

**"DESPAIR, DESPAIR,
DESPAIR... SPARE!"**

AFFECT IN LACANIAN THEORY AND PRACTICE*

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Introduction

On my first visit to Canterbury I came uninvited as one of Henry II's Barons in Jean Anouilh's *Beckett*, to murder the saintly archbishop of that name. I am very happy to be here again, this time at your invitation, and I want to assure you that my mission on this occasion is not to do a hatchet job on affect in the name of some intellectualist overlord who might wish to treat it as a troublesome priest that the analytic kingdom would be well rid of. What I do hope to be able to do is to say something about what the teaching and practice of Jacques Lacan has to contribute to the subject of our discussions at this conference.

I am going to present to you a sort of preliminary collage of viewpoints drawn from a thirty-year period of his work because to the best of my knowledge no-one has yet mapped out the different positions taken by Lacan on affect at different stages of his life and it would be premature for me to pretend that an overall synthesis could be presented at this time. But first to my title.

I chose it, or rather accepted it when it came to me, because it seemed to echo the notions that immediately occurred to me when I was asked to speak to you about affect and in particular about what the work of Jacques Lacan can contribute to our theoretical formulation and to our practical handling of something so central in our personal experience and our analytic work.

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Echo! I use the word advisedly since, as many of you have no doubt recognised, my title is a somewhat truncated quotation from a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins, *The leaden echo and the golden echo*,

*How to keep - is there any, is there none such, nowhere
known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or
catch or key to keep
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty.....from vanishing away?*

The pathos of these opening lines - *How to keep? Is there any way? -* seems to me to catch the flavour of the demand that is often addressed to the analyst by those who approach him or her with the depression or anxiety or confusion brought about by the way in which their hopes of life have been disappointed or indeed threaten to be: one of my most affect-laden patients talks about the sudden attacks of desperation that afflict him in the midst of happy social occasions at the thought that they may never happen again. Is there any way to keep 'beauty, beauty, beauty ... from vanishing away'?

And the response from, the leaden echo is 'no':

*no, no no there's none:
Be beginning to despair, to despair,
Despair, despair, despair, despair.*

It is at this point that the analyst, at least the Lacanian one, whose golden *agalma* has in some mysterious way transformed him for his interlocutor into a subject who knows, can with the poet add his lay to this antiphon of desperation. In the repetitions of despair what he has heard is 'Spare' - a response based on no grasp of meaning and which does not even have the saving grace of etymological justification.

"Spare!"

The second part of the poem - *The Golden Echo* - goes on to develop in Hopkin's enormously allusive style the resonances of this transforming word.

But whatever may be the effectiveness of such word-play in a poem, its legitimacy in psychoanalysis has to be justified from a theoretical and therapeutic point of view. Surely the task of the analyst is to meet this despairing individual on his own ground and try to explore with him the historical basis for his feeling and the ways in which he can to terms with it in the present and in the future. Surely the fundamental message of psychoanalysis is that this is an appropriate and ethical way of proceeding to the alleviation of mental suffering that is being asked of us. And if one proceeds differently is one really practising psychoanalysis.

The core of Lacan's re-reading and re-thinking of Freud is that far from encouraging us to work with suffering individuals, there is no such thing as an individual, that human beings are fundamentally and irremediably divided and that to imagine that the appeal addressed to us emanates from a central unified core is completely to overlook Freud's discovery of the unconscious. The psychoanalyst works on the subject of the unconscious and in order to do this his first theoretical and practical injunction must be to ensure that he does not reinforce the subject's desire to ignore the division within himself.

There is a negative and a positive aspect to this. On the negative side the analyst does not answer the demands that the patient is making on him. This would be to ratify the demand as the expression of a need that has to be met, a need that in analysis is usually expressed in affective terms: I am anxious, depressed, lonely, in pain. But on the positive side the analyst listens to the demand in order to hear in it another voice, the voice of the subject of the unconscious, which manifests itself classically in what are called the formations of the unconscious - dreams, parapraxes, symptoms, jokes - but which may also be detected in any particular verbal idiosyncrasy, even repetition, such as in Hopkin's poem.

I have tried to condense into a few sentences both the essence of what Lacan criticises in contemporary psychoanalysis and the essentials of the method that he argues should be reintroduced if the discipline inaugurated by Freud is to attain its rightful place among the sciences of the human subject and in therapeutic practice.

Lacan's emphasis on the centrality of speech and language in psychoanalysis, from the beginning of his teaching in 1953, has frequently led

to accusations that his theory and practice neglect the more substantial and carnal aspects of human reality. In particular his focus on linguistics and logic is thought to lessen the importance of the affective dimension and to lead to a sterile analysis from which anger, shame, pity, indignation, envy and jealousy have been banished.

