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# I

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

## Lacan's turn to Freud

Since we are talking about Lacan, therefore about psychoanalysis, I will begin with a personal reminiscence, almost a confession. It could borrow its title from Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke*, for it all started with a silly practical joke. In the fall of 1968, when I was a new student at the Ecole normale supérieure, I overheard friends preparing one of the idiosyncratic pranks that used to be one of the privileges of that French cathedral of learning. They had espied with some nervous envy how the famous psychoanalyst would be driven to the school's entrance to emerge with a beautiful woman on his arm and make his way to the office of Louis Althusser, who was then the Ecole's administrative secretary. By contrast with the nondescript student style of the school, Lacan was known to draw crowds from the city's select quarters, a medley of colorful intellectuals, writers, artists, feminists, radicals, and psychoanalysts. It was easy to rig the speakers connected with his microphone. A tape consisting of animal squeals and pornographic grunts had been rapidly put together. Now was the moment to see how the master and his audience would react to this insolence; not having had time to finish lunch, still clutching an unfinished yogurt pot, I followed the conspirators. We arrived late (our X-rated tape was to be aired close to the end of the seminar) into a crowded room, in which dozens of tape recorders had been set on the first row of tables in front of a little stage. There Lacan was striding and talking to the forest of microphones; behind him was a blackboard on which was written: "The essence of psychoanalytic theory is a discourse without words." Clearly, he was begging for our rude interruption! Precisely as I entered the room, Lacan launched into a disquisition about mustard pots, or to be precise, *the* mustard pot, *l'pot d'moutard*?. His delivery was irregular, forceful, oracular. The first sentences that I managed to jot down despite my postprandial stupor are the following:

This pot, I called it a mustard pot in order to remark that far from necessarily containing any, it is precisely because it is empty that it takes on its value as a

mustard pot. Namely that it is because the word “mustard” is written on it, while “mustard” means here “must tardy be” [*moult me tarde*], for indeed this pot will have to tarry before it reaches its eternal life as pot, a life that begins only when this pot has a hole. Because it is in this form that throughout the ages we find it in excavation sites when we search tombs for something that will bear witness to us about the state of a civilization.

This sounded deep, Dadaist, and hilarious, and yet no one laughed or even smiled. Here I was, facing an aging performance artist (Lacan was sixty-seven then) whose very garb had something of the cabaret comedian’s outfit, with a dandiacal Mao costume, a strange shirt, and the most tortured elocution one could imagine, broken by sighs, wheezes, and sniggers, at times slowing down to a meditative halt, at times speeding up to culminate in a punning one-liner. Curiously, he was being listened to in utmost silence by an audience intent on not missing one word. I had forgotten my own yogurt pot, embarrassingly half-full or half-empty in my hand: it had turned into an urn. I vaguely knew the popular etymology of the word *moutarde*, which was supposed to derive from *que moult me tarde* (attributed to one of the Dukes of Burgundy, as I would verify a few years later when I started teaching in Dijon, a first academic post no doubt programmed by these ominous sentences), but did not know that Lacan came from a dynasty of vinegar makers and that one of their specialties was fine mustard. In the seminar, I had just witnessed a typical series of virtuoso associations taking off from mustard pots to engage with funerary vessels as they characterize entire civilizations. Lacan obliquely quoted Heidegger’s meditation on jugs allegorizing the work of art, then climaxed with the Danaids and compared Pan’s musical flutes to empty barrels, all this in a few breathtaking sentences. His words circled around in freewheeling thematic glides rendered more startling by a very particular enunciation: it systematically elided mute *e*’s (*e muets*) and thus, in an accent that sounded old-fashioned but full of stage-Parisian *gouaille*, endowed with new echoes homely phrases such as *l’pot d’moutard*. Much later, I found out that Lacan had punned not only on mustard and vinegar but also on the broader conceptual category of “condiment,” a word he would always use with the demonstrative *ce*, thus uttering “ce condiment,” a phrase which could be heard as *ce qu’on dit ment*: what one says is lying, we only say lies. Lies and truth passed through the hole in the mustard pot, thanks no doubt to the obscene echo of *con* (“cunt”). By way of the mustard pot, I had been introduced to the devious logic of the signifier.

By the time our little prank came up, I had been captured by the master’s voice and was really paying attention to what he was saying: that he still considered himself a Structuralist even if the tide of fashion had started to turn (this was 13 November 1968), that he was busy constructing a model

in which Freudian concepts like *Lust* were combined with Marxist concepts like *Mehrwert* (surplus value), so as to produce the new concept of *Mehrlust* or “surplus enjoyment.” He hoped that such a concept would account for the social function of symptoms while, of course, indulging in rhyming slang and knotting the *mère verte* (or “green mother,” whoever she was) to *Mehrwert*. Thus, when the grunts and groans finally came, no one seemed to be particularly disturbed, Lacan even smiled approvingly as if he had expected such banter as a greeting, if not feared something more offensive. The squeals were quickly switched off and he resumed his talk. Needless to say, the following week, I came on time to the salle Dussane and added my microphone to the others. Little did I know then that I was following a general trend that in a matter of months would bring most of the May 68 generation, all those political baby boomers who had fought their war on the barricades, to Lacanian seminars, reading groups, and couches. Lacan's voice, his exaggerated posturing, his outrageous rhetoric that was not above obscenities or risqué jokes, all this connects him in my mind with the old leader who had been rejected by the young, who after a period of intense doubt had survived the political tempest before deciding it was time to retire. Particularly when seen with the benefit of hindsight, Lacan's life shows many parallels with that of de Gaulle, although his reliance on the “young guard” in the movement he had created means that he may be seen as the anti-de Gaulle of psychoanalysis.

