

## Autism and psychoanalysis

## Autism and psychosis: continuation of a dialogue with Robert and Rosine Lefort<sup>1</sup>

Eric Laurent

Over the last fifteen years, autism has asserted its presence constantly, to the extent that it has replaced "childhood psychoses" in the classification of the "pervasive disorders" of childhood. Isolated almost simultaneously in 1943 by Leo Kanner, a Galician Jew like Freud, who trained in Berlin and emigrated to America in the 1920's, and in 1944 by a Viennese, Hans Asperger, the clinical syndrome remained a rare diagnosis for a long time. "In the beginning autism was paired with childhood schizophrenia. The ideas were divorced in 1979. *The Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia*, founded in 1971, became the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, from the end of the 1960's, English parents "pushed for the diagnosis of autism because it was the only form of learning disability that was not classed as uneducable in Great Britain"<sup>3</sup> Owing to its status as a disability rather than an illness, it allowed parents to claim rights and specialised education. In the United States, the sensitisation of public authorities to such rights increased in response to the mentally disabled sister of John Kennedy. In France, for the same reasons, the supporters of social psychiatry put the argument for abandoning the term "infantile psychosis".<sup>4</sup> After becoming the diagnosis of choice, to the detriment of the childhood psychoses,<sup>5</sup> it then transformed into an epidemic. In California alone, the number of children receiving specialised services for autism tripled from 1987 to 1998, and doubled in the following four years. This wave has highlighted the urgency of calls for more research into autism and

<sup>1</sup> This article was first published in French in the journal *La cause freudienne* 66, Citizen Symptom, May 2007

<sup>2</sup> Hacking, I., What is Tom saying to Maureen?, London Review of Books, 11 May 2006 available online: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n09/ian-hacking/what-is-tom-saying-to-maureen>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Prieur, C., "Le gouvernement face au défi de la prise en charge de l'autisme", *Le Monde*, Thursday 25 November 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sauvagnat, F., « L'autisme à la lettre : quels types de changements sont proposés aux sujets autistes aujourd'hui ? », *Psychoanalytische Perspektiven*, Gand, 39 (2000) p. 113-149.

for more state funding to finance it.<sup>6</sup> The difficulties of isolating the "predisposing polygenetics" for the disorder, and of defining the role of vaccination in the spread of the epidemic, did not deter the supporters of the strictly scientific model. The ineffectiveness of medication for the disorder, especially neuroleptics, no doubt increased the need to announce decisive progress in the research into its physical causes, in order to relieve the anxiety of parents and others closest to autistic subjects, Jean-Pierre Rouillon<sup>7</sup> emphasised that the Circular of 8<sup>th</sup> March 2005 regarding policy on supporting people with autism and pervasive developmental disorders "is less cautious than the specialists in neuroscience regarding the causes of autistic handicap." Indeed, it states: "Their causes are probably related to complex processes, where the intervention of multiple genetic factors has been shown and where diverse environmental factors could be implicated. Previous theories of an exclusive psychogenesis of autism, which had the merit of drawing attention to autistic individuals but exacerbated the distress of their parents should be rejected, as they frequently are today". The priority now is to educate, to support integration and "to limit the consequences for the individual and next of kin." This perspective gives up on the effort that Lacan invited us to make in 1975 concerning autism: "there is certainly something to say to them."<sup>8</sup> Parents are now left face to face with the handicap of their child. They are asked to make their child into their life's "mission" and to support his rights. The "third person" is now purely exterior, someone from whom one claims more rights and support. In these times of penury, this situation is not easily maintained. Marcel Herault, president of the major family association "Sesame autism", stresses "The situation is more dramatic than a few years ago because resources in child psychiatry have declined despite the increase in cases. Ten years ago, most autistic children were offered full-time support; today the support is, at best, partial."<sup>9</sup> It is well known that the institutions open to autistic children in Belgium take some of them; almost three thousand French cases are followed up there. Our Belgian colleagues are well aware of this, welcoming a portion of these children either at the Antenne 110 or at the different extensions of the Courtil.<sup>10</sup>

In the United States and in England, the supporters of behavioural and educational therapies seek to mobilise parents into a constant intensive

<sup>6</sup> Goode, E., "US Reports a Surge in Autism, Calls for More Research as Cause Remains a Mystery", *International Herald Tribune*, 29 janvier 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Rouillon, J.-P., *l'Autisme au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, J., "Geneva Lecture on the Symptom", trans. Russell Grigg, *Analysis* 1, p. 7-26.

<sup>9</sup> Déclarations recueillies par Cécile Prieur, article du monde du 25 novembre 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Di Ciaccia, A., "La pratique à plusieurs, La Cause freudienne", n° 61, Paris, 2005, pp. 107-118; Stevens A., "Le courtil: un choix", *Mental* n°1, 1996; "Entrer en Institution", Conclusion of R13's 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Study Days, *Feuilles psychanalytiques du Courtil*, n° 25/26, July 2006

