

Preface

Method to His Madness: The Truth About Lacan

Jacques Lacan, “the French Freud,” continues to enjoy a reputation as notoriously difficult amongst his foes and friends alike. From the perspectives of non- and anti-Lacanian, Lacan’s teachings and writings are seen to be riddled with obscure formulations, impenetrable jargon, and both confusing and confused misappropriations of ideas from fields other than psychoanalysis. In the eyes of such skeptics, critics, and enemies, Lacan, at best, too often cannot resist the temptation of rhetorical recourse to mystifying smoke-and-mirrors. At worst, he is accused of being a “total charlatan” (Noam Chomsky¹) peddling nothing more than “fashionable nonsense” (Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont²).

Likewise, the sizable majority of Lacan’s more sympathetic readers still find themselves confronted with moments of opacity in his texts more often than they might be comfortable with admitting. Even for native French speakers, *le français à la* Lacan is hard to follow. Those dealing with him through translations face additional daunting challenges of various sorts. Moreover, Lacan’s texts are overflowing with explicit and implicit references clear and obscure that

cover, diachronically, the vast panorama of the history of ideas; synchronically, these references stretch across the full spectrum of disciplines from mathematics and the natural sciences to the arts and humanities. And, of course, Lacan presumes on the part of his addressees intimate familiarity with Sigmund Freud's substantial corpus and its intricate, multifaceted reception.

It would seem that only the very greatest amount of enthusiasm for Lacan could motivate the enormous investment of time and energy apparently requisite for thoroughly unraveling the tangled knots of his discourse—with this up-front investment initially having to take it on faith, to gamble riskily, that these knots in fact can be unraveled and really are worth unravelling. One thing I wish to prove in the present intervention is that this faith is justified, that wagering on Lacan indeed does pay off handsomely. My close reading of "The Freudian Thing" will show how each and every page, paragraph, sentence, phrase, and word of this paradigmatic Lacanian essay is expressive of anything but obscurantism and bluff. This ought to give the lie to the accusations of the likes of Chomsky, Sokal, and Bricmont.

Especially in the decades since Lacan's death in 1981, much progress has been made in rendering his concepts and theories more accessible and transparent. A kind of Lacanian "general intellect" (to borrow a Marxian phrase) has come together over time to form a reservoir of received wisdom about what Lacan himself actually thought and claimed. Thanks to the accumulated efforts of certain exegetes and interpreters, Lacan gradually has become less intimidating and more familiar to recent generations of students and scholars, particularly in the English-speaking world. The theoretical distillates drawn by such students and scholars from the still-growing reservoir of literature on Lacan have proven to be fruitful catalysts for myriad developments in the humanities and social sciences.

At the same time, this Lacanian general intellect is in danger (and perhaps in the process) of achieving what would amount to a Pyrrhic victory for it: enabling people not to read Lacan himself. Nowadays, many of those interested in Lacan opt to bypass the arduous labor of dealing directly with his own words in favor of receiving smooth, elegant translations of these from such reader-friendly authorities as Slavoj

Žižek and Bruce Fink. Neither Žižek nor Fink wishes to facilitate avoidances of unbuffered encounters with Lacan's *Écrits*, *Seminars*, and other productions—quite the contrary. Yet, the very virtues of such gifted Lacanians cannot but threaten to sustain others' vice of using Lacan's ideas without reading his texts.

Yet, why does this matter? What, if anything, is vital about reading texts by Lacan rather than ones on him? From the former to the latter, there are, as any honest Lacanian would admit him/her-self, things lost in translation. That is to say, there is a price to be paid for the accessibility and transparency afforded by the justifiably celebrated and appreciated commentaries provided by Lacan's most talented followers.

