

The Liminal and the (Oral) Drive: Neurotic Tensions and Neo-liberal Recuperations

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Even when you stuff the mouth—the mouth that opens in the register of the drive—it is not the food that satisfies it...

—Jacques Lacan

Drawing on conceptualizations of the liminal from research at the intersections of anthropology and the social sciences and integrating these with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, we will propose that bodies come to act as sites of liminality, and consider how that happens. As such, they set in motion the crafting of identities, regulatory practices, and methodologies at certain crucial points in the experiences of subjective transition and abjection. We come at this idea in two ways. First, we suggest a critique of the neo-liberalist promotion of the ideal of endlessly deferred becoming at the level of identity. We argue that this ideological apparatus of capitalism engages the speaking being in a series of transactions where an abundance of proxies for drive satisfaction are offered in exchange for ceaseless libidinal investment. Our second route brings us to a reconsideration of the acquisition of certain practices which may be viewed as solutions arrived at by the *parlêtre* (speaking-being) in her/his response to the irruption of drive and its relation to jouissance.

But First, the Liminal

The liminal was originally conceptualised by Van Gennep (1909) in his book *The Rites of Passage* to designate a transition from one social state to another and to identify patterns and forms associated with phases of transition. In his conceptualization, the “liminal phase” corresponded to a period during which a subject experiences ambiguity and inherent uncertainty with regard to identity. British anthropologist Victor Turner is credited with

promoting the significance and relevance of Van Gennep's work and the elaboration of the notion and implications of liminality. Turner (1969) was interested in exploring how an individual's experience and personality are shaped by liminality. In his work, Turner argued that individuals sometimes voluntarily enter a state of liminality by engaging in performative acts, or by adopting behaviors unrestrained by the mundane classifications of every-day life. Turner's use of the phrase "betwixt and between" (95) captures the subject's liminal position in terms of conventional and everyday structures. We are particularly interested in the ways that the liminal concept has been taken up by recent theorists of culture and critical psychology, most notably Bjorn Thomasson (2014) and Paul Stenner et al. (2017).

What each draws attention to is the "experience" of the liminal. Thomasson emphasizes that liminality per se explains nothing, rather, liminality is a happening, and human beings react to liminal experiences in different ways (2014, 7). Liminality then is not a state of existence to be celebrated or glorified or wished for, but instead duly and carefully problematized. This is so, he argues, because in a period such as ours which adopts a celebratory attitude towards anything that presents novelty and constant innovation, the notion of the liminal can be taken up as a positive expression of what Homi Bhabha in 1994 termed "cultural hybridity," an aspect of what Zygmund Bauman described as "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000). Thomasson argues that liminality is a powerful tool of analysis used to explore different problems at the intersections of the anthropological and the political whereby *the formative and transformative* significance of liminal experiences can be studied. Considered in this manner, we are interested in how the analysis of liminal situations or encounters may indicate the ways that technologies of the self, in the Foucauldian sense, can be used to shape identities and institutions. Stenner's work on the liminal emphasizes the liminal experience as happening during occasions of significant transition, passage, or disruption. According to Stenner, we experience liminality when the forms of process (socio-

psycho-organico-physical) that usually sustain, enable, and compose our lives are for some reason disrupted, transformed, or even suspended (2017, 14). Liminal experiences obtain a double function: they untie the ties that bind a given person into a given psycho-social position or place, and they form new connections.

Coming at these uses of the concept of the liminal with our own Lacanian psychoanalytic lens raises a couple of issues for us in the first instance:

1. anthropological instances of the liminal as a phase or observable stage in the human life span raise the liminal to the status of experience but reify the notion of the liminal as a discrete object of study, as a phase or stage of existence;
2. critical theorists' conceptualizations of liminal experiences as essential responses to disruption at the level of identity and psycho-social position mobilizes a reflexive and ideologically accountable use of the concept but largely ignores that those experiences can only be articulated and experienced through bodies that are speaking bodies, marked by the signifier, and caught in the circuit of the drives.

From our point of view, the speaking being is a being in time and has no other recourse except to a traumatic encounter with *tuché* as limit. As opposed to the automaton whereby the subject is determined by the chain of signifiers, the *tuché* is a causality marked by the drive, by the failures of the law and of meaning. The *tuché* as limit could be called the real as that which resists symbolization—death as a limit is an example—but other experiences of the liminal, the time between times, or between states of existence, take place within and between the registers of human experience, relying upon the signifier for their articulation with the symbolic economy within which each speaking being dwells.

