to produce a sound, the acoustic nirvana—they all symbolize this great silence:

a little mouse-like thin thinny-weeny sharp razor-sharp voice from the choir of skeletons and bones of skeletons and bones and ashes and blubber of dust and ashes and blubber and junk a thin voice from the choir of skeletons and bones and dust and ashes and blubber and junk sings high and shrill and without pain and without compassion and almost without mercy the ave maria gratia plena hail maria full of grace / the Lord is with thee / you bastard / you liar / and welcome to the acoustic nirvana. (Berckmans, 1993)<sup>185</sup>

Look at the features of damnation on the mug of the man in the street / look at the grimace of rottenness on the gob of average Joe / hear how his speech becomes sputter and his

<sup>184</sup> “Maar goed, de syntaksis verandert opnieuw, de syntaksis zal nog vaak veranderen, de syntaksis is niet één enkel ding, de syntaksis bestaat uit honderden systemen ... ik heb het je al gezegd, er is geen grammatika, er zijn alleen duizenden, nee tienduizenden syntaksische systemen. In mijn hoofd. ... je merkt dat stelselmatig de syntaksis verdwijnt, de retorika lijkt al langer uitgestorven en het is nu nog slechts wachten tot ook de morfologie eraan moet geloven want dan rest er enkel nog de fonologie en tot slot blijft dan nog enkel de fonetiek, een soort van allerlaatste final scream” (Berckmans, 2002, p. 17).

<sup>185</sup> “Een kleine muiskleine dunne piepdunne scherpe vlijmscherpe stem uit het koor van knoken en beenderen van knoken en beenderen en as en blubber van stof en as en blubber en rotzooi een dunne stem uit het koor van knoken en beenderen en stof en as en blubber en rotzooi zingt hoog en schrill en zonder pijn en zonder mededogen en welhaast zonder erbarmen het ave maria gratia plena wees gegroet maria vol van genade / de heer zij met u / gij klootzak / gij leugenaar / en welkom in het akoestisch nirvana” (Berckmans, 1993, p. 35).

sputter a drawn out gurgle and his gurgle a rattle and hear how his rattle gets strangled and dies without a sound. (Berckmans, 1993)<sup>186</sup>

He writes: ‘they passed without a tale / without a sign / without language / not with a scream but with a gurgle’ (Berckmans, 1993)<sup>187</sup>; ‘In the furthest corners of the darkest cellars dwell the most fearful of the fearful. They sing their song without words and without sound’ (Berckmans, 2000a)<sup>188</sup>; ‘that of which we spoke before and now speak of no more because our tongues have been severed and our speech limited to a wheezy squeak that rises up from our diaphragm and falls on deaf ears’ (Berckmans, 2003, p. 80).<sup>189</sup>

### ***‘Language shimmers and sings’***

Between the two poles of the derailing of manic language to the point of disintegration into chunks of language on the one hand and the deadly stagnation of language in absolute silence—the zero point without language—on the other, Berckmans searches for the optimal point of pleasure in language, the point where language sings. ‘Because when language is stark naked. And gnawed off and defleshed to the bone. Then language shimmers and sings. Her oratory for crackling skulls. Her pagan litany. Her ecstatic canticle’ (Berckmans, 1991).<sup>190</sup> Analogous to Lacan’s inquiry into Joyce and his treatment of language, we can question whether the literary treatment of language here tempers the jouissance of language or rather surrenders to it. Lacan (2005/2016) conveys the following about Joyce’s operation of deconstruction and language decomposition in *Finnegans Wake*:

There is undoubtedly a reflection here at the level of writing. It is through the intermediary of writing that speech is decomposed by imposing itself as such. This occurs through a warping, and it is ambiguous as to whether this warping lets him free himself from the

<sup>186</sup> “Kijk naar de trekken van de verdoemenis op het bakkes van de man in de straat / kijk naar het grimas van de rottenis op de smoel van jan met de pet / hoor hoe zijn spreken sputteren wordt en zijn gesputter een langgerekte rochel en z’n rochel een reutel en hoor hoe z’n reutel de adem wordt afgeknepen en sterft zonder weergalm” (Berckmans, 1993, pp. 34–35).

<sup>187</sup> “Ze zijn gegaan zonder verhaal / zonder teken / zonder taal / niet met een schreeuw maar met een rochel” (Berckmans, 1993, p. 38).

<sup>188</sup> “In de verste hoeken van de donkerste kelders huizen de angstigsten van de angstigen. Ze zingen hun lied zonder woorden en zonder klank” (Berckmans, 2000a, pp. 127–128).

<sup>189</sup> “Waarover wij eerder al spraken en nu niet meer spreken omdat onze tongen afgehakt zijn en onze spraak beperkt tot amechtig gepiep dat opstijgt uit ons middenrif en nergens nog gehoor vindt” (Berckmans, 2003, p. 80).

<sup>190</sup> “Want als de taal poedelnaakt is. En afgekluisd en ontvleesd tot op het bot. Dan zindert en zingt de taal. Haar oratorium voor knetterende schedels. Haar heidense litanie. Haar extatische hooglied” (Berckmans, 1991, p. 81).

parasite of speech I was speaking about earlier, or whether it leaves him on the contrary open to invasion from the essentially phonemic properties of speech, from the polyphony of speech. (p. 79)

Lacan wonders whether Joyce's writing frees him from the parasitic, *jouissance*-laden side of language or surrenders him to the phonemic, polyphonic side of language and allows the *jouissance* of language to fester. In a similar vein, we can inquire about Berckmans' writing: is his compulsion to write a necessary operation that prevents him from being completely overwhelmed by the *jouissance* of language, or is it a compulsion akin to an addiction to a particular mode of *jouissance*? We wonder whether it is, in fact, language that is using and enjoying Berckmans, while Berckmans, through his writing, occasionally manages to distill some enjoyment of language for himself. Interestingly, Berckmans struggled with addiction throughout his life. He mentions periods of excessive alcohol consumption (Jacobs, 2003) occasional drug use (Ceustermans, 2018b). Perhaps we should add an addiction to the *jouissance* of language to this list:

now that sloshedness and addiction have befallen me, addiction to the finicky word, the rickety sentence, the lousy paragraph, the page that can only be torn up, the story that now makes no sense at all anymore, the book that's better off being written by someone else. Badness. Baditty. (Berckmans, 1996)<sup>191</sup>

Perhaps derailing is inherent to manic functioning. Manic psychotic functioning seems the least likely able to come to stable solutions or inventions. For example, if delusions appear in mania, they do not lead to elaborate, stabilizing delusional systems, but remain fleeting and unstable. And when solutions and symptomatic practices are invented, as we assume here that writing functions for Berckmans, they seem just as prone to derailment and destabilization. Thus, in one of his books, Berckmans comes to the conclusion: 'Words are no good for a man' (Berckmans, 1995).<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> "Nu laveloosheid en verslaving mijn deel zijn geworden, verslaving aan het pietepeuterige woord, de krakkemikkige zin, de rotaline, de bladzijde die alleen kan worden verscheurd, het verhaal dat nu geen enkele zin meer heeft, het boek dat beter iemand anders schrijven kan. Ergte. Ergheid" (Berckmans, 1996, p. 115).

<sup>192</sup> "Woorden zijn niet goed voor een mens" (Berckmans, 1995, p. 71).

## 5.4. Fictionalizing Reality

To write is to keep the diary of a madman.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Rock & roll met Frieda Vindevogel*<sup>193</sup>

The only true writing is the notating of the graphy of Berckmans Jean-Marie.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Het onderzoek begint*<sup>194</sup>

This is your lord, this is your god, this is your scum, nailed to the cross, decayed into crackling gray grit, at present at 15:00h. left from Golgotha, until the earth cracked and split and tore itself open, walk through the valley, walk through the valley, the written word is a lie, the written word is a lie, the spoken word is nonsense, nonsense is the word that is spoken.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Bericht uit Klein Konstantinopel*<sup>195</sup>

### *Fiction is Truth*

In addition to the treatment of language that Berckmans practices in his writing, his works also serve another purpose: the fictionalization of reality. Starting from his first published work, *Geschiedenis van de revolutie [History of the Revolution]*—his only novel, partly written during one of his first psychiatric admissions—Berckmans himself appears as a character<sup>196</sup>: ‘Mentally disturbed cases like this J.M.H. should just be put in an institution, never to be released again’ (Berckmans, 1977/1994).<sup>197</sup> In Berckmans’ interviews the boundaries between life and work, between reality and fiction appear equally fluid (De Cleene, 2012). In a letter from 1978, Berckmans seems to describe his conception of the relationship between reality, fiction, truth and writing:

Is all this a vision? Am I crazy? Then you are indeed (Gone With The Wind happens. Everywhere always.) Pellicule and paper: nothing but whoredom. There are very, very few

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<sup>193</sup> “Schrijven is het dagboek van een gek bijhouden” (Berckmans, 1991, p. 44).

<sup>194</sup> “Het enige echte schrijven is het noteren van de grafie van Berckmans Jean-Marie” (Berckmans, 2002, p. 51).

<sup>195</sup> “Dit is uw heer, dit is uw god, dit is uw gespuis, gespijkerd aan het kruis, vergaan tot knisperend grijs gruis, heden om 15.00 u. verrokken te Golgotha, tot de aarde barstte en spleet en zichzelf openreet, wandel door de vallei, wandel door de vallei, het geschreven woord is een leugen, het geschreven woord is gelogen, het gesproken woord is onzin, nonsens is het woord dat wordt gesproken” (Berckmans, 1996, pp. 49–50).

<sup>196</sup> Or, what we, anticipating Chapter 4, could call the first of many ‘doubles’ Berckmans will employ. Some of the doubles are: the character ‘JMH’ (Berckmans, 1977/1994), ‘the crazy writer Gerrit Matthijs’ (Berckmans, 1991, 1993), ‘gas-chamber-man’ (Berckmans, 1993), ‘Pafke,’ ‘Ratata,’ ‘the man of steel’ (Berckmans, 1996), ‘Doctor Paf,’ ‘the most modern bizarre man’ (Berckmans, 1998), ‘Berckmans,’ ‘Kromsky,’ ‘Roquentin,’ ‘Pierlala’ (Berckmans, 2000a).

<sup>197</sup> “Mentaal gestoorden als deze J.M.H. moesten maar in een inrichting worden opgenomen en nooit meer worden vrijgelaten” (Berckmans, 1977/1994).



writers. ... All this, this simulated psychosis, it has a name: Fiction. Nonetheless, it is the single one and only truth. You know all this too. I only know it sometimes: when I distill it out of general chaos and put it to paper, when I go for a piss I don't know it anymore. (Ceustermans, 2018a)<sup>198</sup>

From this, we can distill the following series: fiction is truth, writing is knowledge, everything else is chaos. This necessitates a work of translation that transforms the nonsense and chaos of language into the comprehensible fabrication of the written word. Earlier, we understood the mutilation and hacking at language as a means of eradicating of and countering meaning. However, a contrasting process appears to be at play here, where writing is employed precisely to provide a meaning to the events in Berckmans' life.

When Berckmans writes: 'the written word is a lie, the written word is a lie, the spoken word is nonsense, nonsense is the word that is spoken' (Berckmans, 1996)<sup>199</sup>, we encounter the same contradiction. The spoken word represents the derailing nonsense and senselessness of manic language, while the written word embodies the fabrication of fiction, and it is through fiction that chaos and metonymic slippage are countered. Writing fixates, fictionalizes and gives meaning.

Berckmans (2006) writes: 'now there is again a chirping in my mind out of which the words seep onto paper in a syntactic order comprehensible only to you and me and few associates.'<sup>200</sup>

### ***100% Autobiographical Fiction***

Berckmans often emphasizes the necessity of his writing and its autobiographical nature, and it appears that both aspects are intimately intertwined. He states:

Yes, autobiographical, but it doesn't really exist. This book doesn't really exist, it's fiction. And yet it is everyday reality and that's the strange point about it. This book is my

<sup>198</sup> "Is dit alles een visioen? Ben ik gek? Dan ben jij voorwaar (Gejaagd Door De Wind gebeurt. Overal steeds.) Pellicule en papier: niets dan hoererij. Er zijn zeer, ja, zéér weinig schrijvers. ... Dit alles, deze gesimuleerde Psychose, het heeft een naam: Fiction. Het is nochtans de al-éne enige waarheid. Ook jij weet dit alles. Ik weet het slechts soms: als ik het uit algehele chaos op papier breng, als ik ga pissen weet ik het niet meer" (Ceustermans, 2018a, p. 76).

<sup>199</sup> "Het geschreven woord is een leugen, het geschreven woord is gelogen, het gesproken woord is onzin, nonsens is het woord dat wordt gesproken" (Berckmans, 1996, p. 50).

<sup>200</sup> "Nu is er weer een fwiet in m'n kop waaruit de woorden in een enkel voor jou en mij en weinige medestanders begrijpelijke syntactische orde op het papier sijpelen" (Berckmans, 2006, p. 54).

everyday life. All these people exist. Everything that appears in it, is actually real. (de Graeve, 1997)<sup>201</sup>

He confirms: ‘And my works are 100% autobiographical. Everything that happens in my books also happens in my real life’ (Dierckx, 2000).<sup>202</sup> He states:

I need this as a graphy of my own life, you see? My work is directly related to my immediate Umwelt. My main characters are my friends, and it is in fact always about the same people; I simply assign them different names each time. I don’t call it autobiography because a lot of what happens in my stories is made up of course, but it is a graphy of my life, a description of how I experience my life. (Jacobs, 2000)<sup>203</sup>

Yes, the books, this is my graphy, as I call it. My work is a graphy of who I am and how I feel and how I live and what is going on around me. Writing is my backbone. Other than the friendships I have, writing is my existential backbone, which keeps me going in life. If I wouldn’t have that, I’d be dead. A long time already. If I hadn’t started writing at some point, I would have died. (Jacobs, 2003)<sup>204</sup>

He claims: ‘If I don’t make that graphy of my existence, then I collapse’ (Jacobs, 2000).<sup>205</sup>

Demeyer (2011) points out that we should not simply interpret Berckmans’ claims as an invitation to a straightforward autobiographical reading of his work. The focus in Berckmans’ (2002) statement that ‘The only true writing is the notating of the graphy of Berckmans Jean-Marie’ should not be solely on the life of ‘Berckmans Jean-Marie,’ but on the form: ‘writing,’ ‘note-taking’ and ‘graphy’ rather than (auto-)biography. Anyone who reads Berckmans’ stories as an authentic testimony of a life in the margin thus overlooks the form. However,

<sup>201</sup> “Ja, autobiografisch, maar het bestaat niet echt. Dit boek bestaat niet echt, het is fictie. En toch is het elke dag werkelijkheid en dat is het vreemde eraan. Dit boekje is mijn dagelijks leven. Alle mensen bestaan. Al wat er in komt, is eigenlijk echt” (de Graeve, 1997, p. 26).

<sup>202</sup> “En mijn werken zijn voor 100% autobiografisch. Alles wat in mijn boeken gebeurt, gebeurt ook in mijn echte leven” (Dierckx, 2000, p. 108).

<sup>203</sup> “Ik heb dit nodig als een grafie van mijn eigen leven, begrijp je? Mijn werk staat in direct contact met mijn onmiddellijke Umwelt. Mijn hoofdfiguren zijn mijn vrienden, en in feite gaat het telkens weer over dezelfde mensen, ik geef ze alleen wel steeds andere namen. Ik spreek niet van autobiografie omdat veel in mijn verhalen verzonnen is natuurlijk, maar het is wel een grafie van mijn leven, een beschrijving van hoe ik mijn leven ervaar” (Jacobs, 2000).

<sup>204</sup> “Ja, die boeken, dat is mijn grafie, zoals ik dat noem. Mijn werk is een grafie van wie ik ben en hoe ik me voel en hoe ik leef en wat er om me heen gebeurt. Schrijven is mijn ruggengraat. Behalve de vriendschappen die ik heb, is dat schrijven mijn existentiële ruggengraat, die mij in het leven overeind houdt. Als ik die niet had, dan was ik dood. Allang. Als ik niet op een bepaald moment was gaan schrijven, dan was ik doodgegaan” (Jacobs, 2003).

<sup>205</sup> “Als ik die grafie van mijn bestaan niet maak, dan stort ik in elkaar” (Jacobs, 2000).

appreciating the form does not mean disregarding Berckmans' life, quite the contrary, it seems that the existential necessity of his work lies in finding a form for life.

### *A Literary Vivisection*

Ceustermans (2018b) notes that although Berckmans consistently writes about personal themes and draws heavily from his own life, we cannot simply consider his written texts as descriptions of his actual reality. Ceustermans calls Berckmans' manner of processing his surroundings and his daily life into stories a literary vivisection. He argues that Berckmans often transformed problems and difficulties that he could not handle or address in life into literature. According to Ceustermans, Berckmans primarily fought his existential battles on paper, alone. Ceustermans' (2018b) biography of Berckmans provides multiple examples of this phenomenon. For instance, when Berckmans returns from Italy and accumulates enormous debts in a manic enterprise as a concert organizer, he fails to respond to this situation in his life. However, an (unpublished) novella written at the time, is imbued with an obsession with money (Ceustermans, 1918b). In another example, a quarrel with a friend becomes a recurring theme in a story in *Café De Raaf nog steeds gesloten* [*Café De Raaf Still Closed*]: 'Still at odds with Holger' (Berckmans, 1990).<sup>206</sup> The most striking example relates to how Berckmans deals with his disintegrating marriage in the years following his return from Italy. Ceustermans (2018b) highlights the puzzling contrast between the state of Berckmans' marriage, which he described with razor-sharp precision in his prose—in stories in the collections *Café De Raaf nog steeds gesloten* and *Rock & roll met Frieda Vindevogel*—and his complete inability to acknowledge it in any way to his wife or in interviews during that time. Despite the increasing tension and difficulties in their relationship, he is unable to make any attempt to reconcile with her, and in interviews, he portrays his marriage as something that brings him peace and keeps him balanced. It is only through writing that he gets a grip on the situation. It is striking how Berckmans was able to empathize with his wife's loneliness but failed to address it in everyday reality, in the gas chamber of the relationship, as he called it. Ceustermans (2018b) notes the painful contrast for her between the literary praise Berckmans received for his stories dissecting the breakdown of their

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<sup>206</sup> "Lig nog steeds overhoop met Holger" (Berckmans, 1990).

marriage—stories she found too distressing to read—and the seemingly complete disinterest in her emotional life and well-being he exhibited in real life.

The way in which Berckmans transformed his life into literature was not always well received. Ceustermans (2018b) describes how a woman with whom Berckmans had a brief relationship promptly broke off their relationship and wanted nothing to do with him after reading the unfiltered revelations and indiscretions about their relationship and sexual problems in his most recent collection of stories. At one point, Berckmans developed the habit of recording conversations and then editing them into his stories. Ceustermans (2018b) describes the incident with the story *Aantekeningen over De Mesmaecker Jean-Luc* [*Notes on De Mesmaecker Jean-Luc*], which initially appeared in a literary magazine and faithfully reproduced the intimate confessions of Jean-Luc De Mesmaecker. When the publisher discovered the extent to which the literary fragment was drawn directly from real life, they agreed to publish it in Berckmans' next collection with the pseudonymized title *Aantekeningen over De Beuckelaer Jean-Pierre* [*Notes on De Beuckelaer Jean-Pierre*] to avoid potential legal repercussions.

According to Ceustermans (2018b), Berckmans life served writing: his whole existence, all his human contacts, up to the most intimate, only served the purpose of what Berckmans sometimes called his scribbling. In light of our discussion, we could reverse that statement: writing served living, and for Berckmans, writing was an absolutely necessity to make life livable. Even the most intimate aspects of his life had to go through the wringer of literature and fiction to become bearable. How stabilizing his literary processing actually was is debatable, Berckmans did not manage to avoid multiple periods of manic excitation and severe depression and was frequently hospitalized throughout his life.

In addition to the strategies of treating language and the fictionalizing of his experience, in the next section, we will briefly discuss two more aspects of Berckmans' writing strategies: *writing with a secretary* and *Berckmans as a letter writer*.

## 5.5. Writing With a Secretary

Me no speak this bizarre ramshacklely language.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Ontbijt in het vilbeluik*<sup>207</sup>

By the way, James Joyce also had a secretary.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Interview De Morgen*<sup>208</sup>

Following the meticulous work of writing and the laborious, compulsive writing and rewriting, Berckmans invents several additional ways to utilize writing as a means to keep the linguistic disruption he is subjected to in check. While, the previous discussed writing strategy focused on the act of writing and the operations performed on the written language, the strategies we will discuss now emphasize the relevance of the recipients of the writing. In contrast to the abstract reader in the first form of writing, here the addressee becomes more concrete, starting with the role of the secretary and later extending to the recipients of the letters he writes during the final years of his authorship.

A number of Berckmans' later collections—beginning with *Ontbijt in het vilbeluik* onward—appear to be more chaotic and less intelligible than his previous ones. Critics describe these as: silly rhymes, harping on, gibberish (Jacobs, 1998), fragmentary bluster (Osstyn, 2000), incomprehensible lispings (Schouten, 2002), a mush of words (Pieters, 2018)<sup>209</sup> and often assume that Berckmans' mental health also deteriorated during this period (Hellemans, 2001). However, these collections mainly consist of texts that were created in a completely different manner. Instead of being carefully composed and extensively reworked, they were dictated and emerged through a more improvisational process (Ceustermans, 2018b). Whereas Berckmans' earlier writing process involved writing and rewriting, what he referred to as mutilating and hacking at language, with the aim of *writing under control* the associative, metonymic slippage of the manic language, these later collections allow the metonymic sliding of language more free reign.

In 1996, Berckmans met Geert Breës, an admirer, and the two quickly became friends. They often worked together and gradually Breës took on the role of secretary. As Berckmans' health problems worsened, he found it increasingly difficult to write on his own and began to

<sup>207</sup> “Ik niet spreken deze bizarre kramakkelijke taal” (Berckmans, 1997b, p. 8).

<sup>208</sup> “Trouwens, James Joyce had ook een secretaris” (Berckmans, in Peeters, 2002).

<sup>209</sup> The terms used are: “dwaze rijmelarijen ... gemelk ... wartaal” (Jacobs, 1998), “fragmentarisch gebral” (Osstyn, 2000), “onbegrijpelijk gelispel” (Schouten, 2002), “woordenbrij” (Pieters, 2018).

dictate his texts to Breës during late-night sessions. Berckmans himself often made references to Samuel Beckett and his role as James Joyce's secretary, stating:

Without Geert, I am nowhere. He is my right hand, quite literally. Due to arthritis in my fingers, I can no longer type my texts, so Geert does that for me. You know Samuel Beckett was James Joyce's secretary? They were often lying in the gutter together in Paris, just like us here. (Dierckx, 2000)<sup>210</sup>

In Wim Jammaer's (2018) documentary, *De man die zijn snor in brand stak* [*The Man Who Set Fire to His Mustache*], we witness the creation of a section from the eponymous story, which was published in *Het onderzoek begint* [*The Investigation Begins*] (Berckmans, 2002). Berckmans and Breës are shown sitting at a table in Berckmans' kitchen, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Berckmans recites a sentence, and Breës writes it down in a notebook, then reads aloud what has already been written and prompts for a continuation. At times, we see Berckmans, with his head in his hands, sighing that he doesn't know what to do next, but Breës insists on a follow-up sentence and reads out the previous one, to which Berckmans adds more. Afterwards Breës types out the notations of these improvised dictation sessions. The published text is a faithful reproduction of the dictated improvisation. Berckmans refers to these pieces as *bagatelles*, while Ceustermans (2018b) describes them as short, highly associative, and musical eruptions of prose.

The notion of a secretary brings to mind Lacan's (1981/1993) concept of the "secretaries to the insane" (p. 206), a concept that continues to play an important role in the orientation of psychoanalytic treatment for cases of psychosis in contemporary clinical work (Vander Vennet, 2008). Regarding the psychoanalytic conception of the secretary's role, it is noteworthy that Breës not only takes notes and insists on further dictation but also occasionally sets limits. In the documentary, when Berckmans' dictation becomes too vulgar, Breës refuses to notate it, stating: I won't write that down, that sounds more like Brusselmans than Berckmans (Jammaer, 2018). In Berckmans' earlier writing, the meticulous writing and rewriting somehow helped to impose a limit on the manic derailing of language. Here, it seems that the relationship with the secretary, who listens, takes notes and occasionally sets

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<sup>210</sup> "Zonder Geert ben ik nergens. Hij is mijn rechterhand, letterlijk zelfs. Door de artritis in mijn vingers kan ik mijn teksten niet meer intikken en dat doet Geert voor mij. Je weet toch dat Samuel Beckett de secretaris was van James Joyce. Die lagen samen geregeld in de goot in Parijs, zoals wij hier" (Dierckx, 2000, p. 110).

limits fulfills a similar function. Later on, several others will assume the same position for Berckmans (Ceustermans, 2018b).

## 5.6. Berckmans as a Letter Writer

Open letter to my readers, all 847 of them: Good friends, I unceremoniously call you my good friends because I know almost every single one of you.

—J.M.H. Berckmans, *Open brief aan mijn lezers, alle 847*<sup>211</sup>

The third form of writing employed by Berckmans, in addition to the meticulous writing and later the dictation to the secretary, is writing letters. In 2003, after being hospitalized for mental problems of his own, Geert Breës somewhat distances himself from Berckmans' suffocating biotope (Ceustermans, 2018b). From that point on, Berckmans had to be more self-reliant for his writing again. As long as Berckmans wrote with the help of a secretary, he described this as a physical necessity: due to his failing body he could no longer write on his own, he needed a secretary. In the letter writing phase, Berckmans seems to be able to write autonomously again while adopting a different form of address. Without the availability of a secretary, Berckmans returns to a form he used before: the letter. Ceustermans (2018b) highlights the importance Berckmans attached to his correspondence as a teenager and also reminds us that Berckmans' first publication, his only novel, *Geschiedenis van de revolutie* [*History of the Revolution*], later republished as *Brief aan een meisje in Hoboken* [*Letter to a Girl in Hoboken*], is written in the form of a series of letters.

In Berckmans' last collections, which were no longer written with the assistance of Geert Breës, the language seems to have softened somewhat. Van der Straeten (2003) observes that fortunately the language briefly recovers in some of these later stories, most of which were written in the form of letters. Ceustermans (2018b) notes that although written with the intention of publication, they were often actually sent and served practical purposes. In addition to the letters to his deceased parents, the collections contain letters addressed to friends, his most recent muse and his social worker. Through writing letters, Berckmans discovered a third way to utilize of writing, alongside the material treatment of language in carefully composed stories and the improvisational dictation to the secretary. Letter writing can be seen as an intermediate form, not as meticulously carved out as his earlier stories nor

<sup>211</sup> "Open brief aan mijn lezers, alle 847: Goede vrienden, ik noem jullie zonder omhaal mijn goede vrienden want ik ken jullie haast allemaal" (Berckmans, 1994, p. 156).

as spontaneously expressed as his dictated texts, but still addressed to a specific recipient. In this sense, letter-writing fulfills an essential feature of manic language, as described by Leader (2013): the need for an address, a listener.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the role that writing played for the manic-depressive writer J.M.H. Berckmans in dealing with the manic derailment of language. We interpreted Berckmans' oeuvre as a testimony to his persistent struggle with the madness of language.

Drawing on Lacan, we characterized the linguistic aspects of mania as a *flight of signifiers*, a metonymic slipping of the signifying chain. In terms of Lacan's theorizing in the 1960's, in mania, the object *a* fails to function. Consequently, there are no button ties and the subject finds itself at the mercy of the endless metonymic slipping of the signifying chain. Without button ties, no stable meaning nor a persistent experience of subjectivity can arise. In terms of Lacan's theoretical elaborations in the seventies, the drive and pulsion-related festering of language is no longer limited by language and overwhelms the subject completely.

Berckmans' interviews and writings about how he relates to his literary production, reveal a far-reaching subjection to this manic flight of signifiers. In this chapter, we have examined his writing as a means of counteracting this derailment of language. On the one hand, he tempers the metonymic slipping of the signifying chain and on the other hand he establishes an experience of being the subject and the author of his words. To achieve this, Berckmans employs several strategies throughout his writing. As a first strategy, we discussed the meticulous writing and rewriting process as a means of mutilating and hacking at language, a way to counteract the metonymic flight of signifiers. In addition to this treatment at the level of the signifier, writing also serves as a treatment at the level of meaning. Here, we situate what Berckmans refers to as the graphy of his life, the fictionalized and written record of his immediate Umwelt.

In addition to these forms of treatment, we also discussed the successive ways in which Berckmans' writing established an address for his language productions. Initially, when the treatment of the signifier is paramount, the abstract reader serves as the address. It is through authorship and addressing the reader that Berckmans positions himself as the subject and author of his language. In a further development of his writing strategies, Berckmans writes



with the assistance of secretary Geert Breës, who functions as a listener and note-taker. In the improvised dictation to the secretary, the metonymically disordered language is given more free reign, taking the form of a conversation with an immediate listener who assumes the role of guaranteeing some mastery and imposing certain limitations. Another form of addressing oneself to another emerges in Berckmans' letters, which become the main format of his literary output in the last years of his life.

We can consider Berckmans' writing as a *sinthomatic* invention, an artistic, creative and highly singular solution that functions in various ways as a treatment for the manic disorder of language to which he was subjected.

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# 4

## The Writing of Mania. Thomas Melle's Literary Strategies of Recovery

In this chapter<sup>212</sup> we discuss the work of German author Thomas Melle in relation to his manic-depressive experiences. In the autobiographical book *The World at My Back* Melle demonstrates how a dysregulation of language is essential to understanding the nature of his manic episodes. Furthermore, Melle explains how he used writing literature as a response to challenges posed by his manic experiences. In this paper we explore this link in detail. First we investigate the specific dysregulation of language in Melle's episodes of mania. Based on *The World at My Back*, three characteristic language disruptions are discerned in the course of his manic episodes: first, language disintegrates, then narrative consistency breaks down, finally there is a breakdown of subject and ego. Subsequently, we discuss the literary strategies Melle employs throughout his oeuvre and how these address these three aspects of language disruption. Eight literary strategies are identified, which cluster into three broad genres: implicitly autobiographical fiction, explicitly fictional autobiography and eventually *new realism*. Starting from Lacan we discuss how Melle's literary strategies aim at remedying a major issue that accompanies his manic experiences: the workings of language itself. During and in the wake of his autobiographic writing, Melle develops ways of treating language, of keeping language in check, through which he eventually manages to restore his faith in language. We discuss Melle's writing practice and relate it to Lacan's concept of the *sinthome*.

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<sup>212</sup> This chapter is based on: Rabaey, B., & Vanheule, S. (2023). The writing of mania. Thomas Melle's literary strategies of recovery. *American Imago*, 80(3), 573–605. We would like to thankfully acknowledge Lieven Jonckheere's inspiration for this chapter, his reading of *Die Welt im Rücken* and our discussions of it proved invaluable for the ideas developed in this chapter. See Jonckheere (2021) for a 'summary' that kept expanding.

## 1. Introduction: Madness and Writing

In the quest to understand madness, psychoanalysis has regularly turned to first-person narratives, such as autobiographical writing, and to literature. This tradition starts with Freud's (1911) study of Daniel Paul Schreber's (1955/2000) *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. Lacan (2005/2016), among others, continues in this vein by turning to James Joyce to discuss how his writing practice—particularly *Finnegans Wake*—functions as a way of limiting the madness he experiences in relation to language. Lacan argues that Joyce suffers from words that are being imposed, and considers his writing practice as a form of treatment, which also entails the cultivation, by Joyce, of a specific style and ego. Lacan qualifies such creative and particular practice of dealing with symptomatic experiences as the development of a *sinthome*. Just like a symptom, a *sinthome* is a peculiar element in a person's functioning, but unlike a symptom it does not produce suffering.<sup>213</sup>

A contemporary novelist whose works also bear witness to a struggle with madness—manic-depressive experiences in particular<sup>214</sup>—is Thomas Melle. Starting from Lacan we discuss his autobiographic work *The World at My Back*.<sup>215</sup> There Melle (2016) describes how, during manic episodes, language destabilizes and ultimately destroys the narrative of the ego, and how his writing practices respond to this challenge. Melle (°1975) is a successful German author and translator. After studying comparative literature and philosophy, he worked as a translator and theater author. Melle's (2007) prose debut is the collection of short stories *Raumforderung* for which he received the *Förderpreis zum Bremer Literaturpreis*. His subsequent novels obtained high praise as well: *Sickster* (2011) made it to the longlist of the *Deutscher Buchpreis*; *3000 Euro* (2014) and *Die Welt im Rücken* (2016) were shortlisted. In 2017 he received the literary honor *Stadtschreiber von Bergen-Enkheim*. In *The World at My Back* Melle (2016) grippingly depicts three manic episodes and evokes their disruptive

<sup>213</sup> In line with Freud's (1926) definition—"A symptom is a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression" (p. 91)—Lacan considers a symptom as a construction of signifiers containing a message addressed to the subject coming from the unconscious (Fink, 1995). In neurosis the symptom is the return of a repressed signifier, experienced by the subject as a message from within the subject; in psychosis the message of the symptom is experienced as coming from outside the subject (Vanheule, 2011).

<sup>214</sup> Melle (2016) himself prefers manic depression to the term bipolar, which he considers too euphemistic.

<sup>215</sup> For our analysis we made use of the original publication *Die Welt im Rücken* (Melle, 2016). Since then, an English translation has been published; direct quotes are from the published translation *The World at My Back* (Melle, 2016/2023), unless noted. Quotations from other works and interviews are our own translation.



impact. He illustrates these with unvarnished candor, not shying away from the delusional aspects of his experience, and comments on the difficulties of coming to terms with this condition.

Melle experienced his first manic episode in 1999 when studying in Berlin. He describes a prodromal hypo-manic phase characterized by intense writing—frantically working on a novel, pouring out blog posts. Language becomes unstable and unreliable, and haunted by signs and allusive references. Melle goes on a manic ramble through Berlin, running around in panic and confusion, a particularly traumatic experience. In the following months Melle is under the spell of unstable manic and paranoid thoughts, bouncing from panic to elation. He describes upsetting classes, making inappropriate jokes, talking a torrent of words, and getting angry, all in an indiscriminate and purposeless way. For a while Melle is in the grip of a messianic delusion. He is repeatedly committed to a psychiatric institution for short periods of time, but quickly discharges himself and rages on, until gradually the delusion fades away. This is followed by a period marked by depression, a suicide attempt, and a longer psychiatric hospitalization. He recovers and eventually comes to consider this manic episode as a one-time slip up of a young, overheated mind on the way to adulthood. In 2006, Melle, now an established translator and an up-and-coming author (several of his plays have been produced, a collection of stories is about to be published) experiences another manic episode, this time characterized mainly by rage and anger. Melle describes a year filled with conflicts, temper tantrums, fights, fits of anger, and delusional thoughts. He earns a reputation for disrupting literary events and is arrested and committed to a psychiatric institution several times. About a year after the start of this episode a crippling depression sets in. Melle gradually recovers with the help of stays at a psychiatric ward, and by focusing on work—first translating and then writing again. After a few years of stable life Melle decides to stop taking medication. Then, in 2010 Melle experiences a third manic episode. The longest and, for him, the most destructive. The episode lasts for over a year. Melle is again under the spell of a messianic delusion and gets into all kinds of trouble. He starts improving when a psychiatrist and a supportive girlfriend convince him to start taking lithium. Coming out of his mania, Melle finds himself in a sheltered housing facility, deep in debt and with his reputation and friendships in ruin.

In *The World at My Back* Melle (2016) demonstrates how a dysregulation of language is essential to understanding the nature of these manic episodes. Being a writer, Melle was well attuned to the linguistic aspects of mania. While linguistic phenomena have been prominent in psychiatric definitions of mania since Kraepelin's (1921) description of manic-depressive insanity, these tend to be less common in first-person narratives.<sup>216</sup> In *The World at My Back* and in interviews and lectures, Melle describes how some of his literary strategies were developed as a response to challenges posed by his manic experiences, which is what we explore in detail in this article. We first investigate in what specific way language is dysregulated in Melle's episodes of mania. Based on *The World at My Back*, we discern three characteristic language disruptions in the course of his manic episodes (see Section 2). In Section 3 we discuss the literary strategies Melle employs throughout his oeuvre and how these relate to challenges posed by his manic experiences. We identify eight strategies that cluster into three broad genres: implicitly autobiographical fiction, explicitly fictional autobiography, and eventually *new realism*. Starting from Lacan, we discuss how these literary strategies aim at remedying a major issue that accompanies Melle's manic experiences: the workings of language itself.

The purpose of our article is threefold: literary, psychoanalytic, and clinical. With respect to the literary objective, our reading of Melle with Lacan leads to a deeper understanding of Melle's work and the developments within his oeuvre. Additionally, this article has the purpose of expanding and further developing psychoanalytic theory, specifically concerning the understanding of mania. By reading Lacan with Melle, we clarify some hitherto scarcely elaborated notions within Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Finally, and perhaps more tentatively, our clinical aim consists in gaining deeper understanding of how literary strategies might help in the process of recovery (see, for example, Stevens & Bryssinck, 2018).

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<sup>216</sup> Though not wholly absent. For example, Jamison (1995) writes about a manic episode: "I could not follow the path of my own thoughts. Sentences flew around in my head and fragmented first into phrases and then words; finally, only sounds remained" (p. 80). McCarter (2009) states about a period of mania: "I wrote a lot that month, when I was in the mental hospital ... that's all I did—write. ... But my words had no order. It still, simply, does not make any sense" (p. 9) and qualifies her writing as: "My insanity reads like bad poetry" (p. 9).

## 2. The Manic Experience: Dysregulation of Language, Narrative and Ego

We discern three characteristic language disruptions in *The World at My Back*. First, language disintegrates, which Melle calls a shift in language, or the festering of thought and language, described as an automatic associative process beyond his control. When language becomes unhinged and unstable, meaning and sense slip away. As a consequence, in the second stage, narrative consistency breaks down. This process is tentatively and temporarily remedied by delusional constructs that attempt to fix meaning and identity. In the third stage, we see a breakdown of the ego. Narrative instability provokes a fleeting experience of subjectivity, which Melle calls the destruction, and even death, of the ego.

### 2.1. The Festering of Language

In *The World at My Back* Melle (2016) describes how his manic episodes are characterized by a disturbance of language. He states that “an internal shift had taken place in the language” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 52),<sup>217</sup> or a “festering”<sup>218</sup> of thought and language, that is accompanied by “an excess of emotion” (p. 41).<sup>219</sup> Such shift, which he describes as an automatic associative process beyond his control, is particularly present in the description of his first manic episode. This episode started with a hypo-manic phase characterized by excessive writing, and led to a moment when something became unhinged in language, where every word became allusive, ambiguous, unstable, and unreliable.<sup>220</sup> As a consequence of this shift, Melle (2016/2023) describes a complete unsettling of thought processes, where all grip on himself and his surroundings was lost: “What you once knew no longer exists, everything is strange, you yourself are an alien in an alien world” (p. 26). He writes: “everything was changeable, ambiguous, and unbelievably new. I had never seen the signs or the world in this way” (p. 57). This is exciting, but mainly frightening: “Where had it come from—this

<sup>217</sup> “Sprachintern hatte eine Verschiebung stattgefunden” (Melle, 2016, p. 54).

<sup>218</sup> Melle’s (2016) word is “wuchern” (p. 43), a word that also appears in his early work (see Section 3.1). See note 12.

<sup>219</sup> Melle’s (2016) “einem Gefühlsüberschuss” (p. 41), could also be translated as ‘a surplus of feeling.’

<sup>220</sup> Melle denotes the shift in language with the particular word *umstülpen*, which can also be translated as *turned inside out*. This word returns in Melle’s fiction when he describes the fundamental instability of language in mania. In Melle (2016/2023) it is translated as “overtaken” (p. 58).

disturbance, this menace? . . . I couldn't flee, impossible. It was everywhere" (p. 58).<sup>221</sup> In an interview he describes mania as: "Symbolic excess, semantic cancer" (Becker, 2016). Melle (2016/2023) writes: "An alphabet of letters stormed toward me" (p. 56), "I was caught in a chamber full of signifiers" (p. 73); he describes himself as "gripped by a diffuse semantic madness" (p. 52).<sup>222</sup> This ambiguity of signs, when everything could refer to everything, caused panic and confusion:

And of course I was able to twist and turn those sentences in any direction and come to all kinds of conclusions. . . . One thing was certain: an internal shift had taken place in the language . . . I understood both everything and not a single word . . . Every aspect of language—and what is not language?—is twisted and unruly, the signs have been ripped off their moorings. (Melle, 2016/2023, pp. 51–53)

Melle (2016/2023) states: "But language kept slipping away from me. Right from the start, I was producing shreds of Dada that even I could hardly understand" (p. 212).

## 2.2. The Breakdown and Delusional Restoration of Narrative

In a next step, the shift in language produces a breakdown of narrative coherence and continuity: when everything means everything, nothing means anything anymore. Delusional narratives that attempt to fix meaning and identity tentatively and temporarily remedy this process. Melle describes how the dissolution of sense and meaning instantly provokes a process of building thought-scaffolding, of putting together unstable constructions of thought that keep festering in an attempt to restore meaning, a process that occurs automatically, without control. For Melle (2016/2023) this starts from "an excess of emotion" (p. 41).<sup>223</sup> Then:

From one moment to the next shapes of thought disappear, re-form, and re-establish themselves, rush away from the usual center. Your brain hurtles off without its owner. . . . Then the first thought arrives, and building on that, the second and the third, and the thought processes quickly frame—thought by flawed thought—a structure that provides an

<sup>221</sup> In Melle's (2016) phrase "Woher kam diese Stülpung, dieses Kippen, diese Bedrohung?" (p. 61), it is even clearer that the threat comes from this "overturning."

<sup>222</sup> Melle's (2016) expressions are: "Ein Buchstabensturm kam über mich" (p. 58), "Ich war in einer Kammer aus Zeichen gefangen" (p. 78), and "von einem diffusen semantischen Wahn gepackt" (p. 54).

<sup>223</sup> Or "a surplus of feeling." See earlier note.

explanation for the excess of emotions. . . . It just keeps building, skittering on, unrestrained, and like a demented handyman it builds a makeshift shack of thoughts that serves, momentarily, to bed the excessive emotions in a provisional, short-lived set of explanations that won't be valid even the next day.

It starts with a minuscule, mutating detail that proliferates<sup>224</sup> like a madly fantastic structure, . . . A constant, ongoing process is under way, a process of building worlds and destroying them. (Melle, 2016/2023, pp. 42–43)

Delusional thought processes start off from the instability of meaning, where everything could also mean him: “semantic vibrations that made me tremble in synchrony with the tremors in the fields of meaning. Every word could mean me, the adjectives, the nouns, the verbs” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 50). The result is a delusion of persecution, where everything alludes to him and potentially contains a particular, yet-to-be-decoded, personal message: “Nothing means what it means anymore, but everything also always means ‘me’” (p. 53).

