Towards the Difference between Neurosis and Psychosis

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This paper recommends that clinicians attempting to differentiate the structures of neurosis and psychosis take account of Freud's thinking on the mental act of negation, based on his clinical practice, as well as Jacques Lacan's development of Freud's conception. The author argues that this is essential for any diagnosis which invokes the notion of a loss of a sense of reality.

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If in recent years, in other discourses, there has been a loss of confidence in the terms "neurosis" and "psychosis", their differentiation remains crucial to psychoanalytic practice.1 The term neurosis was dropped from the DSM III in 1980; and in the current DSM IV-TR the term "psychotic" is more apologised for than advocated: "The narrowest definition of psychotic is restricted to delusions or prominent hallucinations, with hallucinations occurring in the absence of insight into their pathological nature".2 There is reference to an alternative definition in terms of "a gross impairment in reality testing". This last arguably just makes explicit what the previous one hides behind the words "delusion" and "hallucination".3 By this account

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2 American Psychiatric Association, DSM IV – TR, p. 827. This account replaced the earlier quite moralistic psychodynamic DSM II and ICD-9 definitions in terms of "impairment that grossly interferes with the capacity to meet the ordinary demands of life". Interestingly, DSM IV is at pains to not speak of the "schizophrenic" and the "alcoholic" but prefers "an individual with schizophrenia" and "an individual with alcohol dependence" (ibid., p. xxxi).

3 Delusion: "a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary". Hallucination: "a sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception but that occurs without external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ" (ibid., p. 821). Is this not also a description of our nightly dreams?
psychosis is understood in terms of an aberration regarding what is taken to be, by "almost" everyone else, reality. 4

It is understandable that a diagnosis based on such a Protean notion as reality would cause uncertainty, disquiet and even frustration. Such a basis becomes even more untenable when it can be argued that other "mental disorders" display a questionable relation to reality but do not merit the description psychosis. The abandoned "neurosis" had long been described in terms of flight from reality and indeed flightiness generally.

Indeed it is in the very works of Sigmund Freud that we encounter the notion of a turning away from reality as the mark of psychopathological presentations. It is to the work of Freud that I am recommending we turn to begin to clarify the potential of the psychoanalytic distinction between neurosis and psychosis. I propose that the contribution of psychoanalysis has been misunderstood due to a misunderstanding of the term "reality" in Freud's work. This misunderstanding amounts to reading the term as referring to what we can call a "commonsense understanding of reality", a sense which presumes us all to have the potential to be productive members of society, to participate as economic units of human resource. 5

In his 1914 paper "On Narcissism: an Introduction", Freud tells us, in a reference to a triumvirate most appropriate to us here today, that the motive for his interest in narcissism came from the challenge to "subsume what we know of dementia praecox (Kraepelin) or schizophrenia (Bleuler) under the hypothesis of the libido theory" 6 – that is, Freud's own theory. Proposing the diagnostic term "paraphrenia" to replace both Kraepelin's and Bleuler's terms, Freud identifies "the two fundamental characteristics" of this disorder: "megalomania and diversion of interest from the external world – from people and things". Immediately, he recognises that this is not precise enough because "a patient suffering from hysteria or obsessional neurosis has also as far as his illness extends given up his relations to reality". 7 There is a development in this paper which distinguishes neurosis and psychosis in

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4 American Psychiatric Association, DSM IV - TR, ibid.
5 This notion of human resources has become an accepted term in discourse of work today. Arguably it contrasts with the resourcefulness manifest in the functioning of the unconscious.
7 Ibid.
terms of investment in objects and the withdrawal of that investment. While important, and constituting arguably another route to same place, I will leave that option for another day and continue with our worrying of the notion of reality.

No progress can we make until we give up the “commonsense notion of reality” referred to above. Such a notion of reality does not inform our understanding of mental life.

