

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

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

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

Lacan's turn to Freud

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

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

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,"¹ 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:

Lacan's turn to Freud

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)²

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

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

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 style³ 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 tranquillement 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

Lacan's turn to Freud

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*)."⁴ 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,"⁵ 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

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

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.⁶ Foucault, who as early as 1962 evinced some familiarity with Lacan’s theses,⁷ 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.”⁸ 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).

Lacan's turn to Freud

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 *Écrits* 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.”⁹ This is what the back cover of *Écrits* 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

JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ

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.¹⁰ 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