

## SILENCE AND ILLITERACY

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These remarks were occasioned by two subjects in treatment: one who complains that she cannot speak, and another who says that she is unable to read. In what follows, I will outline formal features of each symptom, in order to pose a few questions regarding the function of the letter in each case as it pertains to feminine sexuality — a problematic that is not yet explicit in the stories that they tell.

In doing so, I will examine one aspect of the negative therapeutic reaction — that is, the *jouissance* of the symptom in its phallic dimension as one modality of what Freud called the ‘repudiation of femininity’ (1937).<sup>1</sup> To resume that argument: the negative therapeutic reaction was defined by Freud as an acute worsening at a moment in analysis when the subject might expect a reduction of suffering. This phenomenon is distinguished from a symptomatic worsening due to the consolidation of the *jouissance* of the symptom at the beginning of the treatment. The negative therapeutic reaction is not so much an activation of *jouissance*, but rather a return of *jouissance* to a symptom that had once been deciphered and emptied.

The two subjects that I will describe briefly are both at a point of beginning, where a symptom is constituted as the crystallization of a message. Whether at the beginning of analysis or at its end, the *jouissance* of the symptom is fundamental to the symptom’s function: to stand in place of a sign of the subject’s being. The symptom, as Jacques-Alain Miller has articulated it, combines at once the function of signifying and of *jouissance*, designated together as a single symbol,  $\Sigma$ , as that which is most “apt for writing the proper name as the particularity of the subject”.<sup>2</sup> He cites the seminar *Ou pire...* in which Lacan states: “Inexistence is of the principle of the symptom, inexistence of the truth that it supposes, although it marks the place, while the automatism of repetition brings to the light of insistence the inexistence of *jouissance*”.<sup>3</sup>

While the negative therapeutic reaction is most clearly characterized as a desperate grasping at a symptom in which, “though interpreted... a *jouissance* continues to resist”,<sup>4</sup> analysis aims at an isolation of this *jouissance* as a discrete problem with possible solutions. Likewise, though in a less exact form, the symptom with which a subject begins analysis includes something of the uninterpretable. By examining the symptom under the rubric of the negative therapeutic reaction, we can anticipate the direction of a treatment that is oriented by a logic of what may be expected of its end. The fate of this uninterpretable *jouissance* in analysis is to become legible as a letter, mobilized towards contingency by the feminizing effect of this letter as it is ciphered in the symptom.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I will first delineate, in simplified form, the symptoms of these subjects, one whose difficulty is constituted in an inability to speak, and another for whom there is an obstacle in reading. What would be an approach to this silence that would be adequate to something brought forward of the real? What remains illegible for the subject in a complaint of illiteracy? These symptoms inscribe the presence of an impossible-to-say and an impossible-to-read — that which doesn’t cease not to be written, catapulted into the order of a phallic *jouissance*.

### 1. Silence

Silence is all we dread.  
There’s Ransom in a Voice —  
But Silence is Infinity.  
Himself have not a face.  
— Emily Dickinson, *Poem 1251*

The subject complains that she cannot speak. She is awaiting an Other who would start the conversation. It is an obligatory condition, therefore structured by a fantasy: of an Other who would know her without her having to say anything, an Other who would know her and find her, despite her protestations that there is nothing to know but silence. She notices that this is odd, an unreasonable expectation. She cannot call anyone despite her best intention. In the vernacular, she is what is called a shy person, quiet. She discloses that this is her demand: that stubbornly she will seduce by way of silence. She attempts to produce this effect in the transference by not speaking in the session. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan points out that such a configuration is basically uninterpretable: “...it is very hard not to realize that, regarding ana-

lytic technique, if the subject sitting across from us doesn't say anything, it is a difficulty concerning which the least one can say is that it is altogether unusual (*spéciale*).<sup>6</sup> A relentless clutching of singularity, the silence is indecipherably loud. *It speaks*, a muffled version of the truth: something is there that cannot be said — not without paying off the father, a ransom that this subject is unable to afford.