effort, without respite, that requires maximal investment, both financial and relational, from each one and at each moment of the day. This pressure, despite partial delegation to "professionals" i.e. behavioural educators, does not preclude the effects of exhaustion on the parents. The asymmetry in the relationship of mothers and fathers to the child with disabilities has not been alleviated, if we are to believe the tragedies reported recently. On 12<sup>th</sup> April 2006 in Hull, England, Alison Davies and her son, Ryan, aged 12 died when they threw themselves into the river Humber, in an apparent murder-suicide. On 14<sup>th</sup> May in Albany, Oregon, Christopher de Groot, aged 19, was trapped inside his burning apartment. He died in a hospital in Portland five days later and his parents were accused of murder, having left him locked in and alone. The same Sunday in May, in Morton, Illinois, Dr Karen McCarron admitted to police that she had suffocated her 3-year-old daughter, Karen, the previous day with a plastic bin liner.<sup>11</sup> These cases were selected by the author, herself a parent of an autistic child, because both mothers had gained the support of their local communities on account of the heroic love each had shown for their sick child. She indicated that she had selected them in order to discourage parents from having hopes that are too high which can lead to these extremes. In this situation, one can truly say that the child becomes the fantasy object: "he alienates all of the mother's possible access to his truth, and to her own, by giving it body, existence and even the demand for protection."<sup>12</sup> The forced identity as "the mother of an autistic child" is not only an occasion for empowerment, it is also, as Jacques-Alain Miller has discussed, a damaging confinement, which Lacan brought to our attention in his "Note on the Child". It is a confinement that extends the forms and disciplines of incarceration that Foucault described for the nineteenth century into societies governed by democratic individualism.

Contrary to what is stated in the Circular of 2005, psychoanalysis has not "blamed the parents". There is no need for psychoanalysis to do that. Rather, it exonerates subjects generally. In this sense, Freud's aphorism stating that whatever parents do, they do it wrong, is valid. To proclaim the error of treating autism through psychoanalysis in the name of supposed genetic determinants is no less erroneous. A subject does not stop being a subject if his body is "disabled". It is necessary to adapt psychoanalysis to his case. It is a question of working with the facts, including eventual biological data, as a tool for the application of psychoanalysis to the case, and not of considering this to be of no consequence to the constitution of the subject himself. As Lacan noted, psychoanalysis does not suppose, in this

<sup>11</sup> McGovern, C., *Autism's Parent Trap*, New York Times, 5 June 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Lacan, J., "Note on the Child", *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 20 (2010), trans. Natalie Wülfing, p.8

sense, a psychogenesis of mental illness. It states the dimension of the body for the subject of the language parasite, which is another matter.

We have seen that the European institutions offering care oriented by psychoanalysis, especially Lacanian psychoanalysis, welcome autistic children.<sup>13</sup> They regularly account for their work, from a theoretical point of view as much as an administrative one. It is also necessary to mention how much the parents of autistic children, especially the mothers, have relied on the support of a psychoanalyst so as not to be left alone in an exhausting battle to obtain their rights. These parents were not followed up as "parents", and instead their psychoanalysis was the place where they could elaborate their own truth, beyond the misfortune that overwhelmed them. There are other ways of removing a sense of guilt than through the universal of science. It is possible to acknowledge the particularity of a suffering without making it into a community identification or cancelling it out by referring to a "natural" cause, beyond the reach of the speaking being.

The place of psychoanalysis in the contemporary epidemic of autism, in all its aspects, is a central question in the dialogue maintained by the research of Robert and Rosine Lefort. Robert Lefort, child psychiatrist and impassioned analyst, had always wanted to apply the lessons of psychoanalysis when working with psychotic children in adapted institutional settings. For him the child, especially the psychotic child, should not be approached solely from the imaginary, as was the case in numerous specialised play techniques. It was necessary to approach the child through the particular knotting of the symbolic and the real. The end of the nineteen-sixties was a favourable time for institutional experiences. In September 1969, with Maud Mannoni, he created "the Experimental School of Bonneuil-Sur-Marne" as an "exploded institution". There he would develop the teaching that the clinical work that Rosine had brought him since the fifties.

#### Autism and/or childhood psychosis: foreclosure and the return of *jouissance*

There was no epidemic when Rosine and Robert Lefort began to focus their interest on what, to them, initially appeared to be a subjective position within the context of childhood psychosis.

The development of their work created remarkable flashes of insight, constantly renewed, into the decisive "instant of seeing" that constituted Rosine Lefort's approach to the case of "Robert", oriented by Lacan. The recognition of an almost hallucinatory word screamed by the child: "*le loup, le loup!*", as if escaping the laws of the symbolic, remained difficult to situate

<sup>13</sup> Here we must signal the work of Martin Egge in the Antenne 112 in Italy. Egge, M., "La cura del bambino autistic", Casa Editrice Astromabio, 2006.

in 1954. At that time this "core" of speech was qualified as "superego." The word does not denote anything, any more than it designates, as such, a speaking subject. "It is neither him, nor anyone else. He is clearly the *wolf* in so far as he says this very word. But the *wolf* is anything in so far as it can be named. Here you see the nodal state of speech. Here the ego is chaotic, speech has come to a halt. But, starting with the *wolf* he will be able to take his place and construct himself."<sup>14</sup>

This word is not articulated as an exchange. It is the first version of what will become the *S1*, the solitary signifier. Its use will become the guiding thread weaving through the work of Robert and Rosine Lefort.

Despite the Wolf Child being in the real, it did not prevent the action of the symbolic. Rosine said of him, "He is the signifier '*Madame!*' He is '*Madame*' as he shows in his behaviour with me, as he plays policeman with the other children, or when he gives them cakes without keeping any for himself."<sup>15</sup> It is by making reverse use of this passage of the symbolic into the real that the subject is led to a "baptism", naming himself by his cry.