Melle describes a period of unstable manic and paranoid thoughts, a fluctuating state, continuously shifting between moments of panic and elation, moving from feelings of intuitive understanding and harmony to fear and torment. Sometimes nothing makes sense anymore and he feels completely lost, and at other moments everything makes too much sense and he feels persecuted. Yet gradually a more stable delusion develops that returns in subsequent manic episodes. In short: a secret world history tells of the coming of Melle as the new messiah, and the whole of culture and world history is filled with signs and allusions to this fact. For a while he is in the grip of this delusion, until gradually it fades away.

### 2.3. The Destruction of Subject and Ego

In a third step, we discern a breakdown of the ego. Melle's shift in language and the associated narrative instability provoke a fleeting experience of subjectivity, which he calls the destruction, and even the death, of the ego. The instability of signs and the experience of everything referring to him not only create a loss of meaning and narrative coherence, but also a loss of self, and the feeling that the world dissolves:

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<sup>224</sup>Or “festers.” Melle's (2016) phrase is “Das System begint, von einem winzigen, mutierenden Detail ausgehend, zu wuchern wie ein irres Fantasiegebäude. Es wandelt sich dabei ständig, morpht sich” (p. 43). We are partial to “festering” for “wuchern.”

I ran on through the city and the city had gone crazy. Signs and images clutched at me from every corner. . . . I was making the city tremble, and at the same time it was roaring through me. It was no longer clear who was setting whom into motion. I had no skin, no barrier. . . . The two of us, the world and I, were dissolving into each other, suffusing each other. (Melle, 2016/2023, pp. 57–58)

Melle's last manic episode starts with a moment of waking up in panic, and an instant experience of the boundaries of the ego dissolving. This is almost immediately followed by the reappearing of the old messianic delusion that still fits like an old glove and that temporarily remedies this dissolution.

Next to such fleeting moments, Melle also experiences a more permanent ego loss in the wake of mania. In the aftermath of manic episodes, a coherent narrative of the ego has disappeared:

As the temporarily recovered patient . . . you wander around in tatters, surprised at the battlefield you've left behind you. You can't change anything even though the manic who rampaged there and the ailing depressive are two versions of your self<sup>225</sup> (but who is that?) that can be connected by memory, but hardly by identity. Still, there's no doubt: it was you. . . . You were the ruffian, and then you were the corpse. And now you are the one with the bipolar disorder, and you are alienated, by definition. (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 102)

No one is or has ever been master in their own house. The lack of understanding of your own existence is universal. I was in shock from the madness that had struck my life, from the destruction it unleashed, the devastation. . . . The biggest shock was that I had lost my self. The I, theoretically a construct but in practice quite a reliable guide, was gone, demolished, rendered nil. (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 112)

No doubt, such changes challenge the autobiographic telling of these experiences; after all, who is the narrator narrating the dissolution of the narrator?

## 2.4. A Lacanian Perspective on Manic Experiences

To conceptually frame the process of the dysregulation of language, narrative, and ego, Lacan's theory is useful. In his discussion of language functioning, Lacan (1966/2006) starts

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<sup>225</sup> In Melle's (2016) words, there are "zwei Versionen seinen Ichs" (p. 111).

from Ferdinand de Saussure's assumption that there is no inherent connection between signifier (word) and signified (meaning); it is only through the articulation of discourse, the chaining together of signifiers, that both meaning and the experience of subjectivity arise. Specifically, meaning is produced by the double workings of anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain. In Lacan's view, language functions by the forward motion of anticipation. As signifiers are chained up linearly, meaning is anticipated, but remains in suspension until a concluding word arrives. As a complement to this forward motion, the articulation of meaning is determined by a retroactive movement as well—retroactive because later signifiers and changes in punctuation re-establish the meaning of previous conclusions.

During manic episodes, this process is disturbed. In Lacan's (2004/2014) terms, in mania "the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (p. 336) takes over. Manic language is purely the associative, forward-moving, metonymic side of language. Connections are made on the basis of the material intricacies of language itself—such as rhyme and clang associations—rather than by the attempt to convey a message. There is nothing stopping the chaining up of signifiers, no intervening process of punctuation or retroactive signification, only endless metonymic movement. Ownership of the process of linking signifiers disappears, and this becomes a near-automatic process. At such moments language goes mad (Vanheule, 2011). Not only is meaning problematized—for example, Melle repeatedly calls all his manic writing pure nonsense—but conceptually speaking the uncoupling of signifier and signified also disturbs the physical experience by freeing up enormous amounts of excitation and agitation, or so-called *jouissance*, which are no longer kept in check by language. In Melle this *jouissance* shows up in his "surplus of feeling" but is probably also expressed in overwhelming panic and in the experience of subjectively charged messages targeting him.

In manic language, the purely associative, forward-moving (or metonymic) side of language dominates, while punctuation and retroaction fail to generate a consistent meaning. Meaning remains in suspense, keeps slipping away and never settles into a coherent message (Soler, 2002). According to Lacan (1966/2006) psychotic phenomena, like hallucinations and delusions, are to be understood as a rupture at the level of the signifying chain (Vanheule, 2011). In mania, this rupture occurs in the metonymic process running wild, which characteristically gives rise to delusional thinking, or as Melle calls it, to the construction of thought-scaffolding, in an attempt to bring this metonymic running off to a halt and thus to

stabilize meaning. Typically, manic delusions are fleeting and unstable (Brémaud, 2017). Melle demonstrates that the more stable that delusional ideas appear, the more strongly the unstable meanings are integrated into a coherent narrative so things make sense again. While it quickly comes to make too much sense, in a paranoid and persecutory way, we can understand how it functions as an anchor that keeps the metonymic process from running off.

To further conceptualize these phenomena within a Lacanian framework, we need to clarify the distinction between the ego and the subject. The ego can be said to function as a conscious narrative construction, the story one tells about oneself; it is rooted in the imaginary and aims at establishing a coherent self-image. Lacan links it to the awareness of our body, identification with our body image and Freud's notion of narcissism. Building on Freud's (1917) dictum that "the ego is not master in its own house" (p. 143), Lacan's notion of the subject is linked to being subjected to elements of our mental life that escape the conscious, narrative construction of the ego. Lacan talks about being "the subject of the unconscious" or being "the subject of the signifier" pointing to our being subjected to the workings of the unconscious, or to the impact of speech (for Lacan, these are rather synonymous). Truly becoming a subject entails, for Lacan, accepting this condition and assuming responsibility for it. For Lacan, the subject is an effect of using language, it is always anticipated and supposed. The notion of the subject does not so much denote a narrative construction or a particular content, but rather a position in language; it entails feeling represented by and responsible for one's speech and one's actions (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 1975/1988).

As Melle describes, the experience of mania disturbs both these dimensions of being: the ego-narrative and the experience of being the subject of one's speech and actions. A manic episode thwarts the sense of conscious narrative authorship of one's actions; in other words, it disturbs the ego-narrative. Meaning remains in suspense, but the ego remains undefined as well, or rather, from moment to moment fleetingly defined by anything and everything it encounters, without settling into a coherent narrative. The disturbance at the level of the signifying chain simply undermines all symbolic consistency (Vanheule, 2011). This is what Melle experiences when he speaks of the alienation, identity loss, and ego-death in the wake of his manic episodes. Delusion functions as an attempt at stabilizing meaning and at stabilizing identity.



The manic shift in language, the “festering” of language and the metonymic running off of the signifying chain, not only destabilize meaning but also undermine the assumption of being the agent of one’s own speech. In Lacan’s (1966/2006) view, subjectivity arises as a consequence of linking signifiers in chains, hence his definition of the signifier as “that which represents the subject in relation to another signifier.” In his view, the subject is not the instance producing speech, but its consequence. It is by hearing what I say that I start making presumptions about who I am. In manic language this is undermined. Signifiers are linked in such random and rapid ways that no signifieds or qualities can be attributed to the speaker in a stable way anymore. This results in the feeling that some crazy force is speaking, rather than I as a subject am speaking.

The effects at the level of ego-narrative and identity are well documented (Dyga, 2020). One pathway for recovery aims at restoring the narrative of the ego, for example, by adopting the narrative of being bipolar (Rabaey & Vanheule, 2022). The focus on the disruption at the level of language, as described by Melle (2016) and here understood within a Lacanian framework, suggests some additional pathways toward recovery. As we will show, Melle’s autobiographical work is not only a reconstruction of the shattered ego-narrative, but entails finding ways of restoring the subject of language as well. By developing ways of keeping language in check, Melle manages to restore his faith in language and to become the subject of language again.

### 3. Writing Mania

In what follows, we discuss how Melle’s writing strategies address these three aspects of language disruption. The festering of language is first stylized in Melle’s work of fiction, and later countered through developing a more sober, new, realistic narrative style. Before we discuss this in detail, we offer a few caveats. First: Thomas Melle’s work deserves to be read, appreciated, and studied in its own right, for its literary merits—and it is.<sup>226</sup> Here we only consider it from a clinical point of view, based on Melle’s own writings and statements about his life and work. Second: Melle’s work is not the result of manic writing. He emphasizes that none of his writing came about while he was manic, even if some texts contain formal

<sup>226</sup> See Gellai (2018) and Zimniak (2010) for discussions on *Raumforderung*; Baßler and Drügh (2012), Gratzke (2018), Rok (2014), and Klein (2015) for discussions on *Sickster*; and Nachtwey (2018) and Steinmayr (2019) for *3000 Euro*.

elements of mania. Melle states: “The texts that were created during the manic phases themselves are, at best, confusing Dadaism” (Becker, 2016). He even opposes the notion of the mad genius artist. In *The World at My Back* he states that he does not draw any comfort from, for example, Jamison’s (1993) writings on manic-depressive artists: “True manics write nothing but nonsense, and I was no exception” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 266). Third: We acknowledge Melle’s (2016) statements about the stabilizing effects and the importance of medication for his recovery. Here we only explore how Melle’s writing strategies contribute to this process. Across Melle’s oeuvre, we discern the following strategies: he stylizes the instability of the language of mania within a postmodern framework (3.1), narrates the experience of mania through the use of literary doubles (3.2), fictionalizes the traumatic experience of mania (3.3), restores the shattered ego by reconstructing the narrator (3.4) and inventing a narrative form (3.5) for the experience of mania, writes himself free from the burden of mania by outsourcing the illness (3.6), takes control of language through the new realism and the strategy of the straight sentence (3.7), and keeps language in check by limiting speech and focusing on written language (3.8).

### 3.1. Stylizing the Instability of Language of Mania: Postmodern Play

A first strategy Melle deploys in dealing with experiences of mania consists of framing the instability of language as a theme within a postmodern framework. In his books, the instability and festering of language is an important theme, particularly in the collection of stories *Raumforderung* and his novel *Sickster*. There the dysregulation of language is not only prominent in the fictionalized descriptions of the manic episode his protagonists go through, but appears as a theme and returns in the structure of the work as well. The instability of language is employed within a postmodern play on the representational limits of language and narrative, which we can consider as a stylization of the festering of language: language derails, the perspective shifts, and there is no coherent narrative holding things together.

In *Raumforderung*<sup>227</sup> the festering of language appears as a leitmotif, employed within a play on language, perspective, and narration. The stories do not form a coherent whole but connect and refer to each other sideways. In the story *Wuchernde Netze*<sup>228</sup> the fictitious writer *Thomas Melle* looks back and comments on his (fictitious) oeuvre (starting with

<sup>227</sup> *Raumforderung* is a medical term, synonymous with swelling, festering, or a tumor (Kämmerlings, 2008).

<sup>228</sup> Which can be translated as *festering networks*.

*Raumforderung*), noting: “I myself do not exactly know, where my preference for carcinogenic word fields comes from. As soon as I write, it starts to fester” (Melle, 2008, p. 144). The author discusses his aversion to realism and his tendency toward stylistic exaggeration. In an interview on *Raumforderung*, Melle said: “I have a tendency towards linguistic excessiveness, yes: mannerism” (Fischer, 2008). The novel *Sickster* revels in wordplay (starting with the title), pop references, and literary allusions, and shifts between narrative perspectives. Several literary critics addressed this postmodern play with language and narrative.<sup>229</sup> In our reading it is a first attempt at fictionalizing and narrating the manic experience of the instability of language. In mania the metonymic side of language breaks down; there is no punctuation and no retroactive generation of meaning and sense—these remain in suspense. The structure and style of Melle’s postmodern language games seem to mimic aspects of the festering of language in mania. The narrative coherence is unclear, meaning is unstable and ambiguous.

### 3.2. Narrating the Experience of Mania: Literary Doubles

Next to that, Melle attempts to narrativize experiences of mania through the use of literary doubles. The doubles are important to understand Melle’s work; they show precisely how life and fiction become knotted in his work and reveal the importance of fictionalizing and giving experience a narrative shape.<sup>230</sup> In *The World at My Back* Melle (2016) explains how all his characters refer to him: “Doppelgänger and recurrent figures<sup>231</sup> pervade the works I have already written and published” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 53). He explains how these are not purely autobiographical constructs: “So far, my protagonists have all been versions of myself, all sharing the same basic constitution, the same basic destiny, but equipped with certain new characteristics that turn them into autonomous figures who can operate on their own” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 204). Melle says these half-fictitious characters came about as “a lucky make-shift solution” for processing his manic-depressive experiences (Raab, 2016).

<sup>229</sup> See Fischer (2008), Gellai (2018), Hillgruber (2014), Hugendick (2014), and Rok (2014).

<sup>230</sup> We can connect the use Melle makes of the double to Lacan’s (1966/2006) understanding of the double in *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function*, where Lacan describes the process of identification with the double or with the mirror image as a formative moment in the constitution of the ego. In Melle’s work we can consider the doubles as variations of the ego. Through the making of doubles, Melle can describe himself as a character in a plot, and through the byway of this fiction, come to understand himself. In Lacan’s mirror stage, the identification with the specular image has a similar formative or orthopedic function.

<sup>231</sup> “Doppel- und Wiedergänger meiner selbst” (Melle, 2016, p. 55).

The doubles reflect the author's evolving relation to manic depression. In *Raumforderung* and *Sickster*, Melle describes his overwhelming experiences. Through the protagonists he narrates the initial dysregulation of language<sup>232</sup> and his first manic ramble through the city of Berlin. For example, in *Raumforderung*, *Thomas M\*\*\*\** tells us about his mania and his stay at a psychiatric ward; *Sickster*'s protagonist *Magnus Taue* shares this faith and is diagnosed with "something like a mix or hybrid between these two syndromes . . . cyclothymia and schizophrenia" (Melle, 2011, p. 223); and in *3000 Euro*, written after Melle's last manic episode, the theme has shifted to the aftermath of the crisis and to recovery. *Anton* is deep in debt, lives in a sheltered housing project, and is not really sure what happened to him: "Has Anton been ill? And is he still ill? What exactly happened to him? There were signs of mania, they said, but Anton thought he had been in control of himself the whole time" (Melle, 2014, p. 77). Before 2016 Melle was rather discreet about the personal elements in his fiction. If madness and delusion appear in Melle's oeuvre before *The World at My Back*, particularly in his novels *Sickster* and *3000 Euro*, it is often employed within the context of social criticism, and interpreted as such.<sup>233</sup> The stories of the doubles seem to be first attempts at providing some narrative coherence to the disruptive and destabilizing experience of mania.

### 3.3. Fictionalizing the Trauma of Mania: Narrating the Unspeakable

For Melle, his books prior to *The World at My Back* are attempts at dealing with the trauma of mania. The traumatic aspect of mania, according to the author, consists not merely in the devastating disruption of his regular life, but in the fact that, looking back, mania is only remembered in flashes, consists of actions that hardly feel to be one's own and are thus impossible to integrate into the narrative of one's everyday life. His manic experiences were so traumatizing and unspeakable that he couldn't do anything but try to find a way to narrate and describe them:

Being manic-depressive is such a colossal complex that it demands to be attended to. One has to deal with it, to apply some order to it. At the same time, I wanted to forge some sort of fiction out of it. That was always my plan, and for a while it worked. (Schrader, 2016)

<sup>232</sup> As in the autobiographical version of these events, Melle denotes this shift in language with the word *umstülpen*.

<sup>233</sup> See Baßler and Drügh (2012), Gratzke (2018), Rok (2014), and Klein (2015) for discussions on *Sickster*; and Nachtwey (2018) and Steinmayr (2019) for *3000 Euro*.

Fictionalizing seems like Melle's strategy to restore the order and narrative coherence that was lost during his episodes of mania. Narrating and dramatizing his experiences runs as a theme through his work. In *3000 Euro*, the protagonist *Anton* remarks:

Life can only be understood backward, someone<sup>234</sup> said . . . Because it is not the summation of good or bad moments that add up to a successful or unsuccessful life, but a dramaturgy, a narrative that should ultimately end well, or in any case, not end badly. (Melle, 2014, p. 41)

Looking back from the vantage point of *The World at My Back* we see how numerous episodes from Melle's life were previously fictionalized in his stories and novels, as an attempt at distancing. He states that even before *The World at My Back* he actually was always already writing about his condition, but in a veiled manner: "It has seeped into my books. They deal with nothing else, but try to conceal it dialectically" (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 17; see also Heier, 2016). For example, in *Dinosaurier in Ägypten*, according to Melle (2008) the pivotal story of *Raumforderung*, we recognize, described in a fragmented and chaotic way, the start of his first manic episode as discussed in *The World at My Back*. Some passages also reappear, word for word, in *Sickster*. In *The World at My Back*, Melle (2016) comments on these previous attempts at describing that "devastating day of destiny" (p. 55).<sup>235</sup> He connects the repetition of words and passages to the unspeakable reality of trauma:

I have even taken paragraphs or longer passages and reprinted them because the narrative struck me as so appalling I couldn't and didn't want to produce yet another version—like someone who has been traumatized and keeps repeating the same sentence because the story behind it (the event, the disaster) can't be told. (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 53)<sup>236</sup>

Thus, Melle's early fiction seems a response to the traumatic experience of mania, a sustained attempt at narrating the unspeakable.<sup>237</sup>

<sup>234</sup> Someone being Kierkegaard: "It is quite true what philosophy says, that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other principle, that it must be lived forward" (Kierkegaard, 2008, p. 179).

<sup>235</sup> Melle's (2016) expression "diesen ruinösen Schicksalstag" (p. 55) is not fully captured in "that devastating day" (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 53).

<sup>236</sup> Actually, because the story "keeps slipping away towards the indescribable." Melle (2016) writes: "weil sich die dahinterliegende Geschichte . . . stets ins Unsagbare entzieht" (p. 55).

<sup>237</sup> The fictitious writer named *Thomas Melle* in the story *Wuchernde Netze* states: "My early work is structured like a trauma. The 'form' of trauma, which is more than its 'content' the subject of the text, is reflected in the form of the text" (Melle, 2007, p. 157). Without succumbing to the lure of Melle's play with a fictitious *Melle*, we could consider this to apply to Melle's work before *The World at My Back*.

### 3.4. Reconstructing the Narrator of Mania: Restoring the Ego-Narrative and the Position of the Subject

According to Melle, fictionalizing experiences with the help of the semi-fictional doubles used to work well:

Writing was a way of giving awful things a different form, of banishing them and of even forging a few sparks of beauty out of the crooked. Which worked out well. It was a movement out of the confines, without being aware of it. (Heidemann, 2016)

But ultimately, he explains, it led to further alienation and confusion, and his books and doubles no longer helped to keep his life together. Specifically, a moment of panic during a lecture urged him to write his autobiographical work: “This may come from the blurring of fiction and autobiography, from the fact that I was never able to be completely honest about my earlier work, which always veiled the relationship between the protagonist and the author” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 305). With *The World at My Back* he attempts to rid himself and his work of what he calls “this eternal double’s farce” (Melle, 2016, p. 226).<sup>238</sup> For Melle, the autobiographical project is an attempt at telling his story without further alienation (Schrader, 2016), or “to bring fiction and autobiography together and bring it to the zero point” (Heidemann, 2016). He explains:

This time I had to say: Ground Zero. Everything on nil. There you go, here is the story. It was for me an absolute necessity to slide the spheres into each other and to say, that is me and this is how I see it. (Motter, 2016)

In *The World at My Back* Melle intends to write about his manic depression in his own name, no longer hiding behind doubles. Yet, this introduces a crucial problem: How could he relate these experiences as his own, when precisely the position of himself as “I,” as subject of his history, was complicated by these experiences? Melle (2016/2023) writes: “And you no longer know who you were. You don’t recognize your actions although you can remember them” (p. 104). His autobiographical book is not just a reconstruction of the narrative of his history, but a reconstruction of the narrator of that history. In a lecture on the occasion of receiving the *Stadtschreiber von Bergen-Enkheim* prize Melle clearly describes the problem

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<sup>238</sup> Melle’s (2016) expression “mich von diesem ewigen Wiedergängertum freizuschreiben” (p. 226) is not accurately captured in “to write myself free of this eternal revenge” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 204).

with which he was confronted. At the outset the narrating subject is shattered, discontinuous, unreliable:

I had to attempt to describe something that was fundamentally indescribable . . . I had to provide a narrative unity . . . to something that from the outset obliterated the narrating subject into fragments, into discontinuity and unreliability, before it even had a chance to take the floor. (Melle, 2017, p. 7)

In his autobiography he describes this as follows:

Saying “I” under these circumstances is not at all easy, and I do so with all the more determination. If I don’t try to round up my stories, fetch them back, raise my voice on my own account without faking it, I will remain a zombie in my life, especially in my life, a version of myself, just like my characters. (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 204)

With *The World at My Back*, Melle does not explain his illness, but assumes it. Precisely through narrating his history, he appropriates his history, makes it his own by narrating it as “me.” Writing his story forges the dimension of the subject that was destroyed by the manic festering of language. Likewise, through narrating his history in his own name, he (re-)constructs the coherence of the ego and the ego-narrative.<sup>239</sup> We see a double work of reconstruction happening here. Constructing the narrative, its content, the story, and so on effectively amounts to a reconstruction of the ego, which we can situate in the dimension of the imaginary. This reconstructs the coherence of the image of the ego. The retroactive assumption of the actions and words in that story as one’s own, on the other hand, is a reconstruction of the position of the subject. It entails the adoption of a position within language and speech in the dimension of the symbolic.

### 3.5. Inventing a Narrative Form for Mania: Artificial Authenticity

Yet, in *The World at My Back* Melle states he will never arrive at an ultimate, satisfactory explanation for his experiences. On the one hand, the act of narrating provides a certain amount of clarity by providing a form, a structure, to capture the experience: “And so I have

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<sup>239</sup> King et al. (2013) point out that writing can have a double restorative function: it can function as a reparatory element in construction of identity at the level of the imaginary, and it can aid in repairing the rupture at the level of the symbolic.

to tell the story to make you understand it” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 19).<sup>240</sup> On the other hand, incomprehensibility is fundamental to the manic experience: “Cruelly, this person cannot even understand themselves. How can they ever make others understand them? All they can do is accept their own incomprehensibility and try to live with it” (Melle, 2016/2023, pp. 16–17). Therefore, rather than an attempt at explaining himself, Melle’s autobiography seems to provide a narrative for the unexplainability he has to deal with: “With my book, I hope to . . . provide a narrative module for something that is actually completely incomprehensible” (Becker, 2016).

For Melle, the crux is not explaining, but narrating. By giving the experience, however incomprehensible, a narrative shape, it becomes somewhat graspable. Indeed, with his autobiographic book, Melle turned a personal problem (the shattered and discontinuous experience of manic depression) into a literary problem (how to give this experience an adequate literary form). No wonder he stresses that this book is a literary project. In form, it is not a mere registration but a dramatization, and in purpose, it is an attempt at reclaiming his history. Melle emphasizes how his book is highly composed and constructed: it is not a primal scream, not a text of self-exposure (Schrader, 2016). According to Melle it is not autobiography, not a memoir, not a testimony, not a victim narrative, not a recovery story. The cover describes it as “a chronicle” and “a radical autobiographical work.”

Likewise, he insists that *The World at My Back*, although completely truthful, is fiction (Becker, 2016). The fictional dimension resides in the positioning of a narrating subject and in the attempt at reconstructing the ego of the narrator. After taking the byway of fictional doubles, here Melle reconstructs the ego-narrative directly. This is only possible by inventing a suitable narrative form. In a lecture, Melle (2017) notes how his book has been called *authentic*, how it’s being described as brutally honest and artless, in response to which he insists on its *artificiality*. He says artifice was indispensable for writing about his experiences. He had to adopt “a different kind of truthfulness, that allows for fiction and for lies. A truthfulness that does not neglect artifice, but only creates itself through it” (Melle, 2017, p. 7).

Interestingly this has even become an artistic creed: “the greater the artificiality the greater the authenticity. Only after something went through the most meticulous molding and the

<sup>240</sup> Or, rather, “to make it more understandable,” which can imply also to himself. Melle (2016) writes: “also muss ich erzählen, um es begreifbarer zu machen” (p. 18).



most stupendous artificiality, can it become *real*” (Melle, 2017, p. 4). In our reading, this focus on artificiality points to the necessity of the work of construction. After all, manic language undermines the stable generation of a message. Meaning and sense are unstable; they remain fragmented and discontinuous. To be able to narrate his experience, a structuring format is embraced, which he stresses by pointing to the importance of artifice.

### 3.6. Writing Oneself Free From the Burden of Mania: Outsourcing the Illness

At the end of *The World at My Back* Melle (2016) expresses the hope of no longer having to be occupied with himself so much, which he repeats in nearly every interview and lecture following its publication: enough about me, back to fiction. In an interview Melle is hopeful:

It’s all open right now. Living and writing. I think I managed to break off some chains in both domains, chains that shackled me and kept me occupied. It’s a liberation. Even if it is a cliché. To write and breathe oneself free, that’s what it’s about. (Bartels, 2016)

One year later he says the book helped provide some distance between him and his topic: “it no longer burdens me so, I can no longer evoke the intensity of the experience in me. That is gone now. It is now a book. I managed, so to speak, to write that burden off of me” (Adorján, 2017, p. 3). It seems by writing about his manic-depressive experiences Melle managed, to some extent, to externalize them. Interestingly, a reviewer called his book “a backup of his personality, a backup of his own narrative” (Rodkoffsky, 2016), and in an interview Melle specified that, during the course of public readings, his own story became more and more unreal to him. The more he read from his book before an audience, the more it turned into material, into pure text: “On occasion it seemed to me as if in the end my illness was just a hoax, like: do I even have it?” (Adorján, 2017, p. 3).

This process of distance-taking is demonstrated most explicitly in the recent play *Unheimliches Tal/Uncanny Valley* (Melle, 2018), where a robot-double of Melle takes the stage, a functioning robot with Melle’s looks and voice. The back of the robot is open, so the computerized insides are visible. Also depicted on stage is a video projection, showing the creation of the robot and of Melle himself addressing the audience. The robot-Melle talks about his manic depression, about the autobiographical book, and the interviews and lectures

given in the wake of its publication. The robot explains his dislike for discussing his book: meticulous word-calibrations and exact phrasings get lost in the conversation and the repetition of his answers trivialize and banalize matters. That is the reason, Melle says from the screen, addressing the audience and the robot, that after outsourcing his mind to his book, he now outsourced his body to the robot: “Finally I can guarantee a stability that was denied to me by my illness. . . . I am no longer at the mercy of my condition” (Melle, 2018). In an interview, Melle explains how the play is a continuation of and a comment on his autobiography and a further problematization of the notion of authenticity (Meierhenrich, 2019). Noack (2018) describes the theme of the play as that of “a man watching his artificial doubling in amazement.”

In our reading, the artificiality of *The World at My Back* effectively helped to put some distance between Melle and his manic experiences. *Unheimliches Tal/Uncanny Valley* radicalizes this strategy. The robot-Melle double and the comments he gives on what the robot tells, seem an ultimate way of getting rid of his experiences by framing these as narratives that tell aspects of truth about the narrator without ever defining the narrating subject.

Lacan (2004/2014) describes one’s inscription in the symbolic as a process that results in producing a subject of language—a divided subject—but that also creates a loss, or installs a lack. For Lacan the subject is always marked by a lack in the symbolic: one never completely coincides with any of the signifiers one articulates, language never completely covers one’s experience, one’s story is never completely straight. What Melle (2018) evokes with the staging of the robot-Melle is precisely this dimension of lack, of not completely coinciding with his ego-narrative. Melle does not attempt to close the gap between his experience and the narrative about it; on the contrary, he accentuates it by having the robot-Melle comment on the distance Melle feels from this narrative. The *lack* or the *not-completely-coinciding-with* takes center stage here. This contrasts with the fictional narrative consistency of ego, which is always an imaginary attempt at closing the gap, at covering up the lack. We can also relate the idea of outsourcing the illness to the notion of the fabrication of a “supplementary loss” (Brenner, 2022) whereby something of the subjective intimate libidinal dynamic is situated in a creation, an object that is then situated in a domain outside of the subject<sup>241</sup>. From there it

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<sup>241</sup> Brenner (2021) develops this notion when addressing Maleval’s (2009) discussion of the autobiographical work of Donna Williams. In her books Williams (1992, 1994) describes the successive ways she developed of navigating the world as an autistic subject. Maleval (2009) argues that the publication of her first autobiographic

can assume a supportive function for the subject and allow for the taking on of a different place in the symbolic<sup>242</sup>. We can understand Melle's (2016) book and Melle's (2018) staging of the lack as such an external inscription of a subjective division.

### 3.7. Taking Control of Language: The New Realism

Through the writing of his autobiographical work, something changes in Melle's relationship to language. By inventing ways of writing about manic depression, Melle (2016/2023) says he became a new kind of writer: "The illness may have broken me forever. But maybe, and against my will, it also made me into a writer" (p. 274).

In his early works of fiction, Melle's style mimics the instability and unreliability of manic language. Yet, after his last manic episode, his writing took a turn toward realism, which is evident in *3000 Euro* (2014), the first novel Melle (2016) considers stylistically untainted by manic depression.<sup>243</sup> At the time, Melle, discreet about the personal relevance of this stylistic shift, says:

It's a development I'm going through. In the past I have tried to experiment more, sometimes the narrator or me as the narrator and the established narrator no longer had themselves fully under control, and were overtaxed, so to speak. . . . There were places where the narrator himself could no longer be controlled. I call the course I am following

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book had specific effects, pointing to how the process of portraying the most intimate aspect of her inner emotional world, which she projected into an object—the book—that was subsequently embedded in the social domain. According to Maleval (2009) publishing this autobiography implied a voluntary separation from this intimate object, which allowed a repositioning of herself in the symbolic order, thus establishing a certain subjective division. As a result, she became less dependent on doubles and imaginary companions. Brenner (2021) stresses the double mechanism at work in this publication process. What matters is not only the creative investment of her dynamic inner world into an object that was then located in the social domain, but how the fabrication of and separation from such an object "comes to engender a lack, a certain subjective division, that is intimately associated with the subject but is permanently put out of the subject's control" (Brenner, 2021, p. 967). Brenner (2022) calls this "a supplementary inscription of a loss of jouissance in a place outside of the subject" (p. 12).

<sup>242</sup> Brenner (2022) states that this inscription of a loss in a place outside of the subject "mimics something of the functionality of the *objet petit a*" (p. 13). Lacan (2004/2014) describes the object *a* as a remainder of the operation of being inscribed in the order of the signifier, or entering the realm of language. Lacan depicts this operation as a mathematical division by which a hypothetical pre-language-subject is divided by the Other, by language, and becomes a divided subject, that is a subject of the signifier. From then on language mediates one's relation to others, to oneself, to the body, etc. For Lacan this process of division has a remainder, a leftover, which is what he then calls the object *a*. Lacan also describes the object *a* as an amount of libido that escapes the economy of exchange between corporeal libido and object libido; and links the object *a* to the rock that Freud speaks of, the final irreducible reserve of libido. For Lacan (2004/2014) the object *a* has a structuring role for the subject and has different qualities in different clinical psychopathologies (Vanheule, 2011).

<sup>243</sup> Gellai (2018) summarizes the reception as: "critical consensus has it that with *3000 Euro*, his second novel, Melle achieved narrative maturity" (pp. 156–157).

now with my new book, a new realism. . . . This time the narrator is sovereign and in full control of his methods, and narrates a bit cooler, not necessarily more emotionless, but more in command, and he knows what he's doing the whole time. (Hillgruber, 2014)

After the publication of *The World at My Back* we understand how Melle is himself, the narrator, gradually gaining more control over language and narrative. In his inaugural speech as *Stadtschreiber von Bergen-Enkheim*, he describes that, to be able to tell his history, “a certain trust in the possibility of realism had to be regained” (Melle, 2017, p. 7). Melle says he could no longer partake in the postmodernist sorrow about the impossibility of ever achieving truthfulness: “it was for me . . . an absolutely necessary tool: namely representation, the classical Mimesis (or rather its construction), the attempt to simply *depict reality as it had been*—in the romantic awareness that this is actually impossible” (Melle, 2017, p. 7, emphasis in original).

This trust in the possibility of a literary realism came about through the use of “the straight sentence”<sup>244</sup> (Melle, 2017, p. 8), that is: the sober sentence that does not come apart at the seams, that does not fold back on itself and takes itself down with a meta-reference, and the sentence that does not run off with the narrator<sup>245</sup>. Melle explains how he needed unpretentious expressions that could function as an anchor—sentences like “I crossed the road” or like the first sentence of his book: “I would like to tell you about a loss” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 9). Such use of straight sentences seems to function as an explicit strategy for keeping language under control, as a literary method that prevents language from running off, a way of writing that keeps language stable and reliable.<sup>246</sup> Simply describing reflects a basic trust in language: “Because my material was actually so indescribable, such a *Ground Zero*, that the description practically had to start nearly from zero, to somehow be able to grasp it”

<sup>244</sup> “Der gerade Satz” (Melle, 2017, p. 8).

<sup>245</sup> Melle (2017) gives an example: “I (or the stream of particles of perception here) walked, no, *bounced*, no, *stumbled* à la Handke over the Kafkaesque street flooded by endless traffic, on which nevertheless not a single car was driving, as I now realized with overexcited eyes, on the retina still the echo of the swarming grain of asphalt; and while I am writing this sentence, I am not even sure of this.” (p. 8). At the occasion of Melle’s speech, this sentence is applauded enthusiastically. A sentence like this drowns out the subject in a metonymic sliding of signification. It does not define the speaker as a subject. While *I crossed the road* does.

<sup>246</sup> We can contrast this new penchant for realism to the disdain for realism when Melle (2008) has the fictitious Melle proclaim in *Wuchernde Netze*: “In spite of a few particularities, I am actually a highly theoretical author, who prefers to launch himself upwards in the next meta-swirl, than to sing the praises of the asphalt of the street in dreadful realism. I am a dancer in virtuality” (pp. 152–153).

(Melle, 2017, p. 8). To be able to describe the indescribable experience of manic depression, Melle needed a certain plainness of language:

Slowly I began to gain a new trust in realism, in the possibility of representation. And in the straight sentence, in the concrete statement: It happened there and then, yes, *that's how it was*, no matter how complicated it came to be: I was on the street, mad, crazy, manic—so I describe a few details of this perceptive hell, as graphic as possible, as *real* as possible, with all the available means of the arts—perhaps now you understand a little better what it's like? And if *that* is possible with literature, I soon thought, and I still think: then what else? What else can I describe? Isn't this *Ground Zero* the opportunity to develop my very own, new realism, one that would be truthful and fictional? What if I could *really* describe everything? (Melle, 2017, pp. 8–9, emphasis in original)

This embracing of realistic straight descriptions repairs the break of metonymy that is typical of manic language with its lack of punctuation and lack of the retroactive generation of meaning and sense.<sup>247</sup> For Lacan (1966/2006), meaning, and the dimension of the subject it denotes, are retroactive effects of interpunction. As long as a sentence is not finished, as long as a phrase keeps going on and stacking clauses, the final meaning remains ambiguous. Meaning is anticipated, but is in suspension until the final word arrives. For example, the phrase *Dimitri missed his friends...* remains unresolved until the sentence ends, because later signifiers determine the meaning of previous ones, the meaning shifts when we add *...when he cowardly attempted to shoot them in the back*. The shorter and simpler a sentence, the less there is room for ambiguity. By explicitly embracing the use of straight sentences, Melle seems to counter the infinite being in suspense. The moment of punctuation and movement of retroaction in the generation of meaning arrive sooner, and so the sense of sentences is more straightforward.<sup>248</sup> For Melle, this restores faith in language.<sup>249</sup>

<sup>247</sup> In Chapter 1 we noted how Jakobson (1956/1987) connects realism to metonymy, he states “following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time” (p. 111). Lacan (1981/1993) echoes this, stating in *Seminar 3*, that “in general metonymy animates this style of creation called the realist style, as opposed to the symbolic style and to poetic language” (p. 228). Melle's new realism is a repair of this realistic metonymy (countering the derailing metonymy of mania that completely loses the plot) and it is this metonymy that provides an anchoring, a setting in time and space. In *L'instance de la lettre*, Lacan (1966/2006) adds that “truth is evoked only in that dimension of ruse whereby all ‘realism’ in creation derives its virtue from metonymy” (p. 430) [“cette dimension d'alibi” (Lacan, 1966, p. 517)]. Lacan's connection of realism to the dimension of ruse (or alibi) lines up with Melle's remarks on artificial authenticity.

### 3.8. Keeping Language in Check: Writing, Not Speech

Finally, in *The World at My Back* Melle identifies the use of medication as crucial to his current style of writing. He describes it as an almost direct treatment for language:

I write under medication. That seeps into my sentences, and inundates the structure. It dams up my choice of words. I constantly come up with qualifiers such as “more or less,” “maybe,” “perhaps,” “a kind of,” for fear of excessive feeling, and maybe for lack of it too, out of the need to cook things on the backburner. The medication lops off the apexes, as they say, the high ones and the low ones, in life and in writing. This brings on a new sobriety, sets up a resistance I have to overcome in order to express anything. (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 267)

In interviews, too, he wonders if his more sober narrative style is an effect of medication; he feels he can no longer write as exuberantly and expressively as before (Heidemann, 2016). Even so, Melle is at peace with this evolution (Heier, 2016) and indicates that, next to the medication, writing is crucial in coping with life: “Life was always what was difficult for me, not writing. Writing was more like a technique for bringing order to things. Or for recreating a disorder so that it loses its horror” (Becker, 2016). Writing is his “ideal way of existing” (Raab, 2016). When an interviewer asks him to expand on a psychological aspect in *The World at My Back*, Melle recoils: “Uh oh, now it’s starting to sound like therapy, I’m getting scared. . . . I had to write literature about it in order to be precise enough” (Becker, 2016).<sup>250</sup> His self-reflection passes through literature and not through speech, which is probably why he

<sup>248</sup> Melle (2016) also mentions a physical, bodily component to the rhythm of his writing. He describes a new tic of holding his breath, letting the tension rise and then fall: “Holding my breath, again and again, consciously at first, soon unconsciously, automatically, even as I write, until I finish the sentence” (p. 286). This affects the rhythm of his sentences.

<sup>249</sup> Our analysis stops after the publication of *Die Welt im Rücken* and the interviews in its aftermath, but some more recent interviews (in September 2022) following the publication of a new novel *Das leichte Leben* (Melle, 2022) prompt us to question whether Melle’s strategy of the new realism is a lasting solution for his episodes of mania. Melle briefly mentions going through another manic episode at the end of 2019 that lasted, with varying intensity, for two years. Due to his depressed state, in the aftermath of this episode, Melle did not go on a book tour and only granted two interviews (Hugendick, 2022). Melle expressed doubts about his former optimism about the ability of literature to save him: “I had the hope that if I fit the illness into a form, that I would then also fit my life into a form. . . . Perhaps that belief was naïve” (Becker, 2022). Yet, Melle also mentioned another way in which writing helped him: he said the recent novel was planned out beforehand, and in periods when his mania was less prominent, the structure that was already in place allowed him to keep writing—he compared it to a coloring book—and this gave him footing and structure (Hugendick, 2022). So, Melle still has some faith in the power of literature for him.

<sup>250</sup> Melle says the same about the aspect of social criticism in his books, he is not interested in proclaiming opinions in interviews: “This has to happen in the books, in all its un-clear-cut exactitude.” (Schrader, 2016).

is rather dismissive of talking therapy: “I’d always resisted psychoanalysts and other psychobabble or silent treatments” (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 182).<sup>251</sup>

This reluctance to speak about himself seems a way of avoiding language that hasn’t been thought through, and therefore doesn’t fit into a proper artificial mold. Being confronted with statements from previous interviews seems unpleasant to Melle; it is not precise enough (Bartels, 2016). Quotes or passages from his book do not have the same effect. It seems the literary form implies a structuring distance and a more relaxed attitude toward the inexactitude of language and its aspects of truth and fiction.<sup>252</sup>

## 4. Discussion

The purpose of our article is threefold: literary, psychoanalytic, and clinical. Concerning the literary purpose, we hope to have clarified, with the use of Lacan, how Thomas Melle’s work relates to and sometimes treats his manic language experience.

In this article we discussed eight literary strategies in the work of Melle. Specifically, these address the three stages of language disruption we discerned in the course of Melle’s manic episodes. First, especially in his early fictional work, the manic shift in language, or festering of thought and language, is stylized such that it mimics the instability of language in mania. Although this is a first attempt at processing this experience, we only consider his later strategies, such as the use of new realism, as a veritable treatment for this dysregulation. Second, the breakdown of narrative is addressed in Melle’s fiction by using doubles and in his attempt to narrate the unspeakable trauma of mania. This narrative reconstruction treats the manic experience of fragmentation and is expressed in Melle’s autobiographical work. Third, the destruction of subject and ego is particularly treated through autobiographical writing. His use of doubles already somewhat treated the destruction of the ego, but especially his autobiographical work reconstructs the ego-narrative and restores the dimension of the subject.

Overall, these strategies cluster in three broad genres that occur more or less chronologically: (autobiographical) fiction, (fictional) autobiography, and new realism. In his

<sup>251</sup> Melle’s (2016) expression is “Laber-und Schweigedoktoren” (p. 202).

<sup>252</sup> We can relate this to Lacan’s (2007) remark on Joyce, in *Seminar 18*, where he states that Joyce would have nothing to gain from a psychoanalytic treatment, because his literary practice (the littering of the letter, as Lacan calls it there) leads him straight to the best of what one could expect from a psychoanalytic cure.

(autobiographical) fiction, Melle's first way of dealing with the disruption of mania is through fictionalizing manic experiences in stories and novels. *Raumforderung*, *Sickster*, and *3000 Euro* can be read along these lines. Melle's fiction here aims at restoring some narrative coherence, but it ultimately increases alienation at the level of the ego. His (fictional) autobiography, *The World at My Back* is a continuation of the effort of restoring narrative coherence, but is mainly an explicit attempt at restoring the dimension of the subject, and the coherence of the ego and ego-narrative. His autobiographical project is just as much a matter of constructing the narrator as it is of constructing a narrative. Melle explains how he combines fiction and artifice in an act of authentic self-creation which manages to put some distance between him and his experiences. Finally, in his *new realism*, during and in the wake of his autobiographic writing—and foreshadowed in *3000 Euro*—Melle develops a fresh style that—together with a focus on writing as opposed to speech—helps to keep language in check and seems to function as a veritable treatment for the manic dysregulation of language. Eventually, through these strategies, Melle manages to restore his faith in language and develops a new way of being a writer, based on a newfound trust in language and representation.

