

## The Freudian Thing and the Ethics of Speech

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*In his 1891 On Aphasia Freud defines the “thing” in the terms of J.S. Mill’s empiricist phenomenology as a set of sensory impressions that is linked both to language and to immediate sensory experience. These distinctions structure the Project for a Scientific Psychology and reappear in “The Unconscious,” where Freud writes that the unconscious is a scene of experience that is linked to, but continues to insist in excess of, language. While Lacan opposes das Ding to Freud’s definition, in “The Unconscious,” of the “unconscious Vorstellungen” as “the presentation of the thing alone,” this essay argues that Freud’s definition of the unconscious points to a scene of experience disorganized by language, that is censored by the passage through the mirror stage, and about which the Other knows nothing. The essay ends by looking at several texts by Tito Mukhopadhyay, who is autistic. Mukhopadhyay describes his autism in terms of a decision to not pass through the mirror stage, which left him exposed to a scene of experience disorganized by the desire carried on the Other’s voice. In his eventual decision to enter into language and write of his experience, Mukhopadhyay’s writings locate an ethics of speech that, rather than censor the unconscious presentation of the thing by linking it to a prohibited Oedipal object, makes a space within the discourse of the Other for a universal dimension of human experience.*

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In his reading of *das Ding* Lacan draws out a line of psychoanalytic thought that addresses the solitude of the subject confronted with the “object” that is “the absolute Other of the subject” (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 52). *Das Ding* becomes the bedrock of a psychoanalysis that addresses the subject of language as such, beyond the natural processes of the organism and before the subject is taken into the systems of laws that regulate the social order.

If it is Lacan’s reading that sustains the Thing as a contemporary psychoanalytic term, it is equally true that the Thing is a central technical term in Freud’s thought. Yet while Lacan approaches the Freudian Thing through

Heidegger, Kant, and Sade, showing how Sade reveals the perverse truth of Kantian ethics as an approach to the “emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing” (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 121), Freud himself theorizes the Thing in the terms of J.S. Mill’s empiricist phenomenology, as a scene of experience that can be linked to, but which continues to insist in excess of, the signifier. Jacques Le Rider has argued that “a specifically ‘Austrian’ philosophy [was] closer to ‘English’ thinking than to anything post-Kantian” (12), and that in particular, “John Stuart Mill seemed to be exercising a greater influence on Viennese modernity than Kant” (12). As Patricia Kitchner and Michael Molnar have noted, from his 1891 monograph *On Aphasia*, Freud defines both the “thing,” and the relationship between the “thing” and the “word” through the “philosophical teaching” of “J.S. Mill” (*On Aphasia*, 78), according to which the “thing” is logically equivalent to a set of sensory impressions.<sup>1</sup> The relationship of the “thing,” inscribed as a durable scene of experience, to the “word” that links the thing to an object of perception, returns in the pre-psychoanalytic *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, and in Freud’s 1915 metapsychological papers the opposition between the “thing” and the “word” structures the distinction between conscious and unconscious experience. When Freud writes that “the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone [*die unbewußte (Vorstellung) ist die Sachvorstellung allein*]” (“The Unconscious,” XIV, 201) he locates the real of the unconscious as a scene of unconscious memory traces that predate the subject’s entrance into language. In these terms, the singularity of the Thing, which insists in excess of any signifier, is a scene of experience about which the Other knows nothing. This set of unconscious experiences constitutes the Thing as a lost object that appears nowhere in reality, and as the unconscious orientation that insists as the excluded center of subjective experience.

In what follows I want to suggest that Lacan’s reading of *das Ding* presents a superficial obstacle to a fully articulated Lacanian reading of the Freudian Thing. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan introduces what is, for Freud, an artificial distinction between Freud’s discussion of *das Ding* in the

*Project for a Scientific Psychology*—as the alien object that is isolated in the subject's experience of the Other—and Freud's definition, in "The Unconscious," of the unconscious as "the presentation of the thing alone"(XIV, 201). The interest in reading the Freudian Thing through Lacan, if slightly against the grain of Lacan's own reading of Freud, is that Freud's theorization of the Thing brings a certain attention to the Thing as a scene of experience that remains the "absolute Other" of the subject. If Lacan's reading of the Thing tends to approach the foundational void in signification from the side of language, showing that an articulated signifying structure—whether ethical, legal, or logical—turns around an unapproachable void at its center, Freud's definition of the "Thing" registers that the Thing is a scene of unconscious experience about which the Other knows nothing.

