

Notes for a Sartrean phenomenology of speaking and being-spoken

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Summary

Building on and extending Sartre's last work, The Family Idiot (a biography of French novelist Flaubert), this paper considers the ways language may construct or disrupt the subjectivity of the speaker. Sartre's understanding of Flaubert's attitude toward language offers an extraordinary amount of material that allows us to answer the question about who is speaking when a subject utters a speech act. His answer is that it is always the Other who is speaking at the origin – until something occurs, which enables a subject to speak by himself and as a Self. Yet this being-spoken

by the Other never fades away completely and can always come back, both as a creative resource (as with Flaubert) or as a constant, alienated and alienating foreground of our subjectivity. I argue that this state of alienation from the speech-act is apparent in disorders of self-affection, and especially in instances of verbal-acoustic hallucinations.

Key words

Language • Phenomenology • Sartre • Subjectivity • Verbal-acoustic hallucination

1. An improductive expression

Unlike with other fundamental issues, the problem of language has been strangely neglected by phenomenological psychiatry. It is true, however, that even philosophical phenomenology addressed such problem only incidentally. Husserl programmatically defined language as an “unproductive” expression: what he meant was that language can only translate into signs a lived experience that was born elsewhere and that continues to live by the laws and logic of such elsewhere: “Apart from the fact that it confers expression precisely on all other intentionalities, Husserl writes in *Ideen I*, the stratum of expression – and this makes up its own peculiarity – is not productive. Or, if one wishes: its productivity, its noematic production, is exhausted in the expressing and with the form of the conceptual which is introduced with ‘the expressions’”¹. Merleau-Ponty has devoted a number of illuminating essays to the phenomenology of language, such as *Indirect language and the voices of silence*, or *On the phenomenology of language*². But these essays never became a cornerstone of his theoretical work nor did they play a major role in the reception and reworking of his phenomenological thought, either in the field of philosophy or phenomenological psychiatry. Heidegger's case clearly represents an exception since his collocation both inside and outside the phenomenological movement was perhaps not unrelated to the centrality that the question of language gradually acquired in his thought³. However, Heidegger's reflections on language – but this applies to

his entire philosophy after the so-called “turn” – never really attracted the attention of phenomenological psychiatry. There are of course exceptions, such as Henri Maldiney, but his is a relatively unusual case, since Maldiney is a philosopher and a psychopathologist, and not a psychiatrist and a clinician in the strict sense; besides, he never focused specifically on the role of language in the psychopathological or, more particularly, schizophrenic experience⁴.

2. A general matrix of meaning

Indeed, the topics and contexts that psychiatry selected as decisive in its dialogue with Husserlian and post-Husserlian philosophy as well as with Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian philosophy were of a different nature. They had to do, most of all, with the issues corporeality, spatiality and temporality in their neurotic and psychotic developments, in their delusional and hallucinatory transformations and in their schizophrenic and manic-melancholic connotations.

To investigate how and why the paths of phenomenology and phenomenological psychiatry intersected at these – and not other – particular junctions would be an immensely rewarding enterprise, as it would lead both to a historical and theoretical evaluation of the overall sense of the long journey of phenomenological psychiatry; moreover, it would throw some light on its strongly polemical relationship with organicist psychiatry, which,

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thanks to Jaspers, Minkowski, Binswanger, Straus and Von Gebsattel, played an essential role in the process of its emerging as a discipline. Also, such analysis would allow us to understand the complex relations between phenomenological psychiatry and the other schools of psychiatry which, roughly in the same years, went through a somewhat similar anti-naturalistic and, in a broad sense, hermeneutical turn, leading to Freudian, Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian, Bionian and Winnicottian psychoanalysis. Such extremely interesting topic, however, cannot be explored here, and must be left in the background.

To conclude this preliminary and approximate survey, Husserl's idea of language as an unproductive epiphenomenon rather than an original phenomenon, as a form of experience devoid of specificity and peculiar constitutive functions, might have exerted a certain influence on the developments just outlined. Indeed, among phenomenologically-oriented psychiatrists, even Ludwig Binswanger still considered language as an additional, non-autonomous and non-original "expression" of a general way of being in the world. A clear example can be found in the essay *Dream and Existence*, where, despite the many references to the linguistic studies of Wilhelm von Humboldt and others, Binswanger still conceives the language of a certain patient and his corporeality or gestures as different expressions of the *same* contents and styles of experience. Apparently, he writes, there is "a general meaning matrix in which all particular regional spheres have an equal 'share,' i.e., which contains within it these same particular, specific meanings (spatial, acoustic, spiritual, psychic etc.)" ⁵.

