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Book Review Essay: “Conversations with Lacan: Seven Lectures for Understanding Lacan” by Sergio Benvenuto

Review of Benvenuto, Sergio. *Conversations with Lacan: Seven Lectures for Understanding Lacan*. New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. 198

Conversations with *Conversations with Lacan*

How can a book be a conversation? Or, rather, how can it be multiple conversations? How can these conversations be with someone who can no longer speak? And how can these conversations also be lectures, divided into the unlikely number of seven? Who is giving these lectures, where, and from what position? Or are the conversations themselves the lectures? Who is the proper audience of a book on Lacan written by someone who claims not to be a Lacanian? And how can a book that so makes you want to speak and write also gesture insistently at that which never ceases not being either written or spoken?

As I write this, I realize that the last time I wrote about a book by Sergio, I similarly began with a series of rhetorical questions. This was his 2016 book on perversions, which in its very title poses a question—*What Are Perversions?*—that the book then refuses to answer, at least within the definitional rubric that its title sets up. Evidently, this is how Sergio’s writing acts on me: it provokes me into a deconstruction of the books’ foundational premises. Indeed, it seems to me that this is what Sergio does as a writer: he asks that his textual performances be submitted to the same procedures to which he submits not only other texts, but also entire theoretical bodies and cultural movements. That is, he opens his writing up to being taken up by the kind of play in which he himself engages, and he implies both the entry points for such openings and the methods for such engagements, without himself submitting his work to that metatextual or deconstructive procedure. Whereas other similarly inclined writers might deconstruct their own work for us, Sergio seems to be aware that to do so would be to enclose his text in a hall of mirrors that would ultimately do little for the transmission of psychoanalysis. This then is the generosity of Sergio’s texts, which are neither purely constative nor purely performative, but somewhere between the two: a positioning that allows the works to ask for co-conspirators to continue their project—to play with him, in both senses, much as the “with” in *Conversations with Lacan* can be understood in various ways.

We can further variously understand this writerly and theoretical positioning as it relates both to the transmission of psychoanalysis and to Lacan in particular, as the book itself does. This is a book about Lacan not because Lacan produced ahistorical truths about the human psyche, but because, more insistently than other psychoanalytic thinkers, he evinced the notion that psychoanalysis is not a body of knowledge but a performative procedure: a way of acting in relation to both the possibilities and impossibilities of subjectivity. Lacan’s psychoanalytic inventions—object a, the Borromean rings, the sinthome—were not just

ways of describing something about human life, but open objects of investigation for his audience to play with: they were not just content but, let's say, *gifts* of content produced in service of putting others to work. In this sense Lacan, in his speaking and writing, put himself in the position of analysand, who produces not transcendent truths but speech objects to be put into play. And yet if, in so doing, he interpolated his readers and listeners as analysts, he also pushed them to become analysands in turn, by producing their own textual and linguistic performances to be gifted to the circuit of psychoanalytic transmission. In some strange way, in one's relation to Lacan's work, one takes up the position of analyst not authoritatively, or finally, but fleetingly, as part of a dialectical movement between analyst and analysand where one perpetually finds oneself called upon by the theories one both receives and produces.

Sergio takes up the mantle of this project, as it underscores what is always at stake with so-called founders of discursivity. As Sergio writes, "what makes a thinker great is not the fact that he or she has discovered definitive truths, but the fact that his or her ideas have the right rhythm, the rhythm that leads (many of us) 'to think'" (Benvenuto, 2020, p. 64); "what the master really transmits is not so much a formal thinking, but a certain style of being-in-the-world" (p. 158). Whether it is by way of the rhythms of thought or of being, theory is transmitted not as content but as rhythm, not as sense but as style: and it is via reading Lacan that one (or Sergio, or some of us) comes to articulate these meta-theoretical claims (though of course, it is also possible to get there by other routes.) In this sense Lacanian thought, as Sergio's book transmits it, exists somewhere in between theory and meta-theory, in that it asks its recipients not so much to repeat its claims, as to articulate its latent assumptions—thus moving the theory to a new register, much as Lacan himself did with Freud and others. Thus it is by employing Lacan's methods that the content of his thought is transcended: a process that Sergio, in imitation of Lacan's invention of neologisms, calls "e-raising" (p. 24). A combination of "raise" and "erase," to "e-raise" a word, a text, a doctrine, or a cultural movement is to give it new sense by shifting "upwards" the register of its articulation: an action that Sergio likens to the movement from symptom to sinthome in Lacanian thought. This then is how Sergio implicitly conceives the book that he has produced, which is a product not of a dyed-in-the-wool ideological Lacanianism—which according to Sergio tends to miss the performative, rhythmic nature of transmission that Lacan himself promoted—but of an imitation of Lacan's methods. And it is via such an imitation that Sergio e-raises what he calls his symptom—that is, his love of Lacan—into a sinthomatic text.

