

The Angelic Body of Post-Modernism

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In my proposed title, I have coupled the body with the concept of post-modernism. I shall attempt to place today's body, that is to say, the matter of this conference, in the context of the specific point of view of post-modern society.

The body and the ideal concern two different registers and as such are heterogeneous. The body concerns an organic plenitude, a real, but on the other hand the ideal concerns an idea, or a thought or a construction at the level of fantasy. Their relation, however, is closer than it might seem at first, because our bodies exist for us only as an Idea in the Platonic sense of the term. We are not our bodies, we only have them. And we try to recover the jouissance of this unknown body by way of the mirror, by way of love, by way of the other's sight.

This relation to our organism proceeds from the first signification our bodies had for our mothers, that is the signification of the phallus, that is to say. the child is identified with the phallus insofar as he takes the place of his mother's desire for a penis. This signification is repressed (what we call primary repression) precisely because the mother doesn't have the phallus and our first identification is with a hole – with the lack of penis of our mothers'. We identify with the hole that is the enigma to the demand of her love. Moreover, it is starting from this hole that we ignore what our body is, that what enigma we are, for ourselves and that is why we can have only an Idea of our body.

The initial phallic investment of the body has been repressed because if we had been identified with the lack of the maternal phallus, we should have to die; this is why maternal castration is horrific. Nihilism concerning the question of being is a direct result of this first rendez-vous that gives love to human beings and seals their pact with the death drive.

Confronted to the exigency of love, speech seeks to assure an existence beyond the image of this problematic body. And by way of speech, or at least while speaking, the phallic investment of the body is repressed thanks to the ideals : the ideals keep the imminent destruction of our bodies at a distance. It is in so far as humans speak of their dreams beyond their bodies, that they can exist. Moreover, their stories and the narration of their histories sustain this originary repression. We can call those stories necessary in order to forget the nothingness of the body, we can call them fictions, myth, religion. There is no such thing as a collective unconscious, there are rather collective fictions, thanks to which each individual unconscious reiterates its own repression.

We can take one example of this relation between fiction and repression considering the passage from endogamy to exogamy. When growing up, what do neurotics look for, if not to realize their repressed oedipal childhood fantasy?

The grown up child try to obtain outside of his family, what he has not obtain inside. Yet at the same time, he will ignore that he is doing so, because the fantasy that is constructed as a consequence of repression will present itself in a reversed form.

Instead of looking for a woman who will be like his mother, he will look for a woman such as he would have wished her to be, that is to say, he will look for a virgin; virginity is the sign that this woman never belonged to his father before she belonged to him. His mother is not a virgin of course, and it is precisely this reversal fiction that signals the repression. And this reversal is reconducted, set into motion with an added boost from cultural ideals such as the Virgin Mary, around whom western fictions on the purity of love proliferate. It is precisely incestuous desire that this religious myth helps to repress.

Thus, the body and its symptoms (which are symptoms of the repressed) depend on the cultural myths that support them. The symptom varies according to changing cultural beliefs. We can take for example, the French sixteenth century mystic, Louise du Neant, (Louise of the Nothingness). A contemporary psychiatric study of her life would classify her as a delirious melancholia. In the name of her belief, she endured excessive self-inflicted pain, yet she was well integrated into the social life of the time thanks to her religious belief. Today, one couldn't inflict such pain on oneself without being committed to a mental hospital very quickly.

This example lets us consider the difference between a society in which the body functions with an ideal, and another society in which the body subsists without an ideal. Or at least, one which likes to think it subsists without an ideal.

With this in mind, we can inquire now about the myths of our own time; what are the sustaining myths of the body in the post-modern era?

Post-modern human beings announce now that they are beyond naïve fictions and ideals, whether they have been promised to them during their life time, or after death. From the point of view of post-modernism, we cannot continue to act and to think with the naïve hope of the accomplishment of a human history. Such is the difference between a "modern" sense of history that conceived life with regard to a sense of emancipation, and our post-modern state.

The enlightenment, and the nineteenth century secular view of progress return to earlier Christian myths of human redemption. Modern progress is the secular Idea of religious redemption. In the modernist notion, we find the enlightenment notion of the emancipation from ignorance by way of education, we find the marxist notion of class struggle or we find market competition in high capitalism as a means to defeat poverty. In short, the modernist notion of history "promises" its subjects a future of happiness and freedom.

The respective position of the body and of the ideal should change at the moment we pass from modernism which still holds a declared and conscious, even political ideal, to post-modernism that claims to be "over" all ideals. What does the body become in a society that claims to have no ideals?

Perhaps we should first try to understand how modern ideals have lost their efficiency in post-modernism. Attentive to speech, we psychoanalysts should notice that religions, fictions, present a very important characteristic – their grammatical mode is that of the conditional. A myth thus supposes that a certain number of conditions are gathered. "If this thing had happenedäonce upon a time... then...." and the rest of the story as consequence of "If". The subject finds his dream transfigured in the fiction by way of the conditional modality. We can thereby deduce a certain subjective temporality. The term "If" is the time of the subject, who exchange reality for his dream he can't live without. We can try to translate this grammatical mode into the corresponding basis, on the same way we can calculate in basis two, basis three, and so on, our decimal system is on basis ten for example. So, in this case, we shall say that the conditional expands to basis three. Firstly it puts at stake the subject, secondly, it puts at stake the predicate of the said subject, and thirdly, it puts at stake the subject as he would liked to be. Thus in relation to his own particular history, the subject is divided in two; the subject is divided between the reality and his dream, (that is what we have seen in the passage from endogamy to exogamy.)

