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With Lacan: a Novel, a Play and a Testimony

Summary:

This article considers the trajectory of the author's experience from being in analysis with Lacan in Paris in the 1970s through its narrative representations in novel, theater and film forms.

I did my analysis with Lacan in the 1970s. At the time a French publisher asked me to write on this topic. The "on" bothered me and I didn't do it. The transference was too important. I didn't have sufficient distance to provide testimony. This is the reason I instead wrote a novel inspired by my analysis.

The name of the novel is *Lacan's Parrot* (Milan, 1997). It is an ironic allusion to the intersection of an analytical relationship and a meeting of cultures: the Brazilian parrot and the European doctor.

Lacan's Parrot (Milan, 1997) is a first-person narrative that shifts between descriptive account and inner monologue. Linked to true events, the novel can also be classified as auto-fiction. I was Lacan's patient, translator and assistant in the department of psychoanalysis of the University of Vincennes. *Lacan's Parrot* (Milan, 1997) follows the heroine's journey of consciousness awakening and new perception of identity, including the issues with her own womanhood.

The novel is not a collection of autobiographical reminiscences. Interwoven with references to family and ancestors, it also affords a historical panorama of the immigrants who in the 19th and early 20th centuries moved from Lebanon to Brazil. They were called "Turks" in their new country because, as Lebanese, they were citizens of the Ottoman Empire.

Lacan's Parrot (Milan, 1997) is also a satire, contrasting the world of Paris — the doctor's world and hub of an entire civilization — with the narrator's homeland, Brazil, where identity is bound up with spontaneity, a culture of the body.

An excerpt from a very well-known French author, Michèle Sarde, who is an emeritus professor of Georgetown University, provides a fine characterization of the novel:

As a narrative element, the notion of cure is used primarily to remind us that the heroine belongs to her time, that she is a product of both a jetset society and the realm of psychoanalysis, and that the novel's central theme is the dramatic saga of immigration, exiled people, acculturation, and loss of identity... The great debates of the 18th century are centered on religious intolerance, absolute monarchy, and the inequality of caste. If Voltaire saw intolerance as an outrage, the outrage of our century is immigration, exclusion, inequality between North and South, and the suffering endured by survivors of the grim tragedies of exile and massacres. (Sarde, 1997, p.180)

Sarde's words strike home especially in light of the tragic recent events, as enormous numbers of refugees have been forced to flee their native countries and entire populations have been displaced.

The protagonist in *Lacan's Parrot* (Milan, 1997) is Seriemá, a Brazilian woman. The other main character is Lacan, the Doctor. In this novel various settings intersect. One is 19th-century Lebanon, as called to mind by Seriemá. There lie the roots of her family, Lebanese immigrants. Another backdrop is Paris in the 1970s, which offered a thriving cultural life... Brazil of the same era is yet another backdrop, where restless, non-conforming young people, like the protagonist, engaged in the counter-culture movement and the rebellions breaking out among youth worldwide, as Brazil was entering deeper into a period of military dictatorship.

Lacan's Parrot (Milan, 1997) is divided into three parts. Part One, which is almost a prologue, tells the story of Seriemá's first meeting with the Doctor and examines the motivations underlying her decision to undergo psychoanalysis with him. Seriemá describes her strategies for approaching the analyst. Interspersed with her narration of their first encounter, Seriemá thinks about Brazil's colonized intellectuals, "blond parrots," who mimic knowledge produced in Europe's metropolis.

Seriemá's psychoanalysis begins in Part Two, where she deepens her understanding of why she decided to undergo analysis with the Doctor. She contemplates the environment and lifestyle in Paris, a city that she is still discovering, and compares it with Brazil. The novel also delves into the question of language, or languages. For example, when the Doctor ventures an erroneous recommendation — I could send you to a disciple who speaks your language, a female analyst from Portugal (Milan, 1997, p.47).

Part Three, entitled "The Circumnavigation," comprises the bulk of the novel. Here readers can observe an analytical cure in all its complexity. Back in Paris following a frustrated return to Brazil, Seriemá truly engages in the process of achieving a cure. An interweaving of different narrative modalities and expressions combines recollections, fantasy, and above all dreams, a vehicle for multiple insights. Seriemá has hallucinations as well, and a crucial one reveals her repression of her father's name because she is ashamed of its Arabic origins. She also calls up images of a magical Afro-Brazilian homeland. Money, her payments to the Doctor, and the "way of the bank" form another theme.

The book has a clear, well-defined ending. Seriemá leaves her analysis behind. After coming to understand why she sought out the Doctor, she decides to return to her native country. The reason why she sought out the Doctor, has to do with me but I could only discover the reason through the novel. In a way fiction helped me to go further in my analysis because not everything that can be written can be said.