The second purpose of our article is to further develop the psychoanalytic understanding of mania. Interestingly, Melle's descriptions of mania and language disturbances tally quite well with Lacan's (2004/2014) understanding of the vicissitudes of language in mania. Interestingly, next to its theoretical importance, this focus on the dysregulation of manic language opens pathways for conceptualizing the recovery from mania. To articulate this further, we return to Lacan's (2005/2016) discussion of James Joyce and the concept of the *sinthome*.

Lacan (2005/2016) introduces the *sinthome* concept in his 23<sup>rd</sup> seminar when discussing the writing practice of James Joyce. *Sinthome* is a return to an older spelling of "symptom," and Lacan here plays on several connotations embedded in the word *sinthome*. *Sinthome* alludes to the English word *sin* and evokes the French *saint homme*, saintly man, someone who does the right thing; both these dimensions are relevant to the notion of the *sinthome*: "on the one hand it refers to a person's 'sins' or frailties, and on the other hand it bears witness to a person's *savoir faire* in dealing with such frailties" (Vanheule, 2017, p. 394). Lacan's (2005/2016) most general definition of *sinthome* is that it is a fourth element that is



needed to connect or *knot* the three human registers of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.<sup>253</sup> For Lacan, to have some stability in mental life and make psychic functioning possible, these three registers have to be *knotted* or intertwined, and to do that, a fourth element is necessary. For Lacan everything that functions as a structuring element in mental life can be considered a *sinthome*. This is why Lacan also calls Freud's Oedipus complex a *sinthome*, or his own concept of the Name-of-the-Father, since these are all elements that connect, or knot, the three registers together<sup>254</sup>.

Broadly speaking there are two related ways in which the notion of the *sinthome* is further developed within Lacanian theory. First, the *sinthome* is conceptualized as the private and idiosyncratic core of the symptom. The knotting of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real comes down to constructing some private way of dealing with language and *jouissance*. In that sense, the *sinthome* is what remains when the symptom is stripped of all its meanings. Therefore, the Lacanian concept *sinthome* does not point to pathologically warded-off subjective truth, as is the case in classic psychoanalytic view on the symptom, but to the private and idiosyncratic core of the symptom. Whereas a symptom contains a message for the subject that has to do with repression and the return of the repressed in a ciphered way (Fink, 1995; Vanheule, 2011), the *sinthome* is what remains after all relevant meanings have been articulated and clarified.<sup>255</sup> It implies a singular way of dealing with language and *jouissance* that bears witness to a characteristic style (Lacan, 2005/2016). The second use of the notion of the *sinthome* refers to the construction of a private solution for dealing with severe psychiatric problems. Lacanian authors especially related the notion of *sinthome* to the treatment of and recovery from psychosis (Vanheule, 2017). In his later work Lacan (2005/2016) conceptualizes psychosis in terms of a central difficulty in linking the three registers discussed. Psychosis implies that conventions fail to provide a support in making such a link, which is why one is forced to construct one's own fourth element to knot the

<sup>253</sup> The imaginary is the register of the ego-narrative and the body image; the symbolic is the register of language and the signifier; the real is the register of *jouissance* and corporeal drive energy.

<sup>254</sup> Jonckheere (2008) theorizes that a *sinthome* is constructed out of a doubling of one of the three registers: the standard neurotic solution of the Name-of-the-Father is a doubling of the symbolic; practices that involve the body or its objects can be considered a doubling of the real (see also Vanheule & Geldhof, 2012); and a *sinthome* involving the construction of a mirror-formed ego are a doubling of the imaginary (see also Rabaey & Vanheule, 2022).

<sup>255</sup> In this light the concept of the *sinthome* is related to the notion of fantasy (Miller, 2007), as a structuring element for how someone deals with *jouissance* or organizes his or her enjoyment. In that sense, at the end of an analysis, what remains is one's *sinthome*.

registers. The sinthome, then, is this homemade fourth element, this private way of dealing with *jouissance* that creates stability in mental life (Vanheule, 2017).

Three aspects of this notion of the sinthome are worth pointing out: a sinthome is a practice, it provides a singular solution for a specific problem, and also enables a connection to the social world. First, as Lacan (2005/2016) states, the sinthome is not so much a bit of knowledge or an idea as it is a practice. Therefore, he links it to the *savoir faire* of the artist. As Geldhof (2014) remarks, this means a sinthome is not a finished construction, but rather an ongoing activity that evolves and takes shape through a number of subjective permutations<sup>256</sup>. Second Lacan (2005/2016) stresses that a sinthome only works if it links the registers at the exact point (or points) where a disconnection is situated. This means that a sinthome is always singular, in that it solves a very specific problem: for example, if the body image is fragmented, a sinthome should address the body image<sup>257</sup>; or if meaning and sense keep running off, a sinthome should address that. A third important aspect is the social aspect of the sinthome. As Vanheule & Geldhof (2012) point out, a sinthome not only provides a private solution for knotting the registers, but also provides a way of connecting to the social world, for example by being recognized as an artist (Maleval, 2009) or by identifying with a particular role from which to relate to others.

Lacan (2005/2016) developed this notion of the sinthome in a year-long seminar where he regularly discussed the work of James Joyce, suggesting that Joyce's writing practice and style constitute a sinthome in that these aim at remedying specific issues that characterized the writer's relation to language. According to Lacan (2005/2016), Joyce was troubled by imposed speech, as exemplified in his epiphanies, where language disintegrates to the point of losing its conventional meaning and consistency. Lacan links this disintegration to specific points of ego-destruction (e.g., in his encounter with father figures, and his numbness for pain). An ongoing aim Lacan (2005/2016) discerns in Joyce's writing practice is his attempt at breaking language apart, pulling it to pieces, or even dissolving it altogether; he calls Joyce's work a sort of decomposition of language in which conventional meaning is lost. Next to that, in Lacan's view, Joyce's writing practice also brings him to creating an ego.<sup>258</sup> Joyce's unique

<sup>256</sup> For a number of case studies that analyze several artistic practices as a sinthome, see Geldhof (2014) and Vanheule & Geldhof (2012).

<sup>257</sup> For an example see Geldhof's (2014) discussion of the work of David Nebreda.

<sup>258</sup> We can identify an operation on the symbolic, the fracturing of language, and on the imaginary, the constructing of an ego.

use of words and narrative structures not only fractures or dissolves language, but also establishes his status as an unconventional modernist, which was eventually reflected in Joyce's belief that he was an exceptional genius. According to Lacan, this double operation knots, for Joyce, the three registers of mental life together. The more Joyce fractures and dissolves language, reaching its pinnacle in *Finnegans Wake*, the more he constructs his ego as an artist. Interestingly, Lacan remarks that *Finnegans Wake* resembles mania. We take this not as a statement on Joyce, but on the breakdown of language that is applied in *Finnegans Wake*. After all, Joyce makes literary language resemble manic language: narrative structure and coherence are challenged; meaning is multiplied and ambiguated until it approaches a nonsense status; and no stable narrator appears, except for that of the great writer concocting all this intricate linguistic madness.

Interestingly, in Melle's work a similar process of destruction and construction is at stake. But Melle's writing practice moves in the opposite direction. In mania, language is unreliable: speech festers, narrative structures break down, meaning slips away, and the ego and the subject are in limbo. As indicated, Melle's later literary strategies seem to aim at keeping language in check and at stabilizing narrative instability and linguistic madness. This means that his strategies are not just a remedy for the experience of mania but are a veritable treatment of the manic dysregulation of language. Or in Lacan's parlance, Melle's operations on language keep the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real knotted by preventing language from running off on its own and keeping it tied to a stable meaning and narrator; he treats the tendency toward collusion between the symbolic and the real by focusing on creating consistency at the level of the imaginary. We see in the practice of both writers the crucial elements of a *sinthome*: it is an ongoing practice, aimed at specific disruptive language experiences, and providing a link to the social world<sup>259</sup>. Melle does not construct an artist ego the way Joyce does. In his case we rather observe a multiplication of egos—with the use of doubles, the autobiography, the robot-Melle, which challenges the notion of a straightforward ego and increasingly accentuates fictional aspects of such construction—culminating in the play with multiple Melles commenting on Melle's experiences in *Unheimliches Tal/Uncanny*

<sup>259</sup> We can note how Melle's writing practice affects the three realms of human experience: the doubles and the biographical narrative reconstruction affects the imaginary, the new realism and strategies for keeping language in check operate on the symbolic, and the medication and perhaps the rhythm of holding his breath affects the real of the body.

*Valley*. He does not seem so much to be focused on attempting to be an ego of an oeuvre, but on trying to be the subject of his writing, that is, by creating a link between the symbolic and the imaginary. Melle's narratives about himself don't mainly propagate an imaginary ego, but are a strategy of coping with language through the search for a convenient style that encourages a belief in language, just like in himself as a subject. Such writing rather minimizes the intervening role of the creative artist. The author here is no longer the postmodern wizard playing with narrative instability and the ambiguity of language, but rather the willing servant who uses language and all its tools of fiction to depict a comprehensible reality. Especially his new realism seems to facilitate that Melle positions himself as a subject who can believe that he is the source of the speech that he articulates. At the same time his new realism with its short sentences and straightforward demystifying messages, seems to facilitate that Melle positions himself as the subject who is the source of the speech that he articulates. The specificity of Melle's new realism *sinthome* is not that it constructs an ego. Rather, his operation on language restores the reliability of language and eventually seems to restore Melle's faith in language.

Another way of looking at these strategies is to consider how Melle's strategies aim at keeping language use conventional. Language experience in mania undermines the self-evident *use* we make of language. In mania language itself goes mad, thus drifting away the dimension of the subject. In the aftermath of such an episode, one is confronted with how much everyday language use is based on trust, on the faith that language obeys us and is an instrument we can use. Hence the affinity manic language has with postmodern considerations on the representational limits of language and narrative, an affinity Melle employs in his early work. Yet, Melle's later use of the straight sentence and new realism is an attempt to rely on language again, and to use language to merely describe, without taking off into meta-reflections on language use and perspective. His evolving writing strategies are thus a conscious and effortful attempt to return to a basic mode of *using* language, to not be bothered by its conventionality and its inherent limitations, but to simply use it and trust it will get the job done. A consequence of the conventional use of language is the anchoring to convention in a broader sense: it is the use of language that ties one to others, to culture, to the social world and its conventions, just as it was the instability of language and the festering of

language and narrative that gave rise to delusional thought, the pinnacle of the unconventional.

Importantly, this discussion of the *sinthome* does not have purely theoretical value, but opens up a whole line of reasoning for thinking about strategies of recovery. This points to the clinical purpose of this study. The work of Melle and his operations on language (i.e., the literary strategies we identified) could prove fruitful in elaborating creative writing strategies to support the process of recovery from mania (see King et al., 2013; Stevens & Bryssinck, 2018). The analysis of Melle's writing strategies and the use of the concept of the *sinthome* can provide some theoretical underpinning for such endeavors.

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# 5

## Lacan and the Language of Mania. From Language Gone Mad to the Madness of Llanguage

In this chapter<sup>260</sup> we discuss manic language phenomena within a Lacanian framework. Although Lacan only touches upon the phenomenon of mania on a few occasions, his seemingly scattered and scarcely elaborated comments on mania allow for the development of a coherent view of mania as a phenomenon of language. First, we situate *flight of ideas* as a phenomenon of the signifier rather than of signifieds, of language rather than of ideas, and propose to call this *flight of signifiers*. Then we comment and elaborate Lacan's comments on mania. Lacan (2004/2014) qualifies the manic subject as being delivered to the endless metonymy of the signifying chain; and describes manic excitation as a return to the real of language (Lacan, 1974/1987). In both these instances, Lacan situates mania within the realm of psychosis and considers mania as a form of language gone mad. Next we discuss Lacan's (1975/1998) notion of *llanguage* as a parasitic force of dysregulation and how this affects Lacan's (2005/2016) view on manic language. Manic language is now no longer considered an instance of language gone mad, but is rather thought to reveal something of the madness of *llanguage* lurking beneath the surface of language. Throughout Lacan's sparse comments on mania the element of language is always prominent as is the question what manic language reveals about language as such.

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<sup>260</sup> This chapter is based on: Rabaey, B., & Vanheule, S. (2023). Lacan and the language of mania. From language gone mad to the madness of *llanguage*. *Philosophical Psychology*.

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter we will discuss phenomena of language in mania within a Lacanian framework. In psychiatric descriptions manic language phenomena are mainly captured under the term *flight of ideas*, which is considered one of the core symptoms of mania (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007). Within a Lacanian framework, we can approach *flight of ideas* not so much as a phenomenon of ideas, but as a phenomenon of language and speech.

In Lacan's work mania is not frequently discussed. He only touches upon the phenomenon of mania on a few occasions. Yet, the few remarks Lacan makes offer an interesting perspective on mania and the role language plays in manic phenomena. Lacan's comments on mania all consider mania as a phenomenon of language (see Lacan, 1974/1987, 2004/2014, 2005/2016) and not, for example, as a phenomenon of mood or as a thought disorder. In this paper we will discuss Lacan's comments and show how they allow for a coherent outlook on mania as a phenomenon of language, even as Lacan's conception of language evolves throughout his teaching. Ultimately, for Lacan, the manic experience of language reveals some qualities of language in general and of the universal human experience vis-à-vis language. Lacan's views on the language experience of mania take as a starting point a view of mania as a particular phenomenon of language disturbance within the structure of psychosis. This is implicit in his comments in his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Anxiety* (Lacan, 2004/2014) and more explicit in his comments in *Television* (Lacan, 1974/1987). Lacan's views on the particulars of language in mania are used to articulate a perspective on language itself, beyond the view of mania as manifestation of psychotic language functioning, and about the relationship of language, and language use, to the subject and the experience of subjectivity. Lacan (2005/2016) further elaborates on this perspective in his 23<sup>rd</sup> seminar *The Sinthome*.

We will first argue (in section 2) that the notion of *flight of ideas* as it is defined in psychiatric descriptions and as it is experienced by patients, can be situated in language rather than in thought. We can understand *flight of ideas*, also referred to as loquaciousness, derailment or tangentiality, in Lacanian terms as a phenomenon situated at the level of the signifier rather than at the level the signified. We propose the term *flight of signifiers*, as it has more to do with a particular slipping in the sequencing of words, than with an abundance of

ideas. Hence it is to be understood as more a phenomenon of words and language than of meaning and ideas.

Then, (in section 3) starting from Lacan's (2004/2014) statement in his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Anxiety*, where he describes the manic subject as being delivered "to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (p. 336), we will discuss mania as a phenomenon specifically situated in the chaining up of signifiers. We examine how this metonymic slipping impacts the aspect of meaning and sense and the experience of subjectivity. We discuss how mania is situated in Lacan's view on psychosis and how in neurosis the metaphor of the *Name-of-the-Father* anchors the signifying chain.

Next (in section 4) we discuss Lacan's (1974/1987) comment in *Television* where he qualifies manic excitation as an instance of "the return to the real of that which is rejected, that is, language" (p. 26). This explicitly situates the experience of mania and the slipping of language within Lacan's theorizing on psychosis as a foreclosure of the principle of order and convention, which Lacan dubbed the *Name-of-the-Father*. Manic language is then understood as language separated from the regulation of social and grammatical convention, or, as language gone mad.

Following that (in section 5) we discuss Lacan's evolving understanding of language and how this applies to the language of mania. Starting from his 20<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Encore*, Lacan (1975/1998) qualifies speech as a parasite for the human being. Now, rather than understanding manic language as a disorder or dysfunctioning of language, he comes to understand it as a return to a primal experience of language, for which he coins the term *llanguage*. In this reasoning the particular phenomena of language that occur in mania, reveal something of man's relationship to language, and to *llanguage*. We discuss Lacan's last reference to mania, in his 23<sup>rd</sup> seminar *The Sinthome*, where Lacan (2005/2016) links mania to the near destruction of the English language Joyce practices in *Finnegans Wake*; and Miller's (2005a) elaboration of this understanding of mania. In this view mania is not so much an instance of language gone mad, but a revelation of the madness of *llanguage*.

Thus we will have demonstrated that Lacan's seemingly scattered and scarcely elaborated comments on the phenomenon of mania allow for the development of a coherent view of mania as a phenomenon of language. As Lacan's views shift from language as a system of order and regulation, in his early structuralist outlook, to language as a parasitic force of

dysregulation, in the so called *later Lacan* period of his teaching (Voruz & Wolf, 1996), so does his view of what manic language reveals about language.

## 2. Flight of Signifiers

The few remarks Lacan makes on the phenomenon of mania all consider mania as a phenomenon of language (see Lacan, 1974/1987, 2004/2014, 2005/2016) and not, for example, as a phenomenon of mood or as a thought disorder. When we turn to psychiatric descriptions of mania, language phenomena are an important element of the diagnostic criteria of mania. Next to an exalted mood and pressure of activity, *flight of ideas* is one of the essential morbid symptoms in Kraepelin's (1921) description of mania and is still considered one of the core symptoms of mania (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007). In the DSM-5, *flight of ideas* is defined as: "A nearly continuous flow of accelerated speech with abrupt changes from topic to topic that are usually based on understandable associations, distracting stimuli, or plays on words. When the condition is severe, speech may be disorganized and incoherent." (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 821).

With Lacan, we can specify more precisely what aspect of language is involved in the phenomenon of *flight of ideas*. In his discussion of linguistic functioning, Lacan (1966/2006) starts from Ferdinand de Saussure's assumption that there is no inherent connection between signifier (word) and signified (meaning), it is only through the articulation of discourse, the chaining together of signifiers, that both meaning and the experience of subjectivity arise. If we look closely, the notion of *flight of ideas* is described not so much as an abundance of ideas, but as a continuous and unstoppable flow of words. Although the expression *flight of ideas* suggests a process of thought, in psychiatric descriptions it appears as a process of language rather than of thought. With Lacan, we can consider this *flight of ideas* as a phenomenon of the signifier rather than of the signified. The process of *flight of ideas* is not driven by the production of meaning and sense, but rather by the material aspect of language, the signifier.

This is clear in psychiatric descriptions as well. Kraepelin (1921) describes a *train of ideas* where patients do not follow a train of thought, but jump from one series of ideas to the next, and coherence is gradually lost in the *flight of ideas* where thoughts intrude and impose themselves on patients, who can no longer gather their thoughts together. Kraepelin (1921)

states that patients with *flight of ideas* “are by no means rich in ideas but only rich in words” (p. 18). Progressively, stock language takes over: “forms of speech, which have been learned as such, combinations of words, corresponding sounds and rhymes, usurp more and more the place of the substantive connection of ideas.” (p. 31) and there is an increase of “pure clang-associations, in which every trace of an inner relation of ideas has vanished, assonances and rhymes, even though quite senseless” (pp. 31–32). Binswanger (1964/2012) remarks of manic language use that “words are no longer used in accord with their meanings, but simply strung together on the basis of their sounds” (p. 199) and that “patients verbalize a great amount, but in terms of thought express very little” (p. 200). Lorenz & Cobb (1952) conclude about manic speech that although superficially manic speech “gives the impression of a great variety of ideas, actually the range is limited.” (p. 769). In these characterizations of *flight of ideas* we see it as a process related to the signifier, it is driven by the material aspect of language, by rhyme, clang-associations, stock combinations of words, sounds, etc. and not by a sequencing of ideas or the generation of meaning. So we can situate the phenomenon at the level of the signifier, not the signified.

Jamison (2017) describes *flight of ideas*, for her the central aspect of manic thought, as

a torrent of near unstoppable speech; thoughts brachiate from topic to topic, held only by a thin thread of discernible association. Ideas fly out, and as they do, they rhyme, pun, and assemble in unexampled ways. The mind is alive, electric. (p. 278)

She characterizes it as a way of thinking: “The mind skips ahead, darts back and sideways. The brain is engaged in knight’s move thinking.” (p. 279), although in her descriptions as well, this process seems driven more by language than by ideas:

For most individuals, words link in a reasonably straight line. For those who are manic, or those who have a history of mania, words move about in all directions possible, in a three-dimensional ‘soup,’ making retrieval more fluid, less predictable. (p. 279)

It is the movement of words, freely moving in all directions, that drive this process. For these reasons Leader (2013) suggests to speak of *flight of words* rather than *flight of ideas*. With Lacan and stressing the material aspect of language, we would propose *flight of signifiers*.

This aligns well with research into the linguistic aspects of thought disorder investigating the linguistic peculiarities specific to mania. Manic speech shifts rapidly from one discourse

structure to another (Hoffman et al., 1986). Manic thought is characterized as extravagantly combinatorial, usually with humor, flippancy, and playfulness (Solovay et al., 1987). Manic speech is characterized by pressure of speech, distractibility, derailment, tangentiality, illogicality, clanging, circumstantiality, loss of goal and perseveration (Andreasen, 1979b; Andreasen & Grove, 1986).<sup>261</sup> Some more recent investigations hypothesize an over-activation of the semantic network (Raucher-Chéné et al., 2017) or a diffuse semantic over-activation (Weiner et al., 2019) in mania. Again, these are all phenomena we can situate at the level of the signifier rather than of the signified, it's about words considered in their material aspect rather than as bearers of ideas and meaning.

So, we could conclude that manic language is characterized by an autonomous functioning of language, driven more by the intricacies of language itself—such as rhyme and clang associations—than by the conveying of a message. In Freudian terms what comes to the foreground here are primary process associations (Freud, 1895, 1900). The primary process is the mode of thinking associated with the unconscious, where psychical energy flows freely, unhindered by meaning and sense, this is in contrast to the secondary process, which characterizes conscious thinking, consisting of more stable and controlled thought processes, generating meaning and sense (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973/1988). In primary process thinking, as Freud (1900) saw exemplified in dreams, meaning is unstable, constantly slipping and fleeting. The mechanisms Freud sees at work in primary process thought are condensation and displacement. In his early work Lacan (1966/2006) interprets these as phenomena of language and gives a linguistic interpretation to Freud's primary process mechanisms, as metonymy and metaphor. For Lacan what drives these processes is inherent to language. We turn to the process of metonymy in the next section.

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<sup>261</sup> Andreasen (1979a) gives the following definitions of these phenomena. *Tangentiality* is defined as: "Replying to a question in an oblique, tangential, or even irrelevant manner" (p. 1318). *Derailment* designates: "A pattern of spontaneous speech in which the ideas slip off the track onto another one that is clearly but obliquely related, or onto one that is completely unrelated. Things may be said in juxtaposition that lack a meaningful relationship, or the patient may shift idiosyncratically from one frame of reference to another. At times, there may be a vague connection between the ideas; at others, none will be apparent. This pattern of speech is often characterized as sounding 'disjointed'" (p. 1319). She considers derailment a more exact definition for what is sometimes described as *loose associations* or *flight of ideas*. *Clanging* is defined as: "A pattern of speech in which sounds rather than meaningful relationships appear to govern word choice, so that the intelligibility of the speech is impaired and redundant words are introduced. In addition to rhyming relationships, this pattern of speech may also include punning associations, so that a word similar in sound brings in a new thought" (p. 1320).



### 3. The Infinite Metonymy of the Signifying Chain

#### 3.1. The Signifying Chain

Lacan's most relevant remark to further develop our understanding of mania as a *flight of signifiers* is his qualification of mania as a metonymic running off of the signifying chain. In his 10<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Anxiety*, Lacan (2004/2014) states that in mania the subject is delivered "in a way without any possibility of freedom, to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (p. 336).<sup>262</sup> Previously we argued that, within a Lacanian point of view, the manic *flight of ideas* is rather to be understood as a *flight of signifiers*, a phenomenon at the level of the signifier, of words and language, rather than of the signified, of meaning and ideas. Here we see exactly how Lacan defines the manic *flight of signifiers*, as a derailing of the process of sequencing words, as "sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (p. 336). This again situates mania at the level of the signifier, but more specifically at the level of the signifying chain, so at the level of the chaining up of words. Desmoulins (in Miller, 1997), when discussing this idea, states "we should understand mania as a disease of the signifying chain" (p. 110).

#### 3.2. The Subject of Metonymy and Metaphor

To understand Lacan's notion of metonymy, we need to briefly get into Lacan's reasoning on language. In his discussion of language functioning Lacan (1966/2006) starts from Ferdinand de Saussure's assumption that there is no inherent connection between signifier (word-image) and signified (meaning), it is only through the articulation of discourse, the chaining together of signifiers, that both meaning and the experience of subjectivity arise. In Lacan's theory of subjectivity, meaning as well as subjectivity are produced, momentarily, by the double workings of anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain. Lacan sees two motions at work in language. There is a forward motion, the chaining up of signifiers, this

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<sup>262</sup> The complete passage of this fragment is: "Let's specify right away that what is at issue in mania is the non-function of *a* and not simply its misrecognition. No *a* comes to ballast the subject and this delivers him, in a way without any possibility of freedom, to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (Lacan, 2004/2014, p. 336). In this seminar Lacan develops the concept of the object *a* and the role it plays in understanding phenomena of subjectivity and psychopathology. For the sake of brevity and clarity, we do not expand on this concept here (for a discussion, see Vanheule, 2011) nor on the notion of misrecognition, but instead limit our focus to Lacan's qualification of manic language.

happens in a linear fashion: words follow words follow words in chains of signifiers. This is what Lacan calls the metonymic side of language. This introduces an element of anticipation: meaning is anticipated, but is in suspension until the final word arrives (for example, the phrase *Dimitri likes his friends...* remains unresolved until the phrase ends). As a complement to this forward motion, there is the retroactive movement of the articulation of a message. Retroactive, because later signifiers determine the meaning of previous ones (for example, the phrase *Dimitri likes his friends...* shifts meaning when we add *...to leave him alone*).<sup>263</sup> This is the metaphoric aspect of language. A message is created by the speaker through the process of punctuation, which is how signification is arrived at. Punctuation creates button ties in discourse, by forging a link between signifier and signified, thus creating meaning (Vanheule, 2011).

Simultaneous to the generation of meaning, the dimension of the subject appears; for Lacan, the subject is an effect of language use. In Lacan's (1966/2006) view, subjectivity arises as a consequence of linking signifiers in chains, hence his definition of the signifier as: "a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier" (p. 694). In his view, the subject is not the instance producing speech, but its consequence. It is by hearing what I say that I start making presumptions about who I am. The messages created by button ties in speech attribute qualities to the speaker and thus pin subjectivity down via speech. Simultaneous to the generation of a message, meanings or signifieds are attributed to the speaker.

In regular language functioning this process follows the logic of Freud's secondary processes, the speaker chains up signifiers, anticipates meaning, generates discourse, constructs ideas and has the experience of being the author or generator of his thoughts. Signifier and signified get linked in this process, words are used to convey a message. The speaker experiences a certain degree of mastery over language (save the occasional slip).

### 3.3. The Name-of-the-Father

To further understand Lacan's (2004/2014) view on mania as a metonymic running off of the signifying chain, we should briefly elaborate on how, in neurotic functioning, the

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<sup>263</sup> We can keep adding words and shifting meaning: *Dimitri likes his friends... to leave him alone... his girlfriend screamed at his best friend... before she violently... kissed her on the mouth... What a dream!... Dimitri thought as he woke up.*

signifying chain is grounded or anchored. In his 3<sup>rd</sup> seminar, *The Psychoses* (Lacan, 1981/1993) and the subsequent elaboration of it in the text *On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis* (Lacan, 1966/2006), Lacan develops the concept of the *Name-of-the-Father* to explain how language and the symbolic order comes to regulate and organize one's experience.

In a linguistically and structuralistically inspired reconceptualization of Freud's Oedipus complex (Vanheule, 2011), Lacan (1966/2006) describes this process as the installation of the paternal metaphor. This is the process by which the imaginary and dual relationship between mother and child is submitted to the symbolic order and to language, by a process of metaphoric substitution. The initial mystery of the *Desire-of-the-Mother*—the question of what regulates mother's coming and going—is metaphorically substituted by the *Name-of-the-Father*. For Lacan this is the start of the process of signification. Henceforth one's relations to others are marked and shaped by language and by the symbolic order. Lacan's (1966/2006) argument is that in psychosis, the paternal metaphor is absent and the *Name-of-the-Father* is missing.

Now for Lacan (1966/2006) what grounds the process of creating meaning by metonymy and metaphor is precisely the primordial metaphor of the *Name-of-the-Father*, this is what anchors speech and thought to the convention of the symbolic order and thus what keeps the metonymic chaining up of signifiers in check.<sup>264</sup> Hence we can understand psychotic language, and manic language as a particular example of it, as language untamed by the neurotic convention of the *Name-of-the-Father*.<sup>265</sup>

### 3.4. Lost in Articulation

In manic language the process of anticipation and retroaction is disturbed, this affects the articulation of meaning and the experience of subjectivity. In the manic experience of the

<sup>264</sup> In Lacan's later theoretical developments, the object *a* has a similar grounding role for language. Lacan states: "the object *a* is the pivot around which every turn of phrase unfolds in its metonymy" (Lacan, in Lemaire, 1970/1977, p. xiv). In the 10<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Anxiety*, Lacan (2004/2014) develops the notion of the division of the subject, by which he describes the operation of being inscribed in the order of the signifier, or entering the realm of language. Lacan describes this operation as a mathematical division by which a hypothetical pre-language-subject is divided by the Other, by language, and becomes a divided subject, a subject of the signifier. From then on language mediates one's relation to others, to oneself, to the body, etc. For Lacan this process of division has a remainder, a leftover, which is what he then calls the object *a*. For Lacan this object is, for the neurotic, situated in the Other (in language, culture, convention); in psychosis however, this is not the case (Lacan, 1967).

<sup>265</sup> This understanding anticipates Lacan's (2005/2016) later developments of mania as a manifestation of *llanguage*.

*flight of signifiers*, the chain of signifiers takes off on its own and the primary process takes over. The primary process freely connects signifiers based on sound, rhyme, etc. This is the ‘ludic’ aspect. Signifiers follow one another no longer dictated by the generation of meaning and sense, no discourse is articulated, signifiers are not linked to signifieds. The speaker is not able to intervene with punctuation, no button ties are created. Hence the infinity of this process.

In the *flight of signifiers*, signifiers follow one another without logic or reason (save primary process logic, which is unreason by definition) and without possibility of intervention from the subject, who can no longer anticipate what will be said and, when looking back, is not able to retroactively make sense of what is said. This disturbs not only the process of the generation of meaning, but also affects the experience of subjectivity. What disappears in the metonymic slipping of the signifying chain is precisely the experience of mastery over one’s language. This is why Lacan (2004/2014) describes the subject as being delivered to the metonymy of the signifying chain, specifically as: “in a way without any possibility of freedom” (p. 336). Thereby Lacan stresses the passive experience of manic language; language derails, the signifying chain moves forward with an automated metonymic force that undermines the experience of being the speaker of one’s words and of being the author of one’s thoughts. The metonymic running off of the signifying chain destabilizes meaning and undermines the assumption of being the agent of one’s own speech. Signifiers are linked in such random and rapid ways that no signifieds or qualities can be attributed to the speaker in a stable way anymore. As a result, subjectivity goes missing, which results in the feeling that some crazy force is speaking, rather than I as a subject am speaking. The disturbance at the level of the signifying chain simply undermines all symbolic consistency (Vanheule, 2011). The purely associative, forward moving (or metonymic) side of language dominates, while punctuation and retroaction fail to generate a consistent meaning. Soler (2002) calls mania a deficit of the button tie, as a consequence meaning remains in suspense, keeps slipping away and never settles into a coherent message. And just like meaning and sense, the subject here is lost in articulation.

No longer feeling to be the agent of one’s actions is clear in patient’s accounts of their manic exploits (Rabaey & Vanheule, 2022) making the aftermath of manic episodes so difficult to deal with (Dyga, 2020; Melle, 2016) but is pertinent at the level of language as

well. We encounter the experience of being in the grip of this metonymic slipping of language, of passively undergoing the phenomenon of the *flight of signifiers*, while no longer experiencing oneself to be the agent of one's thought and speech, in patients testimonies of being the observer rather than the author of their thoughts. For example Jamison (1995) writes about a manic episode: "I could not follow the path of my own thoughts. Sentences flew around in my head and fragmented first into phrases and then words; finally, only sounds remained" (p. 80). She continues:

My thoughts were so fast that I couldn't remember the beginning of a sentence halfway through. Fragments of ideas, images, sentences raced around and around in my mind like the tigers in a children's story. Finally, like those tigers, they became meaningless melted pools. (p. 82)

Adams (2003) states: "Everything that occurred to me in my elated state seemed crucially important and, feeling at times more observer than author, I watched my ideas and observations flood on to the lined foolscap pads in a joyful long-hand stream." (Adams, 2003, p. 10). Cheney (2011) describes a similar experience of being the spectator rather than the author of language:

The answers came quite easily to me—almost too easily, in fact. The right words were just dancing in the air above my head, and I simply had to snatch them down and let them flow through my pen. And once they started flowing, I couldn't stop them; the only problem was writing them down fast enough. (p. 170)

### 3.5. Triumph and Horror

Binswanger (1933/1992) uses the word *Grossmäuligkeit* to characterize the manic mode of being, which translates to boastful or big-mouthed. Czermak (1998/2012), accentuating the aspect of passivity of manic speech, as something one is subjected to rather than is the author of, states we should rather talk of the big mouth of the Other that has engorged the subject, than of the big mouth of the manic. Czermak further states that manic discourse can hardly be qualified as discourse, as the manic does not manage to say anything, does not communicate, rather he is overwhelmed by a torrent of language.

Although to the casual observer mania may look, initially, quite amusing, the person experiencing mania is hardly having fun. Czermak (1998/2012) takes issue with Freud's description of mania as a "magnificent festival for the ego" (Freud, 1917a, p. 131) or as an experience of triumph, as in "the triumph of a manic state of mind" (Freud, 1921, p. 258). Czermak (1998/2012) states it is not the subject triumphing or feasting, there is nothing ludic for the subject, the subject is not playing, but rather is the plaything of the Other, of language, and is delivered to the feast of the Other. Likewise, Melman (2011) qualifies mania as a triumph of the symbolic. Although *the symbolic* here suggests too much order and refers to signification, which is not what is at play here, it is rather signifiers that triumph over signification and over the subject. The fact that manic persons do not experience any control or authorship of their speech and thought but are simply riding the waves of the flow of the signifying chain has been described as an abolishment of the subject (Melman, 2011), or even the death of the subject, who is dispersed in language (Fridman & Millas, 1997).

Although Lacan (2004/2014) qualifies the metonymic slipping as ludic, since language is now driven by primary process associations, unhindered by the necessity of making sense and generating meaning, it is clear that for the manic person the experience is one of horror, not of pleasure. It is the metonymy that is ludic, not the subject. And the endlessness of being in the grip of this infinite carousel of primary process language only adds to the horror. The despair of being in the grip of language slipping away and derailing is present in patient's testimonies. For example, Jamison (1995) writes: "At one point I was determined that if my mind ... did not stop racing and begin working normally again, I would kill myself by jumping from a nearby twelve-story building" (p. 83). In Melle's (2016) account we read:

Memories chaotically and wildly shot through my head, remnants of phrases, fragments of images, echoes of things that suddenly meant something different than what they've meant before. Everything was in motion, there was nothing I could grasp or hold on to. (p. 62)

He continues: "Language no longer had any anchors ... not one sentence was correct anymore, everything went astray. ... It was pure horror" (p. 67).<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Kusters (2014/2020) describes this process in a more positive light, where he explores the possibilities opened up by this being freed from the shackles of language. For example: "Breaking through the borders of language, shot out into the wild blue yonder. ... You no longer live within the bounds of language but float above it, free of phonetic laws, dictionary definitions, rules of grammar, and discursive patterns. Free of language, free of hearth and home" (p. 447).

Here Lacan's concept of *jouissance* is relevant. *Jouissance* (the French term is usually left untranslated) refers to enjoyment, but related to excess, it is pleasure that is no longer pleasant, an excess of bodily excitation, that is almost too much to bear. The concept builds on Freud's notion of the death drive developed in *Beyond the pleasure principle* (Levy-Stokes, 2001). *Jouissance* is pleasure that does not follow the pleasure principle and is not pleasurable for the subject. There is pleasure involved, but it is not so clear who or what is doing the enjoying, the experience is of being enjoyed instead rather than enjoying. In Lacan's reasoning it is language that limits the experience of this bodily *jouissance*. By using language we intervene on bodily tension and excitement, it is language that shapes and tames the drive. This process derails in the *flight of signifiers* and leads to, or adds to, manic excitation.

### 3.6. From Language to Mood

In a Lacanian understanding of psychopathology, the phenomena at the level of the signifying chain, make up the core of clinical phenomena. When discussing mania, Freud (1917a) considered the popular view of the cheerfulness as the cause of the manic activity and energy as false and stated that we need to understand both as caused by a yet to be determined psychic factor. Leader (2013) states that within a Lacanian framework, that factor is language, he explains that for him the distinguishing element of mania is not the mood, but the underlying processes of language. Leader proposes to invert classic psychiatric thought that understands the pressure of speech and the *flight of ideas* as a consequence of an exalted, uninhibited mood. He states that it is the unshackling of language and speech that causes the exalted mood, it is the shift of a position within language that affects mood: "It's not the mood that allows them to speak, but the speaking that liberates the mood" (Leader, 2013, p. 21). As Brémaud (2017) explains it, it is the metonymic derailment of the signifying chain that leads to a freeing up of *jouissance*, now no longer kept in check by language, that then overwhelms the subject and causes the frantic rhythm, the facade of joy and semblance of festivity of the manic euphoria.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> For some research further exploring the direction of language phenomena influencing mood, see the investigations of Pronin & Jacobs (2008) on how speed of thought affects mood and of Brunyé et al. (2013) on how breath of associations affects mood.

### 3.7. Treating Language

The focus on mania as a phenomenon of language opens up some avenues for treatment and recovery (see also King et al., 2013). Rabaey & Vanheule (2021) discuss the German writer Thomas Melle's autobiographic writing and its function in his recovery process. Melle's autobiographic writing is a narrative reconstruction of his manic episodes, but his writing practice also has the function of keeping language in check, of keeping language stable and reliable. Melle developed a number of literary strategies to prevent language from running off. In a similar vein, Cheney (2011), in her autobiographical account of childhood episodes of mania, describes how the meter and rhyme of poetry helped her to anchor and constrain language and thereby her own manic derailment.

## 4. Language Gone Mad

To further elaborate the experience of despair and horror when being delivered to the metonymy of the signifying chain and language unbound by convention, we can turn to Lacan's (1974/1987) comment in *Televisión*, where he qualifies manic excitation as an instance of "the return to the real of that which is rejected, that is, language" (p. 26).<sup>268</sup> This explicitly situates the experience of mania and the slipping of language within Lacan's theorizing on psychosis as a form of rejection of the principle of order and convention, which Lacan dubbed the *Name-of-the-Father*. Manic language is then understood as language separated from the regulation of social and grammatical convention, or, as language gone mad.

To elaborate this, we first need to grasp Lacan's reasoning on language and convention in neurotic and psychotic functioning. In Lacan's structural theory on psychotic functioning, Lacan develops the idea of a structural difference between the clinical categories of neurotic and psychotic functioning as specific ways of relating to language and convention.<sup>269</sup> In

<sup>268</sup> The full sentence the quote is lifted from is: "And if ever this weakness, as reject of the unconscious, ends in psychosis, there follows the return to the real of that which is rejected, that is, language; it is the manic excitation through which such a return becomes fatal" (Lacan, 1974/1987, p. 26). For the sake of brevity we do not discuss here the notion of moral weakness Lacan develops in this text and how this relates to language and speech, see Soler (2002) for a discussion of this relevant to mania.

<sup>269</sup> Lacan elaborates this structural theory in his 3<sup>rd</sup> seminar *The Psychoses* (Lacan, 1981/1993) and in his 1959 paper *On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis* (Lacan, 1966/2006). See Ribolsi et al. (2015) for a discussion of Lacan's view of psychosis as a specific phenomenon of language in dialogue with contemporary research.



Lacan's reasoning what ties signifier and signified together for the neurotic, or, what keeps language use conventional, is the installation of the fundamental metaphor of the *Name-of-the-Father*. This is Lacan's metaphor for the use the neurotic is able to make of convention and language in dealing with questions related to drives and existential matters. In neurotic functioning when dealing with such questions these are always approached and elaborated through the Other, i.e., through language and culture. In psychosis, Lacan reasons, the *Name-of-the-Father* is foreclosed and the subject is left to his own resources in dealing with these existential matters, so these arise as potentially disturbing and enigmatic phenomena (Vanheule, 2011). When confronted with existential questions, the missing metaphor of the *Name-of-the-Father* manifests itself as a void or a rupture in the signifying chain, as a break in the continuity of mental subjective experience.

It is at such moments of a break that Lacan situates what he calls *mental automatism* or *elementary phenomena*. Lacan elaborates de Clérambault's notion of mental automatism, which is defined as consisting of automatic phenomena that are experienced as parasitic elements in a person's functioning, to which someone feels passively subjected, with as most obvious example hallucinations, but also encompassing other processes of interference (Vanheule, 2018). Sauvagnat (2000) points out that within Lacanian thought elementary phenomena are predominantly understood as linguistic phenomena. For Lacan the crucial element is that these phenomena are experienced as something one is passively subjected to and that these phenomena are to be situated at the level of the signifying chain. These elementary phenomena disrupt the course of anticipation and retroaction, manifesting themselves as unanticipated parasitic signifiers or as breaks in the signifying chain, disturbing the process of the generation of meaning and the experience of subjectivity (Vanheule, 2018).

Lacan (1966/2006) explains the mechanism of psychotic symptoms as attempts at reparation. Confronted with a rupture in the signifying chain, for example a hallucinated signifier may form a delusional metaphor that attempts to create meaning and restore the experience of subjectivity, albeit in a delusional way.

Lacanian authors suggest considering the phenomenon of *flight of ideas* as a mental automatism (Melman, 2011) and as the elementary phenomenon of manic-depressive psychosis (Sauvagnat, 2000). The specificity of a manic disruption of the signifying chain is that the metonymic process runs wild. The metonymic derailment of language precludes the

development of a delusional metaphor that could, as it does in other forms of psychotic functioning, temporarily or provisionally provide stabilization by organizing signifiers and tying signifiers to signification (Brémaud, 2017). The very process by which signifier and signified are tied, by which button ties between signifier and signified are created, is disrupted.

So what is lost in the manic *flight of signifiers* is the convention that binds signifier and signified together, we are confronted with the signifier unbound by conventional language use. The regulating principle of language is missing and language is returned *to the real* (Lacan, 1974/1987). The *real* is what Lacan calls that which is beyond the scope of language and the symbolic. For Lacan (2005/2016) it is the symbolic that treats the real and creates reality, “reality as that which is named by language and can thus be thought and talked about” (Fink, 1995, p. 25). So the *real* designates presymbolic or prelinguistic experience, that which precedes language, but also the remainder of the process of creating reality through language as that which has not yet been symbolized and that which resists symbolization. So when Lacan (1974/1987) qualifies manic excitation as an instance of language returned *to the real*, we can understand this language returned to the real as language without order or regularity.

