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Lacan and the Thing

The Ethics of Psychoanalysis^[1], the seventh of a series of twenty-seven or twenty-nine seminars, is but a fragment of some thirty years of speech. Duration, insistence, continuity and discontinuity. Don't miss the general meaning by examining too closely the single moments.

Who speaks to whom? Interlocutors disappear with time. A single voice remains in the silence of the hearers. Finally this voice too is silent. In his last seminars Lacan drew on the blackboard, or tied and untied knots. In the end, he stood, motionless and dumb.

If we follow this parable from beginning to end, the seminar on the whole seems a challenge, with speech its only weapon. It is a challenge to silence-and to death-to the listeners as spectators, their silence being a necessity.

The unprecedented character of Lacanian speech lies in its lack of verbal exchanges with the listeners. If sometimes it invokes a response, this is abated, rejected, even stifled. Its allies in this challenge, if any, are fleeting. The fight is a solitary one, with oneself.

An insistent voice in the midst of silence sounds like analysis, with one exception: Lacan is at once analyst and analysand. The listener is inside Lacan's speech and cannot step out. A question for Lacanians: to which of Lacan's "four discourses" does this one belong?

The Seminar is Lacan's spoken work, oeuvre parlée, a counterpart, if not more important than, his written work (at times unbearably haughty). It is a work quite different from both his writing (*Écrits*) and his radio (*Radiophonie*) or television (*Télévision*)^[2] speeches-an unusual achievement in modern culture (on a par, perhaps, with the other two great lovers of language: Saussure and Wittgenstein). This oral work exhibits a high level of specificity, which is lost or altered as soon as one attempts to put it in writing-or even give it a written order by eliminating repetitions, interruptions and diverging thoughts, thereby cancelling those very losses of thought which are such an inevitable and fruitful side of his very procedure.

In this seminar, for example, Lacan is talking about Melanie Klein, and having affirmed her placement of "the mother's mythical body" in the Thing's central place, he goes on to dwell upon the Kleinian conception of sublimation as a symbolic reparation for injuries caused to the mother's body.

Anonymous version of the Seminar, 1981 (pp.141-2):

Il y a là quelque chose sur lequel nous reviendrons, et que je vous pointe d'ores et déjà comme quelque chose dont vous devez tenir compte. Je vous apporterai les textes, si vous ne les avez déjà vu apparaître dans le champ de votre connaissance. Cet aboutissement de la notion de sublimation; cette réduction de cette notion à cet effort restituitif du sujet par rapport au phantasme lésé du corps maternel, est quelque chose qui nous indique d'ores et déjà que ce n'est assurément pas la solution la meilleure, ni du problème de la sublimation, ni du problème topologique métapsychologique lui

même; les rapports du sujet avec quelque chose de primordial dans son attachement pour l'objet le plus fondamental, le plus archaïque c'est quelque chose qui vous permet tout au moins de penser en tous les cas, au point où nous en sommes, que mon champ ainsi défini du das Ding- opérationnellement-est quelque chose qui en tout cas lui donne son cadre, l'explique, peut permettre de concevoir la nécessité, les conditions offertes au fleurissement de ce qu'on pourrait appeler dans l'occasion un mythe analytique, le mythe kleinien comme tel; mais aussi peut-être en nous permettant de le situer, de rétablir une fonction plus large que celle à laquelle on arrive-et tout spécialement à l'endroit de la sublimation-nécessairement si l'on suit les catégories kleinienne.

Jacques-Alain Miller's version:

Je vous apporterai les textes, si vous ne les connaissez déjà. Mais je vous dis tout de suite que la réduction de la notion de sublimation à un effort reconstitutif du sujet par rapport au fantasme lésé du corps maternel n'est assurément pas la solution la meilleure du problème de la sublimation, ni du problème topologique, métapsychologique, lui même. Néanmoins, il y a là une tentative d'aborder les rapports du sujet avec quelque chose de primordial, son attachement à l'objet fondamental, le plus archaïque, dont mon champ, opérationnellement défini, du das Ding, donne le cadre. Il permet de concevoir les conditions offertes au fleurissement de ce qu'on pourrait appeler dans l'occasion le mythe kleinien, mais aussi de le situer, et de rétablir à l'endroit de la sublimation une fonction plus large que celle à laquelle on arrive nécessairement si l'on suit les catégories kleinienne.^[3] (Lacan 1986, pp. 127-8)

