

the savage, the sign and the signifier¹

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In 1799, a 12-year-old child, naked and wild, is captured in a wood in the South of France. According to the observations of the inhabitants of this region, it seems that he had spent approximately 7 years living alone in the woods, left to his own devices. Doctor Jean Itard, a specialist of the deaf and dumb, set himself the task of attempting to give him an education, and in particular to assist him to come into language.

This child is described in the first instance as a wild body of drives: at the beginning he is dirty and rocks ceaselessly, he bites and scratches those who come near him, nothing happens at the level of his gaze, his eyes are described as unsteady and expressionless, shifting vaguely from one object to another. For Doctor Pinel (famous for having removed the chains that held the mad in place), his senses are blunt, he is inattentive except in regard to his needs. He has no memory, judgement or ability to imitate. It is not possible to communicate with him. He can go from a state of sadness to inordinate bursts of laughter for no apparent reason. Pinel concluded that his life was “purely animal”, that he was probably “suffering from idiocy” and was incurable.

Itard did not share this opinion. He thought this child’s state was due to his lack of socialisation, and he undertook to integrate him into our social life. The greater part of his method relied on training him, with tests and rewards. In the beginning, Victor was insensitive to cold and heat, he didn’t get burnt. He didn’t cry. Unknown noises, even loud ones, had no effect, but the noise made by a nut made him turn around. Itard trained him to become sensitive to heat and cold. Firstly he dealt with his body and its sensitivity. Obviously he did not theorise at all the question of the transference and the particular relation that tied Victor to those around him. In fact, Itard placed him in an Oedipal situation, differentiating his own role from that of Madame Guérin, the governess, who took charge of Victor’s everyday life. In regard to her he said that she had “a mother’s patience and the intelligence of an enlightened teacher”. Victor became attached to Madame Guérin. Itard placed her in a maternal position, attributing to himself a role that was less emotional, more educating and sometimes authoritarian: “His friendship for me is much weaker and thus it must be”, he said.

The effect of this taking charge of Victor was to create a symptom at the level of the body. Victor started to sneeze, for example, something he had not done before. He developed illnesses and in these Itard pinpointed the effect of socialisation upon the body. He defined these symptoms as “these indisputable and unfortunate witnesses to the prevailing sensitivity of civilised man”. Where there had only been a body of drives, with the relation of Victor to those around him, essentially Itard and Madame Guérin, symptoms appeared.

Following this, Itard endeavoured to bring Victor into language.

In this his enterprise was particularly passionate because it was based on a theory of language which is the ancestor of our linguistics, a theory that mostly comes from Condillac, for whom the ego is not totally conscious. It is also an effect of a combination of sensations and of the expression of their transformation into language. The distinction between the sign and signifier had not been established at the time, but the word, considered a “sign of language”, was already described as arbitrary, and, by virtue of this fact, radically disconnected from the idea, or the thing that it represents.

When he was first taken into Itard’s care, Victor quite rapidly developed what Itard called “a language of action” and this occurred from his first contacts with society following his capture. This language was also qualified as “pantomime language”. It was considered inferior to spoken language. It was in fact a language by signs (holding out his plate to request something to eat, accompanying people to the door when he no longer wanted to see them). This language was located at once by Itard as being on the side of meaning, which he radically differentiated from spoken language; it was an obstacle for Victor’s development of a true language, to the extent that it sufficed to signify what he wished for, at the level of need, but in this there was not yet any desire.

Nonetheless Itard attempted to bring Victor into spoken language. From this point of view, the relation that he made of Victor’s formulation of his first word (milk) is particularly interesting. The master was evidently very happy, in the first instance, to obtain this result, but he very quickly relativised its scope when he realised that the word pronounced by Victor was not the expression of a need or a demand, but came rather at the moment of satisfaction. The word did not express lack but, on the contrary, the possession of the object. It was the “sign of the possession of the thing”. The word was only pronounced in “the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of the thing”, which, for Itard, did not correspond to the function of language. However, following this, Victor made more progress. He managed to master a practice of language with the support of writing, following a work spread out over a number of years.

Itard’s texts put forward, in a manner that was very new, the essential questions of the constitution of the speaking subject, and by virtue of Victor’s initial state, regarding the knotting between body, symptoms and language.

A knotting that we also name, following Lacan, Borromean. If what is designated as real is “that part of reality that is expelled for a subject by the intervention of the symbolic”³, Itard’s undertaking would certainly be of this order. The real, attested to by Victor’s “savage” behaviours when he is separated from his “natural” milieu, this real is discarded, expelled from the socialised reality into which Itard wanted to integrate him. The real, when it returns for Victor, is henceforth that which does not cease to not be written, or said. Therefore, it does not cease to manifest itself, for instance in the form of the contemplative states in which he sometimes found himself, sequels of what he has previously lived, prior to the socialisation and language in which Itard wanted him to exist. Fundamentally, without knowing it, Itard endeavours, with Victor to constitute a subject of the unconscious.

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References

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- ³ Chemama, R. and Vandermersch B. (eds.). *Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*. Paris: Larousse, 1998.