In Lacan’s (1966/2006) reasoning on psychosis, at a particular moment of confrontation with an existential matter and subsequently with a void or a rupture in the signifying chain, due to, in Lacan’s conceptualization, the missing metaphor of *Name-of-the-Father*, psychotic phenomena manifests itself. At that moment one can no longer rely on the symbolic order to maintain reality and to make sense of one’s experience. Convention and language are no longer able to structure and give meaning to the world, which now is experienced as *real*. The process of articulating oneself in relation to others through language is disturbed. Particular to the manic manifestation of these phenomena is that this disorder manifests itself in language itself. What is rejected, or foreclosed, in mania, is not only social but also grammatical convention. When languages returns *to the real*, to its unregulated state, the disorder and chaos is manifest in language itself. What remains are the signifiers, without order or regularity, signifiers untamed by signifieds. We are reminded of Kraepelin’s (1921) “pure clang-associations, ... assonances and rhymes, even though quite senseless” (pp. 31–32) or the horror of Melle’s (2016) “remnants of phrases, fragments of images, echoes of things that suddenly meant something different than what they’ve meant before” (p. 62).

When in the grip of language returned *to the real* or being delivered to the endless metonymy of the *flight of signifiers* the subject is in the grip of language gone mad. It is language unbound from convention, the signifier untamed by signifieds. Mania is an instance of language gone mad, running wild. Kusters (2014/2020) describes it as: “language itself takes over.” (p. 220). Leader (2013) states: “in mania, the network takes over” (p. 18). Kusters (2014/2020) uses the term *delanguization* to describe this process of becoming “separated from the linguistic habits and codes of normal communication” (p. 213), when “language is in tatters” (p. 213). In Leader’s (2013) words, in mania there is “an ability to move around language, to not be weighed down by significations ... meaning seems loose and untethered” (p. 57). Bousseyroux (2018) describes mania as a dissolution of the distinction between signifier and signified, thus as language without its function of representation. In Freudian terms: primary process associations take over. Kusters (2014/2020) describes it as language that is “no longer restrained or limited by the stifling ties that connect symbol and meaning” (p. 219). Melle (2016) describes the start of his manic episode as a moment when something gets unhinged in language: “One thing was certain: a shift had taken place in language ... All language, and what is actually not language, is twisted and unsettled, signs have been torn out of their anchoring” (p. 54). Clearly, language has gone mad.

## 5. The Madness of Llanguage

### 5.1. Language as Madness

In a Lacanian look at the manic *flight of signifiers* we encounter language stripped of a number of its regulating elements. Language takes off on its own, unregulated by convention, no discourse is articulated, signifiers are not chained together in a meaningful way but follow primary process associations. As a consequence, no meaning is articulated, the experience of subjectivity is severely affected, and the subject is confronted with the pure horror of jouissance.

What Lacan comes to realize throughout his teaching is that this is not so much a sign of language gone mad, but a return to a primary experience of language. This is a considerable shift in his conception of language and is one of the major turning points in Lacan’s theoretical development (Vanheule, 2011). In Lacan’s shifting conceptualization of language,

in the so called *later Lacan* period of his teaching (Voruz & Wolf, 1996), language is no longer solely considered an instrument for dealing with and regulating jouissance, but language itself is now understood to be affected with jouissance and a cause of dysregulation and chaos.

In Lacan's early view of language, the symbolic order was understood as a force of order and structure, sometimes in a deterministic way<sup>270</sup>, and psychotic phenomena showed how this structure could be dysfunctional or disordered. In Lacan's later conceptualization these phenomena offer a window on the primary experience of language: as a force of dysregulation; an alien, parasitic, self-serving force intruding upon the subject (Lacan, 2005/2016). We could say that Lacan's conception shifts from *madness is language* (i.e., mental disorders are to be understood as disorders at the level of language) to *language is madness* (i.e., mental functioning is to be understood as dealing with the inherent disorder of language). In Lacan's later view of language, language itself is a force of disorder, an element of disruption and chaos. So rather than mania revealing language going mad, it reveals something of the madness of language. Language is no longer just a problem for the manic, but a problem for everyone.

The question concerning psychopathology is no longer how language gets to be disordered, but how so-called normal functioning manages to impose order on the fundamental disorder of language. Lacan (2005/2016) states: "Rather, the question is why a normal man, a man said to be normal, doesn't notice that speech is a parasite, that speech is a veneer, that speech is a form of cancer that afflicts the human being?" (p. 78).

Lacan's early work has as a running thread the tension between the autonomous processes of language and the fictional construction of the ego as agent, building on Freud's (1917b) dictum that "the ego is not master in its own house" (p. 143). The ego-narrative is always a retroactive reconstruction, a form of fiction. Manic language reveals this aspect of language and ego, as the reconstructive work of the ego-narrative people engage in in the aftermath of manic episodes demonstrates (see for example Dyga, 2020; Melle, 2016; Rabaey & Vanheule, 2021, 2022). Thus the experience of mania reveals something of the illusory mastery of

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<sup>270</sup> For example, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> seminar Lacan (1978) explains the mechanism of repetition in neurotic functioning as a manifestation of being in the grip of the discourse of the Other—which is where he situates the unconscious. He states: we are but links in the discourse that surrounds us, and gives as example: I am condemned to reproduce the faults of my father because the chain of discourse cannot be stopped.

oneself. In Lacan's work, the subject is not a permanence, but rather an effect of the signifying chain, always in suspense, always waiting for the next retroactive closure of meaning, and always susceptible to slips and hitches. In this sense madness is not a mistake or a disorder of human functioning, but rather reveals what happens when the defenses fall away. Lacan (1966/2006) states:

Not only can man's being not be understood without madness, but it would not be man's being if it did not bear madness within itself as the limit of his freedom. And far from being an 'insult' to freedom, madness is freedom's most faithful companion, following its every move like a shadow. (p. 144).

Nevertheless, although language is seen as an autonomous force. Throughout his early work Lacan saw language as a force of order, as a structure that serves as a measure against jouissance, as something to control, limit, and guide the *real* of the drive. Throughout his teaching of the sixties Lacan comes more and more to focus not only on the limits of language to contain, limit and regulate, but on the primal mad unregulated jouissance laden forces at work within language itself.

## 5.2. Llanguage is Madness

For this mad, jouissance laden aspect of language Lacan (1975), in his 20<sup>th</sup> seminar, *Encore*, coins the neologism *lalangue*<sup>271</sup>, translated in English as *llanguage*<sup>272</sup> (Lacan, 1989). With the term llanguage Lacan distinguishes himself from structuralism (and hence from his own previous structuralist view of language). Lacan now no longer focuses on the chain of signifiers, nor on the grammar structuring them, but rather on the acoustics and music of language (Soler, 2009/2014). The term is meant to evoke the nonsensical flow of sound a child is first confronted with, before understanding language. Lacan (1975/1989) explains he wanted a word as close as possible to lallation, babbling. With the term llanguage Lacan accentuates the libidinous aspect of language, apart from their meaning, signifiers are also laden with the drive (Vanheule, 2011). Soler (2009/2014) connects it with satisfaction in

<sup>271</sup> Fink (in Lacan, 1998) explains Lacan's construction of the term *lalangue* as a simple joining of the article *la* with the noun *langue*, the French word for language, but specifically referring to spoken language, as in tongue.

<sup>272</sup> The term llanguage was coined by Grigg (in Lacan, 1989) and has become the standard Anglo-American translation of Lacan's *lalangue* (Nobus & Quinn, 2005). Price's (in Lacan, 2016) English translation of *lalangue* as *lalingua* has not been commonly adopted.

speech, “linked to verbal chatter, to blah blah blah” (p. 29), with enjoyment in speaking for the sake of it, rather than communicating a message. Llanguage is always spoken a particular way, what Lacan (1975/1989) calls the *manner of speaking* or the *style* of speaking, referring to the musicality and tonality of speech and to the corporeal drive-related tension that is expressed in it, it is the embodied side of speech. In line with this new view on language, Lacan (1979/1987) coins a new term for the subject, *parlêtre*.<sup>273</sup>

The initial encounter with language for a child is with a nonsensical and jouissance-laden flow of speech-sounds that surrounds him and with which he is approached. Gradually meaning and sense get intertwined with this initial flow of sounds, a process by which language is constructed out of and on top of llanguage. Fink (in Lacan, 1998) explains the notion of llanguage as having to do with “the acoustic level of language, the level at which polysemy is possible due to the existence of homonyms” (p. 144). For Lacan (1975/1989) llanguage is always equivocal, that is ambiguous and open to interpretation until one decides on a particular meaning between multiple equivocal possibilities. This means that in the initial encounter llanguage must be deciphered and a meaning chosen out of multiple possibilities (do I hear ‘dad’s dump,’ ‘that stump,’ ‘that’s dumb,’ ‘dad’s thumb,’ ‘dad’s dumb,’ ...). Llanguage is always spoken and heard in a particular way, which makes for the private character of language. Llanguage always retains something of its initial mystery and a link to jouissance, it retains some of the effects of the corporeal exchanges of the infant with the mother, of the motherly llanguage (Verhaeghe, 2002).

Lacan (1975/1998) now describes language as a response to llanguage, he states: “Language is what we try to know concerning the function of llanguage.” (p. 138) and “language is, no doubt, made up of llanguage. It is knowledge’s hare-brained lucubration (élucubration) about llanguage.” (p. 139), but llanguage has effects on the subject that go beyond the meaning and sense and communication of language. In llanguage, there is no agreed upon meaning, no structure of discourse, it is the superimposition of language that attempts to bring order to the disorder of llanguage (Soler, 2009/2014).

Lacan (2005/2016) qualifies speech as a parasite, a cancer for the human being. We can only achieve a relation of cohabitation to llanguage (Lacan, 1975/1998). Miller (2005b) says the encounter with llanguage is always traumatic, for everyone. The sound of llanguage is

<sup>273</sup> Just like *jouissance* and *lalangue*, the term is often left untranslated, but can be translated to *speakingbeing* (Jonckheere, 2008) or *speakingbeing* (Vanheule, 2011).

never harmonious, attuned to no one, and that this disharmony cannot be bandaged, fixed, or cured. Llanguage makes the one it comes to inhabit, and who will come to speak it, into a sickly being, an invalid. In Lacan's previous conceptualization, language and the signifier functioned as a way of dealing with bodily jouissance, now the signifier itself is considered an "apparatus of jouissance" (Lacan, 1975/1998, p. 55), speech and language are no longer reliable elements in dealing with jouissance, but "to speak is in itself a jouissance" (Soler, 2009/2014, p. 35).

Johnston (2013) points out that Lacan's contrast between llanguage and language can be aligned precisely with Freud's distinction between primary and secondary processes. Just like the secondary process, language imposes rules and boundaries fixing "the slippery, runny overflowing of surplus meanings and nonsense supported by the materiality of *lalangue* (as akin to Freudian primary processes), a materiality underpinning and mixed in with any and every instance of language" (p. 143).

### 5.3. Manic Language as Llanguage

What is revealed in phenomena of psychotic functioning is considered to display "the original state of the subject's relation to lalangue" (Miller, 1996/2007, p. 8). Lacan's last reference to mania is in his 23<sup>rd</sup> seminar *The Sinthome*, where Lacan (2016) links mania to the near destruction of the English language that Joyce practices in *Finnegans Wake*. For Lacan, *Finnegans Wake* illustrates very well what llanguage looks like. Miller (2005a) comments on this and states we can see Joyce's work in *Finnegans Wake* as an illustration of how language gets overrun and destroyed by a welling up of llanguage. Miller states we can speak of mania each time language moves towards its own decomposition or dissolution, thereby revealing that the order of language shows itself to be decomposed, undone, full of echoes that it raises, homophonically, in other languages. Miller (in Miller, 1997) states that what restrains jouissance from running of in mania is the use of grammar and the making of sense, it is sense and signification that function as a guardrail. So manic language demonstrates what happens when these guardrails fall away. Or, as Laurent (1988/2015) states "mania is the overflowing of lalangue no longer held back by the action of language" (p. 147).

Lacan's later vision of language as madness, mania reveals the element of llanguage lurking beneath the surface of language. Mania is not understood as a disorder of language,

but rather reveals language, unbound by language, as the precursor and precondition for language. Lacan understands language as a defense against language as a force of dysregulation as an alien, parasitic, self-serving force intruding upon the subject. In mania this parasitic force comes to the fore unchecked. We can now see how the linguistic aspects of treatment and recovery mentioned earlier, that aim to keep language in check, can also be understood as particular instances of the more general way we use language and convention to keep language at bay.

## 6. Conclusion

Although Lacan never formulated an elaborated theory on mania, the few scattered remarks he makes throughout his teaching (Lacan, 1974/1987, 2004/2014, 2005/2016) allow for the development of a coherent outlook on mania as a phenomenon of language. Throughout Lacan's sparse comments on mania the element of language is always prominent as is the question what manic language reveals about language as such. Ultimately, for Lacan, throughout his teaching, the manic experience of language reveals something of the qualities of language in general and of the universal human experience vis-à-vis language. As Lacan's views shift from language as a system of order and regulation, in his early structuralist outlook, to language as a parasitic force of dysregulation, in his later work, so does his view of what manic language reveals about language.

We start from the accent on the signifier. First we argued that the phenomenon of *flight of ideas* is better captured as *flight of signifiers*, since it appears, in psychiatric descriptions and in patients testimonies, as a phenomenon of language rather than of ideas. Next, we move to the signifying chain. The first comment of Lacan (2004/2014) we discussed, describes the manic subject as being delivered "to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (p. 336). This considers mania as a phenomenon situated in the chaining up of signifiers. In mania the subject has the experience of passively undergoing the automatic chaining up of signifiers, without possibility of intervening, this impacts the aspect of meaning and sense and the experience of subjectivity. This is further elaborated with the second comment we discussed, Lacan's (1974/1987) remark in *Television* that qualifies manic excitation as an instance of "the return to the real of that which is rejected, that is, language" (p. 26). This situates the experience of mania and the slipping of language within Lacan's



theorizing on psychosis as a form of rejection of the principle of order and convention, as a collapse of reality, as circumscribed by language, into the *real*. Both these comments understand manic language as language separated from the regulation of social and grammatical convention, or, as language gone mad. Thereby revealing something of the collapse of the order and structure Lacan considers elemental to language, as the symbolic order, at that point in his teaching. The chaos of manic language and manic subjectivity is considered to be a result of the symbolic order and convention no longer functioning as regulatory principles for language. Manic language is the signifier taking off on its own, unregulated by social and grammatical convention, unable to generate meaning and sense, unable to form a stable sense of being the subject of one's own speech. Meaning and subject are lost in articulation.

A major turning point in Lacan's teaching is the development of the notion of llanguage in his 20<sup>th</sup> seminar (Lacan, 1975/1998). Now Lacan considers language no longer solely an instrument for dealing with and regulating jouissance, but language itself is now understood to be affected with jouissance and a cause of dysregulation and chaos. It is this, more primal, aspect of language that Lacan calls llanguage. Lacan now considers language to be a construction on top of the initial encounter with llanguage, understood as a parasitic force of dysregulation. This causes Lacan (2005/2016) to adjust his view on manic language. Manic language is now no longer considered an instance of language gone mad, but is rather thought to reveal something of the madness of llanguage lurking beneath the surface of language. Now the chaos and punning of manic language reveals something of the initial encounter with llanguage as a parasitic force, as a nonsensical and jouissance-laden flow of speech-sounds invading us and in this sense show something of the universal problem of the encounter with language for every speaking being.

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# 6

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, we discuss the conclusions and implication of our results across the previous chapters. In Section 1, we review and integrate the findings and conclusions from our clinical studies (Chapter 2, 3, and 4) using Lacan's framework of the real, symbolic and imaginary and revisiting these conclusions in light of the perspectives presented in Chapter 5. In Section 2, we extend our discussion of a Lacanian approach to mania, as discussed in Chapter 5, to consider the place of mania and manic-depressive psychosis in Lacanian nosology. In Section 3, we engage in a discussion with Binswanger's phenomenological account of *flight of ideas*. In Section 4, we review psychoanalytic considerations regarding therapeutic approaches to mania and bipolar disorder, and relate these to our research results. Lastly, in Section 5, we examine the limitations of the study and propose potential avenues for future research. Throughout this chapter, we encounter some participants of the study in Chapter 2 again.

## 1. Results and Conclusions

### 1.1. Mania: From the Symbolic to the Imaginary and the Real

#### *Mania as Flight of Signifiers*

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, we elaborated on Lacan's comments on mania as a phenomenon of language and approached the experience of mania and strategies of recovery from this particular point of view. The understanding of mania as a phenomenon of language starts from the symptom of *flight of ideas*, described by Lacan as a metonymic derailment of the signifying chain, for which we suggested the more Lacanian *flight of signifiers*. This flight of signifiers has effects on several aspects of experience: it disturbs the narrative coherence of the ego, undermines the assumption of being the agent of one's own speech, and thus affects the experience of subjectivity. It hinders the production of meaning and sense, and probably contributes to excitation and agitation.

We elaborated on different aspects of this experience, as well as specific strategies of recovery and direct or indirect ways of treating this derailment of the signifying chain. In Chapter 2, our discussion of our participants' experiences focused on the work of identity reconstruction and processes of identification as elements of recovery from experiences of mania. Using Lacan's double mirror model, we interpreted the interview narratives of our participants as a process of identity construction.

The discussion of the work of J.M.H. Berckmans in Chapter 3 focused on his treatment of language and the fictionalization of his experience. Within a Lacanian understanding of mania and its relation to language, we interpreted his literary practices as a way of responding to his specific experience of language. Our analysis was based on statements he made about his manic depression, his absolute need to write, his language treatment, and his particular way of fictionalizing his life into his work.

In Chapter 4, where we focus on Thomas Melle's writing strategies, the themes of the previous chapters are tied together in the discussion of Melle's treatment of language and his reflections on constructing a narrative form and a narrator for his manic experiences, as well as the necessity of fiction to arrive at authenticity.



In Chapter 5, we discussed manic language phenomena within a Lacanian framework and specifically elaborated on the shift in Lacan's conceptualization of manic language. It evolved from an instance of *language going mad* in the derailing metonymy of the signifying chain to a view on mania as a manifestation of *the madness of llanguage*, revealing the element of llanguage lurking beneath the surface of language.

In this section, we integrate and discuss the results of our chapters. We do this by framing them within Lacan's trinity of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary and by looking back at them from the vantage point of Chapter 5, where the notion of llanguage<sup>274</sup> was elaborated. To summarize the three registers: the imaginary is the register of the ego-narrative and the body image; the symbolic is the register of language and the signifier; the real is the register of jouissance and corporeal drive energy.<sup>275</sup>

### ***Unknotting & Reknotting***

Our Lacanian understanding of mania as flight of signifiers finds its starting point in the disturbance in the symbolic realm (the derailing of the signifying chain), and considers the effects on the imaginary (such as the shattering effects on the ego-narrative and identity) and on the real (the manic energy and bodily excitement) as secondary.<sup>276</sup> In the Lacanian literature, the primacy of the symbolic for understanding mania is described as the triumph of the symbolic (Melman, 2011). Manic metonymy within the symbolic register impacts the imaginary by undermining the coherence of the ego-narrative and dissolving any stable identity. Eventually, the experience of being the agent of one's own speech disappears, leaving the subject shattered by the dispersion in language (Fridman & Millas, 1997). The effect of the symbolic on the real is described as follows: in mania, jouissance is no longer contained within the symbolic network of signifiers (Brémaud, 2017), or, in mania, the body is affected by the symbolic, and bodily excitation obscures the fact that it is the invasion of language that sets the body in motion (Vieira, 1993).

Of course, the strict separation of different elements or aspects of experience into the different registers is somewhat artificial and makes abstraction of the muddled nature of

<sup>274</sup> Also touched upon in Chapter 3, Section 4.

<sup>275</sup> For a somewhat more elaborate description see Chapter 1, Section 3.2.

<sup>276</sup> This view probably underplays the real (bodily excitation and corporeal drive energy) as a source of the manic excitation, and does not elaborate on the role the imaginary (collapsing identifications and identity narratives) might play in provoking manic episodes. We will discuss some of these hitherto somewhat neglected aspects in this section.

experience in favor of the clarity of a theoretical model.<sup>277</sup> Moreover, human subjectivity, as later understood by Lacan (2005/2016), results from the interplay of these three intertwined and knotted registers.<sup>278</sup> In addition to our perspective of mania as a problem of language within the symbolic (the metonymic derailing of the signifying chain), with consequences for the imaginary (the destabilized ego-narrative and identity) and the real (the release of *jouissance*), we can also conceptualize it as the three registers becoming unknotted, with particular consequences for each register. In *Seminar 23*, Lacan (2005/2016) develops the idea of the *knotting* of the three registers of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. To maintain some stability in mental life and enable psychic functioning, the three registers must be knotted or intertwined, requiring a fourth element, which points to Lacan's notion of the *sinthome*.<sup>279</sup>

Regardless of how we frame the 'cause' of mania, it is evident that in mania, each of the registers—the imaginary, the symbolic and the real—is affected. Our point of departure, mania as flight of signifiers, prompts us to consider the impact of this manic metonymy on the coherence of the identity narrative and the ego (in the register of the imaginary), on language itself and on the subject's position within speech and language (in the register of the symbolic), and on bodily excitation and corporeal drive energy (in the register of the real).<sup>280</sup>

We will also situate the strategies of recovery and stabilization we encountered throughout the chapters within the registers of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. We will pay particular attention to strategies that manage to knot different registers, those that could be considered a *sinthome*. Our discussion will follow the order of appearance in the chapters.<sup>281</sup> We will begin with the imaginary, as it was the primary focus of Chapter 2, then move on to the symbolic, as the direct focus on language was added in Chapter 3 and 4 concerning Berckmans and Melle. Finally, we will end with the real, which, although less explicitly

<sup>277</sup> There are other ways of understanding how the three registers affect each other in mania: Sauvagnat (2000) describes mania as an intrusion of the real into the symbolic, and Bousseyroux (2011/2018) considers mania as an indistinction between the symbolic and the imaginary.

<sup>278</sup> For this overview we take Lacan's Borromean model as a framework, even if our starting point, the view of mania as metonymic derailment, starts from the primacy of the symbolic.

<sup>279</sup> See Chapter 4, Section 4. We return to this in Section 1.5 of this chapter.

<sup>280</sup> We could add *llanguage* here. *Llanguage* stresses the *jouissance* laden aspect of language, which we could consider the real language or the real of language.

<sup>281</sup> This is also the order of Lacan's theoretical development, from a focus on the imaginary, to the primacy of the symbolic and to the stressing of the real and the complications added by a focus on the *jouissance* of *llanguage*.

focused on, pops up and intrudes through the cracks and slits in the imaginary and symbolic constructions.

Throughout this chapter, we will encounter some of the participants from Chapter 2 again. Chapter 2 is based on a relatively short article, which did not allow for a comprehensive exploration of the richness and diversity of our participants' experience.

## 1.2. Mania in the Imaginary

### *Identity Troubles*

We start the overview of our results with the imaginary. As is clear from the interview study in Chapter 2 and Thomas Melle's testimony in Chapter 4, the experience of mania severely impacts one's identity. Manic exploits and utterances do not easily integrate into one's ego-narrative, and leave the manic individual disoriented, wondering '*what have I done?*' and '*who am I?*'<sup>282</sup> This implies that processes of identity reconstruction in the imaginary realm are an important aspect of recovery. We will discuss this in the following section. In Chapter 2, we also described the disruptive experience of mania as the ego being overwhelmed by the drives<sup>283</sup>, resulting in actions not belonging to one's identity narrative (the experience of: 'although I'm the one doing it, that's not who I am').

In another perspective that attributes a more causal role to the imaginary, it is the disintegration of a stabilizing identity or identification that provokes the release of the drive energy.<sup>284</sup> In terms of Lacan's double mirror model elaborated in Chapter 2, if the ideal ego *i'(a)*, the idealized image about oneself, disintegrates, the drives are no longer integrated or mastered, leading to the experience of uncontrollable turbulence. In Lacanian theories on psychosis, stabilizing identifications play a crucial role in preventing individuals with a psychotic structure from developing a full blown psychosis, or in stabilizing the individual after a psychotic crisis (Maleval, 2000; Sauvagnat, 2003). Consequently, a destabilization of these identifications could be a potential trigger for a psychotic episode.<sup>285</sup> Additionally, we

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<sup>282</sup> Moore et al. (1994) discuss how even a mild case of mania doesn't just have personally disruptive effects on one's life, but also provokes philosophical and ethical questions concerning autonomy, personal identity, rationality, and illness.

<sup>283</sup> We return to this point when we discuss the real of mania in Section 1.4.

<sup>284</sup> We'd like to thank Dries Dulsster for pointing out this unexplored aspect of the results of the interview study in Chapter 2.

<sup>285</sup> Here we can point to the interesting work of Tellenbach (1980) on the stabilizing effects of hyperconformity (or hyperidentification) and on triggering circumstances in melancholic psychosis; and its extension in the work

can mention Cottet's (2008) interpretation of mania as a result of the expulsion of identification. In a discussion of a case from Binswanger (1960/1987), Cottet (2008) interprets the transition from one mental state to another as a dynamic of identification and expulsion. In his reading, the melancholic's raw identification with the object *a*, without the imaginary chasuble (or cloak) of the ego, delivers the subject to pulsations of jouissance. In mania, this identification is radically rejected. Cottet suggests that the dynamic of manic depression can be understood as a pulsation of jouissance between identification and expulsion, observable in its raw state.

### ***Ego-Reconstruction and Identification***

Throughout this study, we have encountered processes of identity reconstruction in the imaginary realm as an important aspect of recovery.

In Chapter 2, we interpreted the narratives of the participants regarding their bipolar diagnosis as describing a trajectory from the disruptive experience of mania to the development of a personalized 'bipolar identity.' In our interpretation of the results from our interview study, participants described a process of narrative elaboration that involves reconstructing the ego through identification with the diagnosis.<sup>286</sup> The study confirms previous research on identity-related challenges related to manic experiences<sup>287</sup> but adds depth by exploring the reconstructive process in detail and interpreting it within a Lacanian framework. Our analysis provides a specific explanation<sup>288</sup> for why the diagnosis is pivotal for many patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder.<sup>289</sup> We show that being diagnosed goes beyond

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of Kraus (1982, 1987, 1996) who applied some of these notions to manic depression, within a more sociological framework, focusing on role and role-identification and role-confusion. Sauvagnat (1999) proposes to interpret what this literature discusses in terms of role, role identification, and character traits as particular modes of suppletion for a psychotic structure.

<sup>286</sup> This is not the only trajectory and probably partly the result of the selection of our participants through a patient organization which precludes people more critical of their diagnosis. For example, in a qualitative study on the identity related experience of people diagnosed with bipolar disorder, Dyga (2020) reported similar aspects of identity disruption and ambiguity (for example, one of the more striking themes of his analysis is 'I don't want to cure myself of what is mine, although it is not me'), yet the attitude of the participants about their diagnosis was more diverse, and half the participants disagreed with the pathologization that comes with being diagnosed.

<sup>287</sup> Such as Chapman, 2002; Dyga, 2019; Inder et al., 2008; Inder et al., 2011; Ironside et al. 2019; Michalak et al., 2011; Proudfoot et al., 2009.

<sup>288</sup> Perhaps only one of many possible ones.

<sup>289</sup> In a systematic review and meta-synthesis of qualitative research on the lived experience of persons with bipolar disorder, Walsh et al. (2016) concluded: "the dominant theme emerging from the data was the challenge of accepting the diagnosis" (p. 5).

simply receiving and accepting the diagnosis; it involves applying standard narratives about ‘being bipolar’ to past experiences, reframing memories, and adopting a new vocabulary.<sup>290</sup> Furthermore, it entails adopting a normative standard, assuming responsibility and reclaiming agency and accountability<sup>291</sup>, monitoring oneself and integrating one’s experience into a narrative identity.<sup>292</sup>

In the analysis of J.M.H. Berckmans’ life and work in Chapter 3, we observed his particular way of fictionalizing his life within his work and the ambiguous nature of his literary production (it’s fiction, but it’s real; it’s autobiographical, but it’s made up) as well as the claims he made about the absolute necessity of this process for him, of making this *graphy* of his life. We discussed Demeyer’s (2011) description of Berckmans’ writing as a response to the existential need to give form to life and Ceustermans’ (2018) description of Berckmans’ way of processing his surroundings and daily life into stories as a literary vivisection. Berckmans does not explicitly connect this practice or its necessity to particular experiences, we can merely note the importance of this imaginary work of construction and point out his use of many literary doubles<sup>293</sup>, of which his pen name J.M.H. is the first and surely the most lasting.<sup>294</sup> We also highlighted the ambiguity with which he speaks of himself and his characters.<sup>295</sup>

In Chapter 4, when discussing Thomas Melle, we tied together the themes of the previous chapters. In his autobiographical work, Melle (2016) not only describes his manic experiences but also the reconstructive work he had to engage in to narrate these experiences. We have linked Melle’s descriptions of his manic experiences and his reflections about his work of recovery and reconstruction to our Lacanian perspective of mania as a derailing metonymic flight of signifiers that disturbs the narrative coherence of the ego and undermines the

<sup>290</sup> The themes of *The bipolar diagnosis* and *Adopting a bipolar narrative*.

<sup>291</sup> The theme of *Assuming responsibility*.

<sup>292</sup> The themes of *Keeping an eye on oneself* and *Personalizing the narrative*.

<sup>293</sup> Some of the doubles are: the character ‘JMH’ (Berckmans, 1977/1994), ‘the crazy writer Gerrit Matthijs’ (Berckmans, 1991, 1993), ‘gas-chamber-man’ (Berckmans, 1993), ‘Pafke,’ ‘Ratata,’ ‘the man of steel’ (Berckmans, 1996), ‘Doctor Paf,’ ‘the most modern bizarre man’ (Berckmans, 1998), ‘Berckmans,’ ‘Kromsky,’ ‘Roquentin,’ ‘Pierlala’ (Berckmans, 2000).

<sup>294</sup> Starting with his first novel, he adopts the writer’s name J.M.H. and only refers to his birth name rhymingly and when discussing his *graphy*: ‘The only true writing is the notating of the *graphy* of Berckmans Jean-Marie.’ (Berckmans, 2002)

<sup>295</sup> For example he states in an interview: ‘I am not ‘J.M.H. Berckmans, writer,’ to my closest friends and family I am just Pafke, the most complete cracker, and that’s all I want to be as well’ (Tilkin, 1997).

assumption of being the agent of one's own speech, thus affecting the experience of subjectivity.

While the participants in our interview studies all narrated their experiences from their current bipolar vantage point, Melle problematizes both the narration of such experiences and the position of the narrator for these experiences. He describes how much his 'bipolar identity' reconstruction necessitated adopting a certain degree of fiction (what he refers to as 'artificial authenticity'). He interprets how his early fiction, with the use of doubles, was already an attempt to narrate his experiences. This echoes Berckmans' stance on *real fiction* and *made-up autobiography*, although Melle is more elaborate and deliberate in his strategies, reflecting on these strategies and distilling them into an artistic creed ('the greater the artificiality the greater the authenticity').

Looking back from our discussion of Melle, we can interpret some of Berckmans' work and writing practice as engaging in analogous processes. The difference lies in the fact that Berckmans does not explicitly discuss or reflect on this as much as Melle does, aside from the quotes and remarks we have extracted from his books and interviews, which leaves room for interpretation. For Berckmans, regardless of how much he continues to write and must keep writing, something at the level of the imaginary remains unstable and fleeting. Even if it is a way to digest his Umwelt, his work remains disconnected from his life, similar to how Melle's early fiction remained detached from his life and had no stabilizing impact on his experiences.

In all three chapters, we encounter what we can interpret as an imaginary repair of the derailing metonymy. The bipolar identity narrative of our interview participants, Berckmans' *made up but real fictionalizing graphy* of his life, and Melle's *autobiographical fiction* and *fictional autobiography* all construct an identity narrative that repairs the derailing metonymy of mania and reconstructs an identity narrative.<sup>296</sup> The difference lies in the writers making the fictional aspect an explicit part of their work. Berckmans problematizes the relationship between real and fiction in his interviews ('I'm just Pafke') and in his work, violating literary

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<sup>296</sup> We point out some links to the relevance of identification in the Lacanian literature on mania. Miller (in Miller, 2008), commenting on Cottet (2008), accentuates how in mania, there is no time to be weighed down or halted by an identification because the metonymic sliding precludes any stabilizing identification. André (1993) describes the discovery of a new identification as a possible solution for manic troubles. In Chapter 2, we noted the relevance of the ego-ideal (a single word or piece of discourse that has been distilled from the discourse of others and that functions as a guiding principle for defining oneself) and the ideal ego (the idealized image of oneself) for the narrative process of ego construction or identity formation. We can connect this to Leader's (2013) remarks on the importance of idealization in the accounts and memoirs of manic-depressive subjects.

conventions and breaking with the traditional form of chronicle and autobiography (Demeyer, 2011). Fictionalizing his experience is a recurring theme throughout his entire oeuvre. Melle explicitly emphasizes the fictional aspect of any account of mania (who is the narrator narrating the dissolution of the narrator?) and reflects on the absolute unavoidable necessity of such fiction. In our interpretation, the bipolar narratives of the participants in the interview study and the reconstruction of the ‘bipolar ego’ in the wake of manic experiences reveal a similar process of fictionalization. We interpret the diagnosis and account of being bipolar not as a final and true understanding of the experience—as it was often reported by the interviewees—but as a starting point, an anchor<sup>297</sup> for the start of a narrative work of identity construction. It is this work—however fictional—that makes the experience understandable and manageable and has a stabilizing role. We will discuss the limitations of the imaginary solution in the next section.

### 1.3. Mania of the Symbolic

#### *Language Gone Mad*

We started our investigation with Lacan’s understanding of mania as a derailing language phenomenon. Throughout the chapters, we characterized this as language gone mad, or, within the framework of Lacan’s later thought, as revealing the madness of language.<sup>298</sup>

We encountered this most explicitly in Chapter 4, in Thomas Melle’s descriptions of his manic episodes. In his autobiography, Melle (2016/2023) describes how his manic episodes are characterized by a disturbance of language, he states that “an internal shift had taken place in the language” (p. 52), and characterizes his episodes as a festering of thought and language.<sup>299</sup>

In Chapter 3, we described J.M.H. Berckmans’ particular relationship with language and the writing practices he developed in response to this. Although writing and manic depression

<sup>297</sup> Or: a button tie or quilting point.

<sup>298</sup> And equally qualified the manic subject as “dispersed in the flight of ideas” (Laurent, 1988/2015, p. 147), or described it in terms of Lacan’s later thought as “the manic dispersion of the subject in language” (p. 148).

<sup>299</sup> What makes Melle’s autobiography so interesting, in general and specifically for our purposes, is how he refrains from any form of psychologizing explanations, he mentions parts of his family history, even wonders to what degree these might form part an explanation for his manic depression, but ultimately writes his autobiography as a history of his relationship to himself and to language.

seem to be strongly intertwined for Berckmans, he does not explicitly connect his experiences of mania to language.

In Chapter 2, the experience of mania as a phenomenon of language was not discussed. We noted the importance of language in Lacan's double mirror model and its relevance for processes of identification and identity construction. We found that the participants had difficulties in capturing the experience of mania in language. However, mania as a phenomenon of language and as a derailing of the signifying chain was also present in the experiences of our interviewees. The study focuses on the processes of recovery in the wake of manic episodes, and for the sake of brevity, we did not expand on the experience of mania beyond the description of mania as a disruption of the usual functioning and acting impulsively beyond one's own control and understanding. Yet, the aspect of language was relevant in several ways and was explicitly discussed or implicitly present in the participants' narratives about the experience of mania and in their strategies of recovery. Participants' descriptions of their manic exploits can be interpreted as being based on a shifting relation to the signifier, as being enthralled by derailing thoughts, rather than as resulting from an elevated mood or activity level or as being overwhelmed by the drive. Participants described feeling addressed by things they encounter, as if everything has a personal meaning for them, addresses them, demands a response from them, and calls them to action. A few quotes can illustrate this aspect of the narratives. Cindy explained how her thoughts take off from the encounter with a single word:

When I am manic and then I meet someone, at such times you believe in fate, there are no coincidences anymore, it's like, wow, it's no coincidence I ran into you, and if that person happens to be holding a book about Paris, then in that moment, it feels like, yes Paris, that's how it's supposed to be, Paris, that's what I have to do, let's go to Paris, I need to go to Paris.

She explained: "everything feels like a signal, like as in I have to address this, I have to do something with it, this is not a coincidence." The phrase *I have to address this* could be interpreted as also pointing to the experience of *this addresses me*, things she encounters appeal to her, demand a response. This echoes with Annie's descriptions of her manic episodes:



I was actually a bit like, oh, I wish my thoughts were calmer, but I still went along with everything, everything was a sign, and everything was another reason for the next action and the next story and the next symbolism, and that was actually very exhausting at certain moments ... everything becomes a sign and you respond to everything, it doesn't stop, and uh, you keep going.

She continues:

So everything has meaning, you can't distinguish unimportant things from important ones anymore, and even the smallest thing, you give it meaning. It's as if your mind is in overdrive. You can't even simply register what happens, no, everything has meaning. Hey, I don't even know where all those ideas came from. But that's how it was, thoughts, it was exhausting at times.

Another way the relevance of language appeared in the interviews with our participants was in how several of them described an urge to write as part of their manic experience. Annie describes how she suddenly wrote an elaborate philosophical treatise while manic, spending many nights working on it. Bea told us that when she's manic she writes a lot and with great pleasure; she says she has piles of short stories and essays, all written during manic episodes. At other times, she has no real interest in writing, nor in what she's written while she was manic. Cindy explained she can look back and identify manic periods when browsing through her diary, just by looking at the amount of writing she did. Dave mentioned how his occasional poetry writing habit intensifies to extreme levels when he's manic, writing day and night. George said that the increasingly poetic and literary quality of his work e-mails are warning sings of an impending manic episode. Ulrik reported furiously writing many angry e-mails and letters, some containing violent threats, while he was manic. Luke described how, at times, the words seem to flow out of his fingers onto the computer:

During my second psychosis ... which was a mix of mania and psychosis, I wrote a manuscript. It just flowed from my fingers onto the computer. I was browsing the internet, and a manuscript emerged. ... Because I was in that psychotic and manic state I wasn't consciously aware of what I was writing, it flowed out of my fingers, I was typing without knowing what I was writing.

The relation to language was present not only in descriptions of mania, but also in strategies of recovery, which we discuss in the next section.

While our reading of these statements indicates a shift in language and sometimes echoes Melle's descriptions about the festering of thought and language, it's important to note that the participants of our study did not explicitly frame these changes in terms of their relation to language. The same applies to their descriptions of recovery processes.

### ***Treating Language***

The particular view of mania as a derailing language phenomenon opens up a line of thought about treating mania through the treatment of language. In addition to the imaginary treatment of the derailing metonymy discussed in the previous section, here, we encounter a treatment of the metonymy that is more situated within the symbolic itself, operating on language directly, by intervening in the sequencing of signifiers.

First, we can mention the strategy of avoiding the encounter with too much language. Some of our interview participants described recovery strategies that involved actively avoiding exposure to an excessive amount of language. They described insulating themselves from language to protect themselves from its call to action and its potential to trigger associative chains of thought that might derail.

George, for example, described avoiding newspapers as a strategy of tempering his hypomania:

That's the thing, politics, I'm greatly triggered by everything, just seeing a headline of BDW [Belgian politician] on the front page is enough to set off my thoughts, get them spinning round for the whole day. ... completely triggered by the slightest word I see about it, oh my goodness.

Holly explains occupying herself with a coloring book and avoiding any input:

I force myself to occupy myself with that, not that I like it or agree with it, because that's really, pardon the expression, for lunatics, but I really have to keep myself in check. And my partner says how the hell is this possible, you with all your intelligence and you're sitting here coloring? I say, well I'm sorry, but the moment I start reading, I'll get ideas and will want to do all sorts of things and go to the bookstore and the library, and then

everything starts up again. You know, I only have to enter the library to find something interesting and then I'm completely absorbed in it and, it could be anything, Obama's biography or whatever. But then it really goes too far, so now I'm like, no, no, I won't read, I can't read, even if it's hard to do. Just anything that stands out, a book, a theme that jumps at me, something you can, like, for example, it was about Michelle Obama, I read an interview and then giddy-up, and then I get into everything from her past and want to know all about it and her background and it just keeps going, and *that* is really interesting and *this* and then I read everything. And before I know it the day's done and phew and even then you keep going. I'm afraid to put on the news, I don't dare to, that's hell for me, every input is something new, like now with Trump and Iran, yes, then, yeah, well I think, ah no, no, no, you can't watch, you can't watch, because it's all input and it sets me off. ... And then it's a jumble of thoughts and it's like OK, we'll do *this*, and *that*, and *that*, and *that*.... The moment information comes at me, it triggers me and then, oh pffff. Well it's to protect myself, I know, but I feel like a horse kept on a short rein.

Next to this strategy of avoiding excessive exposure to language, we have also encountered several more active strategies of keeping language under control. This was most clear in the language treatment developed by the writers we studied.

In Chapter 3, we discussed Berckmans' treatment of language, his meticulous process of writing and rewriting, and his strategies of *mutilitating and hacking at language*. He described his language treatment as a way of dealing with his manic-depressive experiences, a way of *writing it under control*, as he states. We interpreted his writing practice as a method of countering the metonymic slippage and derailment of language.

In Chapter 4, we discussed Thomas Melle's attempt at keeping language in check through the literary style of the *new realism*, employing the strategy of *the straight sentence*. Melle (2017) describes the necessity of developing the literary strategy of the new realism to describe his manic experiences. The new realism and the straight sentence are literary devices intended to maintain language's stability and reliability, preventing language from running amok. Embracing realistic, straightforward descriptions mends the break of metonymy typical of manic language, characterized by a lack of punctuation and retroactive generation of meaning and sense. For Melle, this new way of writing restores faith in language.

Both of these strategies aim to repair the derailing metonymy of language by intervening in language itself, intervening on the unfolding of the signifying chain. From the perspective of mania as llanguage unleashed (see Chapter 5), we can also view these strategies as limiting the jouissance of llanguage by subjecting llanguage to the linguistic constraints of language, by enforcing strict rules ('no running!').

Both of these authors are deliberate about the role writing plays in how they deal with language. In Berckmans' view, he simply must write to prevent himself from going mad or committing suicide, while also describing writing as arduous work and painful. In contrast, Melle is more articulate and positive about the need to pass through writing, which he finds easier than living. We discussed his reluctance to speak about himself in interviews and his aversion to being confronted with quotes from interviews. We have interpreted this as a way of avoiding language that hasn't been worked through and moulded by the process of writing and as a way of establishing some distance.

In the interviews in Chapter 2, none of the participants reported engaging in deliberate language treatment. Just as language was not an explicit theme in the accounts of our participants about their mania, it was not a prominent element in their accounts of recovery. Although the participants described adopting new narratives and words to explain themselves, they did not explicitly relate this to language.

