

The Bodily Effects of Language

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Argument

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Language, speech and discourse have effects on the body. It is at the very origin of the symptom that affects the body and that “expresses something structured like a language”.¹ Lacan takes up this expression in “*The Function and Field of Speech and Language*”: “symptoms can be entirely resolved in an analysis of language, because a symptom is itself structured like a language: a symptom is language from which speech must be delivered”.²

The effects of language on the body are articulated in the diachrony of Lacan's teaching according to a variation that goes from signifying mortification, in the classical period of his teaching, to the effect of jouissance arising from the impact of the signifier on the body, in the later Lacan.

Before the Rome Report

In Lacan's texts prior to the Rome report, it is not the signification extracted from language that is brought into play in the relationship to the body but, as Jacques-Alain Miller explains in “*Lacanian Biology*”,³ a satisfaction linked to the constitution of the unity of the body in its image: “The satisfaction proper to the mirror stage is the identification of the subject, conceived as original organic disarray, with what I will call a complete body image”.⁴ We must thus consider that the subject is “affected by [*affecté de*] two discordant bodies”⁵ which are the organism as real and the body grasped in its unity as an image. The body in its initial presence, as pure organism, as real, is fragmented and it is through the image that it is made One, but it is thus a wholly imaginary One. The only signification here is that of symbolic efficacy reduced to imaginary identification, but it is one that produces satisfaction

¹ Lacan J., “Le symbolique, l’imaginaire et le réel”, Lecture given on the 8th of July 1953 at Sainte-Anne’s Hospital as the opening address for the inaugural meeting of the Société française de Psychanalyse.

² Lacan J., “*The Function and the Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*”, trans. Bruce Fink (Routledge: London, 2006), p.223.

³ Miller J.-A., “Biologie lacanienne et événement de corps”, *La Cause freudienne*, n°44, pp. 5-45.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 20

in the form of the jubilation of the young child in front of the mirror.⁶ The satisfaction produced by the image prevails over the signification of unity which remains entirely imaginary [*toute imaginaire*].

The body of the signifier

Jacques-Alain Miller underlines that “the first repercussion of Lacan's structuralism, that is to say of the privilege given to signification over satisfaction, is to refer the life drives to the imaginary, while the death drive is attributed to the symbolic.”⁷ The life drives, in other words *jouissance* too, are now reduced to an imaginary that has somewhat lost its initial structuring character. On the other hand, the death drive marks the subject and his body through the signifier. This is the development that Lacan makes in the *Function and Field*: “the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing”.⁸ It is this death that constitutes “the endless perpetuation of [...] desire” and that transcends the pure living animal: “Empedocles, by throwing himself into Mount Etna, leaves forever present in the memory of men the symbolic act of his being-towards-death”.⁹

The body is submitted to the deadly effects of the signifier. The Lacanian doctrine of the signifier “institutes presence against a background of absence, just as it constitutes absence in presence”.¹⁰ The elephant on the cover of *Seminar I* testifies to this, the word has a consequence on the *real of life*: “With nothing more than the word *elephant* and the way in which men use it, propitious or unpropitious things, auspicious or inauspicious things, in any event catastrophic things have happened to elephants long before anyone raised a bow or a gun to them”.¹¹

This is the effect of mortification that the signifier imposes on life, with the double effect on the body: symbolic death in life and symbolic life in death. This is how Jacques-Alain Miller formulates it in *Lacanian Biology*: “In this regard, symbolic death is conceived, on the one hand, as a negation of biological life, as evidenced by the act of suicide, but also as an affirmation of symbolic life beyond biological life”.¹² It is Empedocles forever present.

Burial is a clear example. The dead body is not simply carrion, the signifier has elevated it to a singular dimension that deserves to be captured in a funerary organization. Burial signifies a permanence of the body beyond life.

⁶ Lacan J., “Mirror Stage”, *Écrits, op. cit.* p. 76.

