

## **On the Pitfalls and Perils of Publishing/Poubellication: some lessons from the field**

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**Summary:** This paper will present the results of a field study that was inspired by the theories of Maleval on the functions of writing for the psychotic subject. More particularly, we wanted to find out to what extent these theories remain valid in the specific context of Villa Voortman, a non-residential meeting place for people with double diagnosis (psychosis and drug abuse) in Ghent (Belgium), where a substantial part of the visitors is engaged in writing. While the study confirmed the three major functions of writing as identified by Maleval (depositing of excess *jouissance* through the physical act of writing, pouring enjoyment into signifiers, and dumping excess *jouissance* through publishing), a fourth and major function emerged: the identification with an artist. It is reasonable to suggest that this is a particular effect of Villa Voortman's policy to facilitate and stimulate subjects to build up an identity beyond their psychiatric label.

**Key words:** Maleval, Psychosis, Writing, Publishing, Identity, Villa Voortman

### **Introduction**

This paper will present the results of a field study that was inspired by a recent lecture of the French Lacanian psychoanalyst Maleval on the functions of writing for the psychotic subject (Maleval, 2018). In this lecture, Maleval explores how, for the psychotic subject, the publishing of his or her writings can be most liberating, yet is often also an ambiguous process. By way of introduction, we will first illustrate that also for the *neurotic* subject publishing his or her writings can be a conflicted matter, with Lacan himself being a most interesting case in this respect.

### **Poubellication**

Shortly before the *Écrits* would be published, Lacan talked for the first time about "*poubellication*", rhyming "*publication*" (publication) with "*poubelle*" (garbage can), his way of complaining that much of what was being published at that time, should rather be put in the garbage bin. Let it be clear however that his disdain was by no means restricted to others, nor that the timing of his remark was coincidental. Publishing the *Écrits* was not his idea. In fact,

Lacan himself published only a *single* book in his life (his doctoral thesis in psychiatry – with great reluctance and regret as he tried to buy back all copies in order to make the work untraceable), and only once – in case of the *Écrits* - did he authorize a third party to publish a collection of his articles, of which he stated that they were not real articles but open letters, not meant to be read, so that “the title he gave them was more ironic than one could imagine” (Lacan, 2001[1971]).

Lacan’s deep resistance against publishing appears to have multiple roots. It is clear that he preferred speech over writing; not only because he was a performer who loved the stage, but also because speech allows for dialogue, for a direct contact with an audience, including the effects on that audience. Dialogues enabled Lacan to avoid the pitfalls of attempting to state the whole truth, and the same truth to all (Harris, 2017). “The problem with publishing is, that one must always publish *somewhere*”, Lacan once said, not entirely free of some conceited anxiety about bringing his ideas from an elite circle of intellectuals to the masses. Last but not least, there might be a question of identity involved: Lacan did not want his name to become or to be remembered as the name of an *author* (in the Foucauldian sense) (Porge, 2014). If anything, he wanted to be (and be remembered as) a *teacher*, not as an author of a theory in a master discourse. The fact is there for instance that he only accepted the transformation of his Seminars into printed form after the publisher suggested they would be written dialogues that would preserve his role as a teacher.

## **Villa Voortman**

Let us now resort to our field study, in which we wanted to find out to what extent recent theories of Maleval on the functions of writing for the psychotic subject remain valid in the specific context of Villa Voortman.

Villa Voortman (VV) is a low-threshold non-residential meeting center in Ghent for adults with so-called double diagnosis, in extension: people with serious psychiatric issues (most often psychotic problems) in combination with (past or present) drug abuse. This is a most vulnerable group that has it ever more difficult to get access to regular psychiatric aid, not only because they are considered therapy-resistant and/or non-cooperative, but also because economical motives, imposed by government, forces regular psychiatric aid to focus on short-term medicine-based treatments rather than on pathologies that require long-term care. As a consequence, the prognosis of these people is somber: after countless failed psychiatric admissions, with no place to go where they are accepted, they often end up in jail, either as victims or as committers of violence, or they commit suicide. VV’s aim is to offer them a warm environment where they get time and space to bond with the house, the other visitors and the team members. De-stigmatization, empowerment, harm reduction and social inclusion are key principles. One of the ways VV tries to achieve this, is to look for the person beyond his or her psychiatric label(s), by focusing on any interest that can further be developed, be it related to arts, sports, cooking, or any other field. This way not only a stronger self-worth is built, but often this can also be used as a vehicle to create a broader social network.

