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978-0-521-37770-6 - Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan's Dislocation of Psychoanalysis

Samuel Weber

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This book provides an introduction to the thought of Jacques Lacan. Samuel Weber approaches his subject from a dual perspective: he reads Lacan in the light of Freud (whose work Lacan is concerned to interpret); and from the perspective of structuralism, above all that of Saussure, from whom Lacan borrows and develops a distinctive conception of language as "signifier." Through his use of the category of the signifier, Lacan dislocates the traditional understanding of the "Unconscious," thereby revealing it to be *linguistic*, and not psychological, in essence. Lacan is thus shown to contribute crucially to the rethinking of *subjectivity* that marks much of contemporary literary theory.

What Samuel Weber calls Lacan's "return to Freud" – the complex relationship between his work and its Freudian antecedents – is explored extensively in the context of Saussure, Jakobson, and structural linguistics generally.

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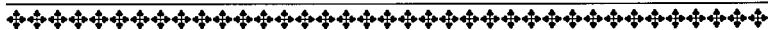
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Samuel Weber's *Return to Freud* is the opening title in a new Cambridge series. *Literature, Culture, Theory* is dedicated to theoretical studies in the human sciences that have literature and culture as their object of enquiry. Acknowledging the contemporary expansion of cultural studies and the redefinitions of literature that this has entailed, the series includes not only original works of literary theory but also monographs and essay collections on topics and seminal figures from the long history of theoretical speculation on the arts and human communication generally. The concept of theory embraced in the series is broad, including not only the classical disciplines of poetics and rhetoric, but also those of aesthetics, linguistics, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and other cognate sciences that have inflected the systematic study of literature during the past half century.

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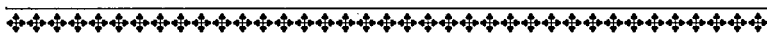
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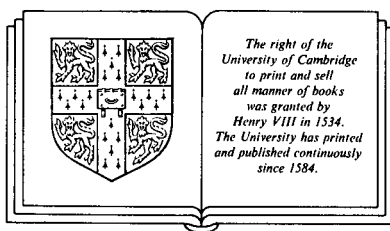
Jacques Lacan's dislocation of psychoanalysis



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In memory of
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Preface



This book has had a rather curious history. It was initially conceived not as a book at all, but as notes for lectures held at the Free University of West Berlin in the early seventies. At that time, there was very little material of or on Lacan available in German, and consequently the lectures I held were designed to serve as a general introduction to the *Ecrits*, which had been published in French some years earlier. The most salient characteristic of these scripts was, and doubtless remains, their pedagogical aspect: they constitute an attempt to delineate the contours of what at the time, at least, was – and for many, still is – a tantalizingly enigmatic rereading of Freudian psychoanalysis. As is often the case when a work emerging from one intellectual field – in this instance, that marked by French Structuralism – is transposed to a different linguistic and cultural area, the contextual underpinnings tend to disappear. This explains why so much of the book is devoted to reconstituting the Saussurean conception of language, which at the time was little known in German, outside of specialized linguistic circles.

In this respect, the situation has changed since then, in Germany no less than in the English-speaking world. And yet, such changes are not as simple or as straightforward as one might suppose. Freud's remarks about repression hold for these changes as well: they do not take place once and for all, but rather must be renewed constantly in order to remain effective. What often happens, by contrast, is that what we call "proper" names begin to circulate widely, suggesting a sort of permanence or at least durability. But these names, far from rendering what they name accessible, function as *screens*, isolating rather than simply repressing, by seemingly arresting the movement of signification. This can be a powerful means of justifying the

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familiar. Indeed, if culture, as Emerson remarks, consists in the number of things that can be taken for granted, the currency of such proper names is both an index of and a factor in the formation and stabilization of culture. In this sense, "Lacan" has become an integral part of our culture.

The notion of language that underlies the writings attached to that name, however, moves in a very different way, and this difference may well explain both the fascination and the resistance it has elicited. To open the questions of naming and predication as problematic processes of signification is to call attention to the irreducible alterity that inhabits language and that renders it so uncanny: all too familiar in its very strangeness. This sort of move can only undercut the desire for clear-cut relations and decisions that is a particularly conspicuous feature of North American society.

In the face of insistent efforts to foreclose such questions, it may still be useful, even today, to retain the notion of "Poststructuralism." If Structuralism can be described as the rediscovery of language as a semiotic system of binary relations, Poststructuralism marks the delimitation of that semiotics in the wake of the system. What emerges is a movement of marks and traits, of differences and deferrals, that can no longer be contained or comprehended in the oppositional categories that constitute the system, as such and in general.