In his 1911 paper ‘Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning’, Freud begins: “We have long observed that every neurosis has as its result, and probably therefore as its purpose, a forcing of the patient out of real life, an alienating of him from reality”. 8 He goes on to say: “Neurotics turn away from reality because they find it unbearable – either the whole or parts of it”. What reality is this which merits such a strong summation: “unbearable”? When Freud continues here he shows that it is not in the turning away from what is referred to as reality that the difference between neurosis and psychosis lies: “The most extreme type of this turning away from reality is shown by certain cases of hallucinatory psychosis which seek to deny the particular event that occasioned the outbreak of their insanity”. In a footnote he describes the human being as “a system living according to the pleasure principle” which “must have devices to enable it to withdraw from the stimuli of reality. Such devices are merely the correlative of “repression” which treats internal unpleasurable stimuli as if they were external – that is to say, pushes them into the external world”. 9 The picture here is one where there is a fundamental conflict between the operation of the pleasure principle, which seeks to reduce or perhaps ultimately annihilate tension,

9 Ibid., p. 220. In the same year, in his case history of the paranoiac President Schreber, Freud indicates that what is distinctive about paranoia should be looked for in “…the mechanism by which the symptoms are formed or by which repression is brought about” and not in the presence of the father-complex or a homosexual wishful phantasy, which are common across the neuroses and psychoses (S. Freud, “Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia [Dementia Paranoides]”, SE XII [1911], p. 59). This is another moment where Freud is looking for a mechanism that would distinguish neurosis and psychosis, the term repression still covering both before the emergence of a distinctive term in the case history of the Wolf Man. This will be discussed further below.
and what are termed “the stimuli of reality (Realität)”. Already here it is clear that this “reality” is not some simple notion of the external world, the commonsense notion of reality, since it is as if to there that these “internal unpleasurable stimuli ... of reality” are sent.

Freud proposes that the reality which is unbearable, from which the subject “withdraws”, is the reality of castration, a proposal that itself has seen many withdraw from the Freudian position. Hence, arguably, the appeal of the loss of confidence regarding the Freudian distinction between the terms neurosis and psychosis. Because, from a Freudian-Lacanian perspective, the difference in the mechanisms or “devices” with which the subject deals with the reality of castration is what differentiates psychosis from neurosis.

Before we reject this occupation with castration as out of touch with contemporary clinical phenomena, I would ask you to consider what every parent hears from their young children, boys and girls: investigations into who has one and who does not; playful interchanging of who’s a boy and who’s a girl. Our very successful amnesia of our own infantile sexual researches does not defend us against hearing it in the evidence coming from our children.

Let us consider a discussion by Freud of a patient’s reaction to castration, that of the Wolf Man. Freud proposes that the debilitating mental disorder suffered by this young man in his mid-twenties originated in an infantile neurosis. A clearer distinction between neurosis and psychosis was still to emerge, but here in this case history a crucial step in that clarification is taken, even is it leaves behind a question regarding the diagnosis of the patient. Freud begins his discussion with reference to the term with which he was most familiar, “repression”.

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11 Consider the position of Ernest Jones and other ardent advocates for psychoanalysis in the debates concerning sexuality and castration in the 1920s and 1930s.
12 Another case history which brings to prominence the reality of castration is, of course, that of the five-year-old boy Little Hans (See S. Freud, “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy”, SE X [1909], pp. 2-149).
13 We have already seen in the quotation above from the Schreber case, a few years before, a hunch that there are other “devices”.
"When I speak of his having rejected it the first meaning of the phrase is that he would have nothing to do with it, in the sense of having repressed it".14