One can hear, in this neologism "e-raise" and its application, the complex movements of text and context in Sergio's thought, the twisting weft of imitation, appropriation, and inspiration with new meaning. Sergio apes Lacan's invention of neologisms in order both to articulate the meta-discursive movements of Lacan's thought and to subject that thought to the same procedure—a procedure which Sergio then elucidates by going back down a level to the content of Lacan's theory of the sinthome. And yet the sinthome is already a construction that, recursively, articulates the upward movement to which Sergio's neologism refers. It's a circuitous route that is reminiscent of the moment early in the book in which Sergio asks, of all of the post-Freudian appropriations of Freud—Ego Psychology *cum* Relationism, Kleinianism *cum* Object Relations, and Lacanianism—"which is the *real* Freud," and then answers (or refuses to answer) by offering a "three-ring parable" from the Middle Ages. In the parable, says Sergio, a father, in a family that for generations has passed a magic ring from father to favorite son, loves each of his three sons equally, and so makes two identical copies of the ring; thus the three sons each think they are in possession of the authentic ring, and there is no saying who really has it (pp. 40-41). The parable was reproduced in Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise* to refer to the presumed hegemony of the three monotheistic religions. This is how we must understand collective claims to Freud's legacy, says Sergio, who then goes on to say that he doubts Lacan would have liked the parable, since he claimed Freud's ring just as insistently as anyone else. "Unless," adds Sergio, "we think that Nathan's three rings were a premonition of the three Borromean rings, which obsessed Lacan in the last decades of his life" (p. 41).

What is going on here? Sergio invokes a medieval parable about transmission as a way of relativizing Lacan's body of thought against Lacan's own manifest wishes; and yet this parable then becomes an analogy for an element of Lacanian thought that itself articulates something of the very relativity at stake. The twistings and re-twistings of content and form, referent and analog, original and successor, citer and cited, or

perhaps most broadly signified and signifier, continue ad infinitum, as mobius strip. This process then operates similarly to how—to turn the screw once more—Sergio articulates the status of Lacan’s witticisms, when he refers to the conceptual slipperiness of one of the most famous of them: as he says, “‘the signifier represents the subject to another signifier’ sounds like a definition, but it only ‘sounds’ like one. This is because in a definition, the *definiendum* or that which needs to be defined—in this case the signifier—cannot appear in the *definiens* as one of the words it defines” (p. 6). In a sense, the entirety of Sergio’s book—at both macro and micro levels, from its dealings in the specifics of Lacanian thought to its critiques of entire intellectual movements—works according to this twisting, anti-definitional logic by which a register of discourse is transcended only to be returned to and repeated, this time with the residues of new meaning afforded by that return. There is an important question to be asked—and that I think isn’t asked often enough within psychoanalytic publishing—about what it means to write psychoanalytically: that is, not so much what it means to write about psychoanalysis, which of course can and does easily happen under the heading of scholarship or research or university discourse, but what it means to write as an analyst, or to write while attending to the analytic position in relation to one’s writing. Sergio’s “e-raising,” as an articulation of both the method and the content of the text, points to one such conceptualization of properly psychoanalytic writing.