The writings of Lacan, together with those of Derrida, remain, today perhaps more than ever, two of the most powerful forces working to keep the alterity of language from being isolated and foreclosed. The efficacy of these texts, however, is never indifferent to the singular idiom – and not just to the particular language – in which they are articulated. Whence the risk, but also the challenge of a book like this one. The difficulty in whose shadow it is inscribed is not just that of translating a difficult text from one language to another, but even more, of *rendering a sense of signifying movement* that is irreducible to conceptual discourse. And yet, reduced it must be by a style informed, *grosso modo*, by the conventional rules and norms of academic discourse. The ineluctability of this reduction undoubtedly constitutes the most serious internal limitation of this kind of undertaking.

It is not, to be sure, its only limitation. To avoid confusion,

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however, it should be kept in mind that the subject-matter of this book, to which the name "Lacan" refers, consists primarily of the writings published in 1966 and entitled, simply, *Ecrits*. In short, the name "Lacan" in this book could be described as a synecdoche, were there a "whole" of which the *Ecrits* could be considered a part. Although it is a matter of record that much significant material was written and published under the name "Lacan" since this text was written, the question of whether it can be considered to form a whole remains entirely open. For my part, I doubt that it can be assembled into anything like a system without the most incisive and pathbreaking aspects of Lacan's "return to Freud" being lost in the process.

Although the texts discussed in the following pages comprise a relatively small portion of Lacan's published work, their discussion can perhaps still help readers to *make their ways* in(to) the *Ecrits*, which remain the most densely charged laboratory of the Lacanian experiment. Contrary to the laboratories of experimental science, however, the walls of Lacan's laboratory are as unstable as the margins of a text: not entirely inchoate, to be sure, but also never completely under control. It is this instability that distinguishes what Lacan calls "l'expérience psychanalytique" – a phrase which *also* means psychoanalytical *experiment* – from its scientific homonym. To make one's way under conditions that can never be entirely controlled is part of what constitutes psychoanalytic truth. To learn how to read Lacan involves making one's way in this sense. The pace of such *reading* is laborious, if also often exhilarating; it has little in common with the rush to judgment that often goes by the same name.

If this book itself is now able to contribute to such reading, it is as a result of the efforts and dedication of Michael Levine, who initiated and undertook the arduous and thankless task of translation. Bruce Fink provided invaluable assistance in revising the manuscript, as did Don Eric Levine. In going over the English text, I have made certain modifications, not so much to the translation, as to the initial German version. Since the two final chapters were written after the book's German publication, they are placed in an Appendix. Both appear here for the first time in English. The result is a considerably revised and expanded English text. A new German edition, published by

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Passagen Verlag (Vienna, 1990), contains certain essays that have not been translated into English.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of the person who introduced me, as he did many others, to the work of Lacan, with an unforgettable vivacity and enthusiasm: to Eugenio Donato. His absence is keenly felt by those fortunate enough to have studied and worked with him.

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Translator's introduction

Accentuating *Ent-stellung*

Samuel Weber's *Return to Freud*, which appears here in English translation for the first time, has for some time had the status in German intellectual circles of what they call a *Geheimtip*, a hot piece of information circulating semi-privately through unofficial channels. Between its short-lived distribution by Ullstein (1978) and its re-publication by Passagen Verlag (1990) copies of this insider's guide to Lacan have passed from hand to hand and have been much xeroxed throughout the Federal Republic's university towns and "alternative scenes." No less popular than the book itself in these circles is the story often accompanying it about its author, a young American writing with ease and rigor in German about a notoriously impenetrable Frenchman. While it is certainly no exaggeration to say that Samuel Weber is someone who is very much at home in these languages, a more accurate description might compare him to the convalescent of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* – that is, to someone perpetually *on his way home*.¹ Indeed, in many ways the text which follows traces the itinerary of this "return."

As the reader will have noticed, Weber's *Return* is itself already a quotation, already a repetition of another "return," and of another's "return to Freud." Moreover, if one reads the subtitle of the text as a gloss on this quotation, it becomes clear that this itinerary is not simply a return home, a return to a proper name, or a return to the authenticity of an original, but is instead a movement of dislocation. In order to follow this movement we should recall how Freud instructed his followers

¹ See Martin Heidegger, "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" in *The New Nietzsche*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985, pp. 64–79.