3. Naming and appearing

A true epistemological break with this tradition was reached only through the abandonment of the "semantic" look through which phenomenology – in a more or less conscious dependence on Husserl's thought – seems to have for the most part analysed the linguistic phenomenon. If language is an unproductive sphere of expression, or if its productivity is limited – as Husserl believed – to the expression of something that has its genesis and meaning elsewhere, then it is clear that language cannot play a specifically productive function, and can only be a dictionary of words that correspond to objects or events outside the words. The reduction of language to semantics becomes inevitable.

Heidegger made a similar observation in a key-passage of his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1934), a passage that he later re-used, expanded and developed in quite different directions. "According to the usual account, language is a kind of communication. It serves as a means of discussion and agreement, in general for achieving

understanding. But language is neither merely nor primarily the aural and written expression of what needs to be communicated". "The conveying of overt and covert meanings – Heidegger goes on – is not what language, in the first instance, does. Rather, it brings beings as beings, for the first time, into the open. Where language is not present, as in the being of stones, plants, or animals, there is also no openness of beings, and consequently no openness either of that which is not a being or of emptiness". We find here a first insight into the nature of the linguistic action: "to name an entity" means to bring it to the level of words and thereby to "appearance", to its manifestation as an entity. In other words, Heidegger means that there is no naming of an entity as if the entity was already there, already given as an entity and just waiting to be named. On the contrary, to name means to bring to light something new. "Such saying – he concludes – is a projection of the clearing in which announcement is made as to what beings will come into the open as" ⁶.

To name means to manifest something, to make it appear on the basis of a project, in the context of an "illumination" and in light of a certain intentionality; to speak means to illuminate – within being and from being – something that thereby takes on the contours of an entity, of a thing signified by the speaker's intention or words, something that becomes objective thanks to the illumination coming from the word, while being as being, as Heidegger used to say, retreats in the shadow and falls into oblivion.

4. The tale of an idiot

The idea that to speak means to act, namely to profoundly reshape both experience and being as they existed before and outside of language, is taken up and developed in an extraordinarily rich and powerful fashion by Jean-Paul Sartre, in a monumental and unfinished work that for many reasons has remained at the margins of both the phenomenological and the phenomenological-psychiatric traditions. The title of this work is *The Family Idiot* (*L'idiot de la famille*, 1970-71): it is a biography of Gustave Flaubert, the great nineteenth century French writer, author of, among many other works, *Madame Bovary*, *The Temptations of St. Anthony* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Such an immense biography (3000 pages in all, plus the sketch of an additional fourth volume) is also a kind of *summa* of Sartre's intellectual journey and of its various stages, which find here their proper place and development.

The topics addressed in his early phenomenological research (*The Transcendence of the Ego*, 1934), the most famous tenets of his existentialist phase (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943), but also the extensive methodological re-

visions undertaken in the fifties and sixties (*The Problem of Method, Critique of Dialectical Reason*), not to mention his various contributions to the biographical (*Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr, Mallarmé, Kean* etc.) and auto-biographical genres (*The Words*, 1964): all of these elements reappear in this work under a new shape. The intricate structure of the text includes, one might say, a series of books within the book: such long and conceptually elaborate digressions, although thematically bound to individual aspects and theoretical problems related to the biography of Flaubert, often function as independent and quite relevant monographs. Sartre addresses several issues: the workings of the comic, the nature of the clinical gaze (Flaubert's father was a surgeon), the structures of desire and sexuality in the context of familial and extra-familial relationships, and also such topics as boredom, passivity, or melancholy – the last being Flaubert's curse and blessing, so to speak, at least according to the logic of Sartre's biographical reconstruction.

Finally, there is the issue of language, an apparently tangential topic, but in fact one necessarily intertwined with all the others: as the biography of an "artist of the word", Sartre's work also represents a genealogical reconstruction of the process through which, on the one side, a certain relationship with language gives rise to a certain structure of subjectivity and, on the other, a certain relationship with family figures gives rise to a certain experience of language and of the relationship between the subject and language, culminating precisely in Flaubert's literary vocation. Another important aspect of this work lies in its "genetically-oriented" phenomenology, in its being a genealogy in motion rather than a static phenomenology of language. To put it differently, its merit lies precisely in its "clinical" nature, if we take the term "clinic" in its original sense, namely as the observation of a certain process, of a certain individual story examined in its transformations, premises and developments, in its continuity and discontinuity.

