



JACQUES LACAN:
PSYCHOANALYST,
SURREALIST,
AND MYSTIC

JEANINE PARISIER PLOTTEL, PH.D.

BEYOND FREUD

**JACQUES LACAN: PSYCHOANALYST,
SURREALIST, AND MYSTIC**

JEANINE PARISIER PLOTTEL, PH.D.

e-Book 2015 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Beyond Freud* edited by Joseph Reppen Ph.D.

Copyright © 1983 by Analytic Press

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

JACQUES LACAN: PSYCHOANALYST, SURREALIST, AND MYSTIC

JEANINE PARISIER PLOTTEL, PH.D.

Jacques Lacan's contribution to psychoanalytic theory and practice is and has been the subject of intense controversy. The quarrels between various factions of both enemies and disciples, the counterculture quality of his teaching, and the political implications of some of his positions have cast shadows on a correct appraisal of his work. The notoriety that came to Lacan in old age, his links with linguistics and structuralism, and his role as trend setter of the Paris intelligentsia have obscured his significant legacy to French psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and neurology. Although many facets of Lacan's approach to psychoanalysis may seem heretical, in fact, its archaeology, in the sense of Michel Foucault, leads to the nineteenth century French tradition of psychiatry and neurology—to Jean-Martin Charcot and other French masters of Freud. Indeed, when considering Lacan's evolution, it is important to remember that this very same tradition was one of the catalysts in Freud's development that led to the creation of psychoanalysis. A brief review of how the Viennese disciple viewed Charcot, his French teacher, will provide the first key to Lacan's texts.

It is common knowledge that Freud's studies with Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris from October 1885 to the end of February 1886 marked a turning point in

the direction of his interests. What may not be so well remembered is how much Freud admired Charcot's clinical presentations of patients. We cannot assert that Freud went so far as to give up the traditional German way in favor of French clinical technique, but this technique was surely integrated in his method. His description of how Charcot presented his patients (Freud, 1887-88) emphasizes the "concepts of the 'entité morbide', of the series, of the 'type' and of the 'formes frustes' " (p. 135). Such concepts are important in French clinical method and were quite foreign to the German perspective.

What especially struck Freud, however—and I am certain that the psychoanalytic infrastructures bear traces of this to this day—was Charcot's friendliness and openness, his responsiveness to students, whom he considered his peers. Freud (1893) ascribes "the intellectual significance" of this man

to the magic that emanated from his looks and from his voice, to the kindly openness which characterized his manner as soon as his relations with someone had overcome the stage of initial strangeness, to the willingness with which he put everything at the disposal of his pupils, and to his lifelong loyalty to them. The hours he spent in his wards were hours of companionship and of an exchange of ideas with the whole of his medical staff [p. 16]...

Freud went on to elaborate:

As a teacher, Charcot was positively fascinating. Each of his lectures was a little work of art in construction and composition; it was perfect in form and made such an impression that for the rest of the day one could not get the sound of what he had said out of one's ears or the thought of what he

had demonstrated out of one's mind [p. 17].

I am not going to delve into the substance of Charcot's science and art—a recent history of psychoanalysis in France, *La bataille de cent ans*, by Elisabeth Roudinesco (1982) has already done this—but I want to stress the oral aspect of his legacy. There is an analogy between knowledge transmitted in such a way and the transference that takes place in the course of an analysis. Spectacle and encounter captivated Freud, just as they had many other scientists and laymen. It can also be argued that the significance of Lacan's manner should be sought in the traditional mediums of Charcot and other French alienists that had struck Freud: oral presentation of clinical cases, lectures, and teaching in an asylum setting.

That Lacan wrote very little and published even less—in fact, only his thesis and a few articles—has been pointed out by several critics. In her recent book, *Vies et legendes de Jacques Lacan*, Catherine Clément (1981), a philosopher turned journalist, observes that most of the essays included in Lacan's *Ecrits* (1966) are papers and communications that were first read at meetings and congresses. The six volumes published to date in the *Séminaire* series (Lacan, 1953-54, 1954-55, 1955-56, 1964, 1972-73), transcripts of Lacan's so-called seminar ("lecture" is the American term), were edited not by Lacan himself but by Jacques-Alain Miller, his son-in-law. This *Séminaire* that is Lacan's major achievement, and we must always bear in mind that its essence is essentially oral. Although these lectures were very carefully prepared, ideas came to Lacan as he spoke before an audience, and some

of the best parts were improvised. These improvisations were charismatic, even inspired, in the literal sense of the word. Their effect on the audience was comparable to the frenzy of an extraordinary bullfight, to the ecstasy of the mystics, and to the passion of absolute love. Then, little by little, as the year went by, the language miracle failed and the spell loosened. Inspiration ceased; the magician on the podium lost his power and turned into an old, hollow man.

In old age, Lacan became a Parisian celebrity, a household word in households where nobody had read a single one of his paragraphs. With his friend Claude Lévi-Strauss, he was the representative of the new structuralism, the “ism” that had followed Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism. For more than 20 years, attendance at Lacan’s Séminaire was de rigueur for anyone who wanted to be in the mainstream of French thought—Barthes, Derrida, Leiris, Jakobson, Kristeva, and Sollers (Schneiderman, 1983), for example, and not merely out-of-town intellectuals. If Lacan happened to dine at Maxim’s or some such place, his presence was noted. For instance, Stuart Schneiderman (1983) tells a story in which Lacan managed to upstage Roman Polanski, who was sharing his table. But I believe that Lacan’s serious achievements belonged to the fortieth, fiftieth, and sixtieth decades of his life, before he actually attained notoriety and an international reputation.

It is obvious that the texts of Lacan’s old age are as elusive as those of many certified psychotics. Are they poetry? Creations of a psychoanalytic Zen master?

