

# LAUGHING AT NORMS

Éric Laurent

With this arrow, I would like to underscore five points. The first is that in Lacan's aphorism, *la norme male*, the male/bad [*mal*] norm concerns men and women, albeit homocentrically. The second is that the normal is what gives meaning to the age of science. This implies a plurality of coexistent norms. The third point bears on the formal modalities of Lacan's aphorism as it is written. The fourth bears on the trans norm and on the male/bad norm. The last bears on the interpretation of norms by psychoanalytical non-sense. It is what allows us to laugh at norms, to not take them seriously in a good manner.

## The Male/Bad Norm and Homocentrism

The articulation of the normal with the male norm [*norme mâle*] is first made in *Seminar XIX: ...or Worse*, precisely during one of the conferences announced under the title "The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst," and it concerns male homosexuality:

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For something to have meaning in the current state of thought, it's sad to say so, but it has to be pitched as normal. This is why André Gide wanted homosexuality to be normal. And, since you perhaps have the lowdown on this [along these lines they are legion]. In two shakes of a lamb's tail it will fall under the cover of the normal.<sup>1</sup>

In "L'étourdit," whose writing follows the Seminar ...*or Worse*, the aphorism displaces the context of the normal of homosexuality toward neurosis. That "L'étourdit" and ...*or Worse* must be woven together is an essential point that Philippe La Sagna and Rodolphe Adam make well in their recently published work *Contrer l'Universel* [*Countering the Universal*].<sup>2</sup>

In "L'étourdit," Lacan completes "Kant with Sade." He opposes Kant and his "noumenon" that flees thought to the way *jouissance* comes to knot itself with thought in neurotic symptoms, in those two major neuroses which "by taking the normal seriously, tell us that it's more like a male/bad norm [*norme male*]." It's no longer Kant with Sade but Kant with Dora and the Rat Man. A true rat-ification. The neuroses state a primary truth: what leads us is phallic *jouissance* or its dream. In the context of its apparition, the male norm speaks not of men; it speaks of neurosis. It's not an identity norm, but a relational one. It speaks of those.

In the late 1930s, the history of science introduced a famous distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification. We could paraphrase it by introducing the distinction between the context in which one of Lacan's aphorisms emerged, and the multiplicity of contexts of usage in which this aphorism can make sense or resonate with the set of his utterances [*dits*]. The aphorism according to which the normal is "more like a bad norm [*norm male*]"<sup>3</sup> (without the circumflex) lends itself well to this distinction. The papers prepared for these Study Days brought to light the fertile multiplicity of contexts in which the male norm (now with the circumflex: *mâle*) could resonate, on its own or in contrast with the feminine *a-norme*.

## Taking the Normal Seriously

This expression allows us to re-read the lesson from *Seminar XIX* where Lacan introduced the central place of the normal. He states there: "Analysis

1. Jacques Lacan, ...*or Worse: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Adrian Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 57.
2. Philippe La Sagna and Rodolphe Adam, *Contrer l'Universel* (Paris: Editions Michèle, 2020).
3. Jacques Lacan, "L'étourdit," (1973), in *Autres Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 479.

began there. If the notion of the normal had not taken on such traction in the wake of history's accidents, analysis would never have seen the light of day."<sup>4</sup> It required that subjects feel that they weren't part of the male norm or the feminine norm for them to come and ask Freud for help. In "L'Étourdit" Lacan clarifies why the normal took charge of meaning. It's because "we are under the reign of the scientific discourse" and of the calculations that accompany it.<sup>5</sup> In this discourse, the universal "man is mortal" translates into life insurance. "Death, in the saying of science, is a matter of calculating probabilities. It is, in this discourse, what truth it has."<sup>6</sup> The scientific discourse, in affirming the *Yad'l'Un* [there's Some One], is accompanied by *Yad'la'norme* [there's Some norm]. If there's Some one, then there's Some norm. And so the feeling of not being there, of feeling one's symptom as pathological, as deviating from the norm that neurotics took seriously in their will to be a normal man or normal woman, according to the calculation that prevails. To take norms seriously is to believe in the universal of The woman on the side of the hysteric, and the will to be the man on the obsessional side, especially under the head of the ideal father of the family.

## Suspension Points

The paragraph where this aphorism on the male norm occurs is introduced by a remarkable writing device. Lacan makes a particular use of the three suspension points of the ellipsis, a usage worthy of Joycean epiphanies. The use of suspension points in the title of *...or Worse* functions as an elision in the form of a bar on the father. In "L'Étourdit," a continuous text, with no subsections, the discontinuities are, all the same, not lacking, and the suspension points contribute to that effect in multiple ways.<sup>7</sup>

Here, the suspension points allow for a sudden unfastening in the text. After having played on the equivocation of *noumène* [noumenon] and *nous mène* [leads us], insisting on the verb "to lead," it's on the *us* that Lacan plays. He hails an interlocutor, until then implicit in the hidden presence of the reader. "What leads us thusly . . . to what? Must I jump, must I swear that I didn't see it right away while you, already . . . these first truths, but it's the very text from which are formulated the symptoms of the great neuroses."<sup>8</sup>

4. Jacques Lacan, *...or Worse*, *op. cit.*, 71.

5. Jacques Lacan, "L'Étourdit," *op. cit.*, 475.

6. *Ibid.*

7. We could differentiate the usage of suspension points on page 487, where they are used at the beginning of three paragraphs, with that on page 479, cited here.