Once this nomination occurs a number of effects follow. A metonymic chain of objects is established that allows the child to emerge from his fascinated *anxiety* before the hole in the lavatory. The child has "expanded his world". Rosine and Robert Lefort never stopped exploring the possibility and logic of the construction of this metonymic chain, in all its aspects.

We have been part of the generation that has followed their decryption and development of a form of child psychoanalysis capable of resisting the spell of the imaginary. It was a matter of correcting a bias in the way that analytic practice had developed. Lacan had situated this bias in: "The function of the imaginary, as I shall call it, or, to put it more directly, of fantasies in the technique of psychoanalytic experience and in the constitution of the object at the different stages of psychical development. The impetus in this area has come from the analysis of children and from the favourable field offered to researchers' efforts and temptations by the preverbal structurations approach."<sup>16</sup>

The emphasis on the place and function of the real for the psychotic subject distanced us from an adherence to Klein in the psychoanalysis of children, thanks to the *object a*, which has no representation. Henceforth, the psychoanalysis of children would move away from the function of body images identified by Francoise Dolto. This orientation also allowed us to

<sup>14</sup> Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan : Book I, Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, trans., John Forrester (London: Norton, 1991), p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> Lefort, R. "Le *S1*, le sujet et la psychose", in *Analytica*, n°47, 1986, p.51

<sup>16</sup> Lacan, J., "The function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Norton, 2006), p. 202.

## Autism and psychosis

appreciate the reasons for the post-Kleinian movement (Meltzer, Tustin) towards the clinic of autism.

To get true access to the "orientation of the real" it was necessary to dispose of the idolatrous prestige of the body and its images. "It would be a great contradiction to maintain the psychoanalysis of children as a technique of play and drawings, when children show themselves capable, the more so the younger they are - even before they can speak - of enlightening us on such an essential matter as the constitution of the subject in the analytic discourse (...). We must take up the psychoanalysis of children again at this minimal level, where the body appears in a privileged way, as a body of the signifier. Signifier certainly, but where the real takes its place on the basis of the object *a*; and if the subject appears as an effect of the real, this is nowhere more apparent than in children".<sup>17</sup> The progressive shifts between different "paradigms of *jouissance*" in Lacan's teaching laid *jouissance* bare in the dimension of the real. The impact of the variations in usage of the "solitary signifier" continues to orientate our exploration of the clinic opened up by Rosine and Robert Lefort.

From *The Birth of the Other (Naissance de l'Autre)* 1980 to *Distinguishing Autism (La distinction de l'autisme)* 2003, Robert Lefort developed a body of work with Rosine that centred on the treatment of subjects for whom "there is no Other". We followed the evolution of their commentary on Marie-Françoise, who taught them about what is produced "when there is no Other" of this solitary signifier.

**From "the structure of psychosis" to "the structure of autism" (2003)**  
They came to consider this "there is no Other" in tension with "the inexistence of the Other" in civilisation. From this perspective, they put forward the idea of an "autistic structure", which, without presenting a picture of autism itself, evoked it by its dominant and very clearly identifiable structural elements. This structure would come fourth in the major structures: neurosis, psychosis, perversion and autism.<sup>18</sup> In *Distinguishing Autism*, geniuses and autistic adults able to testify to their particular subjective position form part of a continuum. They are presented to us as autistic brothers of mankind.

It was from 1992 especially that Robert and Rosine Lefort took the path of separating autism from the general frame of psychoses. Should they be separated through a particular mode of foreclosure that provoked the rejection of all signifiers or through a particular mode of the return of *jouissance* to the body? We talked about this often.

<sup>17</sup> Lefort, R. & R., "Le CEREDA : Centre de recherche sur l'enfant dans le discours psychanalytique", in *Analytica*, n°44, 1986, p. 66  
<sup>18</sup> Lefort, R. & R., *La distinction de l'autisme*, Seuil, coll. champ Freudien, 2003, p.8

Eric Laurent

One of the indications that Dr Lacan gave us is that in the autistic position (understood in the wider sense, as in Melanie Klein's case of Dick, or in the case of Sami Ali presented during the "Study days on alienated childhood", or in the case of the Wolf Child by Rosine Lefort), the autistic child is hallucinating. To say that there is hallucination is to say that there is a submergence of the symbolic in the real. "This child lives only in the real. If the word hallucination means something, it is this feeling of reality."<sup>19</sup> On this basis, how do we define this mode of foreclosure? If there is an Other, it functions as pure exteriority to all signifiers. In this sense, autism would be a "imaginary prosthesis" is one of its particularly striking aspects. Nor is there any delusion with its mixture of imaginary and symbolic.

The reduction of the status of the Other, the protection and distance introduced by the subject, can lead him to a state of withdrawal and subsequently to a catastrophic process of stabilisation, which must be explored in the three dimensions of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. In 1958, Lacan could talk about the stabilisation provided by the delusional metaphor in the Schreber case, and about the "imaginary prosthesis" which protected Schreber until the late triggering of his psychosis. The exploration of these processes would be pursued into the 70's, and after the Seminar on Joyce, as "sinthomisations" in psychotic structures to account for splicing procedures.

Outside this catastrophic stasis, would it be possible to highlight the alternation between stabilisations and passages towards psychosis? In those years, Robert Lefort uttered the aphorism: "the autistic child exits autism to enter psychosis." The stabilisation could be shifted in a number of cases, always centred on the essential mechanism of the localisation of *jouissance*.

