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Lacan ? Derrida

Summary:

There is no novelty in describing and discussing a relationship between Lacan and Derrida, as much has been written on the subject?both pro and con?linking them from different perspectives. Some authors postulate Lacan with Derrida, and others against. I have inserted a lozenge between their names because there is a tension in their relationship/ non-relationship, which implies both union and disjunction, in the perspective of a theoretical encounter that is as necessary as it is impossible. Hence the lozenge both joins and separates their names: their respective works, although completely different, at the same time reflect at least a partial, mutual awareness. However, what prevails in the comparison is the *différance* [difference/deferring], the Derridian signifier that will become one of the main issues in this presentation.[1]

This paradoxical linkage comprehends the opposite natures of the two thinkers: on the one hand, we have Lacan, a passionate, flamboyant character whose teachings were primarily oral, although his main work, painfully reelaborated, was published under the title *Ecrits*; and on the other, there is Derrida, completely self-controlled, whose *lectures* consist of the careful *reading* of previously written texts, from which he attempts to eliminate himself as much as possible.

These two characters could meet only through a game of disencounters. On two occasions they did actually meet, and two sources inform us about those occasions: Roudinesco's *Histoire de la Psychanalyse en France* [2], and Derrida's paper *Pour l'amour de Lacan*[3].

The first meeting took place in Baltimore in 1966. As Derrida describes it, the subject that secretly bound them together was Death. Lacan was concerned with how his work would be read after his death. They spoke about the survival of writing after death, and generally the relationship between writing and death.

I could not possibly explore all the details that inhabit this strange lozenge; however I will present an overall picture that will illustrate what in *not all* of Derrida's work, and what in *not all* of Lacan's work, relates to each other, as well as in what their contributions differ, or defer.

Derrida's philosophical background includes a strong interest in literature, whereby the boundaries between philosophy and literary criticism are blurred. He actively opposes the "metaphysics of presence"?a metaphysics closely linked to the psychology of consciousness that presupposes a transparency of the signified for the "knowing subject." His opposition to this metaphysics draws him closer to some linguistic problems. In reading Freud, Derrida, by placing in question both the new comprehension of writing and the conceptualization of the unconscious, discovers the tool that renders possible the contestation of the metaphysics of presence.

De la grammatologie is a deconstruction. What does this term, so closely associated with Derrida, imply? It is neither a method nor a technique; it represents a *strategy of reading* that attempts to go beyond the explicit

intentions of any author, in order to expose the productive work of the text itself. Deconstruction has to do with the mishap in which a further meaning, present in the text, may or may not become clear. The deconstructive reading pays special attention to the sidelines and framings which, through new contextualizations, allow for fresh readings that at once become new writings.

Deconstruction reveals the lack of a transcendental meaning and objective references that could surmount the issues of reality and objectivity. The subject of intertextuality is always in the line, or, as Nietzsche (an author dear to Derrida) would say, “he” is always an interpretation. And it is necessarily so since there is a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations, reality in its intertextuality being taken as a textual feature, as being nothing but texts creating and recreating it.

The deconstruction implied in *De la grammatologie* (1967) is a deconstruction of linguistics exemplified through the analysis of three different authors: Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

In Saussure we are confronted with the concept of the *sign* which, with its dichotomy of signifier and signified, appears representative of an originary presence, and thus depends on some implicit ontology. Derrida contests the pertinence of the concept of the sign and its logic.

Consider that footnote[4]:

...this does not mean, through a simple inversion, that the signifier is fundamental, or first. The “primacy” or the “priority” of the signifier would be an unsustainable and absurd expression... Never will the signifier precede by its own right the signified, otherwise it would cease to be a signifier and the signifier “signifier” would have no possible meaning. The thought that is announced in this impossible formula without getting to fit into it, must therefore be expressed in another way: it can not be posed without making suspect the idea of the sign itself, of “sign-of,” that will always be linked to what we question here. Therefore, in the limit, destroying all organized conceptuality surrounding the very concept of sign.

