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Children without Speech: the Enigma of Desire

Project

Two of the children that this article will focus on were admitted into the workshops of the Interval.¹ In these workshops, we investigate the way learning is inscribed in relation to the psychic structure of the subject. About sixty young people having scholastic and learning troubles participate, at present, periodically or more regularly in the proposed workshops. Among them, eight are deprived of speech. One phase of the project consists in responding to the enigma that their silence raises. Each of these cases is particular. The origin of the absence of spoken language is different for each subject. This is why the way we envision the work with each one is singular. These mute children present behavior that isolates them. The exterior world is foreign to them and learning is an often insurmountable problem. When this state of autistic indifference is accompanied by an important mental deficit, the organic etiology of their mutism, while probable, is difficult to determine. What work is possible with each one of them? Do they have a request, even if they don't speak? How, then, do they express themselves? What is the desire of the parental Other that makes them mute rejects?

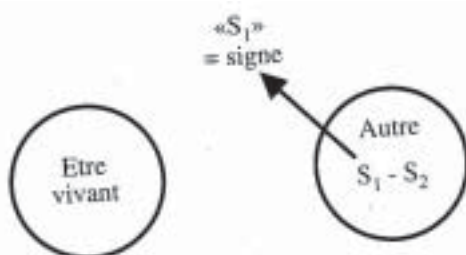
In example, clinical sequences observed among three children of the same age will try to answer these questions.

The question of their structure has brought us to consider the organization of their relation to the other (the Other of Speech) but also

their relation to the object. We observe their reaction in face of the oral object, and finally, also the little other as fellow. Note that two of them are autists, however their destinies are different. The first is no longer at the IMP, for reasons that will become clear. The third has a neurotic structure.

Patricia

The first case under consideration is that of a little girl diagnosed as precocious autism accompanied by a deficit provoked by an acute encephalopathy of antenatal origin. Her behavior is nevertheless that of all profoundly autistic children. Patricia turns round and round, as if in the prison of the maternal belly designated, strangely enough, by the metonymic cut of her first name. She walks on tippy-toes and cries out stridently. Her relation to the Other of speech is a total refusal. She plugs her ears and, if the request of the adult persists, her anxiety becomes apparent. She then eliminates this Other by making herself disappear in an epileptic crisis. She remains indifferent to the calling of her first name, which is, in our terms, the «S1» coming from the Other. In this way, she makes opposition to her body becoming the support of this signifier. There is only an unsymbolized being, unplugged from the signifier, and the Other is in an absolute exteriority which can sometimes take its pleasure in the passive being of the precocious autist through «auto-mutilation.»² Her being remains behind the alienation of the signifier, behind even the logical operation causing the subject.



She is neither «Other» nor «object.» She is not in the least interested in her fellows. She has no «ego,» the constitution of which would require the presence of an ideal ego -- I(O). The absence located in the intervals of the Fort-Da, which is accepted by the subject as paternal function, is unsymbolized. The subject dies even before existing, and no learning is possible, all the more so in face of the physical consequences of the encephalopathy, a condition which leaves little hope for amelioration. No object attracts her attention. She remains amorphous before food, without even the capacity to approach it. However, she sucks at the empty air, at the void which is hers and empty of signification. Soon we had to come to the conclusion that we could not do anything for Patricia.

The request for admission came from her parents, and we responded to it with a provisory placement as semi-in-patient, which allowed a separation from the maternal Other. This was useful for the mother, who could thus become aware of the ambivalence of her desire for her daughter: a desire to both expropriate and to reject. She could speak of it, saying she had always been able to imagine her child and describe her since before her birth; she knew her traits would resemble her own when she was a child. She also talked about how difficult the pregnancy had been -- that she had lost ten kilos after unprovoked and unexplainable vomiting. Today, Patricia is an in-patient in a center more adapted to the medical care her state obliges.

