

Editorial  
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**Special Dossier - Autism and Psychoanalysis**  
The letter! The litter! And the soother the bitther!  
Hypermodern Times

**Éric Laurent**

## **The Autist's Trait**

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LACAN states somewhere that the psychotic has a "normal" relation to the Other.<sup>1</sup> He is sensitive to the "mental automatism" to which we are submitted as spoken subjects. The same could be said about the relation to writing. We have an example of this when the young autistic subject, or the psychotic subject in his autistic dimension, writes.

### **The Subject who has a "Normal" Relation to Writing**

FOR such a subject, this is one object he cannot do away with. He picks up a pen and massacres a piece of paper until it is riddled with holes. He has not symbolised presence and absence. The *Fort-Da* is not functioning, and therefore he has no possibility of writing somewhere that his mother has left. There is no "rehashing of the leftovers"<sup>2</sup> after his mother's departure. He is contending with

1 Lacan, J., "Un signifiant nouveau", the lesson of 17 May 1977 from *Le séminaire XXIV, L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre*, in *Ornicar ?*, Issue 17/18, Spring 1978, p. 22.

2 Lacan, J., "Lituraterre", in *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 2001, p. 11.

an Other that is fundamentally present, in view of which his way of relating to the letter entails getting rid of it through an incessant scratching out. This is the equivalent of the panicky trajectory of his body in pieces, or his frantic fiddling with electric switches, without any of this ever managing to stabilise him.

The fundamental hyperkinesis of the subject who may be called autistic or psychotic is an attempt to eliminate a "Thing" that encumbers him, to finally pierce a hole in its presence. This clinic of the letter can only be put in its proper place by drawing on "Lituraterre"<sup>3</sup>. It is in the letter's relationship with jouissance that one may understand the pathology of writing articulated with an "excess of presence". We manage to bring relief to these children by producing absence, by inscribing the roundabout path of absence, which affords them a chance of writing.

Someone spoke to me in supervision about a case of an autistic child who first presented himself as savagely scribbling on vast quantities of sheets of paper, riddling them with holes. Next he started wanting to take her telephone, always with the same little mechanical laugh, then snatch her pen, then steal her keys. The therapist patiently put up with all that, forbidding it and interpreting to the child his will to "decomplete" her. After this phase, the subject started to speak, saying "break no more". After a year in the institution, he set about staging in a different manner his way of forcing the Other to refuse. The subject who had been contending with "too much presence", in the face of which he could only resort to making holes, came round to trying to extract from the Other the missing signifier.

What is a telephone? It is the locus of the voice, the locus of demand. He was trying to remove the Other's telephone, the stockpile from which the voice was coming. Afterwards, he tried to remove the pen from which came the endless nightmarish writing. And then he tried to remove her keys, the instruments that allow the world to be opened as well as allowing one to be shut in. Once these fundamental attempts had been made, as a host of efforts at producing the trace of absence in the Other, he could say "break no more". Simultaneously, he was able to trace a line around a new object, one selected from among his therapist's objects. To start with, he traced a line that didn't curve round and close up, which later on would give him a chance of finding his place again with writing.

## Modalities of Surplus

WITH *Fort-Da* and the cotton reel, when the mother goes away the child makes up on his loss. In his play he symbolises absence and presence and finds himself

3 [TN, The title of Lacan's 1971 text combines the Latin *litura*, an "erasure", a "blot" or a "smear", and the French *terre*, "terrain", by inverting the second and last vowels of *littérature*.]