Lacan puts his listeners and readers to work—demanding work. He never tired of repeatedly emphasizing that his prioritized addressees were training and trained psychoanalysts, namely, those immersed in the experience and practice of clinical psychoanalysis. One of the key distinguishing features of Lacan's unique analytic pedagogy is his short-circuiting of the distinction between the theoretical and the technical. In psychoanalytic institutes, such as those associated with the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), the various components of the educational curriculum for analytic training candidates are divided between those devoted to theory (as focused on metapsychological models of the psyche, conceptualizations of the mind and subjectivity, connections of analysis to non-analytic academic disciplines, etc.) and those to technique (as focused on conducting clinical analyses, intervening and interpreting, handling practical issues that come up in relations with different types of analysands, etc.). In line with this distinction, the theoretical side of training candidates' formation involves learning about psychoanalysis, while the technical side involves learning how to psychoanalyze.

Lacan's exquisitely crafted discourse, as consecrated to the training of analysts first and foremost, is designed in order, among other things, to force its intended recipients to learn technique while learning theory. To be more precise, Lacan constructs his articulations such that one gets trained in the interpretive techniques of analyzing while also getting trained about the metapsychological theories of analysis. Through artfully mimicking the styles and structures of the language-like

unconscious in his speech and writing on the unconscious, he compels those who want to gain access to his thoughts to listen and interpret in an analytic manner.

Readers who avoid Lacan's own texts, relying instead on more readable commentaries upon Lacan, are cheating themselves out of an education by missing some of the lessons in analytic interpretation these texts are designed to convey. What is more, and as a cliché saying has it, the devil resides in the details. Nearly all of the extant Lacanian secondary literature, at its best, provides illuminating encapsulations of select concepts and passages to be found in Lacan's *oeuvre*. But, in being selective, this literature leaves myriad nuances and subtleties under- or un-illuminated. This is not necessarily a shortcoming. Given the purposes of the majority of writers and readers, scholars and students, very limited and precisely targeted incursions into Lacan's body of work, motivated by various thematic and disciplinary interests, are what is most productive and desirable.

Nonetheless, if one desires truly to know Lacan himself on his own terms, a sustained reckoning with the numerous devilish details of his literal language in all its intricacies and facets is requisite. Against the grain of Biblical wisdom, there is no authentic Lacanian spirit without its letter. Furthermore, I am of the considered opinion that there now exists a sufficient number of sterling initiations into and surveys of Lacan's corpus. In addition to the countless future possible appropriations and extensions of Lacanian ideas, much of the needed labor yet to be carried out in the reception of Lacan consists in putting each of his productions (*Écrits*, *Seminars*, and other pieces) under the unblinking microscope of line-by-line exegeses. Lacan's texts invariably reward such arduous scrutiny.

I believe most of those with an extensive first-hand knowledge of Lacan would agree that the transcripts of his annual *Seminars* are relatively easier (albeit only relatively) to deal with than the essays he composed that form the chapters of his hulking 1966 *Écrits*. Within the format of the former, as academic-year-long series of sessions, Lacan is willing and able to expand on proposals and go into explanations in ways that offer comparatively more assistance to his audiences. But, the *Écrits* are another beast altogether. Readers of these collected essays almost certainly feel the need for more assistance than Lacan provides. He himself confesses:

It is rather well known that those *Écrits* cannot be read easily. I can make a little autobiographical admission—that is exactly what I thought. I thought, perhaps it goes that far, I thought they were not meant to be read.³

I immediately must caution against taking this as an admission of guilt *vis-à-vis* charges of posturing and fakery. Lacan is not confessing that the *Écrits* are tantamount to a bundle of meaningless pretensions and flimflamery. Rather, “they were not meant to be read” only in the usual sense of what “reading” involves.

To cut a long story short via recourse to some of my observations earlier in this Preface, I would suggest that the *Écrits* are meant to be analytically interpreted, not non-analytically read. If to read is to scan for signs of what is readily recognizable by one’s already-established standards for what makes sense and is understandable, then, yes, Lacan’s *Écrits*, like the Freudian unconscious itself, indeed cannot and should not be “read.” However, they indeed can and should set one to interpreting. In the process of such analytic-exegetical laboring, one allows oneself to be opened to certain experiences of the Freudian unconscious changing one’s very principles regarding meaning and comprehensibility. The present book is meant to encourage others to undertake such self-transformative labors, assuring them that, although Lacan might be unreadable, he definitely is not uninterpretable.