In the essay that follows I begin by tracing out Lacan's distinction of *das Ding* from the "unconscious presentation of the thing" before giving a brief genealogy of the Thing, from Freud's *On Aphasia* through the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* and "The Unconscious." I then turn to Lacan's mirror stage to suggest that the disorder of experience that Lacan locates in the time before the mirror stage be read in relation to Freud's definition of the unconscious as "the presentation of the thing alone"(XIX, 201). In these terms the mirror stage, through which the subject exchanges the real of his or her lived experience for the image that comes from the Other, is the initial, and structurally unstable, linking of the Thing to the signifying order.

To ask how a scene of experience—the unconscious presentation of the thing—is equally what Lacan calls *das Ding*, the hole in the real caused by the signifier, I end by looking at several texts by Tito Mukhopadhyay. Mukhopadhyay—who is autistic—describes his experience as a decision not to pass through the mirror stage, which leaves him alone with the unconscious presentation of the thing at work in his body, an experience that he describes as the effect of the voice. Mukhopadhyay's writings locate the Thing not only as a theoretical object—what Lacan refers to as a "primordial function"(*Ethics*, 62)—kept at a safe distance by an articulated symbolic structure, but as a scene of

lived experience with respect to which he must take a position. These writings not only provide a window to a specifically autistic experience, but describe a fundamental dimension of experience at stake for all subjects, an experience that registers the fact that the effects of language go beyond what can be known within, or controlled by, discourse. Mukhopadhyay's decision to write of this real locates an ethics of speech that does not censor the Thing by producing an object in the place of the Thing—by “raising the object to the dignity of the Thing” (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 157), as Lacan writes of sublimation—but which rather gives voice to a universal scene of experience.

### **I. Between *das Ding* and the “unconscious *Vorstellungen*”**

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan appeals to a “subtle opposition in German [...] between the two terms that mean ‘thing’—*das Ding* and *die Sache*”(43). Lacan writes that “the *Sache* is clearly the thing, a product of industry and of human action as governed by language [...] *Sache* and *Wort* are, therefore, closely linked; they form a couple. *Das Ding* is found somewhere else”(45). When Freud writes that “the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone [*die unbewußte (Vorstellung) ist die Sachvorstellung allein*]” (XIV, 201) Lacan thus reads this as a reference to a scene of experience that is organized, in advance, by the signifier. As Lacan writes, the “*Vorstellung* is already organized according to the possibilities of the signifier as such” (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 61). While the unconscious *Sachvorstellung* is governed by the laws of language, by “the laws of metaphor and metonymy” (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 61), “the *Ding* is the element that is initially isolated by the subject in his experience of the *Nebenmensch* as being by its very nature alien, *Fremde*” (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 52). Whereas the *Sachvorstellung* is an organized unconscious representation, *das Ding* is the subjective effect of the first encounter with the Other. As Lacan writes “*das Ding* is a primordial function which is located at the level of the initial establishment of the gravitation of the unconscious *Vorstellungen*”(62). *Das Ding* registers a primordial encounter, while the unconscious *Sachvorstellung* is the unconscious position that the subject

takes with respect to the Thing.

Yet it is not at all clear that Freud himself distinguishes between *das Ding*—as an element that is isolated in the experience of the Other—and the “unconscious *Vorstellungen*.” Whereas Lacan writes that “Freud speaks of *Sachvorstellung* and not *Dingvorstellung*”(45), Freud writes in “Mourning and Melancholia,” “the unconscious (thing-) presentation of the object [*die unbewußte (Ding) Vorstellung des Objekts*] [...] is made up of innumerable single impressions (or unconscious traces of them)”(XIV, 256). Freud’s topographical model, put forward in *On Aphasia* and developed in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*—where Freud writes of the *Nebenmensch*—and “The Unconscious,” argues that the Thing is indistinguishable from a set of unconscious memory traces that is only later linked to the order of language. In terms of Lacan’s metapsychology, the “unconscious presentation of the thing” is not a presentation of the Thing organized by language, but rather the inscription of experience in the subject not only before the subject has entered into the symbolic space of language, but before the child has entered into either the imaginary relationship that is structured by the mirror stage. The Thing, as a scene of experience that is the absolute Other of the subject, is equally a void at the center of all that is articulated in the discourse of the Other.