One participant, however, described an interesting way in which writing served as a form of treatment for him. This approach did not involve keeping language in check but rather dealing with language that is already derailing. George described how writing things down helped him to get rid of his thoughts. The more manic he becomes, the stronger the urge to write down his thoughts. He writes these on small note papers, which he would later organize. He stated:

It helps me to write things away, like it was ... a volcano of thoughts and stuff and by just writing it down *chop-chop-chop*—there's in fact not so much on there [he shows some notes and reads them as he holds them up], look 'hypomania under control, gives a different perspective on things,' another one 'look for protection,' it's like, ah here I have it 'volcano, active chaos.' ... It is simply an urge, see, the thoughts are there and the only way of getting them out is to *write, write, write, write, write, write, write*, until ... you're exhausted and you want to rest and even then it just keeps coming. ... [the writing] It's

compulsive, because it's my only solution for getting rid of things. Because otherwise it's like *bam*, it stays, it stays all together in a state of tension and then I have such a, I say it, it's a volcano ... it's really like a volcano, lava flowing down, one black mass. ... You don't know where it comes from, but you don't have any interest in thinking about that, where do they [the thoughts] come from ... there is no reasonable thinking, there is just an impulse driven thinking, and just, write down *this* idea, write down *this* idea, write down *this* idea. Uh, well even the thought, 'I have to write this down,' is not there anymore, you just write. ... it's just *write, write, write* ... I don't know where it comes from.

He described creating a chaos of papers, filling up his place with scraps. Only later does he organize them by sorting the scraps and putting them in envelopes according to theme. This allows him to somewhat interpret what was going on in his mind or what he was upset about. However, the main function of writing at such times is to get rid of thoughts.

Writing can serve a function within both registers we just discussed. It can be employed as part of a solution in the imaginary, contributing to restoring a narrative identity, and it can also function as an operation on the symbolic, on language itself (see also King et al., 2013; Lippi et al., 2016; Maleval, 1994; Stevens & Bryssinck, 2018).

### ***The Subject of Mania***

To recap our discussion up to now: mania as a derailing language phenomenon disturbs the coherence of the ego-narrative. Recovery can then aim at restoring the ego-narrative (the imaginary solution discussed in Chapter 2 and at work in Berckmans and Melle's fictional/autobiographical narratives) or at keeping language under control (Berckmans' *mutilitating and hacking at language* and Melle's *keeping language in check* with the *new realism*). The notion of the subject complicates the neatness of this imaginary solution.<sup>300</sup> Lacan's understanding of the subject points to elements in our mental life that escape the conscious, narrative construction of the ego. It refers to a position in language rather than a narrative construction and entails feeling represented by and responsible for one's speech and one's actions (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 1975/1988). This experience of subjectivity is disturbed by experiences of mania and is not fully addressed by imaginary solutions such as narrative

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<sup>300</sup> See Chapter 1, Section 3.4 and Chapter 4, Section 2.4 for Lacan's view of the subject. The notion of language and the speaking being is a further elaboration, which we explore further on.

identity constructions.<sup>301</sup> This is particularly prominent in Thomas Melle's work of reconstructing the narrator for his experiences and his strategy of artificial authenticity.<sup>302</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, from a Lacanian point of view, any fixed identity is imaginary, fictitious and never complete. According to Lacan, the subject is always marked by a lack in the symbolic: one never completely coincides with any of the signifiers one articulates, language never fully covers one's experience, one's story is never straightforward. The bipolar narratives discussed in Chapter 2 mostly present a straightforward story, a fixed identity narrative, and are situated in the imaginary without room for ambiguity, lack or subjective division.

In our view, what is notably absent from these bipolar narratives is the madness of language itself. The madness of mania is portrayed as a series of crazy, impulsive actions, yet the bipolar narratives often keep the madness at a distance by unequivocally situating it outside of oneself: *that's not me* or *now I wouldn't do that*. As Melle's account acknowledges, manic experiences problematize the unity of such narratives and the identity of the narrator. Any work of reconstruction or recovery should take language into account. Mania reveals the unreliability of language, so any account solely focused on reconstructing a narrative is an attempt at covering up that revelation.

The bipolar narratives primarily operate *on a strictly imaginary*<sup>303</sup> level, while the fictional elements that both Berckmans and Melle accentuate point to the symbolic realm, highlighting the fictitious nature of these accounts. This connection to the symbolic grants these narratives greater potential for *knotting* the realms of the imaginary and the symbolic, leaving more room for the dimension of the subject. Particularly Melle's strategies seem effective at

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<sup>301</sup> Although the last themes of the trajectory we discussed in Chapter 2, Section 3.4, where after *Adopting a bipolar narrative*, this narrative is further elaborated and personalized (in the themes of *Assuming responsibility Keeping an eye on oneself, Personalizing the narrative*) the narrative remains firmly rooted in the imaginary.

<sup>302</sup> See Chapter 4, Section 3.4 and 3.5.

<sup>303</sup> We are reminded of Leader's (2013) book title: *Strictly Bipolar*; actually a reference to Lizzie Simon's (2002) *Detour: My Bipolar Road Trip in 4-D*, a memoir including conversations with other "bipolar people" (p. 48), she quotes Sara talking about her and her mother's bipolar symptoms: "She's also got a lot of delusions, conspiracy theories, a lot of anxiety—things that I'm not plagued with. I'm strictly bipolar; I have nothing else going on. Mine is so easy: I take Depakote; that's it" (p. 187). Leader adopts the phrase as characteristic of a contemporary pharmacological psychiatric outlook that is unwilling to look at underlying causes and issues being expressed or acted out in manic depression. In Leader's reading, the phrase *strictly bipolar*, suggests an avoidance of possibly difficult or uncomfortable truths expressed in manic depression. But as we see in the full quote (Leader begins his quote starting from "I'm strictly bipolar"), it actually points to an avoidance of the madness of manic depression (such as delusions), in our reading: of the madness of language. We interpret the bipolar narratives as avoiding the madness of language.

knotting several registers together. In Chapter 4, we explained Melle's work as not just reconstructing the ego-narrative within the imaginary but as reestablishing the dimension of the subject that was destroyed by the manic festering of language. We interpreted Melle's retroactive assumption of his history as a reconstruction of the position of the subject. This entails assuming a position within language and speech, a position in the dimension of the symbolic.

By refusing to construct a straightforward narrative about his manic experiences—and even questioning the feasibility of doing so—Melle draws attention to the inherent lack in the symbolic realm. Lacan (2004/2014) describes one's inscription in the symbolic realm as a process that results in a subject of language—a divided subject—while simultaneously introducing a loss or installing a lack. For Lacan, the subject is always marked by a lack in the symbolic. The signifiers one articulates never manage to tell the complete story, never capture experience without transforming it, always leave something to be said. Melle's (2018) portrayal of the robot-Melle evokes precisely this lack, the idea that he cannot entirely coincide with his ego-narrative. Melle does not strive to close up the gap between his experience and the narrative surrounding it. On the contrary, he accentuates this gap by having the robot-Melle comment on the distance Melle feels from this narrative. The *lack* or the *not-completely-coinciding-with* takes center stage here. This contrasts with the ego's fictional narrative consistency, which is always an imaginary attempt to close the gap and cover up the lack.

While Berckmans engages in a similar process, he reflects on it less explicitly. He problematizes the relationship between reality and fiction in his work and interviews, thereby undermining not only the imaginary consistency of his work, but also of his identity. He does so with an awareness of the fiction of both and of their relation to the symbolic and its lack. However, Berckmans' writing has less stabilizing effects, possibly because his solutions in the imaginary and the symbolic realms remain independent of one another. In contrast to this, in Melle's case the imaginary and the symbolic are more intertwined.

Berckmans fictionalizes his life and environment, but this does not seem to have a lasting impact on his experience. This resembles the lack of lasting effect we noted of Melle's early attempts at fictionalizing his life, when he was still writing 'along to his life' or 'alongside his

life' (Heier, 2016)<sup>304</sup> instead of undertaking the autobiographical project resulting in *The World at my Back*, where his writing began to significantly affect his life. Melle's writing practice, despite its awareness of fiction and acceptance of the lack, managed to serve as a stabilizing force for him. In contrast, Berckmans' writing practice seems to address something for him but lacks similar stabilizing effects. This leaves elements of identity, ego-narrative and subjectivity in flux. As we noted in Chapter 3, it is not entirely clear whether Berckmans is disrupting language or if language is disrupting Berckmans.

## 1.4. The Real of Mania

### *Jouissance Unbound*

So far, our discussion focused on mania as a derailing language phenomenon, disturbing the coherence of the ego-narrative. We have explored strategies of recovery which either aim to restore the ego-narrative or to keep language under control. Now, we shift our focus to the register of the real.

The real, in Lacanian terms, is that which resists being captured or represented by the image and escapes being circumscribed by the symbolic. It is the register of jouissance and bodily drive energy.<sup>305</sup> Neither the experience of jouissance or bodily excitation in mania, nor the recovery strategies that primarily target the real of the drive and the body have been the central focus of our research project.<sup>306</sup> In our Lacanian understanding of mania as flight of signifiers, we mainly interpreted the manic energy and bodily excitement as secondary, as a consequence of the derailing of the signifying chain.<sup>307</sup> Lacanian authors who have discussed this idea consider the heightened exaltation and excitation in mania as a consequence of the metonymic derailment of the signifying chain. This derailment leads to the release of

<sup>304</sup> Melle states "Ich habe immer ziemlich nah an meinem eigenen Leben entlanggeschrieben" (Heier, 2016).

<sup>305</sup> In the following section, we discuss the real dimension of language, the side of language tainted by jouissance and the drive, which Lacan calls llanguage, where manic language is not only language gone mad but also reveals something of the universal madness of llanguage.

<sup>306</sup> The current DSM-5 definition of mania, with the addition of "increased goal-directed activity or energy" to the "elevated, expansive, or irritable mood" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124) recognizes the importance of this aspect of mania. Our Lacanian focus on mania as a phenomenon of language and speech only takes into account one of the three classically distinguished domains affected by mania—mood, cognition and perception, and activity and behavior (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007) and somewhat neglects both the aspect of mood and that of activity or energy.

<sup>307</sup> Thereby probably underplaying the role of bodily excitation and corporeal drive energy as a source of the manic excitation.



jouissance, which is no longer constrained by language (Brémaud, 2017; Soler, 2002). Vieira (1993) states that the bodily excitation observed in mania can obscure the fact that it is the invasion of language that sets the body in motion; in mania, the body is affected by the symbolic.<sup>308</sup>

As we mentioned, as it befits the real, it pops up and intrudes through the cracks and slits in both the imaginary and symbolic constructions. This characteristic is also evident in the chapters of this dissertation.

In Chapter 2, Section 3.1, under the first theme titled *The Disruptive Experience of Mania*, we described mania as a disturbance by drive impulses. We wrote:

In a state of overdrive, restless urges overwhelm the ego and disrupt the functioning of language, which, in its turn, cannot be used to master the impulses. At such moments, the dimension of the subject is erased, and reduced to a passive spectator that cannot stop the urges from overwhelming the ego.

It's important to note that we interpret this not as implying that the overwhelming of the drive is necessarily the source or trigger of mania. Rather, this is how it was portrayed in the narratives. As we noted earlier, we can also interpret this unleashing of drive energy as being provoked by the loss of a stabilizing identity or identification, or interpret it as a release of jouissance, no longer restrained by language due to the metonymic derailment of the signifying chain. In Chapter 2, Section 4 we also noted the difficulties participants faced when attempting to describe their manic experiences:

Participants could describe their actions and consequences, and the disruptive impact of the experience, but had difficulty grasping this experience from the inside. Participants had great difficulties capturing the experience of mania in language and relied more on general descriptions and standard narratives of manic behavior and of being bipolar.

In our reading, being *overwhelmed by the drive*, is part of the standard bipolar narrative.<sup>309</sup>

<sup>308</sup> One notable idea we mention without exploring further is the relation of mania to anxiety. La Sagna (in Miller, 1997) states that at the height of manic euphoria, anxiety appears and often marks a turning point. André (1993) remarks that mania is provoked when the subject is confronted with the jouissance of the Other, where we would expect anxiety, a manic episode is triggered.

<sup>309</sup> A note on the notion of the *drive*: throughout this dissertation, we often related mania to “jouissance and corporeal drive energy” and, particularly in Chapter 2, described mania as being “overwhelmed by the drive.” Yet, whether *drive* is the most appropriate concept for describing the excitation and agitation in mania merits further consideration. In Freud's work the notion of the drive—Freud's (1915b) *Trieb*, in Lacan's (1973) view incorrectly translated as *instinct* (Freud, 1915a)—is described as “a concept on the frontier between the mental

Regardless of its source, the real aspect of mania characterized by bodily excitation and jouissance, was evident in all the narratives of our participants. We encountered it in Annie's exaltation during her near-religious experiences, Bea's descriptions of hypomania as being in love, Cindy and George's descriptions of sensory stimuli overwhelming their bodies, Dave and Ellen's stories of intoxicated euphoria, Keira's descriptions of pleasurable tingling sensations or a foul physical tension, Ellen's description of the sexual rush of pleasure that then turns into anxiety; Mary's account of tireless drive, Olga's description of jitteriness, Ulrik's feeling of being possessed by sexual urges, and Ellen, Quirina and Tori's tales of unrestrained promiscuity, sometimes with a traumatic aftermath.

In Chapters 3 and 4, the real side of mania has not been the explicit focus of discussion. Berckmans, in his oeuvre and interviews, does not really discuss the experience of mania as such. We interpreted his literary practices as strategies of responding to his specific experience of language. However, the interpretation of how Berckmans mentions the real of the body remains less clear.<sup>310</sup> In Chapter 3, Section 1.6, we also wondered whether Berckmans' writing was indeed a necessary operation preventing him from being completely

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and the somatic, as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body" (Freud, 1915a, pp. 121–122). Lacan (1973) stresses that Freud's notion of the drive is a montage of disparate elements. Freud (1915a) distinguishes between these aspects of the drive: its pressure, its aim, its object, and its source. Which of these aspects could be considered to be impacted by manic excitation is not unambiguous (e.g., is it an increase in pressure that drives the manic, or is it the metonymic slipping of the object, etc.), nor how to connect it to Freud's qualification of the drive as a constant force. Furthermore, Lacan (1973) describes the trajectory of the drive as circling the object *a*—"la pulsion en fait le tour" (p. 153)—which raises the question of how to relate it to the non-function of *a* in mania. Fink (1995) reminds us that "Lacan stresses that the drive is not unrelated to language: unlike 'instinct,' drives are, in some sense, embedded in language" (p. 188). Or, the drive is "a thoroughly cultural and symbolic construct" (Evans, 1996, p. 47). Perhaps a more cautious approach would be to refer to the 'manic drive' by the DSM-5 description of *increased activity or energy* or to use the more general Lacanian term *jouissance* or, as Lacan (1974/1987) does in *Television*, simply refer to *manic excitation*. To what extent this manic energy or excitation is purely bodily and to what degree it is already connected to and shaped by the signifier remains a question. So the recovery trajectory we described in Chapter 2 as developing ways of representing the drive could alternatively be described as developing ways to represent excitation and agitation and thereby developing it into, or constructing it into a montage akin to the drive.

<sup>310</sup> Ceustermans (2018) mentions sexual unrest as part of Berckmans' mania in his Italian period. In an interview, Berckmans comments on his sexual obsession during his residency in Italy, without linking it explicitly to mania (Herten, 1995). In the same interview, Berckmans proclaims his total disinterest in sex: 'Sex does not interest me at all. The only thing I want to do is write good books. My sexuality is completely replaced by writing.' There is a vague thread of physical discomfort and decay running through his life and work. His work brims with images of rottenness and bodily decay, bodies described as flesh flapping on bones, a loose collection of intestines, falling apart, rotting away, consisting of shit. Elsewhere we alluded to a possible interpretation of the recurring scatological references to shit, crap, dung, etc. as a manifestation of the melancholic identification with the discarded object *a* (Rabaey, 2021).

overwhelmed by the jouissance of language, or if it resembles a compulsion akin to an addiction to a particular mode of jouissance?

In Melle's (2016/2023) portrayal of his manic episodes, we highlighted, the language related-aspects, but there is also a reference to bodily excitation as a starting point of mania. A passage we partially quoted in Chapter 4, Section 2.2, where Melle describes the process of assembling unstable constructions of thought that continue to fester in an attempt to restore meaning, begins with:

So, it starts with an excess of emotion.<sup>311</sup> A shock flashes through the nervous system, cascades of random emotions shoot downward and come swilling back up. You feel a total lack of restraint. Your skin grows hot from within. Your back burns, your forehead is numb, your head empty and at the same time overflowing: floods of neurons. (p. 42)

The excitation and unbound jouissance of mania manifests in various phenomena appearing at the limits of language, such as the increasing speed and volume of speech or vocal affectations.<sup>312</sup> It becomes apparent in Melle's anger and rage, but also in his roaring laughter<sup>313</sup>, and in Berckmans' fits of unhinged screaming.<sup>314</sup>

### ***Limiting Jouissance***

Although it was not the primary focus of our investigation, treating the real of mania, the bodily excitation, was recurrently present throughout the chapters.<sup>315</sup> All participants described lifestyle interventions that target the body or its rhythm, such as ensuring enough

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<sup>311</sup> Melle's (2016) word is "einem Gefühlsüberschuss" (p. 41).

<sup>312</sup> We encounter these language-related phenomena in Kraepelin's (1921) description of pressure of speech. He writes about the manic: "he cannot be silent for long; he talks and screams in a loud voice, makes a noise, bellows, howls, whistles, is over-hasty in speech, strings together disconnected sentences, words, syllables, mixes up different languages, preaches with solemn intonation and passionate gestures, abruptly falling from high-sounding bombast to humorous homeliness, threats, whining, and obscenity, or suddenly coming to an end in unrestrained laughter. Occasionally it comes to lisping or affected speech with peculiar flourishes, also, it may be, to talking in self-invented languages which consist partly of senseless syllables, partly of strangely clipped and mutilated words" (p. 32).

<sup>313</sup> Or rather the roaring laughter in him. Melle's expression *it laughed inside of me* captures its intrusive, external nature: "I would have laughed if I hadn't been in such a panic. And I did laugh, or there was laughter inside of me, but like an echo. From the bunkers under my feet I resonated upward as laughter" (Melle, 2016/2023, pp. 57–58); "Wäre ich nicht so panisch gewesen, hätte ich lachen müssen. Ich lachte ja auch, oder es lachte in mir, aber wie ein Echo. Aus den Bunkern unter meinen Füßen hallte ich als Gelächter empor" (Melle, 2016, p. 60).

<sup>314</sup> Both Melle and Berckmans gained quite a reputation for their boisterous and disruptive presence in public life (Ceustermans, 2018; Melle, 2016).

<sup>315</sup> In the next section we discuss the particular 'treatment' by alcohol and drug use.

sleep, avoiding exposure to excessive excitement, and adhering to regular medication schedules.

In Chapter 2, we interpreted part of the recovery trajectory as involving the development of strategies to represent and control the drive that threatened to overwhelm the participants. Monitoring and representing the drive activity incorporates it into the ego-narrative and represents it in language. This not only integrates the drive activity into the participants' narrative self-representations and self-images but also makes direct intervention on the drive possible. For example, Tori describes that when she feels herself entering a manic state or when her colleagues' comments about her talkativeness alerted her to what she calls her heightening state, she initiates a specific medication routine:

So by the end of that week I was really getting too high up, and then that weekend I canceled all my plans, really everything, and then Friday evening I took extra medication to sleep, and then Saturday I took Haldol every few hours, and all day I just stayed quietly at home by myself, doing nothing, no stimuli, in the hope that I would then go down again, and that actually worked, that is, by now I have had enough experience with it to know how to do it.

All participants reported taking medication, with most of them currently being on medication. Berckmans consulted psychiatrists throughout his life and occasionally mentions various types of medication in his work. We do not have sufficient information to determine the function of other practices that could be considered as interventions on the real of the body, such as his alcohol abuse and periods of starvation.<sup>316</sup> Melle describes that starting lithium was a turning point in his recovery. In Chapter 4, we mentioned how Melle's new tic of holding his breath, allowing tension to build and then release, could be considered an intervention on the real of the body and its rhythm.

### ***Alcohol and Drug Use***

In a brief final remark on the real of mania, we want to highlight its relation to alcohol and drug use.<sup>317</sup> While we did not extensively develop this theme, alcohol and drug use emerged

<sup>316</sup> In his later years, he was hospitalized several times caused by malnutrition, by what he himself described as anorexia, a compulsive distaste for food (Jacobs, 2003).

<sup>317</sup> The link between these two was already noted by Freud (1930). In a discussion of chemical intoxication as one of the methods available to humans for averting suffering, he describes mania as "a condition similar to intoxication" (p. 78).

as relevant elements in the narratives of the participants of our interview study<sup>318</sup>, as well as in the experiences of Berckmans and Melle. Berckmans, in particular, was a notorious alcoholic<sup>319</sup>, often remembered more as a legendary figure of Antwerp nightlife than as a notable author (Ceustermans, 2018). Thomas Melle also makes multiple references to drinking and drunkenness in relation to his manic exploits.<sup>320</sup>

Discussing alcohol and drug abuse and addiction in the context of manic-depressive disorders, Goodwin & Jamison (2007) note the challenge of “separating the insanity from the drink” (p. 226). They note that patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder have significantly elevated rates of alcohol and drug abuse or dependence. During episodes of mania, there is an increased use of alcohol and drugs, although the debate persists whether patients use these substances to self-medicate or to precipitate an episode. Goodwin & Jamison (2007) conclude:

It is probable that a subgroup of bipolar patients abuses alcohol and other drugs to intensify elevated mood and energy states, while another subgroup abuses the same substances to ameliorate or self-medicate their manic, depressive, or mixed symptoms. Some do both. (p. 231)

This ambiguity also appeared in the narratives of the participants in our interview study. Several participants mentioned excessive drinking during a manic episode<sup>321</sup>, while others described alcohol or drugs as major risk factors for triggering a manic episode.<sup>322</sup> Some considered strictly limiting their alcohol (or drug) intake<sup>323</sup> or embracing complete sobriety<sup>324</sup> as crucial aspects of their recovery and current stability.

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<sup>318</sup> In Chapter 2, alcohol and drug use is mentioned in the brief narrative descriptions of 4 out of the 18 participants, but excessive drinking or drug use was a relevant factor for 9 of them, and 6 of them even describe alcohol or drug use as a major element in triggering episodes of mania.

<sup>319</sup> Berckmans makes multiple references to his drinking in interviews (e.g., Herten, 1995) and Ceustermans (2018) describes frequent hospitalizations for alcohol withdrawal.

<sup>320</sup> In his debut novel *Sickster* (Melle, 2011) we encounter the alcoholic excesses of main character Thorsten Kühnemund. *The World at My Back* (Melle, 2016/2023) is full of references to alcohol. A few examples: he mentions having “spent months in this state of semi-delirium brought on by psychosis and alcohol consumption” (p. 140), confesses “sometimes I would fire up my mood with alcohol” (p. 281) and writes about his “hysterical-alcoholic activities” (p. 159). This last statement is more dramatic in the original: “meine hysterisch-alcoholische Existenz” (Melle, 2016, p. 176).

<sup>321</sup> Cindy, Peggy, Quirina.

<sup>322</sup> Dave, Ellen, Frank, Nina, Olga, Ulrik.

<sup>323</sup> Ellen, Nina.

<sup>324</sup> Dave, Olga.

Interestingly, Nina and Olga both describe their drug and alcohol use as intimately connected to their mania, using similar terms to describe *losing themselves in* an alcohol or drug-fueled intoxication as they would to describe *going along with* the onset of a manic mood. Both of them associated their stability with the decision to refrain from *going along with* such intoxication. Dave describes his manic periods as culminating in weeks of drinking from morning to evening, going to bars at night, and using cocaine, ultimately leading to unemployment and homelessness. In Chapter 2, we mentioned Dave's turning point, marked by an emotional confrontation with his sister that made him realize "I don't want to be like that." Following this realization, he decided to quit drinking and using drugs, resulting in his sobriety and stability since then. He states:

That has brought a lot of stability into my life, that I stopped doing that. Because, that has been like a chicken and egg story. But I think for me, it was like, uh, for example, going out with people on New Year's Eve, and, and partying, but three days later, I would still be at the café. Well, I was a bit, I was a bit boundless in that area. And since I started living a sober life, there has been much more stability, and uh, my life has been, well, the last few years, well, the last six years for sure, I have actually been much happier than I ever was in my life before.

The turning point of assuming responsibility for one's manic symptoms, as described in Chapter 2, echoes a similar dynamic sometimes encountered in the recovery trajectory from addiction.<sup>325</sup>

### 1.5. Knotting Mania

Lacan's Borromean perspective on the subject adds that, for recovery with a chance of lasting stability, recovery strategies should aim at knotting several registers together. This is related to Lacan's notion of the *sinthome*, which we discussed in Chapter 4, Section 4. According to Lacan, anything that functions as a structuring element in mental life can be considered a *sinthome*, functioning as a fourth term to the three registers of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. We can now revisit the solutions we discussed in light of their *sinthomatic* potential.

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<sup>325</sup> The trajectory goes from *I can't help it, I'm addicted* to *I decided to quit* (see Rabaey, 2014).

The reconstruction of the ego-narrative through identification with and elaboration of the diagnosis remains within the register of the imaginary. Even though the diagnosis can function as a quilting point, as an anchor and therefore has ties to the symbolic, and even though practices involving ways to represent the drive aim at making interventions targeting the manifestation of the drive, the narrative construct itself does not impact the symbolic and the real, and there is no real knotting of the registers.

Berckmans' solutions seem to target both the imaginary and the symbolic, but these are not knotted in a stabilizing manner. His interventions on language operate in the symbolic register, attempting to temper the madness of language, by limiting the derailing metonymy of the signifying chain and the jouissance of language. His practice of fictionalization undoubtedly plays a crucial role in his relation with his immediate environment, but it does not seem to provide a consistent identity narrative that stabilizes in the way the bipolar narratives do. In his narratives and in his life, everything remains in a state of permanent flux. His interventions on the real of the body<sup>326</sup>, on the symbolic as language, and on the imaginary are all disconnected from one another and fail to knot the registers together in a stabilizing way.

As we suggested in Chapter 4, Melle's writing practice seems to affect the three realms of human experience: his use of doubles and autobiographical narrative reconstruction affect the imaginary; his employment of new realism and strategies for keeping language in check operate on the symbolic; and his medication, alongside the rhythm of holding his breath, impacts the real of the body. In addition, these interventions and their impact are intertwined. His interventions on language enable the construction of a narrative while acknowledging the lack in and the limits to the symbolic realm without entirely undermining its efficacy.<sup>327</sup> Additionally, he describes how medication has effects on his language, tempering it, and how the rhythm of holding his breath, a new tic he adopted, affects the rhythm of his sentences. Furthermore, his strategies on language develop into an artistic creed (artificial authenticity) and style (new realism) that confirm an identity in the imaginary as well as a practice in the symbolic. As Berckmans' evolution seems to move away from using language as a tool for narrative and representation, Melle's development goes in the opposite direction and, as he states, restores his faith in language.

<sup>326</sup> Berckmans drinking and drug use, and his later starvation and neglect.

<sup>327</sup> As seems to be the case for Berckmans.

There are some similarities in style between Berckmans' work and Melle's early work; both enjoy long, derailing phrases, playing with language, undermining conventions of narrative and representation, and so forth. While Melle does not denounce his early work, he does explicitly state that he had to abandon that style in order to be able to write his autobiographical work, to reconstruct his narrative, and himself as a narrator. Berckmans' trajectory goes in the other direction; for a long time, his work seems to evolve towards increasingly undermining the conventions of language itself. While we do not equate the writer and the writing here, it seems clear that such deconstructed language is of little help in forging stabilizing identity narratives. We can equally frame this in terms of limiting the *jouissance* of language, of giving language less free reign.

While both Berckmans and Melle engage in autobiographical projects, with a similar ambiguity as to its nature, Berckmans insists *it's fiction, but it's real*, and *it's autobiographical, but it's made up*, and Melle claims *it's completely truthful, but it's fiction* and written with *truthfulness that allows for fiction and lies*; the result is vastly different. Melle manages to construct a story he can live with, a solid narrative that does not attempt to cover up the lack or the subjective division and that still represents him and his history, in all its unrepresentability.<sup>328</sup> Berckmans mainly seems to question the possibility of representation and narrative.<sup>329</sup>

## 1.6. Conclusion

To conclude our integrating review of the chapters, we consider the repair of the metonymy from the point of view of Lacan's consecutive views of the subject: the ego, the subject, and the speakbeing.<sup>330</sup> The experience of mania, conceptualized as derailing metonymy, thwarts the experience of subjectivity in each of its incarnations. The recovery strategies we discussed can also be considered along the lines of these views of the subject, each with its own strategy for repairing the derailing metonymy.

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<sup>328</sup> Although here, as we did in Chapter 4, we need to point out how Melle, in the wake of yet another long manic episode, expressed doubts about his former optimism about the ability of literature to save him, and called it perhaps naïve (Becker, 2022).

<sup>329</sup> Although his later letters are written in a more sober and representational style.

<sup>330</sup> These conceptualizations are not only consecutive, but also cumulative, since each view builds on and elaborates and complicates the former.



First, there is the imaginary repair of the metonymy of the ego. The repair of the metonymy of the ego consists of the construction of a solid imaginary identity with a straight ego-narrative. As we see in Chapter 2, this solution has its merits and provides the participants with a narrative for integrating and mastering their experiences, and to further personalize the narrative and make sense of one's experiences. In our interpretation, although the dimension of language is absent from the conceptualization within this view, the narrative can function as a quilting point and can keep language in check. The imaginary repair of the metonymy of the ego is an answer to the question '*who am I and what have I done?*' The answer in Chapter 2 is something along the lines of '*I'm bipolar and I need to follow certain guidelines.*' From the point of view of the ego, language is not a factor; the ego can just use language to tell a story about itself without even acknowledging language.<sup>331</sup>

Second, there is the symbolic repair of the metonymy of the subject. The addition of the dimension of the symbolic complicates the straightforward narrative of the imaginary repair of the metonymy of the ego. The question the subject is confronted with has been rephrased from '*what have I done?*' to '*how am I represented by my speech?*' '*who is speaking when I am talking?*' or as we phrased it in Chapter 4 '*who is the narrator narrating the dissolution of the narrator?*' The ego can just use language to tell a story about itself without acknowledging language. The notion of the subject adds that the subject itself is an effect of language, the result of the workings of anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain.

As we already stated, Lacan's understanding of the subject points to elements of our mental life that escape the conscious, narrative construction of the ego. It denotes a position in language rather than a narrative construction or a particular content, and it entails feeling represented by and responsible for one's speech and one's actions (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 1975/1988). This experience of subjectivity is disturbed by experiences of mania and not fully addressed by imaginary solutions such as narrative identity constructions. While the ego can ignore language and its unreliability, its potential for misrepresentation, for lying, for fiction, and the lack it comes with, the subject is the result of acknowledging all these and of taking on a position in language, a position in speech, in spite of all this.

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<sup>331</sup> The ego can be 'strictly bipolar.'

Being the subject of the symbolic acknowledges the fictional nature of identity, the determining force of the structural dimension of language and the lack.<sup>332</sup> As we pointed out when we compared Berckmans' and Melle's strategies in Section 1.3, simply acknowledging the lack and the limits of the symbolic, without intertwining the symbolic with the imaginary of identity and without finding a position from which to speak, only serves to confirm the destabilizing side of language, which has its own risks. Furthermore, the notion of the subject entails the assumption of one's history. In Chapter 4, we described how with *The World at My Back*, Melle assumes his illness; he does not make it understandable but finds a way of accepting its ununderstandable nature. We noted how it is through narrating his history that he appropriates it, makes it his own by narrating it as "me." This is what forges the dimension of the subject that was destroyed by the manic festering of language.<sup>333</sup>

Third, there is the real repair of the metonymy of the speakbeing. The addition of the dimension of the real, specifically the real of the *jouissance* of language, further complicates the view on the subject. Now, language is no longer understood as a force of order and structure, but language itself is marked by *jouissance*. The notion of the speakbeing entails finding ways of limiting the *jouissance* of language by using language. The question is no longer 'am I represented by my speech?' but rather 'who or what is enjoying when I speak?' or 'am I enjoying language or is language enjoying me?' These last questions were particularly relevant concerning Berckmans' relation to language. In this view, the metonymic derailment is language overflowing, language no longer contained by language.

From this perspective, we can consider the strategies intervening on language itself, Berckmans' *mutilitating and hacking at language*, and Melle's *keeping language in check* with the *new realism*, as limiting the *jouissance* of language by submitting language to language with strictly enforced rules. The ego can just use language to tell a story about itself without even acknowledging language. The subject adds the complication that the subject itself is an effect of language. The concepts of language and speakbeing add the dimension of *jouissance* to language and add the idea that language is a parasitic force of dysregulation. In Chapter 5, we pointed out that language is always spoken in a particular way, what Lacan (1975/1989) calls the manner of speaking or the style of speaking, referring to the musicality and tonality

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<sup>332</sup> While the ego can be 'strictly bipolar,' for the subject there's always something else going on, or, the subject is always the effect of something else going on.

<sup>333</sup> We return to the notion of assumption in Section 3.5 of this chapter.

of speech and to the corporeal drive-related tension that is expressed in it. It is the embodied side of speech. So the repair of the metonymy of the speakbeing will need to impact this corporeal, embodied side of speech. The example we encountered is that of Melle writing to the rhythm of his new tic of holding his breath.<sup>334</sup>

## 2. Mania & Manic-Depressive Psychosis in Lacanian Nosology

In this section we make a few comments on the position of mania and manic-depressive psychosis within a Lacanian structural diagnostic framework.<sup>335</sup>

### 2.1. Skirting the Diagnostic Issue

As we explained in the introduction, our investigation focused on the experience of mania specifically understood in light of Lacan's remarks on mania as a phenomenon of language. We considered mania starting from the symptom of flight of ideas, a derailing of the signifying chain, which we referred to as *flight of signifiers*. In the clinical chapters (Chapter 2, 3, and 4), we encountered the effects this flight of signifiers has on the imaginary—disturbing one's identity and ego-narrative—and on the real—we understood the bodily phenomena of excitation as following from this derailing of signifiers. In Chapter 5, we considered manic language from a Lacanian point of view and discussed mania in light of Lacan's evolving understanding of language. What we have not considered, is the place of mania, manic-depressive psychosis or bipolar disorder, in Lacan's structural diagnostics.

In Chapter 2 we sidestepped Lacanian diagnostic considerations altogether. We merely noted that all participants had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. In Chapters 3 and 4, we discussed the literary work of J.M.H. Berckmans and Thomas Melle and the relation of their work to their manic-depressive experiences, we framed this within Lacan's structural diagnostic category of psychosis, but did not further comment on the diagnostic category of

<sup>334</sup> Another example might be Joyce's alleged roaring laughter when writing *Finnegans Wake* (Birmingham, 2014).

<sup>335</sup> This section is mainly written from a structuralist diagnostic perspective and, as such, refers to Lacan's theorizing of the 50's and the 60's. Its main concepts for our purpose are the Name-of-the-Father and object *a*, with the main references being *Seminar 3* and *Seminar 10* (Lacan, 1981/1993, 2004/2014). The later, Borromean Lacan, is not discussed here. Some authors have developed a Borromean view on mania, but, as fits the loose and malleable Borromean framework, these views seem rather tentative and temporary. For example Bousseyroux (2011/2018) describes mania as an indistinction between the symbolic and the imaginary, Melman (2011) as a clear separation of the orders, with the symbolic as the triumphant one.

manic-depressive psychosis. In Chapter 5 we discussed mania as a specific phenomenon within the general structure of psychosis, repeating our themes of flight of signifiers and its disruptive effects, considered as *language gone mad*. Then we related this to a more general point Lacan makes about language in his later work, that of *the madness of language*.<sup>336</sup>

## 2.2. Mania as a Symptom of Psychosis

All Lacanian authors we encountered agree that mania is to be situated within the structural category of psychosis.<sup>337</sup> Lacan initiated a compelling development of Freudian thought with an especially fruitful way of theorizing and clinically engaging with phenomena of psychosis (see Laurent, 2013; Maleval, 2015; Sauvagnat, 2003; Soler, 2002) and his successive conceptualizations of psychosis all result in particular treatment strategies (Sauvagnat, 2003; Vanheule, 2011). Lacan did not show great interest in classifications of different forms of psychosis, but did discuss particular mechanisms specific to different subtypes of psychosis and distinguished between them in his clinical presentations (Leader, 2023). Yet, he “hardly ever talked about schizophrenia, dementia praecox, manic-depressive psychosis etc. as separate nosological categories” (Nobus, 2000, p. 50).

Maleval (in Miller, 2008) states that the diagnostic question whether a subject is melancholic, schizophrenic, paranoid, etc. is not of great interest in itself. For him, the question is how to conduct the treatment, for this purpose the diagnostic of paranoia, schizophrenia, or manic depression may be useful to identify where the invasive jouissance is localized and thus what kind of jouissance needs to be countered. Yet, he points to the fact that most cases of psychosis are actually mixed states, where multiple aspects or elements from different conditions may be present. Subjects may display different psychotic symptoms at different times and often switch between diagnostic categories, which Maleval considers merely different positions within the structure of psychosis, not separate entities.<sup>338</sup> Guyonnet (2014) remarks that in all forms of psychosis we can encounter schizophrenic, melancholic or

<sup>336</sup> We had already briefly mentioned the notion of language in Chapter 3 on Berckmans.

<sup>337</sup> See André, 1993; Arce Ross, 2009; Assoun, 2010; Bousseyroux, 2011/2018; Brémaud, 2017; Christaki-Gadbin, 2003; Cottet, 2008; Czermak, 1998/2012; Fridman & Millas, 1997; Galle, 2023; Jonckheere, 2003; Laurent, 1988/2015; Leader, 2013, 2015; Lippi, 2019; Menard, 2018; Sauvagnat, 1997, 1999, 2000; Soler, 2002; Vanheule, 2019; Vieira, 1993.

<sup>338</sup> Miller (in Miller, 2008) prefers ‘state’ instead of ‘position,’ which still refers to structure.

paranoid elements<sup>339</sup>, similarly, in several psychoses we can encounter multiple and varied manic elements.

Lacanian treatment of psychosis is based on a detailed investigation of the particular experiences patients report on (Leader, 2011), such as what kind of jouissance the patient is confronted with (Maleval, 2000), what kind of Other is in play (Laurent, 2013), what existential questions trouble the subject (Vanheule, 2011), rather than based on diagnostic categories, which seem of no great concern. As we noted in the introduction, the two Lacanian clinical case studies included in the review by Stefana et al. (2023), report on the treatment of a patient with “a psychiatric diagnosis of bipolar affective disorder” (Georgaca, 2001, p. 176) or “suffering from manic-depressive psychosis” (Vanheule, 2017, p. 388), discuss the treatment only in terms of the general Lacanian structural diagnosis of psychosis, not specifically in terms of the diagnosis of manic depression or bipolar disorder.

In this view, mania is considered—and treated—as one of many possible symptoms within the structure of psychosis, as one of the ways unbound jouissance can manifest itself. The specificity of mania lies in how jouissance returns in the signifying chain itself. The jouissance is situated in the pure metonymy of the signifying chain, is dispersed and disseminated in language, leading to the exaltation of language, of language enjoying without limits (Brémaud, 2017). In this sense, mania is a specific manifestation of how Lacan (1981/1993) defines psychosis in *Seminar 3*, as “this invasion by the signifier” (p. 218)<sup>340</sup> and “this psychical intrusion, this invasion by the signifier, called psychosis” (p. 221).<sup>341</sup> In *On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis*, Lacan (1966/2006) explains a psychotic break as follows: when individuals with psychosis are confronted with existential questions, the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father prevents them from finding answers provided within the realm of the Other, within the shared discourse and convention—as would be the case in neurosis. Instead, they are confronted with a hole in the Other. At such times “signifiers are not available to articulate the subject” (Vanheule, 2011, p. 70). In *Seminar 3*, Lacan (1981/1993) considers psychotic phenomena such as hallucinations and delusions, as

<sup>339</sup> Guyonnet (2014) summarizes these as the schizophrenic displacement of jouissance, the melancholic death of the subject, and the paranoid interpretation. He remarks that within the clinical structure of psychosis, there are two general ways of treating jouissance: it returns in the body (which is the schizophrenic solution) or it is situated at the place of the Other, who becomes persecutory (the paranoid solution).

<sup>340</sup> “Cet envahissement du signifiant” (Lacan, 1981, p. 247).

<sup>341</sup> “Cette intrusion, cet envahissement psychologique du signifiant qui s’appelle la psychose” (Lacan, 1981, p. 251).

intrusions in the signifying chain in response to such existential confrontations. These intrusions intervene in the process of articulating meaning, interfering with the workings of anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain. Lippi (2019) states that the linguistic fragmentation in psychosis arises from the unraveling of the signifying chain; this goes for mania as well as for other psychotic phenomena. In this light, mania could be seen as one of the possible psychotic phenomena at the level of the signifying chain, but instead of signifiers intruding or empty spaces appearing in the signifying chain, there is an acceleration of the signifying chain, a metonymic derailment. This has equally disturbing, yet specific, effects on the articulation of meaning and the defining of a subject. As we noted throughout this study, no meaning is articulated, no subject is defined, there is only the slipping, sliding, gliding of the signifying chain.<sup>342</sup>

The volatility of mania, along with the particular mechanism of the metonymic derailing of the signifying chain, precludes some mechanisms of stabilization that work in other forms of psychosis, such as the development of a delusions or identifications. Ey (1954) distinguishes the manic flight of ideas from delusion, characterizing the former as a kind of half-delusion, in which we can encounter various isolated symptoms of classic psychiatry, including false recognitions, interpretations, illusions, hallucinations, delusional thoughts, etc. Ey refers to mania as a fiction that is spoken and thought, a fiction that approaches delusion but never achieves a stable state, suggesting that in mania we encounter delusion in its nascent state.

Brémaud (2017) remarks that the metonymic derailment of language in mania precludes the development of a delusional metaphor, which could provide temporary stabilization by organizing signifiers and connecting them to signification. Fridman & Millas (1997) consider manic elation as the senseless drift of the signifier, describing this metonymic *jouissance* as distinct from the enigmatic *jouissance* that invites elaboration and signification in other psychotic phenomena. Manic excitation does not allude to a subjective truth, is not addressed towards anyone, and does not invite interpretation.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Leader (2015) remarks that to consider this derailment as completely senseless, would be a misconception, in his view, just as in other psychotic phenomena, these point to relevant existential questions for the subject. We get back to this point in the discussion of Binswanger in the next section.

<sup>343</sup> Miller (1993/2002) describes the effect of mania on speech as: “a case of logical inconsistency, and which goes hand in hand with the glimpsed inexistence of the Other—since what is at stake here is a statement [*dit*] which does not pose as truth” (p. 20); “un cas d’inconsistance logique, et qui va de pair avec l’inexistence aperçue de l’Autre—puisqu’il s’agit là d’un dit qui ne se pose pas en vérité” (Miller, 1993, p. 12).

Similar to delusion, mania also precludes stabilization through identification. Miller (in Miller, 2008) proposes to understand mania and melancholia in the context of Lacan's binary of alienation and separation, rather than through Freud's notion of identification, with mania on the side of alienation, and melancholia on the side of separation. Alienation normally functions as a moment of identification. Yet, in mania, one is not burdened by any identification, as these constantly slip away, on the contrary, manic individuals find themselves in an infernal, infinite metonymic slippage. Nothing sticks.