The action of e-raising, as a description of psychoanalytic method, is also inherently social, and indeed, part of what’s notable about *Conversations with Lacan* is how sociable it is. This book has many friends. Sergio brings us into a world of debates and colloquies with colleagues from various fields, always with a love that is both palpable and formal, in that so many—even those with whom the book takes issue—are included in the game. He gives us a sense of his community, of his playmates, of who takes what position on what side of what debate; for him, theory is not trans-historical but local, and social; it takes place among groups of real people in bodies living out their enjoyments together. Often, these anecdotal reports of other people’s theories and even lives are used as analogy or reference point for some other train of thought that Sergio is pursuing. For example, Sergio speaks of Josef Rotblat—“a young Polish physicist” (p. 17) who was awarded a Nobel peace prize for escaping from the US in order to avoid participating in the development of the nuclear bomb, and with whom Sergio was well-acquainted—as a way of articulating the difference between ethics and technique in psychoanalysis. It’s a subtly complex maneuver, of which there are many in the book, in which the justification for the analogy is both structural and absolutely coincidental—that is, that Sergio happened to know this person.

Perhaps in their own way such moments give form to the relationship between chance and necessity in psychoanalysis. But they also mean that we learn a great deal about Sergio himself—his background, who he did his doctorate with (Laplanche), his intellectual and affective proclivities, which he both performs and makes explicit—since, like a good analysand, he includes himself in the scene of his gossip. And by putting himself in the scene—by making himself an object like all the others whom he admires and analogizes and differentiates and critiques—Sergio is inherently self-ironizing. Take for example his admission that he doesn’t even particularly think Kleinian—or Bionian, or whatever—theories are wrong: they’re just boring. Whereas “when I read or listen to a smart Lacanian, I enjoy it a lot more than when I read or listen to a smart Bionian.” “Of course,” Sergio adds, “I am bored by all those who are not smart, whatever their theoretical credo may be. Today not feeling bored is rare in psychoanalysis” (p. 129). This announcement would be somewhat horrifying—there but for the grace of God bore I—if it weren’t so self-ironizing. And this irony, applied equally to persons and to theories, is then itself an application of the psychoanalytic ethic, in the sense that, as Sergio writes, psychoanalysis allows us to “adopt an ironic position with regard to the signifier we actually ‘are’” (p. 83).

The simultaneous independence and sociality of Sergio’s writerly and theoretical positioning is psychoanalytic as well, and it is here that the tension between the singular and the multiple as it plays out in the book—between the lecture and the conversation—finds its center. Sergio’s book may have many friends, but it also insists that “it is important for psychoanalysis to fight *alone*” (p. 38). Thus in the book psychoanalytic theory takes on the same position among its theoretical playmates—Marxism, religion, physics, chaos theory, et cetera—that the analyst, made as such by virtue of the end of her analysis, takes on

vis-à-vis her community. That is, psychoanalysis, like the analyst herself, is both extroverted (as Sergio says, “for Lacan, the end of analysis is not introverted but extroverted” [p. 92]) and irreducibly alone. This tension between singularity and plurality is then internal to psychoanalytic practice as well and, in some way, articulates the relationship between psychoanalytic ethics and psychoanalytic technique, or the ways in which ethics finds its place within and determines technique. As Lacan says in his “Direction of the Treatment” paper, psychoanalytic work centers precisely on a certain tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces, or between openness and restriction: whereas, technically, the analyst can say virtually anything, her ethical orientation cannot waver from the rigorous singularity of the psychoanalytic position—which singularity then points a direction from within the infinite range of potential speech.

It is here that the question of the clinic opens up, and indeed Sergio writes that what he calls his own “deconstructive piety” vis-à-vis Lacan, to the extent that it is transmitted, might “also influence the clinical approach of practicing analysts” (though he adds that “we will not have space to prove it in this work” [p. x]). One way then to continue the conversation of *Conversations with Lacan* would be to interrogate the influence of this particular kind of psychoanalytic transmission on the clinic—its effect on practicing analysts, within their practices. Lacan was out to make analysts, and part of the implicit claim of Sergio’s book is that it is via a transmission of the method, rhythms, and turns of Lacan’s project as much as of its content that an analyst—who then may or may not choose to call herself a Lacanian—might be produced.