5. Archaeology of naïveté

In the reconstruction provided by Sartre, there is a kind of primal event in Flaubert's childhood, which was to affect his entire existence. It was in fact a minor event, halfway between comedy and tragedy. "When he was six, a servant called Pierre, amusing himself with Gustave's innocence, told the boy when he pestered him: 'Run to the kitchen and see if I'm there'. And the child went off to question the cook, 'Pierre told me to come see if he's here'" ⁷.

The little Gustave was "the family idiot". The servant, Pierre, was repeating the family's judgment. And Gustave's father judgment, first and foremost. Gustave is gul-

libe, Gustave performs badly in his studies, Gustave is clumsy in familial, and later social, relationships. Gustave is an idiot first because he is naïve: a kid, and then a man, whose naïveté is absolute, totally helpless and powerless. Sartre's project could be summarised in a formula or in a series of formulas: to penetrate the secret of this paroxysmal naïveté; to illustrate the genesis of this hyperbolic simplicity of mind; to understand how the man of absolute faith in the Other's word was born, and thereby to understand how the man of faith becomes, also, the man of doubt; to understand how the greatest naïveté can generate the greatest distance and the cruelest diffidence. "Run to the kitchen and see if I'm there". Running to the kitchen, searching elsewhere for someone who is already standing before one's eyes: what does this mean exactly? This is the starting point of the many paths Sartre will follow in the course of the 3000 pages of this *monstre-work*. It means, Sartre argues, to prefer the promise of the word to the evidence of vision, to place oneself in a domain of experience where one can see what the word is pointing at, but cannot incorporate what is actually seen into the sphere of language. Gustave's faith is never perceptual, as Merleau-Ponty would say. His naïveté, Sartre declares, "is originally just a relationship with speech" ⁸. To this we might add that it is a certain relationship with the word, or a relationship with a word of a certain kind. It is a relationship of faith toward the word of the father and to the word itself such that those who cultivate it must become men of faith, men of belief, of hearsay, and of faithfulness to the voice of the other "that passes from mouth to mouth" ⁹.

6. Repeating words, repeating worlds

Let us imagine the following scene: Gustave is in front of his "other", his mother, who teaches him to speak, and then to read, for example. He is a helpless child, an infant, a being that still does not belong to the realm of language, at least to the language of the adults. Probably he can only babble. None of us, indeed, was born with a command of language. No doubt, eventually we all became masters of our own language, although never perfectly so. At the beginning, however, it is always the other who, in the eyes of the child, masters the language: the mother, the father, the "grown-ups", the tradition, or simply the past. To learn to speak, therefore, means to learn to repeat the others' words, to imitate a given model – to somehow replicate, as a child, one's father and mother. Learning to speak means to place oneself within an inevitably patriarchal or matriarchal genealogy. Language, in other words, is always "given" or "received", and like all other gifts, Sartre observes, language too is a *poisoned* gift.

In fact, the idea of reception should by itself arouse suspi-

cion. There is someone who “owns”, and someone who passively receives. Such complex relationship between passivity and activity is, so to speak, the very subject of Sartre’s biography. It is, however, a one-way relationship: only one of the two has the words, while the other simply receives them. But what does one receive, exactly, through the gift of speech? One receives some power, Sartre responds. To speak means to act, to grasp the world. Even more than that: to speak means to *bring up* a world, a domain of objects and subjects to be grasped. To speak means to let the world emerge in the context of a certain project. A great German philologist, Friedrich Creuzer, said that the power of language lies in its deictic nature: the original word indicates, and in this way reveals.