### 2.3. Manic-Depressive Psychosis?

Mania is not only a highly specific manifestation of *jouissance*, but manic depression also follows its own particular course or rhythm, that needs to be considered. There has not been much theorizing on this matter in Lacanian circles; as Assoun (2010) states: the psychoanalytic statute of mania is still to be determined.<sup>344</sup> In this section, our aim is not to solve the question of where to situate manic depression in a Lacanian structural diagnostic framework. Instead, we will highlight specific elements that such a framework should account for and explore the difficulties one might run into.

The main challenge in a structural account of mania or manic depression lies in its inherent instability and volatility. Maleval (in Miller, 2008) emphasizes that most cases of psychosis display a mix of symptoms from various subtypes. Moreover, manic phenomena are marked by a unique volatility that complicates their categorization. The distinguishing feature of manic psychotic functioning is its instability. Alongside the typical linguistic phenomena of mania, there are often physical phenomena: patients experience a relentless, physical drive that propels them forward, sometimes resembling the disturbing bodily experiences seen in schizophrenia. Additionally, paranoid phenomena frequently emerge: as a manic episode progresses, the manic individual feels addressed by everything he or she encounters, such paranoid delusions often signals the end of a manic episode.

Discussing mood disorders, Deffieux (in Miller, 2008) remarks that not only is it challenging to align diagnostic understanding of psychoses based on a continuist clinic<sup>345</sup> with

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<sup>344</sup> Mania is sometimes discussed as a part of the diagnostic category of melancholia (see Chapter 1), sometimes as belonging to its own category of manic-depressive psychosis, and even occasionally suggested to belong to the schizophrenias (Leader, 2015).

<sup>345</sup> Meaning: based on the later, Borromean Lacan.

psychiatric categories, but also, in most cases<sup>346</sup>, the agility of *jouissance*<sup>347</sup> makes pinpointing a diagnosis difficult. Menard (2018) characterizes manic-depressive psychosis by two key facts: during episodes, it resembles other forms of psychosis, yet between crises, it tends to resemble the neurotic structure. Sauvagnat (in Miller, 2008) highlights that the particularity of manic-depressive psychosis is that it often remains in an untriggered, stable state. According to Sauvagnat (1999), this indicates the particularly rich mechanisms of stabilization in manic-depressive psychosis.

One crucial element to consider in understanding the volatility and the rich potential for stabilization is the role of the object *a*. Menard (2018) states that what's primarily at stake in manic-depressive psychosis is the relation to the object *a*, rather than the Other. This perspective aligns with Miller's (in Miller, 2008) observation regarding mood disorders. He notes that, the way the mood isolates and reverses itself—what he calls the stridency of mood—points to issues in regulating *jouissance*. This means mood doesn't point to (unconscious) truth, but to *jouissance*.<sup>348</sup> Miller (in Miller, 1997) further remarks how mania can be understood as an accelerated death drive, characterized by an unrestrained *jouissance*<sup>349</sup>, unrestrained by its usual guardrails of grammar and meaning or signification.

Some authors interpret Lacan's (2004/2014) remark about the non-function of the object *a* in mania as referring to a general non-function of the object *a* in all forms of psychosis, without specifically explaining why this leads to a metonymic derailing of the signifying chain (e.g., Vieira, 1993). Yet, the object *a* is considered to have a specific role and function within the structure of psychosis, as it is not situated in the Other. Situating the object *a* in the Other implies an inscription of the subject in the discourse of the Other and the existence of the object *a* as a lack in the field of the Other and as the cause of desire—as is the case in neurosis. In psychosis as well, the object *a* fulfills its function as condensation and localization of *jouissance*. But instead of it being situated in the Other, the psychotic subject carries his cause, his object *a*, in his pocket (Lacan, 1967). Mania, therefore, exhibits a particular volatility of the object *a*: sometimes it fails to function, plunging the subject into the

<sup>346</sup> The discussion takes place at a Lacanian conference of mood disorders.

<sup>347</sup> “Une telle mobilité de la jouissance” (Deffieux, in Miller, 2008, p. 112).

<sup>348</sup> “Il y a donc ces phénomènes de stridence de l'humeur, où elle s'isole et se renverse, et qui nous renvoient ... à un défaut de régulation de la jouissance” (Miller, in Miller, 2008, p. 74).

<sup>349</sup> “Jouissance sans frein” (Miller, in Miller, 1997, p. 109). This is a way of interpreting the manic symptom of “abnormally and persistently increased goal-directed activity or energy” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124).



sheer endless metonymy of the signifying chain<sup>350</sup>, other times it may function, localizing jouissance in the body or in a persecutory Other, etc. The inherent volatility and agility that contributes to the instability of manic depression, also accounts for the diversity of its manifestation, and offers rich possibilities for stabilization.

Leader (2015) raises questions about what happens to the object *a* in the aftermath of manic episodes. Does it start to function again, and if so, how does it fluctuate between functioning and non-functioning? Is it integrated into *i(a)*?<sup>351</sup> Menard (2018) would answer the latter question positively, suggesting that the specificity of manic-depressive psychosis lies in its knotting through the imaginary, through narcissistic identification.<sup>352</sup> Cottet's (2008) interpretation of mania as being the result of an expulsion of identification is related to this interpretation. In the discussion of a case from Binswanger (1960/1987)<sup>353</sup>, Cottet (2008) interprets the passage from one state into another as a dynamic of identification and expulsion. In his reading, the melancholic's raw identification with the object *a*, without the imaginary chasuble (or cloak) of the ego, delivers the subject to a pulsation of jouissance. In mania, this identification is radically rejected. Cottet interprets the dynamic of manic depression as the pulsation of jouissance between identification and expulsion, observable in its raw state.

These considerations also raise questions concerning the episodic nature of manic depression, a topic we will leave unanswered in this discussion. Throughout this dissertation, we primarily discussed the manic state, its derailing language, and its implications for identity and subjectivity. We have not delved into the triggers of mania, the depressive aspect of manic depression, or the episodic nature of manic depression.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Leader (2015) points out that this does not specify how to differentiate the manic non-functioning from other language phenomena in psychosis.

<sup>351</sup> Here *i(a)* refers to the subject's specular image (see Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 859), which we can consider as related to the imaginary identity narrative.

<sup>352</sup> He adds that this knotting of the imaginary is different from, for example, suppletion in the symbolic through a delusional metaphor.

<sup>353</sup> The case of Olga Blum, from Binswanger (1960/1987), a series of phenomenological case studies on melancholia and mania.

<sup>354</sup> Concerning the triggering of mania, we can point to André's (1993) remark that mania is provoked when the subject is confronted with the jouissance of the Other, where we would expect anxiety, a manic episode is triggered. La Sagna (in Miller, 1997) states that at the height of manic euphoria, anxiety appears and often marks a turning point.

### 3. A Dialogue With Binswanger's Phenomenological Account of Flight of Ideas

To further explore our Lacanian understanding of mania as a phenomenon of language, we engage in a dialogue with Binswanger's work on flight of ideas. As one of the founding fathers of phenomenological psychopathology<sup>355</sup> (Hoffmann & Knorr, 2019), Binswanger's early studies focused on *flight of ideas* (Izenberg, 1976) and started from the spontaneous utterances and writings of his patients (Lanzoni, 2005). Given his background, Binswanger is a valuable conversation partner for our purposes. First, let's proceed with an introduction to phenomenology and Binswanger's work.

#### 3.1. Phenomenological Psychopathology

Phenomenological psychopathology engages in the description and analysis of subjective experience of psychopathological phenomena, focusing on pre-reflective dimensions of experience, such as temporality, spatiality, and embodiment, describing these in terms of affective intentionality, bodily resonance, attunement, and atmosphere. This approach places significant emphasis on the dimension of (lived) time, particularly in the context of mood disorders (Fuchs, 2013, 2019). Fuchs (2014) describes the goals of phenomenology as to "suspend any assumptions about causal explanations of a disorder ... and instead try to grasp the patient's experience as best as possible" (p. 404) and to engage in "an analysis of the basic structures of experience that are altered in mental illness" (p. 404).

While psychoanalysis and phenomenology share some common ground, a dialogue between these fields is scarce<sup>356</sup> (Strosberg, 2022). Leoni (2019) views phenomenology and psychoanalysis as two grand experiments aiming at remedying the impasses and limitations of early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychiatry. However, he notes that their paths immediately diverged. Sass (2015) argues that Lacan has more affinity with phenomenology than typically acknowledged,

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<sup>355</sup> As Hoffmann & Knorr (2019) note, Binswanger is somewhat neglected, partially because a lot of his work has not been translated to English.

<sup>356</sup> One impediment for a dialogue between these fields might be the language used. Phenomenological psychopathology uses concepts that are alien to psychoanalysis and a jargon that is sometimes a barrier for psychoanalytic authors attempting to engage with phenomenology. Surely the inverse is also the case. For example, Cottet (2008) comments on Binswanger's rather hermetic neo-Husserlian and Heideggerian philosophical vocabulary and phenomenological rhetoric. Soler (2002) comments on phenomenology's elaborate long, rich descriptions of mania whose lavishness reminds her of the very abundance of mania itself.

with the influence of Heidegger serving as a hinge for this agreement. Strosberg (2022), while critiquing this idea, states that there are fundamental differences between the two fields that should not be reduced to one another. A psychoanalytic view aims to grasp something beyond immediate experience, something that is explanatory for the experience: the symbolic structure. In this view, experience follows from symbolic processes. For Strosberg this situates psychoanalysis “outside of the boundaries of phenomenology” (p. 236).

The phenomenological perspective on mania, akin to a psychoanalytical approach, does not primarily focus on mood or increased activity. According to Fernandez (2014), manic episodes “should be characterized not by any particular moods (such as euphoria, grandiosity, or even irritability), and should instead be characterized by an enhanced or heightened capacity for finding ourselves situated in and attuned to the world” (p. 415). Fuchs (2014, 2019) summarizes some of the contemporary phenomenological descriptions of mania as follows: “The manic mode of existence is volatile, playful, and provisional” (Fuchs, 2019, p. 627), characterized by “lightness, disinhibition, and acceleration” (p. 626), and “the lived body ... is characterized by a centrifugal expansion” (p. 626) and “seems to have lost all resistance that normally impedes acting out every impulse immediately” (p. 627). “As a result of the excess of drive and the expansivity of the body, the space of the manic person changes into an unlimited, homogeneous medium of projects and activities” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 411); “the patient’s lived space is extended, abounding with possibilities and affordances that all seem attractive and promising” (Fuchs, 2019, p. 627). “In the temporal dimension, the manic desynchronization from the environment manifests itself in a lack of rhythmicity and constant acceleration of lived time” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 404) leading to a “desynchronization from others” (Fuchs, 2019, p. 618) and “a momentary life, consisting of isolated ‘nows’” (p. 627). Fuchs (2014) further states: “In the symbolic realm of thinking, the ‘flight of ideas’ corresponds to the dispersed mode of existence that is conspicuous in the patient’s lived space” (p. 411).<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> As a preview of coming attractions, we can already note how in this statement the assumption is that the dispersed mode of existence comes first and is then also reflected in thought, in the flight of ideas, while in our Lacanian interpretation of mania, it is the flight of ideas that comes first and brings on a dispersed mode of existence.

### 3.2. Binswanger's *Über Ideenflucht*

Ludwig Binswanger (1881–1966), a Swiss psychiatrist who served as the director of the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen, had an interest in both psychoanalysis<sup>358</sup> and philosophy, particularly the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. Binswanger sought to integrate and apply psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches in psychiatry (Fichtner, 2003). Yet, he was critical of both Freud<sup>359</sup> and Heidegger<sup>360</sup> (Frie, 2003) and developed his own “hybrid genre of philosophical anthropology and psychopathology” (Lanzoni, 2004, p. 108).<sup>361</sup> For Binswanger “all psychiatric symptoms are ... anthropological modes of existence” (Hoffmann & Knorr, 2019, p. 114).

Binswanger's (1933/2000) study of mania is a phenomenological investigation of flight of ideas starting from a series of case studies.<sup>362</sup> In his view, diagnosis should not be limited to clinical judgment about the presence of a symptom, but should also encompass a psychological judgment about a particular way of human living and its intentional orientation. He critiqued the then contemporary psychiatric explanations of flight of ideas for their mechanistic approach, reducing flight of ideas to associations based on mechanical principles, the overproduction of representations, or attention problems. In his view these explanations fail to take subjective, biographical and psychological elements such as will and intentionality into consideration. In Binswanger's view, psychopathological phenomena should be understood in relation to universal human existential problems rather than in isolation. Binswanger is not interested in what is disordered or anomalous in the psychic life of persons

<sup>358</sup> He maintained a long-lasting friendship and correspondence with Freud (Fichtner, 2003).

<sup>359</sup> Binswanger was attracted to psychoanalysis but distrusted Freud's notion of the drive “because it reintroduced the specter of meaninglessness as the driving force behind meaning: everything was pushed and moved by the drive, but the drive pushed simply because it pushed” (Leoni, 2019, p. 1047). For Binswanger the psychoanalytic tenet that human behavior is causally determined by the instinctual energy of the id was unacceptable (Frie, 2003) and he opposed a reduction of man to his drives and inner conflicts (Delefosse, 1998).

<sup>360</sup> Binswanger gave his own interpretative twist to Heidegger's notions. “With the term *Dasein* (translated as being-in-the-world and used by Binswanger as a synonym for the self) Heidegger attempted, ‘by fiat,’ to ‘undercut’ the subject-object dichotomy” (Edelheit, 1967, p. 90). “For Heidegger, ‘being-in-the-world’ was an ontological term, a necessary condition for *Dasein*, or human existence. In contrast, Binswanger's use of ‘being-in-the-world’ described the particular manner of existence of an individual subject, or group of psychopathological subjects, and thus was an anthropological interpretation” (Lanzoni, 2004, pp. 108–109). Edelheit (1967) suggests Binswanger misappropriated the ideas of Heidegger and Husserl and accuses him of “obscure and pretentious terminology” (p. 89). Schmidl (1959) notes how Binswanger's works can be “as obscure as the writings of Heidegger himself” (p. 51).

<sup>361</sup> Cottet (in Miller, 2008) describes Binswanger's attempts at integrating Heidegger, Husserl, and Freud as leading to rather curious and hybrid assemblages that reveal his ambivalence towards his sources.

<sup>362</sup> In his study of mania, Henri Ey (1954) states no one developed a deeper understanding of mania than Binswanger in his study of flight of ideas.

with flight of ideas, but in the existential way of being that it entails—what he calls the anthropological structure of mania.<sup>363</sup> Flight of ideas, according to Binswanger, was just one element of a broader structural whole, part of a particular mode of Dasein he referred to as manic being-in-the-world, a complex existential-phenomenological phenomenon (Vanclooster, 2001). Flight of ideas is thus “a manifestation of a unique mode of human existence” (Lanzoni, 2005, p. 39). Hence, for Binswanger manic-depressive insanity offers an answer to the question of what it means to be human.<sup>364</sup> He regarded it as “an extreme case of a universal human problem, the attempt to achieve a lasting state of self-integration and stability” (Izenberg, 1976, p. 220), and even “a manner of existing, emblematic of the modern way of being” (Lanzoni, 2004, p. 109).

Binswanger’s (1933/2000) investigation comprises three studies, starting from writings or notated speech of two patients.<sup>365</sup> In the first study, Binswanger analyzes a brief note from a patient complaining to the hospital kitchen staff. He notes how the patient’s thought processes appear to skip or jump certain elements, indicating that, for the patient, everything is close, everything is ‘at hand’<sup>366</sup>, there is no distance between people. The note assumes an immediateness and a proximity in both time and space. The second study comments on another letter from the same patient, addressed to a family member with a request.<sup>367</sup>

<sup>363</sup> As Lanzoni (2004) remarks, in this study, Binswanger does not pinpoint causes of the patient’s mania, nor does he provide any guidelines for treatment or therapeutic intervention.

<sup>364</sup> “In der Tat ist es unsere Meinung, dass das ‘*manisch-depressive Irresein*’ anthropologisch uns über ‘den Menschen’ nichts Neues lehrt, dass es uns vielmehr nur in *auffälligerer Form* und in *deutlicheren Extremen* eine Antwort gibt auf die Frage, was der Mensch ist” (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 141). “C’est en effet notre avis qu’anthropologiquement la ‘*folie maniaco-dépressive*’ ne nous apprend rien de nouveau sur ‘l’homme,’ mais plutôt qu’elle nous donne une réponse à la question du: ‘ce qu’est l’homme’ seulement *dans sa forme spectaculaire* et *dans des extrêmes plus clairs*” (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 206).

<sup>365</sup> In our studies in this dissertation we relied on interviews (clinical interviews in the case of the participants in the study in Chapter 2, and press interviews in the case of Berckmans and Melle in Chapter 3 and 4), and on written text (the writings of Berckmans and Melle) as a data source. Binswanger’s third study takes the nursing staff’s notations of a patient’s speech as a source, and thereby adds what is maybe the ultimate phenomenological source of information: eavesdropping. Psychology’s preferred source of information is people’s own conscious reflection on themselves, whether it is gathered by quantitative measures such as questionnaires or more qualitative measures such as interviews. We could situate this in the realm of the imaginary, with a firm focus on the ego-narrative. The psychoanalytic interest in writing as a data source, specifically concerning the study of psychosis (André, 2011; Maleval, 1994; see also Freud, 1911; Lacan, 2005/2016) adds a focus on the real of language, whether it is situated in the workings of the letter or in the jouissance of language. Binswanger’s relying on the nursing staff’s notations of a patient’s overheard speech—eavesdropping—as a source, bypasses this conscious reflection on oneself and is a more purely observational view on the workings of language in mania. Perhaps this is the most direct view of the symbolic (of language as an organizing—or in this case disorganizing—structure of relations).

<sup>366</sup> As in Heidegger’s ‘present-at-hand.’

<sup>367</sup> The patient asks a distant family member to send one of his sons to come live with the patient’s mother, since he can no longer take care of her himself.

Binswanger concludes from the letter that the patient believes everything is possible, and characterizes the world of the patient as one of optimism. For Binswanger, this optimism does not merely reflect a shift in mood but rather a fundamental shift in the patient's experience of the world and his relation to it. This affective tonality of optimism characterizes the patient's world and thinking style, rendering it inherently volatile and fleeting.

Binswanger's (1933/2000) third study starts from the nursing staff's notations regarding the speech of a 25-year-old man suffering from a confused and disorienting manic<sup>368</sup> flight of ideas.<sup>369</sup> While a reductionist psychiatric perspective might view these utterances as mere examples of manic deconstruction, random associations of sounds and the breakdown of language, focusing on the most fragmented parts of the discourse, Binswanger takes a different approach. He sees this as a discourse of a human being who is not merely talking but expressing himself<sup>370</sup>, and however disordered, disorganized or confused this speech may be, our aim should be to understand this new being in the world.<sup>371</sup> In Binswanger's view, the patient's discourse expresses two things: first, its content revolves around relevant existential themes for the patient, and second, it expresses a playful attitude characteristic of the manic way of being.

Binswanger (1933/2000) notes how the patient's statements contain recurring themes that are existentially relevant for the patient, displaying a unifying overall attitude and a solid

<sup>368</sup> In an addendum to the case, Binswanger remarks that the patient could also be considered a schizophrenic according to Bleuler's theory, yet this does not invalidate his remarks on the flight of ideas. Making a point about questionable diagnostics, Leader (2015) somewhat exaggerates this when he describes the remark as "a discreet appendix in which we learn that later events showed that he was in fact schizophrenic" (p. 130).

<sup>369</sup> To illustrate the patient's discourse, we include a fragment from these notations, first in Lanzoni's (2004) translation, then in the original German. "You are crazy, completely, completely crazy, no, no, you are not crazy, bum! You are right! That is right, but not correct, bum-bum, aha, soso, yes, yes, it's only me, only me, alone, e, a, o, u.' (His roommate came in, in order to see him, and was brought back to bed by the attendant, then it went on): 'What, you let yourself be led around by this idiot, this dummy? You are surely crazy! Hey hey, you are an ass, a meathead, a stupid dog—no, no you are not a stupid dog, but a poor dog, no, no, not a poor dog, but you are poor, you birdbrain, you barn-owl, bum-bum! Aha, it is right, that does good, aha, äh, e o i, that is beautiful, that is the most beautiful moment of my life.' (Then later): 'Thank God, only God, bum, only God alone. Aha, so it's right, no, it is not, thank God.' (The chatter often rose to a holler.)" (Lanzoni, 2004, pp. 113–114). "Du bist wahnsinnig, ganz ganz wahnsinnig, nein nein, Du bist nicht wahnsinnig, bum! Du hast recht! Das ist recht, aber nicht richtig, bum-bum, aha, soso, jaja, ich bin's nur, ich ganz allein, e, a, o, u.' ... 'Was, du lässt dich von diesem Blödi, diesem Schafskopf, bum, wegführen? Du bist ja wahnsinnig! He, du, du bist ein Esel, ein Rindvieh, ein dummer Hund—nein nein, du bist kein dummer Hund, du bist ein armer Hund, nee nee, auch kein armer Hund, kein Hund, aber arm bist du, du Uhu, du Schleiereule, bum-bum! Aha, so ist's recht, das tut gut, aha äh e o i das ist schön, das ist der schönste Augenblick meines Lebens.' ... 'Gott sei Dank, nur Gott, bum, nur Gott allein. Aha, so ist's recht—nein so nicht, Gott sei Dank.'" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 95).

<sup>370</sup> "Nicht nur *spricht*, sondern *sich ausspricht*" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 105).

<sup>371</sup> "Einem 'neuen Sein in der Welt'" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 104); "un 'nouvel être dans le monde'" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 149).

thematic structure. Instead of limiting our analysis to the linguistic statement itself, we should explore the thematic content beyond the statement. In Binswanger's perspective on flight of ideas, as long as there is some adherence to the rules of conceptual grammatical articulation, even in a looser and more elusive manner, we can still discern relevant themes, and we remain in the sphere of meaning and object.<sup>372</sup> In this particular case, Binswanger notes that the patient consistently returns to themes related to his family history and current relational crises<sup>373</sup>, then running away from these again.<sup>374</sup>

In addition to its thematic relevance, the manic flight of ideas displays the emergence of a playful attitude. Binswanger (1933/2000) states that when conformity to the rules or methods of conceptual grammatical articulation ceases altogether, we can no longer characterize it as flight of ideas, because at this point, there is no longer any discernible thought or speech, not even in a confused form, but a new phenomenon emerges: the playful manipulation of speech or sound elements.<sup>375</sup> Instead of using language as an instrument for thought, a stream of words or, more accurately, sounds, emerges as a plaything for existential joy. Here, the patient becomes completely absorbed in the sonorous structure of words, disregarding their meaning or signification. Binswanger describes this as a playful or ludic manipulation of sonorous elements; this no longer concerns thinking (i.e., the operation on logical significations or sensible expressions) but rather a ludic operation on sound material.<sup>376</sup> Binswanger formulates this as the receding of the domain of meaning and the object, the foregrounding of the act of enunciation, and the more or less pronounced transformation of sounds and phonetic

<sup>372</sup> Binswanger argues that the continuity of the inner life history and the psychological subject are maintained during a psychotic crisis, so biographical circumstances are relevant to our understanding.

<sup>373</sup> Such as: the suicide of his father (before the patient was born), his close relationship to his mother, and his recent affair with a married woman. For detailed discussions of the case, see Izenberg (1976) and Lanzoni (2004).

<sup>374</sup> Lanzoni (2004) notes how the patient's speech circles around the event of his father's suicide: "in sum, Binswanger characterized his patient's existence as comprising a circular or vortical movement: a hurried moving away (*Hinwegeilens*) from the central theme or problematic of his father's suicide, toward a playful dispersed attention to things around him, and then a return to his central concern (*Zurückkommens-auf*)" (p. 116).

<sup>375</sup> "Das blosse *Spiel* mit Sprech- oder Wortklangzeug" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 225); "le simple jeu avec l'outil langagier ou sonore" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 321).

<sup>376</sup> "An Stelle des Sprechens als eines Werkzeugs der Mitteilung tritt hier der Wort- oder Lautschwall als eines Spielzeugs der Daseinsfreude. Dieser Wortschwall hat dann mit Ideenflucht als solcher nichts mehr zu tun; denn hier handelt es sich nicht mehr um 'Ideen,' um Denken und Aussprechen oder Mitteilen von Gedachtem, sondern lediglich noch um ein Spielen mit dem Material der Laute" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 225). "A la place du parler compris comme un outil de communication, c'est le déluge de mots et de sons qui apparaît ici, comme un jouet de la joie existentielle. Ce déluge verbal n'a alors plus rien à voir avec la fuite des idées en tant que telle, car il ne s'agit plus d' 'idées,' il ne s'agit plus de penser et d'exprimer ou de communiquer des pensées, mais juste d'un jeu avec la matière sonore" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 321).

combinations (letters, syllables, and words) from being partial elements within the structure and ‘function’ of meaningful expression to becoming independent entities, independent playthings.<sup>377</sup> Instead of expressing meaning, the manic becomes preoccupied with playing with language.

Binswanger (1933/2000) follows his three studies with some general remarks on flight of ideas and the playfulness he discerned in it, which he considers characteristic for the manic way of being.<sup>378</sup> As he later states: “not only the thinking is flighty, but the entire form of life” (Binswanger, 1964/2012, p. 201). Binswanger (1933/2000) discusses several major characteristics, including a tonality of optimism and an existential festive joy. The manic individual takes everything lightly, is playful, and boastful or big-mouthed.<sup>379</sup> He describes the manic mode of being as: leaping, tumbling, floating, sliding, etc.<sup>380</sup> The festive optimistic mood is marked by haste, sliding over things, people and problems, and also harbors indifference, carelessness, letting go, sliding, slipping, etc.<sup>381</sup> Binswanger further discusses the temporal and spatial structure of manic existence. He describes a spatial expansion where everything is near and ‘at hand’ and a temporal quality of instantaneousness, suddenness, and speed. He further describes what he calls presentification, where time contracts to the simple present. In the next section, we will discuss the concept of time and relate Binswanger’s understanding of flight of ideas to the Lacanian outlook developed throughout this study.

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<sup>377</sup> “Das Zurücktreten der Sphäre der Bedeutung und des Gegenstandes, das Vortreten der Kundgabe und die mehr oder weniger ausgesprochene Verwandlung der Laute und Lautkomplexionen (Buchstaben, Silben und Worte) aus der Rolle eines Teilmoments innerhalb der Struktur und ‘Funktion’ des sinnvollen Ausdrucks in die Rolle einer selbständigen Sache, eines selbständigen Spiel-Zeugs” (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 127). “Le recul de la sphère de la signification et de l’objet, la mise en avant de la manifestation et la transformation plus ou moins prononcée des sons et des complexions de sons (lettres, syllabes et mots), du rôle d’un moment partiel à l’intérieur de la structure et ‘fonction’ de l’expression sensée au rôle d’une chose indépendante, d’outil indépendant pour le jeu [Spiel-Zeug]” (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 184).

<sup>378</sup> Lanzoni (2004) summarizes the arc of Binswanger’s study as going “from the analysis of the meaning of utterances to the broader expressions they conveyed (*Sichkundgebens*), and finally to the life-form (*Lebensform*) that produced them—the manic manner of existence” (p. 115).

<sup>379</sup> He calls manics “grossmaulige Menschen” (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 133) or “des hommes de grande gueule” (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 192).

<sup>380</sup> “*Springenden* (taumelnden, schwimmenden oder gleitenden) Modus des Daseins” (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 219). “[Le] mode *bondissant* (titubant, flottant ou glissant) de l’existence” (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 315).

<sup>381</sup> It is not only joy, Binswanger (1933/2000) also calls mania a demonic form of existence. He later formulates this as “running through the festive vertigo in existence, this lordly unbridled to do, singing dancing, jumping, skipping, there is a streak of the ‘demonic.’” (Binswanger, 1964/2012, p. 201).



### 3.3. Binswanger's Existential Time vs. Lacan's Time of the Signifying Chain

Binswanger (1933/2000) characterizes the manic way of being-in-the-world as a profound alteration of the temporal structure of psychic life.<sup>382</sup>

These patients live almost entirely in the present and to some degree still in the past, but no longer into the future. Where everything and everyone is 'handy' and 'present,' where distance is missing, there is no future either, but everything is played off 'in the present,' in the mere here and now. (Binswanger, 1964/2012, p. 199)

Binswanger (1933/2000) describes the manic individual as wandering in the mere present, both in life and in speech<sup>383</sup>, the manic merely *presents*.<sup>384</sup> Binswanger refers to Minkowski's expression of living in pure points of now.<sup>385</sup> Minkowski (1933/1970), in his seminal work *Lived Time*, considered alterations in phenomena of time essential to understanding psychopathological experiences:

What is lacking in our manic patient is unfolding in time. A person in a state of manic excitement lives only in the now, and this is a now which limits his contact with the environment; he has no present any more, since in general he no longer experiences 'unfolding in time.' (p. 294)

Martin et al. (2019) define Minkowski's 'unfolding in time' as "the way in which temporal experience is articulated into a past, present, and future" (p. 75).<sup>386</sup>

<sup>382</sup> Fuchs (2019) notes that, in the phenomenological description of mood disorders, "the dimension of time has always played a particular role, pointing to the close connection of mood disorders with the temporality of existence" (p. 617). Perhaps it is remarkable, considering the importance the aspect of time has in the phenomenological account of mania, that we did not encounter time earlier in our investigation. Looking back, we can note how the lack of awareness of time during a manic episode is mentioned—but merely mentioned, not elaborated on—by two participants (Annie and Frank), how Demeyer (2011) notes that Berckmans (1998) disrupts the system of the indication of time, and how Melle makes several comments on time. "Time was out of joint, and I had fallen out of it, out of time, and landed in the cracks" (Melle, 2016/2023, p. 66). See also Melle's (2018) speech for some of his thoughts on time, and its passing, with the straight sentence "Es ist Zeit" repeated like a mantra throughout.

<sup>383</sup> "... er in den Sprach- wie in allen sonstigen Handlungen sich in der Gegenwart, präziser in lauter Gegenwarten, *herumtreibt*" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 108). "Dans les actes langagières comme dans tous les autres, il vagabonde dans le présent" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 156).

<sup>384</sup> "Der Kranke gegenwärtigt nur" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 184). "Le malade ne fait que présenter" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 268).

<sup>385</sup> "Der Kranke lebe nur in lauter 'Jetztpunkten'" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 184). s"Le malade vit que de purs 'points de maintenant'" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 268).

<sup>386</sup> Martin et al. (2019) report on an interesting phenomenological study investigating and nuancing some of these phenomenological time-related claims. Their conclusion is: "that our data effectively rebut ... that persons in conditions of mania live without awareness of past or future. The participants in our study ... did not 'live only in the now.' This same evidence casts doubt on ... the hypothesis of a 'shriveling' or 'narrowing' of manic

For Lacan, the experience of time, or the alterations in the unfolding of time, are secondary phenomena. Incidentally, in a book review of Minkowski's *Lived Time*, Lacan (1935), disagreeing with Minkowski, remarks that the disturbances of lived time are too secondary in nature within morbid mental structures to be used otherwise than as secondary elements in a natural classification of these structures.<sup>387</sup> In a Lacanian outlook, the relation to the symbolic and the workings of language generate the experience of time. More specifically, we can connect temporality to the workings of the signifying chain: the process of anticipation and retroaction tie the signifying chain to time. Without anticipation and retroaction, without quilting points, without rhythm in speech, there is no temporality, no time.<sup>388</sup>

In Lacan's (2004/2014) characterization of mania as being delivered to "the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (p. 336), *infinite* suggests timelessness, and could be considered as another way of saying *eternal present*. As André (1993) remarks, the workings of the quilting point fixate the signification of discourse and introduce temporality in relation to the signifier. Soler (2002) describes the manic signifying chain as a mere succession of singular elements, and states the same thing happens at the level of time, where we encounter a mere succession of singular moments, which she relates to phenomenology's 'mere present' or 'points of now.' Vanclooster (2001) relates the leveling or equalizing<sup>389</sup> of temporality to the metonymic sequencing of single signifiers. In Soler's (2002) understanding, all phenomenological observations and descriptions of manic time such as the timelessness, circular time, eternal present, momentary existence, etc. describe nothing other than being stuck in a state of suspension between anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain, which accounts for the absence of historical time and historicization. Similarly, Sauvagnat (1997) suggests that the phenomenological literature on disorders of temporality in mania actually describes the manic impossibility of interrupting the signifying chain and should be

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temporal experience to 'enpresenting.' By contrast ... patterns we identified suggest that there is indeed a distinctive form of temporal experience at work in mania, and that this temporal structure has important consequences—for example, regarding awareness of illness, practical reasoning, and awareness of risk" (pp. 86–87).

<sup>387</sup> At that time, before his *retour à Freud* and his linguistic turn, Lacan (1935) formulates this further as that, in order to make sense of morbid passions, we need to understand their structural organization by elucidating the subject's affective history and dialectic relations to others rather than focusing on lived time as an isolated characteristic.

<sup>388</sup> Another way Lacan explores the relation between the symbolic, time, and the subject is in his 1945 text *Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty* (Lacan, 1966/2006) where time is an essential element for the constitution of the subject (for a discussion see Hoens, 2022).

<sup>389</sup> Binswanger's (1933/1992) term is "Nivellierung" (p. 31); "nivellement" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 46).

read along these lines. Cottet (in Miller, 2008) suggests that with the help of the means of philosophy, the phenomenological descriptions of mood disorders as disturbances in temporal experience actually managed to grasp something of a symbolic structure that is not in its place. Christaki-Gadbin (2003) considers the temporalization of the signifying chain to be at the root of the constitution of time.

The flight of ideas, a phenomenon at the level of language and speech, not only results in the eclipse of meaning and the leveling of discourse, but also brings about a particular temporality. Manic speech does not relate to the rhythm of subjective punctuation as a formative element in the relationship with others and time. The absence of structuring punctuation in manic utterances, affects signification and discourse: no point is made, no signification is formed, no discourse—in the sense of an act by a subject—is created. The lack of punctuation equally affects temporality: statements are chained to one another without pause, without anticipation, without questions awaiting answers. This affects the dimension of subjective historicity, revealing the manic's impossibility of inscribing the subject as a product of historical and historicizing events. At the same time the manic seems to embody the instant. Since nothing punctuates his speech or subjectively divides his discourse, the manic himself embodies the time he does not inhabit as a divided subject. In Christaki-Gadbin's (2003) understanding, the manic individual becomes the plaything of non-vectorized time and slides metonymically along the signifying chain, glides from one word to another, from one state to another, embodying in some way the lost continuity.

This interpretation can serve as a hinge for connecting Lacan's (2004/2014) understanding of mania as the ludic metonymy of the signifying chain and Binswanger's (1933/2000) view of mania as wandering in the mere present.

Interestingly, words as sliding and gliding, which Binswanger (1933/2000) characterizes as the manic way of being and relates to existential joy, are in a Lacanian outlook described as characterizing not the subject but the signifying chain and are not related to joy but to horror and despair. Binswanger (1933/1992) refers to the leaping or sliding way of being<sup>390</sup> and connects the festive joy of being to letting go, sliding<sup>391</sup>; he refers to a joyful optimistic mood

<sup>390</sup> "Der springende oder gleitende Modus der menschlichen Daseins" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 217). "Le mode bondissant ou glissant de l'existence humaine" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 313).

<sup>391</sup> "So weit festlicher Daseinstaukel herrscht, herrscht ... *laisser-aller, glisser*" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 190, French in original). "Si règne l'ivresse de l'existence, alors pareillement règne ... *le laisser aller, le glisser*" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 276). Perhaps Binswanger's *festlicher Daseinstaukel*, the manic's *festive fuddle of*

with rushing from and sliding over things, people, problems.<sup>392</sup> Earlier we discussed Lacan's (1966/2006) description of the metonymic movement of the signifying chain as "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (p. 419) or the "indefinite sliding of signification" (p. 681), and of mania as being delivered "without any possibility of freedom, to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (Lacan, 2004/2014, p. 336).<sup>393</sup> Christaki-Gadbin (2003) describes mania as an incessant slippage or gliding of the verb<sup>394</sup> and the manic as the plaything of non-vectorized time, sliding metonymically along the signifying chain.<sup>395</sup> The manic glides from one word to another, from one state to another.<sup>396</sup> Miller (in Miller, 2008) describes the failing of stabilizing identifications in mania with "it slides"<sup>397</sup> and refers to the infernal metonymic sliding of mania.<sup>398</sup>

Clearly, in a Lacanian view, the agency is situated in language (with the subject slipping away from the sliding signifying chain), while Binswanger, on the other hand, situates agency in the manic subject (leaping and sliding through life). The same thing goes for the ludic aspect. For Binswanger, the manic is playing with language, for Lacan, the manic is the plaything of language. For Binswanger (1933/2000) in flight of ideas, the manic is playing with language, or is occupied with a playful or ludic manipulation of sonorous elements. For Lacan, it is the metonymy of the signifying chain that is ludic, not the subject. Czermak (1998/2012) states there is nothing ludic for the subject, the subject is not playing, but rather is the plaything of language. These differences point to a rather divergent view on the relationship between language and subject.

### 3.4. Language & Subject

Some common elements can be discerned in Binswanger's phenomenological investigation of flight of ideas and the Lacanian view of mania as flight of signifiers developed throughout

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*being*, is the manic counterpart to what Lacan (1966/2006) calls the melancholic's "pain of existence" (p. 655), "la douleur d'exister" (Lacan, 1966, p. 777).

<sup>392</sup> "Dem festlichen Stimmungsoptimismus mit seinem *Hinwegeilen* oder *Hinweggleiten* über Dinge, Menschen und Probleme" (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 190). "L'optimisme de tonalité festif avec sa *précipitation* ou son *glissement* sur les choses, les hommes et les problèmes" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 277).

<sup>393</sup> See Chapter 1 for multiple references to Lacan's slipping and sliding of the signifying chain.

<sup>394</sup> "Un glissement incessant du verbe" (Christaki-Gadbin, 2003, p. 399).

<sup>395</sup> "Il est alors le jouet du temps non vectorisé et glisse métonymiquement sur la chaîne signifiante" (Christaki-Gadbin, 2003, p. 400).

<sup>396</sup> "Le maniaque ... glisse d'un mot à l'autre, d'un état à un autre" (Christaki-Gadbin, 2003, p. 401).

<sup>397</sup> "Ça glisse" (Miller, in Miller, 2008, p. 167).

<sup>398</sup> "Le glissement métonymique infernal" (Miller, in Miller, 2008, p. 167).

this dissertation. They share a view that does not primarily characterize mania as mood<sup>399</sup> or as increased energy, and investigate mania starting from manic language.<sup>400</sup> In the previous section, we discussed the notion of time as a point of connection between these two perspectives, linking the Lacanian anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain to the phenomenological notion of time as lived time or temporal existence. There are, however, irreconcilable differences in conceptualization of the subject<sup>401</sup>, and specifically its relationship to language<sup>402</sup>, that preclude a further integration of these views.

In Binswanger's view, human subjectivity cannot be understood apart from language, the subject exists in a shared world of language and it is through language that being is articulated (Frie, 1997). Binswanger (1946/1958) states:

the phenomena to be interpreted are largely language phenomena. We know that the content of existence can nowhere be more clearly seen or more securely interpreted than through language; because it is in language that our world-designs actually ensconce and articulate themselves and where, therefore, they can be ascertained and communicated. (p. 200)

However, Binswanger also maintains that subjectivity can never be entirely reduced to language. According to Binswanger "language is the manifestation of the prelinguistic awareness we have of ourselves and the world around us. The experience of world precedes its articulation in language" (Frie, 2003, p. 145).<sup>403</sup> For Binswanger, the subject expresses his

<sup>399</sup> As Eydoux (in Miller, 2008) remarks, Binswanger's rejection of the conception of mood as causal element aligns well with a psychoanalytic approach.

<sup>400</sup> Lanzoni (2005) states: "Binswanger interpreted the rambling, disconnected speech and writing of his manic patients neither as a simple sign of psychiatric abnormality, nor as a thought disturbance. Instead, the patient's language use demonstrated how she both shaped and inhabited a textured, palpable world—it was the signature of her existence" (p. 25).

<sup>401</sup> Strosberg (2022) states there is a crucial distinction between the psychoanalytic divided subject and the phenomenological unified subject as being-in-the world; Delefosse (1998) calls these subject theories radically incompatible.

<sup>402</sup> Some reciprocal critique is illustrative. From a phenomenological standpoint, Frie (2003) considers Lacan's understanding of subjectivity as overemphasizing language and failing to account for matters as: prelinguistic and nonverbal experience, implicit self-awareness or bodily sense, and embodied being. (In defense of Lacan we can note how Frie (2003) refers to Lacan's *Écrits* (from 1966) and *Seminar II* (from 1964), so does not take into account Lacan's later developments which counter some of these critiques and emphasize elements beyond language.) From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, Edelheit (1967) remarks on Binswanger that "a good part of the strangeness and obscurity of the existential terminology arises from a failure to understand the role played by language in psychic structure and function" (p. 89). Cottet (2008) attributes some of Binswanger's explanations to a lack of understanding of the *jouissance* of language.

<sup>403</sup> Frie (1997) further points to elements in Binswanger's Heideggerian view as "immediate, prepropositional experience" (p. 128), "the prepropositional disclosure of world through *Befindlichkeit* and understanding" (p.

being using language, which he views as “an expressive sign of the nature of embodied existence” (Lanzoni, 2005, p. 26). So, in Binswanger’s perspective, the subject precedes its articulation in language.

Binswanger opposed the view of man as determined solely by drives and inner conflicts (Delefosse, 1998) and would also oppose a Lacanian view of the subject as an effect of the signifier. In Binswanger’s view, the subject is always the active agent. He states that “the subject is not just a passive object of language, but actively engages in the disclosure of world” (Frie, 2003, p. 118). Leoni (2019) notes how Lacan’s subject theory, which situates the subject as an effect of the workings of the signifying chain, grounds the subject in mechanical, impersonal, and meaningless aspects of the workings of language<sup>404</sup>—a view that clashes with Binswanger’s Romantic and humanist view of the subject (Frie, 2003). Here, we can point to Lacan’s (1966/2006) notion of mental automatism.<sup>405</sup> For Lacan, this concept points to language as an autonomous force, which is particularly relevant for his conceptualization of psychosis.<sup>406</sup> His use of mental automatism and the related notion of elementary phenomena allows Lacan to critique a more ‘understanding’ phenomenological view of psychosis, such as Jaspers’ (see Vanheule, 2018; Wachsberger, 2007).

Based on Binswanger’s view on the subject, his primary interest lies in the being behind language. When describing the task of finding the principle of order in the manic’s fragmented speech, Binswanger (1964/2012) states: “this principle, however, is no longer to be found within the verbal disclosure, the meaningful expression, or even thought itself, but only in the *entire form of life*, in the pervasively up-in-the-air, leaping, skipping life style of these patients” (p. 200). This is why Binswanger (1933/2000) states that we need to look behind the linguistic manifestations of mania to understand its order and structure.<sup>407</sup> In

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132), “the prelinguistic experience of world” (p. 132) as necessary prior conditions for articulation in language.