Mossen II

Mossen is also autistic, but without any diagnosed organic problem. At his arrival, he suffered extreme anxiety when any stranger approached, which provoked continuous screaming. To close the door was unthinkable. His gaze pierced us as if he saw through us. Any intervention of the Other, child or adult, was experienced as intrusive: he pushed us away, screaming, plugged his ears if we spoke and aggressed us in a dramatic duel relation. At this epoch, Mossen was still bottle-fed. We tried to modify this habit. Faced with the object «food,» Mossen opened his mouth wide, looking at us, waiting for us to deposit the contents of the little spoon. But as soon as the spoon was introduced into his mouth, he panicked. To close his mouth and swallow was impossible for him. The intrusion of an unknown exterior element was a source of anxiety for him.

However, discreet and pointed observation allowed us to locate instants of calm in which he sat before a mirror, looking well beyond its surface and rocking back and forth. Then he would hum a lullaby, and I would accompany him, modulating with him the music while adding the words. Soon enough, he began furtively glancing at me, and a transference was little by little installed in which I was positioned in a particular way. Soon he manifest progress, and his autonomy during meals became effective. What was this period of calm that he showed us and allowed us to share with him? Did a third intervene here?

In these moments, Mossen was appeased before the mirror. The real beat of his being was substituted for the beat of the signifier which had no existence for him. Yet in autism, as we know, there is no body image constitutive of an imaginary. What was he looking at then? Or more precisely, what was he plugged into? Perhaps the answers lies in this: Mossen has a twin brother, the veritable image of himself. This brother is a lively and intelligent child capable of holding a coherent conversation. Might we not imagine that what for us is *i(a)*, an ego ideal in the mirror, for Mossen is not his image but a reality (as in the first moment of the mirror stage). The presence of his twin brother is a perfectly recognizable reference for him, and one from which he is a bit separated because of his admission to the IMP? As for the hummed lullaby, it is a symbolic trait drawn from both the other as fellow and the Other of speech to which the autistic plugs in. Does the intermittent presence of a physical double which allowed him to rapidly acquire, in rocking before the mirror, an imaginary identification to the other, modify his relation to the Other? The question remains, for one notes at the same time that the speaking adult becomes an extension of his body, truly an active, epistemic object allowing him access to an exterior object which satisfies a libidinal need. Thus, plugged in to the modulated speech of the Other, his being is libidinalized and mechanized. However, the existence of his twin brother, a subject caught up in speech, highlights for us the question of the subject's choice and the destiny reserved for each of these boys, totally, physically identical, yet so different in their psychic structure.

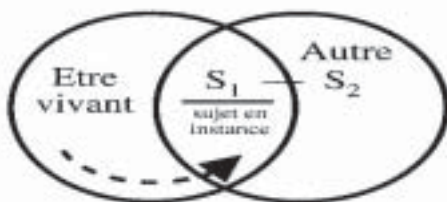
Interviews with the parents inform us that the mother had had a bad experience of the twins' pregnancy, which followed five others. The first two produced two sons. The three following produced three girls.

Yet, the two sons were both dead well before the conception of the twins. The parents spoke of the death of the second son, signaling their pain and their desire to no longer speak of it. But the existence and death of the oldest, they never even mentioned. It was discovered in consulting official records where I learned that the eldest son had also been named Mossen. When one knows how important is the eldest son in a

Maghreban family and that Mossen «II» is the oldest of the twins, one wonders what pathology this desire which is the autism shows. And one can only refer to «Two notes on the Child» that Jacques Lacan addressed to Jenny Aubry in October, 1969, where he indicates that, in the case of psychosis, the child «becomes the 'object' of the mother, and has no other function than to reveal the truth of this object.» The child «realizes the presence of what Jacques Lacan designates as the object in the phantasm.» Does Mossen redouble here the dead being of this eldest son? Then he would be petrified under an S1 coming out of the holophrastic designation which welds him to a signifying chain without interval. At the same time he would be excluded from a future as lacking subject who desires through speech. This «arrestation under an S1» which eliminates the possibility of separation from the signifying chain of the Other, is it on the order of a choice made by the autistic subject or on the order of a predetermined destiny for the child? This remains a question.