Miller's "exte établi" renders what is a labyrinthine speech into what it is readable and comprehensible. The anonymous version, taken from shorthand notes or a recording, is a rough transcription which essentially adds only a punctuation, leaving the flow of spoken speech intact. Thus, it is possible to capture the value of these reflective and elaborating suspensions inherent in Lacan's pauses, repetitions, stereotyped phrases and circumlocutions. We are dealing with a thought in progress, seeking itself with multiple antennae. The official version represents an accomplished thought, crystallized, so to speak, which proposes assertive and simplified formulae ("je vous dis tout de suite"; "Néanmoins, il y a là une tentative d'aborder"), cutting, improving and giving grammar. The result is neither a blatant distortion nor censorship, as some have called it, but rather another state of thought which falls half-way between Lacan's immediate spoken speech-his continuously challenging monologue-and his actual writing. In exchange for this clear advantage of legibility, we have something straightened out, corrected, placed in a cast... Is Jacques-Alain Miller Lacan's inevitable "bed of Procrustes"?

Lacan's ethical research is essentially stretched between two fundamental statements: first, "from an analytic point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is to have given ground relative to one's desire," (Lacan 1992, p. 319) in connection to the statement that desire is "an incommensurable measure, an infinite measure;" and second, that the fundamental desire is incest-thus a desire affected by that law which opposes culture to nature. This tension, clash and complicity between desire and the law which forbids it, gives rise to both the tragic dimension of analytical ethics-wherein the triumph of death (or, better, the triumph of being-for-death) flashes before us-and to its comic dimension as an action's fundamental failure as regards the desire living within it.

For Lacan, as for Freud, the incest par excellence is that between mother and son: father/daughter incest is not considered, or rather, it is relegated to the rules Lévi-Strauss described, with reference to men's exchange of women. Thus, primary importance is given to the subject's relationship to "the fundamental, most archaic, object", which for Melanie Klein is the mother and her "mythical body." But, as the two versions of the seminar showed, Lacan clearly breaks with Ferenczi's and Abraham's disciple: the mother simply occupies a place within that "frame" called *das Ding*, the Thing.

This Thing, when it first appears in Lacan's seminar, is like a meteor bolting across the sky, and, like a meteor, it largely dissolves in this seminar, leaving behind some invisible matter which will be present in all

of his later work.

Where does It come from? From an unnoticed passage now uncovered in one of Freud's superseded texts, his 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, which was published posthumously and has of late become a gold mine for researchers (Freud 1950.). Lacan was not new to this kind of reading of Freud: even *Verwerfung* (forclusion, foreclosure) was lifted from one of Freud's clinical texts. With the Thing, a theoretical text is brought into play, but in both cases Lacan's procedure is the same: to expand on an undeveloped or implicit meaning.

In the passage rescued by Lacan, Freud ponders the origin of knowledge, which he pinpoints in the splitting up of the "primary perceptive complex" (*Nebenmensch*-the neighbor, the "nearest human being"), which for the child is both a small object of fulfillment and the first object of hostility. This *Nebenmensch* is split into two components: one reduced through memory to the subject's information about his own body (hand movements or a cry, for example); and the other, by contrast, new and without paragon (facial features, for example), which "affirms itself through its unchanging apparatus, which remains together as thing, *als Ding* ." This is the Thing Lacan recovered from Freud's text, and which had escaped previous commentators: it is "the element initially isolated by the subject, in his experience of the *Nebenmensch*, as being by its very nature alien, *Fremde*" (Lacan 1992, pp. 51-2); it is the result of "an originary splitting of the experience of the reality" around which the subject's entire world of desires will orient itself-his absolute Other which he will spend his life unsuccessfully seeking to refind. It is in reference to it that the subject "is constituted in a kind of relationship characterized by primary affect, prior to any repression" (Lacan 1992, p. 54).

Hence, Freud's small point becomes, in Lacan, an absence or attracting void of enormous significance, world-founding, much like the Thing of which Heidegger speaks in a lecture quoted by Lacan in this very seminar, and from which he draws the famous example of the vase. For Heidegger, the vase is a model of an original deed: the potter shapes the void which, for Heidegger, holds the "fullness" of water or wine poured to the brim, while the act of pouring from the vase evokes the sacrificial offering of drink to the gods, thus uniting heavenly and earthly powers. For Lacan, the jug's shape embodies a primordial signifier which creates the void, and so introduces the perspective/prospect of fullness. Thus the jug comes to represent "the existence of the void at the centre of that reality called the Thing."