Liminal Beings: Biting off more than they can chew?

In support of Thomasson and Stenner's emphases upon the experiences of the liminal and the trend towards the idealization of the liminal in our culture of liquid modernity, we are

moved to introduce the term “liminal being” as a problematic new psycho-social position. Within this position, which is tied to the super-egoic injunctions of late capitalism to enjoy and to be unique, one is always becoming, never arriving. We argue that post-modern liminal creatures have a correlative new ego ideal, indexed upon the *destination* of a ceaseless reinvention, and the possibility of an endless source of existential guilt for never succeeding, never arriving there. One place where we can observe this performativity of the liminal is in contemporary practices associated with eating—food production, consumption, commodification, and preparation—together with their fetishistic variations under capitalism (e.g., nutritional “supplements” advertised as making the body complete). Here, the promotion of competing ideals under neo-liberalism, fostering the endless consumption of objects in the quest for identity production crafts an interminable range of proxy possibilities for drive satisfaction and at the same time perpetuates an ideology of ceaseless or permanent liminality.

The food industry is a big business, and eating practices under modernity have become established as the signs and traits of the civilised subject with respect to social position. The post-modern turn according to which every consumer can be a producer, every lay-cook a culinary master in their own home, every home-baker an Instagram star with thousands of followers examining their sourdough experiments, exemplifies how post-modern ideals and their accompanying technologies are used to shape identities and practices. Via the logic of Lacan’s discourse of the capitalist (1972), both as consumers and producers, speaking beings today are paradoxically more disturbed by the oral drive even as they consumptively reach toward S1 after S1—toward this or that culinary delight or new sourdough technique—that promises to satisfy and sooth the ravages of the drive. The home-baker Instagram star can both be a dispenser of S1s and herself—or her “brand”—operate as an S1.

In his *Birth of Biopolitics* seminar, Michel Foucault (1979) described how neoliberal doctrine was swiftly becoming widely established in Western societies, pointing to the creation of “homo economicus”; whereas in liberalism we had “a man who exchanges” (194), in neoliberalism we have a man who competes (12), and this extends from his economic activity to his social relations and identity. As ideology, it is produced from the experience of buying and selling goods which is then extended to other social spheres, forming an image of the daily life and typical subjects of a society. Neoliberalism subjugates not through governance but by operating on the desires and *jouissance* of homo economicus.

Homo economicus is “an entrepreneur of himself” (226), reducing the status of the *parlêtre* to its economic activity, to its status as consumer or producer. From marriage to higher education to eating a slice of pizza, any action carried out by homo economicus to increase its ability to achieve pleasure or earn money is an investment. In claiming that the neoliberal subject is an entrepreneur of the self, Foucault pointed out that what had been the self’s relatively immutable feature—the body—has now become transformative through technologies. We can think here of contemporary practices of transforming the body: Lasik, plastic surgery, “cool sculpt,” as well as the following of diets such as the Paleo diet, Slim Fast, Nutrisystem, flexitarian, Eco Atkins, Supercharged Hormone and so on. When taken up by someone driven by the superegoic dictate of ceaseless liminality, just one of these social-capital-increasing practices is not enough. Here, where the liminal creature intersects with the ideal of the homo entrepreneur there is a ceaseless attempt to acquire more and to improve the self.

The ideal of entrepreneurship is to be self-directed and self-employed, to make lots of money (of course), and often to be on the cutting edge of the tastes of consumers, perhaps even creating something consumers did not even know they craved. On both the side of the consumer and the entrepreneur, the invention and re-invention of products corresponds to the

new superegoic imperative of perpetual doing and perpetual becoming that is “you doing you.” Inevitably, with entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk being promoted in the social imaginary, complaints of anxiety and depression abound in the psychoanalytic clinic along with an endless source of guilt for never “making it big.” The demands to “enjoy yourself” and to succeed economically rest on an adulation of the image of the Other—on the other side of the coin are clinical complaints of falling short which often manifest in attempts to bolster the ego or control the drives, through for example, the unending quests to have more willpower, to become healthy, and so on.

