The step ladder (escabeau) and the sinthome

Pierre-Gilles Guéguen

The step ladder (escabeau) is on the side of the jouissance of speech that includes meaning. On the other hand, the jouissance proper to the sinthome excludes meaning. (J-A Miller Presentation for the Congress in Rio)

There is no way to practice psychoanalysis without using speech, nor even without inviting the patient to submit to it. That’s how the fundamental rule on which Freud based his discovery of the unconscious works. Say whatever comes to mind, say silly things; from it all will surely come unconscious formations, truth effects, and an appeasement of suffering caused by the symptom. In this way, over the successive sessions a saying is deposited that takes its support from the transference.

This speech produces effects on the body. It’s what the first hysterical patients showed Charcot and Freud. It also produces effects on thought and obsessions because thought, like the soul, clings to the body, as Lacan notably informs us in “Television”. It also produces effects in psychotic subjects because it regulates the erratic jouissance of the symptom, calms the delusion and makes it productive, what in the classical clinic we call “stabilizations” or “supplementation” (suppléance). Research in psychosomatics, using the hypotheses and observations of the American psychiatrist Alexander who was a pioneer, tried to show that speech has effects on the human organism. Moreover, Lacan gave some indications in this domain, notably, evoking the concept of the holophrase to account for certain phenomena that belong to this field of research. He attributes a function to it “in a whole series of cases” (Seminar XI, Penguin, pp. 237-238) to orient his disciples towards a
more in depth examination of the object a, both in the Freudian fort-da and in the dialectic of alienation and separation. The speaking-body is then, as Miller develops it in his Presentation of the Congress in Rio, a matter that mobilizes the tie between the bodily substance on the one hand, and thought, the soul and belief on the other. Lacan indicates that, as for these clinical phenomena, both belief and the Freudian Unglauben are crucial.

But, beginning with the Seminars XIX and XX, he introduces another clinical dimension that he sees as particularly present in Baroque art and in mysticism: Lacan realizes that one can enjoy meaning (jouir du sens). Particularly the meaning elaborated in analysis, and we are reminded of the often commented warning proffered in his famous “Geneva Conference on the Symptom”: The symptom is a voracious fish that should not be fed with meaning because it always comes back for more. In this way he invites analysts to a new use of interpretation, one that does not feed the symptom with meaning, but on the contrary, after having made to function the quest for meaning, then aims to dry it up rather than amplify it (Lacan J., “Geneva lecture on the symptom”, trans. R.Grigg, p.14)

This is why the Seminar on Joyce (Seminar XXIII) will appear as both an astounding and disconcerting advance for his audience because it is a break with all that preceded it.

In his book, Lost in Cognition, Eric Laurent describes well the formidable recommencement of work that this seminar required. Because, for example as Lacan declares (in Sem XXIII, p.149 French version) “The ancient notion of the unconscious, the Unerkannt, is built precisely on our ignorance of what is going on in our body”, or again returning to the concept of belief: “Amour propre is the principle of the imagination. The speaking-being adores its body, because it believes it has it. In reality, it does not have it, but its body is the only consistency it has — mental consistency of course, because its body is constantly making a break for it.” And Eric Laurent (ibidem p.4): “What had been established, or so we believed, as a radical distinction between madness as a result of foreclosure, and that which is not affected by foreclosure, was now being displaced. Between neurosis and psychosis, which hitherto stood apart like two distinct continents, there emerged a passage of generalisation.”

We believe that we have a body because we speak and we create a character of semblants. That is our step ladder, what makes us imagine that we have a body, whereas we live off of being, that is off of appearance, a universe of semblants that language offers us. And language is a set of signs that makes meanings and significations. All the variations that Lacan presents in his conference on Joyce on the theme of the step ladder go in the same direction. Psychoanalysis is not an ontology; it does not rely on any idea of stability of the being, but rather on creative and desiring fictions that, in the manner of Joyce’s work, give everyone the possibility to believe in themselves, and a reason to live and practice a form of social tie.

The step ladder lets you climb high enough to believe you’re beautiful, that is, to imagine yourself an ego, (the idea of oneself as a body has its weight, that’s exactly what we call the ego. Sem XXIII p.150), to believe to be a character with a story and also to believe that one has a body even while, as Lacan says, it spends its time “making a break for it”.
To put it in the terms of Lacan’s previous work, the only being there is, is fantasized. That’s why we can say that an analysis aims at extracting the fundamental fantasy, or the way that the subject of the signifier vanishes in the face of its mode of drive jouissance. The fantasy is without a doubt what is closest to a subject’s being and also that by which it clings to the body that is its own – or so, at least, it believes.

In contrast, we observe in schizophrenia, which is the illness of those who cannot believe in semblants, that the belief in one’s own body and in its narcissism is put in jeopardy. Many coenesthetic phenomena and/or hallucinations and the phenomenon of the double, attest to this. The fantasy and the ego are especially problematic in these cases.

It seems to me that it is the function originally attributed to the so called fundamental fantasy that Lacan re-examines in Joyce’s case, where the articulation between the Imaginary, Symbolic and the Real is accomplished in one part by a work (and Lacan underlines the importance of the function of sublimation in the tie between the semblant and the body), and in another part by a “name”, that is not a name of the father but an author’s name, a character in the literary world. So then, he gives all its importance to narcissism in Joyce’s case, which had previously been devaluated in his teaching.

This is what the title of our congress really designates by “speaking body”. Symptom and fantasy come from the same side, from the side of what has a sense and gives us a body.

This does not resolve everything, far from it, because this fiction of the body beautiful must still stick to its substance, make something of One (faire de l’Un). Once the symptom has been reduced, cleansed, its lot of suffering moderated by virtue of analysis, the body still has to cling to its envelope, an envelope that itself exists, and is no fiction. Joyce’s case, a paradigm for so many others, shows that this is not a given. It is the famous episode of the beating in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, to which Lacan will give great importance.

What pins the subject to the body is what Lacan calls the sinthome. It is also the real, the hole that the signifier bored in the density of the enjoying substance that the body is - the trauma by which the poison of the signifier made an event in the mass of pure jouissance, that monad of jouissance that is the organic body, and that, by way of a contingency, removes an added jouissance, ensuring a splice between this real body and the mixed body that is made of Imaginary and Symbolic. There is nothing to be said of it except that it exists, that it is proper to each and that it is in relation to the jouissance that made a hole and that repeats itself in an identical way, out of reach of the body of the signifier and the image, until death puts an end to it.

Translated from the French by Julia Richards