

**ON A DISCOURSE THAT MIGHT NOT BE A SEMBLANCE:
BOOK XVIII, 1971: A COLLAGE***

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is modest. It is to stitch together with minimal commentary a selection of the sometimes clear, sometimes obscure, but always provocative passages that risk being lost in the labyrinthine argumentation of this seminar. This may spare potential readers of the seminar some of the confusion and bafflement experienced by our reading group as we struggled to make some sense of it in the academic year of 2001-2002.

Perplexity and bewilderment were also the lot of Lacan's original audience. He chides them on more than one occasion for wanting to know too quickly what he is getting at and how they are to situate themselves in it: '... in no domain of science does one have this mapping, this map, to tell us where we are ... once you begin to speak of a map, you are no longer doing science but philosophy'.¹

Despite this admonition I am going to try, in this introduction, first of all to put the seminar in its context and then choose a certain number of themes that run through it that may help readers to find their way through the maze.

This is a little different to Lacan's unapologetic approach:

... what I contributed the last time left some people a little bit perplexed. Everyone knows that I always finish what I

¹ Talk given to the 9th annual congress of APPI, Saturday 16th November 2002.

¹ J. Lacan. On a Discourse that might not be a Semblance. Book XV Tfl, seminar of the 10th February 71, p.5. Unpublished Translation C. Gallagher.

have to tell you in a little gallop, because perhaps I dragged things out too much, dawdled along earlier, some people tell me, what matter, everyone has his own rhythm. That is how I make love.²

Context

We are in 1971 in the eighteenth year of the Seminar and the 13th of April will see Lacan celebrating his 70th birthday. This seminar is the shortest to date with only ten sessions which run to barely 170 pages in the unpublished French edition that we mainly used in preparing a translation. So the seminar is easy enough to map out: there are sessions on the second and third Wednesdays of January, February, March, May and June. April is omitted for reasons that will be explained shortly.

A complication should be noted in that the sessions of 12th May and 9th June were later reproduced in written form. But our experience is that both *Lituraterre* and *A man and a woman* are easier to approach as they were initially spoken, especially since Lacan's reworking of these texts makes the English translations virtually unreadable.

During this year Lacan seems to have other things on his mind besides the seminar. He was increasingly conscious of his advancing years and of the amount of work that still remained to be done. Elizabeth Roudinesco entitles the chapter dealing with this phase of his life *The search for the absolute* and this search seems to have prompted Lacan's return to his old interest in Chinese and Japanese philosophy, language and culture and in particular to the writings of Mencius.

I have noticed one thing, which is that perhaps I am a Lacanian because I formerly did Chinese. By that I mean, I notice in re-reading things like that, that I had gone over, mumbled through anyway like a like a simpleton, with

² *ibid*, p. 4

donkeys ears, I notice in re-reading them now that, they are perfectly consistent with what I am telling you.³

In April he made his second visit to Japan where his *Ecrits* had just been translated and returned to his seminar, like an explorer of old, full of his wonderful discoveries. In particular there is a new use for the notion of the *littoral* which struck him on the flight over the Siberian plain as giving a sense of the boundary that exists between knowledge and enjoyment.

But despite these esoteric advances he also praised the members of his School who were reworking *The Direction of the Treatment* and he intervened on a number of occasions in the course of the 4-day Congress on *Psychoanalytic Technique* held in Aix-en-Provence in May.

Themes

Trying to find chapter headings under which to organise the content of the seminar is a hopeless task. But I am going to make a shot at it in the full knowledge that it means separating out themes that Lacan deliberately intertwines while he continues, as in recent years, to move away from the Oedipal clinic towards a clinic based on writing.

I suggest a division into *four sections*, which will be presented mainly as a collage of quotations which do not follow the chronological order of the seminar. This in the hope that Lacan's own words, even when they are not clear, will play the role they played for his 800 strong audience, of first provoking and fascinating them and then of encouraging the huge theoretical and clinical effort that continues to this day.

Firstly then, a consideration of the strange word *semblance* (*semblant*) that features in the enigmatic title of this seminar.

Second, an attempt to pull together some of the often extraordinary remarks on sexual identity and *sexual relationships* that culminate in the first writing of the formulae on sexuation.

³ *ibid*, session of 20th January 71, p. 17.

This leads directly to the link that Lacan tries to develop between *writing*, castration and sexual enjoyment including an introduction to Chinese calligraphy and a re-reading of *The Purloined Letter*.

Finally, a return with Lacan to clinical questions and in particular to some very striking formulations on the lessons *hysteria* continues to teach psychoanalysts, if they have ears to hear.

A discourse that might not be a ... 'semblance'¹?

Semblant is a common enough word in everyday French. You can *faire semblant* to do something or *faire semblant* to be sick - although it is not in this everyday sense that Lacan intends the word to be understood here.