In this passage we can see one of the most controversial points of the relationship Lacan-Derrida. Lacan persists in his reference to the Saussurean sign and, with Lévi-Strauss, holds the primacy of the signifier. But Derrida points out the unexpected consequences of this operation. Lacan, when he silently abandons the idea of *la parole pleine* for that of the *mi-dire de la vérité*, or that of the *point de capiton* (the ideal point of supposed agreement between the signifier and the signified), responds, without recognizing it, positively to Derrida’s remarks, although consequently not only to them.

The linguistics of the sign becomes a victim of the illusion of phonological scriptural systems which lead us to assume that writing is secondary and follows the spoken language. This illusion ignores the impossibility of any purely phonetical writing: punctuation marks and silences separating words are non-phonetical elements, without which writing would be unthinkable (even if the history of writing shows that at the beginning alphabetical inscriptions lacked explicit punctuation marks, and separations between words had to be inserted by the reader, the interpreter of the written text; nevertheless, hieroglyphic and ideographic writing systems always include some phonetical elements).

Derrida shows clearly how Saussure, in identifying writing as a representative of the spoken language, excludes the former from language and gives it a purely instrumental character. By making it additional to a spoken language which is complete in itself, writing appears as a violent act of *usurpation* that leads us to believe in the possibility of an unadulterated *essence* concealed in the spoken word.

Derrida, after denouncing the metaphysics inherent in the idea of sign, claims that the spoken language represents in itself a writing. This reversal implies a profound modification of the concept of writing: now we must admit that the “*natural-original* language” never really existed, it has always been writing. This is the concept of *archi-writing*, another name for the *différance* (deference/difference), which we shall

approach below.

Derrida applies the same deconstructive principles to his reading of the work of Lévi-Strauss. According to this anthropologist, the subsequent appearance of writing supports the myth of the “good savage,” with exploitation as an alien factor, derivative of written-language based cultures. But the assumption that a population without writing can exist is an illusion of those who reduce writing to its common phonetical form. Derrida points out the ethnocentric principle of such a conceptualization.

Hence, I can define this paradox as a half truth: it is only insofar as something is somehow and somewhere written that it may be spoken.

In a previous paper[5], I quoted Thomas Mann’s statement that dreams were dreamed because they had been already interpreted. Consequently, discovering now that what is spoken was previously written, should not surprise us. Thus, it is no coincidence that the Miro’s painting, *Blue II*?writing without meaning, lines and dots on an infinite blue?should have been chosen to illustrate the poster of this symposium. Because painting is indeed a form of writing that by no means can be excluded. This applies, of course, to those etchings of dots, denied the name of writing by Lévi-Strauss, a fact to which Derrida places a large question-mark: “On what principles can that denial be sustained?”

Différance is, for Derrida, the key concept in understanding what is at stake here: He explains that this is not a word nor a concept, but a mechanism?the changing of a single letter in the French word *différence*, in which an *e* becomes an *a*. This change of a vowel cannot be recognized phonologically, it is no more than graphic, written sign. Therefore, Derrida poses a “mute” mark, a graphic and transgressive intervention, meant to approach the question of writing and its relation to speaking.

...if the *différance* is (and this *is* is to be crossed out) what makes possible the presentation of the present, it never presents itself as such. (*De la différence*)

The *différance* is clearly on the track of what Derrida meant with his critique of the metaphysics of the presence.

The *différance*, with its lack of essence and existence, without being either a word or a concept, is a strategic proposal to avoid any ontological or teleological reappropriation. A semantic analysis will enable a certain approximation of the adventure of the *différance*. To *differ*, in French has two meanings: the first one is temporal, it implies to postpone, to delay, thus alluding to time. The second meaning?also the most familiar one?refers to that which is different, non-identical, thus making clear the importance of repetition and space.

So, time acquires a historical and also a spatial dimension, rendering its origin not a present but a postergation and a disencounter “...that the *différance* points to an original, productive and constitutive causality, the process of breaking and dividing whose differences or differents would be constituted products or effects.”