Do they signal a revolution in psychoanalytic form? Or have these texts been edited in such a way that they take on the stamp of the meanderings of the unconscious? The cliché, “Only time will tell,” is in order here. However, although Lacan is indeed a difficult and precious writer, most of us find that, read in chronological order, he is quite accessible. Most of his writings are no more arcane than those of Melanie Klein or Heinz Hartmann. And most of Lacan’s significant ideas were present at a time when he still wrote in an easily intelligible way. To my mind, the complicated mathematical knots, the abstruse formulas, the complex formal symbolism added little if anything to the substance of the most important psychoanalytical theorist since Freud.

What explanation can be offered? Clément (1981) puts it well when she states that for a long time, the author was Jacques-Marie Lacan, and when he was Jacques-Marie Lacan, he was comprehensible. We can apply to him his offhand remark about Napoleon (Lacan, 1950, p. 39; 1966, p. 171). “What is the difference between a madman who takes himself for Napoleon and Napoleon himself?” he asked. The obvious answer is that unlike the madman, Napoleon never believed he was Napoleon, but knew he was Bonaparte, and remembered very well what he had done in order to turn Bonaparte into Napoleon. So perhaps Jacques-Marie Lacan knew how he had become Lacan, the guru of French psychoanalysis. Perhaps only his disciples, those who call themselves Lacanians, take the legend seriously. It is likely that had the International Psycho-Analytical Association not cast him out, he would have remained an orthodox professional, but that is

another story. I suspect that his exclusion from traditional psychoanalytic societies caused him enormous pain and anguish. His attempts to be reinstated by the IPA, his pleas with his former friends and colleagues—for example his letters to Loewenstein and Hartmann¹—make this abundantly clear.

Jacques-Marie Lacan was born in Paris on April 13, 1901, and his career ran the usual obstacle course of a French doctor of medicine, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst. His psychiatric curriculum vitae, printed in his thesis (1932), indicates that he had impeccable clinical credentials and the highest possible pedigree in the field. He worked with Henri Claude, an expert on schizophrenia and one of the foremost French psychiatrists of the early century, at the Clinique des Maladies Mentales et de l'Encéphale (Clinic for Mental Illnesses and Illnesses of the Encephalus) in 1927-28. In 1928-29, he was attached to the Infirmerie Spéciale Près de la Prefecture de Police (Special Police Headquarters Infirmary) and trained with Georges de Clérambault, whose theory of mental automatism was a decisive influence. "Our only master in psychiatry" is Lacan's appraisal of his role. From 1929 to 1931 he continued his training at the Henri Rousselle Hospital and spent the summers in Zurich at the Burgholzi, Eugen Bleuler's and Carl Jung's clinic. He obtained a diploma in forensic medicine, and in 1931-32, he returned to the Clinique des Maladies Mentales et de l'Encephale.

Lacan co-authored his first articles with leading senior psychiatrists and neurologists, and he published in psychiatric journals, for example, *L'évolution*

psychiatrique, whose contributors became early recruits of psychoanalysis. His doctoral thesis (Lacan, 1932), which we shall examine in more detail presently, was a traditional work, with meticulous references, careful research, and detailed clinical observations, written in a clear and straightforward style. The young doctor was well on his way to a successful psychiatric career. At this time there appear to be at least two developments in Lacan's professional vitae that must be taken into account to explain his deviations from the psychiatric and medical mainstream.² I am referring to his connections with surrealism and his contacts with psychoanalysis.

Further research is needed about actual relations between Lacan and surrealism. We do know that he published several fascinating articles (Lacan, 1933a,b) in *Le minotaure*, a surrealist journal, and that it was Lacan's ideas that prompted Salvador Dalí's famous critical paranoia theory. He had contacts with René Crevel, the poet who shot himself playing Russian roulette with a loaded pistol (Lacan, 1966, p. 65) and he was a good friend of André Breton. His second wife, Sylvia Maklès, the star of Jean Renoir's film *Une partie de campagne*, attended the same school as the sisters Simone and Jeanine Kahn, who respectively married André Breton and Raymond Queneau. Sylvia's own first husband was Georges Bataille, a writer whose style Lacan imitated (Roudinesco, 1982).

The stamp of this movement is discernible in Lacan's own texts in several ways. First, many characteristics of automatic writing—for example, the use of

puns, and arbitrary and striking comparisons and making verbal associations the organizing structure of an expository piece—are also characteristics of Lacan’s own manner. A sentence such as “*A casser l’oeuf sefait l’Homme, mais aussi l’Hommelette*”(roughly translated, “In breaking an egg homme (man) is made, but also an [h]omelet”) and the allusion to “a large crepe moving about like an amoeba” in the sentence that follows (Lacan, 1966, p. 845) are pure surrealism.

Second, Lacan’s contacts with poets led him to interpret the utterances of his psychotic patients just as he might interpret a surrealist poem, or for that matter any poem at all. For example, he analyzed (Lèvy-Valensi, Migault, & Lacan, 1931, p. 376) the following apparently senseless sentence from the writing of Marcelle C., a paranoid patient: “*A londoyer sans meurs on fait de la becasse*” (“Londoning without morals one makes woodcocks”). Meurs is a kind of portemanteau word composed of *moeurs* (customs, morals) and *meure* (from the verb mourir, to die). Lacan showed that underlying this ponderous formula is the rhythm of a famous line of poetry by the seventeenth century dramatist Pierre Corneille that is known by every French schoolchild: “*A vaincre sans pèril on triomphe sans gloire*” (“In conquering without peril one triumphs without glory”). What appears to be an original verse is in fact generated by a stereotypical automatic auditory mechanism. Familiarity with poets such as Robert Desnos, Philippe Soupault, and André Breton led Lacan to notice that patients gave different graphic renditions of the same phonic material in different places and poems: “*la mais l’as, Vame est lasse, et la mélasse*” (“the but, the ace, the soul is tired, and molasses”). Or, “*le merle*

à fouine, la mère, la fouine (“The weaseled blackbird, the pitchforked mother”). We can give an English approximation of this mechanism by playing on the word molasses to produce “Moe’s lassies, more losses, my asses.” The result of Lacan’s juxtapositions of such phrases is an awareness that psychotic productions may or may not have poetic value and that the substratum of a poem is often material that may be given the label “psychotic” in a clinical context and perspective. (For a fuller discussion, see Lacan, 1933a.)