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to listen a little differently, to displace accents, and to hear as though with the ears of a foreigner, while Lacan's advice to future analysts was to "do crossword puzzles." If Weber's text may be said to heed the call of a "return to Freud," it also seems to transfer that call in its own peculiar manner, for it is itself a practical lesson in the cultivation of foreign accents and unusual ways of listening. In short, his repetition of Lacan's return to Freud is an act of transference and translation that only familiarizes foreign audiences with the language of psychoanalysis in general and with Lacan's French in particular to the extent that it alienates the reader from his or her "own" language.²

While the signs of this kind of defamiliarization are present throughout Weber's text, they are most immediately and paradigmatically evident in the subtitle of the German edition, which describes what has been translated here as "Jacques Lacan's *dislocation* of psychoanalysis" as a process of *Ent-stellung*. On the simplest level Weber's strategic hyphenation of this term has the effect of drawing attention to the signifying matter, which, instead of making itself transparent as it conveys a particular meaning, becomes somewhat opaque like a piece of stained or faceted glass. Thus, in the most basic way the reader is invited to look *at* rather than *through* the linguistic surface.

It is also significant that this invitation to attend to the signifying surface is only *silently* extended; that is, a shift in focus is effected exclusively via the strategic deployment of a written punctuation mark. A mere change in spacing draws attention to the spatial, graphic, and literal dimension of the text, a gesture which also prefigures Weber's approach to the vexed question of the relationship of speech and writing, spirit and letter in Lacan.³ The hyphenation of *Ent-stellung* prompts the reader not only to view this signifier in terms of its concrete, visual, and graphic aspects – what might be called the materiality of the letter – but also to take it literally, *à la lettre*, (or in German *buchstäblich*).

While such hyphenations have in recent years become an all too familiar tic of critical writing, this particular "literalization"

² See Walter Benjamin, "The task of the translator," in *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken, 1969, pp. 69–82.

³ See chapter 4 on "The rise and fall of the signifier."

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of a term seems to reflect the spirit of Freud's own very literal understanding of *Entstellung*. Whereas this term is usually translated as "distortion," Freud comments in *Moses and Monotheism* how

one could wish to give the word . . . the double meaning to which it has a right, although it is no longer used in this sense. It should mean not only "to change the appearance of," but also "to wrench apart," "to put in another place." That is why in so many textual distortions we may count on finding the suppressed and abnegated material hidden away somewhere, though in an altered shape and torn out of its original connection. Only it is not always easy to recognize it.⁴

It should come as no surprise then that such a potentially ambiguous term should be linked to questions of repressed conflict in Freud's writing. As Weber points out in chapter one, *Entstellung* is used in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to designate the general distortion of dreams. These distortions, which also involve the distorted articulation of repressed wishes, are brought about through the interaction of the mechanisms of the dreamwork – condensation, displacement, considerations of representability, and secondary revision – with the dream censorship. While much remains to be said about the precise nature of this interaction, it is sufficient at this point to notice how from the outset the Freudian notion of *Entstellung* is involved in the power struggles of (self)censorship in particular and in psycho-linguistic conflict in general.⁵

What distinguishes this particular form of conflict is that it is never simply waged by opposing forces meeting on a common field of battle. The implications of this are twofold: first, that the seemingly opposed forces of censorship and the mechanisms of the dreamwork are more intimately connected (or are more intensely at odds with themselves) than it at first appears; secondly, that the *site* of such conflict is difficult to locate.

This brings us to the other more "outmoded" sense of *Ent-stellung* as dis-placement or dis-location referred to by Freud which Weber's hyphenation of the term helps to sound out. By

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones, New York: Vintage Books, 1939, p. 52.

⁵ These interactions are discussed at length in my essay "Censorship's self-administration" in *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, 9, no. 4 (1986), pp. 605–640.

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re-introducing the issue of displacement through the disarticulation of a key Freudian term, Weber also seems to suggest that in order to understand psycho-linguistic conflict and its dislocations, immunity cannot be granted to the terms used to describe it. Thus, rather than privileging the level of the signified of Freud and Lacan's texts, which would involve reading them "qualitatively" as positive descriptions of an objective reality, Weber pays particular attention to the "quantitatively" defined level of the signifier; that is to say, he treats the language of psychoanalysis as a network of negative, differential terms (or chains of signifiers), whose specific value can only be established in relation to their "surroundings" and in the context of other relevant texts.