In English *semblance* has a much more literary ring to it - *bearing the semblance of an angel and the heart of a devil*. I could only find one reference to *semblance* in *the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, the well known scene in *As you like it* where Rosalind and Celia are setting off on a hazardous journey and fear that their youthful beauty will attract the unwelcome attentions of brigands along the route. Celia favours dressing down and smearing their faces with mud, but Rosalind has another solution:

(Act I Scene III 123ff4)

Were it not better,
Because that I am more than common tall,
That I did suit me all points like a man?
A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
A boar spear in my hand;
And, - in my heart
Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will, -
We'll have a swashing and a martial outside,
As many other mannish cowards have
That do outface it with their semblances.

Henry Krutzen's exhaustive index of the seminars⁴ shows only one appearance of the word *semblant* before the present seminar and points out that it is frequently used only between January '71 and June 72. This tends to question the view that it relates to the register of the imaginary as opposed to the symbolic and ultimately to the Mirror Phase. In fact it refers much more directly to the Four Discourses that Lacan had developed the previous year in *L'envers de la Psychoanalyse* and it is in the context of these that it should be understood. Lacan will refine his four discourses in the coming years but here he presents a first modification by replacing the Agent - placed on the top left of the quadruped and occupied variously by Si, S2, \$ and o - with the Semblance.

Lacan does not offer a definition of semblance - this would be a philosophical rather than a scientific way of proceeding - but rather a number of examples that are worth meditating on. The origin of scientific thinking is very specifically linked to semblances such as stellar constellations, rainbows and thunder:

If there is ... a sustainable discourse, specifically that of science, it is perhaps no harm to remember that it started very specially from the consideration of semblances. The start of scientific thinking, I am talking about history, is what? The observation of the stars, the constellations, namely, the very type of a semblance. What do the first steps of modern physics turn around at the start? ... Atmospheric phenomena (*meteores*). Descartes wrote a *Traite des Meteores*. The decisive step, one of the decisive steps turned around the theory of the rainbow ... it is something that is defined by being qualified as such as a semblance. No one has ever believed, even among the most primitive

⁴ H. Krutzen. *Jacques Lacan, Seminaire 1952-1980, Index Referential*, Anthropos, Paris, 2000.

people, that the rainbow was something out there, set up in a curve. It is questioned as an atmospheric phenomenon.

The most characteristic atmospheric phenomenon, the most original one, the one that without any doubt is linked to, has the very structure of discourse, is thunder. If I ended my Rome discourse on the evocation of thunder, it is absolutely not like that, by fantasy. No Name of the Father is tenable without thunder, and everyone knows very well that we do not even know what thunder is the sign of. It is the very figure of the semblance.

And a little later:

No discourse that evokes nature ever did anything other than start from what in nature is a semblance. Because nature is full of them. I am not talking about animal nature, which quite obviously superabounds with them. This is even what ensures that there are gentle dreamers who think that the entire animal nature, from fish to birds, sings divine praises, it is self-evident. Every time they open like that, something, a mouth, an operculum, it is a manifest semblance ...⁵

Which evoked for me the words of Joseph Mary Plunkett, one of the poets executed in the 1916 rebellion:

I see his blood upon the rose And in the
stars the glory of his eyes His body
gleams amid eternal snows His tears fall
from the skies.

⁵ J. Lacan. op cit. 13th January 71, pp. 8-9.

But what relation is there between this semblance and the truth? The title of our Congress might lead one to think that truth is the opposite of semblance or make-believe. But for Lacan 'Truth is not the contrary of semblance ... The semblance is only stated starting from the truth'.⁶ This is particularly so in the relationships between men and women. There is no discourse that is not a semblance and it is in discourse that 'natural men and women' have to valorise themselves as such.⁷

Sexual relations

Biology vs Psychoanalysis

Lacan begins this section with a rather startling remark: 'I have not yet, for my part, tackled what is involved in this term sexuality, sexual relationship.' A curious admission since every psychoanalyst from Freud on has spent his days tackling sexuality and sexual relationships. Even more curious when Lacan has already pointed out that 'our whole business is the story of sexual relationships'.⁸

It can only be assumed, from what will follow later in seminar, that he thinks all previous work on the topic, including his own from *The Family* on has been contaminated by the myth-based Oedipus complex and that a genuinely scientific approach to questions about sex demands a different approach.

It is obvious that enormous progress has been made since Freud's time on the biology of sex in animals and humans. Males can be differentiated from females in terms of a different balance of X and Y-chromosomes. But this is of little concern to psychoanalysts as they tackle the questions of sexual relationships:

⁶ *ibid*, 20th January 71, p. 5 & 9th June 71, p. 2. ⁷ *ibid*, 9th June 71, p. 2. ⁸ *ibid*, 17th March '71, p. 12.

