WHERE WAS JACQUES LACAN IN 1971-72?

... ou pire and THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE PSYCHOANALYST*

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Introduction

In a recent review of an exhaustive study on The Smiths – a 1970's band - the writer remarks: "This is not a book for anoraks – it's a book for anoraks with furry trims".

Something similar might be said about the texts I am going to discuss in this paper – the seminar with the curious title of ...ou pire, and the series of talks called *The knowledge of the psychoanalyst*. Many Lacanians have gone to their graves, and many more will, without ever having opened them. They have not been officially edited or published in French and so one has to search around to find unattributed pirate editions or those that have been put together for private use by different associations.

Our group at St Vincent's spent the academic year 2002-2003 translating and reading them following out a long-term project of making available at least a basic version of the Lacan seminars that have not been officially translated into English – so far our tally stands at thirteen.

...ou pire – the three dots at the beginning are important and they are followed by a conjunction and an adverb 'or worse' - is the 19th in Lacan's series of annual seminars and he will eventually make it to number twenty six. He talks more and more of the fact that he is reaching the end of his teaching career if not of his life and this is what pushes him all the more towards what Roudinesco calls 'the search for the absolute'. This seminar follows *Semblance* and anticipates *Encore* - which is

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nowadays probably his best known seminar in the English-speaking world. Despite his protestations of tiredness he nevertheless manages to produce two more sessions than the previous year and adds to these a series of seven talks which he called *The knowledge of the psychoanalyst*.

Where was Lacan...?

Places seemed to be important to him at this stage. He had begun his teaching in 1953 at the psychiatric hospital, Sainte-Anne, had been ejected and moved to the *École Normale* in 1964, and finally ended up in the Law Faculty near the Pantheon in 1969. In the current year he continues his seminar in the Pantheon. But he rejoices at the fact that he is also able for the first time in almost a decade to return to the hospital where he had begun his own psychiatric training nearly half a century earlier. As he never ceases to remind his audience, a friend and classmate there was Henri Ey, the most prominent French psychiatric author of his epoch, with whom he has maintained excellent relations but whom he has repeatedly challenged on his 'organo-dynamic' approach to mental illness. In the first session at Sainte- Anne Lacan congratulates him for the 'civilising' effect he has had on psychiatry during his long career.

'If I have come back to speak at Sainte Anne' he says 'it was to speak to psychiatrists' and to help them to realise 'what specifies them as psychiatrists'. He was therefore aiming at quite a different audience to the literati and logicians who thronged his seminar and on whom he was increasingly to rely in the years to come. But from the very first session he realises that the trainee psychiatrists he wanted to talk to 'at an elementary level' were in a 'crushing minority'. His habitual followers had not been put off by the few extra kilometres they had to travel and had swamped the intended audience. So as the year progressed the fiction of a new audience began to disappear and the 'elementary' remarks he had intended to make at the hospital began to require a thorough knowledge of his previous seminars and writings and really continued the work of the seminar. Nevertheless, there is initially a distinct difference between the way he talks to his seminar and to the audience at Sainte-Anne. He insists that in both places he amuses himself, making a rather facetious distinction: 'What I explained the last time, is that serious amusements took place elsewhere, in a place where I have found shelter, and that for here I have reserved comic amusements...'¹ He also gently mocks the desire of his audiences for lectures on an occasion when Roman Jakobson fails to put in an appearance: 'Because in truth I do not give them. As I said elsewhere very seriously, I amuse myself....² And this is not just frivolity. Referring back to the four discourses and in particular to the discourse of the analyst he says:

This S_1 is precisely what I am trying, in so far as I am speaking here, what I am trying to produce for you. As a result ...I am at the place, the same one, and this is what is educative about it, I am at the place of the analysand.³

So he is using his listeners as analysts in an endless attempt to produce the master signifier as regards what concerns the analytic discourse.

Themes?

So how introduce this seminar and the accompanying talks and persuade some braver souls to read and immerse themselves in them? After living with them for a year and a half it eventually dawned on me that they were texts – I use the word loosely - in which Lacan had made some major developments in his treatment of the formulae of sexuation. In addition he had also introduced some new terms, signifiers, which were to play an important role in his remaining years and in the thinking and writing of Lacanians ever since. Hence, I am going to organise what I

¹ J. Lacan. ...*Ou pire*. Book IXX, seminar of 3rd February '72, p. 3. Unpublished Translation. C. Gallagher.

² ibid, session of 9th February '72, p. 1.