In another passage, the Thing is "at the centre of the significant relations in which the unconscious organizes itself," but only insofar as it is excluded, foreign to the self, even though being at the very heart of it, the seat of intimate exteriority or "exterioracy." Further, the Thing is that part of the real (the real as a whole: the real of the subject, and the real outside it) which suffers from the signifier; or, in other words, the "incidence of the signifier on the psychic real." The text overflows with repeated approximations, as though trying to grasp-while at the same time making ungraspable-what seems inaccessible, lost forever and never lost, to be re-found but, yet, unfindable... Here Lacan's thought keeps bumping into the Thing-it bolts, draws near and pulls away by means of glimpses of oblique or anamorphic thought which both alludes and eludes.

In this light, the Thing-in-itself, or the Kantian noumenon, appears on the horizon, like a fixed point of reference. Explicitly: "On the horizon, beyond the pleasure principle, there rises up the *Gute, das Ding*, thus introducing at the level of the unconscious something that ought to oblige us to ask once again the Kantian question of the *causa noumenon*" (Lacan 1992, p. 73). An approach perhaps already present in the Freudian passage brought to light (through Brentano's mediation?), but which in Lacan assumes full importance, precisely in ethics, just as in Kant.

For philosophers, the faculty of desire, as pure will, implies a causality with freedom, that is, the very concept of a *causa noumenon*-an empty concept in comparison with the theoretical use of reason, but solidly justified by the purposes and maxims of practical life. Twisting Kant a bit, Lacan seemingly proposes through the Thing a general form of desire, valid as a universal law of action. "In the end, it is conceivable that it is as a pure signifying system, as a universal maxim, as that which is the most lacking in a relationship to the individual, that the features of *das Ding* must be presented" (Lacan 1992, p. 55).

Lacan acknowledges the impossibility of giving the validity of universal law to the two central elements within the Freudian construction: on the one hand, desire (*Wunsch*), which in analysis is always the singular, irreducible truth of the individual; and on the other, the super-ego as cultural formation, whose genesis is linked in Freud to the relationship with the parents, or better, with the parental super-egos, and which in any case implies an empirical connotation.

In Freud, however, desire and Super-Ego are connected: the controlling agency derives from the Id's energy. Lacan's intention is to preserve this type of union at a transcendental level, decisively shifting it, however, towards the Id, towards desire, in keeping with his well-known reading of the Freudian formula: "*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden. Là où c'était, dois-je advenir.*" Thus, from Freud's small observation, Lacan builds a regulating agency of desire born from the subject's original and radical splitting by the signifier. This construction quickly reveals itself as one of the most delicate points of his whole seminar.

If in fact the Thing has the value of a universal maxim, then the only thing of which we can be guilty, from an analytical point of view, is giving ground relative to our desire. Desire fills the empty place left by the unconditional Kantian Thou should. And the clause of unconditionality, from an analytical point of view, is not at all restrictive, but quite the contrary: desire implies what is essentially valid, beyond common empirical rules. By order [*per ordine*] of the Thing, the Super-Ego is immediately demoted, if not altogether let go of [*licenziato*] (something which, as we shall see, bears on the Oedipus' statute).

The new statute of desire clarifies the meaning of another twisted link established by Lacan, that between Kant and Sade. If for Sade the jouissance of every human being has the value of a law, then the Sadean world should be one of the possible results of a world ruled by Kantian Ethics, with Boudoir Philosophy completing the Critique of Practical Reason and providing the latter's truth. Lacan's assertions are resolute, and in no way paradoxical. In this way, Sade becomes Kantian to the extent that Kant becomes Sadean – a conclusion which Lacan does not avoid. In fact, through the notion of pain as the "never-ending torment" at the end of Sade's heroes' love's labour, Lacan recognizes the same pain (but is it the same?) which results from the intervention of moral law on our inclinations. But, on this particular point, the link established between Kant and Sade presupposes that we must cancel the positive equivalent of pain felt in the application of the law, that feeling of respect and admiration before the "holy law," and its consequent elevation of the soul. Unless we equate this jouissance with the sadistic one.

Here we certainly don't intend to map out the differences between Kant and Sade. Instead, it is important to note that Lacan's method of "torsion" becomes a tendency to submit to analogy, which, as in the case of Kant and Sade, often turns from an effective, heuristic starting point into a solid cage for thought, because similarities or partial affinities between two situations are insistently pushed to the point of becoming total equivalents. Analogy, initially a potentially inventive procedure, takes on an evocative function, at once fascinating and unproductive.

