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## AT THE LIMITS OF LIVING: TO JOSEPH GRIGELY<sup>1</sup>

Julia Kristeva

The problems of disabled people are of increasing concern to psychoanalysts today. It is in this way that psychoanalytic attentiveness to vulnerability becomes a genuine political issue.

*People Say I Am Crazy*: such is the title of a documentary screened in the United States which reinforced my decision, had there been need, to accept the Chair of the National “Handicap: Sensitise, Inform, Develop” Council in France. The documentary tries to explain to us how we can successfully “heal” and “integrate” a schizophrenic. The hero of the film, reluctantly stuffed with a range of medications which make him “obese,” is nevertheless saved by his sister, an amateur film-maker who has the good idea of filming her poor brother John, who, fortunately is passionate about drawing and engraving. Thanks to the film, the work of the handicapped artist is swiftly made public; he has the right to an exhibition; the funding pours in. The madman henceforth becomes “*a disabled artist*.” He could leave the appalling hostel that he shared with others like him and even regain a certain amount of serenity; I must add that it was the social services that offered him a home worthy of the name. So there we have it, he is cured. All that remained was to award the film a prize, which did not take long to happen. From time to time, the artist rebelled against the camera that focused its gaze upon him, and a little, in the same way, against those who were making a work of art from his malady. But, in the end, he was persuaded, and we could say that he even participated in the making of the film. Was not the

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**Julia Kristeva “Aux frontières du vivant”**

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camera a familiar outsider, a small breathing space between John's malaise and his family? He was not insane enough to deprive himself of this space. Better than the charming "very American" therapist who encouraged him with her amiable "social worker" advice, the loving entrapment made possible by John's film-maker sister was not lacking in interest for the "works" of the artist, which nobody understood, but represented the place into which John had, it seemed, locked away his life. It is here in the film that something seemingly takes place, but that would be another film. Which one? There was no chance of this "movie" revealing it.

Not a word nor an interpretation accompanied John's dramatic representations of the brains and stomachs swarming around with abject flora and fauna; it occurred to no one to let the handicapped artist speak about his anxieties and his desires, about the exclusion into which "the people" had walled him up—an exclusion nevertheless flaunted in the title of the documentary: *People Say I Am Crazy*. Perhaps he could not speak? Perhaps no attempts had been made to let him speak? Perhaps he would try to speak after the making of the film? Who knows?

Today the patient has disappeared: he resurfaces as the object of a film, and why not even say a co-author, since it is true that the adventure has pushed him to produce and exhibit objects that will even be put up for sale, or at least it is hoped so. What a success! It is obvious, he is cured. What could be more wished for in the benign society of the spectacle other than good handicapped people? It suffices that patient has only to become a producer and/or an object of the "show."

An immense sadness restrained my unreserved applause. Something seemed to be missing from this lovely "integration." The *question of the subject* not having been raised, there was nothing to be shared. I had been witness to a *process*, perhaps even to a procedure, but not to a *rebirth*—to an *integration*, but not to an *interaction*. The handicapped person was indeed supported, but this was done in order to facilitate the insertion of his produced objects into the circuit of consumption, where success was measured by the bringing of his story to the screen. The subject in his entirety was absorbed by his objects, and his psychological life was taken as cured since it had quite simply disappeared from sight.

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While his sister director triumphed, and I could understand her joy, John searched for a perspective upon which to rest his weary eyes, out of shame, it seemed to me, out of resignation, out of anxiety.

I was this gaze. Could more have been done? Everyone was happy for him, and he himself gave the impression of wishing to please us; the public was enchanted.

The uneasiness that seized me at the sight of this spectacle only served to reinforce my commitment to the “Handicap” project in France undertaken by the President of the Republic. What else could shake humanistic hypocrisy and productivist self-righteous thinking, other than an attentive accompaniment to psychoanalysis, which alone is capable of unearthing the subject from beneath the producer of images?

—“Where does the current delay in France come from, when you compare the ways in which Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands or Belgium take care of their handicapped people? Especially given that you have had, since the eighteenth century, the Abbé de l’Épée for the deaf, Pinel for the mentally ill, and Diderot for the blind ‘for the benefit of those who could see?’”

