Ordinary psychosis: A creation of language for our times

Introduction

For this intervention I have chosen to not speak of ordinary psychosis specifically, but to situate the concept within the radical aggiornamento of psychoanalytic theory currently under way in the World Association of Psychoanalysis under the impulse of Jacques-Alain Miller and a few others. I will do so by isolating a number of key moments in our orientation since the invention of the concept of ordinary psychosis in 1998. These key moments are crystallized in concepts that can be considered as quilting concepts, quilting points redefining and re-orienting our analytic practice.

Why did I choose this approach?

At a first level, it is consonant with how Lacan has taught us to approach the function of language: quilting, a quilting point, is necessary to gather and order the significations produced in a field, to retroactively specify and determine the intentions of significations which are sometimes unclear even for those who speak, and so to stop, for a time, the chains of signification from continuing to unfold, producing ever more sense and ever less certainty. A signifier, new or novel in its use, functions as a name for a ‘moment to conclude’, after years of elaboration, and retroactively confers meaning upon what has been said. In turn, this quilting point produces a new starting point for our reflection as a community: an effect of truth is produced by the introduction of a new creation of language, and this effect of truth, if it resonates with our experience, impels us to reorganize our assumptions, our experience, and our practice. A similar effect of truth to that generated by the concept of ordinary psychosis was produced more recently by Jacques-Alain Miller’s proposition to substitute the speaking body for the Freudian unconscious: the speaking body comes as a quilting point, the name of a moment to conclude after years of elaboration dedicated to re-orienting psychoanalysis away from sense, and towards the real as compass for our practice.

At a second level, I choose this approach, the ‘mapping’ approach, because it is well-suited to preventing a signifier, a creation of language thus, from taking on the consistency of an objective category. How do we use signifiers? What for? With what effects? These are questions that should never be absent from our practice, given that we are well acquainted with the segregative effects of the signifier.¹

Ordinary psychosis

In fact, the concept of ordinary psychosis is to be understood precisely as a quilting point – Foucault would have called it a principle of intelligibility: a concept extracted from a field ex post facto, which can then be used to order that field. In the 1990s, the work of the clinical sections of the Freudian Field attested to a proliferation of non-classifiable cases in their practice. This shared experience led to three clinical conversations that took place in

Antibes, Angers and Arcachon. These meetings culminated with Jacques-Alain Miller’s quilting point: to name, order and gather the clinical phenomena noticed by analysts in their practice – clinical phenomena which evidenced the transformations in the subjective effects of our civilization –, he used the signifier ‘ordinary psychosis’. The invention of the name ‘ordinary psychosis’ was very important: it gave new impetus to our clinical research for a while and provided an alternative to the ‘borderline’ impasse in psychoanalytical theory. The fact that the word ‘psychosis’ was retained – as it is for the title of the NLS Congress, though it is pluralized – meant that what had been acquired in the psychoanalytic treatment of the psychoses could be retained, while the adjective ‘ordinary’ came to tone down the reactions that can be caused by the word ‘psychosis’.

Most importantly, it allowed clinicians to let go of their safety net, our entrenched belief in the objectivity of the categories of neurosis and psychosis. It forced us to re-learn how to think starting from the phenomena rather than from the category: what is happening instead of what does it mean? And this is what Jacques-Alain Miller, together with the executive committee of the NLS, have set as an objective for the NLS Congress in Dublin: discreet signs. The title of the Dublin Congress echoes the determined orientation of the World Association of Psychoanalysis: a resistance to reducing clinical practice to an ordering of speaking beings under signifiers.

And of course, ordinary psychosis is a signifier, i.e. a creation of language. So its introduction had effects in our community: for at least a decade, analysts tried to correlate this fictitious being with a ‘real structure’, a structure that would be the reference for this signifier: propositions abounded: ordinary psychosis is un-triggered psychosis, stabilized psychosis, a form of psychosis specific to hypermodernity with identification to the norm as a solution, etc.

This is why, in 2008, in his intervention at the Paris-English Seminar, Ordinary Psychosis Revisited, Miller underlined that ordinary psychosis was an epistemic category: a category whose status as a fiction of language we should therefore be fully aware of. What remains is that following its creation, Jacques-Alain Miller engaged in a radical rethinking of psychoanalytic theory for the 21st century, as a few of his texts and our congresses have indicated in their titles.

Symptom as body-event

The next quilting point in the aggiornamento of psychoanalysis in our community came when J.-A. Miller, in his 1998-1999 lecture series, decided to foreground a dimension of the symptom which had been thus far been left aside, although it is present in Freud’s 1926 text Inhibition, Symptoms, Anxiety. I am referring to the symptom as a body-event, which one often finds equated with sinthome in today’s literature. From our vantage point, we can see that this move by Miller initiated a complete reversal of the perspective which Freud, then Lacan until his last teaching, had given to psychoanalysis: where psychoanalysis was seen to stumble upon an irreducible real, something untreatable by language, and so to fail to some extent, Miller will gradually argue that the sinthome, the symptom as body-event, is the only compass that our modernity has left us with, to the extent that even the dispositif of the

\[2\] For a contextual overview of ordinary psychosis, see Laurent É., “Ordinary Psychosis”, in Psychoanalytical Notebooks 26, p. 11-22.


pass is to be rethought to take into consideration the fact that what Lacan called the pass in his Proposition of 1967 does not take the sinthome into consideration – in his 2011 lecture series, Miller suggested that we call this outrepasse. So what is this symptom as body-event?

