

# Hollowed Subjectivity : A Brief Sketch on The Body in Lacanian Thoughts

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The body, according to Merleau-Ponty, exhibits an intersensory, spatial, and temporal unity that is not the straightforward result of associations established during experience, but a total awareness of one's bodily posture in the intersensory world.

Things

...present themselves in our recollection, not as pre-eminently as sensory contents, but as certain kind of symbiosis, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion ...Thus the thing is correlative to my body and ...my existence, of which my body is merely the stabilized structure. [The thing] is constituted in the hold which my body takes upon it; it is ...a structure accessible to inspection by the body ...[E]very perception is ...a coition, so to speak, of our body with things. (MP: 166-68)

To Merleau-Ponty the unified experience of sensory contents by the body is not founded upon an inner or internal unity of the body's organs. Instead, it derives from the world within which the body is always situated and in reference to the body that continually orients and reorients itself:

If man ...is to be aware of a world as ...the theatre of all patterns of behaviour, then between himself and what elicits his actions a distance must be set ...and ...stimulations from the outside must ...impinge upon him "respectfully" ...each particular response ...must take place on the periphery ...Thus it is by giving up part of his spontaneity ...that man can

acquire the mental and practical space which will theoretically free him from his environment and allow him to *see* it (MP: 152).

The body then possesses the world at a distance, and perception is the primary means by which the body 'possesses' the world and through which the body itself flows over into the world. Since the body as such is radically worldly, perception of the world is always the perception of the body itself. This binding of the body to perception is re-examined by Lacan's genetic theory of the ego, which treats our identification of the body with an *imago*, a body-image that appears to have an autonomous existence independent of objective structure (JL: 213). This Lacanian body-image first appears during the mirror stage as a corporeal schema which requires, but cannot be reduced to, the infant's awareness of his/her own specular image as an image of his/her own body. Lacan characterises the development of the child in the mirror stage as a complex transition from a unified body image to the constitution of the body image as an orthopaedic totality:

Not yet able to stand up, and supported by a care-giver or a prosthetic device, the infant enthusiastically responds to the upright posture presented by its mirror image as if it has already achieved the motor mastery depicted by the image. ...Through its reflection in actual mirrors and metaphorical mirror of its mother's image and reactions, the infant is for the first time able to imagine itself as a corporeal unity or gestalt, henceforth allowing it to experience its body parts and movements as integrated and coordinated in a way not yet physically possible (S: 235. See also JL: 216-18).

Humans are unavoidably subjected to and habitualised by the power of *imago* as the foundation of psyche simply because humans, compared to other animals, are born prematurely (JL: 217). Lacking sensory and motor coordination, the ego develops from a

condition of dependency and chaos, thus causing the ego to attach and identify itself with the mother, whose stable standing posture imprints it forever: “ This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to a self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Assent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety ....” (218) Since the understanding and experience of the body occurs at a level that exceeds the body’s own physical capability, the subject consequently relates to the body as a narcissistic *lack*, with its image as the site that occasions the integration of fragmented body parts. Once internalised the cerebral cortex becomes the mirror for the body to be *imagined* as unity or totality. This process of misrecognising one's self creates the ego that fantasises the "I" to endow the subject an identifiable self.

This acquisition of the imagined totality of the body provides us with a concrete unitary self, sculpts our contour so that we now are identities, objects among objects. Here lies the flow of the body into the intersensory world, the Merleau- Pontean *outside* which I briefly conjured earlier. To Lacan the image of the body is the principle of every unity one perceives in objects. Since this unity is perceived only from the outside our ideal unity will thus appear in the guise of the object that “shows him the very figure of his dehiscence within the world – object which by essence destroys him, anxiety which he cannot recapture, in which he will never truly be able to find reconciliation... It is in the nature of desire to be radically torn. The very image of man brings here a mediation which is always imaginary, always problematic, and which is therefore never completely fulfilled” (221). Man is not simply Desire but Unsatisfied Desire. Subjectivity is attained

through an isolation of the self, alienated from the other. “There is something... inaugurally, profoundly wounded in the human relation to the world... “ (222). Lacan uses the Freudian idea of *introjection* to describe the process of reversal whereby the outside becomes the inside. The moment when the subject assumes a mastery of the self through the mediation of the image of the other characterises the subjects appropriation of the other’s form, assuming the position of the outside thus making the outside not pure exterior but something that is *excluded from within*. The body is the site where the body and the world (con)fuses, for the body is the surface, an *outlined form* whose contour marks the limits of both the body and that of the outside space that presses on it. Being the limit of both its interior and its exterior the body-surface is neither ‘outside’ nor ‘inside’. The subject knows himself as a body by assuming the body-image-surface of the other, situated outside the subject: “It is within this see-saw movement, the movement of exchange with the other, that man becomes aware of himself as a body, as the empty form of the body” (219).

