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Pipol 9 : The Unconscious and the Brain – nothing in common : the 5th Congress of the Eurofederation of Psychoanalysis EFP : <http://www.europsychoanalysis.eu/> : July 2019

Yves Vanderveken – The Unconscious Testifies to a Real of Its Own

15th January 2019

Lacan might have regretted the too-close semantic link between the words ‘unconscious’ and ‘consciousness’ (1). He felt that one could appropriate this closeness in order to blur what he considered to be the “cutting edge of the truth” of Freud’s discovery.

Freud had to make the move of inventing psychoanalysis in order to tear the field of symptoms away from neurology, whose causes he had deduced by letting speak the subjects who suffered from them. Lacan then had to repeat this act in order to tear the dimension of the unconscious, again, away from the psychological cleansing to which the post-Freudians had once more reduced it.

The PIPOL 9 theme, “The Unconscious and the Brain: Nothing in Common”, summons up and marks the return of the need to perpetually reinvent the psychoanalytic act, in order to avoid what Lacan attributed as one of the properties of the unconscious: its tendency to close.

There is something scandalous about the unconscious, which each epoch – just like the fortress of the Ego in which the individual is alienated – seeks to minimise by means of a fundamental ‘not wanting to know anything about that’.

This scandal is precisely the hole in cognition, in knowledge, in the relation to self, in the relation to causality, which drills the *eccentricities of desire* and the *irruptions of jouissance* (2) into the field of the speaking being.

In the animal who speaks there is a fundamental flaw, a gap in the relation to sexuality. This is what underpins its absolute *ek-sistance*, as well as that of psychoanalysis, in the realm of the biology of the organism.

By virtue of the fact that it speaks, the human being suffers from a fundamentally disturbed relationship with his body and mind; under this kind of dysfunctional jouissance that traverses them. Yes, he suffers, but it is also this suffering that makes him speak, love, desire, and enjoy himself under the auspices common to no other animal.

Specifically, without relation to any kind of programmed, programmable or computable instinct, but one that answers to absolute contingency and always resulting from one’s own invention, which is unlike any other. There, the field of non-comparability and singularity is total.

This inner dysfunction never stops rebelling against the operations of reduction. This insurrection is what manifests itself by means of the symptom. It is the real specific to the unconscious. It is that to

which what the subject says testifies, and it “never ceases not to be written” by the formations of the unconscious – at least, if one makes the ethical choice of letting the subject speak in their own words. The alliance – which acts as if it has triumphed – between neuroscience and cognitivism carries the *not wanting to know anything* about the unconscious of psychoanalysis to a degree worthy of the advances of science. They see themselves achieving mastery. Molecular biology, genetics and new developments in brain-imaging technology have taken to the zenith the object which centralises all hopes in this sense: the brain. The central organ which, thanks to the powers of imaging techniques and computation draws another real which indexes itself on the suffix *neuro*.

We are confronted by an ethical choice of metaphor to take account of the real, and also by two exclusive modalities of causality.

The *neuro* paradigm concentrates the hope of mastering the Freudian unconscious since beyond the neurological attacks as such, we find everything now referred to as the seat of the psyche and of the mind. And finally, well yes, ... the unconscious *himself*^{*}.

Promises pertaining to this paradigm – always already achieved, but for all that still to come – now include localisations and the calculation of the unconscious itself. Hence the hypnotisation which can bewitch some psychoanalysts, which goes from panic to the siren song of the blurring of the borders between well-named “disciplines”. What we have said here is nothing new.

The *scanning techniques of the neurosciences*, to which PIPOL 9 will give a place, will demonstrate that the operation is accompanied by a new degradation of the said unconscious. It is at the same time perhaps newly decked out in its panoply of power, and for all that still impotent with respect to the strength of the symptom.

Access to the unconscious via the *neuro* paradigm is a pure return to neurology before the necessary invention, with respect to the treated object and to psychoanalysis, and to its downgrading to the status of a psychologising programme of re-education and rehabilitation, to a very sorry figure of a supposed norm. This is all contained in the premise that the brain is a machine – an exceptional one of course – for processing information. Their approach to the unconscious fundamentally reduces itself to unconscious processes and memory, hence the renewed passion for these memory processes. In short, in one way or another, all is essentially referred to knowledge – with its share of false perceptions, cognitive biases, trace memories, etc. Lacan demonstrated that it is precisely this that the real of psychoanalysis, like the real without law, put an end to. In doing so, the *neuro* dimension completely misses something, as Lacan already indicated beyond the field of training with regard to Piaget.

No one disputes that the brain is the instrument which makes thinking possible – in spite of the serious games of Jacques Lacan, indicating that he himself thought ... with his feet (3) or, again justifiably, that the said “*idiot savants*” show that the brain is something richer, something that does not function as a machine. (4)

But it is not the brain that thinks what we call the subject. The subject is precisely that part which escapes its representation.

Lacan's final teaching referred this part to the body, just as Freud referred it to the drive. But to the body that does not come from the reduction to its organism. Rather to the body as object of thought and of representation of oneself.