The previously recalled passage from Heidegger is not unrelated to this kind of German-romantic understanding of the linguistic gesture, and in particular to the deictic function of the word and the revealing power of language¹⁰. Sartre himself stresses the “magical power” of the word and immediately places it at the center of his analysis¹¹. He emphasises how the word “dissolves” into the very thing it refers to, as when a finger points to an object, which becomes visible only as long as the eye doesn’t focus on the finger. The magic lies in this revealing by way of disappearing. Creuzer believed that our words were not mere labels attached to things that are simply given and already present, nor that to name them just meant to provide a pale replica of them. The “primal” words are names that play a revealing, evoking and fulfilling function. They do not name what is already there, but manifest what is not yet there. They reveal and instruct. In this sense, the priest is the first master, the first educator: he names things for the community and before the community. We might add: only through such naming is he able to turn a mass of people into a community united by its standing on the threshold of a common language and a common world. Such world emerges as a common domain thanks to the power of the word, which by naming things for the people unites them into a whole. On the other hand, to speak the word of the other means to allow the world of the other to appear, to perform the action of the other, and to do his will.

Here, again, we have come across the poisonous side of the problem. The gift is in fact a question, not an answer, and its bestowal is conditional to the recipient’s willingness to entrust oneself to the other’s knowledge and power to establish an orderly world through the word. In order to receive the word of the other in its power and agency, one must be ready to listen and be acquiescent (“passivity” is Sartre’s term for this)¹². To speak means to perform the action of the other, namely to be acted by it. For everyone but the father of the community (the priest), to speak means to allow the world of the other to manifest

itself, to speak in the name of the past, to let the voice of the community resonate within oneself.

7. Impossibility as possibility

According to Sartre, when Flaubert the child approaches the world of adult language, he has already a story behind himself that, however short, inevitably prevents him from accessing such world through the front door. In other words, Flaubert can never find himself in the privileged position of Creuzer’s priest. He has behind himself a story of care, breast-feeding, and various kinds of attention. Sartre pauses at length on the reasons behind Caroline Flaubert’s efficient, but not loving, care for her child, recalling the early death of her previous children and her own relationship, as a child, with her father. Suffice it to say that a set of circumstances made her an efficient, but not tender mother, according to a recurring formula in Sartre’s work. In other words, she was able to recognize in the other a number of physiological needs, such as hunger and the need to be cleaned up, but she could not recognise the need for recognition expressed by the child through hunger, for instance. The child is not starving. In fact, he is well nourished. However, he is starved for recognition in the Hegelian sense. He stays alive, but only as immediate life, not as a mediated, subjective conscience headed toward self-consciousness. In the words of Sartre: he is passive, vegetative life. Exposed to the merely physiological efficiency of such mothering, Gustave becomes a purely physiological being, unmediated by the other’s recognition and deprived of the other’s desire – a physiological, not a psychological being. He is not a “divided” subject, as Lacan would say. Actually, he is no “subject” at all.

At this level, therefore, language represents a possibility of action bestowed as a gift to someone who does not know how to act or, rather, who can act only passively. This way, the linguistic action is inevitably performed and experienced passively. This is Gustave’s situation, one could say. Gustave was moulded in this way by the other: by his mother, then by his father, each of them with their own biographies, their stories made of countless other stories, and the boundless past resonating through their lives. Gustave is the passive synthesis of all this. The action and the linguistic act always appear to Gustave as performed by a distant and alien other. In his characteristic terminology, Sartre remarks that Gustave learns to speak from the “outside” rather than the “inside” of language.

We could, and perhaps should, reflect on such divide between the “inside” and the “outside”. Does language appear to Flaubert as an outward rather than inward dimension? Yes and no – one could answer. More precisely, language appears to him as an outward dimension in-

stead of not appearing to him at all. For him, language does not become, as for everybody else at some point in life, a place in which to dwell as a speaker, an eminently blind and invisible spot, neither internal nor external, from which to name the objects of the world and thereby make them visible and in this sense external. Through such naming process, the other side of the visible world is allowed to appear by means of a contrast and a kind of “recoil”, thereby gradually taking on the features of inwardness. The point is, in any case, that Gustave never reaches a position from which to speak the word: “the word is never *his*”, writes Sartre¹³. The word never functions as a window to the world and the things inhabiting it. The name is not a threshold, but a wall. Once the word has been spoken, Flaubert cannot simply run toward the object designated and made available by it, the object in which the word dissolves: he can only “stay” in front of language. Language does not play an illustrative function for him, but, rather, turns into a hard, inert, and insurmountable obstacle.

8. Flaubert, the Egyptian

The family idiot stands in front of the word as in front of the half-shut door in Kafka’s parable *Vor dem Gesetz* (*Before the Law*). The door is not closed, but Gustave does not cross it. He lacks transcendence, if you will. Gustave is, paradoxically, a conscience deprived of intentionality. The door, which normally everyone mindlessly crosses in order to reach a given destination, suddenly stands out in its autonomous existence. The crossing point, therefore, has solidified into an obstacle; it has become an alien, and therefore hostile, force.