Whether one speaks about an exit via psychosis, or of displacements within autism, the child emerges from a stabilisation to slide into a metonymy. It is a destabilisation of the homeostasis in which he is the autistic shell - the height of stabilisation. His body can then be animated, not without a phenomenon of manic excitement, by the effort to re-adhere to what presents itself to the subject as a supplementary object, conceived as similar to those in delusion,<sup>20</sup> a production outside the body of real signifying articulations with which the subject binds himself. To situate this binding, we can find our way according to the four mathemes that Lacan gives us as a compass orientation. S1, S2, \$, a.

<sup>19</sup> Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I, op. cit.*, p. 103

<sup>20</sup> In a classic article, psychiatrist Henry Faure, using a phenomenological approach, described in the following way the « delusional investment of objects ». There is, according to other modalities, an autistic investment of objects, cf. Faure, H., *Entretiens psychiatriques*, 1953, L'Arche, Paris.

## Autism and psychosis

### *To begin with, S1, the master signifier*

The passage of the signifier into the real, and its repetition without displacement, defines what is clinically described as the autistic subject's "taste for order". This may be the repetition of an isolated signifier or of a minimal circuit organised not as pairs of opposing signifiers but as real juxtapositions. The S1 presents us with the clinic of the circuit, circuits that may occur inside a room, an institution, or a town. Lacan could say that delusion is the delusion "of the hallway, the street or the forum". The autistic circuit is organised according to an equivalent topology. We observe it clinically in the wish for nothing to move "in the room, the hallway, the street or the forum", that the world should stay exactly in its place, without the slightest metonymic sliding. If something changes, a crisis happens. When something in the world is no longer in its place, the world order is immediately affected. The world becomes confused with the world order.

The symbolic as real is provided with a topology. We cannot take it to be simply something flattened (*mise à plat*). Sometimes it is a flattening; but there are, on many other occasions, phenomena that cannot be accounted for without a topology of drive space. In *The Birth of the Other*, Rosine and Robert Lefort outlined a number of its properties. For example, let us consider the moments when the child, in an excited to and fro movement fixates on the eye of the therapist and then on the window of the room, as if there were a certain equivalence of orifices, those which open on the body and those which open towards the exterior. To establish this equivalence, we are led to suppose a space that is not constructed with an inside and an outside, delimited by the edges of the house, but a space that is structured like a torus, where from the point of view of its surface, the interior and the exterior of the torus circle are always exterior. Looking towards the interior, one is always looking at infinity.

It is this kind of non-metric space that can help us account for the so-called poor visual perception of the autistic child. For example, the fact that upon hearing at infinity an aeroplane passing across the sky the child feels a terror equivalent to what he experiences in the presence of this noise right beside him. Is this a question of visual or auditory perception? Rather, it is a question of a space in which the subject is glued to the drive in a non-metric fashion. We are dealing with subjects who move in a space of *jouissance* in which infinity and proximity are the same. The hole that is open beside them is also a point at infinity. Metric space is established much later and only with the yardstick (*mètre-étalon*), in other words, the phallus. If phallic signification is not there, it is not possible to measure the world. As Francois Truffaut put it, he got the measure of the world from the legs of women. Without this measure or regulation, the Other is always able to invade the subject's body with a terrible *jouissance*, in catastrophic ways, without rims which could mark a regulated pulsation.

Eric Laurent

Dr Lacan presented the topology of this space through a number of unilateral surfaces that he introduced following his studies on psychosis in the 50's. See Schema R from "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis" and the presentation on Lacan's topology made by Jacques-Alain Miller in his "Topological Supplement to the Preliminary Question".<sup>21</sup>

### *S2, knowledge*

In these children, we observe a relation of direct and radical opposition to the knowledge in language – a relation of pure exteriority. This persecutory relation to knowledge is one that is perfectly constituted. The autistic subject attempts to reduce the disorder of *lalangue* to a language from which fixed rules can be extracted.

In a recent article Jean-Claude Maléval presented a series of quotes from a number of "high functioning" autistic individuals such as Temple Grandin or Donna Williams where the decoupling of the body from the symbolic and the symptom is particularly striking. "Emotion does not guide my decision", states Grandin, "it is pure computing." Lacan drew attention to the same phenomenon in Dick, noting "he already has some sense of vocables, but to these vocables he hasn't given a *Bejahung* – he hasn't assumed them." The difficulty in expressing her feelings led Grandin to compare her mode of thinking to that of a computer. "Recently, I attended a lecture", she reported in 1995, "where a social scientist said that humans do not think like computers. That night at a dinner party I told this scientist and her friends that my thought patterns resemble computing and that I am able to explain my thought processes step by step."<sup>22</sup>

The rules of language presented in this way, disconnected from any relation to the body and to the imaginary, are devoid of any affect. This brings to mind Chomsky's conception of the rules of the language-organ according to his initial theories, before 1983. It is the exercise of a psychotic rigour, but without the imaginary contamination of the delusional construction. The playing of the symbolic is "realised" with no possibility of equivocation. We can rely on the statements of the subjects themselves. One of the peculiarities of this diagnosis is the interest it arouses in our civilisation. The subjects are asked to testify to and transmit the originality of their experience. The media picks such stories up and transmits them widely and autobiographies are published and given a broad distribution. The interest shown in delusions during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has shifted towards the miraculous techniques achieved by "autistic savants". In the end, the

<sup>21</sup> Miller, J.-A., "Les psychoses", *Lettres de l'E.F.P.*, 27 (1979), p. 127-138.