Further, three non-aristotelian terms are at stake because the conditional proposition is contradictory, non-reflective and does not exclude the third term --

Now we can examine, on the other hand, the scientific logic – it develops itself in basis two and it conforms to aristotelian logic: that is reflexivity, non-contradiction and the exclusion of the third term. In basis two, the formal model of the assertion is the equation. And we can consider now that if science is the Ideal of the post-modern Era, it is a very special one: while all the ideals developed in basis three, this new one is developing in basis two.

In the passage from three to two the subject itself is eliminated. At the moment when the discourse of science, in basis two, reduces the importance of myths, in basis three, the subject is erased, rubbed out by scientific Ideology : there is no subject in an equation. And with the subject, science rejects narrative knowledge, fictions of this subject and deprives them of their "symbolic efficiency." This "symbolic efficiency" means only power of repression, of forgetfulness, power of dream as the reverse of fantasy. Of course, the way of the scientific discovery itself doesn't use the basis two; the result only is in basis two. A researcher, mathematician or physician first uses basis three: he makes hypothesis and that means fictions! The scientific hypothesis itself involves a conditional mode. The scientist begins with a basis three – but only in order to cancel it out – his objective is to produce a certainty. The hypothesis cancels itself when it produces a thesis: and the subject disappears in its own operation!

Increasingly, science destroys its own meta-discourse of legitimation and scientists themselves do not believe anymore in what they are doing. We are led to the collapse of ideals and meta-narratives such as described by Lyotard and Rorty.

So we have seen what is happening to the Ideals but these ideals, however, do not form a homogeneous

set. Freud always added the word "Ego" to the word "Ideal." He distinguished the Ideal Ego ‐ that to which the subject is enjoined to identify itself by way of maternal demand and which is pulling him backside towards the past -- and he distinguished it from the Ego Ideal ‐ that to which the subject will try to satisfy in the future, to pay his debt to his father, because this father saves him from the maternal demand, but as this saving father is a rival, he kills him as well. This subject is guilty and try to be forgiven with the great ideals of liberation, which belong to the modern category we have seen, wherein the subject is released from debt. We can represent the subject between these two Ideals ‐ one which pulls him back and one which pushes him forward.

The Ideal Ego and the Ego Ideal constitute two sets and the second one contradicts and counterbalances the first one. At the intersection of these two sets we find the body marked by the symptom, that is, by the manifestation of the contradiction between the two, but also a point of anchoring between the past and the future, between the jouissance of the body and the social tie. The body is suspended between these two ideals. The first, the Ideal Ego, constitutes a fixed point, an intangible origin, and the second one pushes the subject forward, trying to escape from the first one.

This spatial disposition is useful to understand some political characteristics of our century. Indeed, in our post-modern era, it is not all the ideals which collapse ‐ but only those with regard to the future the set of the Ego Ideal. Thus there is no longer an Ideal that serves as a counterbalance to regression. Thus, when the post-modern body finds no more ideals to propel it towards a future, beyond the image, it regresses down to the field of incestuous maternal demand.

What is this way of regression if not the one that this demand has taken, the one of the partial drives: seeing, eating, smelling etcã The result of the regression on the Ego Ideal is an identificatory regression in which the drives serve as the "reference points." And the human world will be divided by means of taste and distaste, following the lines of smell, of the color of the skin, of the shape of the nose and so on. All the visible elements of "drives" will be used to elect good or bad human beings (and it is precisely these that are taken up in racist and xenophobic discourses).

The purpose of the pure materiality of the drives is to make a whole of the body, an "everything" of the body, and thus, at the very same time, it makes a "nothingness" of it, in the same way as the phallus functions: the phallus is a "being" and a "nothingness". This is why the post-modern regressed bodies are floating, incestuously angelic. They look for something to fasten themselves to and does not find it: if they remain as angels, the bodies rejoin the nothingness of the phallus. Each body is in the time a "being", and a "nothingness". It is divided between "to be" or "not to be". It is thus necessary to reject the part of nothingness, of "not to be" on somebody, onto the other. In the absence of the ideal, the regression of the drives will lead to an identification with the perfection of being, "to be" and to reach this perfection the nothingness the "not to be" will be rejected onto the stranger. The stranger is a stranger because he is wearing our own nothingness, that we hate. The stranger is the last recourse to this rejection of the nothingness in order to reach the angel's purity (that of race, of hygiene in the medical discourse, or of ecology in the political realm).