He elaborates: "First he resisted and then he yielded; but the second reaction did not do away with the first".15 This is saying that there was the operation of repression resulting in the unconscious recognition of the reality of castration. Yes, a recognition that does not come to consciousness. This is the challenge of psychoanalysis, for us to tolerate acknowledging the existence of something which is so foreign to our commonsense: the unconscious, mental activity not known to conscious thought, but nonetheless fundamentally determining of our thoughts and actions. This is Freud's description of repression in the Wolf Man. But there is something about this patient that has Freud look further. He proposes that here there is evidence of another current, "the oldest and deepest which did not as yet even raise the question of the reality of castration. This current requires a different term – one more extreme than "the pushing away somewhere" which repression describes. Freud introduces here the word "verworfen" to represent this absolute repudiation, or "excision" as Lacan would subsequently, initially, put it. Freud's crucial step here is perhaps distracted from by the debate about the accuracy of his diagnosis of the patient in terms of "an [infantile] obsessional neurosis which has come to an end spontaneously, but has left a defect behind it after recovery".16 This debate, which tends to regret that "poor Freud, in his confusion, did not see clearly what we all see so very clearly" is of questionable merit compared to the achievement in this passage of producing a term to describe a mechanism operating in relation to castration: Verwerfung, or foreclosure, as it has since come to be translated.

At this point in the text, Freud illustrates the appearance of this new term with the report of a hallucination the Wolf Man experienced as a little boy, in other words, an instance of the enactment of the operation of foreclosure:

"When I was five years old, I was playing in the garden near my nurse, and was carving with my pocket-knife in the bark of one of the walnut trees that come into my dream as well. Suddenly,

14 S. Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis", SE XVII (1918), pp. 84-85.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 8.
to my unspeakable terror, I noticed that I had cut through the little finger of my (right or left?) hand, so that it was only hanging on by its skin. I felt no pain, but great fear. I did not venture to say anything to my nurse, who was only a few paces distant, but I sank down on the nearest seat and sat there incapable of casting another glance at my finger. At last I calmed down, took a look at the finger, and saw that it was entirely uninjured”.

By 1924, in a paper entitled “The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis”, Freud can state: “Neurosis and psychosis differ from each other far more in their first, introductory, reaction than in the attempt at reparation which follows it”. In light of the passage in the case of the Wolf Man, these two different reactions can be named: repression for the former, foreclosure for the latter.

In his Seminar on the psychoses (1955-1956), Lacan describes the distinction between neurosis and psychosis which he finds in Freud:

“In neurosis inasmuch as reality is not fully articulated symbolically into the external world, it is in a second phase that a partial flight from reality, an incapacity to confront this secretly preserved part of reality, occurs in the subject. In psychosis, on the contrary, reality itself initially contains a hole that the world of fantasy will subsequently fill”.

The question of the difference between neurosis and psychosis is one concerning whether symbolisation has been installed in the subject or rejected. We are born into the world of signifiers which carry on incessant

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18 J. Lacan, ibid., p. 45.
signifying. Any stability, any sanity depends on how successfully we manage to silence this "continuous discourse":

"It is a function of the ego that we do not have to perpetually listen to this articulation that organises our actions like spoken actions. This isn't drawn from the analysis of psychosis, it's only making evident, once again, the postulates of the Freudian notion of the unconscious".  

Either a signifier of lack has been introduced, this being a pre-requisite for symbolisation, or it has been rejected. Either this signifier has been registered, so to speak, even if the subject spends their life protesting against it in hysteria or deadening it in obsessional neurosis; or the signifier is not there and the subject lives a life running the risk of bumping into it, of it returning from the incessant signifying of the world.

A most striking example of this is the case of Daniel Paul Schreber to whom the idea occurred, at the age of fifty-one, "that after all it really must be very nice to be a woman submitting to the act of copulation". This idea announced the beginning of a collapse into severe psychotic illness in a man of impressive intelligence and ability. Due to a fundamentally different installation in symbolisation a neurotic subject would have done and everyday does do something else with such a thought.

Lacan captures this difference in very plain terms when he observes:

"...the normal subject is essentially someone who is placed in the position of not taking the greater part of his internal discourse seriously.... Observe the number of things in normal subjects, including yourselves, that it's truly your fundamental occupation not to take seriously. The principal difference between you and the insane is perhaps nothing other than this. And this is why for many, even without their acknowledging it,

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20 S. Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoica)" [1911], SE XII, p. 13.
the insane embody what we would be led to if we began to take things seriously”.\(^1\)

Schreber took the idea seriously, so seriously that he fell severely ill. His singular response however, helped by his intelligence and intellectual acumen, saw him find a way out of the severity of the illness by producing a delusion in which he became God’s wife. It is important to note that this delusion – once established, and that took time – co-existed with the ability to conduct himself with impeccable social graces and to produce arguably the most articulate account of psychosis ever written.