This paper will suggest that while such a reading of Lacan is understandable in view of the way his work has been presented, especially in the English-speaking world, it is in fact a partial and misleading one.

The dichotomy between speech and affect is spurious and, what is more, rather curious in view of the fact that the list of emotions I have just given - anger, shame, pity, etc - are a selection of those listed by Aristotle not in his treatise *On Animals* where some of the more carnal analysts might think of looking for them but in the second part of his *Art of Rhetoric*

The link between speech and affect is also stressed by Freud when he talks about the way in which unpleasure can be transformed into pleasure - and it is noticeable how frequently the word-play type of interpretation lightens the analysand's mood or can even make him laugh. I am quoting Freud's article on *Repression*:

Special techniques have been evolved, with the purpose of bringing about such changes in the play of mental forces that what would otherwise give rise to unpleasure may on this occasion give rise to pleasure; and, whenever a technical device of this sort comes into operation, the repression of an instinctual representative which would otherwise be repudiated is removed. These techniques have till now only been studied in any detail in jokes.¹

Expunging affect

The notion that Lacan was completely uninterested in affect and indeed had a positive distaste for it derives mainly from the fact that he refused to

¹ S. Freud, S.E., XIV, p. 151.

use the term in his famous Rome Report, *The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis*.

Perhaps the best account of Lacan's position with regard to the term at this time is to be found in an exchange between him and Serge Leclaire towards the end of the Seminar on *Freud's Papers on Technique* in July 1954. Leclaire is trying to formulate his problem about Lacan's notion of transference - another essential dimension of analysis that he is supposed to ignore:

When one looks at what is written on transference, one always gets the impression that the phenomenon of transference falls into the category of manifestations of an affective order, of emotions, in contrast with other manifestations of an intellectual order, such as procedures aimed at understanding, for instance. Hence one always finds it a bit difficult to give an account of your view of the transference, in the current, ordinary terminology. Definitions of transference always say that it is a question of emotion, of feeling, of an affective phenomenon, which is categorically opposed to everything which, in analysis, can be called intellectual.

Lacan's response is a lengthy one but the key elements that concern us can be summarised as follows, in his own words:

I urge you, each of you, at the heart of your own search for the truth, to renounce quite radically - if only provisionally, to see if one doesn't gain by dispensing with it - the use of an opposition like that of the affective and the intellectual... This opposition is one of those most contrary to analytic experience and most unenlightening when it comes to understanding it.

and a little later,

I believe that it [affect] is a term that one must completely expunge from our documents (*papiers*).

What he understands by affect at this stage is perhaps more clearly hinted at in his introduction to Jean Hyppolite's presentation of Freud's paper on *Negation*. Hyppolite was France's best known Hegelian and Lacan justified his request to such an eminent dialectician to comment on the Freudian text in the following terms:

Our experience is not that of affective smoochy-woochy. - [I have to trust John Forrester's translation of *un frotti-frotta affectif* because I could not find it in any of my dictionaries]. - It is not our job to provoke in the subject the return of more or less evanescent, confused experiences, in which the whole magic of psychoanalysis is supposed to consist.

So affect is an 'evanescent, confused experience' unworthy of inclusion in any attempt to ground psychoanalysis as a legitimate scientific enterprise and there is praise for Freud who, far from seeing the affective as the psychic reality that lay behind verbalisations and intellectualisations, always stressed its conventional and artificial character.

But the renunciation of the term proves in fact to be only a provisional and temporary one for Lacan and while he continued to argue that the emphasis on affect in contemporary psychoanalysis was the result of a debasement of the theory and the technique, in his seminar on *Ethics* in 1960 he was promising his audience that 'We will perhaps construct this psychology of affects together some day'. His argument has moved on from a total repudiation of the category to the notion that the way that it is formulated in psychoanalysis is incoherent and confused and in need of revision.

But before advancing into the theory of affect that Lacan is poised to construct let us consider the paradox that there was a very productive period of his work when he by no means displayed the scorn for affect which characterises these early years of the 1950's.

Anxiety, jealousy and the affective density of reality

Lacan's essay on *The Family* was originally published in the *Encyclopedic Française* in 1938 and remained buried in that sombre set of tomes, largely unread and, to the best of my knowledge, unreferred to by Lacan from the post-war period up to time of his death. When I came across it more or less by accident in the 1970's it struck me as the ideal introduction to Lacan for the English-speaking clinicians with whom I was working and it has remained a key text in our Masters of Psychotherapy program for the past 14 years. It was only while preparing this paper when I was beginning to think a little more about Lacan and affect that I realised the source of its attraction: it is shot through with concrete clinical references to affect and emotion in a way that none of Lacan's other published work is.