## **II. The empiricist Thing: From *On Aphasia* to Freud’s metapsychology**

Freud’s initial theorization of the Thing as a scene of experience comes in his pre-psychoanalytic *On Aphasia*. *On Aphasia* begins as a polemic against the then dominant theory of “neural localization” where, as Freud writes, “the speech apparatus consists of distinct cortical centres; their cells are supposed to contain the word images (word concepts or word impressions); these centres are said to be separated by functionless cortical territory, and linked to each other by association tracts”(54). Paul Broca and Carl Wernicke had discovered specific cortical centers that seemed to be responsible for the separate functions of speech and comprehension. Whereas a lesion in Broca’s area leads to an expressive aphasia, where one can understand, but only speak with difficulty, a

lesion in Wernicke's area results in a sensory aphasia, where one can speak fluently—though sometimes nonsensically—but cannot understand. It thus seemed that certain cortical centers stored words, while other cortical centers stored the object that the word referred to.

Against the idea that the object and word are stored in a distinct cortical centers, separated by “functionless cortical territory,” Freud proposes that the brain is a complex network of connections, and that when lesions cause aphasias it is not because the “word image” or the “idea of the object” that is stored in specific cells is destroyed, but because a dense network of associations is disrupted. Freud thus argues that “the speech area is a continuous cortical region within which the associations and transmissions underlying the speech functions are taking place; they are of a complexity beyond comprehension”(62). It is just here that the question of the “thing” arises, for Freud needs to show how the “idea (concept) of the object [*Die Object-Vorstellung*]” appears within the complex web of associations that form the “continuous cortical region.”

The word, then, is a complicated concept built up from various impressions, i.e., it corresponds to an intricate process of associations entered into by elements of visual, acoustic and kinesthetic origins. However, the word acquires its significance through its association with the “idea (concept) of the object,” at least if we restrict our consideration to nouns. The idea, or concept, of the object is itself another complex of associations composed of the most varied visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic and other impressions. According to philosophical teaching, the idea of the object contains nothing else; the appearance of a “thing” [*eines Dinges*] the “properties” of which are conveyed to us by our senses, originates only from the fact that in enumerating the sensory impressions perceived from an object, we allow for the possibility of a large series of new impressions being added to the chain of associations (J.S. Mill). This is why the idea of the object does not appear to us as closed, and indeed hardly as closable, while the word concept appears to us as something that is closed though capable of extension. (*On Aphasia*, 78).

The “word” acquires its signification by being linked to the “idea (concept) of the object.” The “thing,” to which the word refers, exists as an open set of associated sensory impressions.

In a footnote to the above passage, Freud refers his reader to a section of Mill’s *A System of Logic* entitled “Of the Things Denoted by Names” as well as to Mill’s *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*. In “Of the Things Denoted by Names” Mill begins by proposing to call any substantial object a “Thing.” It seems that a “Thing” is a substance, a body. Yet “a body” Mill writes, “is not anything intrinsically different from the sensations which the body is said to produce in us; it is, in short, a set of sensations, or rather, of possibilities of sensation, joined together according to a fixed law”(58). In *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, Mill proposes, as a formal definition of matter, the “Permanent Possibility of Sensation.” Mill writes that “both philosophers and the world at large, when they think of matter, conceive it really as a Permanent Possibility of Sensation. But the majority of philosophers fancy that it is something more; and the world at large, though they have really, as I conceive, nothing in their minds but a Permanent Possibility of Sensation, would, if asked the question, undoubtedly agree with the philosophers”(Hamilton, 200). For Mill, the “thing” is the set of its “properties,” a set of sensory impressions joined together by the fixed law of association. The stability of the “thing” comes from the fact that these sensations remain a permanent possibility, even when they are not part of immediate experience.

In order to argue that the referent of language is an associated set of discrete impressions Freud turns Mill’s empiricist phenomenology into an associationist theory of neural structure, and Mill’s definition of the Thing as a scene of experience that is linked to the “word” will come to occupy a central place in Freud’s metapsychology. A second important contribution of *On Aphasia* is the distinction between the cortical region where the “thing” is inscribed as a set of associations of a “complexity beyond comprehension,” and the peripheral nervous system. For while there are no “cortical centers” in the speech region, Freud proposes that because of the “anatomical fact of the

termination of the sensory nerves”(On Aphasia, 66) there are indeed “centers for the visual and auditory nerves, and for the motor organs of speech”(On Aphasia, 66). Freud thus distinguishes between a “continuous cortical region” with a “complexity beyond comprehension” where the “thing” exists as a set of memory traces, and a peripheral system that has to do with the direct experience of sensory impressions. Three distinct elements thus appear in *On Aphasia*, that will return in the *Project* and “The Unconscious.” First, there is the inscription of the Thing as a set of memory traces in the “complexity beyond comprehension” of the “continuous cortical region.” Second there is the “word” which refers to the “thing.” Third, there is localizable sensory apparatus—the peripheral nervous system—which receives sensory data about objects that are immediately present to experience. Freud’s articulation of metapsychological structure will unfold around the question of how language both succeeds and fails to link the Thing—a durable association of unconscious memory traces—to the sensory impressions, conveyed by the peripheral nervous system, that constitute the field of reality.