It is strange that people have not noticed the world of difference there is between this term sexuality where it is only beginning to take on a biological substance and what is involved in what Freud states about the relations that the unconscious reveals. Whatever stumblings he himself may have succumbed to in this order, what Freud reveals about the functioning of the unconscious has nothing biological about it. It only has the right to be called sexuality because of what is called the sexual relationship. This has a name that can be perfectly well stated, namely, the relationships of man and woman. It is necessary to start from these two terms with their full sense, with what that involves in terms of relation...⁹

In other words the progress of science has not been able to conquer the phenomenon of sexual enjoyment for knowledge. In fact objectifying sex sets up a dam against an understanding of it. The business of psychoanalysis is to remedy this failure and it tackles sexual relations in a way that does not fail to take the subject into account, particularly through an exploration of the notion of unconscious phantasy which in Lacan's algebra is expressed as $\$ \langle \rangle$ o.

What is important for us in what concerns us, namely, the field of truth, is that we are dealing with something that takes into account that it differs from the position of the real in physics. This something that resists, that is not permeable to every meaning, that is a consequence of our discourse, and which is called phantasy. And what has to be tested are its limits, its structure, the function, the relationship in a discourse of one of the terms, of the o, the surplus enjoying, the \$ of the subject...¹⁰

⁹ *ibid*, 20^h January 71, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 7.

Shifting from the interpersonal to the political level Lacan offers a memorable explanation for the fascination Hitler exercised for many years on the most sophisticated and hard-nosed Germans:

It is indeed in the measure that something in every discourse that appeals to the Thou provokes a camouflaged, secret identification, which is simply to this enigmatic object that may seem to be nothing, the tiny little surplus enjoying of Hitler, that went no further perhaps than his moustache. This was enough to crystallise people who had nothing mystical about them! Who were the most committed to the process of the discourse of the capitalist, with what that involves in terms of a questioning of surplus enjoying in its form of surplus value.¹¹

Beyond bipolarity: Boy, girl, phallus

Having dealt with the distinction between the biological approach to sex and the novelty introduced by psychoanalysis by focussing on the unconscious phantasy Lacan now turns to the question of gender identity which he reckons poses some very special problems in the case of speaking beings.

The important thing is that to speak about gender identity, which is nothing other than what I have just expressed in these terms, man and woman, it is clear that the question is posed of what can be seen at an early stage about the fact that at adult age, it is the destiny of speaking beings to divide themselves up between men and women. And that to understand the emphasis that is put on these things, on this agency, one has to take into account that what defines the

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 8.

man, is his relationship with the woman, and inversely. Nothing allows us in these definitions of man and woman, to abstract them from the complete speaking experience, up to and including the institutions where they are expressed, namely marriage. It is starting from something that constitutes a fundamental relation that there is questioned everything that in the behaviour of the child can be interpreted as being oriented towards this being-a-man, for example. One of the essential correlates of this being-a-man, is to indicate to the girl that one is such, and we find ourselves, in a word, put right away into the dimension of the semblance.¹²

This might tend to give the impression that Lacan is continuing with a classical man-woman bi-polarity but this is far from the case and he pushes forward his notions of the skewed nature of the 'relationship' between the sexes, in particular by giving a new twist to Fenichel's 'girl = phallus':

It would be well to mark something completely new, what I called the effect of surprise, to understand what has emerged, whatever it may be worth, from analytic discourse. It is that it is untenable to remain in any way with this duality as sufficient. The fact is that the function described as the phallus, which is very awkwardly handled, but which is there ... not simply in an experience, linked to something or other that would be considered as deviant, as pathological, but which is essential as such for the establishment of analytic discourse. This function of the phallus renders henceforth untenable this sexual bipolarity,

¹² *ibid*, p. 11.

and untenable in a way that literally makes vanish into thin air anything that can be written about this relationship.¹³

This is of the highest importance in the crucial area of the assumption of one's sexual identity:

Sexual identification does not consist in believing oneself to be a man or a woman, but in taking account of the fact that for the boy there are women, and that for the girl there are men. And what is important, is not so much what they experience, it is a real situation. If you allow me, the fact is that for men, the girl is the phallus. And this is what castrates them. That for women, the boy is the same thing, the phallus, and this is what castrates them also, because all they acquire is a penis and that spoils things.¹⁴

But men and women experience their relation to one another and the phallus in distinctive ways. In particular he highlights the very particular position that the woman has with respect to the man and introduces novel ways of expressing this, which have the effect of echoing analytic - and indeed everyday - experience.

The woman is precisely in this relation, in this relationship, the moment of truth for the man. If I spoke about a moment of truth, it is because she is the one that the whole formation of man is designed to respond to, and now over and against everything, the whole status of her semblance. It is certainly easier for a man to confront any enemy on the plain of rivalry than to confront the woman in so far as she is the

¹³ *ibid*, 17th February 71, p. 13.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 20th January 71, p. 14.

support of this truth, of the semblance in the relationship of man to woman.¹⁵

And he goes on to offer some clarification of these gnomic utterances, further intriguing his audience:

The woman is the truth of man ... Namely, that to grasp the truth of a man, one would do well to get to know who his wife is. I mean his spouse in this instance, and why not? To get the measure of a person, there is nothing like getting the measure of his wife. When the woman is at stake it is not the same thing! Because the woman has a very great liberty ...