The sub-headings of the original encyclopaedia article tell the story: the imago of the maternal breast; the appetite for death; the nostalgia for wholeness; jealousy, the archetype of social sentiments; the meaning of primal aggressivity; the maternal origin of the archaic super-ego; the existential drama of the individual; neurosis as a defence against anxiety. Here are topics that we can relate to, as opposed to *The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis* or *The agency of the letter in the unconscious*. They are worthy of Klein or Winnicott and it is perhaps for this reason that they were totally expunged when the essay eventually came to be republished by Lacan's heirs in 1984. It may also be why the translation I made of it and which was due to be published by Blackwell more than ten years ago has never seen the light of day.

The conventional and artificial character of affect noted by Freud is one Lacan stresses from the beginning of the work where one of the first functions that he isolates for the family is 'the organisation of emotions according to types conditioned by the environment which is ... the foundation of sentiments'. Conventional and artificial or not, affect plays a major role in these early formulations with Lacan offering to explain their origin in terms of the existential drama of the subject as his emerging sensibility confronts different family structures at different moments of his development.

Now it is curious that Lacan should give such immediate prominence to the notion of sentiment which the pre-war psychologists defined as the

central affective relationship that links a subject to a person, a thing or an abstract idea. Maternal, paternal and filial sentiments are the affective cement that bind the family unit together even though for Lacan they are often the inverted image of unconscious complexes.

It is around this notion of complex that Lacan organises his whole study of the family beginning with the child who is reared in it and ending with the adults who reproduce it. Psychic development - a notion that later would become taboo for true Lacanians - is seen here as being primarily structured by a series of dialectical conflicts between the child and the family environment. These crises are organised around three crucial phases which give rise to the internalisation of three complexes which are derived from specific family constellations: the weaning or maternal complex; the intrusion or fraternal complex and the Oedipus or paternal complex.

This is all the more relevant to our theme in that a complex is primarily defined as linking 'in a fixed form a group of reactions that can involve all organic functions ranging from emotion to object-adapted behaviour'. Again, the affective, emotional, non-cognitive dimension is given the dominant role.

The weaning complex 'forms the basis of the most archaic and stable sentiments uniting the individual to the family'. It fixes in the psyche the feeding relationship which is the primordial form of the maternal imago and the acceptance or refusal of its interruption is a major factor in the formation of the complex. This weaning from the mother is for Lacan only a replay of 'an earlier, more painful weaning that is of greater vital importance: that which at birth separates the infant from the womb, a premature separation from which comes a malaise that no maternal care can compensate for'.

The first affective phenomenon to appear is anxiety and for Lacan it prolongs itself into the first six months of the infant's life, a period that is painfully marked by the asphyxia of birth, the sensation of cold, and labyrinthic discomfort - all consequences of the inadequate adaptation of the infant to the extra-uterine world. This is counteracted to some extent by the awareness of the presence of caring others, a type of archaic knowledge which Lacan says is 'barely distinguishable from affective adaptation' and indeed 'the power, richness and duration of maternal sentiments' is so different from the instinctive behaviour of animals that it creates an affective disposition that he claims is at the root of ...

... the nostalgias of humanity: the metaphysical mirage of universal harmony; the mystical abyss of affective fusion; the social Utopia of totalitarian dependency - all derived from the longings for a paradise lost before birth and from the most obscure aspirations for death.

I have spent rather a long time on the weaning complex because as well as providing an account of the origin and form of the most basic and long-lasting human affects its prominence also counteracts a common belief that the mother-child relationship is ignored by Lacan. The affective correlates of the two other complexes will be described more briefly but in a way that I hope will suggest to you the importance that Lacan accords to them.

It is curious that oral aggression plays so little a part in the account of the weaning complex but Lacan's debt to Melanie Klein - who by 1938 had developed many of her fundamental theses - becomes much more evident in the description of the complex of intrusion where the primary assertion is that 'the archetype of *social* sentiments' (my italics) is jealousy. This jealousy is rooted not in a Darwinian biological struggle for survival but in a mental identification with the child's most important libidinal object at this stage at which it is trying to achieve a narcissistic unity - the sibling or the mirror image. The reality of the fragmented subject's desire to restore his lost unity is demonstrated in particular by his jubilant and triumphant recognition of his image in the mirror - or the looking glass, as Lacan translated it in the title which is all that remains of his paper to the Marienbad Congress where the notion was first introduced. Echoes of Alice. And this jubilant recognition is cemented by the assent that he finds in the look of the mother to whom he turns for confirmation.