### Founders of discursivity

At the second meeting of the seminar, Lacan commented on the political upheaval of the previous spring. Assessing the May “events,” he said that what had taken place was a *prise de parole* (speaking out) – even though no Bastille had been “taken.” What was at stake when the students “took” the streets was Truth, a truth that might be uttered collectively. But, he insisted, Truth only speaks through the staged prosopopeia of fiction (Lacan would mime this trope by saying “The Truth has said: ‘I speak’” on a number of occasions). Because the truth can never be completely accessible, the students of May 68 had wanted to stage a “strike of truth” and expose the way social truth is produced. Lacan remained skeptical and cynical, telling the young audience (he noted that those who were twenty-four understood him better than their elders) that they, too, would soon participate in the reproduction of academic knowledge, knowledge that was fast turning into a commodity. A few meetings later, Lacan saluted the new year with some flourish – as he said, “69” was a much better number than “68” – by calling attention to an article penned by a professor of linguistics, Georges Mounin, who had

published in the *Nouvelle revue française* a critical examination of Lacan's own style.

This short essay is worth examining because, despite barbs and snide put-downs from an expert in linguistic theory (on the whole, Lacan is accused of not having understood Saussure's theories), it hit home in some cases. The article, entitled "Some features of Jacques Lacan's style,"<sup>1</sup> justifies its decision to approach Lacan via linguistic and rhetorical analysis by quoting Lacan's equation of "style" with "personality." It seemed therefore legitimate to analyze Lacan's deviations from standard usage and to infer from these a whole method. To describe what had already often been called Lacan's "mannerism," a labyrinthine syntax that its author had preemptively defended as "Gongorism," a poetic manner that would force his readers to be attentive while immersing them in the fluid equivocations of unconscious discourse, Mounin listed a number of oddities in the psychoanalyst's use of vocabulary and syntax. He began with French prepositions like *à*, *de*, and *pour* that were used quite idiosyncratically: Lacan would systematically replace the usual "because," *parce que* by the ambiguous *de ce que* or, as often, *pour ce que*. For a long time, even after his death, one could immediately spot a Lacanian by a peculiar use of *sauf à* followed by the infinitive instead of *sauf si* followed by a conjugated verb to mean "except if . . .," and also by the use of the verb *pointer* instead of *désigner* to mean "to point," "to point out," and "to refer to." In his wish to modalize at any cost, Lacan relished syntactic periphrases like *pour autant que* (meaning "in so far as," "in as much as") often reduced to ambiguous phrases like *à ce que* or *de ce que*.

On the whole, Lacan, so Mounin continued, loved nothing more than obscure archaisms, poetic inversions, or unusual turns of phrase borrowed either from German or Latin. Guessing wrongly that these deviations were due to early bilingualism, and naming Mallarmé as an obvious literary model (like Lacan's, Mallarmé's idiosyncratic style owed nothing to a family's bilingualism but a great deal to a lifetime of reading the works of German and English writers), Mounin observed a dramatic increase in the frequency of these circumlocutions; for him, the 1966 preface to *Écrits* verged on self-parody. Mounin wished to take seriously not only the meaning but the baroque language of one of Lacan's most important and programmatic essays, "The Freudian Thing," subtitled "or the meaning of the return to Freud in psychoanalysis," a highly rhetorical text delivered in Vienna in 1955 and published in 1956. In this lecture, we discover not only a three-page-long speech in which Truth speaks in person but also a highly wrought conclusion finishing on a paragraph that conceals in dense prose a submerged quatrain in classical rhyming alexandrines:



Actéon trop coupable à courre la déesse,  
proie où se prend, veneur, l'ombre que tu deviens,  
laisse la meute aller sans que ton pas se presse,  
Diane à ce qu'ils vaudront reconnaîtra les chiens . . .  
(E, p. 436)<sup>2</sup>

Mounin's worry seemed justified, even inevitable: was Lacan a frustrated poet, a post-Heideggerian thinker progressing by opaque epigrams, a psychoanalyst wishing to revolutionize a whole field of knowledge, or just a charlatan?

To be honest, Mounin was contrasting what he saw as the excessive theatricality of a fustian style suggesting the image of a hamming buffoon with what he knew of Lacan's personal openness, professional rigor, and availability. Such a style was above all meant to provoke and thus forced commentators to be as excessive as the persona they saw looming behind. In Mounin's outline, the flaunting of style as style underpinned a program summed up by three main claims: a claim to science, since Lacan was transforming Freud's thinking into an algebraic system (Mounin wondered whether mathematical or logical models were only metaphors); a claim to philosophy, whether post-Hegelian or neo-Marxist – Mounin pointed to the recurrent but inconsistent use of the term “dialectic”; and a claim to a new systemic rigor in the discourse of psychoanalysis thanks to the importation of the main concepts of linguistics – and this was what Mounin, anxious about his own field, lambasted. Not only had Lacan misunderstood Saussure's concept of the sign, but he unduly privileged the signifier and collapsed it with the symptom through what Mounin thought was a submerged pun on “significant” (any symptom was thought to be *significatif*, hence *signifiant*). Mounin showed how late Lacan had come to structuralist linguistics, only to embrace it with the blind fervor of a neophyte who distorts what he has not assimilated fully. The Parthian shaft came at the end when Mounin deplored the fact that Lacan's influence on young philosophers of the Ecole normale supérieure had been condoned or encouraged by their institution. According to him, because of Lacan's undue prestige, ten or fifteen years of solid foundational research in linguistics had been wasted. The last remark was to have repercussions, for indeed, at the end of the spring of 1969, Lacan's seminar was canceled. Flacelière, the new director of the Ecole normale supérieure, had declared him *persona non grata*. The last session of the seminar was devoted to scathing political remarks denouncing the director's double game, which led to a chaotic sit-in in his office, a fitting emblem of Lacan's conflicted relations with almost all official institutions. Lacan, following more in the steps of Chairman Mao, who repeatedly used the younger generations as a

weapon against the old guard, than in those of de Gaulle, who had haughtily dismissed France as ungovernable, was no doubt starting his own cultural revolution.