<sup>404</sup> Leoni (2019) states: “meaning emerges by itself: experience does not need an underlying subject as its foundation, nor does it need a supervising consciousness or an unconscious that functions as another form of consciousness. If the unconscious plays a causal role, for Lacan, this causality should be seen as almost mechanical and blind in nature, as a law that generates certain effects not through a humanistic unconscious, but rather through a totally impersonal and mechanical one” (p. 1049).

<sup>405</sup> See also Chapter 3, Section 4.1 and Chapter 5, Section 4.

<sup>406</sup> In the context of this dissertation, we could understand *mental automatism* as equivalent to *metonymy*.

<sup>407</sup> “... der Ordnung und Gestalthaftigkeit die wir ‘hinter’ den sprachlichen Kundgaben unserer Kranken vermuten zu dürfen glaubten” (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 142). “... de l’ordre et de la structure que nous avons cru pouvoir supposer ‘derrière’ les manifestations langagières de notre malade” (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 216). “... die Analyse nicht auf die sprachlichen Kundgaben als solche zu beschränken, sondern *hinter* dieselben zurückzugehen und den Schwerpunkt der Untersuchung auf die Analyse der *Themen* zu verlegen” (Binswanger, 1933/1992, p. 148). “Il ne faut pas limiter l’analyse à la manifestation langagière en tant que telle mais qu’il faut

contrast, for Lacan, the assumption is that the structure of language accounts for experience, including affect and bodily experience.<sup>408</sup>

Binswanger's (1933/2000) project started with the complaint addressed at a psychiatric, mechanical understanding of flight of ideas, which did not explain it in terms of psychology and biography or account for the will and intentionality of the subject. Surely, similar complaints could be formulated against our Lacanian view of the derailing metonymy of the signifying chain. Binswanger's answer to the complaint of a mechanistic understanding of pathological subjectivity versus an understanding of sane subjectivity based on psychology and intentionality is to suppose will and intentionality behind the flight of ideas (the thematic unity he observes in the manic utterances and the interpretation of these as playing with language). On the other hand, the Lacanian outlook addresses the division between insane and sane by considering all subjectivity as the effect of the mechanical workings of the signifying chain.

However, the discussion between Binswanger and Lacan should not be reduced to a caricatural opposition of the manic as the passive object of a mechanical, associative, metonymic, nonsensical stream of signifiers versus the manic as expressing his joyful mode of being through the playful manipulation of sonorous elements. Lacan's theorizing is concerned with how subjectivity arises from the impersonal, mechanical, meaningless workings of the signifier. In this sense, as we developed in Chapter 5, the problem of manic language, in Lacan's later view considered a manifestation of language, refers to the universal problem of the encounter with language for every speaking being and, as such, reveals something of what Binswanger would call a common problem of existence.<sup>409</sup>

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revenir *derrière* celle-ci et déplacer le centre de gravité de l'étude vers l'analyse des *thèmes*" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 216).

<sup>408</sup> For example, in *Television*, Lacan (1974/1987) states that affects need to be approached via the body, a body that is affected by the structure of language: "these affects ... the need to approach them via the body, a body which is, I say, affected only by the structure" (pp. 25–26); "man ... a structure, that of language ... carves up his body" (p. 10); "Affect, therefore, befalls a body whose essence it is said is to dwell in language" (p. 27).

<sup>409</sup> For Binswanger (1933/2000), the manic condition reveals something of the inauthenticity and fragmentation of the modern self. For Binswanger "the patient exhibits the primary traits of the inauthentic modern: an awareness restricted to the present, a continual distractibility and engagement in extensive idle talk, and an unsteady and inconstant self. ... The pathology lay in an inability to achieve authenticity through acts of integration, reflection, and living out of one's center" (Lanzoni, 2004, p. 111). Another way to connect Binswanger's view of mania as revealing something of the modern self is Miller's (1993/2002) assertion that mania "goes hand in hand with the glimpsed inexistence of the Other" (p. 20).

### 3.5. The Assumption of Meaning

Binswanger's (1933/2000) study assumes that the patient's speech expresses two things. First, it expresses a playful attitude characteristic of the manic way of being. Second, its content bears witness to relevant existential themes for the patient.

The first point revolves around whether we should consider manic language as the expression of the manic playing with language or of language playing with the manic. Whether the subject is playing or the plaything is probably endlessly debatable and the answer to the question of who is playing with whom most likely depends on one's basic assumptions concerning the relationship between subject and language. It's a theoretical point of contention with strong positions: in accordance with Binswanger, Ey (1954) qualifies mania as playing and enjoying, bingeing and feasting<sup>410</sup>, Soler (2002) strongly opposes this, stating that the manic is not a player nor a sensualist.<sup>411</sup> In accordance with Lacan's (2004/2014) idea of being delivered to the signifier "without any possibility of freedom" (p. 336), Czermak (1998/2012) firmly states that the subject is not playing with but rather is the plaything of language.<sup>412</sup> Additionally, there is the matter of degree to consider as mania can range from hypomanic playfulness to being overwhelmed by a manic episode. Similarly, the metonymy is not always pure. As we pointed out in Chapter 1, Lacan's (2004) statement is actually: *at times* or *sometimes* without any possibility of freedom.<sup>413</sup>

The second point pertains to the existentially relevant content of the flight and needs to be reckoned with from Lacan's (2004/2014) point of view of mania as being delivered "to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (p. 336). Binswanger (1933/2000) describes the patient's manic speech as a movement of running from and sliding over certain thematic elements and continuously returning to these same themes.<sup>414</sup> Psychoanalytical

<sup>410</sup> "Car être maniaque, c'est *jouer* et *jouir*" (Ey, 1954, p. 93), "le maniaque en effet est en fête: il fait la noce et la foire" (p. 94).

<sup>411</sup> "La formule est belle, mais le maniaque n'est ni un joueur, ni un jouisseur" (Soler, 2002, p. 87).

<sup>412</sup> "C'est lui qui est jouet, qui est joué" (Czermak, 1998/2012, p. 170).

<sup>413</sup> The French original: "ce qui le livre, quelquefois sans aucune possibilité de liberté, à la métonymie pure, infinie et ludique, de la chaîne signifiante" (Lacan, 2004, p. 388) is not completely captured in "this delivers him, in a way without any possibility of freedom, to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain" (Lacan, 2004/2014, p. 336).

<sup>414</sup> Binswanger's (1933/2000) analysis in the third case study shows how the patient's speech circles around relevant existential themes, in a sequence of "a hurried moving away (*Hinwegeilens*) from the central theme or problematic of his father's suicide, toward a playful dispersed attention to things around him, and then a return to his central concern (*Zurückkommens-auf*)" (Lanzoni, 2004, p. 116) showing how "there was yet another organizing principle than play in this confused array of words—a set of concerns, questions, and moral puzzlement that centered on the critical event of the patient's father's suicide. The patient's speech circled



observations do not dismiss this thematic, existential relevance of the manic utterances. Cottet (2008) points out that as a subject cycles through manic and depressive phases, the same signifiers return, and the same complaints appear. Melman (2011) notes that flight of ideas can be considered a permanent dialogue of the manic with himself or of his thoughts with themselves, as if, within what appears to be a flight, there is actually a permanent reprise of each thought by what would be its opposite, in a kind of incessant to-and-fro. Leader (2013) states: “Manic subjects don’t just follow words freely since they tend to end up at the same ideas or words or significations, as if led back to the same points on a map” (p. 19) and points out that “mania was never a purely random flow of words, but had a real coherence and structure” (pp. 19–20).

Yet, within psychoanalytic theorizing on mania, we encounter claims stating that manic language is not discourse, as it does not inscribe the subject in discourse and that in manic excitation, the subject completely disappears (Vieira, 1993). Others state that the manic does not really say anything, informs on nothing, doesn’t reveal anything, conveys no message, is allocated no place in his speech, and is simply being devoured by language (Czermak, 1998/2012). Similarly, some argue that manic speech does not form a product of communication, and is merely an endless slippage of the verb, without forming signification, and is not organized into discourse as an act by a subject (Christaki-Gadbin, 2003).

These statements, in our view, do not imply that the signifiers being chained up have no meaning for the subject or that they are random, but rather that the way they are connected and their metonymic flow, without anticipation and retroaction, does not construct a meaning and does not produce a subject. Of course, while the manic uses words and phrases that are relevant to him—although surely not always—he is not defined by his speech, nor does he connect these words in a meaningful way.

For example, Binswanger (1933/2000) clearly demonstrates the thematic existential relevance of his patient’s seemingly incoherent ramblings. However, in doing so, he also demonstrates that the patient is not the one acknowledging or assuming this meaning; it is Binswanger who does so. Therefore, even if manic speech conveys thematically and existentially relevant words, phrases and thoughts, it is only afterwards, in a retroactive process, that meaning is assumed and sense can be made out of these expressions.

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around this event” (Lanzoni, 2004, p. 116).

As we discussed in Chapter 2 and 4, in the wake of mania, a reconstructive process of identity construction or narrative rebuilding is necessary. Thomas Melle describes in detail the work he needed to engage in to reconstruct the history of his manic exploits and to what extent he needed to rely on a work of fiction to do so. In a similar vein, the participants in our interview study often struggled with how to make sense of their manic talk and behavior. If participants were able to attribute some meaning and sense to their mania, this was always in retrospect. Attitudes toward the manic experience varied, ranging from looking back at it as the expression of some personal truth, to feeling shame and guilt about statements and actions in which one does not recognize oneself.<sup>415</sup> We can connect the retroactive process of sense-making to Lacan's (1966/2006) notion of the assumption of one's history.

In his seminal 1953 text *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*<sup>416</sup>, Lacan (1966/2006) states that the basis of psychoanalysis as conceptualized by Freud is the "assumption by the subject of his history" (p. 213).<sup>417</sup> In Bruce Fink's *Translator Endnotes*, he explains the different connotations of the French *assumer*: "assumer corresponds to the English 'to assume' in the sense of to take on (as in 'to assume a responsibility'), but also implies taking in, adopting, incorporating, owning, dealing with, and coming to terms with" (Fink, in Lacan, 2006, p. 759). The notion of the assumption of one's history is referred to in the context to the neurotic's relation to his or her history within the setting of a psychoanalytic cure, but could also be applied to the retroactive process in the

<sup>415</sup> Mary explains standing up for herself at work in a manic episode: "in my mania, I know I said and did some things, but these were based on truths, and maybe somewhat exaggerated and less, well, diplomatic and all that, but in my perception, those were truths, that wasn't just something I pulled out of thin air." She states: "I remember very well what I did ... I installed myself on his desk and started blurting out all wrongs and mishaps I perceived, and there was a lot of truth to it, because I have, in my opinion, I think the things that happen in a manic episode, at least for me, these were all supported by truth, it wasn't just anything, there was always an element of truth to it." She adds: "I think, even now that I'm looking back on it, that it was based on truths." Annie still wonders what to make of her manic experience, whether it pointed her in the direction of some spiritual truth, or if it was just a neurologically explainable psychotic symptom. Olga talks about the guilt and the deep shame in the aftermath of a manic episode: "very ashamed because I brought myself in situations where, other people were able to see me like, I am not like, no, it is not me, well, actually I am rather introverted and then I become the other extreme, extroverted and, shameless and how do you say it, approaching people and overly social ... and then I'm like what will people think, and how must it have looked, and then I'm so ashamed. Well that just goes to show, it's not behavior you choose, because why would someone consciously do something like that? Well, come on, really, am I a decent person?"

<sup>416</sup> *Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse* (Lacan, 1966).

<sup>417</sup> The full quote and its original are: "This assumption by the subject of his history, insofar as it is constituted by speech addressed to another, is clearly the basis of the new method Freud called psychoanalysis" (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 213); "C'est bien cette assumption par le sujet de son histoire, en tant qu'elle est constituée par la parole adressée à l'autre, qui fait le fond de la nouvelle méthode à quoi Freud donne le nom de psychanalyse" (Lacan, 1966, p. 257).

wake of mania. The task of retroactively reckoning with one's history is particularly relevant for mania. To become the subject of mania, of one's manic exploits and manic speech, these need to be assumed, as in: taken on, taken in, adopted, incorporated, owned, dealt with and come to terms with. Leader (2013) pleads for a more humane approach to manic depression, an approach "which offers the manic-depressive person the chance to assume—however slowly, however painfully—what can be assumed of their history, and to find a way to live with what can't" (p. 88). This was relevant for the participants of our interview study, who achieved this, to varying degrees, through the adoption of a bipolar identity narrative, and was part of the reconstructive and retrospective work Thomas Melle engaged in.<sup>418</sup>

As a final remark linking this back to Binswanger we can connect Lacan's notion of assumption to Binswanger's idea of authenticity. In his study of flight of ideas, Binswanger (1933/2000) demonstrated "that the manic style of being, which at first seemed to be a merely degraded form of existence, exhibited a complex existential structure" (Lanzoni, 2004, p. 117), yet Binswanger also described the manic way of being of his patient as inauthentic.<sup>419</sup> Lanzoni (2004) summarizes Binswanger's view of authenticity as "one's ability to actively take hold of, and integrate, one's experience; the temporal and spatial qualities of experience; and certain psychological conceptions of family life" (p. 119–120), and as "an act of gathering the self from its everyday dispersion, and taking hold of the existential meanings of one's life" (p. 126). With some effort we can connect this taking hold and integrating one's experience to Lacan's notion of the assumption of one's history and find some agreement on the existential challenges mania provokes, regardless of whether these challenges are expressed through a playful or ludic manipulation of sonorous elements or are provoked by being delivered to the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain.

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<sup>418</sup> See Chapter 4, Section 3.4 for a discussion of Melle's assumption of his illness and his history.

<sup>419</sup> Fortunately, a discussion of Binswanger's notion of authenticity is beyond the scope of our discussion here. See Stephensen & Henriksen (2017) for a discussion of Binswanger's adoption of the Heideggerian notion of *Eigentlichkeit*.

## 4. Therapeutic Implications

### 4.1. The Role of Psychotherapy?

Throughout this dissertation, we encountered different paradigms of treatment. First of all, there was the psychiatric treatment by medication. Both writers discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, and all of the participants in Chapter 2, considered medication an important part of their treatment.<sup>420</sup> The second important treatment strategy we encountered is the route of identification, becoming an expert of one's condition, as is discussed in Chapter 2.<sup>421</sup> This psychological strategy is related to the psychiatric route since it often entails adhering to prescribed medication and lifestyle routines. Both these strategies, medication and identification, do not promote the invention or creation of singular, creative strategies. The third type of treatment we encountered is the invention or creation of something new. Here we can point to Melle's and Berckmans' singular language treatment and Melle's development of a new writing style and artistic creed with his *new realism*, in particular. We interpret the latter as the invention of a new metonymy in response to the derailing metonymy of mania.<sup>422</sup> This third strategy is in line with the psychoanalytic point of view and its focus on inventing singular solutions for singular problems.<sup>423</sup>

We can ask the question: what is the role of psychotherapy in this constellation of medication, identification and creation?

If we turn to our interviews, remarkably, only a few participants considered psychotherapy an important part of their recovery. Most attach more importance to psychiatric consultations and to eventually being diagnosed as bipolar than to any psychotherapeutic encounters or trajectories. Some participants mention psychotherapies as part of hospitalization (Annie, George, Luke) or state having been in therapy without seeming to attach much importance to

<sup>420</sup> All but two participants were currently under psychiatric care and taking medication (Annie and Peggy were not, but had been in the past).

<sup>421</sup> Exemplified by the large number of experts-by-experience in our sample.

<sup>422</sup> See also Chapter 4, Section 4 for a discussion on the *sinthome*.

<sup>423</sup> To be clear: neither of these two writers has ever been in psychoanalysis or in psychoanalytic therapy. To our knowledge, both mostly relied on hospitalizations and psychiatric consultations for treatment. Melle is even very dismissive about therapy, so we in no way want to turn him into a proponent of psychoanalysis. Melle (2016/2023) mentions a "narcissistic therapist" (p. 182)—"mein selbstverliebter Therapeut" (Melle, 2016, p. 201)—to whom he didn't return after the therapist failed to notice the rope marks on his neck after a suicide attempt. Melle (2016/2023) describes psychoanalysis "and other psychobabble or silent treatments" (p. 182) as "a massaging of the soul" for people that "had no problems, but ... took them very seriously" (p. 182).

it (Annie, Cindy, Rita) or are even dismissive of what they consider ‘merely talking’ (Nina, Luke). Some mention a long therapeutic relationship to a psychiatrist (Frank, Luke). Bea describes having had a bad experience with a therapist that did not recognize her diagnosis, Ellen considers the group meetings in a patient organization as her therapy, and both are on the lookout for a therapist with specific bipolar experience. For a few of our participants psychotherapy was a relevant factor in their recovery (Frank, Keira, Mary, Olga, Tori).<sup>424</sup>

To further consider the role of psychotherapy in the treatment of bipolar disorder, we turn to some current research literature followed by a section discussing the psychoanalytic literature on treating bipolar disorder.

## 4.2. Current Views on the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of Bipolar Disorder

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, in developing a Lacanian view on mania as a phenomenon of language, we encountered and discussed a number of strategies for treatment and recovery. In this section, we consider some therapeutic implications of our studies and situate these within a broader discussion on the status of psychotherapy for manic depression or bipolar disorder. We do not attempt a review of psychotherapy research and treatment guidelines, but merely wish to relate our findings and the psychoanalytic perspective to some of the current views on psychotherapeutic approaches.

In the introduction we pointed to some of the impasses of a Freudian understanding of mania, and of the post-Freudian developments in its wake. Impasses in a psychoanalytic understanding of mania have led to difficulties in orienting therapeutic treatment within a psychoanalytic framework. Some of these difficulties are particular to the application of a psychoanalytic understanding to manic states—we will get to this next—but some of these difficulties reflect broader issues concerning the treatment of mania, manic depression or bipolar disorder. The question of what exactly is therapy for bipolar disorder or what it aims at, transcends the particulars of psychoanalytic treatment.

Kalin (2020) points out that despite advances in understanding and treating bipolar disorder, there is still “much to be improved upon regarding their treatment” (p. 647) and

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<sup>424</sup> Although Mary considers what she calls her self-therapy (i.e., educating herself on bipolar disorder) since her diagnosis as her most important therapy; Olga mainly credits her recovery to transcranial magnetic stimulation, and Tori considers the sessions of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy to be her most helpful therapy.

according to Carvalho et al. (2020), “the diagnosis and treatment of bipolar disorder remain, to a large extent, subjective clinical exercises” (p. 64). For a long time, medication was the main course of treatment for bipolar disorder and it remains an important factor of treatment.<sup>425</sup> Despite pharmacotherapy, relapse is common, episodes are often recurrent (Vieta et al., 2013), and morbidity and psychosocial impairment often persist (Reinares et al., 2014). This has led to an increase in attention to psychological interventions. Currently, most treatment guidelines include some form of psychosocial intervention (Vieta et al., 2009), usually adjunctive to medication (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Miklowitz et al., 2020).

In recent years<sup>426</sup>, there has been an increased interest in psychological interventions for bipolar disorders (Kupka et al., 2015), and “a proliferation of randomized, controlled trials of psychological therapies specifically developed for bipolar disorders added to routine medication” (Lam et al., 2009, p. 474).<sup>427</sup> Kupka et al. (2015) state that there is now evidence supporting the claim that psychosocial and psychological interventions can improve symptoms and reduce hospitalizations in people with bipolar disorder. In a systematic review and meta-analysis of psychological interventions for adults with bipolar disorder, Oud et al. (2016) conclude that there is evidence that psychological interventions are effective in reducing relapse rates and hospital admissions. In a review, Swartz & Swanson (2014) report that several “bipolar disorder-specific psychotherapies, when added to medication for the treatment of bipolar disorder, consistently show advantages over medication alone on measures of symptom burden and risk of relapse” (p. 1). The consensus is that psychotherapy, when added to pharmacotherapy, is helpful and contributes to a better outcome (i.e., less relapse) (Miklowitz et al., 2020; Reinares et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2007; Vieta et al., 2009), particularly when it is specifically tailored to bipolar disorder (Lam et al., 2009; Swartz & Swanson, 2014).<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Torrey & Knable (2002) consider medication “the single most important aspect of the treatment of manic-depressive illness” (p. 137). Goodwin & Jamison (2007) consider medication to be the standard treatment for bipolar disorder, and tend to view other interventions such as psychoeducation and psychotherapy as mainly supporting medication adherence. A different point of view is Havens & Ghaemi’s (2005) discussion of how the “therapeutic alliance can be seen as a mood stabilizing treatment in patients with bipolar disorder” (p. 137).

<sup>426</sup> Most authors situate this shift somewhere around the turn of the century (e.g., Kupka et al., 2015; Lam et al., 2009).

<sup>427</sup> This can be considered a response to previous laments about lack of studies on the role and usefulness of psychotherapy (e.g., Colom et al., 1998; Jones, 2004).

<sup>428</sup> Lam et al. (2009) conclude that “psychotherapy specific to bipolar disorder is effective in preventing or delaying relapses in bipolar disorders” (p. 479).

Specific forms of therapeutic interventions being considered effective are cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychoeducation<sup>429</sup>, interpersonal and social rhythm therapy<sup>430</sup>, and family intervention<sup>431</sup> (Reinares et al., 2014). There is some variation between studies and recommendations.<sup>432</sup> For example, the current multidisciplinary guideline for treating bipolar disorders in the Netherlands (Kupka et al., 2015) recommends following evidence-based interventions with well-documented effects on preventing relapse, stabilizing mood and improving depression: psychoeducation, cognitive-behavioral therapy, family-focused treatment, interpersonal and social rhythm therapy, and mindfulness.

Some critical nuance is necessary. Koenders & Steenhuis (2022) note how the development of psychotherapy as a treatment form for bipolar disorder is relatively still in its infancy. Compared to other psychiatric disorders, there has been a limited amount of research and the outcomes are not very consistent (Oud et al., 2016). Kupka et al. (2015) note how the quality of proof varies.<sup>433</sup> Lam et al. (2009) call the results of studies adding psychosocial intervention to pharmacological interventions promising, yet not inconclusive.<sup>434</sup> None of the treatments that are considered evidence-based have been investigated in the manic phase (Koenders & Steenhuis, 2022) and often in trials, data of patients in different phases was

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<sup>429</sup> Vieta et al. (2009) describe the goals of psychoeducation as “illness awareness, enhanced adherence, early warning sign detection, encouraging healthy habits, avoiding substance misuse” (p. 495). They note how psychoeducation is a collaborative process that goes beyond mere delivery of information.

<sup>430</sup> Reinares et al. (2014) explain interpersonal and social rhythm therapy as “based on the hypothesis that stressful life events and unstable or disrupted daily routines can lead to circadian rhythm instability and, in vulnerable individuals, to affective episodes” (p. 49). Vieta et al. (2009) describe it as a behaviorally focused interpersonal therapy that emphasizes “helping patients recognize the impact of interpersonal events on their social and circadian rhythms, as well as on providing patients with psychoeducation about their illness and stressing the importance of adherence to treatment” (p. 498).

<sup>431</sup> Vieta et al. (2009) describe family intervention as aiming “to improve family functioning using a combination of communication, problem solving, and coping strategies training; psychoeducation; and relapse prevention techniques” (p. 497). It is “psychoeducation, communication enhancement training and problem solving training delivered at home for the patient together with their relatives during the post-episode period” (Reinares et al., 2014, p. 49).

<sup>432</sup> In a review of the literature, Vieta et al. (2009) find support for psychoeducation and cognitive-behavioral therapy and family interventions based on a psychoeducational model. Oud et al. (2016) find sufficient evidence for individual psychological interventions, group and family psychoeducation, and collaborative care; but no evidence of benefit for other types of psychological interventions such as interpersonal and social rhythm therapy. Miklowitz et al. (2020) conclude that the evidence supports family, cognitive behavioral, and psychoeducational therapies. Koenders & Steenhuis (2022) consider these treatments as sufficiently proven to be recommended: interpersonal and social rhythm therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, family-focused therapy.

<sup>433</sup> Oud et al. (2016) state that “much of the evidence was of low or very low quality thereby limiting our conclusions” (p. 213).

<sup>434</sup> Kalita (2021) notes that the estimations regarding the effects of psychotherapy might be “overly optimistic” (p. 147).

aggregated, limiting the conclusions (Oud et al., 2016).<sup>435</sup> It is not entirely clear what exactly works based on the current evidence (Geddes & Miklowitz, 2013), nor for whom certain interventions might be most beneficial or what the active ingredients and working mechanisms of these interventions are (Scott et al., 2007). Oud et al. (2016) conclude “there is insufficient evidence to recommend one specific treatment over the others” (p. 219).<sup>436</sup> Reinares et al. (2014) note it is still unclear which populations are most likely to benefit from which approach and what is the best timing to implement them.<sup>437</sup>

In our Lacanian framework, we can characterize all current treatment recommendations as contributing to medication and identification.<sup>438</sup>

We noted that medication is an important part of treatment, as evident in psychotherapy research. In most, if not all, psychotherapy studies, psychotherapy is an adjunctive approach alongside drug treatment (Oud et al., 2016; Vieta et al., 2009) and there is no evidence for the efficacy of psychological therapies alone without medication (Lam et al., 2009). Furthermore, psychoeducation is a fundamental component of many psychological and psychosocial interventions for bipolar disorder (Kupka et al., 2015). Although various interventions may operate through different mechanisms, such as improving medication adherence, stabilizing sleep and daily routines, promoting early identification of signs of relapse, changing dysfunctional attitudes, or improving family interactions; most psychological interventions contain some form of psychoeducation (Reinares et al., 2014). Vieta et al. (2009) note that despite differences in theoretical models, there is a considerable overlap in the core elements of recommended psychosocial interventions for bipolar disorder<sup>439</sup>, with psychoeducation being a common element.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Few studies have been conducted with acute patients (Reinares et al., 2014), and the inclusion of these patients is more than likely to influence the results of the studies (Scott et al., 2006).

<sup>436</sup> They add: “the best evidence is for individual structured psychological interventions, and there is weaker—but still promising—evidence for group and family interventions and for collaborative care” (Oud et al., p. 219).

<sup>437</sup> They suggest interpersonal and social rhythm therapy may be beneficial in acute phases (Reinares et al., 2014).

<sup>438</sup> We interpret psychoeducation as contributing to identification (of course that is not all it does).

<sup>439</sup> For example: there is a large overlap between cognitive-behavioral interventions and psychoeducation (Kupka et al., 2015), and the cognitive-behavioral interventions that have been investigated for bipolar disorder are mostly aimed at psychoeducation and self-management (Koenders & Steenhuis, 2022).

<sup>440</sup> Lam et al. (2009) describe the disorder-specific common components across therapeutic orientations as: “use of a diathesis-stress model, psychoeducation, promoting medication adherence, self-monitoring and moderating behavior, promoting routine and structure, problem solving, and active relapse prevention measures” (p. 474).



Kupka et al. (2015) summarize the common elements in most recommended psychological and psychosocial interventions as follows: patients receive information about the disorder, learn to identify early warning signals and prodromal symptoms, develop coping strategies for responding to early warning signals, managing mood instability or situations that can potentially trigger shifts in mood or activity level, and create both emergency and staying-well plans for moments of crisis.

The predominant focus on medication and psychoeducation is reflected in current treatment guidelines.<sup>441</sup> In the following sections, we explore what a psychoanalytic perspective might add to this focus on medication and identification.<sup>442</sup>

### 4.3. Psychoanalysis and the Manic-Depressive Patient

Stefana et al. (2023) note how currently recognized evidence-based models of psychotherapy exclude psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychotherapies since there are no randomized controlled trials proving their effectiveness.<sup>443</sup> Only a limited number of psychotherapies—those that are short-term and protocol-based—align with the paradigm of evidence-based medicine and, which relies on randomized controlled trials (Vanheule, 2009; Verhaeghe, 2009; for a further critique of this paradigm, see Westen et al., 2004).<sup>444</sup> In psychoanalytic research and theorization, one of the main research tools is the single case study (Hinshelwood, 2013; Meganck et al., 2017). Efforts are being made to integrate psychoanalytic treatment into the evidence-based model. A systematic umbrella review of recent meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials for common mental disorders in adults, conducted by Leichsenring et al. (2023), confirmed that psychodynamic therapy can be

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<sup>441</sup>For example, the current multidisciplinary guideline for treating bipolar disorders in the Netherlands, recommends psychoeducation as the first course of action (in combination with medication). If the mood does not sufficiently stabilize with medication and psychoeducation, and for relapse prevention, psychotherapy (specific for bipolar disorder) is recommended (Kupka et al., 2015).

<sup>442</sup>We do not wish to position the psychoanalytic account in opposition to medication and identification. We believe our Lacanian psychoanalytic account can add something of potential value to the currently rather limited palette of available treatment strategies.

<sup>443</sup>The main form of psychotherapy that has been investigated is cognitive-behavioral therapy. In a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials, Chiang et al. (2017) conclude that cognitive-behavioral therapy “is effective in decreasing the relapse rate and improving depressive symptoms, mania severity, and psychosocial functioning, with a mild-to-moderate effect size” (p. 2).

<sup>444</sup>It is remarkable how a randomized controlled trial that has a more naturalistic and less exclusionary setup (not excluding patients with substance abuse or dependence, frequently recurring episode, comorbid Axis-I disorders or current acute episode) (Scott et al., 2006), has less promising results, and sticks out in subsequent meta-analysis (e.g., see Lam et al., 2009).

considered an empirically supported treatment for depressive disorders, somatic symptom disorders, anxiety disorders and personality disorders.<sup>445</sup> However, bipolar disorders were not part of the review.<sup>446</sup> Yet, as Stefana et al. (2023) note, “bipolar patients have been sitting on the couch for more than century” (p. 72). We now turn to the—mainly post-Freudian—psychoanalytic literature on treating manic depression

A psychoanalytic therapeutic approach to mania and manic depression faces problems due to a lack of clear conceptualization of the status of mania and a lack of clarity regarding the goals or purpose of psychotherapy for manic-depressive patients. In a brief overview of psychoanalytic understanding of mania and bipolar patients, Goodwin & Jamison (2007) note how psychoanalytic pioneers as Abraham, Rado, and Fromm-Reichmann all expressed reservations about the suitability of these patients for psychotherapy.<sup>447</sup> They characterized bipolar patients as “unstable and chaotic, narcissistically based, bereft of emphatic regard for the rights of others, too dependent or independent, singularly rigid, and full of rage” (p. 338), perceptions as these “led most psychoanalysts to be wary of and reluctant to treat these patients” (p. 338).<sup>448</sup> In a discussion of psychodynamic therapy, Jackson (1993) states that “manic-depressive patients are not usually regarded by psychiatrists as suitable subjects for psychotherapy” (p. 103).<sup>449</sup> Stone (1978) writes that “once a manic illness became evident, analysts even a generation ago recognized the inordinate difficulty of working effectively with these patients” (p. 430).

<sup>445</sup> As a side note, even though we might be tempted to take on the label of evidence-based, we cannot assume psychodynamic therapy to stand for all forms of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic therapy. For example, the treatment principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis differ considerably from those of other strands of psychoanalysis (see Fink, 1995, 2007).

<sup>446</sup> The authors note that “further individual randomized controlled trials of psychodynamic therapy are required in those areas where only a few or old randomized controlled trials are available, as well as for specific mental disorders such as bipolar or psychotic disorders” (Leichsenring et al., 2023, p. 301).

<sup>447</sup> For example, Cohen et al. (1954) stated that the common experience of therapists is “to find the manic depressive much more irritating but much less frightening to work with than the schizophrenic” (p. 116) and were surprised to note “that of those psychoanalysts who are working with psychotics, the large majority ... tend to avoid those in the manic-depressive category” (p. 113). Fromm-Reichmann (1949) notes “the disinclination of many dynamic psychiatrists to become the psychotherapist of a patient suffering from manic-depressive mood swings” (p. 161) and wonders “why is it that most dynamic psychiatrists who are greatly interested in psychotherapeutic work with disturbed schizophrenics are very reluctant to undertake psychotherapy with manic-depressives” (pp. 161–162).

<sup>448</sup> The hypothesis Goodwin & Jamison (2007) put forward, is that these cautionary warnings are based on impressions of patients from an era before the use of lithium and other medications became the standard treatment. Although they recognize and advocate the importance of therapy, they stress that the main treatment in their view is medication.

<sup>449</sup> Yet Jackson & Williams (1994) also state that “many psychotherapists have come to believe that a large proportion of such patients could benefit from psychotherapy under the right conditions” (p. 137).

Not only do therapists express reluctance, but some authors even warn against psychoanalytic therapy, describing it as “a potentially dangerous intervention” (Jackson, 1993, p. 103) or suggesting that it could lead “to an intensification of the manic episodes” (Lucas, 1998, p. 198). Torrey & Knable (2002) describe psychoanalytic psychotherapy as “one of the least helpful forms of psychotherapy for individuals with manic-depressive illness” (p. 208). Stone (1978) recommends “a more reserved stance regarding the feasibility of unmodified psychoanalysis” (p. 437). Fromm-Reichmann (1949) reports that psychoanalytic therapy “was not generally successful with the manic-depressive” (p. 158).

In their review of journal articles discussing clinical cases or vignettes of psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy involving patients with bipolar disorder, Stefana et al. (2023) highlight the paucity of published studies.<sup>450</sup> The results of the review of the effectiveness of psychoanalysis for bipolar disorder by Stefana et al. (2022), suggest “that psychoanalysis may positively impact symptoms and global functioning in patients with bipolar disorder, the underlying evidence is poor and should be confirmed by experimental studies” (p. 5). Yet, their findings “provide no robust evidence for psychoanalysis/psychoanalytic psychotherapy as an effective treatment for people with bipolar disorder” (p. 8), primarily because the results rely on a limited number of psychoanalytic narrative case studies. Kalita (2021), in a review study on the usefulness of psychodynamic psychotherapy for bipolar disorder, concludes that evidence suggests “little practical usefulness of a classic psychodynamic approach, based on concept of improvement through insight into repressed content” (p. 145).

It is notable that the specific therapeutic interventions advised or even warned against are those falling under the category of “psychoanalytic psychotherapy aimed at conflict resolution and personality development” (Jackson, 1993, p. 103), “unmodified psychoanalysis” (Stone, 1978, p. 437), or “a classic psychodynamic approach, based on concept of improvement through insight into repressed content” (Kalita, 2021, p. 145). This suggests that the critique is directed at psychoanalytic approaches that are not specifically tailored to address manic depression or bipolar disorder. Several examples are illustrative of the troubles faced by these psychoanalytic therapies.<sup>451</sup> In an extensive case study, Jackson (1993) mainly illustrates how

<sup>450</sup> Their search of articles published from 1990–2021 resulted in 24 articles. The explanation they offer is that psychoanalysis and psychodynamic therapy are not recognized as evidence-based psychological interventions and therefore not currently accessible as a psychological treatment.

<sup>451</sup> Although it is hard to generalize based on research data on psychoanalytical therapy for bipolar disorder. The review by Stefana et al. (2023) of the psychoanalytical literature on bipolar disorder not only shows the paucity

attempts to make sense of and interpret manic symptoms (i.e., deciphering their meaning as if they were messages from the unconscious) prove ineffective and contribute little in terms of resolving or decreasing these symptoms. Similarly, Lucas (1998) reports on a case and laments the powerlessness of his psychoanalytic interventions, observing how “despite many different types of interpretation, her manic state seemed to have a life of its own” (p. 198). Stone (1978) attributes these impasses to the fact that “manic patients tend to exhibit such profound denial of illness as to make the analytic process unworkable” (p. 430). Leader (2013) notes that, to the despair of some clinicians, “manic-depressive subjects may arrive at key connections in therapy, which have little or zero effect, as if insight had no real value” (p. 56).

The perspective explored throughout this dissertation, viewing mania as the subject taken for a ride on the derailing signifying chain, can help elucidate the problems associated with classical psychoanalytic treatments focused on interpretation and grounded in the assumption of underlying sense and meaning behind manic phenomena.

Interpretation, in the classical (neurotic) sense, supposes some sort of truth in one’s speech. Lacan’s qualification of manic speech as the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain calls this assumption into question. Just as mood does not point to unconscious truth but to *jouissance* (Miller, in Miller, 2008), manic speech is speech that does not function as truth (Miller, 1993).<sup>452</sup> From the understanding of the manic subject as a dead subject, a subject no longer represented by or present in language, follows that manic excitation does not point to a subjective truth, is not addressed to anyone, and does not appeal to interpretation. Only when the manic excitation has gone down, can the triggering determinants and a subjective position be determined (Fridman & Millas, 1997).

All post-Freudian reservations and impasses concerning psychoanalysis and psychotherapy with manic-depressive or bipolar patients can be traced back to the failure to fully grasp the specific relation to language at work in mania and manic depression.<sup>453</sup> This often implies an

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of published articles reporting on psychoanalytic treatment, but also illustrates just how diverse and divergent the different post-Freudian theoretical strands are.

<sup>452</sup> Miller (1993/2002) states that in mania, “what is at stake here is a statement [*dit*] which does not pose as truth” (p. 20); “il s’agit là d’un dit qui ne se pose pas en vérité” (Miller, 1993, p. 12).

<sup>453</sup> Lacanian authors would also state this point as a failure to consider the structural diagnosis of psychosis and the effects of the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father (see Soler, 2002). This points to differing conceptualizations of the diagnostic category of psychosis between Lacanian and post-Freudian approaches. However, the observation regarding the specific nature of language in mania remains valid irrespective of these differences in diagnostic perspectives.

excessive focus on the content of speech, neglecting the specific relation to language. Consequently, the post-Freudian treatment strategies emphasize interpretation, while our Lacanian view underscores the importance of invention or creation.<sup>454</sup>

#### 4.4. A Lacanian Perspective

Throughout this dissertation, we encountered several strategies of recovery and treatment that do take into account the specific manic relation to language, avoiding the pitfall of assuming meaning where there is derailment. We can categorize these strategies again within Lacan's trinity of real, imaginary and symbolic.

We start with treatment strategies that target the real dimension of mania. In Section 2 of this chapter, we explored a Lacanian approach to mania, situated within a broader understanding of psychosis. This approach focuses on targeting *jouissance* and helping subjects develop and invent strategies of dealing with unbound *jouissance*.<sup>455</sup> An interesting notion we can add here is that of 'rhythm,' which we encountered in Berckmans' prose and Melle's tic of holding his breath.<sup>456</sup> Additionally, Lippi (2019) describes the treatment of manic discourse as the establishing of a rhythmic pattern in interactions between patients and therapists.<sup>457</sup> Similarly, Christaki-Gadbin (2003) characterizes the goal of treatment as the installation of a rhythmic structure in manic speech. The goal of the clinician is to find ways to punctuate the flow of the manic person's speech, shaping it into a product of a rhythm, thereby reinstating the interplay between synchrony and diachrony.<sup>458</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> Or, in Section 3.5 of this chapter: assumption (as opposed to interpretation).

<sup>455</sup> For example, Sauvagnat (1997) suggests we need to study, on a case-by-case basis, what kind of a limit to the signifying chain there was in place before the manic crisis.

<sup>456</sup> We can add Czermak's (1998/2012) description of manic speech as speech without rhythm or scansion. Nothing buckles signification and nothing has meaning for the manic individual.

<sup>457</sup> Lippi (2019), in a discussion of an extended therapeutic treatment of a frequently hospitalized manic-depressive patient, develops a musical understanding of mania, linking the manic speed of discourse to John Coltrane's fiery saxophone playing and describing the role of the analyst as akin to that of the rhythm section. She conceptualizes the exchanges between patient and therapist by referring to the collective improvisations of free jazz. She describes the presence of the analyst as a non-intervening presence, waiting without intervening, creating silence in the manic discourse. She describes that it is in the dialectic between being present and silence that rhythm is established. She understands the treatment as the installation of a rhythm, not as an attempt to limit, direct or contain the manic discourse. Interventions, scansion, and punctuation, do not have the goal of framing the manic patient, but seek to inspire. Similar to free jazz, where a single note, sound, noise, breath, or accent can change the course of a composition. In that way a fruitful polyrhythm can be established. Lippi describes how the establishment of a polyrhythmical exchange led to stabilization and eventually improvement, in the case she reports on.

<sup>458</sup> We can also refer to Fuchs' (2019) notion of resynchronization therapy (although Fuchs' notion is more related to reinstalling a rhythm to daily life and connecting to the surrounding rhythm of society than the Lacanian

We encountered and extensively discussed treatment strategies operating on the symbolic, operating on language itself, or on the way signifiers are sequenced in the signifying chain. We discussed Berckmans' mutilating and hacking at language, and Melle's new realism employing the strategy of the straight sentence. Both strategies are also ways of tempering the *jouissance* of language and they both achieve this through writing.<sup>459</sup>

Meaning and sense emerge in the imaginary strategies concerned with the reconstruction of identity and ego-narratives (Chapter 2 and 4), as well as through their further development facilitated by the interplay of the symbolic and the imaginary in the process of becoming the subject of mania (Section 1.3 of this chapter). In Section 3.5 of this chapter, we related the retroactive process of sense making to Lacan's (1966/2006) notion of the assumption of one's history. In this process, meaning and sense arise retroactively, are the result of a work of construction.<sup>460</sup> This does not disregard the content of manic speech, but acknowledges the particular relation to language and its effects on the experience of subjectivity.

In this dissertation, we have developed a Lacanian understanding of mania as a phenomenon of language. Throughout the chapters we have been attentive to particular strategies of recovery this view inspired. In this section, we have attempted to position these within ongoing debates about the role of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis in the treatment of mania and manic depression.

In our view, the focus on creation, invention and assumption is a worthy addition to the current view of psychotherapeutic interventions for bipolar disorder as—in our interpretation—medication and identification, and can potentially provide some clinical inspiration for dealing with mania or manic depression.

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rhythm of discourse discussed here).

<sup>459</sup> In Binswanger's (1933/2000) view, writing in itself already impacts the experience of mania by introducing the element of time. Binswanger characterized mania as a profound alteration of the temporal structure of psychic life, whereby the manic only lives in the present (see Section 3.3 of this chapter). Writing opens up the dimension of the future, is anchored to the future because it points to when a reader or recipient of a letter will read what's written.

<sup>460</sup> In the case described by Lippi (2019), she explains that it was only later, after the crisis had passed (which took six months of hospitalization), that the patient was able to subjectivize her story and engage in the historicization of her narrative through therapy. During this process, the patient rediscovered some fragments of her truth (which happened in the year after the hospitalization).

## 5. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

### 5.1. Limitations

First of all, there are several methodological shortcomings and limitations. In Chapter 2, the main drawback pertains to the selection of the participants. The recruitment through the website of a patient organization selected a very specific subtype of patients. As it turned out, most of the participants embraced their diagnosis with enthusiasm; many worked as expert-by-experience or took on organizing roles in a patient organization, and some frequently testify publicly about their condition. All of these factors impact the narrative about their manic experiences. This does not invalidate our results; our analysis of the identity reconstruction in the aftermath is sound. However, questions remain about how this specific subset of participants influenced the content of the themes and stages we discerned. Another limitation inherent to this type of research is the nature of data collection. The stories and narratives were collected in single interviews. These were conducted in a sensitive way, establishing a safe atmosphere. Yet, this may restrict the range of what can be said or expressed. For example, a series of interactions over a longer period of time might allow for ambiguity or division about the diagnosis to appear. We also obtained limited information about context and history, compared to an extended autobiography and numerous interviews. Another limitation to consider is the setting itself, an interview about their diagnosis—actually about their manic experiences, but all participants talked about their experiences within the narrative framework of the bipolar diagnosis. We can only wonder how much the interviews served, for some participants, mainly as an occasion to reaffirm their diagnostic story for themselves, serving a function beyond merely sharing their story.