Now I am recounting something that is familiar to many of you because I had not noticed until recently that what happens between the child and the mirror-image is described here by Lacan as 'affective identification' - a dimension which is almost entirely elided in later accounts of the experience. Even though unity and coherence have been achieved only in the imaginary the illuminating intuition which is the core of the mirror-stage, the image that has been internalised brings the weaning complex to an end and forms the

bed-rock of a sense of narcissistic satisfaction which cannot be put into words. The drama of jealousy is further highlighted as this inchoate ego is confronted by alter egos with the main motor of socialisation being the 'jealous sympathy' that each of us experiences for our fellows.

The Oedipus complex introduces a further array of affects with sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and aggressivity against same sex parent leading to the terrors of castration anxiety. But the main point that we will single out is the role of this complex in the constitution of human reality which, Lacan's affirms ...

... cannot be dealt with in terms of an intellectualist psychogenesis; it consists in bestowing a certain affective depth to objects. It is a dimension which, though forming the basis of all subjective understanding, would not be distinguished from it as a phenomenon if the clinical experience of mental illnesses did not help us to grasp it as such, by proposing a whole series of degraded forms at the limit of comprehensibility.

The affective isolation of the mentally ill from their fellows or indeed from their own bodies is attributed by Lacan to a failure in the process of sublimation which gives us our feel for the real world. It is a commonplace of clinical work to find people whose intellectual ego functions are perfectly intact but whose sense of reality is, nevertheless, insecure. The strange, uncanny sense that very often introduces a psychotic illness is thus attributed by Lacan not to a failure in cognitive or intellectual functioning but to this other dimension which is developed with the successful completion of the Oedipal phase and gives to the objects of our world a certain density and perspective which makes them worthy of our respect.

"An affect which does not deceive"

With the range of affects he considers in such a systematic way in *The Family*, Lacan might well be thought to have had within his grasp the possibility of constructing a systematic hierarchy of affects based on the dialectical emergence of successive complexes. But as we have seen his initial

postwar writings took him instead in the direction of an attack on the whole notion of affect and a suggestion that it should be removed from the vocabulary of his followers.

Some years ago, in a lecture given in Dublin, Marcel Czermak, a clinical director of the prestigious Hopital Sainte Anne, responded to a criticism from the floor about Lacan's ignoring of affect by affirming, to our astonishment, that he had in fact a general theory of affect. This had been developed not in the classificatory style of a David Rapaport or on the model of Descartes' treatise *On the passions of the soul* but around anxiety which he described as 'an affect which does not deceive'.

The primary definition of anxiety for Lacan is that it is the sensation of the desire of the Other and to give an initial illustration of what he means by this he asks us to imagine ourselves confronted by a gigantic, man-sized, praying mantis, an insect best known for the female's unsettling habit of biting off the head of her sexual partner after they have mated. The multi-faceted eyes of this voracious creature offer us no image of ourselves and no sense of an assent given to our existence. This is the kind of situation, negating the jubilation of the mirror stage, in which the sensation of the desire of the Other completely swamps any sense of stability and allows the subject to be invaded by the highest degree of anxiety.

A more subtle approach is given in his commentary of Freud's text on the uncanny which Lacan argues is the best possible introduction to the problem of anxiety and thus to all problems of affective life. *The Uncanny* is described by Freud as a feeling lying within the field of what is frightening and related to *Angst*. It is a phenomenon whose core Freud claims he finds hard to identify in everyday or clinical experience because of his own lack of sensitivity to it and so he proposes to grasp it initially in the fictional works of authors who know how to instil in their readers a feeling of dread about some person or situation that has long been familiar. Another example of the intimate relationship between language and affect.

In E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale of *The Sandman*, Nathaniel's mother assures him that the phrase 'The Sandman is coming' is only a figure of speech for saying 'It's time for bed' but the nurse gives him a different version: 'He's a wicked man who comes when children won't go to bed and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes so that they jump out of their heads all bleeding'.