Audience: *Louder!*
Lacan: *What's that?*
Audience: *We can't hear!*
Lacan: *You can't hear?*
Audience: *No.*

I said: the woman has very great freedom with respect to the semblance! She will manage to give weight even to a man who has none.¹⁶

The structure is such that man as such in so far as he functions is castrated, and on the other hand, something exists at the level of the feminine partner that one can simply trace out by this feature, whose importance I highlight, the whole function of this letter on this occasion, that the woman has nothing to do with it, if she exists - now, that is why she

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 15-16

does not exist, it is in so far as the woman, has nothing to do with the law.¹⁷

The limits of Freud's myths

Lacan now tackles Freud's attempt to ground the questions of sexual relations and the assumption of sexual identity by arguing that having recourse to myth can be seen today to be an inadequate way of resolving these matters. The myth of Oedipus in the *Interpretation of Dreams* and the myth of the father of the primitive horde in *Totem and Taboo* claim to offer a way of understanding the origins of civilisation, morality and religion and in particular of contemporary relations between the sexes. But Lacan considers that specialists in mythology such as Kroeber and Levi-Strauss were perfectly justified in seeing Freud's use of myth as flawed and he now articulates his own critique.

The genealogy of desire, in so far as what is in question is how it is caused, relates to a more complex combinatorial than that of myth. [Myths] operate according to laws of transformation that are precise but very short on logic. Or at the very least what we must say about them, this is the least that can be said, is that our mathematics enriches this combinatorial. Perhaps we would do well to question whether the psychoanalytic discourse does not have better things to do than to devote itself to interpreting these myths in a style which does not go beyond ordinary commentary, which besides is completely superfluous.¹⁸

As regards Freud's two best-known myths, Oedipus and the primal father of *Totem and Taboo*:

¹⁷ *ibid*, 17th March 71, p. 14.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 9th June 71, p. 16.

Must I underline that the key function of myth is strictly opposed in the two? The law in the first, so primordial that it exercises its retortions even when the guilty have only contravened it innocently, and it is from the law that the profusion of enjoyment has emerged. In the second, enjoyment at the origin, then law, whose correlates with perversion you will spare me underlining. Since it is with the promotion of sacred cannibalism, that all the women are prohibited, in principle, for the community of males, which has been transcended as such in this communion. It must be that the murder of the father has constituted - for whom, for Freud, for his readers? - such a supreme fascination, that no one has ever even dreamt of underlining that in the first myth this murder happens without the knowledge of the murderer, who not only does not recognise that he is attacking the father, but who cannot recognise him because he has another, who, from all time was his father, since he adopted him. It was even explicitly in order not to run the risk of attacking the aforesaid father that he exiled himself. What the myth is suggestive of, is to show the place that the generating father has at an epoch in which Freud underlines that, just like our own, this father is problematic.

Because Oedipus would be absolved, if he were not of royal blood, namely, if Oedipus did not have to function as the phallus, the phallus of his people, and not of his mother. What is there in common in any case with the murder of the second myth which we are led to believe is one of revolt, of need, that in truth is unthinkable, except as proceeding from a conspiracy.¹⁹

¹⁹ibid, pp. 19-20.

For Lacan, the use of the Oedipus myth emerged from Freud's experience with hysterics in the first phases of his analytic work. The letters to Fliess bear witness to his sense of wonder at the fact that Sophocles had articulated in ancient times an awareness of the law governing sexual relationships that he was only now uncovering in the stories of his contemporary patients. But *Totem and Taboo* and its myth derived from a different source:

It is curious that I have had to wait until now to put forward such an assertion, namely, that Totem and Taboo is a neurotic product. This is absolutely indisputable, without for all that my questioning in any way the truth of the construction. That is even how it bears witness to the truth. One does not psychoanalyse an *oeuvre*, and that of Freud less than any other. One criticises it, and far from a neurosis making its solidity suspect, it is the very thing that solders it in this case. It is to the testimony that the obsessional contributes about his structure, to the aspect of the sexual relationship that proves to be impossible to formulate in discourse, that we owe the myth of Freud [or Freud's myth?].²⁰

There is, finally, a third myth from which the origins and history of Judaeo-Christianity can be understood and for Lacan *Moses and Monotheism*, is the point at which everything that Freud articulated becomes truly significant. This myth Lacan appears to suggest would hold up, but since he was forced to abandon his seminar on *The Names of the Father* in 1963 he had sworn never to fully develop the sense of that statement.

Lacan uses his critique of these myths to launch his own advance into the central role of writing and in particular of logic. Much of this

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 20.

remains obscure to me but it seems that it is by putting some of Freud's mythology into syllogistic form that its flaws can be demonstrated. In particular he picks out the statement in *Totem and Taboo* to the effect that the motive for the rebellion of the sons was the Father's possession of all the women. This is logically unsustainable because there is no universal of woman and *all the women* does not exist.