We focus briefly now on a particular type of entrepreneur that we see as emblematic of the performativity of the liminal in modes of consumption, production, preparation, and commodification. The celebrity chef, as Mihalis Mentinis points out in his book, *The Psychopolitics of Food*, is at once a romantic figure of culinary artistic genius and, at the same time, the entrepreneurial ideal. Those who have achieved celebrity chef status have seemingly managed, as culinary artists, to have become uniquely themselves while achieving success and wealth in the same effort. “The ‘magic’ of cooking,” says Mentinis, “intersects with discourses on the ‘discovery of the true self’ and ‘self-actualisation’; it is about the ‘cooking’ of the self so as to bring out its tastes and flavours” (2016, 15). The celebrity chef thus serves a function of transmission of the neoliberal injunctions to “be happy,” to “enjoy,” and to “be yourself”—which are all propagated at the level of the oral drive in our relationship to food. What’s more, these days celebrity chefs are increasingly those who are always cooking up something more inventive than the next guy.

However, unlike other celebrity entrepreneurs such as Warren Buffett, the celebrity chef is intimately involved in the process of the food’s production with her or his own hands. This seems to make the celebrity chef an unalienated worker, one that, according to Mentinis, is united organically with his or her product of work (2016, 14). In our view, the idea that the

celebrity chef or anyone, for that matter, can de-alienate the worker from the product is a fantasy. Nevertheless, it is a fantasy which has a certain kind of effectiveness as it allows the liminal creature to imagine an end to the ceaseless striving for success and authenticity while at the same time paradoxically inspiring more efforts to cook inventively, to achieve a career as YouTuber doing what one already loves, and so on. In essence, this constitutes a doomed project of attempting to bring the drives under conscious control, involving a fantasy of the ego's ability to incorporate the drives into itself.

Emmy, oh Emmy, Why Did You Throw Your Pudding Away?

Another place where the liminal functions as suspended identity is in the permanent “betwixt and between” of the anorexic, the bulimic, and the orthorexic; where the noun functions not as identity but rather as a sign for the Other that the subject's desire is halted in flux. In psychiatry terms such as Anorexia Nervosa qua diagnosis are used once the presence of a number of pathological characteristics are observably present. Lacanian psychoanalysis on the other hand considers how these and other terms are adopted or adduced (but also refused) by the speaking being who suffers in certain ways from permutations of the oral drive and the detours of the signifier. The speaking being may introduce themselves as ‘bulimic’, as ‘anorexic’, as ‘binge-eating’ and so on, but the analyst may hear these terms as signifiers denoting that the subject's desire has become stuck, but stuck in a place of non-sticking, in a liminal space, that is. (However, even in this space, and perhaps especially because the liminal is so pressing, the identity captured by the adoption of the clinical term may prove useful in an otherwise transitory and transitional space and time.) If along with Stenner et al, (op.cit.) we consider that liminal experiences arise as responses to psychological disruption, interruption, and transition at the level of identity and to the destitution or disarray

that accompanies an exit from a psychosocial position, we can think anew about the function of eating disordered symptoms and their signification for the desire of the speaking being.

As such we turn now to our second pathway of examination of the liminal and the drive. Here, in a move reminiscent of Durkheim's analysis of suicide we are going to see how the liminal is another way of thinking about the existential dramas of the speaking being whose identity had held an important psychical function for them but it either has been torn away or the very position in which that identity functioned no longer exists.

As psychoanalysts, we observe that when the insignias of identity as constitutive of a "centered" self no longer hold, the speaking being may become temporarily or permanently derailed; we may see this in the experience of any lived pregnancy, marriage, separation, or bereavement, as examples of the most ordinary but typical disruptions to our notions of self-hood, identity, and subjectivity. In these experiences, our typical manner of drive satisfactions in the way we miss the object are subverted, and the beyond of the pleasure principle is painfully experienced. We may also see how encounters with the signifier of the lack in the Other may halt the *parlêtre* in a variety of traumatic episodes which set in motion an experience of the liminal. We can most often see this is in the clinical work with children and adolescents working through the traumata of change, loss, parental separation or gender and sexuality troubles at the level of identity. As such, in our clinical work, we can come to consider how severely disordered speaking bodies come to act as sites of liminality; we use this term conscientiously, taking for granted that the liminalized body is one which is already dis-ordered, as in a state of disarray and disruption. What we see as ultimately disordered is desire; that which Lacan identifies as the drone of human existence, the motor of the fantasmatic relation with the Other. And this experience may then set in motion the attempt at re-crafting an identity, making use of signifiers which are borrowed or imitated (we can think here of hysterical anorexic identification as a signifying operation by which the subject can

temporarily tether themselves to the other, or anchor themselves in the Other). But we can also think of regulatory practices of eating and dieting which together with techniques and crafts for bringing the body to order provide practical and sometimes very effective responses to experiences of subjective transition and abjection. On the one hand, pro-ana and pro-mia blogs and websites inform and promote ways of eating/non-eating which allow the subject to ally with the other via the hysterical method of identification so nominated by Freud and later developed by Lacan (Freud, 1923b; Lacan, 1958). On the other hand, seemingly banal practices of Paleo, Slimming World, Weightwatchers and so on, also allow for the mobilization of identification through crafting an eating practice founded on the notion of a community. In both cases, the subject forms a link with the Other or with others by way of the drive, just as in both cases the subject can find something which offers stillness in a time of extreme flux and liminality.