This image of eyes plucked from their orbits and thrown on the ground is there of course from the very origins of psychoanalysis in the myth of Oedipus. For Lacan it is the surest key to understanding the phenomenon of anxiety and he struggles to convey what this atrocious image implies:

He who possessed the object of desire and of the law, he who enjoyed his mother, Oedipus to give him his name, takes this further step, he sees what he has done. You know^T what happens then. How choose the word, how can one say what is of the order of the unsayable and whose image nevertheless I want to make emerge for you? The fact that he sees what he has done has as a consequence that he sees - this is the word before which I stumble - the moment afterwards his own eyes swollen with their vitreous humours on the ground, a confused pile of filth since - how can we put it? - because since he had torn his eyes from their sockets he had quite obviously lost his sight. And nevertheless it is not that he does not see them, see them as such, as the finally unveiled cause-object of the final, the ultimate ... concupiscence, that of wanting to know. The tradition even says that it is from that moment on that he really becomes a seer.

The moment of anxiety is not the mutilation, the plucking out of the eyes, which Freud overhastily reduced to a castration-equivalent: 'It is that an impossible sight threatens you of your own eyes on the ground'.

This same sight is the very one that threatens the young Nathaniel when despite his dread he spies on his father and the lawyer Coppelius - the Sandman - at their mysterious nightly experiments and is thrown into a state of panic and delirium as redhot coals are about to be dropped into his eyes.

There is a second moment of horror when as a student he falls in love with the human doll Olympia who is being constructed in the apartment opposite and learns that the eyes which had so entranced him in her had been stolen from him by Coppola, a new incarnation of the Sandman. After Coppola had quarrelled with his fellow-creator Spalazani and fled, 'Nathaniel saw' - an impossible sight - 'a pair of blood-flecked eyes were lying on the

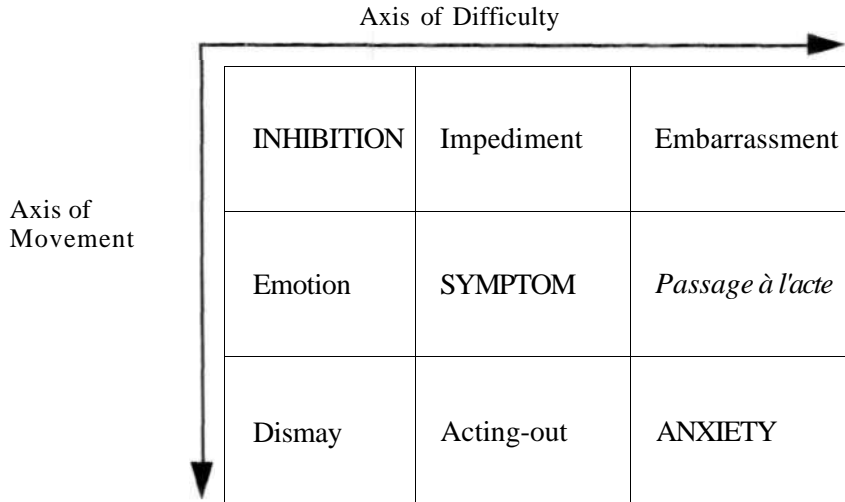
ground and staring up at him'. This time the madness that gripped him took the form of a murderous attack on Spalazini which led to his incarceration in the madhouse.

The final episode is when Nathaniel, now recovered, climbs a tower with his betrothed and sees through a spyglass the figure of Coppélius approaching. His eyes begin to roll, fire flashes and glows behind them and in an attack of mania he tries to murder his beloved and finally, with one last look exchanged with Coppélius and a cry of 'Love-ly eyes! Love-ly eyes!', he throws himself to his death.

Freud concludes that the feeling of uncanniness is directly attached to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes which he describes as a 'mitigated' form of castration. I believe that Lacan's interest in the uncanny comes from the fit he detects between it and o-objects that he is developing as the causes of desire and the objects of anxiety. Rather than always reducing anxiety to a fear of castration, Lacan insists on establishing what he calls the look' as an object which of itself is capable of being anxiogenic. It would take us too far to discuss the nature of the o-objects in this paper, so suffice it to say that rather than classifying and hierarchising the whole range of affective states that he discussed in *The Family*, Lacan has chosen the path of focusing on the objects that are their cause. Here we are limiting ourselves to the look and its position as object of anxiety as a paradigm for the generation of affect.

The coordinates of anxiety

It is now time to turn to the matrix, or table, of the coordinates of anxiety which Lacan began to present to his listeners in the very first session of his seminar on *Anxiety* and which formed the basis for Marcel Czermak's claim that he did indeed have a general theory of affect. This table was presented to the seminar, element by element, over a six-week period and you will have to excuse me for putting it before you in its completed form without this preparation:



In his introduction to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Strachey notes the unusual difficulty Freud had in unifying the three terms of the title. Freud himself remarked that the elements of the triad did not seem to be on the same plane and it is perhaps this remark that suggested to Lacan to place them at different levels as the diagonal of a square and associate each of them with coordinates that are distributed along a horizontal and vertical axis.

At first glance some of the elements that occupy the different boxes may appear to be unrelated to affect but I think you will see that each of them has an affective component and since other attempts to make sense of affect have been so unsuccessful perhaps this one may deserve your consideration.

The starting point for Lacan's analysis is the term inhibition, a notion so familiar to us that we may fail to see that Freud's use of it in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* refers mainly to movement, either literally, as in an hysterical inhibition of walking, or metaphorically, in the sense that every exercise of a function, as for example digestion, implies movement. But for Lacan the notion of inhibition can be made more relevant clinically by explicating the dimension of difficulty that it also contains. His first step in bringing more coherence to the terms of inhibition, symptoms and anxiety is to unpack the notion of inhibition along these two axes of difficulty and

movement and to demonstrate visually, as it were, the different aspects of inhibition that refer most directly to symptoms and anxiety.

His first move is to extract from inhibition a notion described by the French word *empêchement*, translated here by 'impediment' which in fact shares its etymological derivation from *impedicare*, to have one's foot shackled or caught in a trap - a situation which is certainly not without its affective correlates. As the matrix indicates, impediment suggests an inhibition that has symptomatic overtones, as for example in the case of a speech impediment where one senses not just a simple lowering of function but the interference of the unconscious in the production of phonic material.

Lacan now takes the further step of isolating the aspect of inhibition that has a direct reference to anxiety. His choice of the word 'embarrassment' may initially surprise us until we restore to embarrassment its strong sense of the subjective experience of being hampered, encumbered or perplexed in the face of outside forces. Embarrassment arises when you no longer know what to do with yourself, when you no longer find aiming behind which to barricade yourself. An experience with which we can all identify.

If we now turn to the movement axis we find a further aspect of inhibition designated by Lacan as emotion. What he wants to isolate is the experience of being knocked out of a movement geared towards a particular goal: *ex-movere*, emotion. One reference-point he returns to is Goldstein's notion of the catastrophic reaction, the vacillating, Inadequate, inconsistent and generally retarded behaviour of someone who has been subjected to a severe shock for which he is unprepared and with which he is unable to cope. Anxiety has been defined as a failure of the 'hystericisation' which would have allowed the subject to remain in the imaginary of an ancient drama rather than face the real. Emotion can thus be situated in the matrix as something of the order of symptom which has not reached the extreme distress experienced at the level of anxiety.

Perhaps the greatest benefit to be drawn from the introduction of emotion at this point in the matrix is to highlight the point that for Lacan anxiety is something other than emotion, a very surprising and provocative suggestion for psychoanalysts who generally speaking do not distinguish between feelings, emotions and affects and are thus led into confusions of diagnosis and treatment.

The final point on the axis of movement brings us once again to a coordinate of inhibition that is directly related to anxiety. The word *émoi* used by Lacan, sounds a little bit like emotion in French, but it has the very specific connotation of a sudden and complete loss of power. It is this suddenness which in French best distinguishes it from emotion which can be a permanent or long-lasting state. Once again there is an English word which completely captures this nuance and has the added charm of sharing the same etymological derivation. That word, which has a much longer history in the language than either emotion or anxiety, is dismay. It appears first in the 13th century as a verb meaning to discourage completely and in the 14th becomes a noun describing the state of being completely crushed or overwhelmed. Like embarrassment it has lost some of its force in popular usage where it frequently means no more than a state of mild disappointment, but if we keep to the correct usage we will find dismay a very useful term for thinking about clinical conditions clients describe in various ways. The affect-laden patient I referred to in my opening remarks is particularly liable to being suddenly wiped out by a chance event or remark.

Acting-out and passage a l'acte

There are two final coordinates of anxiety in the matrix which have in common the use of action to stave off the encounter with the real that is dreaded in anxiety.

Curiously, the French have not found a suitable word to express Freud's *agieren* and have adopted the English 'acting-out'. On the other hand there is a term consecrated in French psychiatric usage which includes such actions as fugues or impulsive suicide attempts and for which we have no inclusive term in English. I suggest that we reverse the French practice and adopt the term of *passage a l'acte* to describe these phenomena.

Freud's *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman* published the year after *The Uncanny* provides a vivid example of the distinction between the two forms of action. Here the young woman who has been scandalising her parents by publicly flaunting her devotion to a notorious *demi-mondaine* makes a sudden and very serious suicide attempt after her father had cast a furious look at her and her companion when he

passed them on the street. The irate look had the function of demonstrating that she had become nothing in her father's eyes, of producing a fading in her subjectivity which no longer left her a place in the human drama and gave rise to the sudden impulse to leave the stage. Throwing herself over a railway bridge was interpreted by Freud as a representation of giving birth, an ambiguity allowed by the German *niederkommen*, but for Lacan this young woman, who is clinically one of the most serious cases Freud mentions in his writings, was dropping out of ex-sistence in a much more structural way.

While she was publicly parading her love for the woman so disapproved of by her parents she was acting-out, playing her defiant part in the oedipal drama, revenging herself on a father who had sired a child when she thought he loved her rather than her mother. But when the irate look of that same father was followed by an impatient rejection by the older woman her reaction was a *passage à l'acte*, a brutal resigning of her part in the casual comedy, a suicidal leap that was intended to remove her permanently from the scene.

So much for Lacan's general theory of affect as it was presented in his 1962-63 seminar on Anxiety. Lacan himself described this seminar as 'by far the best that I have given' but you will be forgiven for not being aware of its contents since like many of Lacan's more clinically relevant works it remains unpublished.

Las **Meninas**

To close, let me tell you about the point that our own seminar group is at in our project of reading Lacan's seminars chronologically, because I think it has an unexpected relevance to our discussion of affects and also may perhaps be of interest to the School of Arts and Image Studies who are the joint hosts of this conference. I am talking about Lacan's study of Velasquez's *Las Meninas - The Maids of Honour*.

It is said that in the days of Generalissimo Franco there was a plaque next to it in the Prado officially declaring it to be the most important painting in the world, and even though the plaque has been removed I am reliably informed by my art historian friends that this is one point on which they would be inclined to agree with the judgment of the Franco regime.

Lacan spends almost a half-dozen sessions discussing it in his 1965-66 seminar on *The Object of Psychoanalysis* but I have only been able to find one article in the psychoanalytic literature that adverts to this discussion and the art historian Hubert Damish in his much-praised work on *The Origin of Perspective* does not allude to it, even though he is very appreciative of Lacan's theory of art as it has appeared in the seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. All of this to say that it is virgin territory and might deserve the attention of those who know much more about art and images than I can ever aspire to.

The discussion of *Las Meninas* is a further index of a shift by Lacan from his initial propositions centred around the aphorism that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' to a focus that also accommodates what he describes as the visual structure of the subject and the place that it occupies in his relationship to the Other. He is moving from linguistic transformations to spatial ones, from the manipulation of verbal material to the projection of surfaces onto one another, from jokes to paintings.

His interest in painting derives from a conviction that it more than any other medium allows there to be highlighted the function of the look, which he considers to be one of the fundamental objects of psychoanalysis. Despite Freud's allusions to it in the article on *The Uncanny* and his subtle treatment of voyeurism and exhibitionism in *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* the look has never been isolated as such within psychoanalysis. However, Lacan had been greatly struck by the way in which his friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty had made it a key element in his posthumous work on *The Visible and the Invisible*.

What he is trying to grasp is the way in which the look allows for a better articulation of the structure of the irrevocably divided subject of psychoanalysis. This subject cannot be assimilated to the classical subject of knowledge who reflects in his conscious representations the reality of the world around him. Classically, this subject in front of a painting is represented by an eye which synthesises the impressions received from the painting in a retinal image. But just as there is an unconscious subject which gets the point of a joke before any intellectual grasp of its meaning, so also there is a sense in which a painting has an effect on the subject which goes far beyond the production of ocular images.

Hence Lacan's radical distinction between seeing, which is centred on the eye as organiser, and looking, which he would argue is prior to the physiology of the eye and originates in a sensitivity to light. This sensitivity develops into a sense of being looked at which does not require the perception of the eye of another but can arise, as Sartre remarked, from a rustling of leaves or the sound of a footstep followed by silence.

The importance of *Las Meninas* in isolating the function of the look was drawn to Lacan's attention by Michel Foucault's treatment of it in the opening chapter of *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses)*, published during the course of the seminar. But while Foucault's emphasis appears to be on the function of the painting as a representation of classic representation, Lacan stresses that it manages to have its effect on us - an effect that he describes as fascinating, disturbing, uncanny and gut-wrenching - by making present precisely what cannot be represented.