Applying this to the linguistics of the sign, it means that the sign presents itself as a differed (delayed) presence, postponing the moment of the encounter with the thing itself, the one that we might later find. The *différance* questions the secondary origin of the substitute, and so it questions the whole idea of origin. The forces that are at play in the game of disencounters, being differed, require the repetition between what happens at first and what happens the second time (the first being something that never took place, something emerging as the retroactive effect of the *différance* itself). In Nietzschean terms, the mask allows the representation, and the representation is the reality itself, without implying any kind of presence behind it.

For this reason Derrida questions the possibility of asking “What differs (delays)?”, “Who differs (delays)?”, questions that can be posed only insofar as they are based on the assumption that there is something or someone, prior to the *différance* itself; because *différance* itself produces the *what* and the *who*.

In this way the *différance* brings us in contact with what we ignore, and exceeds the alternative between presence and absence. Freud gave the name of *Unconscious* to this other Otherness.

...the unconscious is not, as we know, a presence in itself, hidden, virtual, potential... this radical Otherness related to any kind of possible presence signals itself in the irreducible effects of untimelessness, of retardation.

(*De la Différance*)

Derrida finds in Nietzsche, Freud and Lévinas the hint of the possible end of ontology, as well as the beginning of a new perspective where the *différance* would find a place.

Derrida takes from Lévinas the wonderful expression with which he defines the enigma of the concept of otherness: “*A past that never was a present*“, and that defines, for all of us, the field of psychoanalytic work.

This Derrida’s path for a careful reading of Freud’s texts. This reading would not be possible without Lacan’s *return to Freud*.

The essential question in Freud’s investigation is: What is memory all about? The one who could explain memory in all of its forms (including oblivion) would have explained the psychic reality itself.

Derrida retraces Freud’s path, from the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*[6](1895) to the *Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’*[7] (1924). For Derrida, there are all kinds of references to the writing, which are not metaphors:

Undoubtedly Freud does not use metaphors, if using metaphors is to refer what is known to what is unknown. Through the persistence of his metaphorical inversion, on the other hand, what we think is included by the term *writing* becomes enigmatic.

In the *Project*, Freud is forced to conceive of different systems, supposedly neurological, that must meet a double standard: they must be able to delete and to retain. This is what the mystery of memory is all about.

From the *Project* we can move on to his famous 52nd letter to Fliess[8] (1896), in which we find a sketch of the psychic apparatus, which includes several systems, differentiated by their functions. The possibility of a passage from the path of one system to that of another depends on their “reorganization according to new connections, a *retranscription (Umschrift)*... memory does not pre-exist in a simple fashion, but in a multiple one, it is registered in a variety of different signs.” The idea of a memory that is already a writing dominates this letter.

Two aspects from *Die Traumdeutung* (1900) are relevant here: first, the *regard for representability* as the mechanism of how dreams work, which explains their visual character. Freud attempts to illustrate the dream formation making allusion to several analogies, to hieroglyph, rebus, comics, or ideographic writing?all scriptural systems which represent the background against which dream and history may be represented; second, the psychic apparatus which must explain the representation, *the other scene*, which is constituted by its mnemonic path, written marks that might or might not be activated.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*[9] (1920), Freud presents us with the scene of his grandson’s game of throwing and retrieving a reel (*fort-da*), whereby the repetition appears as giving birth to the trace. It is in his Second Seminar[10], that Lacan elaborates the subject of the relationship between language and death. Derrida would state that light is shed on this subject when (and only when) we realize that language is already a writing.

Now we approach in the *Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’*[11] that device made up of a waxed base covered by a separate plastic sheet that allows us to save what we erased, precisely because it was erased.

The transcription systems proposed by Freud suppose the necessary existence of a *primary* writing, of an origin. This is the limit questioned by Derrida, proposing the inexistence of such an origin. We are always confronted by transcriptions that are, all and always, originals.

When Freud explains the delusional satisfaction of desire, he *invents* a first experience of satisfaction. It is a nostalgic first experience that never really was. It is a theoretically necessary myth: *a past that never was a present*.

We have taken a rapid look at some texts to illustrate the relationship between Freud and Derrida, from Freud's side.

