

BOOK REVIEW

JACQUES LACAN AND THE OTHER SIDE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Lizzy Newman

Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (eds.), *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Duke University Press, 2006. ISBN: 0-8223-3719-3.

‘All politics rests on the fact that the entire world is only too happy to have someone who says “Quick march!”—towards no matter what —Jacques Lacan, ‘Geneva Lecture on the Symptom’

This new book, *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, comes not a moment too soon. I say that because when I read the first essay I wished that I had *already* read it, already knew it. This essay is so timely and poignant in what it has to tell us about contemporary social discourses that it’s already too late. What this shows us is how prescient and anticipatory Lacan was in 1969 in his thinking and speaking about psychoanalysis and its relations to (what we used to call) civilization.

Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis brings together sixteen essays that are mostly all responses to Lacan’s seventeenth seminar given in the academic year of 1969-70. This seminar is already published in French and has the title *L’envers de la psychanalyse*. Seen from this distance, Seminar XVII is especially significant in that it marks and predicts, quite alarmingly, the social changes that were only beginning at that time, and the effects upon the constitution of subjectivity that these discursive shifts will entail.

Seminar XVII, given a year after the student uprisings in Paris, is the seminar in which Lacan introduces his theory of the four discourses—the four discursive arrangements of jouissance that constitute our social bonds and our subjectivity (or lack of it). It is in this seminar that he says he wants to ask the question about the place of psychoanalysis in relation to politics. Lacan’s thesis about this period of late capitalism is that

there has been a shift in terms of the dominant social discourse, from what he names the Master's discourse to that of the University discourse. The University discourse is characterized by the effacing of politics with totalitarian-style bureaucracy, and by the rise of universalism in the approach to (scientific) knowledge and the management of subjects that such universalization entails.

The most startling and brilliant essay of this collection is the first one, from Jacques-Alain Miller. It is entitled 'On Shame' and looks at the new relation between the subject and *jouissance* that is an effect of the change in discourse. Miller explores Lacan's comment in Seminar XVII 'There is no longer any shame'. The implication is that the new mode of social relations is one of hyper-permissiveness, in which there is an injunction to enjoy (*jouir*) as much as one wants, without the judging gaze of the Other in front of whom one might have once felt ashamed. Rather, one is encouraged to enjoy looking oneself.

Miller proposes that shame is an inherent aspect of civilization, to do with one's relation of being as dependent upon the Other. What happens when there is no longer any shame, he asks? 'No shame', he says, 'alters the meaning of life'. Miller goes on to analyse current conditions as counter to subjectivity. These days, under the discourse of capital, subjects are no longer represented by 'a signifier that matters'—by an S1 or Master signifier that is the condition of their singularity, their dignity, and the vehicle of their transcendence. It is at this point that Lacan's idea that the Master's discourse is the inverse of the psychoanalyst's discourse becomes apparent: the master's discourse is the very condition of possibility of the subject, and therefore of the psychoanalytic discourse, a discourse that promotes the subject's ineffable singularity. Having moved beyond this discourse, what is the possibility of psychoanalysis today?

Miller makes the interesting observation that although there is no shame about our *jouissance* any more (only shame about our desire), hidden behind this 'liberation' is a more profound shame at being alive: the shameless are shameful—they are rejects. In response to this excess and the ensuing insecurity, we see a rise in authoritarianism as a form of artificial master signifier, a development that we see every day.

Everything that Miller notes in this profound and beautiful essay is easily observable, and therefore touches the reader. Any (but not every) reader would be moved by this writing, which tells us something about the type of writing it is. For me, the effect of reading this text is that afterwards, even if only in a small way, my life is not the same as it was before. This kind of reading-effect is therefore akin to an act—a psychoanalytic act, coming out of a psychoanalytic discourse. This is what we expect from psychoanalysis: that it creates a change in the subject via the signifier.