A painting for him is not a representation - the images that are represented on its canvas are not the essential thing - but a representative of representation, which is how he translates Freud's *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*. Lacan's interpretation of this term has generated much controversy in French psychoanalytic circles but let us simply try to see how he applies it in the present case. If the picture does not have its effect on us by virtue of the images on the canvas by what means does it work? Lacan plays on a whole variety of registers including the way in which the scopoc drive which inhabits us is confronted by something in the picture which means that we cannot see what we are looking at - and this is the primary sense he gives to the back of the easel which occupies the left of the painting as we are looking at it. Velasquez' purpose in including it was surely not to give us a representation of the back of an easel!

The painting has its effect principally through the making present of the look of the painter in the painting, and this look is made present in *Las Meninas* not in the eyes of the self-portrait of Velasquez which occupies such a prominent part in the picture, nor through the much more obscure look of the King and Queen at the back of the picture, but through the effects of the perspective which turns this apparently well-ordered, almost conventional painting into something that unsettles anyone who opens him or herself to its influence.

We 'loafers' who amble around the Prado gazing at paintings that seem passively to await our scrutiny and our greater or lesser degree of comprehension, do not realise that the painter of genius has laid a trap for us, - that the painting looks at us as much, much more, than we look at it. The stratagems of perspective used by painters since the time of Alberti are not simply there in order to allow the viewer to organise the material before him in a series of harmonious planes. They are there much more importantly to allow the painter to be present in the picture and to choose the point from which he in his turn will continue to look at us down through the centuries.

To the innocent who thinks that there is a reciprocity between the viewer and the painter - which would be exemplified in *Las Meninas* by an exchange with the self-portrait of Velasquez - Lacan makes the painter respond: 'You do not see me from where I am looking at you'. Which might be paraphrased:

I, through my complete mastery of the techniques of perspective, have placed myself, my look, at a point which is actually outside the frame in which my painting is apparently contained, and thus destroy for you your illusion of being an autonomous ego who stands back from my work in order to assess my purpose in creating it.

This destruction has had its effects even on members of our own group who have only seen reproductions of the painting, but who confess to feelings of vertigo and disorientation as they become more open to it. These more sensitive souls understand very clearly why in the Prado there is, Lacan notes, a mirror in close proximity to the painting which allows people who have been somewhat overwhelmed by it to find their bearings again. The mirror by reproducing the perspectives of the real world, as opposed to the constructed ones of the painting, restores the look to its habitual latency and allows life to go on in its usual way.

This is heady stuff and it subverts our usual notion of the rationally self-conscious subject standing in front of an inert object - which is precisely why Lacan uses it to substantiate the primary finding of psychoanalysis regarding the *Spaltung*, the split in the subject. But can we say anything more

specific about the way in which Velasquez achieves his effect? Let us go straight to the core of Lacan's thesis which he develops over several weeks.

To the division in the subject there corresponds a division, though one of a different kind, in the painting. The painting is in fact constructed around two axes. One of these goes from the elbow of the man leaving the scene through the lighted doorway at the back, to the foot of the easel whose back dominates the left-hand side of the painting. The second begins in the eyes of Velasquez and passes through the little group of the Infanta, her maids of honour, the dwarfs and the dog and heads towards a point that is outside the frame of the painting. The inclusion of the space outside the painting - the space we inhabit as spectators - within the painting is one of the devices used to disturb us. This, according to Lacan, is the first instance in the history of painting in which a technical device is used to include the spectator within the painting, and the breaching of the barrier between us and it makes us very unsure of our own ground.

But there is a further point. The two lines dividing the painting cross one another, although not on the same plane, and provide the axes for the construction of a hyperbola, the two branches of which head off to infinity, reproducing in a very uncanny way the schema that Lacan had given for the way in which the world of the psychotic comes apart when he has lost his moorings to reality by foreclosing the name of the father.

It is no accident that this painting was made by the King's painter at one of the darkest moments in Spanish history when Philip IV, whom we dimly see at the back with his wife, was in despair at the way in which he had wasted the resources of the empire, and spent many hours weeping before the tomb he had constructed for himself seeing no future for himself or for his house. And yet in spite of it all the genius of Velasquez was able to produce a work of art which while fully exposing those who would look at it down through the centuries to their own fragility and mortality, nevertheless affirms in its own way a message of hope. It is not for nothing that it has been called 'the theology of painting'.

Spare!

Conclusion

Having begun with Thomas A'Beckett, I might be expected to finish on Samuel B (Barclay) Beckett but I prefer to end with another echo to counterbalance that of Hopkin's: William Butler Yeats' *The Man and the Echo*. Once again it is a meditation of the power of language and its capacity to generate feeling and action, this time by an old man who has begun to dread the effect his words may have had:

*I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lays wrecked
And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.*

Echo

Lie down and die.

But that is not the poet's last word.

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