<sup>22</sup> Maléval, J.-C., "Plutôt verbeux les autistes", *Omicar* n° 299, 26 January 2007.

## Autism and psychosis

pathology that seemed to be the most disconnected from all communication has given rise to a communication that is strange and multiform. Now we can read the survey by Kamran Nazeer<sup>23</sup> of his four friends at the special school for autistic children, which he attended in 1982. He left there for Cambridge University, England, and now works for the Foreign Office, the most sought-after ministry in the English public service. He gives an autistic perspective on autistic cases. One of his previous schoolmates works as a political discourse analyst in Washington; another is an information systems engineer; and another is a courier specialising in highly complex itineraries. All is not rosy however as a female friend, a gifted pianist, committed suicide during a major depressive episode. In the survey, we can see how these autistic subjects found thoroughly autistic solutions for enabling their insertion in the Other. High functioning autism respects its own mode of functioning and that of others without any imaginary obstacle. The fact of having not the least empathy is not just a handicap. It frees one from all "understanding". We have the particular example of Daniel Tammet, an autistic individual who became famous in 2004 for having recited the number pi up to 22,514 decimals and for breaking the bank at blackjack in Las Vegas. In *Born on a Blue Day*, Tammet writes about his childhood, when numbers were his only friends. His style is so elegant that the strangeness of the work transpires only slowly: there is no dialogue, no humour, and no amusing self-reflection. He tackles his story without embellishment, driven by the ardent desire to explain himself. He sometimes drowns in the details when he gets onto one of his passions, such as the structure of language. With a facility verging on osmosis, he is capable of syntax (he mastered Icelandic in a week). On the other hand, he struggles to acquire competencies that are obvious to others: communication, empathy, brain breaks everything down into concrete and tangible elements," he explains. "It is the intangible that I have trouble understanding."<sup>24</sup>

### §, the subject

Let us define the subject in the simplest way, as Lacan sometimes does, as the one who is spoken of (*celui dont on parle*). We often see that autistic children are identified with, hang on to, something spoken by a parent, most commonly an instruction.

<sup>23</sup> Nazeer, K., *Send in the Idiots, or How We Grew to Understand the World*, Bloomsbury, London, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Jardine, C., "L'autiste qui aimait le nombre π", *The Daily Telegraph*, London, translated. *Courrier International* n°828, 14-20 September 2006.

Eric Laurent

The subject's emergence from this first status, this first position, his separation from the Other, is not achieved only through moments of producing knowledge about language as a whole and about the rules of discourse as a social link, but equally through moments of stupor, of pure real absence. In both cases, or on these two sides, we may speak about production of the subject, whether on the side of alienation, the pure exteriority of discourse, or on the side of stupor.

Such a subject may describe a "moment of emptying". This is a pure, real absence that may be the upsurge of a subjective function within a state of hyperagitation or screaming, or from within the diktat imposed by the "realisation" of the master-signifiers of parental speech.

### Object a

We can describe the autistic subject's different modes of attachment to an object that is supplementary, particularised and electively erotised. This object of *jouissance* outside the body raises itself to the category of an object a. The subject's body and the object are in a relation of constant re-adhesion as the subject tries to situate himself in relation to this object. Gluing himself to it or rejecting it just as well. This object is essential and inseparable from the subject, whether it is a balloon, a box, a glass or a computer. Here, we can discuss what Bettelheim proposed with the idea of the "child-machine". Let us abandon the "child-machine". Let us talk instead about the "child-organ", because what the child demonstrates does not concern an object that is dehumanised, as Bettelheim believed. What he describes is the perfect illustration not of a machine, but of an exteriorisation of the Other as exteriority, of an organ with no function. The different constructions produced by autistic children indicate the functioning of a supplementary organ that the child attempts, at the cost of his own life if necessary, to extract or to introduce as the appropriate organ for language in his body.

This applies particularly to objects that, in our civilisations, make a rim with the body (*bord avec le corps*), like shoes and gloves, or which cover it, like aprons and clothes, often required as protection. These objects substitute effectively for skin, functioning as armour that can become more detachable components of the robot-heroes currently fashionable in console computer games.

While considering the difficulties encountered by a subject experiencing his body as detached from its skin, we also need to consider facts of another order such as the shift brought about when the child isolates an object in its singularity. We have an example of this type of isolation, this

## Autism and psychosis

type of raising up of an object in the sequence, described by Rosine Lefort in the text published in *Ornicar?*, namely the raising up of the baby's bottle in *The Wolf Child* and the consequences that it produces.<sup>25</sup>

The outside-of-the-body object is gradually drawn inside the border (trace) that, in a very real sense, has been drawn up around the subject's body. At first "outside the body", this object gets taken in and inserted as part of a montage made up of the body plus an object outside it. It is in this sense that the autistic subject's efforts to inscribe himself within the family of that inhabiting it (*que d'labiter*) is also what makes an organ for his body... It is even through this that he is reduced to finding that his body is not without other organs, and that each of their functions gives him a problem.<sup>26</sup> Lacan goes on to evoke "schizophrenic speech", which sustains itself without the aid "of the slightest established discourse", in this regard, but can we not also locate "autistic writing" here too? Doesn't the function of the organ-computer, which best incarnates the disconnection of the symbolic from speech and the voice, bear this out?