## 2. Illiteracy

...and yet so poisonous.  
Are the ravishments of truth, so fatal to  
The truth itself...  
— Wallace Stevens,  
*Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*

After years of self-reflection, this subject had concluded that something irreparably bad had happened in her childhood, and her life has been reduced to 'nothing' as a consequence. All relationships are destined to result in her becoming hated or neglected. Having known love, she is sure it cannot last. Only hatred and neglect are enduring. She has reduced life to the point where she can no longer work, forgetting time and friends. She requested treatment for the only symptom that she could not explain: for years, while reading a text that interested her, she would read the same word over and over again, a certain number of times, unable to move forward with reading. Now worse, she found herself compelled to read the first letter of the word, again a certain number of times, before proceeding to the next letter. Fixed to the letters, reading became impossible. When asked how she reads in her native language — a language that does not use letters but rather characters — she says it is 'the same'. For her, repetition of the letter and repetition of the stroke within the character is of the same movement, an adequate translation from one to the other, inscribing a difference more fundamental than nationality or place.

## 3.

For these two subjects, there is a reduction to the minimum of life and satisfaction. Whether we choose to call it masochism, the death drive, or a passion for the nothing, the state of suffering of these subjects reveals two truths that have found a mode of expression: (i) *There is something that cannot be said*, (ii) *There is something that cannot be read*. Of what shows itself in a complaint, at least one can say is that *it is written*.

In *Seminar XX*, Lacan situates the symptom in the domain of the necessary, as an insistence that "does not stop being written". In contrast, there is another 'does not stop' — the "does not stop *not* being written" which "is the impossible... the sexual relationship [that] does not stop not being written". Between these two domains of not-stopping, Lacan observes, "the phallic function turns out to be mere contingency".<sup>7</sup> Contingency, an encounter, takes place as a stopping point where the impossible (that which does not cease not to be written) traverses into writing.

The two cases above represent an impossible-to-say and an impossible-to-read in the format of the necessary. A reduction of mobility to a minimum, frozen in conformity with the fantasy, these symptoms attempt to capture a truth of the unutterable and the illegible in a manner that is certain and can be possessed as certitude. In an inexorable logic of subtraction, these subjects, each in their own way, render a semblance of that which is unrepresentable, hypostasizing the lack as a phallic signification that does not cease to write itself, and constructing an imaginized version,  $-\phi$ , in the place of a fundamental lack whose impossibility is the very condition for its deployment in reference to the signifier.

A mark upon the real, the letter is an effect produced by the presence of the signifier as necessary, inscribing a locus for a contact of the real with that which can be written as contingent. In this way, the letter is the imprint of the possible as it emerges from a desire concealed within an image given to the subject by his symptom.<sup>8</sup>

## 4. The negative therapeutic reaction — a clinging to the image

In her 1982 paper, *Addiction to Near-Death*, Betty Joseph describes the 'awful pleasure' that ensues from the negative therapeutic reaction as the patient's 'communication with himself' — a silent communication in which "[t]here is a felt need to know and to have the satisfaction of seeing oneself being destroyed".<sup>9</sup>

One could productively place this observation alongside a footnote from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where a child enacts his own disappearance by hiding a bobbin that he throws into his cot: during a long separation from his mother, “the child had found a method of making *himself* disappear. He had discovered his reflection in a full-length mirror which did not quite reach to the ground, so that by crouching down he could make his mirror-image ‘gone’”.<sup>10</sup> The disappearance of the subject, a fundamental absence that would be contradicted by his mirror image, is accompanied by a satisfaction in destruction, as long as he must hold onto the image that positions him in the fantasy of the Other’s desire,  $i(a)$ .

Separation would thus be not only a separation from the Other and a breaking with the infinite production of the signifying chain. It also separates the image from the object  $i(a) \ltimes a$ , a separation internal to the symptom, in which its *jouissance* is extracted by way of a deciphering that exhausts the meaning lodged there. In this way, the cause of desire falls from the Other  $I(A)$  as impossible to signify, a remainder that is nonsensical, of a real that is not treatable by the signifier.

Freud remarks in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, that “No stronger impression arises from the resistances during the work of analysis than of there being a force which is defending itself by every possible means against recovery and which is absolutely resolved to hold on to illness and suffering.” After attributing a portion of this to an unconscious sense of guilt impinging upon the ego from the superego, Freud goes on to point out that “this is only the portion of it which is, as it were, psychically bound by the super-ego and thus becomes recognizable; other quotas of the same force, whether bound or free, may be at work in other, unspecified places”.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the ideal may be  $I(A)$  and its articulation to the ideal ego as  $i(a)$ , separation introduces a suspension of an imaginary mirage and a discernment of that portion of the real that is neither bound to the ideal, nor to the signifier — a ‘freely mobile’ real that is not and cannot ever be resolved in the law of Oedipus. Efforts to resolve this real within the phallic domain reinscribe it as a traumatic encounter with the *jouissance* of the Other, that which returns to the symptom as suffering. In this way, the extraction of satisfaction from the symptom signals a passage beyond the Oedipus complex and an activation of ‘freely mobile’ *jouissance* that can be tolerated when it is not bound by necessity, that is to say, symptomatically.