Likewise, Lacan might have learned from surrealism and not necessarily from Freud how to interpret a literary work as though it were a living being. The seminar comes to mind that deals with Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (Lacan, 1966), in which the letter stolen from the Queen by the minister is restored to her by Dupin, but many other instances can be given. For example, in his lecture of March 2, 1960, Lacan (1959-60) quoted a stanza by Arnaut Daniel, a great troubadour that Dante ranked with Virgil. His point was that this poem about courtly love embodied “the central void around which is organized and articulated whatever it is that sublimates desire” (p. 29). The same void and sense of nothingness is revealed in his appraisal of André Gide. When Gide’s wife Madeleine took revenge on her husband by burning all the letters he had ever written to her, she knew what she was doing. The letters had been Gide’s way of filling up his own sense of emptiness, the literal hole that he stuffed with all kinds of games, which allowed him to watch himself pretending to be himself. In *Et NUNC Manet in Te* (Lacan, 1966), written after the death of Madeleine, his wife,

Gide confessed that after the letters' destruction, his relationship with her, "*n'offre plus, à la place ardente du coeur, qu'un trou*" ("left but a hole in the ardent part of his heart") (p. 762). The loss of this correspondence, of which Gide had no copy meant that whereas previously his mirror had been the substance of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, it had turned into the vertigo of a ditch, a gap, nothing, and nothingness.

Lacan's sense of play and games would of course have delighted the surrealists. He liked using everyday imagery, slang, and ordinary words of our childhood and adolescence, anything from mustard pots to Picasso's ostrich cabbages, to illustrate philosophical and psychoanalytic concepts. He himself referred to "this seriousness that I always develop further and further to its punchline," ("*ce sérieux que je développe toujours plus en pointe*"). Elsewhere he says that he is the Góngora of psychoanalysis. When he spells the French word *raison*, (reason) r-e-s-o-n, following the example of Francis Ponge, to show how the sound itself suggests something that resonates; when he puns on the French word *poubelle* (garbage can), referring to psychoanalytic publications—his own included—as *Pouvellications*; when he dismisses the "Lacanian" by reminding them that he himself is a Freudian, Lacan is playing. But he is also playing when he ridicules his opponents and his disciples, when he applies linguistic and mathematical concepts to psychoanalysis. A surrealist is never more serious than when he is playing, of course, so in that sense Lacan remained a surrealist to the end.

Finally, Lacan is a surrealist because his own formulas are themselves short poems, or so they would have been defined by his friends Paul Eluard and André Breton. I am thinking of aphorisms such as “*Ton désir c’est le désir de l’Autre*” (“Your desire is the desire of the Other”); “*L’Inconscient est structuré comme un langage*” (“The Unconscious is structured like a language”); and “*Moi, la vérité je parle*” (“Me, I speak the truth”).

To stress Lacan’s surrealism is to remain true to French intellectual history. The so-called surrealist revolution coincided with the introduction of psychoanalysis. André Breton was one of the first French writers to read and write about *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Public opinion often attacked both surrealism and psychoanalysis for being foreign and hostile to “*la clarté française*,”—French clarity. Indeed, just as surrealists were drawn to the study of dreams and the exploration of the unconscious, so psychoanalysts were drawn to the surrealists. Lacan was not alone in being close to them. For example, Adrien Borel, one of the founders of the Société Psychanalytique de Paris (SPP) in 1926, analyzed Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris (Roudinesco, 1982, pp. 358-360). René Allendy, author of 200 articles on various occult subjects was one of Antonin Artaud’s psychiatrists and was also Anaïs Nin’s analyst. In a general way, many of the first- and second-generation French analysts were writers and had contacts with the world of arts and letters. Marie Bonaparte was a prolific author, and her book on Edgar Allen Poe was widely read. Eugénie Sokolnicka was André Gide’s model for the character of Madame Sophroniska, the analyst who unsuccessfully

treated Boris in *Les faux-monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*). Edouard Pichon, the president of SPP, was co-author with his uncle, Jacques Damourette, of a monumental seven-volume study of French grammar, *De la langue à la pensée*, a book that Lacan often cites.

During Lacan's formative years, in the Paris of the 1920s and early 1930s, many young psychiatrists were drawn to the study of Freud and became psychoanalysts. These same psychoanalysts were interested in language, literature, and the arts; and artists and writers, in turn, took up psychoanalysis. The fact that Lacan had contacts with Breton, Crevel, Eluard, and Dali did not make him an isolated figure, but rather one who was very much in the mainstream of his avant-garde milieu. Psychoanalysis was itself a marginal discipline, but within it, Lacan was a member of the reigning establishment and a very classical, orthodox Freudian analyst. He was analyzed by Rudolph Loewenstein, and the analysis seems to have lasted a long time, from about 1932 to 1939. The two men remained on very cordial terms. As noted earlier, when Lacan left the Société Psychanalytique de Paris and began to have difficulties with the IPA, he wrote "Loew" a long letter justifying his position and asking him to intervene on his behalf with Hartmann, who was then president of the IPA.

An examination of Lacan's first book, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (1932), his doctoral thesis, completed before his own analysis, will show the synthesis of these various themes in a clinical case history,

the case of Aimée.