What the myth of the enjoyment of all the women designates, is that there are not 'all the women'. There is no universal of the woman. This is what is posed by a questioning of the phallus, and not of sexual relationship, as regards what is involved in the enjoyment it constitutes, because I said that it was feminine enjoyment... It is starting from these statements that a certain number of questions can be radically moved forward.²¹

And he goes on with some further formulae that appear here, I believe, for the first time in his seminars:

The woman can only fill her place in the sexual relationship, she can only be it under the heading of a-woman (*d'une-femme*). As I strongly emphasised, there is no 'every woman'.²²

The woman does not exist - that she exists is the dream of a woman, and it is the dream from which Don Juan emerged. If there were A man for whom The woman existed, it would be marvellous, one would be sure of one's desire. It is a feminine lucubration. For a man to find his woman, what

²¹ *ibid*, 17th February 71, p. 16. ²²
ibid, 19th May '71, p. 17.

else is it if not the romantic formula: it was destiny, it was written down.²³

Then he goes on more explicitly to designate what he believes to be the main weakness of psychoanalysis if it is to establish itself among other more sophisticated contemporary discourses on man's subjectivity - and this is a theme that has pursued for a number of years, notably in *The Logic of the Phantasy*:

We ought to question from the point of view of logic and of writing, what is meant by the maintaining in analytic discourse of this residual myth called the Oedipus complex, God knows why, which is in fact that of *Totem and Taboo*, in which there is inscribed this myth entirely invented by Freud, of the primordial father in so far as he enjoys all the women.²⁴

And to do this:

We have to start from the central point, which is also the enigmatic point of the psychoanalytic discourse ... the one which might not be the discourse of semblance. ... It is its failure at the level of a logic, of a logic that is sustained by what every logic is sustained, namely, writing ... What is designated in Freud's writings is a veiled, obscure truth, one that is stated by the fact that, a sexual relationship ... can only be sustained, can only be established, from this composition between enjoyment and the semblance called castration.²⁵

²³ *ibid*, 17th February 71, p. 22.

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 15.

²⁵ *ibid*, 16th June 71, p. 5.

The Oedipus complex, is a written myth and I would even say more, this is very exactly the thing that specifies it. One could have taken precisely any one at all, provided it was written the Oedipus complex is designed very exactly to highlight for us that it is unthinkable to say: the woman (*la femme*). Why is it unthinkable? Because one cannot say: all the women. One cannot say all the women because it is only introduced into the myth because of the fact that the Father possesses all the women, which is manifestly a sign of an impossibility.²⁶

This leads us, perhaps not altogether convincingly, to a consideration of what is the most original and difficult theme of this seminar - Lacan's continued promotion of a clinic based not on the Oedipus complex but on the nature of writing and his exploitation of the Chinese and Japanese language to further his argument.

Writing

>From the beginning of his teaching the particular angle from which Lacan re-read Freud was based on his discovery that Freud had anticipated many of the findings of modern linguistics: de Saussure's signifier, Jakobson's metaphor and metonymy. From now on he will modify this position and in particular begin to take his distance from the professional linguists, stung perhaps by university criticism of his 'metaphorical' use of this sophisticated science:

It was not his competence as a linguist, and for good reason, that allowed Freud to trace out the paths of the thing we are dealing with. What I, for my part, remind you of is that he was only able to follow these paths by demonstrating a

²⁶ *ibid*, 17* March '71, p. 13.

performance in language that was nothing short of acrobatic.²⁷

So now the stress is on language rather than on the discoveries of the professional of linguistics and he will shortly produce another neologism by stating that his interest is in *linguisterie* - probably a condensation of linguistics and *hysterie*. This brings him back to Freud's interest in language and to discoveries he made from the hysterics who were his principal teachers:

... this is what Freud proved, the decisive thing he contributed, the fact is that by the mediation of the unconscious, we glimpse that everything that belongs to language has to deal with sex, is in a certain relationship with sex, but very specifically in that the sexual relationship cannot, at least up to the present moment, in any way be inscribed in it.

In his 1913 article on *The Claims of Psychoanalysis to Scientific Interest* Freud had already put forward that it was more appropriate to compare dreams with 'a system of writing' rather than a language.²⁸ Even earlier his awareness of the centrality of writing had already been shown in his presentation of the dream as a rebus:

Yes! The fact that the dream is a rebus, as Freud says, is naturally not something that will make me yield for a single instant on the fact that the unconscious is structured like a language, only it is a language in the midst of which there appeared its writing.²⁹

²⁷ *ibid*, 9th June 71, p. 8.

²⁸ S. Freud. (1913) *The Claims of Psychoanalysis to Scientific Interest*. S.E., XIII.

²⁹ J. Lacan, *op.cit.*, 10* March 71, p. 14.

Perhaps this is the context that will give some clarification to another obscure formula: 'Writing is enjoyment' (*Vecrit, c'est la puissance*).³⁰

It is in Chinese and Japanese writing that Lacan seems to feel he can find a confirmation for this.