Let us review a very old case of Freud's (1893-95), practically pre-psychoanalytic, as a case-study of a liminal being. We join Fanny Moser— Frau Emmy Von N.—for her session at lunchtime in the sanatorium with Freud. As he entered the room, he caught her in the act of throwing her dessert out through the window. It turned out that this was something she had been doing daily, and he further discovered that she regularly left about half of every meal on her plate. She told Freud that she was not in the habit of eating more and that she had the same constitution as her late father who was also a “small eater.” In addition, she only liked to drink “thick” fluids like milk, coffee or cocoa whereas water or minerals ruined her digestion. Freud straightaway responded to this very new material in the same way as many medical and mental health practitioners do today: even though she didn't strike him as “noticeably thin,” he nonetheless thought it a good idea to recommend for her to drink more and to increase her food intake (Freud 1893-95, 81).

On his next visit to her, he instructed her to drink alkaline water and forbade her from disposing of her pudding. Conceding to Freud's orders, she nonetheless warned him that it would turn out badly (81). When Freud found her the next time having eaten all of her food helpings and having drunk water, she was in a profoundly depressed state and complained of violent gastric pains. Things went downhill after this for both Emmy and Freud: she threatened to starve herself to rectify her digestion, he threatened to have her removed from the sanatorium if she didn't accept his theory that her gastric pain was due to [her] fear (82). At the end of this time period, Freud found her docile, submissive, and willing to accept his theory (but only because Freud told her so!). After putting her under hypnosis later that day, Freud finally asked her about her eating habits. An account of Emmy's eating and drinking particulars emerges at this point which indicates four key moments where a disruption at the level of subjectivity can be seen to launch Emmy into a liminal experience. In an attempt to shore up the disorder of this experience, Emmy adjusts her consumption of food and water, or as we could term it, crafts a regulated practice of eating in such a way as to allow her to move forward.

The first moment occurs when she is a child. Asked to eat her meat at dinnertime, Emmy refused and her mother demanded that Emmy eat the meat two hours later after it had been left standing there, congealed, cold, and with the fat set hard on the plate. Her disgust upon recollecting this punishment remained current in her everyday experience of eating since regardless of what was on the menu she saw "the plates before me with the cold meat and fat on them" (82).

The next part of the story is a memory of when she was in her early twenties following the death of her mother, and she was living with her brother who was an officer who had "that horrible disease" (82). Emmy knew that it was contagious, and she was terrified of picking up his knife and fork by mistake at the dinner table. Again, at this point in

her telling of the story, she was visibly disturbed, and Freud said she shuddered. She went on to say that in spite of this fear she ate her meals with him so that no one would find out that he was ill.

Soon after that, she recalled how she nursed her other brother, a consumptive, whose spittoon accompanied him to the dinner table and whose illness, coughing up phlegm, and so on, necessitated frequent spitting across the plates into the open spittoon (more shuddering). This made Emmy feel sick to her stomach, but she couldn't show it, she said, for fear of hurting his feelings. And when she sat down to eat, in her mind's eye she saw those spittoons on the table, and they still made her feel sick.

Finally, she recalled that when she was seventeen, she had gone with her family to Munich where they had all contracted a gastric virus due to drinking the water. The others had improved following medical attention, but her condition had persisted and had not even gotten better after drinking "mineral" water. She remembered thinking that *it wouldn't be of any use* even though "the doctor" had prescribed it.

Freud made short shrift of these eating symptoms—banishing them under hypnosis—and was delighted to report in the case history that the therapeutic effect under hypnosis was immediate and lasting as she went on to eat and drink without "making any difficulty" (83). In his discussion of the case as a whole, Freud comments:

She ate so little because she did not like the taste, and she could not enjoy the taste because the act of eating had from the earliest times been connected with memories of disgust whose sum of affect had never been to any degree diminished; and it is impossible to eat with disgust and pleasure at the same time [...] Her old-established disgust at mealtimes had persisted undiminished because she was obliged constantly to suppress it, instead of getting rid of it by reaction." (89)

Certainly, we can see Freud's understanding of Emmy's anorexia as a hysterical symptom, or more precisely, what he would go on to develop as such.