AIMÉE

At eight o'clock one evening, a well-known Parisian actress arrived at the theater where she was scheduled to perform and was greeted by a nicely dressed woman whom she mistook for one of her many fans. This woman asked the actress whether she was Madame Z., and when the answer was yes, the woman pulled out a knife out of her handbag and turned the blade toward the star. Madame Z. managed to grab it, cutting two tendons in her fingers in the course of the scuffle. The woman, henceforth called Aimée A., was duly restrained and carted off to jail. Madame Z. did not press charges, and her assailant was moved to Ste. Anne Asylum, where Lacan observed her for a year and a half. At first, Aimée continued to have hallucinations, obsessions, and to heap abuse on her intended victim. But suddenly, 20 days after the incident, at seven o'clock in the evening, she began to weep as she realized that the actress was totally innocent of any wrongdoing. Her delirium dissipated completely and the vanity of her megalomaniac intentions and the inanity of her fears struck her all at once. She had recovered.

This 38-year-old woman was originally from Dordogne, born into a large peasant family, with three brothers and two sisters. She had a tenured job with a rail transport company; her record was outstanding, and her superiors were

pleased with her performance and tolerated some of her idiosyncrasies. She was married to another employee of the same company, but the couple lived in different towns. Her husband took care of their 8-year-old son, and she visited them more or less regularly. The patient herself had organized this life-style at the end of a previous voluntary commitment to a mental institution a year and a half earlier. At that time she had believed that a number of highly placed celebrities, including several writers, were going to have her son killed, and she had written a letter of resignation on behalf of her husband to their mutual employer. Then, forging his signature, she had applied for a passport to the United States.

The fixation on Madame Z. was not an isolated episode. Aimée had set her sights on celebrities before. For example, she had tried to establish contact with a well-known novelist, Mr. P. B., the initials of Paul Bourget, and with the Prince of Wales. She sent them letters and miscellaneous writings, including a weekly sonnet and a novel called *Le Dètracteur*; in turn, she collected newspaper and magazine clippings reporting their activities. Her initial infatuation for P. B. had turned to hatred, and she was now convinced that he was plotting to kill her son.

The changing of love into hate was another pattern of her relationships. Her first love, for example, was characteristic in this respect. She had become infatuated with the local Don Juan a month before she was transferred to another town. For three years she wrote him regularly and spent most of her leisure daydreaming about him, hiding her passion from everyone. She never saw him

again, and one day her love changed to hatred and scorn: “I went from love to hate abruptly,” she admitted spontaneously to Lacan (1932, p. 225). The same mechanism played in her friendship for Mademoiselle C. de la N., a fellow worker from an impoverished aristocratic family who influenced her deeply. It was this woman, in fact, who introduced Madame Z., a neighbor of one of her relatives, into Aimée’s life. “You are not like the other girls,” Mlle. C. de la N. is reported to have said. “I feel that I am masculine,” was Aimée’s response. “You are masculine,” agreed her friend. Lacan characterized the manner in this book as *midire* (literally, to “midsay”—to speak in half tones). The suggestion that Aimée’s attraction for her own sex may be a factor here would be readily accepted today, but in the early 1930s an observer might have neglected to note that at the time of her attempted crime Aimée had broken all contacts with her old friend. The circumstances of her change of heart went back ten years, when Aimée had given birth to a stillborn baby girl, strangled by the umbilical cord. Her friend had telephoned for news. The patient immediately felt that Mlle. C. de la N. was responsible for this calamity and that she had conspired to kill the little girl.

Throughout his account, Lacan took care to include long excerpts from Aimée’s writing and to present her aspirations for the improvement of the social and human condition in such a way that his readers come to esteem rather than belittle this patient. He avoided the patronizing tone of the superior judge, the medical boss, or even the average Frenchman or Frenchwoman. The diagnosis was that she suffered from self-punitive paranoia (*paranoia auto-punitive*).

Madame Z. represented an idealized version of herself, a mirror of her ideal ego. Like Aimée, Madame Z. had a career, and being a wife, mother, and homemaker was not the focus of her daily life. Her activities were covered by reporters, so that there was a connection between her life and print. Aimée herself aspired to literary renown, to a place in the newspaper. In many circles, the morality of actresses is questionable; and it seems likely that Aimée's own code of ethics would classify her in the category of fallen woman and sinner. That is just what Aimée felt herself to be; in her family's mythology she was the brightest child, the intellectual star, but also the one who was always late and kept everyone waiting, the one who could not pull her act together, the one who was disorganized and undependable. The feeling was that she should never have gotten married at all. Aimée incorporated Madame Z. into this image, and the stab wound that punished her was but a punishment inflicted upon herself. When Aimée came to realize the senselessness of her attempted aggression, she was in a sense cured. She had been punished, and now she had no more use for her delusions.

The root of this illness was found in her relationship with her older sister. Aimée recognized the virtues of this sister but nevertheless hated her and felt herself the victim of this woman, who had achieved her equilibrium at Aimée's expense. A childless widow, this sister now had an ersatz husband and child, that is to say, she lived with Aimée's husband and child. When Lacan interviewed the sister, she made it clear that her younger sibling's illness and incarceration suited her well, and she feared that a pardon would jeopardize her life. Aimée

understood this, yet although her feelings could hardly have been more ambivalent, she rejected all criticism leveled against her rival. Lacan was especially struck by the sharp contrast between her words expressing hyperbolic praise and the icy tone in which she uttered them. Lacan (1932, pp. 232-233) characterized her attitude as a *Verneinung* (denial) reaction of the purest kind.

