

LACAN FOR BEGINNERS

Cormac Gallagher

The two notes that follow formed the basis of a discussion with psychiatric and nursing colleagues in St Vincent's Hospital who at that time (1981) were rather skeptical about the clinical relevance of Lacan's work. They are reproduced here for the convenience of students who claim they still help clarify the way in which Lacan re-articulates Freud's case histories.

The note on Dora is based on *Intervention on transference* (1951) which has since been translated into English. That on Hans gives a very condensed account of Lacan's exhaustive commentary on the case in the still untranslated seminar on '*La relation d'objet*' (1956-1957).

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HOW TO READ FREUD'S 'DORA'

The *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905) was Freud's first extended account of the process of a treatment using the psychoanalytic method; the first also in which he tried to deal with the question of his own position - the position of the analyst - in such a treatment. Here, for the first time in the literature, the problem of transference and counter-transference emerged as being of decisive importance in the success or failure of an analysis.

The psychoanalytic method invites the patient to say whatever comes into his or her head without omitting anything or without trying consciously to organise the order in which the material is presented. It further instructs the analyst to adopt a position of listening with a neutral 'floating attention'. These two recommendations seem to set the stage for endless hours of aimless and pointless monologue by the patient. However, the free association of the neurotic in the presence of the analyst

is determined - by the anticipation of an interpretation. As for the analyst, his style of listening is the necessary condition for making an interpretation that leads to a revelation of the truth.

What 'Dora' illustrates for Lacan, is how the recognition of the moments of transference and counter-transference leads to the structuring of the exchange that occurs between analyst and patient and transforms it into a dialectical process that uses the truth to remove the neurotic symptoms. The word 'dialectical' is used to stress the active subjectivity of the patient in relation to the subjectivity of the analyst. Only in such an intersubjective exchange can the truth be expressed.

Lacan reads 'Dora' as a series of developments of the truth and of the decisive turning points in which they culminate. The treatment progressed favourably as long as Freud recognised these turning points and thus allowed Dora to tell the truth. It broke down at a moment when Freud's own subjective position - his counter-transference to Dora - prevented his recognition of a fresh transference that Dora was developing. This failure led Dora to reject Freud as she had rejected other significant men in her life and to abandon the treatment when her symptoms had been only partially resolved.

The first development of the truth: Dora's first transference difficulty was a tendency to identify Freud with her hypocritical father and the whole treatment might have foundered here if Freud had not been determined to listen to her side of the story before making any judgements. Avoiding this first trap led to her accusations about the duplicity of her father in his love affair with Frau K. Her most bitter grievance is that in order to continue this affair he had more or less handed Dora over to Herr K., the husband of his mistress. This despicable behaviour was, Dora claimed, at the root of her unhappiness and illness.

This led Freud to the *first dialectical turning point*: 'What is your own part', he asked, 'in the disorder you are complaining of?'. There then appeared the second development of the truth. Dora admitted to a certain complicity in her father's love affair. In this phase Freud uncovered Dora's identification with her father, and the discovery of this identification led on to a period of therapeutic work which allowed the removal of many of the symptoms which drew their strength from this

identification. There also emerged much more clearly another dominant symptom - a morbidly obsessive jealousy of Frau K. and a hatred of her father for having given the love due to her to that woman.

This gave Freud the opportunity to produce *a second dialectical turning point*. There are two steps here. First, Freud showed Dora that in her jealousy she was behaving like a jealous wife, and that this pointed to her own being in love with her father. Secondly, this love itself concealed the affection that Dora felt for Frau K. Her father's affair had had the effect of interfering with the very close friendship that existed between them.

The third development of the truth elaborates on this homosexual attachment which Freud recognised as such but was unable to exploit fully because of his own subjective perplexity in the face of female homosexuality. This failure on his part was only explicitated in a foot-note added to the case nearly twenty years later.

His own prejudice and his admiration for Herr K. led him to insist to Dora that her way to happiness lay in a recognition of her love for Herr K. Dora should work, Freud felt, towards enabling Herr K. to divorce his wife and to marry her. It was this insistence that led Dora to stagnate in a transference situation she had already lived through with Herr K. and she abandoned Freud as she had abandoned that gentleman. Freud's counter-transference had become determined by his unwitting identification to Herr K., and Dora made him pay the price.