**The Mental Act of Negation**

In order to look further at this action of symbolisation which is a fundamental one, literally in sense of “founding”, and one which arguably determines the difference between neurosis and psychosis, we can turn to Freud’s 1925 paper “Negation” and read it with the light of the commentary by Jacques Lacan and Jean Hyppolite, the philosopher invited to contribute to Lacan’s seminar in February 1954. What is most valuable is the emergence of a distinction between two applications of the term negation along with support for why psychoanalytic work can do with the Lacanian conception of the Real.

Freud begins with a couple of examples, delivered in a style remarkable for its lightness given the sense of negation that is to emerge later in the paper. Is it too fanciful to say that it anticipates Lacan’s distinction quoted above on the question of whether we take signifying material seriously or not? Freud gives us phrases from his practice: The patient saying: “Now you’ll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I have no such intention” or the much-quoted “You ask who this person in the dream can be. It’s not my mother.” Freud’s response: “We emend this to ‘so it is his mother’”. These are examples of how “the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness.... Negation, he proposes, is “a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed: indeed it is a lifting (\textit{Aufhebung}) of the repression, though not of course an acceptance of what is

repressed”. In case there is any misunderstanding that the effect that repression is so easily overcome by the dropping of a not into a sentence, Freud reiterates: “...what is essential to the repression persists”.  

How are we to understand this? When Freud says “...what is essential to the repression persists”, I understand him to be saying that the repression of the reality of castration persists, that is, the repression of the signifier of a fundamental lack. What has been revoked is the effect of repression on signifying material previously unavailable to consciousness and now let through with a stamp of negation – “not” – which Freud compares to the “Made in Germany” label on products. In other words, the symbol of negation allows “thinking (to) free itself from the restrictions of repression and enrich itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning”. This potential for therapeutic gain, for the lifting, albeit only intellectual, of repression may be welcomed by the therapeutic enthusiast, but it may also sound alarm bells in those who are uneasy about what the “talking cure” can unleash. This concern is understandable and would indeed be justified in relation to a psychotherapeutic practice that did not ground its practice on a clear theoretical distinction between neurosis and psychosis. I say theoretical because in clinical practice the structure may not reveal itself immediately, so the theoretical distinction provides a restraint regarding one’s clinical position and the form of interventions in the work. It should also be said that if it is a theoretical distinction, it arose from the clinical work of practitioners such as Freud and Lacan.

Hyppolite, for his part, makes a crucial contribution. He highlights Freud’s positing of an original judgement of attribution by the nascent subject: a judgement in terms of good / bad, useful / harmful. This occurs prior to the judgement that a thing exists. In other words, expedience precedes acknowledgement of existence. This has to do with it being a judgement on the part of what Freud calls the “pleasure-ego”. This pleasure-ego takes in – introjects – the good and the useful, and expels the bad and the harmful. This is the basis for that which we subsequently call our “intellectual activity”. The judgement of existence only emerges when a “reality-ego” has appeared. This reality-ego is a development of the

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23 Ibid., p. 236.
pleasure-ego and acts on its behalf, but takes into account what it can get away with in light of what is real.

Already the terms require to be discriminated. An agency of thought -- the reality-ego -- is working in the service of the pleasure principle in the face of the opposing force of some "brute real", let us call it for now. What is called "reality-testing" is the responsibility of this reality-ego. In so far as the pleasure principle directs our mental life away from the unpleasurable, reality-testing is a negotiation of lack which works to avoid encountering it. We can say that it directs how we side-step the repressed in our everyday lives, how we distract ourselves from it through the satisfaction of our narcissism, the exercise of our aggressivity, our erotic adventures and how we struggle with it in our inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety.