The master's discourse is characterised by the fact that at a certain point there is someone who will make a pretence of commanding. [...] That there is someone who is happy to take on the function of pretence, ultimately delights everybody.

—Jacques Lacan, 'Geneva Lecture on the Symptom'

This collection of essays is divided into three sections, and the first is undoubtedly the best. Russell Grigg's essay 'Beyond the Oedipus Complex' is a thoughtful and highly

valuable contribution to the scholarship around this question that Lacan raises at this time: after the failure of the father function, how do we re-think the Oedipus Complex? There are important clinical issues that follow from this question of the father, particularly for hysteria, so it is right that this paper is followed by a helpful analysis from a newly mellowed (and coherent) Ellie Ragland of the two cases of Freud that Lacan revisits in this seminar, Dora and the homosexual girl. Paul Verhaeghe is utterly reliable of course in his output and proves again that he is never a waste of time to read.

The biggest (and most pleasant) surprise, however, in this section is the essay by Dominiek Hoens, whom I had not read before. His essay is philosophically agile, politically and socially relevant and a delight to engage with. Part of his paper involves a reading of *The Hostage* by Paul Claudel, a text that Lacan discusses in Seminar VIII (*Transference*). Hoens charts the cultural shift from the death of honour and the ‘aristocracy of desire’ to an era of Bourgeois Christian love, in which we can follow the degradation of the subject, from being represented by a signifier within the discourse of the Master, to becoming ‘an ugly sign’. Hoens proposes psychoanalytic praxis as ‘a new (sub)culture of desire’ as an alternative to the dominance of the University discourse. I find a resonance with this idea in Lacan’s comments in Seminar XVII about his own romanticism, when he is faced with the realization that psychoanalysis, unlike the bland universalized ‘wise words’ of psychotherapeutics, is ‘not for everyone’.

In a short review it is not possible to do justice to the best aspects of some of these essays: the material from Seminar XVII itself is vast (Miller’s whole essay is a response to just a few sentences in the last session of the seminar) and the philosophical and clinical issues are complex. A book like this one is an excellent resource to have, especially for English speakers, in that it’s a reference one can turn to as one needs. The paper by Oliver Feltham, who is the translator of Alain Badiou’s major work (*Being and Event*) into English, is an important text that engages with questions about structure and the ensuing problematic of how to account for change in Lacan’s theory of the four discourses. I feel, however, that his essay deserves a different context in which his politico-philosophical questions could resonate amidst more like-minded neighbours.

Like most things, this book is a varied compilation in terms of quality. Contrary to popular opinion, I find that the feverish gibberish of Slavoj Žižek has very little to say to me about psychoanalysis. The fact that *his* Name sells books (purportedly about Lacanian psychoanalysis) tells us, rather, something about the place of psychoanalysis within capitalism. His contribution, if one can really call it that—more like a take-over bid—to this collection is really appalling, and moreover, it’s not about Seminar XVII: Žižek makes no reference to Lacan’s seminar. This is of no concern to the publisher—it’s more important to them that his name is on it as editor of the series, since what really counts is to sell more units. The fact that students within the universities will dutifully plough their way through these sorts of Žižekian ravings only proves the truth of Lacan’s vision, that we are truly subject and submissive in relation to the Master, and that we don’t care if he’s a real one or not! Whatever he’s like, we want him!

Depending on which essay one reads, how you feel about the book changes dra-

matically. Nevertheless I would recommend it as essential to any scholar of Lacan's work—some of these essays you can't do without. The variation in quality (and in discourse: some essays inhabit the psychoanalytic discourse, others are obsessional in style and inhabit the discourse of mastery that is so boring for its readers) is part of late capitalism. Quality of products is more or less irrelevant these days—things sell regardless of how ugly, inferior or poorly made they are. Probably if you made it a smaller book with only the finest essays in it, it wouldn't sell so many copies. I don't know... This book too partakes of the discourse that inhabits us all.