The interpretation here follows Freud's in *The case of Schreber*, quoted by Lacan. We can shape the famous paradigm of denial in paranoia so that it applies to females rather than males, and we can see how apt it is for Aimée: "I love her" may be denied to produce "I do not love her." This is equivalent to "I hate her" and leads to the projection, "She hates me," which is a leitmotif of the persecution theme here. A second type of denial, "I do not love her, but I love him," can be turned into "He loves me." We can thus interpret Aimée's infatuation with the male figments of her imagination—the Prince of Wales, the writer P. B., and her first love. In other words, she was able to mask her attachment to her own sex by denying it and substituting a "him" for a "her." The third denial structure, "It is not I who love the women—he loves them" (Freud (1911), p. 64 leads to the theme of jealousy, whether there is projection or not. "Delusions of jealousy, added Freud, contradict the subject, delusions of persecution, contradict the verb, and erotomania contradicts the object" (Freud (1911), p. 64-5. Recall that Aimée believed that the objects of her attention want to kill her son. Her unfounded fears were meant to hide the fact that it is not her child she loved, but the woman she connected with him. Finally, the fourth type of denial is an absolute denial: "I do

not love her. I do not love anyone at all. I love only myself." This leads to megalomania and to a regressed narcissistic stage (Lacan, 1932, pp. 261-262).

The symptoms of Aimée's illness were but denials, displacements, and substitutes of a prototype, the sister persona. However, her actual choices of love-hate objects were determined by the conjunction of random coincidences and deep analogies of affect (Lacan, 1932, p. 234). The sister was the mirror that reflected an image that erased and displaced any other image of herself. Killing the sister meant wiping out the image that was but a reflection of her own self. The actress embodied Aimée's ideal ego insofar as she was a projection of her artistic endeavors, of her desire to better herself, to be in the public limelight, and to gain fame and glory. Madame Z. was only a shell, an image, an object. Aimée denied her otherness and perceived her only as an extension of Aimee's own imagination.

Lacan's (1937) looking-glass theory provides the tool for further elaboration of these mechanisms. At the heart of this theory is the observation that the human child goes through a mirror phase from 6 to 18 months. Unlike the chimpanzee, a human baby who sees himself or herself in a mirror is able to perceive that the baby in the mirror is indeed himself or herself, and the sight of his or her image fills the baby with joy. The baby will begin to laugh, to move with glee, and to express elation in every possible way. To describe this as jubilation is hardly an overstatement. What has happened is that the child has put himself or herself on: The child has fit himself or herself into the image in the mirror, and that structure

becomes the identification—in the psychoanalytic sense—of the child’s self. The “I” shapes itself before objectifying itself as an ego in the dialectic of identification with the imago of the double and before language assigns it the function of subject in the realm of the universal (Lacan, 1966, p. 94). In French, this fact becomes obvious when we consider the distinction grammar makes between *je* and *moi*, a distinction that roughly approximates the difference between “I” and “me” in English. When the baby recognizes his or her image in the mirror, the baby has a notion that he or she is an “I.” The awareness of being an ‘I’ means that the image of a whole body, a body that is a totality replaces the image of a body in pieces in the Kleinian sense, in which the baby is part an organ of his or her own body and part an organ of another body. Indeed, when a patient’s sense of self has utterly disintegrated, he or she will often dream that his or her body is cut up and its organs separated and disjointed with the wings and limbs like those represented in paintings by Hieronymous Bosch. When the “I” attempts to build itself up, however, dreams represent the id as fortified buildings, castles with elaborate walls, moats, towers, and other metaphors of inversion, isolation, duplication, annulment, and displacement characteristic of obsessional neurosis.

At the end of this mirror phase, another dialectical mechanism inaugurates the insertion of the “I” into the “me,” and this takes place in situations that are elaborated by social relationships. Human knowledge is mediated through identification with the imago of the desire of the other. Perhaps the mirror also reflected another image; someone else may have been holding the infant—a

mother and/or a father. The constructs that follow will be socially determined, and language will be the mediator.

The looking-glass phase provides an inkling of why Lacan rejected the positions of American ego psychology promoted by Rudolph Loewenstein, Ernst Kris, and Heinz Hartmann. It is doubtful that one of the reasons for his criticism of the “New York troika,” as he often called it, was his sense of abandonment when Loewenstein set up residence in the United States during the war. In fact, Lacan’s rejection of ego psychology lies at the very root of his thinking.

In America, Lacan claimed, psychoanalysis was a therapy whose goal was to make the citizen adjust to the environment. Put in a political perspective, members of society should behave and lead their lives according to the values of that society. But if we substitute the term “dominant ideology” for the term “values,” then whether abiding by this ideology is a sign of equilibrium is highly debatable. Lacan held that this was not the goal of psychoanalysis. His position toward the use of psychoanalysis in the United States was similar to the position many Americans take about the use of psychiatry in the Soviet Union. It is possible that from a Soviet perspective, the mere fact of being a dissident is a sign that one is not “right in the head,” that one is unhinged, and that treatment is needed. But it also seems quite clear that the purpose of psychiatry or of psychoanalysis is not to adjust these dissidents to the society in which they live. Today, it is difficult to argue with Lacan’s position that the purpose of psychoanalysis is psychoanalysis

—or, in other words, a quest for truth—rather than making patients adjust to the cultural mainstream.

Many of Lacan's most moving pages make this point over and over. In a sense, his most debatable technical innovation, the variable analytic hour, is a consequence of this quest for truth. He himself explained that closing off a session meant that an obsessional patient would not go on for months on end making small talk about Dostoevski's novels while his or her life wasted away. Forcing such a patient to pay more for less can be an effective truth serum! Be that as it may, the ultimate goals of analysis for Lacan is the moment of truth, an ineffable sense of unity and plenitude of one's being.

Lacan took great care to separate the various planes and relations that he expressed with the words "imaginary," "symbolic," and "real." These terms become intelligible when we examine the perception we have of ourselves. On a very literal level, since I have never seen myself, and since the only "me" I can actually "see" is an image of "me" in a mirror, this "me," this "ego" is an imaginary function. It is the discovery of an experience, and not an a priori category (Lacan, 1954-55, p. 50). Furthermore, this imaginary function will intervene in psychic life as if it were a symbol. "One uses the ME the way the Bororo uses a parrot. The Bororo says I AM A PARROT; we say, I AM ME" p. 52). (The Bororo are South American Indians found along the upper Paraguay River.)