³ ibid, session of 8th March '72, p. 5.

have to say around a number of themes: *The formulae of sexuation* – which had been introduced the previous year - *the matheme* (a new term that had long been implicit in his teaching), *lalangue* (another neologism that looked to the past and the future) and the *Borromean Knot* which he discovered by chance in conjunction with his meditations on an enigmatic formula about human relations that we will discuss later.

I should stress at the outset that I will be dealing with these themes only at the level of the current seminar and talks. This is not an exercise in 'final state' Lacanian doctrine but an attempt to clarify where he was at a very particular stage of his life and teaching when none of these themes were fully elaborated. As usual I will try to let Lacan speak for himself and limit my contribution to some connecting commentary.

The formulae of sexuation

Before getting into the technicalities of these formulae let us lighten our approach by listening to Lacan's account of a contact with Simone de Beauvoir who might well be described as the high priestess of the modern discussion of the relationship between the sexes:

The functions described as 'sexuality' are defined, inasmuch as we know something about it – we know a little about it even if only by experience – from the fact that there are two sexes, whatever may think a celebrated author who I ought to say, at one time, before she produced this book called 'The second sex', believed, by reason of some orientation or other – for, in truth, I had not yet begun to teach anything – believed she should consult me before producing' The second sex'. She called me on the telephone to tell me that undoubtedly she needed my advice to clarify what should be the psychoanalytic contribution to her work. Since I pointed out to her that it would require indeed at least – this is a minimum, because I have been speaking for 20 years and it is not by chance – that it would require five of six months for me to disentangle the question for her, she pointed out to me that there was no question, of course, that a book that was already in train should wait so long, the laws of literary production being such that it seemed to her that she should rule out her having more than three or four conversations with me. After which, I declined this honour.

The foundation of what I am, for some time, in the process of bringing forward for you, very precisely since last year, is very precisely the fact that there is no second sex. There is no second sex from the moment that language comes into function.⁴

So we are moving from the affirmation that there is no sexual relationship to the statement that there is no second sex. Men and women clearly exist but

The sexual relationship... can no longer be written in terms of male essence and female essence.⁵

But, says Lacan, the new writing that he is producing on the basis of Frege's quantification theory rather than Aristotle's propositional logic claims to support the network of sexual relationships and offers a chance of making a division between what is grounded as male and as female. He repeatedly writes on the board over these years a series of letters that claim to ground the non-relationship between the sexes. I have found no convenient book on logic that spells out the constituents of these formulae in the way Lacan uses them. The Φx which appears in all four elements is unlikely to appear in a book of logic since it is derived from Lacan's own

⁴ ibid, session of 3rd March '72, p. 4.

⁵ ibid, session of 3rd March '72, p. 10.

way of writing the phallic function as it emerges in psychoanalysis as denoting both the phallus and castration.

 $\dots \Phi$ of x affirms that it is true...that what is referred to the register of the sexual act, refers to the phallic function. It is very precisely inasmuch as it is a matter of the phallic function...that something solicits us to ask them how the two partners are different. And this is very precisely inscribed by the formulae that I put on the board.⁶

The other symbols derived from modern logic, first appeared in the previous year's seminar and can be explained as follows: \exists - there exists; and \forall - all. These symbols can be seen as a reversed E and an upsidedown A. When a line appears above either of these or above Φx they are to be seen as negated – although Lacan is at pains to stress that this negation is not the same as the negation of traditional propositional logic. The formulae are arranged in pairs, two on the left and two on the right, two on the upper row and two on the lower and are laid out as follows:

$$\begin{array}{cccc} \exists x \ . \ \overline{\Phi x} & \overline{\exists x} \ . \ \overline{\Phi x} \\ \forall x \ . \ \Phi x & \overline{\forall x} \ . \ \Phi x \end{array}$$

Though this is not made explicit in the present seminar it might be helpful to refer to Dylan Evan's explanation of them. The symbols on the left-hand side refer to the male, those on the right to the female. $\exists x \cdot \overline{\Phi x}$ (= there is at least one x that is not submitted to the phallic function); $\forall x \cdot \Phi x$ (= for all x, the phallic function is valid); $\exists \overline{x} \cdot \overline{\Phi x}$ (= there is not one x that is not submitted to the phallic function); $\forall x$. Φx (= for not all x, the phallic function) ($\forall x \cdot \Phi x$ (= for not all x, the phallic function).

⁶ ibid, session of 3rd March '72, p. 11.