This was the question I was asked during my stay in Chicago by the intellectual and renowned deaf artist, Joseph Grigely, after he had read my “Letter to the President of the Republic on the subject of handicapped citizens.”<sup>2</sup>

—“Perhaps this delay emerges from the fact that secularisation has ousted compassion from our world, and yet, without psychoanalysis, we seriously risk being pushed into an impasse—one threatening all countries—wherein handicapped people are reduced to the function of either invalid or worker. In the United States, you know how to manage this ‘process’ more efficiently than we do in France, and consumerism triumphs in the most pernicious of good consciences. I prefer to wager that we will attempt to rehabilitate the subject in the deficient body, in order to pry him out of the exclusion into which common sense has locked him. I prefer to wager that it is from this authentic and necessary cultural change that we will be able to improve the laws and material compensations.”

This was how I responded to Joseph Grigely, benefiting from his interest in French psychoanalysis which he astutely distinguished from the various American therapies, and trying to persuade myself that I was not simply nurturing thoughts of “*wishful thinking*.” It is here that I would like to continue the conversation I had with Joseph Grigely, thanks to sign-language translation.

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Lettre au Président de la République sur les citoyens en situation de handicap, à l’usage de ceux qui le sont et de ceux qui ne le sont pas*. Paris: Fayard, 2003.

Twenty-five years of analytical practice have convinced me that psychoanalysis being the intimate experience *par excellence*, there could not be a politics of psychoanalysis. However, the psychoanalytic attentiveness to the *parlêtre* is the Copernican revolution of values and norms which opens up new possibilities of links to others, links which themselves constitute the very essence of politics. If listening to the unconscious unveils the vulnerability of the speaking being, it is inevitable that psychoanalysis meets with the principal anxiety of the third millennium: what meaning is given to the limits of life—to birth, to death, to deficiencies? By transferring the religious and philosophical ambitions of an individualised Western world into the very heart of scientific rationality, the Freudian discovery of the unconscious is undoubtedly the only humane approach likely to avoid both the euthanasia based on scientific pretensions and the pseudo-humanism destined to ossify the patient under the carapace of a worker. We know about *body-building*; we are now taking part in *producer-building*. Will the advanced democracies know how to find the ways to accompany life to its limits and limitations, whilst still privileging and appealing to the subjects within them? Such is the wager that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious prepares us for, if we admit that it is a discovery of the *essential vulnerability of the speaking body*.

Summarising the analytical approach in such a way requires some explanation. Eros and Thanatos, unveiled by Freud in the unconscious of men and women of the twentieth century, were led neither to reveal a desiring superman (as certain Lacanian zealots would have it), nor to take pity upon a suffering humanity (as the orthodox post-Freudians would like to murmur). In fact, the duel between hedonists and nihilists is one of those French specificities which fends well in the media, but cannot stand up to the complexities of psychical life revealed on the couch of the contemporary psychoanalyst.

It is the *delicacy of the speaking being* that the analyst examines today, after having read his Freud and his Lacan, his Melanie Klein and his Bion, his Winnicott and his Frances Tustin. The Freudian voyage into the *night of desire* gives way to taking care of the *capacity to think*—never one without the other. The result? Modern psychoanalysis, as I understand it, seems to be an elucidation of the vulnerability resulting from the biology/language crossroad, as well as a perpetual rebirth of the subject, if and only if this vulnerability is recognised. Situated in this untenable place, psychoanalysts, by going beyond the frequent disasters and increasingly visible psychic-somatic terrain, have the privilege—unique today?—of accompanying new emerging capacities to think-represent-think; capacities which are

as much new bodies as well as new lives.

Contrary to world-wide technology that overwhelms us with its propaganda, the global era that unfolds after the modern era is not characterised by a performing and enjoying Man(kind), bisexual master of his desires and/or of their debacles. The vulnerability that reveals itself today on the analysts' couches is precisely what the maniacal surge of hyper-productivity, of global demonstration, and of suicidal religious wars, is fiercely trying to deny.

By adding a fourth term—vulnerability—to the inherited humanism of the Enlightenment's "liberty, equality, fraternity," the analytical ear inflects these latter terms towards a concern for sharing, in which and thanks to which desire, with its lining of suffering, moves towards a permanent renewal of the self, the other and their bond.

It is from examining, for more than two decades so far, the delicacy and vulnerability of women and men who have confided in me, that I believe I heard—in the President's intention that France make up for its reluctance to personally accompany its handicapped citizens—an appeal ... to psychoanalysis. For no other discourse, no other interrogation or therapy would know better, at one and the same time, how to recognise the lack in being (*manque à être*), and how to enlist it in a project of on-going renewal, whether it be limiting or surprising.<sup>3</sup>

I do not speak only of the psychoanalytic approach to *psychical handicaps*—psychosis or autism—which, in the best of cases, would lead to a situation wherein the subject is foreclosed. Without denying pharmacological or other approaches which facilitate social behaviours, I also want to speak about the approach which claims for its objective the protection and the optimisation of psychical life, to the extent that it remains an infinite quest for meaning—a *bios* traversal to the *zoe*—resulting in a biography with and for others. Although what John, in the documentary that I have referred to, managed neither to say nor to think, the film—almost despite its producers—could not prevent the potentialities of his thoughts and words from being guessed at.