Sartre writes about Flaubert’s encounter with the “material presence of the sign”, about an “imprisoned thought (...) crushed by the actual presence of its sign”. What the eyes and ears of Gustave are confronted with is language as pure matter, as a constraining and agglutinating force – as an obligation to submit and obey. In this case, to speak is really to do the other’s will, to bow to an external power, to consent to be inhabited by a world of meanings that are “thought” in a language that is never one’s own. We have encountered such “material” language – Sartre observes – “in magical formulas, in riddles, and in the *carmina sacra*; we find it each night in our dreams”¹⁴. This is why Gustave believes to words of Pierre the servant: “Go and see if I’m elsewhere”. Here the “thing itself” in its self-evidence is not Pierre nor is it the adjacent room: it is Pierre’s sentence. This is also where Gustave’s later difficulties in learning to read have their beginning: the written text will appear to him as a hieroglyph, as a dense and opaque sign and, simultaneously, as an obligation and an enigma.

In the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* Hegel has written that “alphabetic writing is in and for itself the most intelligent” among all the other forms of writing elaborated by mankind (hieroglyphics, pictograms, primers etc.)¹⁵. It is the most intelligent, for Hegel, because it is both the most analytical and the most synthetic. The ideal reader conforms his mind to the analytic-synthetic intelligence of the alphabet, travelling, so to speak, across the signs in the direction of the sound, and through the sound in the direction of meaning, in a vertiginous and instantaneous ascent toward the incorporeal. This is, precisely, what Gustave cannot do. To him, the voice of the other is an enigma. With awe and devotion, he is forced to address the alphabet as a kind of hieroglyph, enduring its ambiguity and unanalysable thickness, unravelling the maze of its possible paths with liturgical slowness. Gustave cannot understand the word of the other, he is unable to move beyond the letter of the text and grasp its supersensitive meaning. Faced with the word of the other as well as with the hieroglyphic spelling-books of his school years, the young Flaubert appears like an archaic and magical being – an ancient Egyptian.

9. To hear, to obey

Sartre provides a masterly analysis of the word “Calcutta” in one of Flaubert’s early works, written when his childhood was already a distant memory, but his anguish and the troubles of his early “idiocy” before the magic of words must have been still vivid in his mind. Flaubert’s short story is entitled *November*. This is the passage analysed by Sartre: “Oh! L’Inde! L’Inde surtout! Des montagnes blanches, remplies de pagodes et d’idoles... Puisse-je périr en doublant le Cap, mourir du choléra à Calcutta ou de la peste à Costantinople! Et trotter le jour, dans les gorges des Sierras, voir couler le Guadalquivir!”¹⁶. The sentence, Sartre remarks, expresses a desire, but at the same time, as it emphatically recalls the names of those faraway places, seems to convey the force of a destiny. The beauty of the words is the analogue, even the substitute for the beauty of the cities and places Flaubert has conjured up. “And what would India have been for Gustave if it were not called India?”, Sartre asks¹⁷. Again, reliable is the word, not the thing. Flaubert’s faith is linguistic, not perceptual. Gustave relies on the word, on its sound and its graphic shape. He is fascinated by the appearance and the overwhelming material force of a particular word. What inspire his wording is the sticky and agglutinating density of those names.

Why not just die in Rouen, Sartre asks, “without so much fuss”?¹⁸. Because the point is not to die, or to kill oneself. The point is to die in Calcutta. And why Calcutta, where Flaubert has never even been? Because the point

is not Calcutta the city, but Calcutta the word. It is not a matter of going to Calcutta, but of heading for Calcutta the word and its uniquely alluring sound. It is a matter of listening to oneself while uttering that word, of creating opportunities to write it down and thereby re-read it and be conquered by it once again. To listen to that word means to obey it (*audire, obaudire*: the faith in the received word is a kind of charm, acquiescence, obedience), or, if you will, to evoke it in order to be inspired by it: one will become that person who wants to go to Calcutta, who stands out for his devotion to the word "Calcutta", who finds satisfaction in obliterating oneself in the sound "Calcutta".