* * *

Let us now approach Lacan's side. There are two implicit references to Lacan in *De la grammatologie*. The first one when Derrida states the impossibility of the *parole pleine*. As we know, this is, basically, a Lacanian term, and widely discussed in *Rome's Speech*[12] (1953). This subject was able to present itself only after Saussure's linguistics, which enabled Lacan to read Freud's work under a totally new light. In spite of this, the Lacan-Saussure association would be short lived, collapsing when Lacan questioned the concept of *signification*. Lacan creates in this context two neologisms: *signifiance* and *lalangue*. In *lalangue* the ambiguity comes from a written, non-phonetical mark, that responds specifically to the Derridean definition of *différance*. Is this an answer given by Lacan or is it an interpretation changing the question itself? Let us leave this as an open question.

Lacan will move from his proposed *parole pleine* to the *mi-dire de la vérité*, and to the condition of *not-all* (*pas-tout / pas-toutes*) that will be the characteristic of women (*The Woman* only exists crossed out [*sous rature*], that is, in the same way as the *différance* and as the *Truth*.)

Another place of encounter/ disencounter between these two authors is "The Purveyor of Truth", Derrida's careful reading of Lacan's Seminar devoted to Edgar A. Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. Derrida explains the differences between his reading of Poe's story and that of Lacan in his paper *Pour l'amour de Lacan* [13]. We will consider here three fundamental differences between them.

The first is that of the trajectory followed by the letter: if the letter always arrives at its destination, as Lacan sustains, it must have a destination of its own. This leaves open the possibility of an encounter of the signifier and the signified, an issue dealt with when we discussed the problem of the *sign*, and therein, the possibility of Derrida's explicit disagreement with Lacan.

The second issue?the truth as an unveiling (*aletheia* in Greek)?is a consequence of the first. This conceptualization, related to that of Heidegger, enables Derrida to state that it is not enough to want to go beyond metaphysics to accomplish the project. Heidegger may have taken ontology to its limit, but he remained trapped within it, unlike Nietzsche, whom Heidegger claimed to follow.

The third issue is one in which, paradoxically, Lacan agrees with Marie Bonaparte: the transcendental position of the phallus. Both refer to the phallus as the mother's missing penis. There Derrida argues that there can be no phallogocentrism without phallogocriticism, that the difference is not a simple distinction, since it always implies a hierarchization. On this subject the feminist movements took up Derrida's proposals, but this does not mean that Derrida is himself a feminist.

We have pointed out the increasing divergence between Lacan and Saussure, but we must also point out the path that goes, within Lacan's work, from *The Signification of the Phallus* (1958) through the *Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality* (1958) to the 20th Seminar *Encore*[14] (1972-3), in which Lacan proposes the formulae of sexuation and the existence of another *jouissance*, besides the *phallic* one,

the *jouissance* of the Other, a feminine *jouissance*, understood as a *supplementary jouissance*.

“Supplementary” is a word having some unjustified connotations. When in his *De la grammatologie* Derrida analyzes Rousseau’s essay *The Origin of Languages*, he emphasizes the issue of the *supplement*. If writing for Rousseau is a supplement of speech, thus implying its secondary character, Derrida focuses on the multiple meanings of the word *supplement*, which (in French) it also means taking the place of what is lacking. It is in this sense that Derrida asks for a new logic of the *supplement*.

Could the *feminine jouissance* be Lacan’s answer to Derrida’s proposal of the signifier *phallus*? The *feminine jouissance* distinguishes itself because it *cannot be said* but it *can be written*, and therefore may be understood as a *différance*.

At this point, we find that Lacan’s steps go from language?in *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (1953)?to writing?in the *Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious* (1957)(Lacan specifies that this work precedes any *Grammatologie*) and in the Seminar *Encore*. Later Lacan will define the Real as “that which never ceases not being written” and the Symbolic as “that which never ceases to be written.” In the Seminar devoted to Joyce (1975-1976), Lacan states the possibility of stabilization and of supplying the *Father’s Name*, in psychosis, through writing.