Freud puts its function thus:

"It is no longer a question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken into the ego or not but of whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be rediscovered in perception (reality) as well. ...The first and immediate aim, therefore, of reality-testing is not to find the object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to find such an object, to convince oneself that it is still there". 24

Reality-testing, therefore is an exercise in the denial of the reality of castration in that it seeks out an object which will convince that the lost object is still there.

It is reality-testing that is responsible for the production of a fetish. In his 1927 paper "Fetishism", 25 Freud highlights another mechanism, a very common one, with which the little boy, say, deals with the perception of the female genital, the perception that there is no penis there. He "disavows" the perception. Here Freud is discriminating further, elaborating a distinction between the operation of repression and the operation of disavowal. 26 The manifestation of disavowal in the fetish can be understood as the child

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26 From this paper derives the importance of the term "Verleugnung" (disavowal).
holding to his belief that the female has a penis in spite of and along side of the perception that it is missing:

"...the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and ... does not want to give up".27

Reality-testing directed by the pleasure principle is therefore hardly the most reliable mental activity. It is an exercise which supports the denial of lack. It seeks out representations of the object that is lost so as to satisfy, if nothing else, a narcissism that must be whole: "...a pre-condition for the setting up of reality testing is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction".28 Lacan, for his part, describes reality-testing as an exercise by the ego which alienates us from our subjectivity.29

It is in the final paragraph of this short paper by Freud on negation that a second application of the term negation emerges. Affirmation (Bejahung) is situated on the side of bringing signifying material in and together, uniting it creatively. Hyppolite brings our attention to how Freud locates this action on the side of Eros, the Greek god of desire.30 In contrast, and in a relation which Hyppolite underlines as dissymmetric, is the action of negation which is the "successor" of expulsion.31 This primordial negation is clearly not the same as the negation in the examples which introduced the paper.32 However, it could be said that the two have one thing in common. Both function in relation to the reality of castration. However, the use of the

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27 S. Freud, "Fetishism", SE XXI (1927), pp. 152-153. That it was the mother who was negated in the example in the 1925 paper on negation is perhaps not unconnected to this point.
32 Hyppolite describes the negation that revokes repression as “the negation of negation”, meaning that it cancels somewhat what had been earlier negated as in repressed. See J. Hyppolite, ibid. in J. Lacan, Ecrits (1966), p. 884; Ecrits (2006), p. 752.
symbol of negation, as in the earlier examples, succeeds in lifting – if only intellectually – something of the repressed material that has been gathered around the signifier of lack (Lacan’s -φ). This second, more primordial sense of negation is very different. It acts in relation to the signifier of castration by expelling it utterly, "excising" it, as Lacan puts it in his remarks.33

Hyppolite argues convincingly that Freud’s paper proposes that the destructive impulses provide the basis of our intelligence and thought.34 This proposal would have us pause a moment in our tendency to idealise this function and in our related tendency to judge some formations of our mental life such as dreams, delusions, and blunders as lacking the quality of intelligence or being "thought". The inference is that, in so far as we think, we think about what has been expelled. This fits with the fact of the paranoid quality of thought, whether pathological or not.

It is here that we can be helped by Lacan’s term, the "Real". It refers to the unsymbolised realm to where signifying material is expelled. That is a contradiction. It is from where the signifying material which occurred to Schreber came back for some reason. Lacan comments that what is expelled "will not be refound in (the subject’s) history".35 This has implications for the approach to any invitation offered to a psychotic to speak. (It also has implications for any attempt we might make to predict the irruption of psychosis. Is there any way of policing any one subject’s encounter with signifiers?).