As *On Aphasia* distinguishes between the “continuous cortical region,” where the thing is inscribed as a set of impressions, and the “centers for the visual and auditory nerves”(On Aphasia, 66), the *Project* begins by distinguishing between the peripheral system, which “receives external stimuli,”(I, 304) and the internal system, which is connected “only with the interior of the body” (I, 304). While a simple organism only has need of reflex actions, a human, who searches out objects that are not immediately present in reality, must be able to store the object of desire as a “thing-complex” within the internal system. To coordinate the peripheral system with the internal system, the *Project* introduces consciousness as the system that judges whether or not the “thing-complex” inscribed in the internal system is present in an “attribute-complex” that is perceived by the peripheral system,

Freud argues that the peripheral system cannot store energy, so when it is activated by a stimulus that introduces energy into the nervous system, the peripheral system must either respond to the stimulus with a reflex action, or



pass this energy on to the internal system. If this energy is passed on to the internal system, the organism needs to judge whether the “attribute-complex” presented by the peripheral system corresponds to the “thing-complex”—the desired object that the subject is searching out in experience. The consciousness system is able to determine whether the “thing” corresponds to a perceptual object because consciousness is sensitive to what Freud calls the “quality” of energy that passes through the nervous system. To this end, Freud distinguishes between the “quantity” and the “quality” of the energy that passes through the nervous system. In the *Project* Freud works “to represent psychical processes as quantitatively determined states of specifiable material particles and so to make them plain and void of contradiction” (I, 295). Freud continues that “the material particles in question are the neurons” (I, 295), and that these neurons are invested with a quantity of energy. The flow of energy through these neurons is guided by a principle of “neural inertia”—modeled after the principle of conservation of energy—that dictates that neurons divest themselves of energy—by passing it on to the next neuron—in order to return to a position of equilibrium. The entire neural system, governed by this principle, works to divest itself of the quantities of energy that enter into the system through the form of external stimuli, in order to maintain a state of equilibrium. Therefore, when a quantity of energy enters into the peripheral nervous system through an external stimulus, this same quantity of energy must either be expended in a reflex action, or passed on to the internal nervous system. And yet the same quantity of energy, Freud reasons, could be transmitted with a different “temporal period”—for example in ten small pulses, or in one large pulse. While the peripheral and internal systems respond only to the quantity of energy that moves through them, consciousness responds to this “temporal quality.”

Freud argues that these variations in the temporal quality of the energy that passes through the brain depend on the external stimulus that introduces energy into the peripheral system. When energy is passed from the peripheral system to the rest of the brain, this temporal quality “is transmitted without inhibition in every direction, as though it were a process of induction”(I, 310).

The internal system, which is only connected to the interior of the body, has a naturally “monotonous”(I, 310), which is to say uniform, “temporal quality.” When an actual stimulus is perceived by the peripheral system, the “temporal quality” of this energy passes into the internal system, and thus modifies the monotonous period of “neuronic motion”(I, 310) in the internal system. The consciousness system is able to perceive these modifications in period. As Freud writes, “it is these modifications which pass from [the peripheral system] through [the internal system] to [the consciousness system], and there, where they are almost devoid of quantity, generate conscious sensations of qualities. This transmission of quality is not durable; it leaves no traces behind it and cannot be reproduced”(I, 310). Freud writes that “indications of quality are [...] primarily indications of *reality*, and are intended to serve the purpose of distinguishing the cathexes of real perceptions from the cathexes of wishes” (I, 371).