This is why in a later seminar (*Encore*) Lacan (1975) could come to see the Super-Ego as the imperative of enjoyment, jouissance: "Enjoy!"-while adding, of course, that the Super-Ego is at the same time the "agent of castration." But, in this seminar, this commandment is an impossible one; here, as we have said, the duty to desire is not linked to the Super-Ego, but, rather, to the presence-absence of the Thing, this "fearful center for the aspiration of desire," which precedes any Super-Ego formation.

Surprisingly, at this central point two different situations overlap. On the one hand, the original splitting of the subject is the effect of the signifier: our relationship with the signifier inserts the "enchanted circle" that divides us from the Thing. Thus the Thing appears as the Absolute, original-and missing-*Nebenmensch*, to whom the subject relates in a dimension of loss, regret and nostalgia. Now, on the other hand, for Lacan, this absolute mother at the same time implies the dimension of prohibition-she is the "goods" that are forbidden by the law of incest. But if there is a lack, prohibition is out of place, superfluous. There is no need to forbid what does not exist.

However, the prohibition of incest is valid for another mother, the one fully present in her relationship with the child, who is separated from her by paternal law. But here we are in the field of the Oedipal relationship, with its specific timing which is altogether foreign to that of the original separation. The Oedipal mother is, according to Lacan, entirely reduced to her relationship with the phallus she lacks, a “phallus-carrying” figure, in reference to those Greek rituals in honor of Dionysus, in which participants carried the simulacrum of the phallus. The failed distinction between this phallophoric mother and the Thing crushes and condenses the Oedipal development into a single original moment. But if Oedipus is an *Ur*-Oedipus, then Oedipus is no more.

One might ask the reason for this surprising overlapping of lack and prohibition. The Thing, as we have seen, approaches the Kantian noumenon; if we step back from the Lacanian textual twisting, which neglects the a priori, non-empirical, origin of Kant’s noumenon, we can discern in the Thing the hypostasis of the relationship with the Kleinian mother. A stormy, polymorphous figure, a rough, disquieting sea which complicates Freud’s Oedipal description, and which Lacan seeks to subject to the Law of the Father. In this way, however, the richness of the maternal figure and the exceptional variety of her relationships with the son (one need only leaf through a few pages of *Envy and Gratitude* to recognize the hellish hullabaloo therein, perhaps the only modern equivalent of Dante’s *Inferno*) are sacrificed for the benefit of a figure completely reduced to one lacking the phallus. The problematic relationship between the two mothers—the Freudian one of prohibition, and the anguishing, threatening one which leaps from the pages of Melanie Klein—appears in Lacan as one of prohibition imposed by the paternal law—the “frame” into which “the mythical body of the mother,” that is the Thing, should fit.

Here, prohibition functions almost as an extra protection against a situation perceived as an absolute threat. One might even say that it functions as an exorcism against a threat which comes from nothing. And one might further ask what kind of pre-established limit is set on the position and intervention of the analyst in his day-to-day work.

Anyway, the consequences of the prohibition of incest introduced at this stage are immediately evident. If a barrier of incest is erected between the Thing and the subject, then all attempts to approach the Thing form either a transgression against the law (which opens up the field of perversion, as exemplified in Sade) or a deficiency—a partial or total absence—of the law itself (which opens up the field of psychosis). These are Lacan’s conclusions. If, instead, the Thing is characterized as a primordial mother who has become a “central void,” unreachable in itself, then the relationship can be like an asymptotical movement towards her, uninterrupted by external obstacles and, above all, not labeled as exclusively pathological. But here we have taken a leap beyond Lacan, who clearly insists on the barrier of incest, at the price of coming up against insurpassable impassés. Let us give a few examples.

To represent the relationship between the Thing and the Law, Lacan resorts to the famous passage in Saint Paul in which sin is placed in relationship to the law: “Is the Law sin? Never may that become so! Really I would not have come to know sin if it had not been for the Law; and, for example, I would not have known covetousness if the Law had not said: ‘You must not covet.’ But sin, receiving an inducement through the commandment, worked out in me covetousness of every sort, for apart from Law sin was dead.” (Romans, 7, 7-8). Lacan replaces sin with the Thing and points out that the relationship between the Thing and the Law could not be better described than in Saint Paul’s terms. But Lacan omits that Paul is referring to the old relationship with the law, from which the apostle claims that he is free, that “he is dead to it,” subjected now to a new spirit rather than *vetustas litterae*, old letters. By quoting only the first part of Paul’s speech, Lacan dooms himself to be a master of “old letters.” He does not recognize the leap effected by Paul—and the entire ancient culture—with his new formulation, which is certainly neither a substitution nor a recapitulation of the old law. Lacan’s omission is a symptom of his inability to go beyond the order of obedience and transgression.