He thus failed to reach what would have been *the third dialectical turning point*. This would have consisted in pointing out to Dora that she was now transferring on to him the feelings that she had had for Herr K. This would in turn, says Lacan, have led to a further development of the truth concerning the true nature of Dora's attraction for Frau K. She was drawn to the older woman not as an individual but as an expression of the mystery of her own feminine identity.

Dora's fundamental question was 'What is it to be a woman?' Freud's limited answer to that question, which consisted in trying to marry her off to a suitable man, brought the progress of the treatment and the removal of the symptoms to a close.

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HOW TO READ FREUD'S 'LITTLE HANS'

In the context of a year's teaching on the theory of object relations, Lacan devoted 12 Seminars between March and July 1957 to a commentary on Freud's *Analysis of a phobia in a five-year-old boy* (1909).

His thesis is that Hans' phobia resulted from a destabilisation of the relation that had existed between him and his mother. He argues that the function of the analysis was to set in motion again a dialectical process that had become stagnated. Without the analysis a neurosis or a perversion might well have become permanently established in the child at this stage; by means of it Hans was able to achieve some sort of identification with his father, and to relate to his mother in a way that allowed further progress.

The Pre-morbid Phase

Until the age of three-and-a-half Hans presented a perfect picture of a child bathing ecstatically in the love and admiration of his mother. His father at this stage is principally seen as an adjunct to the mother who duplicates her love. Hans has learned that he gives pleasure to his mother and that he is secure in her loving presence because he too brings something to the relation. He loves her presence, and she his. This presence and pleasure is principally in the register of the *imaginary*. It is a pleasure of seeing and being seen: a scopophilic and exhibitionistic pleasure.

It would be a mistake however to see this relation as purely dual. The child is never simply alone in the presence of his mother. There is always a third element to their relation: not the father or other children, as we might think, but the phallus. It is the phallus that makes the mother/child relation a dialectical and progressive one, and prevents it from being stagnant.

The child is not loved by the mother just for himself. He is loved as a substitute for the phallus. Penis envy is present in different degrees in different mothers, but as far as Hans' mother is concerned he appears to be

an indispensable appendage which she has to have with her, especially when she is dressing and undressing, in the toilet, or in bed.

In his relation to his mother Hans sees the phallus as being at the centre of her desire, and he takes up different positions in order to attract and captivate this desire. He tries to imagine himself as she imagines him and guesses at her imagined world in order to become perfectly identified with her object.

Correlatively, she is for him a phallic mother. The exhibitionism of Hans at the beginning of the case history, and the questions he asks his mother - 'Have you a widdler?' 'I thought you would have a widdler as big as a horse' - are evidence of the central role that the phallus plays in the structuring of his universe in the pre-phobic phase.

The Precipitating Events

In the first days of January 1908, when he was four-and-three-quarters, Hans had his first anxiety dream, and this was soon transformed into a phobic fear that a horse would bite him. The anxiety resulted from a radical destabilisation of the imaginary world in which his mother's desire and the image of the phallus were the organising elements. Three disruptive events are important:

1. *His awareness of his real penis:* This is shown in masturbation and in a realisation of its littleness and insufficiency compared to the phallus of his imagination. Suddenly the game of enticement he was playing with his mother in the imaginary world becomes real, and he cannot measure up to the real demands that might be made on him. He has lost his function in his mother's world, and, at the same time, his reasons for existing.
2. *His mother's rejection of his real seduction:* She rejects his attempts to get her to touch his penis, saying it would be 'piggish'. She too is forced out of the imaginary game she has been playing with her son by the introduction of his real sexuality.

3. The birth of his sister Hannah: This disturbed the unique relation with his mother and gave rise to questions about Hannah's absence of a penis.

Because Hans' genitality is already well established the anxiety caused by this shattering of his imaginary world did not result in a regression with the production of hysterical or obsessional symptoms. Instead, it is transferred into a phobic fear which serves as a defence against anxiety.

The Analysis

Hans' anxieties have been crystallised into a real fear. The analysis aims at stimulating Hans' imaginative abilities so that he can produce, in dream or phantasy form, myths that will allow him to restructure his world. Communal myths are an attempt to resolve a problem in man's relation to life, death, sexuality, existence etc. Hans' individual myths attempt to find a place in his world for the three events which were originally inadmissible: his real penis, his mother's rejection and his sister's birth. As he goes along he begins to grasp certain symbolic relations and to revise his notion of the world. The horse which bites and falls is a central signifier in these myths.