Lacan’s inside/outside (via Freudian introjection) points to the peculiar structure of the body that ‘flows over into the world’ and problematises the body’s ‘limit’. Introjection presents the difficulty of containing the body within its skin, or of determining what is inside and outside the body, causing the body to escape geometric elucidation. The body is not easily ‘closed’ within itself, as a circle is closed with respect to the outside. The body does not occupy space as a natural object does. When it comes to the body, the relations of interior and exterior are more complex and enigmatic if one begins by regarding the body as an extended substance in (mathematical) space.

Although the external space is always annihilated by the imaginary we must refrain from taking the imaginary body as simply obscuring the roles of the Symbolic and the Real in the constitution of the body. Since the body does not automatically cohere by nature but instead holds itself together and is able to move through space only with the help of imaginary and symbolic props that give space and time their consistency, we could say that the relation between the real and the symbolic - the formation of a structure which also includes the real as an 'interior exclusion'- allows the body to move, and gives coherence to external space. This human space, the space of desire and human movement, cannot be grasped in terms of mathematical space, and the space of the body therefore cannot be adequately conceived through the usual geometry of inside and outside. The Real as an interior exclusion means that the constitution of the body also depends on an inscription of the void, the symbolic "containment" of lack.

It appears that for Lacan this void can be explained if the body is defined as *embodied language*, i.e the body as a 'speaking subject' whose perception of the world is constituted within a narcissistic relation: "The object is is always more or less structured as the image of the body" (222). Since the 'I' is the fragmented body-subject that recognises its unity in objects "uniquely from without" (Ibid.), subjectivity is thus formed on the basis of discordance and anarchy where every object-relation is infected by a fundamental uncertainty. Lacan explains that prior to the subject's entry into language

"desire exists solely in the.... imaginary relation to specular stage, projected, alienated in the other. The tension this provokes has no other outcome... than the destruction of the other. What saves us from this destructive impulse to destroy the other is our the world of symbols, that we live in "a world of others who speak" whose "power of naming..."

makes object subsist with a certain consistence.... Nomination seals the wound by endowing objects a 'sameness', an identity, ....a certain permanence over time, ...making nomination the time of object" (220 - 23).

Object endures through its name and anarchy is evaded through the virtue of naming that seals, a pact that make possible human co-existence. Language is the communion with the other through which desire is inverted and learns to recognise itself in the other. However, since language is purely symbolic the named object is prone to losing its natural specificity in a movement along the signifying chain that makes the named object a substitute, a signifier of the other's recognition. The object is thus perpetually displaced and projected to infinity, always seeking 'something more'. The artificiality of naming exiles objects beyond all biological needs, hence beyond natural limitations. Consequently, there is a further requirement for a 'limit' at the symbolic level, and it is precisely here that desire emerges as this limit to the infinite displacement of symbols, giving a finite shape to the otherwise endless play of symbolic substitution. The shift from symbolic uncertainty to desire is accomplished precisely by the institution of a lack, a void or obliteration that is not symbolic, that escapes the dialectical movement of the 'productive negation' of the other, but is nevertheless constitutive of the subject. This void, therefore, has an effect: it leaves a 'remainder', a relic that is regarded as a *power*. This effect is the 'nominated', a remnant opened by a mark of death that haunts it but cannot be inscribed or reduced to a symbolic phenomenon.

Within Lacanian logic I think it is necessary for the materiality of language to be thought of as a relic that we pierce and attach to our body. The materiality of language

lies in it being a prop produced by a lack that is not inscribed in the movement of symbolic production, but rather makes it possible. This is the 'absolute condition' that reverses the unconditioned character of desire, allowing it to acquire a local habitation and a name. Naming brings us back to Merleau-Ponty's remark on the outside that invades us and the certain ways we have of meeting this invasion, one of which is language. The body that names forms a subjectivity with a hole at its centre, which tells us the relation between the Symbolic and the Real must involve a certain failure of the symbolic order to fully incorporate the Real. Certain elements will always escape the symbolic and renders subjectivity seriously 'incomplete', because rather than missing by being outside the structure those elements are excluded from within. This hole in subjectivity points to a death at the center of our relationship to the Real, a relationship that is always symbolic, mediated by language. *The subject belongs by not belonging.* The cleavage between language and the Real is filled with Desire, and since desire seeks to annihilate lack, it demands an absolute negation. In short, what commands desire is death itself. Death here cannot be thought of as biological expiry, not a simple event placed at the end of a temporal sequence. Rather we need to think of it as existing at the very at the origin and opens a human time that is structured by anticipation and memory. Thus the void or death that links the symbolic to the real is not at all a deficiency but, on the contrary, an absolute condition of meaning. This implies that the subject who lacks lack at the center his/her being is unable to name, for symbols (language) are born only from the inscription of the void. To be completely lacking of this void means to stop desiring and transcend language, an orgasm attained only through biological expiration - *one dies once one stops dying.*

**ABBREVIATIONS:**

- JL = 'Jacques Lacan' (selections from writings of Jacques Lacan) in Welton, D. (ed.) *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1999: 213-31
- S = Bonner, C.W. 'The Status and Significance of the Body in Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic Order' in Welton 1999: 232-51