There is a certain affinity between Weber's approach to Lacanian terminology and Freud's way of dealing with images in dreams, which, he says, should not be read according to their "pictorial value" [*Bilderwert*: their value as images of something else], but instead according to their "semiotic relationship" [*Zeichenbeziehung*] – that is, like a rebus according to the relations obtaining among the signifying elements themselves. Thus, rather than dealing straightforwardly with Lacanian "concepts" in terms of their positive content, Weber reads Lacan through Saussure for whom concepts are purely differential and not defined positively by their content but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.

Yet in contrast to Saussure, Weber's "differential" approach to Lacan's texts involves reading his conceptual apparatus not only negatively, but moreover as particular *avoidances*, *displacements*, and *perversions* of a received tradition. As he says, Lacan's "aim is to disorient and if possible to transform the psychoanalytic orthodoxy."⁶ Thus, it is never simply a question of Lacan's adoption or application of a particular model (even – and especially – that of Saussure's linguistic theory), but instead of a specific displacement, "critical appropriation," and "strategic deployment" of such models.

As Weber suggests, Lacanian discourse can only be situated with regard to what and whom it is polemically setting itself off

⁶ See chapter 7 on "The subject as 'fader': the imaginary and the symbolic".

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from at a particular point in time. Thus, the *place* of that discourse, which is differentially and *conflictually* determined, is always only a negative *dis-place*, an "*Ent-stellung*."

In order to delimit these "dis-placements" of Lacanian psychoanalysis Weber is compelled by the logic of his own argument to stage a series of encounters – which are often not so much "face-offs" as *aversions* and strategically *skewed* encounters – with Freud, Hegel, Saussure, Jakobson, Benveniste, Husserl, Laplanche, and others.

Yet while the particular "dis-placements," which are (or rather *will have been*) Lacanian discourse, may perhaps only be differentially located in terms of what they are not – that is, through a process of determinate negation – these negative determinations are rarely as fixed and defined as they at first seem.⁷ In order to stress the necessary and inevitable *indeterminacy* of these "dis-placements" and in order to set them off however provisionally from the related Hegelian notion of determinate negation [*bestimmte Negation*], Weber introduces the term "differential articulation" in his reading of Saussure and uses it throughout the text as a means of avoiding the traditional language of representation [*Darstellung*]. His plays on *Ent-stellung* not only serve to accentuate this tricky veering away from more traditional notions of *Dar-stellung*, but also to link the process of "differential articulation" to other psychoanalytic notions such as dream distortion, displacement, and condensation. Indeed, the signifier *Ent-stellung* functions as a veritable nodal point in Weber's text, the specific value of which can only be appreciated by examining the various signifying chains in which it is enmeshed. Some of the more crucial links in the chain run as follows: *Ent-stellung* – as distortion – as displacement in the sense of differential articulation – displacement as a particular mechanism of the dreamwork – displaceability in the sense of *Übertragbarkeit*: the volatility of psychical energy in the primary process – displace as a dis-location or negative site – in German literally an *Ab-ort*, a term whose more conventional sense of toilet is linked to the

⁷ See Weber's discussion of the importance of the future perfect tense for Lacan, its difference from the present perfect of Hegelian discourse, and its connection to issues of belatedness in Freud in chapter 2 on "Mistaken identity: Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage."

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closed restroom doors examined in Weber's reading of Lacan's "Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious."

While Weber's text thus acknowledges and accedes to the particular indeterminacy of "Lacan's *dis-location* of psychoanalysis" through its pointed distortions of standard Freudian terminology and its strategic exploitation of linguistic ambiguities, this indeterminacy also seems to manifest itself as an oscillating movement of the argument itself. A decisive first step of this movement, which is often accompanied by a rhetoric of "radicalization," traces a movement "beyond" or "outside" a particular tradition (be it metaphysics or the "*idées reçues* of psychoanalytic orthodoxy"), while a more tentative second step examines how what has presumably been supplanted, displaced, or "precipitated out of the signifying chain" still functions as a determinate absence, as a spectral signifier that continues to haunt what supplants it.

While one might indeed link this rhythm of displacement to the Freudian mechanism of repression, a term coined by Lacan to describe the way that "Saussure *genuit* Jakobson" is worth examining in this context since it adds a twilight cast to the crisis of succession (beyond-not beyond) repeatedly enacted by Weber's text. As though no one term could quite describe this hesitant movement, which is neither progressive nor regressive, neither generative nor degenerative, Lacan forms the oxymoronic verb *genuire* by extracting the "genes" from terms like *genèse* and *génération* and combining them with the noxiousness of the verb *nuire* thereby begetting not so much a monstrous product as a disturbing [*génant*] mode of "production."