If in *On Aphasia* the opposition between the “thing” and the “word” is part of a general theory of signification, in the *Project* Freud defines the “thing-complex” as a specific scene of experience—as the unconscious memory traces of the “subject’s first satisfying object (and also his first hostile object)”(I, 331). While consciousness serves to link the “thing-complex” to an “attribute complex,” neuroses develop when unconscious memories make it impossible for consciousness to accurately identify the “thing-complex” as a perceptual object. Freud gives the example of an hysterical woman who is “under a compulsion not to go into shops alone”(I, 353). This compulsion is the effect of two repressed childhood memories which result in a faulty judgment of the relationship between the “attribute-complex” and the “thing-complex.” In the first, two shop assistants, one of whom “attracted her sexually”(I, 353), were “laughing at her clothes”(I, 353); in the second, “she had gone into a shop to buy some sweets and the shopkeeper had grabbed her genitals through her clothes”(I, 353). She has an unexplained fear because the idea of going into a shop alone “passes through a number of unconscious intermediate links”(I, 355). The repressed memories lead her to make a faulty judgment that the “attribute-complex” that she is confronted with when she goes into a shop alone is connected with the “thing-complex”—the

scene of desire linked to her first satisfactions and fears. If she can reconstruct the repressed memory of this experience, she will no longer make a faulty judgment that she is in the presence of the Thing when she goes into a shop. Eliminating the repressed memories that result in an incorrect judgment that the “thing-complex” is present in reality should thus allow the subject to correctly identify the object of his or her desire.

Yet the problem, as Freud writes, is that “the ‘thing-complex’ keeps reappearing in connection with a variety of ‘attribute-complexes’” (*I*, 371). In these terms, Freud’s invention of psychoanalysis is a response to his discovery that despite conscious judgments the Thing continues to trouble experience, as the real of subjective experience that is not caused by and does not correspond to any possible object of perception. When Freud returns to this metapsychological structure in “The Unconscious”—20 years after the *Project*—he no longer looks to consciousness to align the unconscious presentation of the thing with an object in reality, but rather theorizes that conscious judgments about the thing are wrong, because of a fundamental misalignment between the set of objects that are named in language, and the memory traces that comprise the unconscious presentation of the thing.

Freud begins “The Unconscious” by separating these structures from their reference to neurophysiological location, writing that “[o]ur psychical topography has for the present nothing to do with anatomy” (*XIX*, 174). In the *Project* Freud writes that “perceptual complexes are divided into a constant, uncomprehended portion—the thing—and a changing, comprehensible portion—the attributes or movements of the thing” (*I*, 371), and in “The Unconscious” this division reappears in the same terms as in *On Aphasia*, as the distinction between the “thing” and the “word.” As Freud writes, “what we have permissibly called the conscious presentation of the object can now be split up into the presentation of the *word* and the presentation of the *thing*” (*XIV*, 201). Freud continues that “the conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of the word belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone” (*XIX*, 201). While the unconscious is defined

as the presentation of the thing, the preconscious serves to link the thing to the word. Consciousness operates within the set of preconscious links between the thing and the word. Thus, while consciousness exists where the “thing” is linked to the word, “being linked with word-presentations is not yet the same thing as becoming conscious, but only makes it possible to become so”(XIV, 192). There are thus two logical moments where the unconscious presentation of the thing is censored: there is the censorship imposed by the preconscious when the thing is linked to the word, and there is the censorship imposed by consciousness when some of these links between the “thing” and the “word” are rejected. As Freud writes, “the *Ucs.* is turned back on the frontier of the *Pcs.*” and while “derivatives of the *Ucs.* can circumvent this censorship,” when these derivatives “try to force themselves into consciousness, they are recognized as derivatives of the *Ucs.* and are repressed afresh at the new frontier of censorship, between the *Pcs.* and the *Cs.*” Freud thus concludes that “the first of these censorships is exercised against the *Ucs.* itself, and the second against its *Pcs.* derivatives”(XIV, 193). The unconscious presentation of the thing—the thing before it is linked with the word and as it persists beyond the censorship of the preconscious—is a scene of experience that remains outside of language, at work in the subject as the cause of the symptoms and acts that subvert what the ego wants for itself in the social world. There is an unbridgeable gap between the real of subjective experience, and that which is named as a possible object of perception within the discourse of the Other.

### III. The unconscious presentation of the “thing” in the body

Lacan’s reading of *das Ding* in Freud turns around a passage in the *Project* where Freud asks what happens when a subject encounters “a fellow human-being [*nebenmensch*]”(I, 331) within the perceptual field.

[T]he complex of a fellow-creature falls into two portions. One of these gives the impression of being a constant structure and remains as a coherent “thing” [*Ding*]; while the other can be *understood* by the activity of memory—that is, it can be traced back

to information about the subject's own body. (*I*, 331)

The perceiving subject's interest in his "fellow-creature" comes from the fact that the "thing-complex"—the trace of the "subject's first satisfying object (and also his first hostile object"(*I*, 331)—is invested in a certain "attribute-complex." In the language of the "The Unconscious," where the "conscious presentation of the object" is "split up into the presentation of the *word* and the presentation of the *thing*"(*XIV*, 201), the perception of the "fellow-creature" links the unconscious presentation of the thing with an object that is named in the preconscious repository of signifiers, and thus potentially available to consciousness.