Jean-Claude Maleval organises the clinic of autism decisively around the object voice.<sup>27</sup> He attributes to the object voice the capacity to bear the trace of singularity that is unbearable for the autistic subject. This can be observed in the refusal of dialogue, whether addressed to the subject or in his address to the Other. To the extent that *jouissance* is not extracted from speech, the subject experiences speech as a true mutilation. To talk is "to empty oneself" or "to empty one's brain". This is why "the dissociation between the voice and language is the principle of autism".<sup>28</sup>

We forget that the use of language presupposes consent to the existence of a place, that of the Other, that is "cleared of *jouissance*". This is what constitutes its "lack of guarantee". The autistic subject cannot overcome the trauma of the address. He is too terrified to consent to the incorporation of the voice as the otherness of what is being said.<sup>29</sup> There is no organ of the voice that is possible to incorporate. Keeping faith with the falsehoods at stake in the detour of "communication" is thus not sustainable for this subject. While talking is to "enjoy oneself" through the detour of the person being addressed, for this subject talking remains pure mutilation.

<sup>25</sup> Lefort, R., "Les trois premières séances du traitement de l'enfant au loup", *Ornicar?* n°28, 1984, pp 59-68

<sup>26</sup> Lacan, J., "L'Etourdit", *Autres Écrits*, Seuil 2001, p. 474.

<sup>27</sup> Maleval, J.-C., "Plutôt verbeux les autistes", *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, J., *Le Séminaire, Livre X, l'Angoisse*, Seuil, 2004, p. 318. In his article, J.-C. Maleval provides a very subtle commentary on this, while developing the indications given by J.-A. Miller in his article on 'Jacques Lacan and the Voice' [*Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 6 (2001), pp. 93-104]

Eric Laurent

In this sense, the autistic individual's relation to his body presents us with a body cleaned of all possible organs of exchange. The autistic body is the true "body without organs". The dividing up (*morcellement*) of the body into organs is overcome at the price of being locked into a "shell", as some have called it. The subject "enjoys itself" (*se jouit*) without the pathway of the drive that could otherwise link the body of the subject to the Other. This distinction is present in schizophrenia where the return of *jouissance* occurs in the body of the subject. It is present in paranoia, where bad *jouissance* is "from the Other". It is abolished in autism because the path of the drive does not exist. In other words, we could say that the body-shell is what results when all the orifices of the body are plugged with the "lamella". There is no longer any possible pathway. The intent of the Wolf Child on castration in the real during the first phase of his treatment signals the radical rejection of an organ with a function that is pure enigma for the subject: "the psychotic, unable to cut off the oral object from the Other, must cut off his own penis. The pairing of breast-penis is a fundamental equivalence, as Robert demonstrated over some months – with the effect of his having to urinate during each session – testifying to the inescapability of the cut, in this case, in the real."<sup>30</sup>

### The application of psychoanalysis to autism: autism à deux

How is psychoanalysis applied to autism? It is a matter of allowing the subject to disengage from his homeostatic withdrawal in the encapsulated body and to pass into a subjectivity that is something like an autism à deux. It is a matter of making oneself the new partner of this subject, beyond all imaginary reciprocity and symbolic interlocution. How can this be achieved without the subject experiencing an unbearable crisis? The support of an object outside the dimension of play is necessary to become a partner for the autistic individual. "Without an object there is no Other".<sup>31</sup> Let us see how Rosine Lefort proceeds:

I took her off for the session; she was delighted. I sat on the low chair; Nadia looked uneasy as she checked my position in relation to her own. She seemed reassured and went to get the toys out of the ark, one after the other. On that day her movements were less clumsy, more direct, and her tic had disappeared. She took a great

<sup>30</sup> Lefort, R & R, *Les structures de la psychose*, Seuil, 1988, p.73.

<sup>31</sup> Lefort, R & R, *Les structures de la psychose*, Seuil, 1988, p.64. This observation is made in relation to the Wolf Child, but the authors add the following note: "As in autism. This is what Marie-Françoise shows, impotent to have her session and as soon as she is in the room where the session takes place she turns her back on me. An autistic component appears as soon as there is no object in question between the subject and the Other; what characterises autism is, in fact, an Other without the object."

## Autism and psychosis

deal of interest in a little cup from a doll's tea set; the whole session was to centre on this. She threw it down, then picked it up and examined it. I told her it was a cup to drink from, just as I had named all the toys as she took them out of the ark. She put the cup to her mouth and sucked it, but she was looking at the bottle; she threw down the cup, tried to push over the bottle with her hand, did not dare to do so, and tried to reach it with a wooden post she had taken out of the ark and had been sucking before approaching the bottle with it.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, a to-ing and fro-ing of the paths of the subject around the object of the Other begins, leading the subject to unhook an object from the body of the analyst, an object that returns in a series of substitutions, creating the precedent of a metonymy. It will enable a metonymy to be established, sliding from one object to another, at the same time as there is a collage.