In the 1998-9 Course, the symptom as body-event is apprehended in two ways: first, the symptom is a modality of libidinal satisfaction (which Freud notes in the 1926 text). Second, the symptom as body-event is an effect of the traces of discourse on the body of the speaking being (not a repressed representation, as with the conversion symptom). In what way does a re-definition of the symptom as a body-event help us to find a compass for our practice? It removes the symptom from the classical set of the formations of the unconscious, identified by Freud as distinct modalities for the repressed to return using the mechanisms of the signifying chain such as displacement, transference and condensation. It also amounts to recognizing that what Freud called the symptomatic residues, the unanalyzable, are not an effect of the subject’s virile or feminine protestation in the face of castration, as Freud hypothesized in Analysis Terminable and Interminable. The symptomatic residues are equivalent to the symptom as body-event.

In his 2011 lecture series, Miller will give a new status to the symptom as body-event: it is what, in the human experience, pertains to the register of existence, insofar as it resists the differential play of signifiers. The sinthome is what remains identical to itself irrespective of all the operations of sense that can be effected on/by a subject in analysis. As such, it is also what saves the subject from the endless play of difference that structures the dimension of being.

In order for this to make a bit more sense, I will connect the foregrounding of the symptom as body-event to another fundamental quilting moment in Miller’s teaching: it is his last lecture series at Paris-8, and it provides a comprehensive reordering of Lacan’s thought from the perspective which, crucially, Miller refers to as Lacan’s renunciation to ontology (lecture of 11 May 2011). I will conclude with a fundamental consequence Miller draws with regards to psychoanalytic practice.

**Renunciation to Ontology/De-ontologisation of the analytic practice**

What is Miller referring to here with this expression? This “renunciation to ontology” is also referred to as a “de-ontologisation of the analytic practice” (25 May 2011). It is impossible to do justice to Miller’s amazing tour de force here, but we can summarily say that it is in this seminar that Miller radicalizes the difference between being and existence, and re-orders Lacan’s teaching according to what pertains to the register of being and what belongs to the register of existence. Here is one of the formulations of the proposition:

> The Other does not exist means exactly that it is the One which exists... the One of the signifier. The Other does not exist does not mean that the Other is not. The Other, the big Other, is.... It is impossible to understand this wonderful concept that Lacan crafted of the big Other without grasping that the big Other is inscribed at the level of being, to be distinguished from the level of existence. It is impossible to find one’s way without distinguishing being from existence. (16 March 2011)

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5 Miller J.-A., L’orientation lacanienne, L’être et l’Un, leçon du 16 mars 2011 : « L’Autre n’existe pas veut dire exactement que c’est le Un qui existe.... L’Un du signifiant... L’Autre n’existe pas, ça ne veut pas dire que l’Autre n’est pas. L’Autre, le grand Autre, est.... on ne comprend rien à ce concept merveilleux que Lacan a forgé du grand Autre si on ne saisit pas que ce grand Autre s’inscrit au niveau de l’être, à distinguer du niveau de l’existence. Impossible de se retrouver là-dedans sans distinguer l’être de l’existence. »
To put the argument very simply – Miller takes it through the epistemic scansion of Western philosophy, through the three phases of Lacan’s teaching, through concepts such as the phallus, the fantasy, feminine jouissance, castration, etc. – for most of his teaching, except for the part that Miller himself identified as the TDE [Tout Dernier Enseignement] in a previous Course [2008-9], Lacan sought to treat the real with being; we can also express the same idea by saying that he tried to transform jouissance into desire – this would be the desired effect of an analysis. I’m sure that you can see that this is a way of understanding the paternal metaphor: Name-of-the-Father over the Desire of the Mother, with DM as a possible name of jouissance. Or again, if we think back to the second paternal metaphor developed by Miller in 1986 and picked up by Éric Laurent at the NLS Congress in Tel Aviv: to use the whole of language to house all phenomena of jouissance.

Let us put it in yet another way: Lacan sought, for years, through many inventions and very artful readings of the Freudian texts, to show how the whole of jouissance could be negativised by language: in other words, how everything that pertains to the register of existence could be translated into the register of being. But from Seminar XIX onwards, Ou pire…, and concluding with Seminar XXIII, Lacan affirms that there is something which exists [Yadl’Un]: it is not, however, some naive reference to a pre-ontological, animal life, but to the One of the signifier. The One is not to be confused with S₁, first signifier of the chain, – it is specified as a One-all-alone, the signifier insofar as it is outside sense, marks the human body and produces jouissance, and the symptom as body-event.