We may recall at this point that repetition is a key-element of the word as word of the other. To speak means to repeat the word of the father, of the priest, of the past. To repeat a word, however – and to repeat it because one is not capable to assimilate it, because one is doomed to replicate it as an excrescence stubbornly and monstrously attached to something else – also means to isolate it, to pull it out from the sentence and the context to which it originally belonged. It also means to abstract it from the overall intention of the sentence and from the principle that purposefully and intentionally governed its enunciation, so that the word remains as the only context in which any other object and word will have to fall. There is only one conclusion to be drawn from this: the intentionality, now, does no longer belong to the person who pronounces the sentence containing the word "Calcutta" and to the overall enunciative process, but to the word "Calcutta" itself, its phonic matter and its graphic shape. Having become thing-like, an opaque hieroglyph, an unsurpassable materiality, the word attracts around itself the domain of meaning and the sensitivity of the subject. It is the word "Calcutta" that actually speaks.

10. The intentionality of matter

Like when an electric current passes through a pile of iron filings and orients the particles according to its lines of force, so the word "Calcutta" becomes a touchstone, a paradigm for the other words, a master voice the writer obeys as the puppet obeys the ventriloquist. The web of sentences, the play of associations, and the concatenation of the linguistic clichés all spring up from the isolated and absolutised matter of this word. There are assonances and dissonances, rhythmically similar or different words, words that are connected to it by way of alliteration, and others that relate to it only indirectly. For this reason, there will be *de la peste* (a plague) in Constantinople ("st" is the law regulating the construction of the phrase: *peste à Constantinople*), and there will be cholera in Calcutta ("ca" "co", "cu"). For the same

reason Flaubert's imaginary journey includes Constantinople and Calcutta ("ca", "co", "ta", "ti", "tta"), and not Tokyo and Hong Kong. For this reason, the words *peste*, *Costantinople*, *choléra*, and *Calcutta* form a pre-determined constellation (o, e, a, a, u, a).

These lines should be compared with another extraordinary passage from one of Flaubert's early letters to a friend. Here, Flaubert abandons himself to talking for the sake of talking and at the same time finds himself reflecting on such talking. In doing this, he is like a child that surrenders to the word of the other: "Me voilà lancé dans le parlage, dans les mots; quand il m'échappera de faire du style gronde-moi bien fort, ma dernière phrase qui finit par "brumeux" me semble assez ténébreuse et le diable m'emporte si je me comprends moi-même. Après tout, je ne vois pas le mal qu'il y a a ne pas se comprendre... Nom de dieu si je suis bête! Je croyais qu'il allait me venir des pensées et il ne m'est rien venu, turlututu!"¹⁹. The "u" of *venu* is connected to the immediately following *turlututu*. Language is a thing, a thing endured. The word "functions as a hallucinogen"²⁰. Far from reproducing certain scenes, the phonic matter and the graphic shape of words actually *produce* such scenes. The writer is nothing but a scribe writing under dictation. The sense is a by-product of the mechanical functioning of a language that has been reduced to linguistic matter, to a phonic thing, a visual object, a pure signifier.

In this regard, the very expression *parlage* is revealing. Language is an enslaving mechanism in which the subject is trapped. Language requires blind obedience, and its anonymity and impersonality renders such obedience even more inhuman. Sense lies is the verdict of a game that appears mysterious and senseless, when it is judged from a humanistic point of view. In other words, in both the *parlage* and in the letter just mentioned, there is playfulness as much as uneasiness before a language that has become a thing, and there is anxiety about one's condition of unrelenting servitude to an alien language that speaks within oneself. The speaking subject perceives his words as foreign objects with which he simultaneously does and does not coincide. On the other hand, and for the same reason, he sees himself "disconnecting" from the word, losing his identity with it, while the word returns to be the other's word, a word that is impossible to make one's own.

11. Writing and depersonalization

"If I write, it's so that I can read myself", Flaubert writes in one of his many diary notes about the art of writing. It is an illuminating sentence, not so much for the understanding of Flaubert the man, but for that of his art as a writer; it is enlightening, however, only if it is not reduced to a

trivial narcissistic formula, or, if you wish, only if the narcissistic experience that it implies is not trivialised. What is conveyed here is not the writer's desire to embrace his mirrored image or to objectify himself into a text so to admire his duplicate in paper and lose himself in it.