I must confess that for us – and for me who actually attended these presentations some thirty years ago – these formulae remain very obscure but fortunately a number of other speakers at this congress have been willing to tackle them head on. Let us conclude this section with one of the ways in which Lacan tries to open up the relationship between the sexes in this seminar by focussing on the notion of 'all men' and 'all women':

...what is involved in the kinship of the universal with our affair? Namely, the statement by which objects ought to be divided into two 'alls' of an opposite equivalence... it is a matter of grounding this sexual relationship in universals: how is the universal 'Man' related to the universal 'Woman'?⁷

Far from being an abstraction this relationship occupies our whole earthly life and it arises, he claims, because we are not just dogs and bitches but are possessed by language and are speaking beings – otherwise we would not have to bring the universal into play as people from Aristotle on have done.

Having dealt with some of Lacan's developments of his formulae of sexuation we can treat even more briefly the two new terms of *matheme* and *lalangue* which he introduced this year, before ending with some considerations on the Borromean Knot.

Lalande, Laplanche, Lalangue

Saussure distinguished between *parole, langue and langage* [word, tongue, language] and Lacan now introduces a further refinement in our use of language in psychoanalysis which he will henceforth call *lalangue*. The best discussion I have seen on this is in Erik Porge's recent book⁸ but I will only quote a single phrase since it ranges well beyond the scope of

⁷ ibid, session of 3rd March '72, p. 8.

⁸ E. Porge. Jacques Lacan, un psychoanalyste, ERES, Paris, 2000.

this year's seminar: 'Lalangue denotes the binding of the subject of desire to the tongue'.

Instead I will allow Lacan to tell how he almost stumbles on the term. Reflecting on the early years of his teaching, what he now calls his discourse, he says in his first talk at Sainte Anne:

I had begun it by saying 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. Someone found an extraordinary contraption: the two chaps who could have best worked along this track, spun out this thread, were given a very nice job: Vocabulaire de la Philosophie. What am I saying, Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse. You see the slip, huh? Anyway it's as good as Lalande.

Lalangue, as I write it now – I have no blackboard - well, write lalangue in one word: that is how I will write it from now on. ...I did not say that the unconscious is structured like lalangue but is structured like a language, and I will come back to it later.

But when those responsible that I spoke about earlier were launched on the Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse, it is obviously because I had put on the agenda the Saussurian term lalangue which I repeat I will henceforth write as a single word. And I will justify why. Well then, lalangue has nothing to do with any dictionary whatsoever. A dictionary has to do with diction, namely, with poetry or with rhetoric for example. This is not nothing, huh? It goes from invention to persuasion, anyway it is very important.

Only, it is precisely not this aspect that is related to the unconscious. Contrary to what I think, the mass of listeners think, but that all the same a good number know already, already know if they have listened to the few terms in which I tried to make a passage to what I say about the unconscious: the unconscious is a matter first of all of grammar. It also has a little to do, a lot to do, everything to do with repetition, namely, the aspect that is quite contrary to what a dictionary is used for. So that it was a rather good way to ensure that those who could have helped me at that time to follow my trail, were diverted. Grammar and repetition is a quite different aspect than the one that I pinpointed earlier as invention, which is not nothing of course nor is persuasion. Contrary to what is, I don't know why, still very widespread, the useful aspect in the function of lalangue, the useful aspect for us psychoanalysts, for those who have to deal with the unconscious, is logic.⁹

This is a valuable critique of one of the most consulted dictionaries of psychoanalysis which is often taken as a reliable guide to understanding Freud and Lacan's work. His initial slip in talking about a 'dictionary of philosophy' – the one best known in French, edited by André Lalande – shows what he thinks of the 'dictionary of psychoanalysis' that had seduced away two of his most promising collaborators, Jean Laplanche and J-B Pontalis. This is perhaps his clearest statement of what he objects to in it. It misinterprets his basic tenet that the unconscious is structured like a language by focusing on definitions rather than the grammar of the unconscious, which I take to mean here the functions that Freud first isolated in connection with the dream-work, condensation, displacement etc.

One final quote from Lacan as he introduces this new term into his discourse:

...if I say that I am talking about language, it is because what is at stake are common features that can be

⁹ J. Lacan. op.cit. Session of 4th November '71, p. 4.

encountered in lalangue. Lalangue itself is subject to a very great variety but there are nevertheless constants. The language that is at stake, as I took the time, the care, the pain and the patience to articulate, is the language where one can distinguish the code from the message, among other things. Without this minimal distinction, there is no place for speech. That is why, when I introduce these terms, I call them "Function and field of speech" – for speech it is the function – "and of language" – for language it is the field.¹⁰

The matheme

Once again let us introduce this term in an anecdotal way as Lacan did to his audience at Sainte-Anne. He talks about a question that had been put to him the previous evening by someone from his School:

It is one of the people who take their position a little to heart and who posed the following question which has of course in my eyes the advantage of getting immediately into the core of the subject. Everyone knows that this rarely happens to me, I make my approach in prudent steps. The question that was put to me is the following: Is the incomprehension of Lacan a symptom?¹¹

First he distinguishes between his person and his discourse and then goes on to claim that his discourse was not all that misunderstood – otherwise how explain the large audiences that are attracted by it. But he goes a little further and articulates an experience that is common to many of his listeners and readers:

¹⁰ ibid, session of 4th November '71, pp. 6-7.