By focusing on “The Freudian Thing,” I return to the classic, middle-period Lacan of the 1950s. The first phase of Lacan’s reception in the English-speaking world was preoccupied primarily with this Lacan, the champion of the Symbolic unconscious generally grouped together with the mid-century structuralist movement in France. Following this first phase, roughly the past two decades of Lacanian scholarship has been fixated upon the later Lacan of the 1960s and 1970s, the thinker of the elusive but insistent Real.

Still-prevailing intellectual fashions amongst Lacanians and their fellow travelers strongly imply that Lacan’s Saussure-inflected “return to Freud” of the 1950s is somewhat *passé*, an earlier stage of his intellectual itinerary representative of a long-closed era of thought (i.e., classical French structuralism). This dovetails with the tacit suggestion that

what is truly living in Lacan's legacy, what speaks to the interests and concerns of today, are his later various moves beyond, behind, beneath, and/or between the signifiers of the unconscious-structured-like-a-language. My close reading of "The Freudian Thing," a 1955 piece pivotal for, and epitomizing, the quasi-structuralist Lacan, problematizes these currently widespread assumptions about the different periods of Lacan's theorizing in two respects.

First, I intend for my unpacking of this *écrit* to show that much of great interest and value still remains to be extracted from the middle-period Lacan, despite there being a number of excellent introductions to, and overviews of, this figure already available. Second, by situating "The Freudian Thing" in relation to the broader sweep of Lacan's teachings as a whole, I also go some way towards undermining the apparent fixity and firmness of the alleged division between the middle- and late-period Lacans. Through both examining Lacan's self-references back to "The Freudian Thing" over the subsequent years as well as allowing the ideas of this 1955 *écrit* to cross-resonate with points in the later Lacanian *oeuvre*, I demonstrate that there is a substantial amount of continuity between the Lacan of the 1950s and the Lacan of the 1960s and 1970s. This continuity is in danger of being overlooked by the now-entrenched tendency to assume a fundamental discontinuity in Lacan's trajectory in which it is proposed that the hegemony of the Symbolic gives way to the primacy of the Real.

My efforts herein have several forerunners and inspirations. For instance, John P. Muller and William J. Richardson's 1982 *Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to Écrits* and Fink's 2004 *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* both provide careful, informative reflections upon many of the key chapters of Lacan's 1966 tome. However, the exemplary precedent for me in this context is Philippe Van Haute's 2002 *Against Adaptation: Lacan's "Subversion" of the Subject—A Close Reading*. I hope to do for "The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis" what Van Haute does for 1960's "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious."⁴

Finally, I end this Preface with a few words recommending how to utilize my book—and how to do so without circumventing Lacan himself in his own words. I would suggest reading my Introduction below

before turning to the text of “The Freudian Thing” itself. After that, and with my thirteen Chapters corresponding to the thirteen sections of Lacan’s 1955 *écrit*, a procedure of first reading each section of “The Freudian Thing” and then reading my Chapter commenting upon it promises to maintain the closest contact with Lacan’s text and maximally to facilitate an appreciation of its fine-grained details (in addition to its overarching lines of thought). Lastly, my Conclusion both encapsulates the essential aspects of “The Freudian Thing” as well as situates it in relation to Lacan’s post-1955 analytic career.

A certain Biblical reference is fitting at this juncture. As will be seen in what ensues, Lacan, with his Jesuit education, makes great use of such references. Herein, I seek not just to give readers fish (i.e., Lacanian concepts I already have extracted from his works), but to teach them how to fish (i.e., how to extract these concepts themselves). I want readers to learn not only about “The Freudian Thing,” but also how to interpret Lacan’s texts generally. In sticking to the letter of Lacan, I also mean to remain faithful to his spirit as embodied in the pedagogy of teaching analytic technique while also teaching analytic theory.

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Notes

1. Noam Chomsky, “Noam Chomsky on Slavoj Žižek,” *Chomsky’s Philosophy*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVBOtxCfan0>.
2. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998), 18–37.
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 26.
4. Adrian Johnston, “Unpacking the Quilting Point: A Review of Philippe Van Haute’s *Against Adaptation*,” *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 349–354.



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