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What is a teddy bear  
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The autistic ch  
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Other. When affor  
boot"<sup>8</sup>, the child ha

4 *Ibid.*, p. 16. [TN, *meuler* in the sense of "to fill

5 *Ibid.* [TN, *Papeludun* incorporates the Catalan

6 [TN, *En-pelure* reser added to an animal connotation is *pelure*

7 *Ibid.* [TN, When pron Written as Lacan's *qui ne serait pas du s*

8 *Ibid.* [TN, *Hun-en-Pa* with the same connot

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equipped with a cotton reel to boot. Next the reel transforms into a teddy bear. What is a teddy bear? It is a cotton reel that the child turns to when he has to face up to a separation. It is a reserve of libido, says Lacan. With this little stockpile, outside the body, the Other can leave. Even if the Other leaves him desolate with its departure, he still has that. With this reserve of libido, he can "fill out"<sup>4</sup> the anxiety he is left in by the departure of the Thing, the real mother in as much as she is the locus of language that humanises the child. She is the child's "language centre", and when she goes, she leaves him in absence, where there is no more signifier, no more trace. She leaves with all the child's signifiers. If this goes badly, the child might be autistic and no longer have a signifier for himself – they are all gone. Therefore a few need to stay behind, in reserve, in the cotton reel or the teddy bear. With that, the child stands a chance of bearing the anxiety when there is no trace of presence, and no trace of absence. The child who finds himself back with the cotton reel will soon find himself a sheet of pelure paper [*papier en pelure*] upon which he will be able to trace a line, a trait, but *nomorenwon*.<sup>5</sup> On an extra piece of paper, a sheet of paper *En-Peluce*<sup>6</sup>, a trait will be inscribed, *nomorenwon*, because One is enough to mark out the trace of this absence.

The autistic child, instead of marking down the *nomorenwon* trait, makes scratchings, hundreds of them. He does not write anything. The modality of the reserve of libido is missing. He does not have the reserve of libido at his disposal. The child has no reserve in which to stock libido while he waits to use it with the Other. He tires himself out eliminating the libido that encumbers him. He does not have anything that will allow for the constitution of a comfort blanket, something the child can believe in when he is left desolate by the absence of the Other. When afforded the emptiness of "th'Athing"<sup>7</sup> with the "Cuddly-Hun-to-boot"<sup>8</sup>, the child has something on which to fasten.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 16. [TN, *meubler* is at once "to furnish" in the sense of "to furnish one's home" and "to fill" in the sense of "to fill the silence".]

5 *Ibid.* [TN, *Papeludun* is loosely homophonic with *pas plus d'un*, "not more than one", but also incorporates the Catalan word for paper *papel*.]

6 [TN, *En-peluce* resembles *en plus*, "extra" or "to boot", but also resembles *en-peluche*, the suffix added to an animal name or character to indicate that it is a stuffed "cuddly" toy. A further connotation is *pelure*, a "skin" or "peel", as in *papier pelure*, a fine "onionskin" paper.]

7 *Ibid.* [TN, When pronounced with the definite article, *l'Achse* resembles *la Chose*, "the Thing". Written as Lacan writes it here in "Lituraterre", the "thing" is prefixed by the Latin preformative, and/or the object *a*, this latter reading being invited by Lacan in *Le séminaire livre XVIII, D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, Seuil, Paris, 2006, p. 120.]

8 *Ibid.* [TN, *Hun-en-Peluce*, is loosely homophonic with *un en plus*, "one more", or "an extra one", with the same connotations set out in footnote 6. As in English, *Hun* evokes a warlike foreign invader.]

### Writing as Filling Out "th'Athing"

WHAT is always borne out by writing is not the impression of the One but another style of impression, that of the absence whereby S (A) gets written for the child. With this, by employing the contrivance of the reel/teddy, he has filled out the emptiness of what opened up. Thus the child manages to bear witness to his relation to the signifier, not as the killing of the Thing, but as the filling out of "th'Athing", filling out its mortal emptiness. What one can truly call writing is a confrontation with the symbolic system. On this point, the psychotic trait meets up with the writing of those writers for whom it is a matter of a wide-reaching confrontation with the parasite of language. If we follow Lacan, we can thus grasp the position of Joyce-the-Sinthome, but also Proust's position, or Mallarmé's. Writing is a trait that sets out to play on equivocation so as to stabilise the relation to *lalangue* that can always leave you in the lurch.

Translated from the French by Adrian Price

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