

**Introduction:****Reason, Unreason, and the Epistemology of the Borderline**

Jeffrey S. Librett

University of Oregon

The current Special Issue of *Konturen* brings together humanities scholars and clinical psychoanalysts with the intent to reconsider the question of the “borderline personality disorder” (its concept and object, in history and theory) within the context of the broader question of the borderlines of psychoanalysis “itself.” Where does the “borderline” fit within psychoanalytic discourse, both today and in its history?<sup>1</sup> And what does the still open debate around the “borderline” tell us about the limits, internal and external, of psychoanalysis? For the limits of psychoanalysis are importantly engaged by the “borderline,” and this in at least three senses. First, the “borderline” originates as the category of the edge between neurosis and psychosis, whereas it is often supposed that psychoanalysis finds the limit of its effectiveness in the treatment of psychosis. In terms of such a supposition, the inside of the outside (or the outside of the inside) of psychoanalysis runs along the edge of the determination of the “borderline personality” in its distinctness from psychosis. On the other hand, and secondly, even if one believes that psychoanalysis can indeed successfully treat psychosis, as some of the contributors to this Issue emphatically do (and on the basis of considerable experience with the treatment of psychosis), then the question still remains as to the internal limit or division represented within psychoanalysis by the distinction between the “borderline” and the other nosological categories that organize psychoanalytic discourse. Where does the “borderline” fit within the various typologies of obsession, hysteria, perversion, psychosis, phobia, narcissism, and so on? And finally, a number of movements and schools within psychoanalysis are also structured around different approaches to the “borderline.” These movements and schools tend, moreover, to be polemically opposed to each other. For example, this category plays almost no role within the French, Lacanian tradition, while it is strongly present in (especially post-World War II) Anglo-American analysis. Yet it divides the work of Anglo-American analysis from within: followers of Kernberg’s “ego-psychology-

object-relations” approach, Kohutian self-psychologists, and students of Fonagy’s “mentalization” theory will all take significantly different approaches to the “borderline.”<sup>2</sup> And it divides the French tradition, as well. For example, Julia Kristeva mobilizes the “borderline” in the service of a critique of the Lacanian approach to language, and the question of whether one should assimilate “borderline” phenomena to the neurotic or to the perverse structures remains at least implicitly under debate in the Lacanian tradition.<sup>3</sup> In sum, it would not be exaggerated or unrealistic to say that the “borderline disorder” is at the center of disordered—disputed and contested—borderlines within and across psychoanalysis in general, and along its outer edges.

In order to generate new insights into this problematic, the contributors to this Special Issue have been invited to consider it within the still broader “framework” established by the multiple theorizations of borders, limits, and frontiers of all kinds in humanities work (philosophy, literary studies, history) from the rise of structuralism through the current and ongoing vogue of cultural studies. It seemed to me (and to our Editorial Board) that it would be interesting and productive for both the clinical and the academic discourses involved to begin here to fill the glaring—and genuinely surprising—lack of any focused “application” of humanities border theory thus far to the clinical discussion of the “borderline personality disorder.” Further, and conversely, we wanted to ask how this “disorder” sheds light on the orders and disorders of humanities methods that might be brought thus reflectively to bear upon it.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, given the extreme complexity and the textual and historical expansiveness of such a question or topic, the nine diverse contributions to this Special Issue can each address only specific aspects and angles. In order to organize these contributions, and to show how they relate to each other within a common “framework” of problematic binary oppositions that prestructure any current discourse on the “borderline,” I will sketch in this Introduction what I consider to be the main dimensions of this “framework,” and I will suggest how the individual contributions can be situated within it. However, because this requires significant elaboration, and because I do not wish to frontload the Issue with a long, continuous argument, I have broken the remainder of this Introduction into three separate section-introductions, which develop discontinuously a continuous theme, and which discuss the individual contributions—

always, of necessity, somewhat reductively—under the various aspects of this theme. The three thematic sections are as follows.

We begin with the opposition between *reason* and *unreason* (as *madness*), an opposition that I consider here in terms of the historical and philosophical approaches of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, respectively. We then pass on to the rather different, but closely related, tension between *reason* and *faith* in its avatar as “science” and its “non-scientific” others. And finally, we examine the transformation of the reason-faith opposition, within the discourse of reason itself, into the methodological binary of *rationalism* and *empiricism* (along with its ideological or phantasmatic doubling as an apparent competition between *philosophy* and *science*). This distinction between rationalism and empiricism is crucial, I argue, for the conceptualization of the “borderline,” especially in that the often polemical, mutually disdainful divergence between Lacanian and Anglo-American psychoanalysis turns around just this distinction. In short: consideration of these various closely related conceptual pairs will allow us not only to situate the individual contributions to this Special Issue of Konturen, but also to begin to grasp crucial determinants of all discourses on “borderlines” of and in psychoanalysis, determinants upon which such discourses, I believe, still too infrequently and insufficiently reflect.

---

<sup>1</sup> I will continue to use quotation marks throughout the Introduction(s) in this volume for the clinical sense of the term, “borderline,” with the proviso that the clinical sense can never be entirely distanced from the more general sense of the term.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Feher Gurewich has the distinction of being nearly the sole clinician-thinker to make a well-informed and serious effort to bridge the divide between the Lacanian and the Anglo-American clinic specifically by inquiring into the appropriate translation between the borderline and narcissism designations, on the one hand, and Lacanian theory on the other. See “Is Lacan Borderline?” and the volume coedited with Michel Tort and in collaboration with Susan Fairfield, *Lacan and the New Wave in American Psychoanalysis*. In “Is Lacan Borderline?” Gurewich suggests that borderline/narcissistic disorders can perhaps be understood in terms of “a certain inability to rely fully on an unconscious fantasy,” where the subject is “not-all inscribed in the world of phallic signification” (150). This approach is close to the one developed by Lucie Cantin, in this Special Issue, in terms of the failure of the installation of the phallus and the lack of any fantasy of seduction in the “borderline.”

<sup>3</sup> I return to this in the Introduction to the third section of this Special Issue.

<sup>4</sup> For example, and to anticipate, the “borderline” structure, according to Kernberg and many others, is rooted in an inadequate integration of all-good and all-bad internal self- and other-objects. But modern secularization entails an ongoing uncertainty about whether given values are to be taken in a relative sense (which ultimately means that they are voided as objective values, hence “all-bad”) or in an absolute sense (such that they would be “all-good”), and not just an uncertainty but an oscillation between relativity and absoluteness, or (subjective) nullity and (objective) value. Does this mean that liberal modern intellectuals, or simply modern subjects (perhaps since Descartes) are all “borderlines” (or their uncanny doubles, “narcissists”), or that the “borderline” gives particularly acute expression to the modern condition, and what would follow from one inference or the other?

#### Works Cited

- Gurewich, Judith Feher. “Is Lacan Borderline?” *The Dreams of Interpretation: a Century Down the Royal Road*. ed. Catherine Liu, John Mowitt, Thomas Pepper, and Jakki Spicer. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2007. 147-57.
- Gurewich, Judith Feher and Michel Tort (in collaboration with Susan Fairfield). ed. *Lacan and the New Wave in American Psychoanalysis: the Subject and the Self*. New York: Other Press, 1999.