⁷ Miller J.-A., “Biologie lacanienne”, *op. cit.* p.20

⁸ Lacan J., “The Function and Field”, *op. cit.* p. 262. [

⁹ *Ibid.* p.263.

¹⁰ Lacan J., “The Direction of the Treatment”, *Écrits op. cit.*, p.497.

¹¹ Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1, Freud's papers on Technique*, trans. John Forrester, p. 178.

¹² Miller J.-A., “Biologie lacanienne”, *op. cit.* p.21.

It is even, for Lacan, “the first symbol in which we recognize humanity in its vestiges”,¹³ that is to say the sign that life and the body are henceforth marked by the signifier, unlike animal life. It is an S_1 that marks the subject while also petrifying him. “This S_1 is the stone of the living, it is what realizes the signifying petrification, which is moreover incarnated by what is nevertheless an almost universal rite, the tombstone.”¹⁴

In his book, *The Other Side of Biopolitics*,¹⁵ Éric Laurent underlines that Lacan makes burial “the moment when the emergence of the speaking being occurred”¹⁶ and that he thus anticipated the position of many prehistorians today. Language begins with this particular treatment of dead bodies. This burial is thus a writing, comments Éric Laurent: “In this funerary writing, the body becomes an inscribed absence, around which the objects of jouissance are arranged and deposited.”¹⁷

He also shows the shift that will take place in Lacan with *Radiophonie*: “In *Radiophonie*, Lacan articulates jouissance and body on the basis of set theory. Thus, burial is no longer mediation or eternalisation. It makes it possible to give a logical form to the excess that objects of jouissance carry with them in their relation to the orifices through which jouissance enters the body”.¹⁸

Having a body

One has a body; one is not it. This formula is permanent for Lacan. Jacques-Alain Miller points out that it is already present in *Seminar II*, but it also appears in one of his last texts, “Joyce-le-symptôme”.¹⁹ That “one has it” also means that the subject can never quite be sure of it. The body may appear a little strange, if not alien to the subject. He does not really control it, and the body sometimes simply does its own thing.

This is already true in neurosis. The singular traits of jouissance appear stronger than the subject. Anorexia, for example, testifies to the drive’s investment in the oral object or the nothing.

¹³ Lacan, J., “Function and Field”, *op. cit.* p. 262.

¹⁴ Miller J.-A., “Biologie Lacanienne”, *op. cit.* p.17.

¹⁵ Laurent É., “L’envers de la biopolitique, une écriture pour la jouissance”, Navarin, Champ freudien, Paris, 2016.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.35

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 39.

¹⁹ Miller J.-A., “Lacanian Biology”, *op. cit.* p. 9. Cf. J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II, The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, Transl. Sylvana Tomaselli, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.72, and J. Lacan, “Joyce-the-Symptom”, Transl. A. R. Price, *The Lacanian Review*, Issue 5, July 2018, pp. 13-18.

This body, separated from the subject, is even more so in psychosis, where phenomena of disjunction or dissociation can be encountered. The body can also appear fragmented.

A very good example of this disjunction of the body and the subject's being is given to us in a text by Jacques-Alain Miller about one of Lacan's patient presentations²⁰ that concludes with the notion of an "illness of mentality" [*maladie de la mentalité*]. A few words on this case which, according to Lacan, is to be counted, "as one of these normal madmen who make our environment" – which today would make us think of ordinary psychosis. This lady, who presented as being ill at ease in society, but also with her employer and who felt herself to be neither a true or a false patient, came out with the following striking expression: "I would like to live like an article of clothing". Commenting upon this expression, Lacan remarks: "This person hasn't the least idea of the body she is putting into this dress, there is no one to inhabit her clothing." *Illness of mentality* is here opposed to an *illness of the Other*, which is linked to a certainty. Here is a subject's relation to their body in which we are perfectly able to grasp this radical disjunction between the body and the subject, between the One of the body and the subject's signifying being.