The imaginary differs from the symbolic. Lacan's symbolic function is a transcendental function, beyond any image, and it is inscribed in memory. That is, one of its characteristics is that it is a presence in absence and an absence in presence. For example, when the baby takes a ball, hides, it, and takes it back again, all the while saying "here," "gone," "here," the baby is learning that the ball is present even though he or she cannot see it. When the baby does see it, when it is present, he or she knows that it may disappear and that its absence is a possibility. In Freud, of course, the disappearance of the object is linked to the disappearance of the mother. The paradox as Lacan sees it, is that the baby misses his or her mother when he or she notices she is not present. The mother's presence is acknowledged when she has gone. And when the mother is absent, the child learns that he or she can keep her image present in his or her mind symbolically. Making the ball appear and disappear is a symbolic expression of learning to cope with the mother as other.

In life, we cannot see the symbolic, of course, but it is present nevertheless. We build it and we learn how to build it just as, in order to play ball, we have to learn how to do so. For example, the baby boy sees himself in the mirror, and he also sees his father and mother. When he perceives his parents as images of his own projections, he functions in the realm of the imaginary. But his parents also exist as the other (*l'autre*) beyond their images in the mirror. They are parents, but they are also children and grandchildren of their parents and ancestors. In a sense, siring a child does not make a man a "father." A father becomes a "father"

only when he takes on for himself the symbolic function of the “father” and is able to pass this Other on to his child. The child integrates the Other, (*l’Autre*), with an initial capital letter. His past, that is to say his history, is inserted into the present as well as the future—not only his own history, the history he knows, such as the childhood he remembers, but also the history he has forgotten and the history that his ancestors repressed but that he himself continues to perpetuate. When I claim that my cat Jeffrey is a devoted and caring father, I am guilty of anthropomorphism that attributes to the cat the feelings of a human father. My statement is articulated on Lacan’s imaginary level in which my words reflect what I see in *my* mirror. When I write that the horse Prince William V may win the famous X derby because Prince William IV, an X derby winner—himself sired by Prince William III, also a winner—was his father, I am speaking on a level Lacan would call symbolic. My example may be imaginary—after all, I have made up the names of the racehorses—but because the racing world itself is a symbolic realm and because its customs and conventions make sense in a historical and human perspective, the racehorse as father is a symbolic entity.

Lacan’s “real,” the third element in the triptych, is not reality. It is likely that Lacan uses this term in the same sense as Jeremy Bentham did when he meant that the “real” was the opposite of the “fictitious” (see Lacan, 1959-60, p. 60). The concept includes what is neither symbolic nor imaginary. It refers to very stuff that is structured by the symbolic. Applied to the concept of fatherhood, for example, the real would be the physiological act of procreating without any

interpretation whatsoever. Anything at all that we say about the act, the very words I use to convey the information, immediately draw the reader and me onto the symbolic plane. The word “father” itself is a sublimation and a spiritual act. As Lacan (1959-60, p. 14), explained many times, the king is naked. The unconscious itself is structured around the symbolic function.

We are now in a position to understand why and how the unconscious is structured like a language. The real cannot be apprehended at all except through a symbolic operation. If there is no symbolic level, the real remains organic and dead, as it were. The initial perception is in a sign, and this sign is itself both a signifier and a signified, that is, an element of language.

A lot of ink has been spilled about Lacan’s debt to Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1915) *Cours de linguistique générale*. In fact, the ideas of the Cours are and were quite familiar to all French-speaking linguists and psychoanalysts of the early twentieth century. Ferdinand’s own son, Raymond de Saussure, was a psychoanalyst, a member of the Societete Psychanalytique de Paris, and he knew Lacan well. It has been claimed (Roudinesco, 1982) that Raymond was totally ignorant of his father’s contribution to linguistics, but I cannot believe this at all. When Lacan takes up Saussure’s distinction between the “signifier” (*signifiant*)—the acoustic image, the sound of an utterance—and the “signified (*signifié*)—the concept or concepts expressed by the utterance, he is using a linguistic shorthand that was widely used. Likewise, he is using appropriate modern terminology when

he refers to the paradigmatic chain of thought—the principle of “clang” associations whereby “big” leads to “dig,” and “dig” leads to “rig” or another such sound—and to syntagmatic associations, in which “big” may lead to “great,” “Alexander,” “Philip,” and “Macedonia.” In this perspective, the conclusion that the unconscious is structured like a language means simply that there are no innate ideas, and that the unconscious is a cultural rather than an organic entity.

The same point can be made about other applications of linguistics to psychoanalysis. Freud’s analysis of dreams, his mechanisms of displacement, denial, and similarity, are themselves tropes. An attempt to determine whether a given symptom is expressed linguistically by, for example, a synecdoche (the trope that suggests a part for the whole, less for more, or more for less) or by a metalepsis (the phrase whereby an indirect expression is substituted for a direct expression³) may lead to an accurate descriptions of given speech pattern corresponding to given clinical configurations. Perhaps that is the significance of Lacan’s coinage of the word *Lalangue*, a linking in one word of the article la and the noun langue, meaning tongue, in the sense of speech or language. The word also suggests André Lalande, the author of a famous French dictionary of philosophy, a book philosophy students refer to with the metonymy or synecdoche, *Lalande*. The reasoning goes something like this: I speak English just as you speak English, but my speech is different from yours, although it is also the same, so that my *Lalangue* is like your *Lalangue*, yet the two are not the same. Just like Humpty Dumpty, I make my words mean something different than you make

your words mean, but we have to use the same words. Even when the unconscious coins new words—Lacan’s *Lalangue*—it adapts signifiers of the linguistic and puts them to its own use. This new sign may remain a private term, or it may enter the linguistic mainstream. When it does, it modifies the *Lalangue* of everyone and in some way it changes the cultural unconscious, that is, the linguistic substratum of our culture.