Lacan's revolution was waged more in the name of Freud than of Marx, however, although Lacan strove for a while to reach a synthesis of Marx and Freud after he trumpeted his "return to Freud" at the beginning of the 1950s. Typically, when he mentioned Mounin's essay in public, Lacan did not try to defend or explain himself. He jokingly reminisced that he had started his career by writing about the problem of style<sup>3</sup> and should re-read his own text to be enlightened. He dismissed the whole article and kept his equanimity; however, there was one remark that hit a raw nerve. Mounin wrote: "Let us savor the tranquil Bretonian majesty [*la majesté tranquille bretonnienne*, referring to André Breton] with which Lacan says: Freud and I" (*SJL*, p. 87). There he was not quoting Lacan but summing up the gist of a page of "Science and Truth" in *Ecrits*, a theoretical tract read to the same students – no doubt the source of Mounin's critical remark about Lacan's negative influence on the *normaliens*, the students of the Ecole normale supérieure. In his text, Lacan sounds even more pretentious: he not only claims that he alone "tells the truth about Freud, who lets truth speak under the name of the unconscious," but adds his name just after that of Freud as those of the true founders of psychoanalysis: "But there is no other truth about the truth on this most vivid point than proper names, the name of Freud or mine . . ." (*E*, p. 868). Mounin had been rather sarcastic when he was inciting his readers to open *Ecrits* and see in a passage taken out of its context another symptom of Lacan's indurate grandiosity.

Lacan debunked Mounin's reproach as coming from an envious rival, someone who would object: "Well, that guy doesn't take himself for nobody!" Then he wondered why Mounin, who had confessed in the article that he did not understand Freud or care for him in the least, should show such an exaggerated respect for the founder of psychoanalysis. To convey his point more strongly, Lacan quoted a story he had narrated earlier, during the first seminar he had given at the Ecole normale supérieure in March 1964, the famous anecdote of the tin can floating on water. In 1964, Lacan had engaged in a digression about the difference between the eye and the gaze, a new conceptual couple that had been suggested to him by the publication of Merleau-Ponty's posthumous book, *The Visible and the Invisible*. To provide a personal illustration, he evoked a vignette, the story of an outing in a boat when, as a young man, he had accompanied a group of fishermen. One of them pointed to an empty sardine can floating in the water, glittering in the sun. Then he said to Lacan, "You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" and burst out laughing (*S XI*, p. 95). Lacan, quite aware that the

fisherman's jibe implied that he, the bourgeois tourist, was the odd man out among a group of active workers, added that, to be more precise, even if the can did not see him (*voir*), it was in fact gazing at him (*regarder*) all the time. The sardine can condensed the light without which we cannot see anything, while allegorizing the idea of an Other gaze looking at us when, because we just see objects in our field of perception, we do not pay attention to the gaze that frames them and us from outside.

In January 1969, by a bold reworking of the allegory, the sardine can encapsulated Freud's gaze, for Lacan offered the following as a retort to Mounin: "The relation between this anecdote and 'Freud and I' leaves the question open of where I place myself in this couple. Well then be reassured, I place myself always in the same place, in the place where I was, and where I still remain, alive. Freud does not need to see me (*me voir*) in order to gaze at me (*me regarder*)."<sup>4</sup> Lacan was not simply asserting that Freud was dead while he was alive, which would have been an inelegant triviality. "Alive" in this context implies keeping something alive within a tradition that is in danger of becoming mummified. It is against this risk that Lacan constantly evoked the living "experience" of psychoanalysis. And what is it that is being kept alive? Speech, language, the medium without which psychoanalysis does not exist, a medium that has to be understood by splicing together Freud's insights and those of linguistics. Being alive in a world whose epistemologies have changed, Lacan "sees" new things by elaborating new concepts like *objet a* (this is the object as defined by psychoanalysis, as in "object of fantasy" or "object of desire"). However, this could only succeed if one acknowledged that the field had been opened by another whose gaze and signature should not be elided. The name of an Other who had, above all, written texts is the name of an Author to whom Lacan vowed to return constantly but not slavishly. He could see and speak truly because Freud was still "regarding" him.

A month and half later, a different event in Paris allowed Lacan to probe deeper his link to Freud. On 22 February 1969, Michel Foucault gave his influential lecture "What is an Author?" at the Collège de France. Lacan heard it with interest and took part in the general debate that followed. He then referred to it at some length in his seminar four days later. In a typical burst of *que* and *de*, Lacan evoked his *Seminar on Ethics*, a seminar whose publication he had considered although it was postponed until after his death. In his talk, Lacan quoted phrases used by Foucault, such as "the Freud event" and "the Author function,"<sup>5</sup> as he summed up his discussion with the philosopher. Such terms derive from Foucault's masterful mapping of authority. Foucault was trying to distinguish his position, a position rather close to new historicism, from that of critics like Roland Barthes, who had argued in

1968 that authors were “dead” since they only played the part of bourgeois owners of meaning. Without acknowledging any individual author’s right to the ownership of meaning, Foucault explains that it is necessary for certain names to serve as points of reference, thus defining the Author function, particularly when dealing with “inventors of discursivity” or “initiators of discursive practices,” among whom Freud and Marx figure preeminently.<sup>6</sup> Foucault, who as early as 1962 evinced some familiarity with Lacan’s theses,<sup>7</sup> is clearly alluding to Lacan when he states that it is “inevitable that practitioners of such discourses must ‘return to the origin’” (*LCP*, p. 134). Foucault explains that recourse to foundational texts does not simply indicate inadequacies or gaps but transforms the discursive practice governing a whole field: “A study of Galileo’s works could alter our knowledge of the history, but not the science, of mechanics; whereas a re-examination of the books of Freud or Marx can transform our understanding of psychoanalysis or Marxism” (*LCP*, pp. 137–8). In his seminar, Lacan states with some pride that “no individual alive today has contributed more than I to the idea of the ‘return to,’ particularly in the context of Freud.”<sup>8</sup> However, he does not engage with an argument made more trenchant by Foucault’s keen epistemological assessment: if Marxism and psychoanalysis do not have the status of hard sciences, it is because they are still in debt to the texts of a founder, a founder who left a legacy of future strategies that are both marked by future resemblances and future differences:

They [Marx and Freud] cleared a space for the introduction of elements other than their own, which, nevertheless, remain within the field of discourse they initiated. In saying that Freud founded psychoanalysis, we do not simply mean that the concept of libido or the technique of dream analysis reappear in the writings of Karl Abrahams or Melanie Klein, but that he made possible a certain number of differences with respect to his books, concepts, and hypotheses, which all arise out of psychoanalytic discourse. (*LCP*, p. 132)

Unlike scientific inventors, the “founders of discursivity” cannot be accused of error – Foucault even writes that “there are no ‘false’ statements in the work of these initiators” (*LCP*, p. 134) – but precisely for this reason their theories demand a constant reactivation; they are productive because of the many “constructive omissions” that demand endless returns to the origin. Such an origin is not defined by truth procedures or verification; on the contrary it is porous, full of gaps and holes: the return “is always a return to a text in itself; specifically, to a primary and unadorned text with particular attention to those things registered in the interstices of the text, its gaps and absences. We return to those empty spaces that have been masked by omission or concealed in a false and misleading plenitude” (*LCP*, p. 135).