However, we hope that Mossen can discover an exterior world

in which certain objects, until now enigmatic, will interest him and that the call of the Other will someday find an address in him. We already have observed certain indications. In the workshop 'swimming pool' for example, the adult (who, as we have seen, was no more than an object permitting him a libidinal satisfaction) in a game of 'hide and go seek,' became Other, place of speech. He called Mossen by his first name to which Mossen responded by showing himself. We note that throughout this stage, there is an intersection between the being and the Other which attempts to name this being. In another example, the little story that closes and signals the end of each workshop has given Mossen a place as subject interested by the characters and tale the story unfolds.



Certainly, this autistic subject remains alienated from the discourse of the Other; his libido depends on it. But Mossen is situated here minimally as subject attentive to this discourse which, in bringing about a signifying beat which accompanies the real beat of the game of 'hide and go seek' underwater or closes the workshop, can perhaps displace the limits of the field which would allow for an extension of Mossen's singular knowledge. We might also think that if the psychotic structure is an imposition forced on the child by destiny, the choice to remain autistic or to pass beyond it to schizophrenia or paranoia is perhaps open to the child.

Thibaut: the puppet unstrung

Thibaut suffers from a very complex syndrome. He is motor cerebral mutic handicapped and presents a large retard in the acquisitions situated in the framework of a probable antenatal encephalopathy. Since his arrival, we've been searching to see if we are dealing with a subject of desire or not. In effect, Thibaut is an enigma for us. Is he a psychotic subject, even an autistic retarded by his serious handicap, or a neurotic subject with a total inhibition in certain circumstances whose «symptom [analyzable] represents the truth of the familial couple, as Lacan proposed in «Two Notes on the Child.» Then he would be a subject caught up in the signifier.

Without apparent anxiety, but amorphous, very inhibited in his alimentary and excretory functions, without any autonomy he stays wherever one brings him, eyelids down, mouth agape. He sometimes responds to our questions, but his responses are then a function of the sentence's formulation. Thus, an affirmative such as «Are you hungry, Thibaut?» while he is at table prepared for the repast will generate a shaking of the head «yes.» He doesn't, however, make a move. If the formulation is negative: «Aren't you hungry, Thibaut?» he shakes his head «no.» His response is thus a function of the enunciation and not of the content. His wish is not expressed in the sign he makes to us.

The question of his relation to his fellow and to the discourse of the maternal Other were raised in the mother's presence; Thibaut was described to us as being very active, lively, demanding, tyrannical, exactly the opposite of his attitude at the Interval. The interviews I had with this mother revealed themselves to be instructive. She indicated to us that, facing Thibaut's unbearable hypotony, she decided when he was three to invest all her energy in a method called «patterning.» The body of the child is stimulated eight hours a day by a team of five adults who exercise repetitive and cadenced movements of the child's legs, arms and head. Object of this experience, Thibaut seems to have been moved like a marionette according to the will of an other. After several years had passed hoping in vain, and faced with the ineffectiveness of this method for her son, the

mother looked for something else. Having heard about our work, she, in her words, decided to «go for all or nothing» and confided Thibaut to us. She is a very worried mother, reticent at each of our initiatives, always looking to know. We quickly perceived that she attached a great deal of importance to certain of her son's functions, even anticipating his eliminatory system. When she arrived, she would systematically conduct him to the toilet so that he could empty the contents of his intestines and bladder. Thus, she disposed the waste part of her son far from her home. She then would take him to the special education school where he was enrolled half-time in the morning, looking forward to the much hoped for progress. In the evening she would stuff him full of cookies during the drive home. During this period, Thibaut exhibited little by little a smile and called out to certain chosen people when they approached.