I began to write the novel in 1985 and it was published in Brazil in 1991. I dared to have it translated into French and I say dared because the original version is very close to the spoken language in Brazil that most translators ignore. The Portuguese of Brazil is different from the Portuguese of Portugal. The difference is due to the influence of the Indian and the African languages. The fact is that in 1997 the novel was published in France and in 1998 also in Argentina.

In the nineties I started writing for the theater and in 2009 one of my plays was translated from Portuguese into French and presented in the Théâtre du Rondpoint in Paris. In 2010 I attended one of Robert McKee's storytelling seminars and I realized that I had to work more on the play. I did it and it was translated into English.

In 2018, *Après Coup*, the Lacanian psychoanalytical association of New York directed by Paola Mieli, invited me to do a conference and after that the play was read by Edoardo Ballerini and Jane Malmo in the New York School of Art. The reading of *Goodbye, Doctor* (Milan, 2015) was directed by Richard Ledes well known for different films— *A Hole in One* (2004), *The Caller* (2008), *Fred Won't Move Out* (2012) which is about Alzheimer's...

Richard liked *Goodbye Doctor* (Milan, 2015) and wished to make a film out of it. I hesitated at first but he came to see me in Brazil and we discussed a lot. I realized we have many points in common and then wanted the film to be done by Richard. In 2019 the agreement was signed. He would adapt the play as well as the novel, that at this time was already translated into English by Cliff Landers – one of the best

translators from Brazilian Portuguese – and is called *Lacan's Parrot* (Milan, 1997).

Richard asked me to write the script but I preferred him to do it. I do think now that one of the reasons for the good result is that the director worked with an entire liberty.

Two years after the agreement the film was ready. David Patrick Kelly in Lacan's role is perfect and Ismenia Mendes, who has a Portuguese origin and therefore belongs to the same cultural world as I do, performed Seriemá beautifully.

More than thirty years had passed between the moment I started writing the novel and the first projection of the film in Paris – at Studio des Ursulines in 2021. But the fact is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is now in the movies.

While Richard was working on *Adieu Lacan* (Ledes, 2021) I wrote the testimony of my analysis. I did so because I had already written a novel and a play that had to do with me and I finally just wanted to bear witness to the efficacy of the practice of Lacan, of his specific way of working.

Lacan profoundly changed analytic practice. On the one hand, because he maintained the transference with a cutting of the session and not an interpretation of the meaning of the words of the analysand, which can provoke a resistance to the analysis. On the other hand, Lacan modified practice in not respecting the rule of 45 minutes per session established by the International Psychoanalytic Association. In his eyes, to respect it made no sense because it was the words of the analysand that counted and not the time on the clock. Once the essential had been said, the analyst had fulfilled his role, the session was over. It was not necessarily short as they say, its length was variable. There were very short sessions, of course. But for analytic reasons and not mercantile ones.... nothing to do with time is money.

It was not the linear time of Kronos which guided Lacan, but the time of Kairos, that of the fleeting moment where an opportunity presents itself that one needs to grasp. Borrowing the way of Kairos, Lacan overturned psychoanalysis and returned to it the virulence of its beginnings. More than that, he taught us to not waste time, which is fundamental to whatever human activity, today more than yesterday.

Last but not least I want to say that my work with Lacan did not completely free me from anxiety. But it changed my life. It allowed me to accept my origins, my biological sex and motherhood. That happened thanks to his interest and his way of working. It is this way of working that is stressed in my book *Pourquoi Lacan* (Milan, 2021) that has not yet been translated and published in English but I hope it will be.

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Bio:

Betty Milan was born in São Paulo, Brazil. She is the author of novels, essays, plays, and crônicas that have been published in Brazil, France, Spain, Portugal, Argentina, and China. She has also written for Brazil's leading newspapers and magazines, including the news daily Folha de S.Paulo, Veja magazine, and Veja.com. She worked for the International Parliament of Writers, based in Strasbourg, France. In 1998 and 2015, she was a guest author at the Paris Book Fair. In 2014, she represented contemporary Brazilian literature at the Miami Book Fair International. In 2018, she was invited to Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins, and the New York School of Arts to speak on the diaspora and literature. In 2019, she attended Lebanese Diaspora Energy in Beirut, where she was honored for her contribution to her ancestors' homeland. Before turning to writing, she earned her medical degree at the University of São Paulo and trained in psychoanalysis with Jacques Lacan in France, where she served as his assistant at the Department of Psychoanalysis, University of Paris 8.

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