Chinese

Patricia McCarthy has gone to considerable lengths to examine the case that Lacan makes for the importance of Chinese in grasping the relations between knowledge and enjoyment. I would refer readers to her article in this issue as well as to a number of articles that appeared in the summer 2001 issue of *The Letter P*

As we saw in the introduction to this paper, Lacan had begun to pursue again - with passion, Roudinesco stresses - his old interest in Chinese with the help of a tutor, sinologist Francois Cheng, mainly it seems because of the very special role that writing had occupied for millennia in Chinese culture and the way it could illuminate the fundamental preoccupations of psychoanalysts:

Since writing, exists in China from ... time immemorial, I mean that well before we have to properly speak of works, writing already existed for an extremely long time, and we cannot evaluate how long it did exist. This writing has, in China, an altogether pivotal role, in a certain number of things that happened, and it is rather ... it is quite illuminating as regards what we may think about the function of writing.³²

^M *ibid*, 19th May '71, p. 1.

^P cf Articles by C. Gallagher, Dany Nobus, Gerard Pommier and Erik Porge, given as papers to the 2001 International Symposium on Psychoanalytic Research, held in Beijing, China, in *THE LETTER*, Summer 2001, issue 22, pp. 1-58. Also P. McCarthy, '*Writing and Enjoyment*' in *THE LETTER*, Spring 2003, issue 27. ^H J. Lacan, *op. cit*, 17th February '71, p. 20.

Japanese

As we saw earlier Lacan paid his second visit to Japan in April. Again it was its language and art that fascinated him and in particular the predominant role played by writing in Japanese culture and society. Curiously, as I was writing these lines I received notification of a study day to be devoted to psychoanalysis and Japanese culture by Charles Melman's *Association Lacanienne Internationale* on 22 March 2003. They paraphrase the remark of Lacan in this seminar that: *The Japanese Tongue urns Created by Writing* and go on to argue that the interaction between speech and language exemplified in Japanese is extremely instructive for the psychoanalyst as he attempts to read and decipher dreams and the other formations of the unconscious. The interweaving of word and writing in Japanese is of such a kind that it changes the status of the subject and makes it quite different to the model of subjectivity that we take for granted in the Western world.

But it was on his return from Japan, flying for the first time over Siberia, that the notion of littoral seems to have come to Lacan and he plays on it as James Joyce played on letter and litter. A littoral, or coastline, offers a different type of boundary between two territories to that of a mountain range or river dividing two countries, and he takes it as a more provocative model for the boundary between knowledge and enjoyment:

Between centre and absence, between knowledge and enjoyment, there is littoral which only veers towards the literal from the fact that this bend is one you can take in the same way at every instant. It is only from that that you can hold yourself to be the agent who sustains it.³³

³³ *ibid*, 12* May 71. p. 12.

Guy LeGaufey and his colleagues at the *Ecole Lacanienne* choose *Littoral* as the title of their journal showing how relevant this notion is to the most contemporary developments of Lacanian discourse:

Is it possible in short to constitute from the littoral a discourse such that it is characterised, as I am putting the question this year, by not being emitted by a semblance? This is obviously the question that is only proposed in what is called *avant-garde* literature, which itself is a littoral fact and, therefore, is not sustained by a semblance, but for all that proves nothing, except, by showing the break that a discourse alone can produce. I say produce, put forward with a production effect, this is the schema of my quadrupeds of last year.³⁴

All of this leads, in an admittedly obscure way, to what is perhaps the core of this year's seminar - the assertion that the sexual relationship cannot be written in a logical form, the core of the later assertion that there is no sexual relationship.

There is no sexual relationship

Some of what Lacan articulates about the absence of a sexual relationship had been adumbrated in recent years and he repeats his exhortation to his listeners to focus on what contemporary logic has to say about the notion of relation:

... there is no sexual relationship in the speaking being. There was a first condition which could have immediately allowed us to see it, which is that the sexual relationship, like

^M *ibid*, p. 16.

every other relationship when all is said and done, only subsists from the written. What is essential in the relationship, is an application, a applied onto b (a~» b), and if you do not write this a and b, you do not sustain the relationship as such. This does not mean that things are not happening in the real. But by what right would you call it a relationship? ... the sexual relationship is not inscribable, cannot be grounded as a relationship.³⁵

And he tries to clarify what he means by this paradoxical utterance since after all, as he admits, 'we do make love':

...what I define as an effective inscription of something which is supposed to be the sexual relationship in so far as it would put into relationship the two poles, the two terms which would be entitled man and woman, in so far as this man and this woman are sexes respectively specified as masculine and feminine, in whom, in what? - in a being who speaks. In other words, who dwelling in language, draws from it this usage which is that of the word.³⁶

This once again is foreshadowed in Freud, but only if you read him as Lacan does, something he seems to say his listeners are incapable of:

Can one say that properly speaking, for example, Freud formulated this impossibility of sexual relationships? Not as such. I am doing it simply because, and after all it is very simple to say, it is written everywhere. It is written in what Freud wrote. It only has to be read. Only you are going to

³⁵ *ibid*, 17th February 71, pp. 11-12.