The limitations and drawbacks of Chapter 3 are just as manifold, although different. Berckmans made multiple references to his manic depression in interviews, but these are all brief comments or short statements, often in passing and within broader conversations on various topics. Additionally, as De Cleene (2012) points out, we cannot ignore the performative aspect of Berckmans making statements to the press about his mental condition. Although we refrained from extensive psychological interpretations about Berckmans' motives and focused on an analysis of his language treatment, it is important to acknowledge that our analysis of how his writing and his manic-depressive experiences influence one

another is our construction, our interpretation. While we present our arguments and demonstrate the elements of his life and work on which we base our construction, the result remains an interpretation. This chapter might be our most speculative one.

Chapter 4, focusing on Thomas Melle's writing practices, remedies some of the shortcomings of the previous chapters. The case we present about Melle's writing is also our construction and interpretation, wherein we inevitably accentuate certain aspects while overlooking others. We believe this chapter is the most methodologically sound. The 'data' that underpins our interpretation is more extensive; although we did not interview Melle<sup>461</sup>, we have at our disposal a literary oeuvre of several novels and a book of stories, an extensive autobiography, numerous lectures, and countless interviews. What makes Thomas Melle an ideal subject for our research purposes is that, in addition to his candid and lucid depictions of the brutal experience of mania, he provides us with his own conscious reflections on the processes of identity reconstruction and fictionalization in its aftermath. In a sense, we could characterize this chapter as just as much a reading of Lacan with Melle, as a reading of Melle with Lacan. This might actually apply to the entire dissertation, as it significantly informed our discussions of Lacan in Chapters 5 and 6, which could be seen as mainly a reading of Lacan with Melle and of Melle with Lacan. Perhaps another shortcoming.

A limitation common to all our studies is that they rely entirely on retrospective accounts of mania. Yet, in our defense, we believe we have addressed, acknowledged and thematized many of these drawbacks. For example, Chapter 2 relies on retrospective accounts but specifically explores and theorizes the relation between manic experiences and the retrospective narrative. Chapter 3 delves into how writing about madness addresses the madness of language. In Chapter 4, the retrospective construction of an account of experiences of mania takes center stage in Melle's reflections and our comments on it. Another limitation in Chapters 2 through 4 is that we did not attempt to interact with the participants beyond data collection. Although we engaged with people's narratives and considered their perspectives, we did not engage in a co-creative interpretative process of

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<sup>461</sup> At one time we considered contacting Melle to engage in a conversation about our interpretation of his writing practices, but after our analysis developed further and took into account Melle's statements on talking versus writing in his interviews and Melle's (2018), or rather robot-Melle's explanations about his dislike for discussing his book, we opted not to bother him.



theory construction. Instead, we remained firmly within the academic tradition of extracting data from participants and subsequently theorizing about them from a safe distance.

Chapters 3 and 4 come with all the possible reservations and limitations inherent in the interpretation of an artist's life and work. However, we believe that we have navigated many of the common pitfalls associated with interpretations of the mad artist. One major pitfall in these studies arises when the researcher conducting the analysis is also the one diagnosing the author and interpreting the impact it had on life and work of the artist.<sup>462</sup> We have managed to avoid many of these problems by engaging with artists who not only discuss and describe their particular mental health struggles, but also explicitly discuss their diagnosis and how their condition impacts their life and work.

Another pitfall to avoid is basing interpretations on only a portion of an artist's oeuvre. In the case of Berckmans and Melle, we managed to study their complete oeuvre, as both are overseeable in scope.<sup>463</sup> Furthermore, since Berckmans was relatively obscure, and Melle only achieved major literary success after the publication of his autobiography, we were able to consult most of the secondary literature published about these authors, along with the bulk of literary criticism and reviews.<sup>464</sup>

In Chapter 1, Section 1.3, we detailed our methodology for Chapters 3 and 4. Throughout these chapters, we made a conscious effort to specify the statements, quotes, or fragments upon which certain hypotheses and conclusions were based. We were sufficiently prudent in formulating our interpretations cautiously, ensuring they did not extend beyond the scope of

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<sup>462</sup> For example, during the course of this research project, we considered exploring the life and work of Virginia Woolf. There are multiple reasons why we didn't pursue this avenue. As Lee (1996) describes in her biography, it is not a great stretch to interpret the symptoms and troubles experienced and described by Virginia Woolf as indicative of manic depression. For example, an often-cited quote from her husband, Leonard Woolf, describes what might be a manic episode with flight of ideas as follows: "she talked almost without stopping for two or three days, paying no attention to anyone in the room or anything said to her. For about a day, what she said was coherent; the sentences meant something, though it was nearly all wildly insane. Then, gradually, it became completely incoherent, a mere jumble of dissociated words" (Woolf, 1964, pp. 172–173). Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence that Virginia Woolf was diagnosed as manic-depressive, and she did not write about herself in terms of manic depression (Lee, 1996). She was primarily diagnosed, sometimes with enthusiastic eagerness by biographers and researchers interpreting her oeuvre with specific agenda's (see Caramagno, 1992; Jamison, 1993). Consequently, her life and mental condition have become the battleground for various conflicting interpretations (Marcus, 1992). A battlefield we chose to avoid.

<sup>463</sup> We did not seek access to Berckmans' archive of unpublished work mentioned by Ceustermans (2018), and we didn't manage to consult all of Melle's plays.

<sup>464</sup> Which would not be possible for an author as Virginia Woolf, considering the enormous scholarly attention her work already received.

our investigation. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that, particularly in these chapters, some personal interpretative bias cannot be ruled out.

Our psychoanalytic approach to research adds the single case perspective as a methodological tool (Hinshelwood, 2013; Meganck et al., 2017), allowing in-depth investigation of the logic within individual cases. Furthermore, our psychoanalytic approach to the study of psychosis emphasizes writing as a prominent source of data (André, 2011; Maleval, 1994; see also Freud, 1911; Lacan, 2005/2016).<sup>465</sup> One limitation is that we were unable to fully integrate all methodological research perspectives into one study. In this sense, an interview with Melle would have solved this methodological gap.

The limitations of our study extend beyond the methodological realm and also encompass theoretical considerations. Just as methodological decisions and choices affect the results, so do theoretical ones. Our approach of examining mania through the lens of language developed gradually, influenced by Lacan's statements, remarks made by some of the participants in the interview study, further informed by a chance encounter with a recently published collection of Berckmans' stories and consolidated by a reading of Melle's account of his manic episodes. While our singular focus on language has enabled us to explore certain aspects of mania and strategies of recovery, it may also have limited our exploration of other perspectives.

Our theoretical point of departure—as acknowledged in footnotes throughout our work—might have overly emphasized the imaginary and the symbolic while potentially downplaying the significance of the real of the body as a force to be reckoned with in mania. Phenomena such as bodily excitation, the exaltation, the impulsive urge to act, etc. deserve more attention than we have paid to them. The restlessness and physical excitation probably need to be considered as independent forces rather than solely as effects of the derailing signifying chain. This core aspect of mania is acknowledged in the DSM-5 definition of mania, which includes “and abnormally and persistently increased goal-directed activity or energy” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 124) in addition to the “abnormally and persistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood” (p. 124). Our singular focus on language may have led us to somewhat overlook manifestations of *jouissance* and bodily excitation in mania.

Even while remaining within our focus on language and the symbolic, one notable theoretical aspect of Lacan's thought that deserves to be further explored in relation to mania

<sup>465</sup> Thereby circumventing the conscious reflection on oneself solicited by psychological—and most phenomenological—sources of data, and adding a focus on language itself, beyond the ego-narrative.

and its effect on the subject is the notion of *logical time*. In his 1945 text *Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty*, Lacan (1966/2006) develops an intricate theory on how the symbolic order constitutes the subject. This notion of logical time is another way Lacan grounds the subject in the symbolic, alongside what we previously discussed as *the time of the signifying chain*.<sup>466</sup> Connected to this, a deeper Lacanian investigation of how mania impacts the phenomenological dimensions of time and space could yield valuable insights.<sup>467</sup>

As a result of our singular focus on derailing language, we can account for the effects of mania at the level of language and its impact on the ego-narrative and identity, as well as their implications for recovery. However, we can contribute little to a comprehensive understanding of the triggering of episodes, the course of manic depression over time, and the rhythm of its episodes. Similarly, our focus on mania, although justified and rooted in a perceived lack in Lacanian psychoanalysis, prevents us from contributing to an understanding of its relation with the depressive side of manic depression or to situating it within the context of melancholia.

## 5.2. Avenues for Future Research

Following the course of this particular research project, interesting and complementary avenues could be explored by studying other participants and authors. One fruitful way to expand upon the results of Chapter 2 might involve repeating the investigation with different subsets of patients, perhaps reflecting a broader range of attitudes towards their diagnosis. To build on the results of Chapter 3 and 4, it would be useful to include other authors whose work and manic-depressive experiences are intertwined and study their unique approaches. For example, it would be interesting to investigate the differences and similarities between Berckmans' writing strategies and those of Dutch manic-depressive writer A. Moonen (1937–2007) whose writing practice and style similarly appear to involve keeping language under control by imposing strict rules to it<sup>468</sup>, resulting in a diary-like quality that fictionalizes his life (see Sanders, 2016). Another writer worth investigating in relation to Melle is David

<sup>466</sup> See Section 3.3 of this chapter.

<sup>467</sup> For example both Lacan's (1966/2006) melancholic "pain of existence" (p. 655)—or "la douleur d'exister" (Lacan, 1966, p. 777)—and Binswanger's (1933/1992) manic festive fuddle of being—"festlicher Daseinstaukel" (p. 190), or "l'ivresse de l'existence" (Binswanger, 1933/2000, p. 276)—both point to an element of timelessness.

<sup>468</sup> Moonen wrote in short, staccato-like sentences, full of scabrous and ingenious neologisms.

Foster Wallace (1962–2008). When discussing his development of artificial authenticity, Melle (2017) evokes Wallace and interprets his proliferating postmodern meta-reflections and the way his texts continually fold back on itself as a desperate yearning for truthfulness—a truthfulness he believes Wallace failed to reach. It seems that Wallace indeed struggled with realism and representation and, in his later years, sought ways to tell his stories in a more straightforward manner without capitulating to realism (Max, 2009). Wallace’s life and work might be considered in relation to depression or melancholia (see Pire, 2021).

There is a hint—but not more than that—of manic depression in Max’s (2012) biography. When recounting one of Wallace’s multiple hospital admissions for crippling depression, Max mentions “doctors likely considered the possibility that he suffered from bipolar disorder, manic depression” (p. 52). Yet, the unovercomeable drawback or limitation for such a study of Wallace is the fact that Wallace never discussed or directly wrote about his own mental health (Max, 2009), although depression is a recurring and heartfelt theme in his work: “The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror” (Wallace, 1999, p. 31).

Another potential follow-up study could involve a more in-depth exploration and practical application of ideas related to treating language in a clinical context. This could, for example, manifest as treatment interventions within psychiatric care, such as implementing writing workshops or as being attentive to particular and idiosyncratic ways in which patients invent strategies for limiting *jouissance* and treating language.

Regarding methodological variation, future research efforts may consider moving beyond a purely retrospective approach to the experience of mania, including patients who are currently in or closer to a manic episode.

In terms of theoretical expansion, there is room to further enhance the dialogue with phenomenology. In addition to our discussion focusing on language, it would be beneficial to explore other aspects of experience such as time and space. According to a Lacanian view, these aspects are grounded in the symbolic realm and could be explored in dialogue with phenomenological accounts of these fundamental phenomenological fields of human experience.

Furthermore, a Lacanian exploration of mania could focus more specifically on the imaginary and the real, aspects of the manic experience that received less attention in this project. This could involve engaging with Cottet's (2008) notion of mania as the pulsation of *jouissance* oscillating between identification and expulsion. Another, perhaps even more necessary addition to the current investigation would be to engage with the depressive side of manic depression, which—in our aim to give mania the attention we believe it deserved—we rather sidestepped.

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## CHAPTER 6

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# Appendices

## Appendix A. Narrative Description of Participants

*Annie* is a 47 year-old woman currently working in an administrative job. She experienced two manic episodes with religious delusions shortly after her mother died, 19 years ago. She has not had manic episodes or symptoms since and has been off medication for a few years. She is an active participant in a patient organization and still struggles with the question of how to make sense of her manic episodes.

*Bea* is a 46 year-old woman working as a school secretary. She's experienced mood swings that she can't control for as long as she can remember. She describes these as a few months of intense living, with lots of activities and very extroverted behavior, followed by a few months of quiet, depressed withdrawal and isolation. Now that her children are older and that she is divorced from her husband, her manias are more pronounced.

*Cindy* is a 40 year-old woman currently training to be an expert by experience. She describes having had manic episodes since she was a teenager. She describes these as periods of intense living, where every stimulus gains a personal relevance and triggers an action. She describes that it was more often others who were bothered by her manic episodes and it was her partner who insisted she seek treatment. She hasn't had manic episodes for over five years and describes having developed strategies to control manic episodes, mainly through being alert for early symptoms and limiting her exposure to stimuli.

*Dave* is a 49 year-old man working as an expert by experience in a psychiatric hospital. He had four major manic episodes, periods of impulsive, chaotic living with lots of alcohol and drug use, causing him to lose his job and his home multiple times. His last manic episode was six years ago, and he explains that it was mainly after a particularly confrontational family intervention that he made a deliberate decision to gain control over his symptoms. He stopped drinking and now closely monitors himself for signs of the onset of mania.

*Ellen* is a 41 year-old woman currently recovering from a recent manic episode. She experienced multiple manic episodes that, at first, often led her to develop successful business initiatives, which then fall apart when her manic episodes come to an end. She has only recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and is currently trying to protect herself from

the onset of a new episode by limiting her exposure to input and information, since she feels that “anything that I find interesting can set me off again.”

*Frank* is a 44 year-old male working as a nurse. He experienced a major manic episode two years ago in the process of leaving his wife. He is unsure if “it was the relief of leaving her that triggered the episode” or if “the manic episode gave me the strength to leave my wife.” In hindsight, he describes one earlier manic episode after changing jobs a few years earlier.

*George* is a 62 year-old man working as a social worker. He was hospitalized multiple times for long stretches in his early twenties for suicidal depressions and has experienced multiple periods of mania and hypomania that lasted many months. He is currently recovering from a long (hypo-)manic period of working long hours and taking on many projects. He has an elaborate system in place with his wife, his general practitioner and his psychiatrist monitoring his mood and with specific agreements about which interventions should take place at what stage.

*Holly* is a 50 year-old woman working as a housekeeper. She experienced two major manic episodes in which she, in contrast with her usually calm and tranquil personality, went on sudden trips, impulsively changed jobs and neglected her family. To limit stress and excitement that might trigger manic episodes, she left her job in retail and currently works in a part-time stress-free job and hasn't experienced any episodes for the last eight years.

*Jeff* is a 45 year-old man working as an IT consultant who experienced a manic episode with paranoid delusions fifteen years ago, shortly before the birth of his first child. He has not experienced manic symptoms since then, and he continues to take medication and closely monitors his mood.

*Keira* is a 23 year-old student who suffers from sudden, severe mood swings that she doesn't understand and cannot control. She has recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and is still struggling with the diagnosis and what this means for her.

*Luke* is a 56 year-old man currently hospitalized and recovering from a manic and psychotic episode lasting many years, where he was constantly angry and irritable, would get into fights and threaten people. A number of lawsuits and charges against him are pending. He is currently homeless and unemployed.

*Mary* is a 58 year-old retired teacher who experienced two manic episodes, each lasting a few months, with the last one seven years ago. She took an early retirement and is currently

very active in a patient organization and self-help group. She states that her manic episodes had a personally significant meaning in her life and she now likes to be involved in helping others deal with their symptoms by inspiring them with her own story.

*Nina* is a 37 year-old high school teacher who has experienced multiple manic and depressive episodes since her early teens. Her mother and grandmother were already diagnosed as manic-depressive, and when she was eighteen she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Her most recent manic episode was eight years ago. Since then she has found stability through giving up drugs and alcohol and with the help of the structure provided by a supportive partner.

*Olga* is a 31 year-old police officer who has experienced multiple acute manic episodes since her early twenties, which, combined with large quantities of alcohol, often put her in dangerous situations, leading to arrests or emergency hospitalizations. She has not experienced manic episodes for nearly two years, since a particularly traumatizing hospitalization and a night spent in isolation made her decide to monitor her state very closely and isolate herself from stimulation when necessary.

*Peggy* is a 42 year-old woman recently released from a long stay in a psychiatric hospital and doing volunteer work. She has been hospitalized multiple times since her late twenties, sometimes for more than a year, for severe depressions. She experienced multiple manic episodes in which she abused alcohol and had multiple sexual encounters. Her last manic experience was more than two years ago.

*Quirina* is a 50 year-old woman working as an expert by experience in a psychiatric rehabilitation center. Since her early twenties, she has experienced multiple manic episodes, often leading her to change jobs, partners and place of residence. She was hospitalized multiple times and was diagnosed thirteen years ago. She struggled for a long time with controlling her manic episodes. She describes now being symptom free for three years, after a few confrontational interventions led her to “no longer hide behind my diagnosis and assume responsibility.”

*Tori* is a 32 year-old woman employed as a community guard. She experienced her first manic episode when she was in her early teens. She was diagnosed shortly after that and spent most of her teenage years in and out of psychiatric hospitals. She has not experienced manic episodes in recent years, which she ascribes to closely monitoring her mood, isolating, and

## APPENDIX A

adjusting her medication when she feels she is starting to become manic. She hides her diagnosis from her work environment and struggles with the isolation this causes her to feel.

*Ulrik* is a 41 year-old man currently unemployed after losing his job after insulting his boss and co-workers in a recent manic episode. He generally becomes manic a few times per year, resulting in bouts of heavy drinking, sexual promiscuity and delusions of grandeur. He reports having had to start building his life again from scratch multiple times after losing his job and house in longer manic episodes. He has only recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and is starting to educate himself about the condition. He says manic episodes have also brought him good things and important insights.

## Appendix B. Summary

### Language gone mad. A Lacanian study of mania

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, there is a dearth of theorizing on the phenomenon of mania and the diagnosis of *manic depression* or *bipolar disorder*. This dissertation is a contribution towards remedying that lack through an attempt at engaging with the phenomenon of mania from a Lacanian point of view.

Lacan only touches upon the phenomenon of mania on a few occasions, yet, his scattered and scarcely elaborated comments provide the basis for developing a coherent perspective on mania as a language-related phenomenon (see Lacan, 1974/1987, 2004/2014, 2005/2016). In our reading, the Lacanian view on mania is unique as it understands mania as a phenomenon of language. In this dissertation we investigate how the derailing language in mania impacts the experience of the subject. Throughout the chapters we explore what this point of view implies for our understanding of mania, the experience of mania, and the aftermath and processes of recovery from mania.

Our method is conceptual and qualitative, in the sense that we combine Lacanian theory with the examination of interviews and autobiographical testimonies. In Chapter 2, we report on an interview study with 18 people who testify about their experiences of mania. In Chapter 3 and 4, two literary case studies, we engage with two authors who have written and testified in interviews on their experience of mania. In Chapter 3, we study the literary work of J.M.H. Berckmans and in Chapter 4, we discuss the autobiographical and literary work of Thomas Melle. In these three clinical chapters we engage in an interpretative dialogue between testimonies and narratives about experiences of mania and a Lacanian understanding of language and subjectivity applied to mania. Chapter 5 is a more conceptual study investigating the implications of manic language for Lacan's views on language.

Goodwin & Jamison (2007) give the following textbook description of mania: "Manic states are typically characterized by heightened mood, more and faster speech, quicker thought, brisker physical and mental activity levels, greater energy (with a corresponding decreased need for sleep), irritability, perceptual acuity, paranoia, heightened sexuality, and impulsivity" (p. 32). In the DSM-5, mania is part of the diagnosis of *bipolar 1 disorder*

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In a Lacanian perspective on mania, mania is not considered a problem of mood or energy, but strictly speaking a problem of language and discourse (André, 1993; Leader, 2013; Soler, 2002). In psychiatric descriptions of mania as well, language phenomena are prominent. Next to an exalted mood and pressure of activity, *flight of ideas* is one of the essential morbid symptoms (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Kraepelin, 1921). In the DSM-5, flight of ideas is defined as: “A nearly continuous flow of accelerated speech with abrupt changes from topic to topic that are usually based on understandable associations, distracting stimuli, or plays on words” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 821). The notion of flight of ideas suggests a thought process, but it is primarily described as a continuous and unstoppable flow of words rather than an abundance of ideas. With Lacan, we can consider this flight of ideas as a phenomenon of the signifier rather than of the signified. We propose to call it *flight of signifiers*.

As a starting point for elaborating a Lacanian view of mania, we discuss Lacan’s (2004/2014) remark in *Seminar 10*, where he states that in mania, the subject is delivered to “the sheer infinite and ludic metonymy of the signifying chain” (p. 336). In this short remark, Lacan densely encapsulates an elaborate perspective on language and subjectivity, and a theory regarding their disruption in mania. To put it briefly, in mania, language derails and as a consequence the subject finds itself at the mercy of this derailing language, until eventually the experience of subjectivity itself gets undermined. The flight of signifiers disturbs the narrative coherence of the ego, undermines the assumption of being the agent of one’s own speech and thus the experience of subjectivity. The flight of signifiers hinders the production of meaning and sense and probably contributes to the manic excitation and agitation. As a background theory we refer to Lacan’s understanding of the relation between language and subject in his 1957 text *The Instance of the Letter* where Lacan (1966/2006) takes on Jakobson’s notions of *metaphor* and *metonymy* and relates them to Freud’s concepts of *condensation* and *displacement*. According to Lacan, both meaning and subjectivity emerge through the articulation of discourse, the chaining together of signifiers. This process involves the double workings of anticipation and retroaction of the signifying chain. Manic language consists of purely the associative, forward moving, metonymic side of language. This disturbs the process of anticipation and retroaction, and affects the articulation of meaning and the experience of subjectivity. What disappears in the metonymic slipping of the signifying chain

is precisely the experience of mastery over one's language. Signifiers are linked in such random and rapid ways that no signifieds or qualities can be attributed to the speaker in a stable way anymore. This results in the feeling that some crazy, uncontrollable force is speaking, rather than I as a subject am speaking. In this state, the subject is *lost in articulation*.

In Chapter 2, *Mania in the Mirror*, we report on a qualitative interview study involving 18 individuals with experiences of mania. We interviewed them about their experiences, and while the interviews had a broad scope, they proved more informative about the process of recovery than the experience of mania as such. We conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. This resulted in six themes that depict a trajectory of identity construction: *The disruptive experience of mania*, *The bipolar diagnosis*, *Adopting a bipolar narrative*, *Assuming responsibility*, *Keeping an eye on oneself*, and *Personalizing the narrative*. The first part of the results describes the steps participants took in living with their manic experiences. Subsequently, we interpret the results using Lacan's model of the double mirror, which offers a theoretical perspective on identity and subjectivity concerning the relationship between drives, drive-regulation and identification. In terms of Lacan's model, we describe the recovery trajectory as a process of gaining mastery over manic experiences through the development of ways to represent the drive and by adopting a shared narrative about the drive. Our main focus here is on the reconstruction of the ego after being shattered by the experience of mania and how, for the participants in this study, adopting a narrative about being bipolar contributed to their recovery.

In Chapter 3, *The Crackle of the Letter*, we discuss the literary work of the Flemish writer J.M.H. Berckmans in light of his lifelong struggle with manic depression. Berckmans' body of work reflects his ongoing struggle with the dysregulation of language. Through his writing, Berckmans develops various strategies to address this linguistic dysregulation. On the one hand, he aims to mitigate the metonymic derailment of the signifying chain, and on the other, he seeks to experience himself as both the subject and author of his words. Berckmans treats language through a meticulous process of writing and rewriting, what he describes as 'mutilating' and 'hacking' at language. Simultaneously, his writing allows him to fictionalize his immediate surroundings, which he refers to as the *graphy* of his life. Furthermore, we discuss the successive forms of address throughout his work: from the abstract reader, to the

notating secretary and the addressee of his letters. In Chapter 3, the focus shifts from the disruption and reconstruction of the ego-narrative to the workings of language in both the experience of mania—the manic derailment of language—and the strategies of recovery developed by Berckmans—his language treatment.

In Chapter 4, titled *The Writing of Mania*, we discuss the work of German author Thomas Melle in relation to his manic-depressive experiences. Melle's (2016/2023) autobiographical book *The World at My Back* demonstrates how a dysregulation of language is essential to understanding the nature of his manic episodes. Furthermore, Melle explains how he turned to writing literature as a response to challenges posed by his manic experiences. In this chapter, we explore this link in detail. First, we investigate the specific dysregulations of language observed during Melle's manic episodes. Based on *The World at My Back*, three characteristic language disruptions are discerned: first, language disintegrates, then narrative consistency breaks down, finally there is a collapse of subject and ego. Subsequently, we discuss the literary strategies of recovery that Melle employs across his oeuvre and how these address the three aspects of language disruption. We identify eight literary strategies, that cluster into three broad genres: implicitly autobiographical fiction, explicitly fictional autobiography, and, eventually, *new realism*. The eight writing strategies are: *Postmodern play*, *Literary doubles*, *Narrating the unspeakable*, *Restoring subject and ego*, *Artificial authenticity*, *Outsourcing the illness*, *The new realism*, and *Writing, not speech*. Drawing from Lacan's insights, we discuss how Melle's literary strategies aim at remedying a significant issue that accompanies his manic experiences: the workings of language itself. During and in the wake of his autobiographic writing, Melle develops ways of treating language, keeping language in check and eventually restoring his faith in language. We explore Melle's writing practice and relate it to Lacan's concept of the *sinthome*. This chapter serves as a bridge between the two primary themes of the preceding chapters: the reconstructing of the ego-narrative and the treatment of language. These themes are explicitly addressed by Melle himself in his book and in interviews about his work.

After utilizing Lacan's framework to engage in a dialogue with the manic experience and recovery strategies in the preceding chapters, Chapter 5, *Lacan and the Language of Mania*, shifts its focus to Lacanian theory. We investigate what Lacan's consecutive remarks on mania unveil about his conceptions of language as such. We revisit the notion of *flight of signifiers*



and elaborate Lacan's comments on mania. He qualifies the manic subject as being delivered to the endless metonymy of the signifying chain (Lacan, 2004/2014) and describes manic excitation as a return to the real of language (Lacan, 1974/1987). In both cases, Lacan situates mania within the realm of psychosis and views it as a form of language that has gone mad. We then discuss Lacan's (1975/1998) notion of *llanguage* as a parasitic force of dysregulation and its implications for Lacan's (2005/2016) understanding of manic language. Manic language, according to this perspective, no longer represents language gone mad but reveals the underlying madness of *llanguage* lurking beneath the surface of language.

In our sixth and final chapter, we discuss the overarching themes that permeate the various chapters of this dissertation. We do so utilizing Lacan's framework of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. Furthermore, we engage in a discussion with Binswanger's phenomenological account of *flight of ideas*. We confront the Lacanian understanding of the manic as being the plaything of language (Czermak, 1998/2012) with Binswanger's (1933/2000) understanding of manic language as the playful or ludic manipulation of sonorous elements and relate this to their diverging conceptions of the subject and its relation to language. We address some nosological and therapeutical implications of our study. Finally, we reflect on the study's limitations and propose potential avenues for further research.

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## Appendix C. Samenvatting

### Op hol geslagen taal. Een Lacaniaanse studie van de manie

In de Lacaniaanse psychoanalytische theorie wordt er opmerkelijk weinig aandacht besteed aan het fenomeen van de manie en de diagnose van *manische depressie* of *bipolaire stoornis*. Deze studie draagt bij tot een remediëring hiervan door een poging te ondernemen om het fenomeen van de manie te benaderen vanuit een Lacaniaans perspectief.

Lacan raakt het fenomeen van de manie slechts enkele keren aan, toch bieden zijn verspreide en beknopte opmerkingen een basis voor het ontwikkelen van een coherent perspectief op manie als een taalgerelateerd fenomeen (zie Lacan, 1974/1987, 2004/2014, 2005/2016). In onze lezing is de unieke bijdrage van een Lacaniaans perspectief op de manie dat ze de manie opvat als een taalfenomeen. In deze doctoraatsverhandeling onderzoeken we de impact van de ontsprende manische taal op de beleving van het subject. Doorheen de hoofdstukken verkennen we wat dit perspectief betekent voor ons begrip van manie, de ervaring van manie, en de nasleep en herstelprocessen na een manische episode.

We hanteren een conceptuele en kwalitatieve methode, in die zin dat we Lacaniaanse theorie combineren met onderzoek op basis van interviews en autobiografische getuigenissen. In Hoofdstuk 2 rapporteren we over een interviewstudie met 18 personen die getuigen over hun manische ervaringen. In Hoofdstuk 3 en 4, twee literaire casestudies, gaan we in op twee auteurs die over hun manische ervaringen hebben geschreven en getuigd in interviews. In Hoofdstuk 3 bestuderen we het literaire werk van J.M.H. Berckmans en in Hoofdstuk 4 bespreken we het autobiografische en literaire werk van Thomas Melle. In deze drie klinische hoofdstukken gaan we een interpretatieve dialoog aan tussen getuigenissen en verhalen over manische ervaringen en een Lacaniaans begrip van taal en subjectiviteit toegepast op de manie. Hoofdstuk 5 is een meer conceptuele studie die onderzoekt wat de implicaties van manische taal zijn voor Lacans opvattingen over taal.

Goodwin & Jamison (2007) geven in hun handboek de volgende definitie: manische toestanden worden typisch gekenmerkt door een verhoogde stemming, meer en sneller spreken, snellere gedachten, verhoogde niveaus van fysieke en mentale activiteit, meer

energie (met een bijhorende verminderde behoefte aan slaap), prikkelbaarheid, scherpere waarneming, paranoia, verhoogde seksualiteit en impulsiviteit. In de DSM-5 maakt de manie deel uit van de diagnose van *bipolaire stoornis type 1* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In een Lacaniaans perspectief op manie wordt de manie niet zozeer beschouwd als een probleem van verhoogde stemming of toegenomen energie, maar strikt genomen als een probleem van taal en discours (André, 1993; Leader, 2013; Soler, 2002). Ook in psychiatrische beschrijvingen van manie zijn talige fenomenen prominent aanwezig. Naast een verhoogde stemming en een toegenomen activiteit, is *ideeënvlucht* een van de essentiële symptomen (Goodwin & Jamison, 2007; Kraepelin, 1921). In de DSM-5 wordt ideeënvlucht omschreven als: een bijna voortdurende stroom van versneld spreken met abrupte veranderingen van onderwerp die meestal gebaseerd zijn op begrijpelijke associaties, afleidende stimuli of woordspelingen (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). De notie ideeënvlucht suggereert een denkproces, maar wordt vooral beschreven als een continue en onstuitbare stroom van woorden eerder dan als een overvloed aan ideeën. Met Lacan kunnen we deze ideeënvlucht beschouwen als een fenomeen dat zich afspeelt op het niveau van de betekenaar eerder dan van het betekende. We suggereren het begrip *betekenaarsvlucht*.

Als vertrekpunt voor het ontwikkelen van een Lacaniaans perspectief op de manie bespreken we Lacans (2004/2014) opmerking in *Seminarie 10*, waar hij stelt dat het subject in de manie overgeleverd is aan de pure, oneindige en ludieke metonymie van de betekenaarsketting. In deze korte opmerking zit een uitgewerkt perspectief op taal en subjectiviteit vervat, en een theorie over hun verstoring in de manie. Kort samengevat, in de manie ontspoord de taal en als gevolg daarvan is het subject overgeleverd aan deze ontsporende taal, totdat uiteindelijk de ervaring van subjectiviteit zelf ondermijnd raakt. De betekenaarsvlucht verstoort de narratieve samenhang van het ego, ondermijnt de assumptie van zelfbeschikking over het eigen spreken en daarmee de ervaring van subjectiviteit. De betekenaarsvlucht belemmert de productie van betekenis en zin, en draagt waarschijnlijk bij aan de manische opwinding en onrust. Als achtergrondtheorie verwijzen we naar Lacans opvattingen over de relatie tussen taal en subject in zijn tekst uit 1957, *L'instance de la lettre*, waar Lacan (1966/2006) Jakobsons opvatting over *metafoor* en *metonymie* overneemt en deze relateert aan Freuds concepten van *verdichting* en *verschuiving*. Voor Lacan is het slechts door de articulatie van een discours, door het aaneenschakelen van betekenaars, dat zowel

betekenis als de ervaring van subjectiviteit ontstaan. Dit gebeurt door de dubbele werking van anticipatie en retroactie van de betekenaarsketting. Manische taal is louter het associatieve, voorwaarts bewegende, metonymische aspect van taal. Dit verstoort het proces van anticipatie en retroactie en heeft invloed op de articulatie van betekenis en de ervaring van subjectiviteit. Wat verdwijnt in het metonymische wegglijden van de betekenaarsketting is precies de ervaring van het beheersen van de eigen taal. Betekenaars worden op zo'n willekeurige en snelle manier aan elkaar geschakeld dat geen betekenissen of eigenschappen meer op een stabiele manier aan de spreker kunnen worden toegeschreven. Dit leidt tot het gevoel dat één of andere gekke kracht spreekt, eerder dan dat ik als subject spreek. Het subject verdwijnt hier in de articulatie.

In Hoofdstuk 2, *Manie in de spiegel*, rapporteren we over een kwalitatieve interviewstudie met 18 personen met manische ervaringen. We hebben hen geïnterviewd over hun ervaringen, en hoewel de interviews een brede reikwijdte hadden, bleken ze informatiever over het herstelproces dan over de ervaring van manie op zich. We voerden een thematische analyse uit op de interviewtranscripten. Dit resulteerde in zes thema's die een traject van identiteitsconstructie weergeven: *De ontwrichtende ervaring van manie*, *De bipolaire diagnose*, *Het aannemen van een bipolair narratief*, *Verantwoordelijkheid nemen*, *Zichzelf in het oog houden* en *Het narratief personaliseren*. Het eerste deel van de resultaten beschrijft de stappen die de deelnemers namen bij het omgaan met hun manische ervaringen. Vervolgens interpreteren we de resultaten aan de hand van Lacans model van de dubbele spiegel, dat een theoretisch perspectief biedt op identiteit en subjectiviteit met betrekking tot de relatie tussen driften, driftregulatie en identificatie. In termen van Lacans model beschrijven we het hersteltraject als een proces waarbij participanten controle krijgen over manische ervaringen door het ontwikkelen van manieren om de drift te representeren en door het aannemen van een gedeeld narratief over de drift. Onze voornaamste focus ligt hier op de reconstructie van het ego nadat het is verpletterd door de ervaring van manie en op hoe, voor de participanten aan deze studie, het aannemen van een narratief over bipolariteit, heeft bijgedragen aan hun herstel.

In Hoofdstuk 3, *Het Knetteren van de letteren*, bespreken we het literaire werk van de Vlaamse schrijver J.M.H. Berckmans in het licht van zijn levenslange strijd met manische depressie. Het oeuvre van Berckmans weerspiegelt zijn voortdurende worsteling met de

ontregeling van de taal. Door zijn schrijven ontwikkelt Berckmans verschillende strategieën om met deze talige ontregeling om te gaan. Enerzijds probeert hij de metonymische ontsparing van de betekenaarsketting te temperen, anderzijds poogt hij de ervaring te bewerkstelligen van zich het subject en de auteur van zijn woorden te weten. Berckmans behandelt de taal door middel van een nauwgezet proces van schrijven en herschrijven, wat hij beschrijft als ‘hakken’ en ‘kerven’ in de taal. Tegelijkertijd stelt zijn schrijven hem in staat om zijn onmiddellijke leefwereld te fictionaliseren, wat hij bestempelt als de ‘grafie’ van zijn leven. Verder bespreken we de opeenvolgende vormen van adressering in zijn werk: van de abstracte lezer, naar de secretaris-notulist, tot aan de geadresseerde van zijn brieven. In Hoofdstuk 3 verschuift de focus van de verstoring en reconstructie van het ego-narratief naar de werking van taal, zowel in de ervaring van manie—de manische ontsparing van de taal—als in de herstelstrategieën die door Berckmans zijn ontwikkeld—zijn taalbehandeling.

In Hoofdstuk 4, getiteld *Het schrijven van manie*, bespreken we het werk van de Duitse auteur Thomas Melle in relatie tot zijn manisch-depressieve ervaringen. Melle’s (2016/2017) autobiografische boek, *Met de wereld in de rug*, toont aan hoe een ontregeling van de taal essentieel is om de aard van zijn manische episodes te begrijpen. Daarnaast legt Melle uit hoe hij zich tot het schrijven van literatuur wendde als reactie op de uitdagingen die zijn manische ervaringen met zich meebrachten. In dit hoofdstuk verkennen we dit verband in detail. Eerst onderzoeken we de specifieke taalontregelingen tijdens Melle’s manische episodes. Op basis van *Met de wereld in de rug* onderscheiden we drie karakteristieke taalverstoringen in de loop van zijn manische episodes: eerst desintegreert de taal, vervolgens verdwijnt de narratieve consistentie, en uiteindelijk is er een ineenstorting van subject en ego. Vervolgens bespreken we de literaire herstelstrategieën die Melle in zijn oeuvre hanteert en hoe deze de drie aspecten van taalverstoring aanpakken. We identificeren acht literaire strategieën die zich clusteren in drie genres: impliciet autobiografische fictie, expliciet fictieve autobiografie, en uiteindelijk, *nieuw realisme*. De acht schrijfstrategieën zijn: *Postmodern spel*, *Literaire dubbelgangers*, *Het vertellen van het onuitsprekelijke*, *Het herstel van subject en ego*, *Artificiële authenticiteit*, *Het uitbesteden van de ziekte*, *Het nieuwe realisme*, en *Schrijven, niet spreken*. Voortbouwend op inzichten van Lacan bespreken we hoe Melle’s literaire strategieën gericht zijn op het herstellen van een belangrijk probleem dat gepaard gaat met zijn manische ervaringen: de werking van taal zelf. Tijdens en na het schrijven van zijn

autobiografie ontwikkelt Melle manieren om taal te behandelen, taal onder controle te houden en uiteindelijk zijn vertrouwen in taal te herstellen. We onderzoeken Melle's schrijfspraktijk en relateren deze aan Lacans concept van het *sinthoom*. Dit hoofdstuk dient als brug tussen de twee belangrijkste thema's van de voorgaande hoofdstukken: de reconstructie van het ego-narratief en de behandeling van taal. Deze thema's worden expliciet besproken door Melle zelf in zijn boek en in interviews over zijn werk.

Nadat we in de voorgaande hoofdstukken het Lacaniaans kader hanteerden om in dialoog te gaan met de manische ervaring en herstelstrategieën, verschuift in Hoofdstuk 5, *Lacan en de taal van manie*, de focus naar de Lacaniaanse theorie. We onderzoeken wat Lacans opeenvolgende opmerkingen over de manie onthullen over zijn opvattingen over taal op zich. We hernemen de notie van *betekenaarsvlucht* en werken vervolgens Lacans opmerkingen over de manie verder uit. Hij kwalificeert het manische subject als overgeleverd aan de eindeloze metonymie van de betekenaarsketting (Lacan, 2004/2014) en beschrijft manische opwinding als een terugkeer naar het reële van de taal (Lacan, 1974/1987). In beide gevallen plaatst Lacan manie binnen het veld van de psychose en beschouwt hij het als een vorm van op hol geslagen taal. Vervolgens bespreken we Lacans (1975/1998) notie van tataal [*lalangue*]<sup>469</sup> als een parasitaire en ontregelende kracht en de implicaties daarvan voor Lacans (2005/2016) begrip van manische taal. Volgens dit perspectief is manische taal niet langer een manifestatie van gek geworden taal, maar onthult ze de onderliggende waanzin van tataal die onder het oppervlak van de taal sluimert.

In ons zesde en laatste hoofdstuk bespreken we de overkoepelende thema's van de verschillende hoofdstukken van deze dissertatie. We doen dit aan de hand van Lacans kader van het reële, het symbolische en het imaginaire. Daarnaast gaan we een discussie aan met Binswangers fenomenologische benadering van ideeënlucht. We confronteren de Lacaniaanse opvatting van de manicus als de speelbal van de taal (Czermak, 1998/2012) met Binswangers (1933/2000) begrip van manische taal als de speelse of ludieke manipulatie van klankelementen en relateren dit aan hun uiteenlopende opvattingen over het subject en diens relatie tot taal. We bespreken nog enkele nosologische en therapeutische implicaties van onze studie. Tot slot reflecteren we op de beperkingen van de studie en stellen we mogelijke richtingen voor verder onderzoek voor.

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<sup>469</sup> Lalangue wordt in het Nederlands vertaald als 'detaal' of 'tataal' (Jonckheere, 2007).

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## Appendix D. Data Storage Fact Sheet Chapter 2

Mania in the Mirror  
Bart Rabaey  
05.09.2023

### 1. Contact details

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#### 1a. Main researcher

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- name: Bart Rabaey
- address: Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent
- e-mail: bart.rabaey@ugent.be

#### 1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

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- name: Stijn vanheule
- address: Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Gent
- e-mail: stijn.vanheule@ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

### 2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies

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\* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported: Rabaey, B., & Vanheule, S. (2022). Mania in the mirror: A qualitative study of recovery of mania within a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 39(3), 226–234. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pap0000386>

\* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?: Interview data of the participants in the study

### 3. Information about the files that have been stored

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#### 3a. Raw data

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\* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? ☒ YES / ☐ NO

If NO, please justify:

\* On which platform are the raw data stored?

- ☐ researcher PC
- ☒ research group file server
- ☐ other (specify): ...

## APPENDIX D

\* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- ☒ main researcher
- ☒ responsible ZAP
- ☐ all members of the research group
- ☐ all members of UGent
- ☐ other (specify): ...

### 3b. Other files

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\* Which other files have been stored?

- ☐ file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: ...
- ☐ file(s) containing processed data. Specify: ...
- ☐ file(s) containing analyses. Specify: ...
- ☐ file(s) containing information about informed consent
- ☐ a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
- ☒ file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify:  
excel table with overview of pseudonimized information of the participants
- ☒ other files. Specify: written documents form 1 interview participant, published account from 1 participant

\* On which platform are these other files stored?

- ☐ individual PC
- ☒ research group file server
- ☐ other: ...

\* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- ☒ main researcher
- ☒ responsible ZAP
- ☐ all members of the research group
- ☐ all members of UGent
- ☐ other (specify): ...

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=====

\* Have the results been reproduced independently?: ☐ YES / ☒ NO

\* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):

- name:
- address:
- affiliation:
- e-mail:

v0.2

In den Schriften werde ich mich nicht finden.

—Thomas Melle, *Die Welt im Rücken*