Virginio Baio presented the exemplary case of a child followed up at l'Antenne 110 for twelve years: from the age of six to eighteen. This child had made an idiosyncratic and fairly complex construction composed of a chair and two bowls of water which he had to keep constantly in equilibrium from a foetal position, lying on a piece of tissue. This mechanism was fairly complex because each time there was a movement the bowl of water would fall. At that moment there would be a crisis: an excitation would grip the body of the child. He would then attempt to self-mutilate to produce holes in his body. Forbidding this did not succeed in restraining him. It was necessary to seize hold of his body to stop him and introduce some pacification. The construction would be set up again immediately, the bowl filled to the brim to calm the subject. In the course of time, we observed the construction of a chain that evolved "from one object to another around a hole". The subject replaced the bowls with a cup, and as the cup was replaced with other instruments, a series of substitutions was created, leading from the complex machine he had at the start and ending with a pen which he accepted for writing. Lacan noted the progression in the "Wolf Child" case from a primordial body-container to a detached instrument. "We see the child behaving in accordance with the more or less mythical function of the container, and, as Mme Lefort has noted, only being able to endure it being empty at the end. To be capable of enduring its emptiness is, in the end, to identify it as a truly human object, that is to say, an instrument, capable of being detached from its function."<sup>33</sup>

From this, the child with whom Virginio Baio had been working retained a transference that allowed the child, in the final years, to laugh whenever

<sup>32</sup> Lefort, R & R, *The Birth of the Other*, trans. Marc Du Ry, Lindsay Watson and Leonardo Rodriguez, (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 92  
<sup>33</sup> Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I*, op. cit. p. 104.

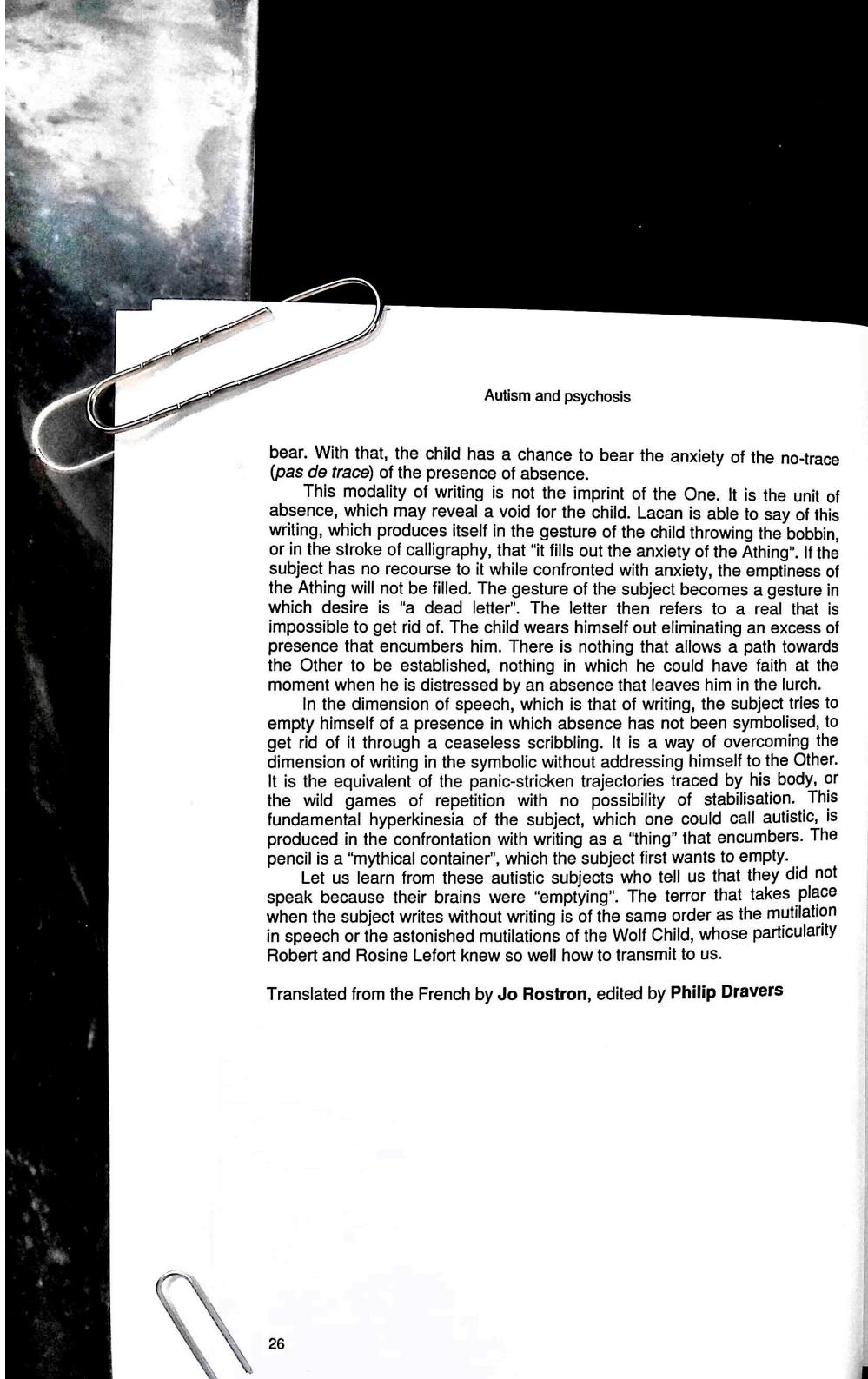
Eric Laurent

the analyst said "No" in a loud voice. Twelve years later, the child was able to leave the institution, having found a way to consent to speech and writing as a mutilation that had become bearable.

In supervision someone told me about a case of an autistic child who presented himself by savagely scribbling on huge quantities of paper to the point of making holes in it. He would then begin, always with the same little mechanical laugh, to want to take away the therapist's telephone, to snatch his pen, and then to steal his keys. The therapist put up with this behaviour patiently, without conceding to it, while making the interpretation that the child wanted to make holes in the paper and to make objects disappear. After this phase, the subject was able to speak, saying "break no more!"