Other types of handicaps—*mental* (Down syndrome), *sensorial* (deafness, blindness) or *motor*—also push, though differently, people into deficient situations which exclude them from belonging

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<sup>3</sup> '*manque à être*' makes reference to the same phrase of Jacques Lacan's, which has been variously translated as 'want-to-be,' 'want of being,' 'lack of being,' Whilst these translations are important, I have chosen, with Kristeva's agreement, to translate here the phrase as 'lack in being.' – TN.

to a community. This is because these disabilities bring each of those *not* suffering from them face to face with the anxiety of castration, the horror of narcissistic wounding and, at a later stage, with the unbearableness of psychical or physical death: deepening therein the most intractable kind of exclusion suffered by the handicapped person.

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Rejections caused by race, social origin or religious differences have led to political disputes which, for the last two centuries at least, have taken over the place once occupied by charity, and managed, for better or for worse, to reinstate in the minds of citizens and by law, the well-named “human rights”: a horizon forever unsatisfying but henceforward part of “common sense,” so that resisting racism, classism and religious persecution appears to be the sensible thing to do. It is an altogether different question when the exclusion suffered by the handicapped person is raised. The voluntarism of the beautiful humanist soul, sustained—though not always—by juridical and social measures, and nourished by a more or less noble camaraderie, is shown to be incapable of overcoming the fears and anxieties which determine the unconscious, and very often conscious, rejection of those who are handicapped by those who are not.

It is here, in this precise place that *psychoanalytic attentiveness to vulnerability* could assume its full political significance, by addressing not only those who suffer from a handicap, but those in society who are capable not only of integrating them, but to create a real interaction with them. Be reassured, I am not suggesting that everyone must be “psychoanalysed,” unless people want it, and it happens; nor am I trying to say that “we are all handicapped,” as has been said “we are all German Jews,” all New Yorkers of the Twin Towers, all gays or all women. I say only this: by lending a psychoanalytical ear to the incommensurable singularity of the *exclusion unlike others* that handicapped people suffer from, it becomes obvious that it concerns us. Not necessarily because “it could happen to anyone,” but because *it (ça)* is already inside me: in our dreams, our anxieties, our amorous and existential crises, in the *lack in being (manque à être)* that overwhelms us when our resistances fall apart and the “interior castle” itself begins to crumble. Since to recognise it in myself will help me to discover the incommensurable subject within the deficient body, in order to build together the project of a shared life. A project in which my fear of castration, of a narcissistic wound, of defect, and of death—up until now repressed—are translated into care, into patience, and into a solidarity capable of cultivating my being in the world (*être au monde*). At this conjunction, the handicapped subject

perhaps becomes not my *analyst*, but my *analyser*?

I am not claiming that this social contract supported by psychoanalytic attentiveness will manage to dissolve a handicap into a state of vulnerability. If every speaking being is constructed around a central weakness, the presence of a handicap imposes a very different ordeal: it is the *irreparable* that the handicapped subject is faced with, in addition to the lacks or deficiencies which only evolve in certain cases, when they do not stagnate or worsen. And yet, the analysand who has not confronted the irreparable in himself has not finished, in Céline's words, with his "journey to the end of the night." And how many impending desires, dormant abilities, possibilities of an astonishing life lie in this cohabitation with the irreparable!

I am convinced that by having tamed their vulnerability, analysts and all those who try and lend their speech to the unconscious are capable of receiving handicapped subjects with the best outcomes, so that the desires, anxieties, and creativities of those excluded unlike others, are expressed and elaborated. Having identified our own limits permits us to share those of the handicapped subject: his weaknesses, like his brilliances, therein emphasising the strongest sense of the word "sharing," which is not fusion, osmosis or identification. To share: to take part in particularity, going beyond the separation that our destinies impose on us. To participate: without forgetting that we remain "apart," by recognising our unshareable "part"—the part of the irreparable.

Have we not, in this dream of a citizenship shared with the most fragile, wandered very far from psychoanalysis? In a certain way we have. But not really, if we admit that far from being a world apart, a coded language or a sect of initiates, psychoanalysis is another way of being in the world.

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