Foucault makes it clear that the “return to” does not entail respectful imitation but a type of reading that is also a rewriting. Much as Althusser was wondering how one could read Marx “symptomatically,” that is, by separating what is really “Marxist” and what is merely “Hegelian” in his writings, Lacan wonders where and how Freud may be said to be properly “Freudian.” The issue is thus not that of a greater or lesser fidelity to Freud. It is the critical diagnosis of a loss of vitality, a weakening of the original “cutting edge” of a discourse and practice. Thus it is no surprise to see Lacan comment on his own return to Freud in the recapitulative introduction he wrote for a number of early texts on psychoanalysis in the 1966 edition of *Ecrits* by saying that this meant his taking Freud “against the grain” or “in reverse”: “an inverted reawakening [*reprise par l'envers*] of the Freudian project characterized our own” (*E*, p. 68). This is to be found in “Of our antecedents,” a preface to canonical Lacanian texts such as “The mirror stage.” Some ten years earlier, when presenting Freud’s work to a Viennese audience in the essay on “The Freudian Thing” quoted above, Lacan complains about the failure of Austria to honor the revolutionary discoverer of psychoanalysis. Given the betrayal of the founder by his own disciples, any “return to” will have to function as a “reversal”: he denounces a “psychoanalytical movement in which things have reached such a state that the *mot d'ordre* of a return to Freud means a reversal.”<sup>9</sup> This is what the back cover of *Ecrits* dramatizes as a drawn-out struggle between “obscurantism” or “prejudice” and a new “dawn” or “enlightenment”: “No surprise, then, that one should resist, still now, Freud’s discovery – a phrase that can be extended by amphibology: the discovery of Freud by Jacques Lacan.” What this suggests is that the exploitation of the ambiguity between a subjective and an objective genitive leads to the redoubling of Foucault’s paradox: if there has been a Freudian discovery, it has been forgotten, and one needs the rediscovery of the discovery; thus Lacan is not simply pointing to Freud as too soon forgotten by the International Association of Psychoanalysts (whose faulty memory is an equivalent of the murder of the father). If we want to understand Freud’s discovery we must grasp how the discovery of the unconscious, of the signifier, of an Other place for desire could have been rediscovered by Jacques Lacan.

### Freud’s discovery by Lacan

Unlike Freud, Lacan was never a self-conscious “author,” although like Freud he knew the difference between “a book by . . .” and “a book from . . .” an author. In a passage of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud mentions a fragment of a dream he had forgotten. In that fragment, Freud spoke in English, saying of one of Schiller’s works, “*It is from . . .*,” then noticing

the mistake and correcting it to: “*It is by . . .*” (SE 5, p. 456 and p. 519). This dream of books, travels, and defecation (Freud links texts with titles such as Clerk-Maxwell’s *Matter and Motion* with literary glory but also anal excretion) called the “Hollthurn dream” is analyzed in two passages of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and shows how crucial the publication of books and their related claims to authority were for Freud. In another dream, Freud mentions lending a novel by Rider Haggard to a female friend who wants to read some of Freud’s books instead. He replies simply: “. . . my own immortal works have not yet been written” (SE, 5, p. 453). That same dream had presented the rather horrific picture of his lower body open by dissection and showing tangled viscera but also silver paper, containing, as he explains, an allusion to a book on the nervous system of fishes (a topic that had interested Freud before his psychoanalytic discoveries). Freud’s imaginary body was partly made up of books, and his discovery of psychoanalysis via dreams and hysteria was based upon a process of self-analysis that required writing as a technique and medium. Besides, we know that he would often tell his patients about his latest findings and urge them to read his papers as they appeared. Whereas we see Freud engaged quite early in the rigorous writing schedule he observed throughout his life even when his fame brought more patients, Lacan always boasted of his teaching and the interactive space of his seminar while dismissing his “writings” as being just that: matter, anal writing – what he repeatedly called *poubellification* (garbage-publishing) for “publication.” Later, he would often quote Joyce’s pun in *Finnegans Wake* on *letter* and *litter*, even using it as a starting point for a meditation on writing.<sup>10</sup> If Lacan’s writings are now available in two dense collections, *Écrits* and *Autres écrits*, totaling some fifteen hundred pages, the seminars make up a larger but more problematic sequence of oral texts partly edited or rewritten. Besides, the kind of interactive performance I have described makes it impossible to produce a definitive version of these seminars. What stands out is that in both his writings and his seminars, Lacan’s style, even when it does not consciously mimic an oral delivery, keeps a strong flavor of oratory. In his Viennese talk, “The Freudian Thing,” Lacan suggests that his writings condense the gist of his doctrine while the seminars present a continuous commentary on Freud. This view turned out to be misleading for, after 1964 and the move to the Ecole normale supérieure, the seminars moved on from Freud and began to probe and develop Lacan’s own concepts. Thus “The Freudian Thing” lauds Freud:

Will I surprise you if I tell you that these texts, to which for the past four years I have devoted a two-hour seminar every Wednesday from November to July, without having covered more than a quarter of the total, if indeed

my commentary presupposes their totality, have given me and those who have attended the seminars the surprise afforded only by genuine discoveries? Discoveries ranging from concepts that have remained unused to clinical details uncovered by our exploration that prove how far the field investigated by Freud extended beyond the avenues that he left us to tend, and how his observations, which at times suggest exhaustiveness, were never enslaved to what he wanted to demonstrate. (E/S, pp. 116–17)<sup>11</sup>

But in what precisely does Freud's discovery consist? If we go back to two texts already quoted, it is clear that Lacan is never reluctant to give his version of the discovery, although his definition varies hugely. On the back cover of the 1966 *Ecrits*, we read that Freud's discovery was that "the unconscious is determined by pure logic, in other words by the signifier." Eleven years earlier, in "The Freudian Thing," a no less memorable statement is provided: "One took to repeating after Freud the word of his discovery: it speaks [*ça parle*], and, no doubt, where it was least expected, namely, where there is pain [*là où ça souffre*]" (E/S, p. 125).<sup>12</sup> An important decade has elapsed, a decade that produced a shift in Lacan, who moved from the pathos of the suffering subject of the unconscious (albeit in a neutral mode, since one may wonder whether it is "it speaks" or "the id speaks") to a logical or linguistic mode of apprehension via the signifier.