In his first Seminar, *Freud's Papers on Technique*, Lacan writes of the encounter with the "human other" in terms that are strikingly similar to Freud's discussion of the encounter with the "fellow-creature." Lacan writes that "the function of the other, of the human other, is, in the adequation of the imaginary and the real"(*Freud's Papers on Technique*, 139). Lacan proposes that it is through the mirror stage that the "human other" takes on this function. Humans are born "premature"("The Mirror Stage," 77) and unable to control their bodies. As the infant passes through the mirror stage he or she comes into an imaginary relationship with the body by identifying with the imaginary object that the mother is smiling at in the mirror. It is only when the infant identifies with this beyond-of-the-image—with the ideal object taken as the object of his or her mother's desire—that he or she comes to inhabit the disorganized collection of objects that are reflected in the mirror.

[T]he real objects, which pass via the mirror, and through it, are in the same place as the imaginary object. The essence of the image is to be invested by the libido. What we call libidinal investment is what makes an object become desirable, what is to say, how it becomes confused with this more or less structured image which, in diverse ways, we carry with us" (*Freud's Papers on Technique*, 141).

When these "real objects" which cross the mirror plane, are organized by the image—which will form the basis of the ideal ego—that the child receives from the Other, there is an adequation of the "imaginary" and the "real." The function

of the mirror stage is thus to attach the visual experience of the body in the mirror to the “structured image” that the child receives from the Other.

Freud writes that the preconscious censors the unconscious presentation of the “thing” by linking it to a word—to something that can be named as an object of conscious perception in the discourse of the Other. Through the mirror stage, Lacan describes the process through which the unconscious presentation of the thing is censored as it is attached to an image that comes from the Other. In terms of Freud’s topography, the mirror stage describes the process through which the preconscious censors the unconscious presentation of the thing by linking it to something that comes from the Other. Not only is the mirror image a two dimensional representation of the objects that are directly opposite the mirror, but the child who sees him or herself in the mirror is faced with a visual representation of the body from which lived experience has been evacuated. The unconscious presentation of the thing, in other words, is neither in the “real objects” nor in the “imaginary object.” Rather, a libidinal investment that comes from the Other—through the imaginary object that the child takes as the object of his or her mother’s desire—appears at the place of the experiential dimension that is censored by the presentation of the “real objects” in the mirror. The mirror stage thus is comprised of two logical moments. In the first moment, the child sees the “real objects” reflected in the mirror, as the body reflected in the mirror is divested of its experiential dimension. In the second moment the “imaginary object,” which the child takes as the object of the Other, comes at the place of the experiential dimension that is censored from the “real objects” as they pass through the mirror plane.

In his Seminar X, *Anxiety*, Lacan locates the structure of psychosis with respect to these two moments, as a “captivation” that intervenes between the passage of the “real objects” through the mirror plane, and the identification with the imaginary object—the “structured image”—that would provide an imaginary coherence to the real objects reflected in the mirror. To understand psychosis, Lacan writes,

It suffices to refer to the moment I have marked as characteristic of the

experience of the mirror and paradigmatic of the construction of the ideal ego in the space of the Other—the moment where the infant turns his head, tracing the familiar movement that I have described to you, towards this Other, this witness, this adult who is there behind him, to communicate to her, by his smile, the manifestations of his jubilation about something, let us say, that makes him communicate with this specular image. If the relation that is established with the specular image is such that the subject is so captivated by the image that this movement is not possible, then the pure dual relation will dispossess him of his relation to the big Other. (*Seminar X*, 142)

The infant who is in a psychotic position is captivated by the image in the mirror, and thus does not turn his or her head towards the Other. Because the infant does not turn his or her head, he or she does not identify with the imaginary object of the Other's gaze. The infant does not identify with what will become the ideal ego in the space of the ego ideals sustained by the Other, but rather takes refuge in the "real objects" reflected in the mirror in order to flee the "thing" at work in the body.

#### **IV. From the "thing" at work in the body to the ethics of speech**

In several remarkable books, the first of which was written when he was eight years old, Tito Mukhopadhyay describes his traumatic experience of a "scattered self" and "fragmented world," his captivation by the "virtual world" of objects that pass through the mirror plane, and his refusal of the image from the Other that would come at the place of this real at work in the body. Because he does not pass through the mirror stage he is caught between the overwhelming experience of the Thing and the captivation by the mirror that censors the unconscious presentation of the thing in the body. Lorna Wing writes, in her introduction to *The Mind Tree*, that beginning "from the time he was about 2 ½ years old" his mother "used the technique, familiar to parents and teachers of child with autism, of moving his limbs through the motions needed for each task, including pointing, until he learnt the feel of the muscle movements"(xi). Using

this technique of “facilitated communication”(xi) he learned to “read and write by using an alphabet board [and] from the age of six years he has written by himself using a pencil”(x). Mukhopadhyay’s books are about his experience of his autism, and about the relationship of this experience to language. His writings identify a vector of language that does not censor the Thing, by linking it to an object of possible conscious perception in reality, but rather makes a space within the discourse of the Other for the real of his experience. He constitutes himself as a speaking subject not through the identification with the object that comes from the Other, but through labor of writing of the real of his subjective experience.

Mukhopadhyay writes that the central problem of his autism is the lack of control over his body and his experience of a “scattered self” and “fragmented world.”

The fragmented world needed unification

Fragmented world of fear and pieces

Beyond 'our' understanding and reaches

Broken into bits and parts,

With the cause of our escaping hearts! (*The Mind Tree*, 88)

Mukhopadhyay continues that “This song is not sung lightly by the autistic hearts. This is a reason for their withdrawal. This is the reason for their escape”(The *Mind Tree*, 88). Mukhopadhyay writes that when he was 2 years old he discovered that the “virtual world” that he could enter into by staring into a mirror granted him solace from this terrifying experience of the fragmented body.

The boy refused to accept the existence of his body, and imagined himself to be a spirit.

Imagination took shape to lead his mind to a world of fantasies. By mere wishing he could believe that he was there. He believed that there was a world inside the mirror. He felt that objects were as real as the objects around him.

...[In the mirror] it was as silent as he wished it to be. The people were not in condition to use their voices, but they understood each other



well. The children were also there. But they just thought. The people had the contentment of an abstract kind. Their eyes actually showed what each one thought. [...]

The 'mirror travel' was a great way to be free of the noise around.

The more he did the better he felt. (*The Mind Tree*, 19-20)

In his description of the mirror as a silent scene where there is no need for voices, Mukhopadhyay locates the audible as the dimension of experience that is censored by the passage of the “real objects” through the mirror. The ambiguous unattached desire carried on the voice that gears into his body, that fragments the world, and scatters his self, is censored by the silent world of “mirror travel.”

Captivated by the “real objects” reflected in the mirror, he refuses his mother’s efforts to interest him in the “imaginary object.” When his mother tries to engage him in his image, by moving a “little handheld mirror as close as possible to my face, so that my real nose would touch the reflected nose” (*How Can I Talk if my Lips Don’t Move*, 16) he does not respond.

I think I was supposed to laugh at the mirror play or whatever she wanted me to think it was. Later, when I observed children, not through the eyes of the mirror but through my own reason and understanding, I realized that when there is something intense going on, there is an expectation of some kind of response. So perhaps mother expected me to laugh at the mirror that was coming near me, touching my nose, and moving away from my nose, along with her animated voice. I never responded. I was not interested in the nose reflection game.”(*How Can I Talk if my Lips Don’t Move*, 16)

In refusing the image—the imaginary object—that comes from the Other, Mukhopadhyay is caught between the silent inhuman world of objects reflected in the mirror, and the excess of the voice at work in his body. He both escapes from the excess of the thing and avoids entering into the space of the Other, where he would equally be exposed to the ambiguity of other’s desires. In her psychoanalytic reading of autism Danielle Bergeron writes that “during the mirror stage, [the autistic] does not enter human language; for, to enter language

supposes that one accepts being affected by the desire and jouissance of the Other”(131). Bergeron continues that, “the autistic does not want to enter into the time or the space conditioned by the desire of the Other, nor to be delivered up to the Other in the Other’s space, as if he were working to ‘save his skin’ from the desire, the drive and the *jouissance* that would intrude through the voice of the Other, through the audible”(121-122). As Mukhopadhyay writes, “Human ears cannot hear anything other than sounds. But not my ears, as I believed then. And not the ears of the mirror either. I believed that if you cared enough to listen, you could hear the sky and earth speaking to each other in the language of blue and brown”(How Can I Talk if my Lips don’t Move?, 1). In the mirror “the people had the contentment of an abstract kind. Their eyes actually showed what each one thought.” The ambiguity of the Other’s desire is silenced by the univocity of the “language of blue and brown.”