## **Push-to-creation**

It appears then that a lot of VV's visitors turn out to be quite creative in various fields: drawing, painting, sculpting, making and playing music, and, of course, writing. This should come as no surprise; it has been observed already from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on that a "push-to-creation" appears to be inherent in the psychotic structure, as a means to cover up or stand-in for what is missing at the level of the Symbolic (in this respect, writing seems to guarantee a better success than other forms of art, as it usually leads to a firmer anchoring into the Symbolic), and as a means to handle the excess of jouissance that comes with the psychotic structure. Intoxication (drugs or alcohol) or self-mutilation are dire alternatives to handle this excess. In this sense, Villa Voortman considers the combination of psychosis and substance abuse not as an actual "double diagnosis", but rather as two sides of the same coin, with substance abuse being a self-medication to suppress fear, pain, and psychic suffering (Bryssinck, 2003). Moreover, toxicomania can have a stabilizing effect not only by its effect on the body in the Real, but also by its effect in the Imaginary: for some, the identification with an addict is more bearable than the identification with a psychotic (Bryssinck, 2003).

## **The three functions of writing for the psychotic subject**

It is precisely this depositing of excess of jouissance that Maleval identifies as a first function of writing, stressing that already the sole act of writing – i.e. the physical act - can have this liberating effect (Maleval, 2018). Lacan too remarked that the writings of psychotic persons should in the first place be interpreted as sheets of paper covered with scripture, that their dimension as objects should be emphasized. This contains no judgment on the quality of these writings; it merely indicates that the hands-on practice of writing can have a pacifying function, independent from the content. This becomes more understandable when considering that for many psychotic persons, emotions are hard to symbolize, and can be expressed only in a very direct way. In this sense, scratches on paper can function as an alternative to scratches on the body.

While even the most elementary form of writing, such as doodles or meaningless scribbles, may have an important function, Maleval argues there's more to gain for psychotic subjects when they are somehow able to put into words what they cannot symbolize. He calls this second function "pouring enjoyment into signifiers". The words that are used may be words that rise up from the Real, but they can help in mastering the enigmas that the subject is confronted with and restrain the fear that comes with them.

Maximum gain however can be achieved when the psychotic subject is also able to somehow liberate himself from his writings: in that case a separation is induced between the writing subject and that part of the subject that got shape in the novel or poem. This liberation can come in many forms: regular publishing -through a publisher or on one's own account- or exposition, but also destruction, loss or gift can act as successful forms of so-called "vidage" (dumping) of the excess of jouissance that was deposited in the writings (the third function). At the same time Maleval warns for potential negative side-effects when a psychotic subject parts from his work,

as these may surpass the initial therapeutic effects: while the neurotic person may already be conflicted about parting from his work, for the psychotic person this is all the more so as a lack of limits causes him/her to navigate between excessive happiness and severe suffering anyhow, and moreover, more than for the neurotic, his works of art are considered a true part of himself. Publishing one's work can then be seen as losing or selling oneself, compromising the subject's integrity, and possibly leading to severe depressive or psychotic episodes, hospitalization, and acting out, including suicidal acts.

### **Field study**

In our field study, where we had open-ended interviews with a number of visitors engaged in writing, and also based ourselves on our day-to-day interactions with them, splendid examples of the three functions of writing as identified by Maleval, emerged. Before discussing the general findings, we will present one case study in more detail.

Philippe is a quiet, gentle, and intelligent man in his fifties, who started writing short stories and poems at the age of 15. He bundled them and handed out copies to his friends in order to give them "a piece of himself". Later on he also wrote a fictionalized history novel, tried to publish it, but was turned down. What drove him to writing, was fear, he says. Fear for death, fear for the "I that wasn't me", fear for falling into pieces. Being able to express this fear always brought catharsis, as soon as he took up the pen. At that time, he also started creating a peculiar kind of poetry, composed of non-existing words, yet with lots of alliteration and sounding most beautiful. To Philippe, words are like music – a 2<sup>nd</sup> love of his – and besides, he adds, words are meaningless anyway. (Not unlike the Lacanian view where the relation between signifier and signified is considered to be arbitrary). There follows a period of conflicts with his parents (he comes from a family of intellectuals who desperately want him to study, while Philippe is not willing to abide to the school system, and wants to work with his hands anyway). A rupture follows. For the next 15 years, Philippe is more and more drawn to music, and gets a prestigious and demanding job in this field. This period is also marked by frequent mood swings, lots of alcohol, and a deep sadness for a broken up marriage that he tries to overcome by intensively writing in his diary in the evenings. At the age of 35, Philippe has his first psychotic breakdown. Convinced that he is the new Antichrist – triggered by the discovery that he is a descendant of Clovis – he goes through a manic stage where he believes to be telepathic and have healing powers, and is divinely predestined to become a writer. He sells everything and is on his way to move abroad when he runs into a police force that forces him into psychiatric hospitalization. A severe and long depression quickly follows. The next 15 years, Philippe constantly swings between manic and depressive episodes, and is repeatedly hospitalized (60 times in total). His writing is confined to composing scripts in the manic periods (coherent with his delusion, such as writing letters to politicians in order to convince them of the importance of a meeting), and, in the depressive periods, hindered by tremor as a side-effect of medication, to making meaningless little scrabbles on pieces of paper, while he keeps telling himself "maybe this is nothing, but yet it's something. Despite all these medicines, I exist, and I will continue to exist". It is only 10 years after his first hospitalization, during a hypomanic period, that he is finally