8. Jacques Lacan, "L'Étourdit," *op. cit.*, 479.

So these are all ways of putting into play in the text, by written means, the cut that highlights the void covered over by the male/*mal* [bad] norm, the neurotic norm.

## Neurosis and the Partner $\Phi$

What the symptoms of the great neuroses reveal is the embarrassment of the subject with their partner. This is what the Seminar *...or Worse* brought out, still in its lesson on the norm. Phallic jouissance cannot be said to be sexual jouissance. Man and woman make believe, but the jouissance is real. "It's very clear that it's more with big  $\Phi$  than with the other, the partner, that each has a relation." Lacan exemplifies that the homosexual subject is more assured in his relation to his organ, in that he confounds more easily with big  $\Phi$  than can the hetero, who must transit the incarnation of big  $\Phi$  in the feminine body that does quite well without the penile organ. "[H]omos have better erections, and more often, and harder."<sup>9</sup>

The male/*mal* [bad] norm finds itself thus straddling, if I might say, the line between normal homosexuality and the neurotic norm. On the homo side, the relation to the organ and its satisfaction is simplified. On the neurotic side, the phallic dialectic and its lack—its neuter, as Eric Marty puts it, following Roland Barthes—draws the subject to be interested in the deficit of its jouissance marked by castration. It introduces a minus that acts as a cut with jouissance. This minus comes in the place of the nothing partner that defines the veritable cut.

## The Trans Norm and the Male/Bad Norm

We are the contemporaries of attempts to establish new norms. They too come in the place of the nothing partner. This new norm misleads as much as the preceding ones in relation to jouissance. It makes the organ its cause. The position of the transsexual subject participates in the common error, says Lacan. The common error is the other side of the *Ortho doxa*, with regard to the phallic point. The error is to incarnate sexual difference, a pure effect of discourse, in an organ. In a second phase, after having succumbed to the common error, a particular passion is born. The liberation desired by the transsexual aims for the organ as a common measure. This liberation wants to ignore that the sexes are incommensurable in the non-relationship of jouissances, beyond the organ. The transsexualist

9. Jacques Lacan, *...or Worse*, *op. cit.*, 71.

subject, in their passion to cross over to the other shore, essentializes the sexual difference, and makes exist the identity of both shores, with no regard for the radical alterity of feminine jouissance. This is why the operated transexual subject does not care about whether or not the penile or vaginal prosthesis will give them sensations. It is not a sensualist passion. It is beyond. As for sensations, there will always be enough.

## The Nothing, the Laughter, the Interpretation

In the proliferation of norms, nothing overcomes the fundamental misrecognition. A man's or woman's partner, binary or not, is not the other of their choice; it is jouissance that compels them. On the side of the partner, it is the nothing. What remains is the surplus jouissance that is outside of meaning [*hors-sens*]. The sexual non-relation returns all pretensions of norms to their vacuity. This orientation towards the real of jouissance produces sayings of a new sort, like Lacan's aphorisms, which try to confront the utterances bearing on being that metaphysics handed down to us. Lacan hopes that they "will prove themselves to be of surplus nonsense, funnier, in a word."<sup>10</sup>

The surplus nonsense is a new kind of utterance on jouissance, in its relation to the sexual non-relation that it covers. It's a materialist [*matérialiste*] operation.<sup>11</sup> In making use of the psychoanalytic discourse, Lacan wants to incite psychoanalysts to extract other aphorisms from norms of jouissance produced by other discourses—the master's or the university's—and heaven knows that these days the university discourse is producing them for us, be they woke or asleep.

To extract new utterances on jouissance supposes being able to interpret materially [*matériellement*]. It's not a simple liberty of speech with regard to norms that a material interpretation supposes. However, the liberty of speech is, as Jacques-Alain Miller has strongly underscored, a necessary condition. It's up to psychoanalysts to make it their springboard for their variations of Lacanian unarism.

*Translated by Julia Richards*

10. Jacques Lacan, "L'étourdit," *op. cit.*, 479.

11. At the end of "L'étourdit," Lacan takes example from Democritus' nonsense, playing with signifying material to make the one of matter, the Greek atom, from an extraction of the void. He invented the "*den*," from the void, "*meden*," by cutting from it the negation "*me*," making this double negation of the reference the name of the indivisible. In this way he laughs at the materialism that dominated the thinking of his times.

# UNTRANSLATABLE

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