Perhaps herein lies the explanation for Lacan’s deliberate use of a language that bares his own linguistic associations. As a student of Saussure and a reader of Hegel and Heidegger, he knew that in a sense, each one of our utterances changes the total language of our linguistic community and that some utterances change it more than others. For example, his theory of the “*Nom du Père*” certainly modified the theoretical assumptions French psychiatrists and psychoanalysts have about psychosis. Here, in a sense, Lacan’s *Lalangue* has begun to change not only clinical theory, but also its practice. Very simply put, the “*Nom du Père*” means not only the father’s name, but also the father’s “no,” that is to say, the act whereby the father severs the symbiotic bond between mother and child. This “no” must take place if the child is to develop into an autonomous being. The name of the father cannot be transferred to the child unless the child receives it and accepts it on the symbolic level. In Lacan’s terminology, the image in the mirror, my other, must have achieved a link with the Other, who is not myself, but who is constituted by my recognition of how my history can be integrated in the world in which I live—that is, the Name-of-the-Father. Why are the N in “*Nom*” and the P in *Père*

capitalized? These capital letters suggest a symbolic level, and they are allusion to the Father in the Scriptures. The signifier goes beyond the actual daddy, and suggests that the Name-of-the-Father is sacred insofar as it gives a meaning to our lives and sustains the ideas and ideals of society, culture, and civilization.

“What makes a psychosis come about?” was the question Lacan asked himself. Years of clinical experience (it must always be kept in mind that Lacan’s theory and his reading of Freud took place in the context of his extensive clinical experience with psychotics) led him to perceive that in every case there was a *Verwerfung*. Lacan translates *Verwerfung* into French as foreclusion, a term he borrowed from Damourette & Pichon’s monumental grammar book, *Des mots à la pensée*.⁴ I would translate this into English as “shut out, foreclosed, and excluded,” suggesting something that might have opened, but remained closed. Pichon used *foreclusion* to describe characteristics of the second term in the French negative, for example, the words *pas* (not), *plus* (not), *rien* (nothing), *jamais* (never), *aucun* (none), and *personne* (nobody) in such phrases as *Je ne sais pas* (I don’t know), *Je ne sais plus* (I no longer know), *Cela ne me dit rien* (That doesn’t mean anything to me), *Elle ne sait rien* (She knows nothing), *Il ne va jamais au cinéma* (He never goes to the movies), *Il n’a aucun devoir* (He has no homework), and *Personne n’est venu* (Nobody came). In each of these sentences, and in this type of French sentence generally, the second negative casts out definitively something that might have been. Likewise, in psychosis, the ‘Nom du Père’ signifier is itself excluded.

In order for psychosis to manifest itself, the Name-of-the-Father, must be *verworfen*, excluded, foreclosed; it must have failed to reach the Other's place, and must now be called there in a symbolic opposition with the subject. The failure of the Name-of-the-Father at that place, by the hole that it opens in the signified, begins the cascade of signifiers whereby proceeds the growing disaster of the imaginary, until the level is reached where signifier and signified stabilize in a metaphor of delirium.

Lacan's theory, then, is that in psychosis the central signifier, that is, the Name-of-the-Father, has failed to inscribe itself in the subject's language register. At the place where it should have been incorporated, there is a gap, a hole, a void. When the occasion presents itself—for example, when an ersatz signifier happens to make its way into the appropriate chain—this vacuum will suck up any signifier at all that happens to come along, and an elaborate delusional system will come to occupy the place of the missing Name-of-the-Father. For example, in the case of Schreber, Geheimrat Professor Flechsig, remained for him the chief instigator during the entire course of his illness. Freud (1911) quotes Schreber: "Even now the voices that talk with me call out your name to me hundreds of times each day. They name you in certain constantly recurring connections, and especially as being the first author of the injuries I have suffered" (p. 38). God Almighty comes to play a part as Flechsig's accessory, as does the soul of the chief attendant of Pierson's asylum, the clinic to which Schreber moves. They are but substitutes for the Name-of-the-Father; and the divine rays, the special birds, the nerves of God,

and Schreber's own transformation into a woman are generated to fill the emptiness created by the absence of the transcendental signifier.

Lacan's theory of the unconscious is a materialistic theory: The unconscious is structured like a language—that is, a concept, a signified, is linked to a signifier, an acoustic image, and in turn this signifier suggests another signified, so that an idea is immediately turned into matter. It is paradoxical, therefore, that Lacan speaks like a theologian. The psychotic—and Schreber is an excellent example—makes God Almighty into the image of the father, but in fact, the correct stance and the condition of sanity is that the father be created in the image of God Almighty. The unconscious may be structured like a language, but if this language is to sustain interhuman relations, culture, and civilization, then it must itself rest on a transcendental signifier in the image of the Great Other (*le Grand Autre*), Lacan often said.

The dedication of Lacan's doctoral thesis to his brother, Reverend Father Marc-François Lacan, Benedictine monk of the Congregation of France, makes us wonder whether both brothers did not follow a similar path. Lacan was not a man of the church, but nevertheless he preached a gospel. In his gospel the tropes of psychoanalysis incorporated tropes of other disciplines—philosophy, theology, literature, art, linguistics, and anthropology—characteristic of the culture of a given time and place: the middle of the twentieth century in France, an anticlerical country with a strong Catholic tradition. Lacan's Christian Parisian

cosmopolitanism may be the counterpart of Freud's Jewish middle European universalism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author gives grateful thanks to the Research Foundation of the City University of New York for a Faculty Research Fellowship.

REFERENCES

Bertin, C. (1982). *La dernière Bonaparte*. Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin.

Clement, C. (1981). *Vie et légendes de Jacques Lacan*. Paris: Grasset.