The telephone is the location of the voice. The child had tried to take away the telephone of the Other, the store where the voice comes from. Afterwards he had tried to take away the pen, from which comes endless nightmarish writing. Finally, he attempted to steal the keys, instruments that enabled the opening of the world as well as a locking away. Having made these fundamental ventures as so many attempts to produce the trace of the absence in the Other, he could say "break no more". Simultaneously, he traced a line around an object chosen from among the therapist's possessions and the line he traced did not close up on itself at the first attempt. Later, this will give him the chance of getting to grips with writing, which circumscribes a void.

In the scribbled lines, the hundreds of scribbled lines that he scored into the sheets of paper, nothing gets written. No libido left its trace there. While the subject took a pen in his hand and massacred the paper to produce holes, the *fort-da* was not functioning. The subject therefore has nowhere the possibility of writing that his mother had gone. There was no rehashing of leftovers (*accommodation des restes*) from the mother's departure. With the *fort-da* and the bobbin, when the mother goes away, the child recaptures her. He symbolises absence and presence through the game and moreover finds himself equipped with a bobbin as well (*en plus*). Afterwards the bobbin is transformed into a teddy bear (*ours en peluche*). What is a teddy bear? It is a bobbin that the child resorts to when facing a separation. It is a "reserve of libido" says Lacan. With this little reserve, outside the body, the Other can depart. It remains with him even if the Other upsets him by going away. With this reserve of libido, he can ease the anxiety caused by the departure of the Thing, the real mother in so far as she is the place that humanises the child. She is the centre of the child's world and when she goes away she leaves him in a state of absence, where there are no more signifiers, no more traces. She leaves with all the child's signifiers. If that goes badly the child may not have a single one left for himself – they are all gone. To be able to talk, to be able to write without emptying himself, the child needs some of them remaining, in reserve, in the bobbin, in the teddy



## Autism and psychosis

bear. With that, the child has a chance to bear the anxiety of the no-trace (*pas de trace*) of the presence of absence.

This modality of writing is not the imprint of the One. It is the unit of absence, which may reveal a void for the child. Lacan is able to say of this writing, which produces itself in the gesture of the child throwing the bobbin, or in the stroke of calligraphy, that "it fills out the anxiety of the Athing". If the subject has no recourse to it while confronted with anxiety, the emptiness of the Athing will not be filled. The gesture of the subject becomes a gesture in which desire is "a dead letter". The letter then refers to a real that is impossible to get rid of. The child wears himself out eliminating an excess of presence that encumbers him. There is nothing that allows a path towards the Other to be established, nothing in which he could have faith at the moment when he is distressed by an absence that leaves him in the lurch.

In the dimension of speech, which is that of writing, the subject tries to empty himself of a presence in which absence has not been symbolised, to get rid of it through a ceaseless scribbling. It is a way of overcoming the dimension of writing in the symbolic without addressing himself to the Other. It is the equivalent of the panic-stricken trajectories traced by his body, or the wild games of repetition with no possibility of stabilisation. This fundamental hyperkinesia of the subject, which one could call autistic, is produced in the confrontation with writing as a "thing" that encumbers. The pencil is a "mythical container", which the subject first wants to empty.

Let us learn from these autistic subjects who tell us that they did not speak because their brains were "emptying". The terror that takes place when the subject writes without writing is of the same order as the mutilation in speech or the astonished mutilations of the Wolf Child, whose particularity Robert and Rosine Lefort knew so well how to transmit to us.

Translated from the French by Jo Rostron, edited by Philip Dravers

## Why the hypothesis of an autistic structure?

Jean-Claude Maleval

Autism is no longer considered as a psychosis. This opinion has come to establish itself in international literature through a process that has its roots in the 1975 vote in the American Congress that passed the Development Disabilities Act. This officially recognised the existence of developmental disabilities (among which autism, epilepsy, mental retardation and cerebral palsy were cited side by side), along with the need to provide specific forms of care for each.<sup>1</sup> In 1980, in the DSM-III, autism became a "Global Development Disorder" and six years later in the DSM-III-R it was classed among Development Disorders which were now qualified as 'Invasive'. It only took a few decades for parent associations, but also lettered associations of psychiatrists and psychologists, as well as researchers in Cognitive Science, to stop considering autism as a psychosis. The French Classification of Mental Disorders in Children and Adolescence (CFTMEA) resists, but this has little echo at the international level.

One of the major criticisms levelled at psychoanalysts by Autism France rests on the shameful word psychosis, attached to a hypothesis of psychogenetic causes, while science has supposedly demonstrated that it is a disorder caused by neurobiological dysfunction. In fact, today the aetiology of autism is still unknown. The more research there is into its genetic origin, the more the complexity of the problem is discovered. Researchers no longer bet on the discovery of a gene, but on a multitude of spontaneous mutations, which leads its epigenesis to be taken into account, in other words the influence of environmental factors. A recent study by the University of California, San Francisco on monozygotic and dizygotic twins, of which at least one is autistic, has overturned the findings of previous research by calculating that the influence of genes accounts for only 38% of the aetiology of autism,<sup>2</sup> while the figure most frequently cited marks it around 90%. It has thrown things out of kilter and is controversial. Whatever

<sup>1</sup> Hochmann J., *Histoire de l'autisme*, (Paris: O. Jacob, 2009) p. 419-46.

<sup>2</sup> Hallmayer J. & co., "Genetic Heritability and Shared Environmental Factors Among Twin Pairs with Autism", *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, 2011, 68 (11), pp. 1095-1102