After Freud's initial instructions that his father should tell him that his mother had no penis and that his anxieties came because he was too fond of his mother, Hans' mythmaking turned around the presence and absence of the maternal phallus and his own identity with that phallus. For example, he sees her in her chemise and quite naked, and then again he symbolises her genitals, as compared to his father's, in his phantasy of the two giraffes.

Freud interrupts this phase by intervening with his own oedipal myth which introduces Hans to the notion that his father has an important part to play in his anxiety. Hans does see his father in some way as a jealous father who has to be confronted, but the real father does not fit the bill here. He is too nice, mild and unassertive with respect to his wife, his child and, apparently, his own mother. So Freud is obliged to introduce the notion of an imaginary jealous and castrating father.

Following this, Hans produced a series of myths indicating his glimpse of the possibilities of solving his dilemma by passing from the world of his mother to the world of his father. Broadly speaking, this means a passage from the imaginary to the symbolic order. This is at first a fearful prospect and his phantasies are occupied with the fear of movement and of falling. However, this first phase comes to an end on April 11th with the phantasy of a plumber who comes to unscrew the bath - the first time that Hans has managed to produce a myth of castration.

The imaginary/symbolic dialectic is illustrated by the alternation of phantasies about the veiled phallus of his mother as he shares the intimacies of her life, and his gradual identification with his father's role. He shows that he has begun to guess his father's part in the birth of his sister, and that he has a special relation with his mother from which Hans is excluded.

The key dialogue with the father takes place on April 21st, with Hans insisting that his father must be jealous of him. If he is a man he must be. Soon after this Hans produces a final castration phantasy in which the plumber comes with pliers and unscrews his bottom and his widdler, and gives him another one. With the production of this castration phantasy his anxieties comes to an end and his phobia disappears. At the same time he moves from a mother identification to a father identification with regard to the playmates whom he has always talked of as his children: 'I was their Mummy, now I'm their Daddy'

Castration as access to sexual identity

It seems paradoxical that Hans had to accept the notion of castration before he could identify himself with his father. It seems however that his imaginary phallus must be momentarily done away with, with the promise that he will accede legitimately to his father's place. Castration of this sort can be seen as a sort of weaning, as painful and as essential as the primitive weaning of the child from his mother's breast. The impasse he had reached in his relations with his mother left him open to being devoured by her - the horse who was going to bite - and this engulfing was more terrible than anything expected from the father. In addition there

was no promise, no further dialectic progress possible in the simple mother/child relation.

The only way out of the shattering sense of inadequacy is through castration with the promise of legitimate possession of his father's place, in time. The affair is taken out of the child's hands and he finds somewhere he can wait safely. His father's persistence in not wanting to castrate him meant that Hans had to produce his own myth of the mysterious plumber because unless such a castrating figure exists he has no future.

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LACAN FOR BEGINNERS

Written by Philip Hill and illustrated by David Leach.

New York, 1997, Writers and Readers Publishing Inc.

Is it misguided to write a 'beginners book' on a thinker as complex, obscure, fluid and rich as Lacan? It depends perhaps, on to whom the book is addressed.

In the opening to the French edition of the *Ecrits*, Lacan states that 'the style is the man'. He then wonders is it 'the man to whom he addresses himself?' He further states that 'in language our message returns from the Other in inverted form' and again he wonders about something. This time he wonders 'if man was to be reduced to the place where all our discourse goes back to, wouldn't the question itself then be whether there is a point in asking him at all?' Indeed, what is the point? What is the point of interrogating and working through all these difficult and obscure Lacanian texts? What is the point of asking him?