able to start writing about this hospitalization and the events that preceded it, resulting in a moving novel. When one day, seven years ago, a psychiatrist tells him that he has to accept that he'll reside in psychiatric aid for the rest of his life, Philippe decides to go and live with a family member. Being part of a family, together with a mixture of Buddhistic meditation, yoga, psychotherapy, medicine, music making and writing, he succeeds in proving the opposite: there have been no hospitalizations since. After five years, he manages to live on his own, yet leads an isolated life. A year later he discovers Villa Voortman, and shortly after that, for the first time recites his poetry to a small public on our monthly so called "Open Gates" happenings, followed by a performance for a large audience during a theater production, and eventually he is able to recite his poems at an event outside of the Art Bru circuit. For Philippe, who has been trying for years to get rid of being labeled as a manic-depressive psychotic, the new identity as an artist is of the utmost importance. It gives him the confidence to step out of his isolation, and to build a small circle of acquaintances.

Philippe seems able to perform both "the impossible writing" and "writing about the impossible", terms coined by Maleval to distinguish between two types of writing: in the impossible writing, language is not used as a means of communication; there's a radical rejection of the Other and of language. These authors rebel against language, often by inventing neologisms. It is a kind of "direct" writing that may calm down the subject, but also accentuates his or her isolation. There is no social link, a reason for Maleval to compare it to masturbation. This impossible writing is what Philippe does in poems consisting of non-existing words. Remarkably however these poems enable him to step outside of the Art Brut circuit and inscribe himself in a social circle of "regular" poets, where his creations are labeled as Dadaistic – a term that he embraces. In the second type of writing, "writing about the impossible", there is more symbolization, the writing is less direct, much more is said between the lines. There's more to gain for the subject here, as it can help to give sense to certain phenomena. Philippe's novel about his manic periods is an example of this.

## **General findings**

Each person in the villa that is engaged in writing, has its own unique story, yet some common facts emerged throughout our study.

In almost every case, the subject was compelled to writing out of *fear*, usually at young age, and well before onset of the first psychotic breakdown. While writing could not prevent this onset (rather obvious, as they probably would not end up as visitors of the center in that case), writing, especially about their delusions afterwards, is reported to have had a curative effect, in that it helped them somehow to become compatible again with the universe. Some of our visitors are not able to write from this perspective; the therapeutic effect there seems to come primarily from a restraining of the destructive powers of their paranoid delusions. As for the importance of publishing, we can only endorse the point made by Maleval. It is also here that the center can make the largest contribution to its writing visitors. Which form of publishing has the most liberating effect, seems to be very individual. For some, it is the live performances that we regularly organize, others prefer the opportunity to just read their writings out loud to a

selected listener of the team, while others continuously make gifts in the form of a poem (and now and then ask it back the next day).

While this is all much in line with Maleval's findings, there's one aspect that is hardly touched by Maleval, and that emerges again and again in our case studies, namely the fact that writing enables a subject to identify with a writer or a poet. This seems to be of major importance, in some cases even a key driver, and to have such stabilizing impact, that it could well be added as a fourth function of writing. It seems reasonable to suggest that this is a particular effect of all our subjects at Villa Voortman. The center's policy to facilitate and stimulate subjects to build an identity beyond a psychiatric label, apparently bears fruit. As mentioned, in all cases the tendency to write was there at young age already, but it seems that offering an individually tailored publicizing platform can significantly contribute to the buildup of identity and self-worth, and possibly to social inclusion.

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