Thanks to the recognition of these different operations in our (unconscious) mental functioning the conclusion we can draw is the following. Where the operation of this primordial negation, this excision, has occurred and where it has determined the direction of the subjective

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33 J. Lacan, "Réponse au commentaire de Jean Hyppolite sur la ‘Verneinung’ de Freud", 
35 J. Lacan, op. cit., _Ecrits_ (1966), p. 388; _Ecrits_ (2006), p. 323. This is an important point in the face of the dominant tendency to seek and explanation of, say, the factors precipitating the onset of Schreber’s psychotic collapse in terms of historical biographical events, such as his new post, his relation to Prof. Flechsig, the absence of children in his marriage, or, invoked most, the personality of his father.
relation to the signifying chain that makes up the Symbolic Order the effect will be a psychotic structure. Where the signifier of lack has been acknowledged but radically repressed the structure will be one of neurosis. I apologise if this now comes across as doctrinaire. I propose that this is a distinction that can, possibly should, be fundamental to practice; that it is a distinction that arose out of the clinical practice of Freud and was subsequently elaborated by Lacan; and that it is the basis for a distinction between neurosis and psychosis.

I would like to conclude with some remarks and references made by Lacan in relation to the exposition of "Negation" (1925) by Hyppolite. Lacan proposes Freud’s paper as his clearest formulation of resistance because it treats the resistance to the unconscious and repressed. This is a rejection of the misunderstanding of resistance as being towards the analyst.

Lacan argues that the moment of ejection is required for there to be symbolisation and a subject’s entry into a place in the Symbolic Order. This would have the primordial expulsion on the other side, so to speak, of the action of symbolisation. There is a sense here that things could go either way: either into symbolisation and the repression of the signifier of lack, or the absolute rejection, or foreclosure, as Lacan will subsequently term it, of symbolisation.

Lacan returns us to clinical material with two references, one to the hallucination from the case of the Wolf Man, and the other to an instance of acting out in a case from the psychoanalyst Ernst Kris.

Describing hallucination as "the crucial alternative to experience", he highlights the word that Freud had just introduced in his work to distinguish the mechanism of rejection from repression: Verweifung cuts short "every manifestation of the Symbolic Order". He remarks on the way that the little boy was unable to articulate the experience to his beloved nursemaid, Nanya. The hallucination “submerges with its roar” what the reality principle constructs under the name of the “outside world”. Reality, as I

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have attempted to describe it above, is a very fragile entity in the face of an invasion of the Real.

The case of Kris involved an academic who was unable to progress in his work on account of a pathological concern that any work he produced would inevitably be plagiarism. This was due to a compulsion he feels to take other people’s ideas. When he announced that he had found a book which contained all the ideas of his own book, Kris, for his part, decided to read the patient’s work and the work the patient felt he had plagiarised. He took it upon himself to communicate to the patient that he had not plagiarised the material. The patient’s reaction to this, as reported in a subsequent session, was as follows: “Every noon, when I leave here, before luncheon, and before returning to my office, I walk through X Street (a street well known for its small but attractive restaurants) and I look at the menus in the windows. In one of the restaurants I usually find my preferred dish – fresh brains”.38 Lacan describes this as an “acting out”.39 It was a reaction to an intervention of the analyst based on the rudiments of commonsense. The analyst set himself up as the arbiter of reality and masterfully communicated the facts to his patient. The patient could answer in no other way than his acting out. By this is meant an irruption into his lived experience of something which directs that experience to the restaurant and the eating of fresh brains. Lacan describes this as “a true emergence of a primordially ‘excised’ oral relation”.40 It is an act that is not understood by the patient. It is just acted out. It is retold but without any indication of insight or even a question about what determined it. As an example, it represents the chasm between a form of work that attempts to return a patient to commonsense reality and the functioning of our mental activity which is not primarily driven by that reality.41

39 This may be a useful reminder of the psychoanalytic sense of this psychoanalytic term. As a term it is used widely to describe “acting up” rather than “acting out”.
41 This distinction is based on the one made by Charles Melman in 2005 (See C. Melman, “George Best and the Names of the Father”, *The Letter* 36 [2006] pp. 62-68).
I assure you that I am aware that this is difficult material and that I thought long and hard about the wisdom of bringing my attempt to clarify it for myself to your attention here. I decided to do so, not with the expectation that you would go away informed. It was rather that you would go to lunch hungry ... but not, perhaps, on this occasion, for fresh brains.

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