We have retraced Derrida’s path, and the fruitful way in which his study of Freud has enabled him to propose new hypotheses and connections. We have underlined the critical points of his relationship with Lacan, and how Lacan modified his own point of view, increasingly approaching Derrida’s proposals, In *De la Grammatologie* Derrida states the impossibility of the primacy of the signifier and of the *parole pleine*, a position later abandoned by Lacan. In *The Purveyor of Truth*, Derrida states the impossibility of a pre-established destination, that would make possible an encounter between the signifier and the signified. Later, Lacan defines the subject, crossing him out and making him or her fade between a primary inexpressible signifier and a secondary one that has come to represent the first one ($S_1 - S - S_2$). In Lacan’s formulas of sexualization, the phallic *jouissance* does not prevail as the only one, but admits the possibility of another one, a *supplementary jouissance* of feminine sexuality. After taking into account all these coincidences and divergences, must we assume that they are both saying the same thing, or that Lacan has become Derridean (as Derrida suggested in *For the Love of Lacan*)? This is not the answer, as it would be necessary to preserve the *différance*, and what this *différance* might create with its divergent productive possibilities.

Derrida himself records another anecdote of dis-encounter. Lacan is quoted saying to René Girard, in Baltimore: “Yes, yes, but the difference between him (Derrida) and myself is that he has nothing to do with people who suffer.” Derrida considers this as an extremely imprudent expression, since Lacan had no way of knowing about the suffering of the people he, Derrida, dealt with. Lacan could not even guess of what happened to Derrida in transference, Derrida objected, thus denying him the place of the “subject supposed to know”.

Derrida is right: whoever deals with writing must also deal with suffering, because writing is a confrontation with death, and he/she must also take the responsibility for the transferences he/she reinforces from his/her place... Nonetheless, Lacan is also right: the psychoanalyst must deal with the problem of psychosis, and this represents a hiatus in our understanding, a radical difference in their respective practices.

In the literary field, the endless reading, repeating itself as a mirror reflecting in another mirror, opens up to infinity the possibility of new readings. What happens in the experience of madness, when, in a subject, the “cork” that usually stops the endless sliding of the signifiers is lacking?

Such is the role played by *the Father’s Name* that must, in Lacan’s work, replace the *mother’s desire* in the *paternal metaphor*. And when this function fails and delirium unleashes, it is the *delusional metaphor*, the one that must fill this void, stopping the sliding of the signifier and allowing a process of restoration of a reality, as personal as it may be.

We could point out that Lacan in his early work?beginning with the 11th Seminar (1964)?proposed the model of the fish trap, where the object *a* places itself in the hole that enables its opening and closing, that is, the temporary pulsation of the unconscious. And when, later on, we find the formula of the fantasy?S *a* ?what remains of the operation of the constitution of the subject where the Real is present, the object *a* produces the threshold to what can be represented, and thus stops the sliding of the signifier.

I should conclude this presentation with the hypothesis that the main difference remaining in the field cultivated by Lacan and Derrida is Lacan's elaboration of the object *a*, a necessary loss for the existence of the subject.

Many questions remain unanswered: can *deconstruction* and the appeal to *différance* free philosophy from metaphysics? or?as is the case with Heidegger, who, according to Derrida, remains in the field of ontology, a field which the latter attempts to surpass?is Derrida himself trapped in the same disjunction? In a recent interview Derrida affirmed that deconstruction is the experience of the impossible. This is the definition of psychoanalysis itself, given by both Freud and Lacan.

A Derridian psychoanalyst? A Lacanian deconstructionist?

Translated from Spanish by Clea Braunstein Saal

Notes:

[1] This is a transcription from a lecture given in New York, February 1994, from the Tenth Symposium of the Fundacion Mexicana de Psicoanàlisis, on "Writing and Psychoanalysis."

[2] Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co. A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman (London: Free Association, 1990), especially ch. 8.I and 9.

[3] Published in the previous issue of this *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, 2, ("For the Love of Lacan"), pp. 63-90.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *De la gramatologia* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1986), p. 26.

[5] Frida Saal, *El lenguaje en la obra de Freud*, in *El lenguaje y el inconsciente freudiano* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1982).

[6] Sigmund Freud, S.E., Vol. I, pp. 283-400.

[7] Freud, S.E., Vol. XIX, pp. 227-233.

[8] Freud, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis. Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, drafts and notes, 1887-1902* (London: Imago, 1954), letter 06/12/1896.

[9] