

BULIMIA AND PERCEPTION OF THE FEMININE BODY¹

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"I eat everything that comes into my head".^{*} Such is the phrase that I have chosen to present Madame M., and have isolated from other statements which said the same thing and described at every possible opportunity the ordeal of the drive excess in which Madame M. had become fixed. I propose to inscribe this excess of the oral drive within the parameters of the question of perceptual disorders, drawing on the recently published *Séminaire IV: La relation d'objet*, and upon which Jacques-Alain Miller is making a commentary in his course this year, *Donc*. The question is formulated there as: "What happens at the moment that the satisfaction of need comes into play and becomes substituted for symbolic satisfaction? [...] precisely because it has entered into the dialectic of the substitution of satisfaction for the demand for love, [orality] is precisely an erotic activity. It is libido in the proper sense, and sexual libido".²

In the example of the statement that I am proposing, it seems to me that one is immediately tempted to pose the following questions: Who speaks? Is this subject that says I the one that eats, or would this be the one that is eaten by everything that comes into her head? "The sexual rapport", says Lacan in the seminar on *Transference*, "is that by which the rapport with the Other opens onto a union of bodies. And the most radical union is that of the original absorption, to which the horizon of cannibalism points, is aimed, and which characterises the oral phase for what it is in analytic theory".³

How to seize then, beyond what is said by this subject devoured by the demand of the Other, the place of desire, between the lines of this monstrous inscription that she offers to the other's gaze? What has Madame M. been telling me, for all this years? What literality does she bring to her body? How will she be able to make this letter pass from the side of the signifier, and try to decipher a meaning there, which is none other than *jouis-sens*?

The Symptom

In spite of her hundred kilos, Madame M. surmounted, step by step, the obstacles of an existence which didn't tempt her very much, except by way of a mortal identification with the voracious mouth that never closes, the gaping 'presence of the open maw of life'.⁴ She is thirty two and has passed through some experiences which have given her the illusion of a fragile adaptation to both social reality and her feminine condition: despite her weight, despite the deformed image that she offers to the other's gaze, she holds down a regular job and she has married someone who loves her — though it was on the occasion of this encounter, following the retirement of her parents, that she plunged into obesity. She then underwent several infertility treatments in order to realise her dearest wish: *to be pregnant and have a child*. Thus she achieved, with the reserved participation of a husband little inclined towards sexual matters, an in vitro fertilisation, carrying, for the length of a pregnancy, the little girl that she hoped for. At this time she slimmed down — after some stays in a clinic specialising in weight loss cures — to a weight absolutely equivalent to the one she was supposed to be during the pregnancy, but has never since lost the additional kilos that were added to those forecast. Today, she speaks of this as follows: "I'm one hundred kilos — my father also. Everyone in the family is a bit big. But me, I can see it very clearly, 'I'm a fair-ground freak'".

I often asked myself why Madame M. came so assiduously to speak to me, even though she spoke very little of her weight and never lost any. Might it have been that the analysis brought about some modification of the subjective position of this patient, who seemed to have but one sole principle, "to eat everything that came into her head", and thus, eventually, continuing to take on the weight of the very speech that she comes nevertheless to deposit⁵ each week, without any apparent interruption? What does she deposit as such, which cannot alleviate her? What relationship does she sustain with her misshapen body? What image is she supporting?

In *Seminar IV*, Lacan indicates that, "all relations with the body proper, which are established by the intermediary of the specular relation, all that appertains to the body, comes into play and is transformed by its accession to the signifier".⁶

^{*} *Je mange tout ce qui me passe par la tête.*

Yet, the symptom of which Madame M. came to complain didn't pertain to her body. Her comments on what only today she calls 'her bulimia' are recent. Rather she is effected, profoundly troubled, by the unhealthy dependence that she maintains with her mother, and by the sensation of a vertiginous void that she permanently feels from being separated from her. The symptom of bulimia was thus a disturbance of separation which would bear on that category of serious neuroses of which Freud speaks in his 1924 article *The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis*. He observes, "that every neurosis disturbs the patient's relation to reality in some way, that it serves him as a means of withdrawing from reality, and that in its severe forms, it actually signifies a flight from real life".⁷

Madame M. had been giving me long descriptions of reality and its stability. A moment had appeared to me propitious for the suspension of her weekly sessions, when one day she had been formulating that, henceforth, she no longer wanted to be the child but to have the child, and that she had made up her mind to engage herself in the medical treatment more readily than in the psychoanalytic treatment. What was then a psychotherapy would finish, on a very limited therapeutic result, having a benefit in the register of 'having' as its horizon.

The return

It is after the birth of her little girl, around one year ago, that Madame M. decides to return to speak to me. All her comments are thus extracted from this second period. She is worried about her violent gestures and impulsion towards what she had nevertheless hoped and prayed for to the point of undertaking such a long treatment. Having become dangerously obese after a difficult pregnancy that she spent reclined, today she notes that nothing has ever come to fill this void she inhabits, not even the child, neither during her pregnancy, nor since the birth. Finally, she is worried about the future of the child that she gladly put into this position of plugging her anguish and compulsions.

I regularly intervene in order to introduce some scansion into her pathological relationship with this little girl who seems now to encumber her, and in order to ease the new anguish which doesn't fail to assail her faced with her incapacity to cope with her role as mother: "I'm no longer a woman, I'm not a good mother, my daughter is eating me", she tells me one day. I encourage her to return to the weight-loss treatment for a few weeks. She feels very guilty about leaving her daughter during this time, but at the same time she fears reproducing with her daughter what her mother did with her: rendering her so dependent, to the point of not knowing how to live. She immediately adds that her mother was a good mother, devoted above all else to her three children, administrator of the whole family home, a school cook, but who had pushed a retiring husband, submissive and absent, into the background. She evokes rather the suffering in which she knows she had been much earlier, at the arrival of her younger sister, eleven months after her own birth: this sister, her mother's last child, would have literally stolen her place, leaving her in a despair without limits. She recalls the terrible scenes that she would make to her mother in order to end up in her bed, at night, huddled against her, the tantrums which would suddenly overwhelm her when something was refused her, her compulsions, already, as a child, to go and steal from the cupboard the cake she hadn't had, and the shame before her brother and sister when her mother denounced the theft. She also recounts the legend which describes her as the naughty girl, she who bites her sister and mother, she who is tied to her bed to keep her in it, she whose head the mother puts under cold water to make her be quiet, she who the brother sprays with a jet of water while calling her 'the octopus', thus her demand for love was invasive for those closest to her. Clearly, *devoration is in the foreground*.⁸

The painful recital of the family romance, alternating thus with that of her irrepressible onsets of bulimia, is punctuated by the narration of difficult relations with her child, and by the increasingly assiduous critique of the passivity which her husband demonstrates in his place: as he has no desire for her, she eats. Such seems to be her response to the absence of the desire of the Other. And after her return to the analyst, nothing seemed to be able to weaken either her transference love, or her complaints, or this heavy symptom, which gave our meetings a somewhat monolithic character.

One day she introduced in passing something new, a small detail, a divine detail that I hastened to seize in mid-flight, producing a shift in Madame M.'s position.

The session was shorter than the others, which were never able to end on the scansion that I was trying to introduce: there was no possible limit, as if everything could be said. The scene occurs in a local patisserie. "Once again", she tells me, "I stopped before the sacred chocolate. I didn't resist it. If there'd been eight in the window, I'd have bought eight. There were six. I asked for six. I was ashamed. I knew that she [*the pâtissière*] knew they were all for me. But what happened next? 'I only ate five' I

wanted to leave one for my husband.” It was the day before the session. She is still surprised by what she has just said. I punctuate in two words: *minus one!* Her astonishment turns to perplexity. She accepts the scansion.

Some sessions later, she brings this dream, fresh from the same morning, a rarity in this *automaton* in which the analytic work could be swallowed up just like the rest. “I came to see you. You told me that I had to go and see my husband. That’s all. I woke up in an anxious state. I always fear being dropped.”

Could it be that the analyst, like the sacred chocolate, might have finally begun to be lacking for her? That she might agree to substitute absence for this unconditional demand, this demand of the Other’s presence, of the mother, who she has been calling each day by telephone since she got married? *That desire might finally respond to love*, this same desire that demand crushes, that the voracious drive swallows up each time it presents itself under its last form which is only *lack*? How then to take hold again of the place of this pathological oral object for Madame M., the elective object of the whole familial economy for several generations?

In other words, and *if desire has to be taken to the letter* as Lacan invites us in his text *The Direction of the Treatment*,⁹ can we maintain that this dream finally divides Madame M. in her mortal passion for her object, which never comes to satisfy her want-to-be? If she can dream that the analyst will see another woman elsewhere, that, in a certain fashion, the analyst leaves an empty place there where, like the real, it always returns to the same place, she can wonder about her own: *what am I for you?* — me who can neither lack anything nor be lacking for the Other, because it cannot lack anything. She can then leave ajar the door behind which the list of mathematical operations stretches out: sacred additions, multiplication of substitute objects certainly, but also a subtraction of *jouissance*, and the division of the subject which results from that.

There where the object of the gift of the other had disappeared before the gift itself, the gift of love, the gift of the same lack and of its open mouth, finally *the loss comes to be inscribed*. Sometime after this she tells me, “You know, between father and mother, everything is going well, my husband is in agreement with me regarding what should be done with our daughter. What is not going well, is between man and woman. So I *ea!*”

A fine response to the absence of sexual rapport. She had nevertheless explained to me, at the time of our first consultations, that this man had pleased her precisely because he wasn’t too fond of sex,* and that he left her in peace. What she realises today is that he has taken the place of her mother to an even greater extent than she had asked for. For beyond the real of the object, of the phallus that the mother lacks, that the child demands at the same time that it wants to realise it with its being, what she awaits from the Other is, as Lacan underlined in *Seminar IV*, *nothing real*: it is an object as signifier of love. And when there is a real satisfaction of the demand which, like an ideal inscribed in this family, is but a filling by food, this satisfaction shifts onto *jouissance*: “This is kept in check” says J.-A. Miller, “by this filling-in of the lack by devoration, by what is called bulimia, like a guarantor, after all is said and done, of the frustration of symbolic satisfaction”.¹⁰

“But the child”, says Lacan, “does not always fall asleep thus in the bosom of being, especially if the Other, which has as many ideas about its needs, interferes, and in the place of what it does not have, force-feeds it with the choking pap of what it has, that is to say, confounds its care with the gift of its love”.¹¹ It seems that what remains of the crushing of the symbolic by the real object, is *the imaginary, an image*, an end of something.

The fantasy

It seemed to me to be possible to seize an index from this, when, a few months ago, Madame M. related the fundamental scene of her childhood. It happened in the evening, with the father’s return after several days away at work as a railway controller, when he brought back some sweets [*gourmandises*] from his travels in Switzerland — the same which would be the object of her first compulsions in the mother’s cupboard. The father’s return to the marital home was not without a ceremony which remains for her marked with horror: the father is awaited, he opens the door, puts down his bag, and exclaims: *who’s bringing me my slippers?* Now, only the one who brings him his slippers has the right to open the father’s bag full of biscuits and chocolates.

* *Il n’était pas gourmand de sexe.*

Madame M. has difficulty saying it. At my invitation, she continues: never did she want to bring the father his slippers. In consequence, she never had the right to open the bag. On the contrary, her sister would race off to bring the slippers, and then she alone had access to the father's bag.

The father's bag, it could just as well be the title of this work. The sign at once of his love and his power, she who never had the right, who refused *having*, would it have only left her with *being*? A bag full, not of books or a hidden knowledge, to be discovered as in the unconscious; not of the agalma of desire, but the stopper of knowledge.

To be the father's bag, it would be just as well to be what the mother lacks, since it is absent: to be the phallus of the mother, like she would like to be it coming each night to squeeze up against her in her bed. J.-A. Miller has reminded us in his course this year that, "What is decisive in the clinic of any subject is feminine sexuality, with, as pivot, *Penisneid*".¹² Lacan, in *Seminar IV*, reminds us that the most important thing, in the relation to the object, is *the lack of the object*. He reminds us by way of the case of Little Hans that the phallic folly of the child, whether girl or boy, is to believe that he is the phallus, what J.-A. Miller has written as follows: from E/-φ — the metaphor of the child equivalent to the mother's phallus — to -φ... E — the metonymy of the phallus for the subject, who equates it with the phallus.¹³

For Madame M., it seems to be a question of freeing herself from this mortal folly that can only lead to worse. In this identification with the dead father, with the absent father that only the full bag comes to represent beside the lacking mother, she doesn't seem to be able to get rid of a secret wish: 'to live and stay beside my parents', like a cousin of hers did with her parents. Because what she wants is, 'to be with them'. She tells me that there doesn't seem to be much hope. The death drive is in the foreground.

Nevertheless she recently admitted entering, for the first time, the bookshop next door. She was on her way home from this session concerning the return to her parents, and she bought a book. A book on the mother-child relation. A book instead of the sacred chocolate? A book on what isn't known, what is already there, a different food, in short, something to get her teeth into, or to slide into the bag.

Madame M. is absolutely no longer in the same position. If from now on she complains much more of her husband's sleeping phallus, she goes so far as to think, while looking at herself in the mirror, of what she could be without what she now calls *her carapace*... a different version of the function of the veil?

The question is open: what remains to be given to this woman by the analytic operation? In conclusion, I would like to go back to Lacan's comments at the end of *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: "Of the one who ate the book and the mystery it bears, the question can indeed be posed — is he good, is he bad? This question now seems unimportant. The important thing is not to know whether the man is good or bad in the beginning, the important thing is to know what the book will yield once it has been finished".¹⁴

Translated by Adrian Price.

1. Paper delivered during the *Conférences du mercredi de la Section clinique*. (Whilst *féminin* may be rendered by 'female', the French *femelle* being restricted to zoological and botanical use, we opt for 'feminine' in view of its remove from the biological reference. On this question, see *Sex, Gender & Jouissance* by R. Klein in the *Reporter of The London Circle* No. 5, May 1999 [TN]).
2. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire IV: La relation d'objet*, Seuil, Paris, 1994, pp. 183-184.
3. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire VIII: Le Transfert*, Seuil, Paris, 1991, p. 239.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
5. *Déposer* — from laying or putting down, often with the negative connotation of dumping or tipping, to more formal procedures of submitting or registering, the French *déposer* extends to a far greater range of signification than its English counterpart, 'to depose' [TN].
6. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire IV, op. cit.*, p. 189.
7. S. Freud, *The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis*, trans. J. Strachey, SE XIX, PFL Vol. 10.
8. *Dévoration* — from the verb *dévor*er, 'to devour' [TN].
9. J. Lacan, *The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power in Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan, Routledge, London, 1977, p.256.

10. J.-A. Miller, *Donc*, 1993-4, (unedited), teaching delivered at the *Département de Psychanalyse de Paris VIII*, lesson of 16 March 1994. This lesson was published in the Bulletin of the ACF-Dijon, *Filum* No. 2, Dijon, 1994, pp. 3-18.
11. J. Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
12. J.-A. Miller, *op. cit.*, lesson of 26 January 1994. This lesson was published by our colleagues from Bilbao in Spain.
13. *Ibid.* 'E' denotes *Enfant*, that is, the child [TN].
14. J. Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Porter, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 325.

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