Thus it would be wrong to believe that Lacan's discourse in his seminars restricts itself to close readings of Freud's texts, even if most of them, at least in the first decade, do just that, and very well,<sup>13</sup> before boldly exploring the new avenues he mentions – but the gesture is less that of modesty than a wish to be a founder above all, that is, a founder re-discovering the Freudian truth, and much less an author. This is why Lacan constantly foregrounds a practical dimension in his doctrine and always refers to an "analytic experience" that must be taken as the sole foundation for this type of discourse. Such an experience of language, of possible healing by words and silence, locking in a curious duo two persons, each of whom projects ghosts of many others and of the Other, often leaves a simple alternative: either to stress purely clinical issues, or to focus on the politics of new institutions. This does not mean that theory is left lagging behind: all of this is done in the name of theory.

Once more, it was Althusser who perceived keenly the underlying unity of what Lacan had been doing for some time. His position on Lacan had been a mixture of personal resistance to a man he saw captivated by effects of power and seduction, and fascination for a theoretical effort that was never produced in the voids of pure ideas but on the contrary was buttressed by concrete political gestures like foundations, exclusions, dissolutions. In an

illuminating letter to René Diatkine, who had expressed personal reservations against Lacan, Althusser stressed Lacan's historical role: "Lacan's claim and his unique originality in the world of psychoanalysis lie in his being a *theoretician*. Being a theoretician . . . means producing a *general system* of the theoretical concepts, rigorously articulated with each other and capable of accounting for the *total set* of facts and of the field of analytic practice."<sup>14</sup>

When did Lacan become a theoretician, then? Probably as early as 1932 with a thesis that not only flaunted philosophy by quoting Spinoza in Latin in an epigraph culled from *The Ethics* ("Therefore desire in one individual differs from desire in another individual only in so far as the nature or essence of the one differs from the nature or essence of the other"<sup>15</sup>) but also offered a "dogmatic" solution to age-old dilemmas: the third part of the thesis on paranoia presents "dogmatic conclusions" (*PP*, p. 346–9) and dismisses facts that are not based upon a theory ("It is the postulate that creates science and the doctrine facts" [*PP*, p. 308, n. 1]), while praising psychoanalytic knowledge for having discovered the "laws" that determine the links between subjective and objective phenomena (*PP*, p. 248). Lacan not only stood out among his immediate contemporaries and colleagues in psychiatry as a philosopher who could read Greek and German fluently and who put to good use his knowledge of the classics, but also as someone who had the nerve and the ambition to "re-found" a whole field. In that context, one should not forget that Lacan came to Freudian psychoanalysis via French psychiatry even if his doctoral thesis, *Of Paranoid Psychosis in Its Connection with Personality*, does not hesitate to criticize the then dominant psychiatric discourse in France, from Babinski's "pithiatism" (a term that he intended to replace "hysteria") to Janet's notion of automatism. Lacan's thesis undertakes a major shift from French psychiatry to Freudian psychoanalysis, and it is worth taking a closer look at this, his first published book. The thesis has been denigrated as belonging to a pre-Lacanian Lacan, much in the same way as Freud's pre-psychoanalytic works on aphasia, cocaine, and eels are still not included in the *Standard Edition*. Even if it has received some critical attention,<sup>16</sup> it has not been translated into English yet. It nevertheless presents a foundational moment for Lacan's oeuvre despite a few crucial hesitations.

What makes this work distinctive is not simply the rich methodology or the culture deployed but the fact that the central part of the thesis reads like a novel. It rests on a systematic exploration of one case of paranoia. When the woman he called Aimée (quoting a character from one of her novels) was brought to Lacan's attention in June 1931, it was after a dramatic incident: on 10 April 1931, she had attempted to stab a theatrical actress. The



actress was wounded in the hand but did not press charges, as her attacker was clearly insane. Two months later she was brought to Lacan's care at Sainte-Anne and he confirmed the previous diagnosis of paranoid psychosis. After having worked intensively with her for about a year, he refined the diagnosis, downplayed the elements of erotomania and persecution and stressed the "auto-punitive" structure (and to do so, he needed Freud's concepts). Before the crisis, Aimée's erotomaniac delusions had focused on two male figures, the Prince of Wales and Pierre Benoit, a popular novelist, but the latter infatuation was soon directed at the novelist's mistress, the very visible actress Huguette Duflos, who had become a dangerous alter ego for Aimée. Aimée was also a frustrated self-taught writer, whose beautiful texts were confiscated and then amply quoted by Lacan. The two novels Aimée had written in a frenzy of inspiration in the months preceding her assault are summed up and partly transcribed. Lacan provides a diagnosis of a particular type of delirium based partly upon a written archive and his insight into the structure of a personality. What is then a "personality"?