Having a body can indeed be understood in more than one way. In *Being and the One*, commenting on Lacan's text "Joyce-the-Symptom", Jacques-Alain Miller says this: "Can we say of the Lacanian subject that it didn't have a body? No, but it only had a visible body, reduced (...) to the pregnancy of its form (...). Did the subject recover a body with the drive, with castration, with the object little *a*? It only recovered a body sublimated (...) by the signifier. Before Lacan's later teaching, the subject's body was always a significantised body, borne by language. It is quite different when conceived on the basis of the jaculation *Yadl'Un* [there's something of One], because in this case the body appears as the Other of the signifier, in so far as it is marked, in so far as the signifier constitutes an event there".²¹ It is no longer the body conceived as mortified by the signifier, but the body as a place where the impact of the signifier produces an effect of jouissance.

The body and jouissance

After moving from satisfaction ("*The Mirror Stage*") to signification ("*The Function and Field*"), Lacan will come to place the emphasis back on satisfaction in the last part of his teaching. This is what Jacques-Alain Miller

²⁰ Miller J.-A., "Teachings of the Case Presentation", in *Returning to Freud: Clinical Psychoanalysis in the School of Lacan*, Stuart Schneiderman (Ed), Yale University Press, 1980, p. 51.

²¹ Miller J.-A., "Being and the One", lesson 12 (11 May 2011), unpublished.

underlines in *Lacanian Biology*: “This leads him, for example, to pass from the concept of language to that of *lalangue*, that is to say to propose that the signifier as such works not for signification, but for satisfaction”.²² This goes in the direction of “posing an equivalence between signification and satisfaction”.²³

And Miller draws out the fact that there are two movements present in the links between the body and the signifier. First, there is a significantisation of the body present from the first period of Lacan’s teaching, the principle example of which is the signifier of the phallus, which raises an organ to the dimension of the signifier. But in the last period of Lacan’s teaching, there is also a corporisation of the signifier to be considered, which is, on the contrary, “the signifier grasped as affecting the body of the speaking being, and the signifier becoming body, dividing up [*morcelé*] the body’s *jouissance* and making surplus-enjoyment spring forth, cutting up the body, but to the point of making surplus-enjoyment spurt from it”.²⁴ This allows us to grasp that the signifier affects the body other than through a set of meanings. It is “the bodily effect of the signifier, that is to say, neither its semantic effect, which is the signified, nor its effect as a supposed subject, in other words, all the signifier’s effects of truth, but its effects of *jouissance*”.²⁵

This double movement of significantisation of the body and corporisation of the signifier is given by Lacan in “*Radiophonie*”: “I return first to the body of the symbolic which, it must be understood, is in no way a metaphor. This shows that it alone isolates the body, to be taken in the naive sense, namely the one according to which the being who supports himself with it doesn’t know that it is language that bestows it upon him, to the point that it would not be there if he were not able to speak about it. The first body makes the second by incorporating itself into it [*de s’y incorporer*].”²⁶ The being has his body only because of language, otherwise it wouldn’t even be there, but it is the incorporation or *corporisation* of the signifier that gives him this body caught up in the effects of *jouissance*. This embodiment whereby the signifier becomes body makes the body a writing surface where the object is inscribed outside the body [*s’inscrit hors-corps*] but articulated to it [*articulé au corps*], as Eric Laurent notes.²⁷

It is the body as a writing surface, it is the body decorated with piercings or tattoos, it is the body subject to the requirements of hygiene or to sports performances, it is the body augmented with objects of *jouissance* or

²² Miller J.-A., “Biologie Lacanienne”, *op. cit.* p. 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁶ Lacan, J., “Radiophonie”, *Autres Écrits*, p. 409.

²⁷ Laurent E., *L’envers de la biopolitique*, *op. cit.* pp. 34-35.

incorporating products. This surface of inscription is thus both outside the body and articulated to the body. This body affected by the signifier outside of meaning is also affected by body events.