Rather than simply describing this crisis of succession involving the linguists Saussure and Jakobson, Lacan's language awkwardly "deproduces" it by enacting its own generational crisis; that is, without introducing a new, competing, alternative mode of (linguistic) production Lacan displaces the anthropomorphic terms in which we usually discuss "generational" issues (in the largest sense of the term). The excessive word play and coinage of an oxymoronic neologism are at the very least an indication of the disruptive energy which seems to be required to shake up traditional thinking about such matters. What erupts in this word play is not so much an ersatz linguistic or "genetically engineered" mode of production, but rather the

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conflicts which are necessarily repressed and misconstrued in the production of an identity, in the fetishistic identity of a production process.⁸

To understand how these deproductive or generational crises manifest themselves (or rather silently "insist" since this movement is precisely not one of production) as a rhythm or cadence of Weber's text, let us briefly turn to his introduction of the notion of differential articulation in his chapter on "The unconscious chess player: the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure." According to Weber,

The radical difference between Saussure's theory and this [metaphysical] tradition is to be sought . . . in the radicalization of the idea of *difference* as the principle of the linguistic sign [. . .] What Saussure describes as the "two amorphous masses" of acoustical and ideational material can only crystallize and precipitate out as signifier and signified by virtue of their differentiation; a sound can only operate as a signifier insofar as it is distinguishable from other sounds; a thought can only be signified insofar as it is distinguishable from other thoughts. Thought of in this way, signification is no longer conceived as a process of representation, but as one of *articulation*. (p. 27)

This first movement thus has all the markings of a "radical" break, a decisive step beyond, and a supplanting ("signification is *no longer* conceived as a process of representation, but as one of articulation"). Yet in a second step Weber goes on to describe "this radicalization of differentiability" as that which "defines Saussure's *ambivalent* position with respect to traditional metaphysical approaches to language." (p. 28) This second more hesitant *pas* seems to suggest that it is less a question of supplanting or deposing a powerful tradition than of bringing out certain contradictions and ambivalences within it.

The point is *not merely* that Saussure does not go far enough in breaking decisively with tradition (although this is *also* the case particularly in light of the long chapter of the *Cours* devoted to the traditional subordination of writing to speech); rather, what is most important for Weber is that the radicalization of difference as "articulation" will never become a *new principle* or a *position* decisively beyond a superceded tradition of metaphysical linguistic theory precisely because it will have always already

⁸ That is, "misconstrued" in the Lacanian sense of *méconnaissance* which is discussed in chapter 2 on "Mistaken identity."

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been linked – as it is here – to sources of contradiction and “ambivalent positions.” As Weber states at the opening of chapter four

To properly understand the significance of structural linguistics for Lacan, one cannot overlook its internal contradictions. Saussure's writings are of interest to him less as the site where a certain strain of modern linguistics sought to pose its foundations, than as the theater in which the structure of language and its relation to the subject are staged as questions. (p. 38)

That Weber has recourse to dramatic language here (and indeed throughout the text) is no accident, for as he says in an important footnote, “the theatrical aspect of articulation tends to emerge whenever phonocentric conceptions of language are no longer taken for granted.” (p. 73 note) Obviously, the theatricality of Weber's own writing goes beyond his use of certain metaphors to include the cadences and hesitations which scan the text. These rhythms subtly displace accents in a way that effectively re-introduces repressed conflicts, logical aporia, and linguistic ambiguities. They open an equivocal space – perhaps only as wide as a hyphen (or a missing letter) in the term *Ent-stellung* – in which foreign accents may resonate and other unfamiliar ways of listening may be cultivated. Or to put it a little differently, the graphic dis-articulation of *Ent-stellung* silently re-enacts the uncertain shift in signification from a notion of re-presentation to a process of differential articulation. For the reader this means that instead of being able to narcissistically view the word as a discrete *body* and unit of meaning, one is compelled to focus on the letter – that is, on the dislocated joints, hinges, and differential spacing of articulation.⁹ In short, accentuating *Ent-stellung* is but a way of displacing and dislocating an accent, a way to begin to beat out the complex rhythms of a “return to Freud.”

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⁹ See chapter 2 on “Mistaken identity” and chapter 6 on “Spades and hearts: the subject as stylus.”