With regard to the “genital act”: “it is doubtless possible to achieve for a single moment in this act something which enables one human being to be for another in the place that is both living and dead of the Thing. In this act and only at this moment, he may simulate with his flesh the consummation of what he is

not under any circumstances” (Lacan 1992, p. 300). It is difficult to escape the impression of an intrinsically contradictory valuation. Being in the Thing’s place, that central core of desire, cannot be reduced to a simulation or to the causation of the appearance of that which does not exist. And this valuation is echoed in later formulations. In *Encore*, for example, “phallic jouissance” is a pure “organ jouissance,” but at the same time there exists a “jouissance beyond the phallus.”

This is the road which leads Lacan to the mystics, who are often present in his work and even directly questioned (in *Encore*, for example, he questions Eckhart regarding *das Ding*), but at the same time also referred, or subjugated, to something else. With the Thing, Lacan draws nearer to them (he refers to the biblical burning bush as “Moses’ Thing”), but moves away from them at the very moment in which a specific configuration, going beyond his usual “aphoristic formulae,” is needed. The mystic experience lies beyond the barrier of incest and reveals an anthropological aspect heretofore refuted, feared, or reduced to religious attitude tout court.

Thus Lacan ignores excessive joy, which is at the heart of the ecstatic experience. On the horizon of absolute attainment of the Thing, there is essentially only pain, as the Kant-Sade satanic duo shows us. Yet the same Lacan, following Freud, discovered a different line, in which the relationship with the Thing (this is the obsessional ceremonial) is governed by worry over avoiding not pain, but “excessive pleasure”; or worry over having to “respect” the void of a particular kind of sublimation (religion). Thus, the obsessional ceremonial and the religious construction are both means of containing and safeguarding the “burning bush” of excessive joy.

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Noted:

[1] Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, trans. by Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992).

[2] The author is referring to three of Lacan's publications: *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), *Radiophonie* (in "Scilicet", n. 2-3, 1970, pp. 55-101) and *Télévision* (Paris: Seuil, 1973.) [Editor's note.]

[3] Engl. transl.: "I will bring the texts involved, if you don't know them. But I can tell you right away that the reduction of the notion of sublimation to a restitutive effort of the subject relative to the injured body of the mother is certainly not the best solution to the problem of sublimation, nor to the topological, metapsychological problem itself. There is nevertheless an attempt to approach the relations of the subject to something primordial, its attachment to the fundamental, most archaic of objects, for which my field of *das Ding*, defined operationally, establishes the framework. It allows us to conceive of the conditions that opened onto the blossoming of what one might call the Kleinian myth, allows us also to situate it, and, as far as sublimation is concerned, to reestablish a broader function than that which one necessarily arrives at if one accepts Kleinian categories." (Lacan 1992, pp. 106-07)

Bio:

Elvio Fachinelli (Luserna, Trento, 1928 – Milan 1989) was an M.D. and psychoanalyst in Milan where, in the 1970's, he established the journal 'L'erba voglio'. He published his witty 'psycho-political' articles there and in the popular weekly 'L'Espresso', establishing a strong connection between psychoanalysis and the emancipatory and radical movements at that time. Although he remained a member of the official Italian Psychoanalytic Society (SPI), member of IPA, in 1969 he led a public protest against the Italian psychoanalytic establishment, which he criticized for its conservative sclerosis. He authored the books: *L'erba voglio*, with Luisa Muraro and Giuseppe Sartori (Turin: Einaudi, 1971); *Il bambino dalle uova d'oro* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974); *La freccia ferma* (Milan: L'Erba Voglio, 1979); *Claustrofilia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1983); *La mente estatica* (Milan: Adelphi, 1989); *Freud* (Milan: Adelphi 2012). 'On Time on Psychoanalysis', EJP, 12–13, <https://www.psychomedia.it/jep/number12-13/fachinelli.htm>. 'The Psychoanalyst's Money', EJP, 18, <https://www.psychomedia.it/jep/number18/facchinelli.htm>. 'On the Beach', EJP, 24, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/category/ejp/discussions/on-the-beach-e-fachinelli/>

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