¹¹ ibid, session of 2nd December '71, p. 1.

To take up anyway one of the latest testimonies that I received about it, about the way in which everyone expresses themselves, well then, despite this sentiment of not really being with it, nevertheless, I was told in this latest testimony, that this helped the person in question to find his bearings in his own ideas, to be illuminated, to be illuminated himself on a certain number of points.¹²

And this leads him on to a much more universal phenomenon than not understanding Lacan: mathematical incomprehension.

This is something that manifests itself, there are people, and even young people, because this is only of interest among the young for whom this dimension of mathematical incomprehension exists. Is it a symptom? It is certain that when one interests oneself in these subjects who manifest mathematical incomprehension, fairly widespread still in our time, one has the feeling ... that it comes, in the subject who is the prey of mathematical incomprehension, from something which is like a dissatisfaction, a maladjustment, something experienced precisely in the handling of the truth value.

And he goes on to articulate something that certainly would be quite startling to educational psychologists and remedial teachers:

The subjects who are prey to mathematical incomprehension expect more truth than the reduction to these values that are called, at least in the first steps of mathematics, deductive values. The articulations that are described as proofs seem to them to lack something which

¹² ibid, p. 2.

is precisely at the level of a requirement of truth. This bivalency: true or false, certainly, and, let us say, not unreasonably, leaves them baffled...¹³

This seems to me to be an attempt to align the analytic discourse, as Lacan understands it, with mathematics. In other words, the practice of free association is based on the fact that one is not looking for truth or meaning but rather on the attempt to support analysands in the articulation of their desires. Psychoanalysis is quite close to what Bertrand Russell says about mathematics in that:

...mathematics is very precisely what busies itself with statements about which it is impossible to say whether they have a truth, or even if they mean anything at all. This indeed is a rather extreme way of saying that all the care precisely that he has lavished on the rigour of putting mathematical deduction into shape, is something that is assuredly addressed to something quite different to the truth, but has an aspect that is all the same not unrelated to it.¹⁴

All of this finally brings us in a rather inelegant way to the first mention of the term matheme (*mathème*). At least from the seminar *Object Relations* (1956-57) onwards Lacan's teaching has been laced with mathematical style formulae – the different intersecting points of the graph are a good illustration of this - \$ D, \$ o, etc. But now he introduces a signifier that emphasises the centrality of the mathematical in his teaching and which will be increasingly used in the years that remain of his teaching and in the work of his successors. After remarking that mathematics is a field in which one cannot write just any old thing he goes on to talk about:

¹³ ibid, p. 5.

¹⁴ ibid.

...something that I have not yet made an allusion to here, namely, here at the seminar, but that I brought forward in some remarks where, no doubt, some of those who are here attended, namely at Sainte Anne, when I posed the question of what one could call a matheme, positing already that it is the pivotal point of any teaching. In other words that the only teaching is mathematical, the rest is a joke.¹⁵

This gives us the link between the incomprehension of Lacan and the incomprehension of mathematics and the years to come will see an even greater stress on the mathematising of psychoanalysis in terms of knots and chains and topology. But this is the year that will see the introduction of the mathematical contrivance that is perhaps the one most associated with the later Lacan – the Borromean knot.

'I ask you to refuse me...' and the Borromean knot

At the beginning of the fifth session of his seminar – one at which Jakobson was supposed to have delivered a lecture – Lacan wrote on the board this enigmatic phrase:

' I ask you To refuse What I am offering you... because: it's not that.'
(Je te demande/ de me refuser/ ce que je t'offre / parce que: c'est pas ça.)

Where this formula came from is hard to know, even though in the edition of ...ou pire produced by Charles Melman's association it is accompanied by a little table of Japanese words and their French translation with a hint that this is an example of the politeness required in Japan when offering a gift.

¹⁵ ibid, session of 15th December '71, p. 3.

