



The «mystery of the speaking body»

Il «mistero del corpo parlante»

Le «mystère du corps parlant»

O «mistério do corpo falante»

El «misterio del cuerpo hablante»

Presentation of the theme

«Man is the terminal illness of the animal»
Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 2nd edition

The «mystery of the speaking body»: this expression —taken from *Encore* (Seminar XX)— flows from Lacan’s very blood. Like a piece of linguistic crystal, it radiates brilliance in the past that also reverberates into the future.

In the past, there is the sphere of culture that gave rise to the “mystery of incarnation” and “the word made flesh,” but also his previous teaching that would reduce the mystery — if ever there was one. The agency of speech had been recognized; Lacan knew to shift it from the field of religion to the structure of language, where the “it speaks” of the unconscious can provide a response that will not be ineffable. What better place than the beautiful, papal city of Rome to question speech anew?

The future: not a reverberation of his previous classical thesis, but a step forward, paradoxically, in the direction of a solidly atheistic mystery, which subtracts the religious dimension. For what the expression announces is instead a truly singular....biology, which has to do with a real that is altogether different from the real of the life sciences, but which is nonetheless present in our experience, and which only psychoanalysis can approach.

For, if there is a mystery, it is not that of the word made flesh, but of flesh which speaks. Here is the shift. Certainly, flesh wouldn’t speak unless it took voice from the unconscious, as Lacan emphasizes in “*L’étourdit*”¹. This is why its enigmas are not simply those that belong to life, but belong instead to that property of the human being known as *jouissance*, distinct from the question of the organism’s homeostasis. This is essentially what the biologist does not know, in spite of studies on sorrow; and what the psychoanalyst takes as his object, as far as speaking beings are concerned.

One might imagine that “Freudian biology” as Lacan termed it —with its vocabulary of life and death— comes close to the concerns of biological science, so triumphant today. Just look at Bichat’s famous formula! But this was precisely the error Lacan was attempting to denounce by labeling it ...Freudian.

By Freud’s own formulation, his *Eros* and *Thanatos* are not data from experience. The life and death drives are offshoots of a free-floating analytic thought as it confronts the well and truly experienced enigmas of repetition and what accompanies it: at once entropy and the insistence of *jouissance*.

¹ Lacan, Jacques, “*L’étourdit*”, *Scilicet* 4, Seuil, 1972, p. 20.

I am saying “analytic thought.” Lacan, in 1964, used the term “mythology,” when speaking of the theory of the drives; and he added that they do not refer to the unreal, “for it is the real that the drives mythify, as myths usually do.”² What is implied: language is not able to reach it. The word “mythology” was, I believe, a way of raising the Freudian reverie up an epistemic notch. Most likely, at the time of *Encore*, Lacan would have said “elucubration,” to mark the distance that is maintained from the unthinkable real, the very distance that is inscribed as mystery in the “mystery of the speaking body.” In any case, whether mythology or elucubration, it has to guard against any unmediated application of Freud’s death drive—a conceptual *aporia* if there ever was one—to immediate clinical data, and above all, against confusing it with the simple tendency to aggression, whether directed against the other or oneself.

Curiously enough, Lacan made more direct references than Freud to the true register of biology—to the enigmas of life, *Zoe*—neither neglecting them—far from it—in the name of the symbolic nor confusing them with *Bios*. In three areas, essentially: birth, mortality, sexuality. First, “prematurity of birth.” Lacan makes it the real—meaning necessary—condition for the opening toward language. Next, individual death. In a species that reproduces itself by way of sex, Lacan views this as doubling, on the side of biology, of the loss due to language. Lastly, “biological bisexuality”³ which Freud had highlighted: the male/female which doesn’t produce a man or a woman but compels discourse to produce among the speaking beings “two halves”⁴, homologous to the *sex ratio* in reproduction, leaving aside what science is currently promising in matters of reproduction.

Nevertheless, the expression «mystery of the speaking body» belongs to another level. And given the Lacanian theses that have come before, what should surprise us is “mystery”, more than “speaking body.” The more so as the sentence in its entirety redoubles the accent: «the real, I will say...is the mystery of the unconscious»⁵. Look at that! The unconscious is removed from Symbolic register and deposited into the register of the enigmatic real. This is something new!

One could make a study of Lacan’s successive elaborations, as he attempts to think about the hold the «it speaks» of the unconscious has on the body substance. *Encore* is hardly the beginning. In particular, one could follow his definitions of drive, symptom, and the sexual relation. The drive: produced as the echo, in the body, of the demand; and that by which «I speak with my body», saying simultaneously what «I» wants and therefore «I» lacks. The symptom: a «body event» in the encounter between words and jouissance. The sexual relation: that which chatter constantly convokes, without managing to write it.

It is interesting to follow the successive steps, but even more interesting to see what this expression brings forth that is radically original. It is connected to all the innovations that surround it in the text of *Encore*. I recall several points: the unconscious that one deciphers is «*elucubration*», hypothetical; *lalangue*, which is not a structure, does not pass into language, into spoken “knowledge”, except by way of coalescence with jouissance, according to individual contingencies. A little later, what followed was the accentuation of «*l’inconscient réel*», incarnated and disjoined from the subject’s meaning; a reduction of the role of truth and promotion of the term «*parlêtre*» [speaking being], not to mention *sinthome*. No doubt, all this needs to be unfolded and illustrated clinically, at the same time as the various consequences are drawn out, notably concerning the limits of the aim of knowledge, the possibility of transmission, the passage to a finished analysis and the analyst that it requires.

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² Lacan, Jacques, “On Freud’s ‘*Trieb*’ and the Psychoanalyst’s Desire,” in *Ecrits*, translated by Bruce Fink, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 724/853.

³ “*L’étourdit*”, *op. cit.* pgs., 12 and 19.

⁴ “*L’étourdit*”, *op. cit.* pgs., 12 and 19.

⁵ Lacan, Jacques, *Encore*, Seuil, 1975, p. 118