If it is the case, as Boileau said, that what is understood well can be clearly formulated, then we could argue that Lacan, in all likelihood, did not understand very well because his work is obscure and sometimes impenetrable. But do we demand greater clarity from writers and poets like Joyce, Mallarme, Beckett and Plath so that at least we can be assure ourselves they understand? This is not to imply that Lacan is a writer or a poet. Lacan is a psychoanalyst. The implication is rather that psychoanalysis has a lot in common with literature and poetry. What they have in common is an attempt to make sense of human experience via a medium which in itself is incomplete, namely language. This attempt to make sense of life is therefore doomed to failure. It is an impossibility. Literature, poetry and

psychoanalysis are concerned with the impossibilities of language and life. Hill writes:

We all have to live with the real, with 'the impossible to say'. If we manage to find the words to say something that we could not say before, we can only do so at the cost of introducing new items in the real which we then cannot talk about. Language always introduces new indeterminacies, uncertainties and the renewed division of the subject. This is why Lacan argues that language is an universal trauma or wound, taking an unique form for every subject.

It might be interesting to mention that Sylvia Plath's poetry is a perfect illustration of language as a trauma or wound and it is a language which at times is pushed to its very limits. That is the beauty of her poetry. But it is not only in psychoanalysis, literature and poetry that we encounter the limits, impossibilities and indeterminacies of language and life. Hill writes that the physicist Heisenberg discovered that it was impossible to measure simultaneously the position and the speed of an electron as it orbited around the nucleus of an atom. 'His discovery produced a new attitude to science, with expectations completely different from those of Newton's time. Science could no longer be relied on to solve all the problems of life. Since Heisenberg, science, however useful and informative, has become yet another set of impossibilities'. Not everything in life can be measured, clearly formulated and immediately understood.

Philip Hill, in his excellent book *Lacan for Beginners*, writes, amongst other things about language, the real as impossible, *jouissance*, the subject and the object, psychosis, feminine sexuality and topology. These topics have in common that they centre around the limitations, impossibilities and traumas of life. From Hill's writing it is obvious that he has closely interrogated Lacan and worked through the obscurities and complexities of his work. But more importantly Hill has returned from this task and been able to write about it clearly. As the saying goes: 'There is absolutely no simplicity, there are only simplifications'. The book is an excellent introduction to Lacan in the sense

that it inspires people to read him. It is a beginning. But do not expect to be inspired by this book if you read it only as a short-cut to Lacan's theories.

The style is the man: The man to whom he addresses himself? Lacan addressed himself to analysts. Hill addresses beginners. There is only a point in reading Lacan if you have a curiosity about the complexities of the human mind and culture. This precisely what Hill's book gives us a glimpse of and invites us to explore. This book is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the 'Sunday paper type criticisms' of Lacan's work which are based solely on opinions, rumours and allegations about his life-style. Now that is misguided!

Rik Loose

LACAN FOR BEGINNERS

Written by Darian Leader and illustrated by Judy Groves

In *Lacan for Beginners*, Darian Leader has made a Trojan attempt to condense the mighty corpus of Lacan's life's work into a entertaining concoction suitable for general consumption. This is the formula of the excellent Icon books series, their wide appeal being the ability to wed distilled knowledge to a cartoon-like format, without pretending to be other than what they really are - an aperitif.

In fact, the imaginative illustrations by Judy Groves uncannily portray Lacan as he really was, a larger than life character reminiscent of the heroes and villains of D.C. comics fame.

Opening with a brief biographical sketch, Leader firmly situates Lacan's influences in the intellectual milieu of Pre-war Paris, but acknowledges his grounding in the French Psychiatric tradition. The core of the book is revealed in its cover illustration, in Lacan's fascination with how the human infant comes into being as a desiring subject. The genesis of the ego is outlined as a central theoretical preoccupation of both Freud and Lacan, the disjointed images of the fragmented body silently cautioning us of the concept's own theoretical primitiveness.

Leader takes the reader upon on a *tour-de-force* of key Lacanian concepts which he anchors in Lacan's tripartite structure of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. However, it is the crucial concept of desire that rightfully takes centre stage, namely the desire of the child and of the mother, in the relation to the phallus and their negotiation of loss and alienation in language. Leader skilfully outlines the graph of desire to illustrate the subject's construction of otherness but the difficulty inherent in explaining the psychoanalytic concepts of *jouissance* and phantasy can be seen clearly. Indeed, Leader throughout the book tries to link theory and practice which will be of benefit to those who have found Lacanian

theory obscure. Overall, he takes pains to trace the development of Lacan's thought from his interest in paranoia to the use of topology as a metaphor to map the human psyche - which is no mean feat, considering its very essence is also subject to gaps and omissions in its very fabric. It is an ideal introduction to Lacan and is to be recommended.

Sarah McAuley