Writing, on the contrary, is a powerful device for de-identification and depersonalization. Reading is an act that implies a glacial distance between the person who wrote the text and the person who is reading it, even if the two persons coincide. A written document is by definition a foreign document, an object from the past, and is inevitably judged from a partially disenchanting perspective. The subject and his words are no longer a whole, as in actual speech, where, as Jacques Derrida has argued, there is the experience of a unifying vocal self-affection²¹. The similarity between the two phenomena studied by Sartre and Derrida, however, is significant and yet misleading. Derrida has showed that in the phenomenon of hearing-oneself-speak identity is produced through difference: a non-coincidence tends to fade into a transparent coincidence of speaking and hearing-oneself-speak. Such fading is what allows the subject to exist as such. Basically, there is no subject without a self-closing and self-contained auto-affection, however unstable such condition may be.

When one is facing one's written word, however, one inevitably encounters the word of another and therefore sees oneself as another and as a stranger. The subject is confronted with his own ambiguous image, which has taken the form of a hallucinatory thing among other things; he has also conjured the hallucinatory power of language, which now appears as an eerily and enigmatically autonomous object: on the one side, such object is felt as deeply connected to oneself, imbued with the innermost secrets of one's experience of life, and, on the other, as profoundly alien, unreachable, and infinitely distant. Of course, in speech and in hearing-oneself-speak there is identity only through difference, there is coincidence only through non-coincidence, namely there is voice only through a primordial and inescapable writing – an *archi-writing*, Derrida would say.

"True" writing becomes possible, therefore, through a number of preliminary writings and primal disseminations: here – where language becomes the hallucinatory, magic power of the other, an unassimilated and unassimilable otherness – such writing leads to the explosion of that non-coincidence no longer constrained, of that difference no longer fading into identity, of that permanently underlying fracture which here has turned into a divide, a schism, a *Spaltung*. To open one's mouth means, here, to be confronted with one's dead letter, to find oneself chained to it and, simultaneously, hopelessly distant from that static and no longer decipherable sign – a sign no longer hospitable, no longer accessible. It is the end

of the subject as a provisional self-contained auto-affective circle and the beginning of hallucination as a prime manifestation of the dissolution of the subject as auto-affection through the disintegrating power of writing. It is madness finally revealed – the madness of language which manifests itself as subjective madness.

12. From literature to schizophrenia

One might notice, indeed, that the domain of psychosis is equally familiar, if not even more familiar, with this reversal of intentionality: this is the kind of autonomous effectiveness of language that, according to Sartre, is accessible to everyone through the world of dreams and rituals, and which by no accident he describes as a hallucinatory experience. Therefore, the verbal hallucination, which so often characterises the schizophrenic experience, can be seen as a sort of re-emergence of what Sartre has shown to be the foundation of language as a gift, as the word of the other, as a "feudally" endured word. In a sense, once the sovereign auto-affection of the speaker has become impracticable, one's word is perceived as a foreign word. Such auto-affection had definitely become impracticable for Gustave the child, whose "passivity" or "passive agency", according to Sartre, was the result of the peculiar structure of his family relationships.

A word truly belongs to its speaker only if the speaker can make it his "own". If such condition is absent – if, that is, the genealogy of the subject is such that the word is doomed to remain suspended on the threshold between the familiar and the alien, in a sort of no man's land – then the encounter with one's word can only be an encounter with a foreign word: the subject feels like he is "spoken" and "acted" by such word because the only dimension of intentionality left seems to concern only language itself. Language is always a revealing, and therefore prescriptive, force. Such force now acts independently, in the sense that the subject has never become able to master it or at least to think he was able to do so. To a subject condemned to passivity, a force that cannot be made one's own can only take on a sinister, elusive and overpowering character. If one's word is abandoned to itself and encountered as the word of the other, its original power of revelation will turn into an unmasking and accusatory force, a force that threatens or alludes, insults or insinuates. In this sense, the entire scope of the "negativity" of the content and form of the verbal hallucination would be a consequence, variously characterized according to the individual biographies, of the individual stories of the delirious persons – of that essential and somewhat transcendental phenomenon which is the loss of the intentionality of the speaker.