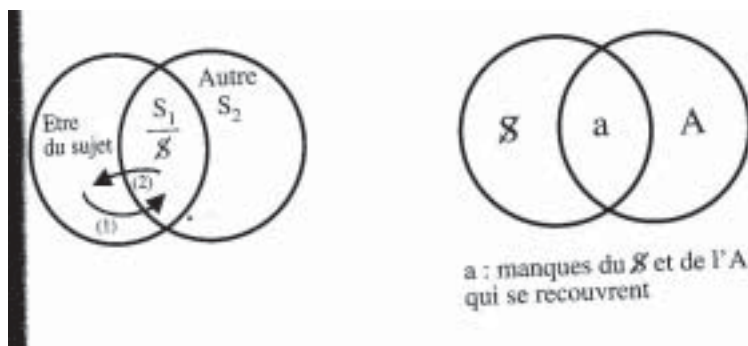
A transference was installed in this way according to his criteria. Based on the facts that had been gathered, a workshop was proposed to him shortly after his admission. We entitled it «marionette workshop» in the image of what Thibaut had been. This, I believe, was the departure point of his opening to the exterior. It was up to him to choose the characters. He could do what he wanted with them. I contented myself with following him, authorizing his actions with a few words. After several seemingly unproductive sessions, he himself became the jointed puppet on the rug. Moving his arms and legs, he emitted sounds and embraced certain «dolls.» I tried to put words to what he seemed to indicate to me, and he responded with a headshake that corresponded to the content of the statement this time. Thus he intervened in his own way as subject of the statement, guiding me for the rest of the workshop. In getting to work, we were able to locate a subject capable of desiring in his new approach. From then on, he would make great improvements.

Today, he is autonomous for the meals he takes alone at his rhythm. He laughs and truly has fun when an activity pleases him. He tries to execute exploits, such as summersaults or cartwheels, because another did it. But he knows how to stop himself when he is tired, and then he shows with an adequate gesture that he wants to rest. It must be noted that in orthophonics, he practices a gestural method which he now uses judiciously to request things. His inhibition has given way to a growing activity, while a new symptom has been installed -- a systematic incontinence at home or on the way back to the IMP as well as whenever he is in a situation in which he receives orders that he cannot counter. A peremptory tone of voice or elements that he is incapable of confronting, the sudden invasion of the Other is experienced as omnipotent. The lack of the Other of speech is missing and anxiety occurs while the symptom crops up with a vengeance.

Lacan said of this symptom that it is «an imaginary substitution of the child for the father, precisely as impotent.»³ Is it not, for Thibaut, a way to tell us of his malaise in facing the structure of the parental couple where he finds himself caught between a too powerful mother who knows and a father who is silent?

The desire for progress, evolution, and human dignity that this narcissistically wounded and guilty mother feels for her handicapped son is such that she suffocates him unconsciously and hinders him from desiring elsewhere. The father of this child also suffers greatly from the handicap of his son. He flees his pain in his work and is very little present at home. He never comes to interviews, leaving to his wife the role of «toilet technician.» Thus, (the interviews at first having been solely with the mother) there is still a lot of work to do so that these parents become aware of the truth of their couple.

Today Thibaut is eight-years-old, and we affirm how much these two years spent at the IMP have permitted this child, until then submitted to his mothers acts and her imperatives of progress, to finally separate himself and desire elsewhere in spite of his serious handicap.



From one subject to the other

In conclusion, we propose this axis for work: to make a subject acquire, learn, to permit progress, certainly yes, but only insofar as one takes into account the subject with which one is working. In all of these

cases, to discover an elsewhere, it is necessary that a subject be installed (which is not the case for Patricia) and that this subject, at a minimum, can disengage itself from the alienation in the discourse of the Other (Mossen is actively working on this) and, in the best possible case, that this subject authorizes himself to accede to signifying separation as a subject lacking and desiring (like Thibaut), even if the subject is deprived of spoken language.

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² Colette Soler. « Hors discours: autisme et paranoïa.» Les feuillets du Courtil #2, 1990; pp. 9 - 24.

³ Jacques Lacan. *Le Séminaire, Livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Seuil, 1969 - 1970; p. 109.