From the symptom that speaks to the symptom that is written

The Freudian symptom, drawn from hysterics, is a symptom that speaks in the body, which must be decoded in order to bring out its truth. It communicates and involves the “two”. As Jacques-Alain Miller says, “It is given a sense of truth and it is interpreted”.²⁸

The reversal operated in the last Lacan invites us no longer to listen to the symptom, but to read it. There the symptom is no longer truth, it is reduced “to its initial formula, i.e. the material encounter between a signifier and the body, to the pure shock of language on the body”.²⁹ It is no longer the truth of the symptom that is targeted by interpretation, it is its real, the symptom to be read. In the letter, it is not the being of the signifier that we find, it is a real.

This is how we can read the small sequence that Joyce describes in the portrait of the artist and that Lacan comments on in the last session of *Seminar XXIII*.³⁰ A boy named Heron, helped by classmates, gave him a beating, but immediately following “the escapade, Joyce wonders how it is that, once the thing was over, he bore no malice to him. (...) He observes that the whole business was divested of, like a fruit peel”.³¹ And Lacan comments: “It’s not simply a matter of his relationship with his body, but, if I may say so, of the psychology of this relationship”, namely “the confused image that we have of our body.”³² It is Joyce's failing ego that causes this image not to hold up, it is a “*dropping* of the relationship with the body”.³³ Without connection to the image Joyce builds a surrogate ego through writing.

“The *parlêtre* adores his body because he thinks that he has it”, says Lacan, adding that “adoration is the only relationship that the *parlêtre* has with his body”.³⁴ Adoration means worshipping it, it is love, more precisely what we call self-esteem [*amour propre*] when it comes to the love for one's own body [*l'amour de son propre corps, (...) de corps propre*]. It is the only “mental consistency” the *parlêtre* has because his physical body can “clear off at any moment.” What gives this mental consistency is in fact self-esteem for one's

²⁸ Miller J.-A., “Reading a Symptom”, trans. Adrian Price, *Hurly-Burly* 6 (2011), p.148.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.152

³⁰ Lacan, J. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII: The Sinthome*, trans. A.R. Price, Polity, 2016.

³¹ *Ibid.* p.128.

³² *Ibid.* p.129.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.52.

body, the idea that we have of our own body and to which we hold dear. That is what becomes lax in Joyce, like the peel of an overripe fruit.

The body event

Jacques-Alain Miller underlines two definitions of the symptom. On the one hand, "the symptom is an advent [*avènement*] of signification. It is in this capacity that it is eminently interpretable. This definition says nothing else".³⁵ This is the classic symptom with its effects of truth. On the other hand, "the definition of the symptom as a body event [*évènement*]] that I have promoted is necessary and inevitable in so far as the symptom constitutes a jouissance as such." This definition "makes the status of the interpretation that could respond to it much more problematic."³⁶

From the moment the symptom is grasped by jouissance and affects the body "insofar as it enjoys itself",³⁷ it is an event of the body. And then it develops as meaning. But at its root it is "a pure reiteration of the One of jouissance that Lacan calls *sinthome*."³⁸ The One is repeated in the iteration and there is the body that appears as Other,³⁹ the body event being the conjunction of the One and the body.

The event does not bear witness to a truth to be discovered. Rather, it refers to excess, surprise and the contingency of the encounter. It leaves no room for interpretation in terms of meanings. It is therefore about staying away from sense. "Indeed, these are meanings that first present themselves in listening; they are what capture and permeate you. It is already a great deal to succeed in detaching oneself from these enough to isolate in them the signifiers, and to interpret, on the basis not of signification, but of simple homophony, not of sense but of sound. On occasion, this interpretation can be reduced to making a sound resonate, nothing more."⁴⁰

Translated by Philip Dravers

³⁵ Miller J.-A., "Biologie Lacanienne", *op. cit.* p. 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Miller, J.-A., "L'être et l'Un", unpublished. lesson 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, lesson 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, lesson 8.