We revisit Emmy's anorexic solutions here because they also seem to us to offer a valuable clue to thinking about the acquisition of certain eating habits at a time when

desire/appetite is disordered, what we have been introducing here as the inauguration of the liminal experience in relation to the demand of the Other.

What we know from Lisa Appignanesi's (1992) detailed research on the background of Freud's case histories is that Emmy's entire childhood was seasoned with death. Her mother had fourteen children, of which only four (including Emmy) survived to adulthood; and Emmy would have experienced six of these deaths during the course of her own childhood and adolescence. When she was nineteen, Emmy found her mother dead. Hers is an existence marked by death and disease, giving rise to a recurring liminal state during which her desire is the only thing that lends stability to her existence. What makes the material Emmy gives to Freud even more interesting is the account of her anorexia which begins by her refusal of her mother's initial demand to eat meat by swallowing down the less appetizing version with the meat fat set hard. We thought it would be interesting to subject this symptom to Lacanian psychoanalytic scrutiny in relation to the signifier.

The German *Kummerspeck* is a compound noun consisting of two words. The first is *der Kummer*, which refers to emotional pains like concern, worry, sorrow or anxiety. The second is *der Speck*, which can either mean "bacon" or "fat." Most translations of *Kummerspeck* render it as something like "grief fat" or "sorrow fat. So, what Emmy swallows down is a kind of suffering that has a name, *grief-fat*. This is a possible naming of the response of a little girl to a constant state of bereavement and sorrow, and significantly a state of affairs in which her mother is the epicenter. Perhaps then the order of the material she gives to Freud from swallowing down the grief fat of her mother's, to swallowing down a whole host of other disgusting meals following her mother's death, can be considered afresh in this light.

The most affectively charged state in Emmy's case is not, as Freud thought, the disgust of the hysteric, but rather the absence of limit between life, sickness, and death.

Emmy installs an oral solution in order to delimit the liminal arising out of the *tuché* of her existence.¹ This is a solution which Freud undoes under hypnosis, despite her having found it to be helpful to her for almost twenty years. Freud sees the presence of anorexia and responds with a demand for her to eat; we can see now, with this attention to the signifier that Emmy's experience of the liminal inaugurated a shift in her desire/appetite such that refusal/delimitation and an identification with her father whom she called a "small eater" functioned in certain important psychical ways. We may wonder if this late father also liked to refuse something of Emmy's mother and found a way to stage this refusal in his just eating a little of what he was offered. What seems clear is that what Emmy eats and drinks is conditioned by her own attempt to preserve a space for desire, a space that quite literally ends up as "half a plate." We can say that Emmy eats half a plate of food and half a plate of nothing. Having nothing, eating nothing, as Lacan realized, are ways to preserve desire in the encounter with the demand of the Other. (Lacan, 1977, p. 104).

Eating disorders are very often attempts at an oral solution to the problematic of experiences of the liminal. As such attempts aim at ways to preserve a space for one's own desire, we find problematic the use of diagnostic labels because they try to fix the speaking being's identity and therefore result in wresting away the agency involved in any passage from one subjective position to another. Put differently, the speaking being's experiences of the labor of becoming are foreshortened in favor of an identificatory destination imposed upon them. Such an identity qua diagnosis operates according to a set of signs (for example, BMI, bone density loss, etc.) read from the body of the *parlêtre* which could also be

¹ What we are calling an 'oral solution' here may very often be observed in the ways very young patients respond to *Tuché*, i.e., with the effects of a totally unpredictable encounter with the real. The real is incompatible with any symbolic co-ordinates: hence, Lacan's invention of the neologism, '*troumatisme*,' (*trou*, French = hole) from his tenth seminar (Lacan, 1977). As an irruption of the real in the midst of our reality, trauma tears a hole in the very fabric of meaning. The hole (perhaps rabbit hole) as an unsymbolisable, unbearable experience may be stopped up by an invention which often takes the form of a cessation of eating, or a cut in the eating practice, something which breaks the fall in the hole of liminal meaninglessness.

described as the attempt to solve or re-solve the tensions or paradoxes of the drive's encounter with the liminal. Missing this paradox risks condemning the *parlêtre* to endlessly circulate within a system of signs rather than finding, as with Emmy's "half a plate," a singular solution to the suffering of the drive's encounter with the liminal.

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