### **5. The *jouissance* of the symptom as one modality of the repudiation of femininity**

Life’s nonsense pierces us with strange relation.  
— Wallace Stevens,  
*Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*

In the concluding comments of his 1937 essay, Freud proposes that the ‘repudiation of femininity’ poses problems for both sexes at the end of analysis. One could say that the negative therapeutic reaction is a return of *jouissance* in the place where separation would open onto that which cannot be treated by the signifier ( $\neg \forall x \Phi x$ : not all  $x$  is submitted to the phallic function); but it also opens onto what is not an exception from the phallic function either ( $\neg \exists x \neg \Phi x$ : there does not exist an  $x$  that is not submitted to the phallic function). In this way, the negative therapeutic reaction might represent a final resistance to femininity, where the fantasy stubbornly covers over the place where it must fail.

In this repudiation of femininity inherent to the structure of the fantasy, only a sign of the impossible as revealed in a gap — a punctuation mark that lands upon the real as nonsensical — can introduce a stopping point into the return of *jouissance*, a writing that could cease to be written as *automaton*, shifting over to a locus of contingency.

A sign of the impossible can only be contingent, a mark of absence that furrows the real as letter — a letter, as Lacan states, that is “...more properly... littoral, that is to say figuring that an entire domain renders the frontier for the other, insofar as they are foreign [to one another], to the point of not being reciprocal. [...] The edge of the gap in knowledge, isn’t this what the letter outlines?”.<sup>12</sup> This stopping point, a letter, where what does not stop not being written ceases not being written, operates as punctuation rather than as a signifier. A mark of punctuation — as Jacques-Alain Miller states in his paper *The Disparate* — remains within the realm of the semantic, but differently: it is a mark that suspends meaning. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan points to the ellipsis (*point de suspension*) as a mark that would articulate the real with desire. He comments: “The displacement of the negation from the ‘stops not being written’ to the ‘does not stop being written,’ in other words, from contingency to necessity — there lies the point of suspension to which all love is attached”.<sup>13</sup> An ellipsis that indicates where something has been dropped,

repressed, and thereby returns in the symptom, becomes displaced into a pure opening of a gap, a space where *jouissance* can become suspended to the *Name of the Father* as desire.

The symptom as suffering manages to dispense with contingency for the sake of a certainty, in the domain of necessity — an enigmatic configuration that awaits deciphering of its letter as unutterable and illegible. As for the symptoms of silence and illiteracy, it is as yet too early to say what can emerge from the analytic elaboration of these two subjects. Their symptoms represent, in a concise way, the dependency by which the symptom becomes appended to a letter and they reveal a truth of this locus of articulation with the real: its silence, on the one hand, and on the other hand, a zone of illegibility. As Pierre Naveau has recently commented, this illegibility takes place as an opening of the signifying interval, in anticipation of its readability as a closing of the interval, the writing of the bar. Of the symptom, one could say perhaps that it is an *analphabétisme*, a figuration of *jouissance* that, illegible, awaits its reading. Or, to go further, one could make a distinction between *reading* and the discernment of the *legibility* of the symptom.

1. S. Freud, *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, 1937, SE Vol. 23, p. 250.
2. J.-A. Miller, *Sinthome as a Mixture of Symptom and Fantasy*, trans. P. Dravers and V. Voruz, *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* No 5, London, 2001, p. 17.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
4. *Ibid.*
5. J. Lacan, *Lituraterre*, 1971, in *Autres écrits*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 2001, p. 12.
6. J. Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore*, trans. B. Fink, Norton, London, 1998, p. 101.
7. *Ibid.* 94.
8. J. Lacan, *Lituraterre*, *op. cit.*, p. 14,18.
9. B. Joseph, *Addiction to Near-Death* in IJP No 63, 1982, pp. 449-456.
10. S. Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920, SE Vol. 18, p. 15.
11. S. Freud, *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, *op.cit.* pp. 242-243.
12. J. Lacan, *Lituraterre*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
13. J. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, *op. cit.* p. 145.