Further, what exists is the condition of what there is:

This real ... is of the signifier. It has nothing to do with palpitating presence [i.e. let us not confuse existence with animal life]. And it is thanks to this signifier that you have all the beings you want. It is necessary for the signifier to shape itself up as discourse for beings to appear on the surface of the real, though they may burst like soap bubbles. There is only one signifier as real ... the signifier insofar as it exists as real governs and conditions all the equivocations, all the semblants of being in discourse.⁸

This One is the One of jouissance, which had appeared in Freud’s work as the moment of the fixation of the drive as root of the symptom before its semantic unfolding. It is the One which iterates outside of sense for each subject, the sinthome that an analysis at its end can hope to circumscribe [serrer].

**The Politics of de-ontologisation**

Why does Lacan renounce ontology, and Miller after him? If Lacan started his teaching by arguing that the particular of a subject’s identifications should be subsumed under the universal of the signifier (when his idea was that psychical causality pertained to the imaginary register), in the TDE the universalization of the signifier is what precludes the singularity of a subject from being circumscribed in speech. Thus in his course, Miller speaks of his patient presentation, and his annoyance that the patients he converses with are systematically introduced as psychotic. I quote him:

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⁷ Laurent É., “Psychosis, or Radical Belief in the Symptom”, in Hurly-Burly 8, p. 243-251.

⁸ Miller J.-A., L’Être et l’Un, “Ce réel... c’est du signifiant. Rien à voir avec la présence qui palpite. Et c’est grâce à ce signifiant que vous avez ce que vous voulez d’êtres, il faut que le signifiant se monte en discours pour que des êtres fassent leur apparition à la surface du réel, quitté à éclater comme des bulles de savon. Du signifiant en tant que réel...il n’y en a qu’un…. Le signifiant en tant qu’il existe comme réel préside et conditionne toutes les équivoques, tous les semblants de l’être dans le discours.”
I strive to foil the inscription of the case within universality. I annihilate the universal so we may focus on the singularity, or even the original invention which the subject in question demonstrates... to see it, we must efface the knowledge that we derive from the universal. What Lacan, in the last analysis, calls the father, is what makes an exception, and amounts to existence, in relation to universality... the universal is at the level of the function, but it can only be incarnated, it can only operate, under the form of singularity. This means that we must not drown existence under our belief in the all – this is valid for all – but that we must substitute the perspective of the One to that of the all. This is the indication which Lacan’s passionate utterance, Yadl’Un, gives us. I am taking it here at the clinical level as an invitation to sacrifice the totalitarianism of the universal to the singularity of the one.9

From these points on, we can redefine what needs to happen in an analysis: first, an emptying out of being (Vidage de l’être, du sujet qui vit de l’être): i.e. the reduction of a subject’s creations of language, the ‘shrinking’ aspect. Then we need Miller’s next quilting point, that of the speaking body, as an orientation for the remainder of the treatment. The subject has a body: “we must go through the difference between being and existence to give its value to the difference between being and having. Having a body is on the side of existence. It is a having only marked on the basis of the subject’s void.”10 Here, we are talking about jouissance as a body event, and as “the veritable cause of psychical reality”:

The body then appears as the Other of the signifier, insofar as it is marked, insofar as the signifier produces an event there, and then this event, this body event that jouissance is has the value of the veritable cause of psychical reality.11(11 May 2011)

You can, I hope, immediately see the correlation between Miller’s objection to using the category of ordinary psychosis as anything other than an epistemic category and his argument as to Lacan’s de-ontologisation of the analytic practice.

**Consequence: “A declaration of fundamental clinical equality between parlêtres”**

Jacques-Alain Miller draws the logical consequences of the *aggiornamento* of psychoanalytic theory, initiated by the invention of the signifier “ordinary psychosis” as a creation of language for our times, in his presentation to the theme of the Rio Congress in April 2016. First, the speaking body has become the object of psychoanalysis for our times, replacing the Freudian unconscious insofar as the Freudian unconscious can be said to be of the register of being. Second, the practice of psychoanalysis is itself to be “de-sublimated”: it must become “a practice without truth, a practice without the fiction of truth, without the fiction of universals. It is a de-sublimated practice”.13 Finally, in his 2014 presentation, Miller delivers his “declaration of fundamental clinical equality between parlêtres”,14 asserting that we are all affected by debility (imaginary), delusion (symbolic) and dupery (real). In the de-sublimated world of our contemporary practice, our compass is the syntheme, which will lead to what Miller calls an “existential conclusion” for an analysis: “there is a jouissance

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10 Ibid., « il faut en passer par la différence de l’être et de l’existence pour donner sa valeur à la différence de l’être et de l’avoir. L’avoir un corps est du côté de l’existence. C’est un avoir qui ne se marque qu’à partir du vide du sujet. »
which does not let itself be negativised [by being]. There is a jouissance that is not in the ontological register, which is a register of fiction."¹⁵ In this perspective, the orientation of our analytic practice is to circumscribe [serrer] the real of the symptom, irrespective of the structure we hypothesize as correlate to the creations of language we use.

¹⁵ Miller J.-A., L'être et l'Un: « il y a une jouissance qui ne se laisse pas négativer [par l’être]. Il y a une jouissance qui n’est pas dans le registre ontologique qui est un registre de fiction. », 25 mai 2011.