For my part, I believe that what Sergio’s book allows or inspires in its readers is an articulation of their own, particular, specific—which also means embodied, thus implying a relation to the Real—relationship to theory, with the suggestion that it is from within such an articulation that psychoanalytic work can proceed. To provide my own anecdote: it has now happened to me several times that I have gotten profoundly disoriented after hearing a particular signifier in session with a patient. With one patient, the signifier was “cash”; with another, it was “trick”; another, “peel.” All three times, I’ve had the strange and momentary fantasy that that signifier was the patient’s name, even though I knew that their names had nothing to do with those words. And yet, in a way, these signifiers *were* their names, and indeed one patient, after making mention of his peculiar agility with peeling oranges, named himself precisely this way: as he said, “all the Kowalski brothers are excellent at peeling fruit.” Now, I could consult Lacan the master about what a so-called master signifier is, and give a lecture about it; or I could, as I have come to do, understand Lacan’s idea of the master signifier as a word that, when it emerges in a session, makes me dizzy and confused in this very particular way.

I bring this up because Sergio’s book has given me a way to think this kind of vignette as itself a registration of theory, such that theory becomes an e-raising of clinical experience that, in the next round, becomes integrated back into the clinic. This is the place where the lecture becomes supplemented by the conversation, and it is here that something of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real as Sergio captures it in his book comes to life. In other words, the Real makes its presence felt not only in the content but also the form of Sergio’s telling: he performs in the form of his transmission the chiasmatic dance of Symbolic and Real—of the trans-historical and the local, embodied, and specific—that is his essential subject and that is where the subject as such emerges. This indeed may be the only way to transmit something of the Real, as it centers a psychoanalytic session, within a verbal context—which means that theory must needs engage the radical irreducibility of an encounter (or missed encounter) with the Real that it also describes, bringing theory vertiginously close to something like autobiography.

It is also a very funny method of transmission. If this is how you talk about what a master signifier is, then a master signifier as a piece of theory becomes inherently absurd. Theory mimics its subject here not because of some pure principle of imitation, or because we like to think an owner looks like its dog, but because a theory is produced in the same way all verbal performances are produced. Any theory of the signifier must then be as ironic in its relation to the Real as the signifiers it both describes and trades in. Sergio opens up this absurdist register of theory-making, and it is here as well that the place of Lacan in English translation—and perhaps especially, for me, in the American context—clarifies itself. It seems to me that American Lacanians—for various cultural reasons, perhaps having to do with their outsider’s relation to the

continental tradition—may be especially inclined to take on an ironic position vis-à-vis their own status under the signifier “Lacanian.” From the other direction, it is perhaps in the context of the current American political stage that we might put to question with particular urgency the relationship between the irony of the signifier, as Sergio’s work insists on it, and the status of both identification and of truth. Certainly, in America in general today, we have problems with truth; with group identifications; and with irony—irony understood in its most serious dimension. One other way to continue the conversation then would be to ask about the place of something like truth within a psychoanalytic theory that takes seriously the ironies of signification and affiliation, and the possibilities for the social link that emerge from such a theory.

To end with a parapraxis: this book review was originally given at a symposium celebrating the publication of Sergio’s book in English—an event that led to a thoughtful discussion that, by the end, touched precisely on the question of clinical practice. Sergio’s take: in analysis, theory is essential, but you have to forget it for it to work. As an analyst, you might read theory, but ultimately, you have to also eat it: only once you have absorbed it, such that it works on you unconsciously, can it be useful in your practice. Thus, said Sergio, you need theory in order to ignore theory. That very morning, much to my absolute horror, I had managed to delete every

single file (over 2,000 files in fact, as I later learned) from my desktop—including the talk I was supposed to give on Sergio’s book. Twenty years of notes and writings on psychoanalytic theory had been erased in a moment. My sister-in-law is an IT person, and she managed to help me recover most of it, for which I’m very grateful—though the experience did afford me some reflection on what all these files mean to me, and to what extent I need them. In any event I say this as a way of indicating the profound effect that Sergio’s writing has: on the unconscious, on the body, and as a form of action that pushes others to act—whether mistakenly or not—in turn.

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