³⁶ *ibid*, 19* May 71, p. 5.

see later why you cannot read it. I am trying to say it. To say why I for my part do read it.³⁷

And so we reach this controversial conclusion:

Language ... only connotes, in the final analysis, the impossibility of symbolising the sexual relationship between the beings that inhabit it, that inhabit language, by reason of the fact that it is from this habitat that they are able to speak.³⁸

The formulae of sexualisation:

But Lacan is not content to state this in words since he has constantly argued that logic, from Aristotle on, was introduced in order to bring rigour and discipline into the way in which we express ourselves; And thus for the first time, on March 17th, he presents a set of logic, formulae which express in the symbols of mathematical logic his notion about the negation of the sexual relationship. These are destined to bewilder and provoke not simply his listeners but also future generations of readers:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \forall x. \Phi x & \uparrow & \forall x. \overline{\Phi x} \\ \exists x. \Phi x & \downarrow & \overline{\exists x. \Phi x} \end{array}$$

³⁷ibid, 17* March '71, p. 3.

³⁸ibid, 9* June '71, p. 5.

An approximate statement of these formulae in a verbal form is possible but Lacan enters into very little at this point. So I will follow his example and leave to the discussions on the following seminars - ... *Ou Pire* and *Encore* - any further teasing out of what they involve. In any case Lacan would prefer them to stand in their mathematical form given his belief that the only serious teaching and the only accurate means of transmission is through mathematics - and his students would do well to learn this new language if they want to follow him for the remainder of his teaching.

As he will later put it:

What I want to open up ... to illustrate for you, is that logic carries the mark of the sexual impasse.³⁹

The purloined letter

To conclude this section on writing we turn to Lacan's commentary on his seminar on Poe's *Purloined Letter*, which he had delivered in 1955 in the course of the seminar on *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*.

It was with a re-writing of this seminar that Lacan had opened his *Ecrits* in 1966 and he had mentioned it on a number of other occasions. This, I think, is perhaps the most substantial commentary in recent years and he devotes the bulk of two sessions to a new reading of what he was trying to get across. Curiously, this discussion appears to have escaped the attention of the most serious study of this seminar in English - Muller and Richardson's *77K Purloined Poe* (1988). He urges his listeners to re-read some pages of it and is furious when nobody in the audience had apparently done their homework:

³⁹ *ibid*, 17th May 71, p. 16.

You haven't re-read them? Get the hell out of here! Anyway, it's very annoying. You don't expect me to read them for you. That really is asking too much of me. In these pages, I am very precisely only speaking about the function of the phallus in so far as it is articulated, as it is articulated in a certain discourse.⁴⁰

Despite its attraction for literary and philosophical critics - Derrida among others - Lacan insists that what he is talking about is of direct concern to psychoanalysts. He modestly insists that it is the best presentation of the phallus that has ever been done:

What I am talking about, is the phallus. And I would even say more, no one has ever spoken better about it. That is why I am asking you to consult it. It will teach you something.⁴¹

What it is designed to teach us is the effect of the letter, in the sense of an epistle, on the subjectivity and behaviour of those who come into possession of it. He summarises his purpose as follows:

... it is very explicitly by studying the letter as such, in so far as what? In so far as, as I said, it has a feminising effect ... the demonstrative character of this little essay, is that when all is said and done, it is the most perfect castration that is demonstrated. Everyone is equally cuckolded.⁴²

This assertion that it is through writing rather than through the Oedipus myth that the phallus and castration can be best grasped leads onto our

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p. 2.

⁴¹ *ibid*, 10* March 71, p. 20.

⁴² *ibid*, 19* May 71, p. 2.

final theme, the last sessions of the seminar in which Lacan returns to a favourite clinical theme - the structure of the hysteric

The Hysteric

Let us come now to the hysteric because I like to start from the hysteric, to see where the thread leads us. The hysteric, we have asked ourselves, have we not, what it is, but precisely, this is the meaning, it is to such a question: 'What is it?' ... no reply can be given at the start to this meaning. To the question 'what is the hysteric?', the answer of the discourse of the analyst is: 'You'll see'. You will indeed see, precisely, by following where she leads us. Without the hysteric, of course, there would never have come to light what is involved in what I am writing ... that it is very precisely, in effect, that it is to the semblance of the phallus that there is referred the pivotal point, the centre of everything that can be organised, be contained in terms of sexual enjoyment, that from the first approaches to hysterics ... Freud leads us.⁴³

And he articulates once again his own 'in praise of neurotics'.