In this situation, the speaker cannot perceive himself as

a “speaking” subject. On the contrary, we are here in the domain of the impersonal “one”: “one speaks”. Indeed, this anonymous and ominous “one”, typical of idle talk, speaks through the subject. “One” is inhabited by the alien and accusatory power of idle talk. Similarly, certain mysterious verbal chains typical of the schizophrenic experience – which remain impenetrable to an approach motivated by the search for a meaning and for a hypothetical intentional subject behind such meaning – exhibit a sort of magic law of composition, one full of meaning and spectral rigor. This becomes clear as soon as one accepts that this apparently disorganised speech cannot be seen as the expression of an autonomous subject capable of mastering language or of a “self” provided with a faculty for the “expression of meaning”, which is in any case enigmatic and far from natural.

Our familiar capacity to “mean” something through language is actually a skill that has to be learned and that therefore can also be unlearned: in fact, one can find oneself in a situation where such learning is not possible or such capacity for meaning has lost its sense. A subject that, to use a Sartrean keyword, is imperfectly “constituted” or, for some reason, feels “deprived” of his more or less precarious sovereignty, suddenly finds himself unable also to consider language as one of his own “faculties” or “possibilities”.

13. The spoken subject

To conclude, the subject, in this case, becomes a “possibility” of language. What speaks is in fact language, while the subject is simply “spoken” and “acted” by a word that appears as an inexorable and inhuman force. In turn, and correspondingly, the subject takes on the character of a lifeless thing confronted with an equally lifeless force, of a vulnerable and naked portion of matter confronted with the impenetrable fortress of a meaning that is produced elsewhere, in an inaccessible location that can be easily pictured as the hideout of a great puppet master.

When language becomes an autonomous signifier, its laws impose themselves on the speaker with their obtuse and fascinating strangeness. It might be added that the “materiality” of the signifier is not a primary element of language at all, an ingredient “in itself” constituting the linguistic phenomenon. Rather, the materiality of language is an outcome of the impossibility for the speaker to inhabit that active threshold of language described by Sartre as the moment in which the subject “recovers” the word of the other and makes it his own. If that threshold stands for an indissoluble unity of the signifier and the signified, the impossibility of such recovery disrupts the signifying function of language and consequently leads to an experience of the word as a “pure” and naked “sig-

nifier”, one fraught with those ominous implications by which the speaker feels besieged and threatened. Only at this point the possibility arises of that glossolalic play whose warning signs we have briefly described.

It is only under these conditions that the tragedy of language can take place, a tragedy in which language seems to spin around itself and sink into the abyss of its internal and material – phonic or graphic – references: a pure sonic mechanism, a ricocheting of fragments that keep gathering and re-gathering according to the autonomous laws of rhythm and melody, of consonance and dissonance, of material similarity and dissimilarity. The realm of the autonomy of the signifier²² has turned into the barren land of perfect heteronomy, a wasteland that unfolds when the advent of the speaker as a subject is definitely precluded. Not to be able to speak means, here, to be spoken by a “thing” that, in reality, is never inert nor “objective”. The schizophrenic condition seems to helplessly experience, to the most painful degree, the enigmatic dimension, active and yet material, inhuman and yet profoundly constitutive of the human being, that in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre has called “practico-inert”. To be spoken means to discover oneself exposed to an otherness that is never, by definition, that of another human being, of another person – without being for this reason that of a real object.

Conflict of interests

None.

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- ¹⁵ Hegel GWF. *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, § 459.
- ¹⁶ Vol. 2, p. 265: "Oh, India, India above all! White mountains filled with pagodas and idols ... If only I could perish while rounding the Cape, die of cholera in Calcutta, of the plague in Constantinople! ... And trotting all day in the gorges of the Sierras see the Guadalquivir running".
- ¹⁷ Sartre J-P. *The family idiot*. Vol. 2 (trans. Cosman C). Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987, p. 266.
- ¹⁸ Sartre J-P. *The family idiot*. Vol. 2 (trans. Cosman C). Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987, p. 267.
- ¹⁹ Sartre J-P. *The family idiot*. Vol. 2 (trans. Cosman C). Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987, pp. 218-19: "All right, here I am shooting off my mouth, flinging words around; scold me roundly when I start affecting style. My last sentence, which finished with 'misty', seems rather hazy to me, and the devil take me if I understand it myself! After all, I don't see what's so bad about not understanding yourself; ... For God's sake, I'm stupid! I fancied some thoughts were going to come to me, and it was nothing at all, nonsense (*turlututu!*)".
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- ²² I am implicitly referring to the title and the content of a book that would deserve a much broader discussion: Beccaria GL. *L'autonomia del significante*. Torino: Einaudi 1975.