Lacan uses the term "personality" rigorously and criticizes approaches to what he calls a "psychological personality" (*PP*, p. 31). For him, personality must be approached on three levels: as a biographical development (he needed to reconstruct Aimée's story); as the conception one has of oneself, a reflexive measure that is "dialectical" and can be gauged in dialogue, eventually modified and acted on; and finally as a "tension" between social values implying an ethical participation (*PP*, p. 42). Personality implies a dynamic dialogue between social determinations, personal fate, and reflexive revisions. Before giving his definition, Lacan reviews the theories of personality from traditional metaphysics to scientific psychology and then clearly opts for a phenomenological approach: the philosophical references in the thesis (beyond the debt to Spinoza) are mostly to Scheler, Husserl, and Jaspers. He uses "intentionality" not as an intuitive capture of subjective intentions but as a focus on a subject defined as a speaking being: "But one still has to explain the *phenomenological* existence of these intentional functions, like the fact that the subject says 'I,' believes he acts, promises, asserts" (*PP*, p. 39). A footnote mentions the derivation from the Latin *persona*, the mask with a hole to let the voice of the actor resound: even if philologists are divided on this point, Lacan approves "the significant intention" of the etymology (*PP*, p. 34, n. 6). This insight will not be lost, even after the turn to Structuralism. In a long theoretical essay criticizing Daniel Lagache (he read Lagache's work in 1958, wrote the essay in 1960, and published it in 1961), Lacan attacks the latter's "personalism" and fusion of psychology and psychoanalysis. He writes: "We can say that with the *per-sona* the person begins, but what of

the personality? Here an ethics announces itself, hushed into silence not by fear but by desire: the whole question is to know whether the way through babble of psychoanalytic experience will lead us there.” (*E*, p. 684).

Because it forces us to consider issues of social relations and ethics, “personality” cannot be reduced to a vague equivalent of the “self” or the “ego.” Precisely because of this dangerous proximity, Lacan has to distinguish personality from the “ideal image of the ego” – and this is where Freud comes into play for the first time when a footnote refers to “Freudian theories” that have pointed out the partly unconscious mechanisms presiding over the constitution of this image and its links with affective identification (*PP*, p. 39, n. 18). A second footnote sends us to Freud’s *Das Ich und das Es* (1923) when invoking the clash between the *Ich* and *Über-Ich* (both left in German). What is remarkable here is Lacan’s prudence in refusing to translate hastily *Ich* as “ego” (“id” was then translated into French as *soi*, a usage adhered to in the thesis). In addition, Lacan refuses to moralize personality, just wonders what we mean when we say that so-and-so has “personality” (*PP*, p. 41): the term suggests moral autonomy or a sense that a person can make promises that will be held. Often though, under the promises and suggestions of moral autonomy, we discover resistances that arise to oppose a limit to the encroachments of reality (*PP*, p. 41). What is presented as a “phenomenological” analysis of personality in the first part appears in the synthetic third part of the thesis as a thoroughly Freudian theory of the subject, even if the subject or *je* is not yet opposed to the ego. In the last part, Lacan explains that he had been using Freudian categories all along, especially when he was talking of resistance, even if he notes that most moralists, from La Rochefoucauld to Nietzsche, had described this mechanism before (*PP*, p. 320). In fact, what he needs above all is Freud’s notion of the super-ego.

The last and synthetic part of the thesis makes it clear that Lacan’s intention is not to complement Freudian psychoanalysis, which has stayed cautiously within the confines of treatment of neurotics, with a bolder approach to psychosis: his aim is to use what he has learned from the treatment of psychosis to redefine Freud’s topological model of the subject, a model articulating the id, the ego, and the super-ego. Lacan limits his direct borrowings from psychoanalytic doctrine to two “dogmatic postulates”: first, that there is a strict overlapping between genesis and structure in personality; second, that there is a common yardstick by which we can measure the various features composing personality, and which is found in psychic energy, or libido (*PP*, p. 320). These postulates are instrumental in criticizing theories of psychosis based upon a doctrine of innate “constitutions” – as Lacan adds, the only issue that remains in such doctrines is to know when to lock up the patient! (*PP*, p. 308). This is why he can state his reliance on “historical materialism”

(*PP*, p. 309 n. 2), for it is at the social level that the approach to a structure like the difference between neurosis and psychosis and the deluded “idealism” of each person’s self-reflection can cohere (*PP*, p. 314). The “science of personality” combines the intentionality of phenomenology and an account of social forces as they are replayed in the psyche. Aimée is a good example of this social determination: she chose an actress for her crazy attack because she had been caught up in the phenomenon of the “star” (*la vedette*) which provides, as Lacan glosses, a modern form of social participation (*PP*, pp. 317–18). Aimée was an uprooted woman of peasant extraction who had polarized on this fascinating image all her ideals and all her hatred. The actress embodied her *Ich-Ideal*, Freud’s expression with which Lacan will grapple for decades. In the thesis he expresses his dissatisfaction with the Freudian notion of a “narcissistic fixation” often adduced to account for psychosis; he asks: “Is narcissistic *libido* produced by the Ego or the Id?” (*PP*, p. 321). He queries Freud’s hesitations about the exact status of the *Ich*: is the ego purely identified with the function of perceptive consciousness, the *Wahrnehmungsbewusstsein*, or it is “partly unconscious” (*PP*, p. 322)? After having quoted Fenichel, Abraham, and Freud, he concludes this survey on a skeptical note: “In fact, narcissism appears in the economy of psychoanalytic doctrine as a *terra incognita* whose borders have been delimited by investigations born from the study of neuroses but whose interior remains mythical and unknown” (*PP*, p. 322). This maps out the terrain that Lacan would keep on exploring over the next decade via the mirror stage.

Was Freud more timid in accounting for the social factors of his patients’ neuroses? Lacan hints that this is the case, and his diagnosis of a psychosis of self-punishment for Aimée culminates with the global category of the “psychoses of the super-ego.” Thus Aimée’s case ties together three levels, the intentional level rife with the subject’s personal tensions, the structural level determined by the function of the ideal of the ego and the super-ego, and the social level with a dialectic of social alienation and desired ethical participation. And finally it is desire that provides a key to the totality of Aimée’s personality (*PP*, p. 311). Because of the determining factor of desire, personality cannot be reduced to the “ego,” whether as a philosophical or a psychoanalytical concept. But Lacan too seems to hesitate, for in the conclusion to the discussion of Aimée (perhaps in view of all the personal details amassed) he writes that the best approach to the case is via the patient’s resistances and that a “psychoanalysis of the ego” is sounder than a “psychoanalysis of the unconscious” (*PP*, p. 280). This sounds like the dominant Freudian orthodoxy that Lacan would attack in the fifties. However, this was not just a distortion introduced by Freud’s followers; in a late essay like “An outline of psychoanalysis” (1938), Freud had written typically: “The

analytical physician and the weakened ego of the patient, basing themselves upon the real external world, are to combine against the enemies, the instinctual demands of the id and the moral demands of the consciousness of the super-ego" (*SE* 23, p. 173). In the synthetic part of the thesis, however, Lacan stressed both the sadistic function of the super-ego and the fact that the term "personality" allowed him to overcome the individual ego. The "new science" of personality was condensed as "the development of man's intentional functions linked to tensions that are proper to social relations" (*PP*, p. 328). In fact, all these tensions, intentions, and relations pave the way for the realm of what Lacan would start calling the "symbolic system" of culture in the fifties.