The lines of demarcation between good and evil are the consequences of the maternal demand. And the instrument is the drive. Furthermore, if there is a retraction towards an identification with the object of the maternal jouissance, that is to say the phallus, it is because the mother is castrated and she demands

something as a consequence of this castration. And by whom can she be castrated if not by a father? Thus we find here this figure of a violent, raping, castrating father, a sodomite, the one that we meet over and over again in the totalitarianism of our century. And, as we have seen, the raping father is suspected too in the democratic power.

Even without recourse to the political story of totalitarianism, we can nevertheless see that this violent father – whose death is not symbolized – sheds some light on the contemporary idealization of perversion. In our post-modern society, neurotics imagine that perverts have all the jouissance and can enjoy more than the neurotic. Thus perversion makes headlines daily; crimes, drugs and pedophilia are front page news. Similarly, homosexuality is center stage in the theater of regressive ideals, progressive ideals being out-moded and no longer having such an audience.

Now, we can see another point of the future of the angelic bodies : in so far as the meta-discourse of science becomes hegemonic, scientific discourse integrates various religious themes, including the idea of progress itself which was initially a religious one.

Science further assimilates the huge weight of neurotic guilt that religion was trying to make pay and regulate. The reduction of guilt by science is very simple: as in the meta-discourse of science, everything is determined, the result is that the subject is no longer responsible, rather he is finally innocent. As there is a cause to everything that happens, says science, so family and society will be responsible. The subject will blame his problems on family and on society that surrounds him.

But guilt cannot disappear so easily, and the angel will look for further purifications. Here once again, the stranger will bear the burden of the fault and a segregationist ideology will prosper. Here again the world will be divided in rich, poor, black, white, smoker, non-smoker and so on.

But this is not enough for the body to reach the angelic purity. When the ideology of science marginalizes modern ideals, this will let body floats unanchored, reduced to their organic functions. There is not only a division by the drive outside, but also the body itself will be divided in feed back by the same drive.

We have seen it, in the lack of Ideals, the pure angelic body can regress to the past in the forms of nationalism, racism and xenophobia. But what the ideology of science removes of the ideals on the one hand, it returns on the other by way of a medicalization of the organs. The organs are separated, doubly removed from the body: first the biologic is reduced to the physico-mathematical and then, separated from the subject. In the post-modern mythology, this separation of the body and of the subject is the object of medicine.

In the discourse of medicine, all that is calculable, that is to say, the diverse chemical and physical functions of the organism, situate the body on the side of determinism that concerns the body alone, stripped of its humanity, separate from unconscious overdeterminism. The main effort of the mathematicization of the body is to find the causes of suffering inside of the body without caring if they are outside. And as there is a relationship between the various parts of the body, it's always possible to

find something inside that looks like a cause. For example, impotence has a certain connection with hormones and so this hormone is given as a cause even though it is not a cause of impotence and so on.

The fantasy of science is that if we can find the physical mediator of some pain and if it is possible to act on these organic intermediaries with success, then we can think that we have treated the true cause of the pain. The mediator is taken for the cause. Naturally, as the psychic body recovers exactly the physiological organism, it is always possible to find these mediators which produce effects that produce further effects (for example, insomnia seems "caused" by certain type of molecules although its cause may in fact be, for example, financial concerns or love problems, and so on.)

The causality is thus folded up upon itself in the internal structure of the organism which sends back each one of its terms to one another in a closed system. The symptom is ignored in its unconscious overdetermination. And it is quite surprising that serious researchers propose to resolve the problems of psychic life by way of studying neurons. How is it that they don't perceive, for example, that a mourning suffering is due to the loss of a dear person and not to some cellular disfunctioning? It is thus quite common that depression (which is a type of mourning) is explained by nervous physiology. Neurophysiology replaces the psychic symptom for another, the drugs, which are doubly silent – they hide both speech and they hide the guilt of that hiding itself. The neurosciences are thus the occasion for a religious belief. They are dreaming of an autistic body that will not respond to emotional links with others. It is in fact a religious belief to dream that we have an autistic body without moral or psychical pain such as for example a love-sorrow or a humiliation that cannot be reduced to a synapse disfunctioning. And this dream results from a folding of the Ego Ideal on the organic, as racism. Doing so, the Ideology of science represses and occludes the psychic life of the subject, while it is precisely this psychic life that is in the position of causality.

As a consequence the physician's authority stands on a knowledge that has no relation to the suffering that it treats (impotence, for example, is not a physiological problem.) Doctors thus increasingly and without knowing it are taking a religious role. Like priests, before they are delimitating the interdictions of a well-ordered sexuality at the same time that they are regulating the norms of regimes and hygiene.

Sexually transmitted diseases function as a powerful organizer of sexuality in the same sense that religion functioned at an earlier period. The fear of AIDS for example functions regularly in the fantasies of ordinary subjects, who don't even have sexual relations, or those who have a perfectly ordered life.

As you may have noticed in this paper, I am not particularly pessimistic. The fact that humanity is at the border of a catastrophe is nothing new and so there is no reason for being particularly more pessimistic right now than when I started this speech thirteen minutes ago. The Freudian discovery however, helps us to think the problems and thus psychoanalysis has a particular responsibility that allows us to be reasonably optimistic. There are always good reasons to trust in evident madness.