The subject is not his body. A dysfunctional jouissance objects to its representation. The subject exhausts himself trying to resolve this. Jouissance always escapes the subject, to be commemorated iteratively in the symptom, a missed encounter with enjoyment which would be suitable for the subject but which does not exist.

Psychoanalysis invites us to confront the real. It is on the real that what we call our clinic is founded. We are required, yet again, to demonstrate this.

Anybody who wants to deny this 'beyond the pleasure principle', by leaning on a wish and a hope for homeostasis in the relationship with the body-organism-machine, exposes himself to the return of an unleashed symptomatic irruption, as much as to his own subjection.

This insane hope for the brighter future of the neurosciences in the version that touches on scientism, feeds it.

Civilisation is what is at stake here. It goes well beyond the clinic alone. We will make this the object of PIPOL 9, the 5th Congress of the EuroFederation of Psychoanalysis.

Translated by Janet Haney and John Haney

*English in the original.

(1) Lacan, J., *Television*, New York/London, Norton, 1990, p. 5.

(2) Extract from the rubric "Do you want what you desire? Excentricities of desire, disruptions of enjoyment", 17th Study Days of the Escuela Lacaniana de Psicoanálisis, 24-25 November 2018, written here as presented.

Lacan, J., "Conférences et entretiens dans les universités nord-américaines", *Scilicet 6/7*, Seuil, Paris, 1976, p. 60.

Lacan, J., "The Place, Origin and End of My Teaching", *My Teaching*, London/New York, Verso, 2008, pp. 31.

NOTES ON REFERENCES

Also available at [The Unconscious Testifies to a Real of Its Own : 15th January 2019 : Yves Vanderveken](#) or [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12314](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12314)

- "Lacan might have regretted the too-close semantic link between the words 'unconscious' and 'consciousness' (1)." : *Television*, [Television: 31st January 1974 : Jacques Lacan](#) or [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=326](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=326) : p5 of Dennis Hollier's translation : - II.

- [Questioner] I think, my dear doctor, that I am here not to trade witticisms with you ..., but only to give you the occasion to reply. Therefore all you will get from me are the thinnest, the most elementary, even common-place, of questions. I'll throw one out at you."The unconscious- what a strange word!"

- [JL] Freud didn't find a better one, and there's no need to go back on it. The disadvantage of this word is that it is negative, which allows one to assume anything at all in the world about it, plus everything else as well. Why not? To that which goes unnoticed, the word everywhere applies just as well as nowhere.

It is nonetheless a very precise thing.

There is no unconscious except for the speaking being. The others, who possess being only through being named- even though they impose themselves from within the real- have instinct, namely the knowledge needed for their survival. Yet this is so only for our thought, which might be inadequate here.

This still leaves the category of *homme-sick* animals, thereby called domestics [*d'hommestiques*], who for that reason are shaken, however briefly, by unconscious, seismic tremors.

It speaks, does the unconscious, so that it depends on language, about which we know so little:

- “No one disputes that the brain is the instrument which makes thinking possible – in spite of the serious games of Jacques Lacan, indicating that he himself thought ... with his feet (3) : [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2nd December 1975 \(MIT lecture on topology\)](#) : [Jacques Lacan](#) : See [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=310](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=310)

: p6 of Jack W. Stone’s translation : 4. – The soul.

The only thing that seems to me to substantify the soul is the symptom.

Man would think with his soul. The soul would be the tool of thought. What would be the soul of this so-called tool?

The soul of the symptom is something hard, like a bone.^[SEP]We believe we think with our brain.^[SEP]Me, I think with my feet, it is only there that I encounter something hard; at times, I think

with the platysmas (*peauciers*) of my forehead, when I bang into something. I have seen enough electro-encephalograms to know that there is no shadow of a thought there.

- “or, again justifiably, that the said “*idiot savants*” show that the brain is something richer, something that does not function as a machine. (4)

But it is not the brain that thinks what we call the subject. The subject is precisely that part which escapes its representation.” : [The place, origin and end of my teaching \(Lyon\)](#) : [October 1967 : Jacques Lacan](#) : See [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=6264](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=6264)

: p31 of David Macey’s translation :

And yet, it's not entirely unrelated. There are lines, tubes and connections there too. But a human brain is so much richer than any of the machines we have managed to build so far. Why shouldn't we raise the question of why it does not function in the same manner?

Why can't we perform three billion operations, additions and multiplications, and other standard operations in twenty seconds the way a machine does, when so many more things are being moved around in our brains? Curiously enough, our brains sometimes do work like that for a brief moment. On the basis of everything we know, the brains of the retarded do work like that. The phenomenon of *idiot savants* who can calculate like machines is well known.

This suggests that everything to do with the way we think is, perhaps, the result of a certain number of language-effects, and that they are such that we can operate on them. I mean that we can build machines that are in some way an equivalent, but on a much shorter register then we might expect from a comparable productivity if we really were talking about a brain that functioned in the same way.

[Julia Evans](#) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12365>

Practicing Lacanian Psychoanalyst