It is properly speaking prodigious that those very people who, caught up in certain perspectives, those that we might define as putting themselves forward, as it were, with respect to society, those therefore who, in this perspective, present themselves as infirm, let us be kinder, as limping, and we know that beauty limps, namely, the neurotics, and specifically the hysterics and the obsessionals, that it was from them that there started, this overwhelming flash of

⁴³ *ibid*, 16th June 71, p. 9.

light that travels the length and breadth of the *demansion* that conditions language.⁴⁴

This is because what Freud discovered is that hysterics tell the truth about sexual relations:

... there emerges the following, so easy to read in what is involved in the so precious function of hysterics. The hysterics are the ones who, as regards what is involved in the sexual relationship, tell the truth. It is difficult to see how this path of psychoanalysis could have opened up if we had not had them. This is where we should start from to give its meaning to the Freudian discovery. What the hysteric articulates is, of course, that as regards constructing the every man, she is just as capable as the every man himself, namely, by imagination. So then because of that, she does not need him. But if by chance the phallus interests her, namely, what she sees herself as castrated of, as Freud sufficiently underlined, only by the progress of the treatment, of analytic treatment, she only has to put up with it. Because we have to believe that she has this enjoyment, that she has it herself, and that if by chance sexual relationships interest her, she has to be interested in this third element, the phallus. And since she can only be interested in it through the relationship to the man, in so far as it is not sure that he even has one, her whole policy will be turned towards what I call having 'at least one of them'.⁴⁵

Today this may be more difficult to pick up because hysterics present themselves clinically in a very different manner than in Charcot's time:

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 19* May'71, pp. 18-19.

... it was enough for the hysteric to renounce the extravagant clinic with which she furnished the gap in the sexual relationship. It is to be taken, it is to be taken as the sign, it is perhaps to be taken as the sign made to someone, I am talking about the hysteric, huh, that she is going to do better than this clinic. Anyway the whole pantaloony of the first great formal logic, is absolutely essentially linked to the idea that Aristotle had of the woman. This does not prevent, precisely, that the only universal formula that he did not allow himself to pronounce was all women (*toutes les femmes*). There is no trace of it. That an individual as sensitive as Aristotle never in fact wrote this every woman, is precisely what allows it to be advanced that every woman is the statement by which there is decided the hysteric as subject, and that it is for this reason that a woman is solidary with a *papludun* [no more than one] which properly lodges her in this logic of the successor that Peano gave us as a model. The hysteric is not a woman (*une femme*).⁴⁶

... the hysteric is situated by introducing the *papludun* by which each one of the women is established along the path of: it is not of every woman that it can be said that she is a function of the phallus (*ce n'est pas de toute femme que se peut dire qu'elle soit fonction du phallus*). That this is the case with every woman is what constructs her desire and that is why this desire is sustained by being unsatisfied. The fact is that a woman results from it, but one who cannot be the hysteric in person ... this fable is only supported by the fact that the man is never anything but a little boy. And that the hysteric is unable to let go of this is something that casts doubt on the function of her truth as being the last word ... in short, I

* *ibid*, pp. 12-13.

dared to articulate, to encourage people to notice, that this revelation that is bestowed on us by the knowledge of the neurotic about something, is nothing other than something which is articulated as there is no sexual relationship.⁴⁷

Finally, the hysteric's father and her castrated husband:

When it is, let us say, the hysteric who summons him, what matters is that someone should speak. One can say that the master signifier, up to the present, of the analytic discourse, is indeed the Name of the Father. The Father is a term of analytic interpretation. To him something is referred ... if we define the hysteric by the following, a definition that is not particular to her ... namely, the avoidance of castration, there are several ways to avoid it. The hysteric has this simple procedure, the fact is that she unilateralises it on the other side, the side of the partner. Let us say that for the hysteric, a castrated partner is necessary. That he should be castrated ... is at the source of the possibility of the enjoyment of the hysteric. But it is still too much. If he were castrated, there would perhaps be a little chance, since castration is precisely what I put forward earlier as being what allows the sexual relationship, it is necessary that he should be simply what answers in the place of the phallus.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Somewhere in *The Family*, Lacan talks about Freud's presentation of the Oedipus as deserving 'our study and our criticism'. The same might be said of his presentation of a post-oedipal psychoanalysis. The criticism comes easily and many of his closest associates over the years found it

⁴⁷ *ibid*, pp. 14,17.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 16* June 71, pp, 13,15.

impossible to understand what he was up to and stopped coming to the seminars. I mentioned recently to one of those who had persisted that I frequently advised those who come to our Monday evening group that they would be better off reading some of Lacan's earlier and more comprehensible seminars. But I was waved aside and told that it was very important that people find some things impossible to understand.

And these students appear to agree. They want to pursue this study despite all the criticisms they have read and heard about the later Lacan and their own experience of incomprehension as they confront his texts. But then this is also perhaps the attraction of Joyce and Beckett, authors to whom Lacan often refers in these years. Perhaps when we come to the seminar that he devoted to Joyce in 1975-76 everything will suddenly become much clearer. We'll go on!

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