In spite of the classical transparency of its language, Lacan's thesis offers some difficulties. It is packed with questions, questions that aim at expanding the Freudian field concerning paranoia and leading to a more precise description of the structure of subjectivity. After the thesis, Lacan continued the discussion of Freudian concepts. As early as 1936, we find an article entitled with some bravura "Beyond the 'reality principle.'" Its sub-title is revealing: "Around this fundamental principle of Freud's doctrine, the second generation of his school can define its debt and its task" (*E*, p. 73). There Lacan opposes the concern for truth (evinced by philosophy) and the concern for reality. A phenomenological stance still dominates, but this time phenomenology yields a different insight: Freud's reverence for reality as a principle leads to the awareness that psychoanalysis only works with language. "The given of this experience is first of all language, a language, that is to say a sign" (*E*, 82). Much later, Mounin will quote this equation ironically, hinting that Lacan did not know much about linguistics. But we are in 1936, and what matters is how he stresses two important notions, all the more important as they are linked: the impact of unconscious knowledge and a concern for language as such.

As Lacan reminisced in "Of our antecedents," the lesson of this conceptual knot was conveyed to him once and for all by Aimée. By "clinical exhaustion," systematically and exhaustively examining one single case, he had reached a "paranoid knowledge" that finally forced him to take creativity into account: "For fidelity to the formal envelope of the symptom – the only true clinical trace we may acknowledge – led us to this limit which turns into pure creativity. In the case of our thesis (the Aimée case), these were literary effects, and with enough merit to have been quoted by Eluard under the (reverential) heading of involuntary poetry."<sup>17</sup> Thus one might say that "Aimée" played for Lacan the role Nadja had played for Breton or Anna O. for Freud and Breuer: a figure of inspiration, a brilliant failure despite extraordinary artistic and linguistic gifts, and finally an allegory of femininity

granting access, without any need of “theory,” to a different truth concerning the unconscious. This is why we need to explore once more Lacan's not so tranquil “Bretonian majesty” when he speaks of “Freud and I.”

### Lacan's paranoid modernity

Mounin's remark about Lacan's “Bretonian” majesty contains an element of truth, less because it denounces Lacan's arrogance or delusion of grandeur than because Breton's notoriously ambivalent attitude to Freud was repeated by the French psychoanalyst some ten years later. Breton had launched Surrealism as a quasi-Freudian movement that trusted the spontaneous dictation of the unconscious, but when, in October 1921, he paid a visit to Freud that should have been a reverent pilgrimage, he was severely disappointed by the meeting. “Interview with Professor Freud” (1922) describes Freud pitilessly as “an old man without elegance” whose shabby consulting room is worthy of an impoverished local generalist. The Viennese MD stubbornly refuses to engage in meaningful dialogue and hides behind polite generalities. He concludes tongue-in-cheek by quoting Freud's tepid endorsement: “Happily, we do count a lot upon the young.”<sup>18</sup> This painful sense of a discrepancy between Freud the man and Freudian ideas, or between the inventor of psychoanalysis caught in all his human and social limitations and the empowering invention of psychoanalysis itself was to mark the attitude of the French intelligentsia in the following years.

Thus Breton's second *Manifesto of Surrealism* (December 1929) quotes Freud rather distantly and with critical asides about the term of “sublimation,” while reasserting that a dose of dialectical materialism would do wonders for Freud. As we have noted, in his thesis Lacan had saluted dialectical materialism as a way of avoiding both spiritualism and “mechanistic materialism” or any behaviorism (*PP*, p. 309, n. 2). Moreover, for Breton, Freud was suspected of lending arguments to what he saw as Georges Bataille's “non-dialectical” materialism. In this ideological conflict, Dalí's theory of paranoia emerged as a new watershed in Surrealist groups. Dalí had been the object of a tug of war between Bataille and Breton; Bataille initially took to Dalí and wrote a passionate article on the 1929 painting called “The Lugubrious Game.” In his commentary, Bataille interpreted the painting as representing castration and emasculation; he saw a sign of this in the way one male figure is portrayed in breeches stained with excrement. Immediately Dalí refused permission to reproduce the painting, and then attacked Bataille in “The rotting donkey” (July 1930) for his “senile” ideas. As Dalí wrote, Bataille's mistake derived from an incorrect interpretation of Freud, a “gratuitous use of modern psychology.”<sup>19</sup> All this brought grist to the

mill of what appeared as Dalí's object, the definition of his paranoid-critical method. Aligning himself with Breton's Second Manifesto, Dalí explained that next to going into the street with a revolver and shooting people at random (as Breton said, this was the purest Surrealist act), his proselytizing activity aimed at propagating the "violently paranoid will to systematize confusion" (*OU*, p. 110). Anticipating Lacan, Dalí adds that since Freudian ideas have been watered down he means to use paranoia to give them back their "rabid and dazzling clarity." He then launches into a description of the method he has devised to see reality differently, a method that took its bearings in paranoia:

The particular perspicacity of attention in the paranoiac state must be insisted upon; paranoia being recognized, moreover, by all psychologists as a form of mental illness which consists in organizing reality in such a way as to utilize it to control an imaginative construction . . . Recently, through a decidedly paranoiac process, I obtained an image of a woman whose position, shadow and morphology, without altering or deforming anything of her real appearance, are also, at the same time, those of a horse. (*OU*, p. 112)