Lacan also relates it to Wittgenstein and one of his best-known propositions:

Wittgenstein, throughout his whole life, with admirable asceticism, stated something that I condense as, what one cannot say, well then, let us not talk about it. As a result he could say almost nothing. ... It is very precisely, it seems to me, what one cannot speak about that is at stake when I designate by 'it is not that' which just by itself justifies a demand such as 'to refuse what I am offering you'. And nevertheless there is something that may be tangible to everybody, it is indeed this 'it's not that'. We are confronted with it at every instant of our existence.¹⁶

Lacan discusses this 'I ask you etc' – which he describes as a knot - at some length, but following such a discussion would take us too far afield. Instead let us return to his discovery of the importance of the Borromean knot in unravelling it:

A strange thing, while I was questioning myself last evening about the way I would present that to you today ... it happened, while dining with a charming person who is following Monsieur Guilbaud's classes that, like a ring on a finger, I was presented with something that I am now going to, that I am going to show you, something which is nothing less, it appears, I learnt last evening, than the coat of arms of the Borromeans.



¹⁶ ibid, session of 9th February '72, p. 9.

It needs a little care, and that is why I am taking it. And there you are! You can redo it, you did not bring any string? You can redo it with pieces of string.¹⁷

And he encourages his audience to experiment with it and emphasises the unusual features it embodies:

It is enough then for you to cut one of them, for the two others, even though they seem to be knotted together exactly like in the case of what you know well, namely, the rings of the Olympic Games, is that not so, and which for their part continue to hold together when one of them has gone. Well as regards this, it's finished! It is something that all the same is interesting, because you must remember that when I spoke about a signifying chain, I always implied this concatenation.¹⁸

And he finally goes on to relate this experiment to the central element in his theory, the **o**-object.

It is clear that in this knot that I put before you today, demand, refusal and offer, only take on their sense each from the other, but that what results from this knot as I tried to unknot it for you, or rather, to take on the test of its unknotting, to tell you, to show you that it never holds, holds up in two's by itself, that this is the foundation, the root, of what is involved in the little **o**-object.¹⁹

- ¹⁸ ibid, p. 13.
- ¹⁹ ibid, p. 14.

¹⁷ ibid, p. 12.

This notion of the importance of the chain of three is taken up when he returns to Sainte-Anne the following week. This merits a rather lengthy quote since it links the Borromean knot to the fundamentals of psychoanalytic discourse and includes an exchange with a naïve listener:

I spoke in short about this thing that I summarised in the Borromean knot. I mean a chain of three, which is such that by detaching one of the rings from this chain, the other two cannot hold together for a single instant. From what does that arise? I am forced to explain it to you, since after all I am not sure that put forward, quite simply, in a crude way like that it is enough for all of you.

This means a question about what is the condition of the discourse of the unconscious, it means a question posed about what language is. In effect, this is a question that has not been settled. Language ought to be tackled in its grammar, in which case – this is certain - it relates to a topology...

X: What is a topology?

Lacan: What is a topology? What a nice person! A topology is something that has a mathematical definition. Topology is something that is tackled first of all by non-metrical relationships, by relationships that can be put out of shape. It is properly speaking the case for these sort of flexible circles that constitute my:

I ASK YOU TO REFUSE WHAT I AM OFFERING YOU. Each one is something closed and flexible and which only holds up by being linked to the others. Nothing can be sustained all by itself. This topology, by reason of its mathematical insertion, is linked to relationships – this precisely is what my last seminar demonstrated – is linked to relationships of pure significance. Namely, that it is in so far as these three terms are three that we see that the presence of the third establishes a relation between the other two. This is what is meant by the Borromean knot.²⁰

Conclusion

In the final seminar Lacan rules out any question of providing a summary of the year's work – although he will later provide his usual dense account of it for the *Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études* under whose auspices he was permitted to teach at the Sorbonne.

Since this paper is already something of a summary, although I would prefer, as in previous years to describe it as a collage, our conclusion can be very brief. First: even though ... ou pire and the accompanying talks are not all that well known and are overshadowed by the earlier seminar on the four discourses and the subsequent Encore, I think we have seen enough to say that they introduce a number of signifiers that are important in Lacan's later work and continue to influence the writing and practice of those who succeeded him. Secondly, I think they bear witness to this man's unflagging attempts to articulate the relevance of Freud to the contemporary debates on the human subject and how the discovery of the unconscious illuminated the work of earlier thinkers, from Socrates on, who took seriously the dilemmas of our Finally, they show his passion to revitalise psychiatry and existence. psychoanalysis and to make known to those in the general public who have ears to hear, his teaching on the psychoanalytic discourse.

²⁰ ibid, session of 3rd March '72, pp. 1-2.

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