Damourette, J., & Pichon, E. (1911-1950). *Des mots à la pensée. Essai de Grammaire de la langue française*. 7 vol. Paris: d'Artrey.

Freud, S. (1887-88). Preface to Charcot. *Standard Edition*, 1.

Freud, S. (1893). Charcot. *Standard Edition*, 3.

Freud, S. (1911). Psycho-Analytic Notes on An Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia. *Standard Edition*, 12.

Gide, A. (1925). *Les faux-monnayeurs*. Paris: Gallimard.

Lacan, J. (1932). De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité. Thèse pour le doctorat en médecine, diplôme d'état. In J. Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la*

personnalité, suivi de Premiera écrits sur la paranoïa. Paris: Seuil, 1975.

Lacan, J. (1933a). Le problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïaques de l'expérience. In J. Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité, suivi de Premiera écrits sur la paranoïa*. Paris: Seuil, 1975.

Lacan, J. (1933b). Motifs du crime paranoïque. In J. Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité, suivi de Premiera écrits sur la paranoïa*. Paris: Seuil, 1975.

Lacan, J. (1936, July). The looking-glass phase. Paper presented at the 14th International Psychoanalytic Congress, July 31 Marienbad. (1947) 16th International Congress, July 17; Zurich . (1966) *Ecrits*, Paris: Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1950). Propos sur la causalité psychique. In L. Bonnafe, H. Ey, S. Follin, J. Lacan, J. Rouart *Le Problème de la psychogenèse des névroses et des psychoses*. Paris: Desclée de Brouver, (1966). *Ecrits*.

Lacan, J. (1953-54). *Le séminaire: Livre I. Les écrits techniques de Freud* (J.-A. Miller, Ed.). Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975.

Lacan, J. (1954-55). *Le séminaire: Livre 2. Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* (J.-A. Miller, Ed.). Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978.

Lacan, J. (1955-56). *Le séminaire: Livre 3. Les psychoses* (J.-A. Miller, Ed.). Paris: Seuil, 1981.

Lacan, J. (1957). Le séminaire sur "La lettre volée," April 26,1955. In *Ecrits*. Paris: Seuil, 1966.

- Lacan, J. (1958). Jeunesse de Gida ou la lettre et le désir. *Critique* (April, 1958), 131, pp. 291-315. (1966, *Ecrits*), Paris: Seuil.
- Lacan, J. (1959-60). *L'éthique*. Paris: Editions du Piranha. Unauthorized transcript.
- Lacan, J. (1964). *Le séminaire: Livre 11. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (J.-A. Miller, Ed.). Paris: Seuil, 1973.
- Lacan, J. (1966). *Ecrits*. Paris: Edition, du Seuil.
- Lacan, J. (1966). Position de l'inconsicent au congrès de Bonneval repris de 1960 en 1964. In *Ecrits*. Paris: Seuil.
- Lacan, J. (1972-73). *Le séminaire; Livre 20. Encore* (J.-A. Miller, Ed.). Paris: Seuil, 1975.
- Lacan, J. (1980). Le Séminaire de 1980: Dissolution. *Ornicar?* No. 20-21.
- LaScisson de (1953, July 14). *Ornicar?*. 1956, p. 136.
- Levy-Valensi, J., Migault, P., & Lacan, J. (1931). Ecrits "inspirés: Schizographie. In J. Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité, suivi de Premiera écrits sur la paranoïa*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975.
- Miller, J.-A. (Ed.). (1976). La Scission de 1953 [Special supplement], *Ornicar?* 7.
- Roudinesco, E. (1982). *La Bataille de cent ans: Histoire de la psychanalyse en France*. Paris: Ramsay.
- Saussure, F. de (1915). *Cours de linguistique générale*. Ed. Bally, C., Sechehaye, A.

Geneva.

Schneiderman, S. (1983). *Jacques Lacan. The Death of an Intellectual Hero.* Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press.

Notes

[1\]](#) The letter to Lowenstein, dated July 14, 1953, contains the following:

I want you to feel how bitter this experience has been for us, and also how decisive. I give you authority to communicate this [letter]—in spite of the tone of the confessional that is found and in spite of our special relationship—to Heinz Hartmann whose person I have always held in the highest esteem [p. 135].

The end of his letter to Hartmann on July 21, 1953, reads as follows:

Dear Heinz Hartmann, I regret that the chaotic events of past years, as well as the extreme isolation that is conditioned by our professional life prevented me from making myself better known to you. But I count on your authority to make it possible for the authentic and deeply caring effort that is the foundation of my work in bringing Freud's teaching alive to be respected; to bring back the tone of reason to a fight that is as sterile in its forms as it is base in its motives, and to take the equitable measures necessary to preserve the audience that psychoanalysis is presently conquering in France and that this fight can only hinder, (p. 136)

Evidence that Marie Bonaparte might have been behind Lacan's exclusion from the IPA is apparent from excerpts of her own letters to Lowenstein published in the biography, *La dernière Bonaparte* (Bertin, 1982).

[2\]](#) It is likely that more information will become available in the near future, particularly with the publication of the second volume of Roudinesco's history of psychoanalysis in France.

[3\]](#) For example, in the French play *Phèdre*, by Jean Racine, the heroine in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, expresses her desire by pretending that she loves her husband Theseus, Hippolytus' father, not the way he is now, but the way he was when he was his son's age

(Roudinesco, 1982, p. 158).

[4](#)) Roudinesco (1982, pp. 392-395) points out that although Lacan is usually given credit for this term in psychoanalysis, in fact, he borrowed it from his colleague.

About the Author

JEANINE PARISIEN PLOTTEL, Ph.D., is Professor at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, where she is director of the Twentieth Century Conference. She writes about literature and psychoanalysis, is on the editorial advisory boards of the *Review of Psychoanalytic Books* and *Dada/Surrealism*, and is publisher of *New York Literary Forum*.