This passage leads to a new method for the avant-garde and provides a new foundation for Rimbaud's program of a "systematic deregulating of all senses" leading to the automatic production of spontaneous hallucination and the multiplication of delirious sign-systems. In "The rotting donkey," Dalí pushes his thesis further by collapsing conventional systems of representation and paranoid delirium. The woman who is at the same time a horse and a lion forces us to conclude that "our images of reality themselves depend upon the degree of our paranoid faculty" (*OU*, pp. 116–17). If paranoia opens a door into other kinds of visual perception, it also turns into a principle that replaces any idea of the material world by simple hallucination – a view leading to Lacan's later distinction between reality and the real. Here reality is just a type of simulacrum. This might be why Dalí had chosen Breton's rather than Bataille's camp. Both criticize Freud's dualism while rewriting his insights in a monist discourse stressing either the materiality of the body leading to excess, waste, and excrement (Bataille), or a series of simulacra underpinned by a universal and productive desire (Breton). Bataille appears stuck in "vulgar materialism" while Breton tends to stress the creative imagination. In this context, Lacan's relationships with Bataille and Breton appear loaded with transference and counter-transference, from his marriage to Bataille's estranged wife, Sylvia, up to a much later stress on *jouissance*, a notion that translates Bataille's concepts of waste, expenditure, erotic excess, and transgression.

Dalí's ideas gave a jolt to Lacan, who chanced upon them just as he was working on his doctoral dissertation. Elisabeth Roudinesco thinks that it was the impact of Dalí's "The rotting donkey" that allowed Lacan to break with classical psychiatric theories and revisit Freudian meta-psychology with a new agenda.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, at the time of his thesis, Lacan was translating Freud's article on "Certain neurotic mechanisms in jealousy, paranoia and homosexuality," a text in which Freud restates the theory underlying his main analysis of paranoia, that is the Schreber case: for him, the creation of a paranoid system of delusions aims at allowing the return of a repressed homosexuality. Freud mentions a case of jealous delirium in a heterosexual patient, noting how delusional attacks would follow successful sexual relations in the couple; by inventing imaginary male lovers and creating delirious recriminations, the husband projected his own desire for men. This theory is clearly not the route followed by either Dalí or Lacan in the early thirties. Lacan already relied on an analysis of the signifier. It was also at that time that he co-authored "Inspired writings" (1931), an essay analyzing the psychotic ramblings of a young teacher who had been hospitalized at Sainte-Anne. The stylistic analysis of the grammar of mad utterances acknowledges Surrealism. The authors quote Breton's first *Manifesto of Surrealism* and look for a model of interpretation in Breton's and Eluard's imitations of different types of delirium in *The Immaculate Conception* (1930).<sup>21</sup>

Thus, quite logically, the Surrealists were the first to greet the thesis with exuberant praise: Crevel's 1933 "Notes toward a psycho-dialectic"<sup>22</sup> expressed the hope that Lacan's work would provide a new foundation for psychoanalysis at a time when Freud appeared reactionary, idealistic, or pusillanimous. It was not only that Lacan dared to treat psychosis but also that his work was firmly grounded in the social world. In spite of himself, Lacan was thus enlisted in the cause of a Surrealist Freud-Marxism. But as Dalí later insisted,<sup>23</sup> Crevel's suicide in 1935, partly brought about by his inability to reconcile Surrealism, psychoanalysis, and communism, was one of the bad omens that announced the demise of the movement. It may not have helped that Dalí was investing more and more paranoiac activity into fantasies about Hitler on the one hand and high fashion on the other. Conversely, Lacan had already taken some distance from Surrealism and from left-wing politics; he only elaborated his own version of Freud-Marxism in the late sixties.

If Lacan's theory of paranoia has little to do with Dalí's concept of a beautifully multiple hallucination,<sup>24</sup> it does leave room for artistic creation, since, as we saw, Aimée was a gifted writer looking for recognition from the press and novelists. The Aimée case forced him to make inroads into mirrored

doubles and the release of aggression they elicit in paranoids. This would soon provide a bridge to the construction of the alter-ego as a dangerous rival and the need for fabricating delirious paternity systems that resemble the symbolic. Above all, thanks to the convergence of interests between Bataille, Dalí, Breton, Eluard, Crevel, and Lacan, the second decade of Surrealism was dominated by the concept of paranoia exactly as the first had been by automatism and hysteria. Breton's comprehensive memoir *Mad Love* (1937) affirms his belief in desire as the main spring of all our dreams and actions but also leaves room for paranoia. Desire is not just unleashed by hysteria in a distorted pastiche of artistic creation but it is structured like paranoia – that is, it produces knowledge. Close to the end, Breton uses Freud's *A Childhood Memory of Leonardo da Vinci* to expound the principle of paranoid criticism. Even if the vision of a vulture hidden in the Virgin's dress was only Pfister's hallucination and not the direct product of Freud's meditations, once an interpretation has produced a new image in a previous one, it remains there, hovering between objectivity and subjectivity.<sup>25</sup> What Leonardo had stumbled upon was the "objective chance" in which any artist or person will learn to read the half-erased letters of a text written by desire. Breton continues his musings:

The purely visual exercise of this faculty which has at times been called "paranoiac" allows us to conclude that if a single spot on a wall or elsewhere will almost always be interpreted differently by different individuals acted upon by distinct desires, this does not imply that one will not manage to make the other see what he has perceived.<sup>26</sup>

Even when Polonius humors Hamlet's feigned madness by agreeing to see a whale in the clouds, his calculated acceptance suggests the possibility of a verbal communication. Breton's view of paranoia is weaker than Lacan's because, unlike Lacan, he does not try to think systematically but magically; he avoids Spinozist "essences" that provide Lacan with a firmer conceptual grid, since these essences are not substances but the relations provided by language. Paranoia creates a system of signs that function as "images" or pure signifiers before being held accountable to so-called objective truth. Thus they betray the creative function of desire that underpins their production. Such a desire can lead to murderous attacks, at times with the objective of putting oneself under the domination of the sadistic super-ego through an expected punishment but also with a view of getting rid of an idealized image of oneself projected in another person.

Lacan's first deliberate critique of Freudian logic came much later with the *Seminar on Hamlet*, but it is based on insights provided by Aimée. Freud's main argument about the Oedipal structure of Hamlet's desire (Hamlet