Mukhopadhyay describes his experience as disorganized by this detached, unanchored voice, yet it is equally this experience that takes him into language, as the basis of a speech through which he constructs himself, as the subject of an unrepresentable real, within the space of the Other. The turning point in Mukhopadhyay’s narrative comes when “he reasoned out that he might give it a try to be a ‘body’ instead of a ‘spirit’”(The Mind Tree, 28). This first effort to come into his body involves his discovery of “spinning” and “flapping.” He writes: “He got the idea of spinning from the fan as he saw that its blades that were otherwise separate joined together to a complete circle, when they turned in speed”(The Mind Tree, 28). The origin of his spinning is a metaphoric act, an effort to construct a unified world, through a relationship to the signifier. As he continues to confront the real of the fragmented body, his mother encourages him to enter into language, and this entrance into language is accompanied with a loss of the “virtual” world of the mirror: “He got angry with mother for educating him. Many a time when he tried to get a feeling of bliss, by imagining fantasies, his knowledge about the subject prevents him to dive into the virtual. It was irritating. He could not ‘feel’ the virtual as he did before”(The Mind Tree, 42). Entering into language, and articulating his experience, Mukhopadhyay

constructs a relationship to his body. He writes that “the fragmented self of hand and body parts which I once saw myself as, have unified to a living ‘me’, striving for a complete ‘me’. Not in the abstract existence of the impossible world of dreams but a hope for a concrete dream of this book to reach those who would like to understand us through me” (*How Can I Talk if my Lips Don’t Move?*, 89). By confronting the traumatic real of his body—“the fragmented self of hand and body parts”—as he enters into a relationship to the Other—“those who would like to understand us through me”—Mukhopadhyay constructs a “unified and living me.” What Mukhopadhyay calls a “living me” must be distinguished from the ideal ego established in the space of the Other: the “living me” is not constructed on the basis of the Other’s ideals, but rather through the work to make a place for a real within the space of the other, by giving voice to that which would have otherwise remained silent. Mukhopadhyay, who did not pass through the mirror stage, who did not construct his ego in the space of the Other on the basis of the image he received back from the Other, lays bare this vector of ethical speech: a speech on the basis of a real at work in the body. This is a vector of speech that does not censor the real of experience by participating in a cultural elaboration of the forbidden object in order to cathect the “thing” in the signifiers of the Other, but which makes a space within the field of the Other for the experience of the “thing.”

For the child who passes through the mirror stage, who identifies with the image that is returned by the mother, there is equally something in the subject that the Other does not recognize, that the Other does not want, and with which the subject is alone. Beyond the fact of the libidinal investment in the image that is returned to the child by the mother, which forms the basis of the ego through which the subject situates him or herself in the discourse of the Other, the Freudian “thing” continues to work in the lived experience of the subject as that in the body which remains unaddressed to the Other. As Lacan notes, this scene of experience, of the fragmented body, “is regularly manifested in dreams when the movement of an analysis reaches a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual [...] in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically

represented” (“The Mirror Stage,” 78). In “The Mirror Stage” Lacan writes of the fragmented body as the consequence of the fact that humans are born “premature” (77). Mukhopadhyay shows that this scene of experience is itself the presentation of the voice at work in the body. In Freud’s language, at the same time that the unconscious presentation of the thing is censored by the preconscious (the Other as the locus of signifiers) as it is attached to a possible object of conscious perceptual experience, it continues to exert its presence in the experience of the body that remains outside of the address to the Other. Lacan writes that the ethics of psychoanalysis is to be “well-spoken, to find one’s way in dealing with the unconscious” (*Television*, 22). Reading this ethics alongside Freud’s definition of “the *Ucs.* [as] the region of the memory-traces of *things* (as contrasted with *word-cathexes*)” (XIV, 256), locates the ethics of psychoanalysis in a speech about unconscious experience, a speech about a real that remains unconscious, at work in the body, as the absolute other of the subject, and the cause of desire. Mukhopadhyay’s writings reveal this dimension of speech that, rather than link the real of unconscious experience to an object named in language, makes a space in the discourse of the Other for that which insists in experience as the real of the subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Kitchner writes that in *On Aphasia*, “Freud followed Mill in assuming

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that [...] a word acquired meaning by being associated with an 'object-representation'"(78). Michael Molnar notes that "these ideas of object- and word-presentation are to recur in 'The Unconscious' as the traits differentiating conscious from unconscious mental activity"(112). Neither Kitchner nor Molnar notes that Freud theorizes the 'object-representation' through the "thing," nor notes the problematic of the "thing" in psychoanalytic thought.

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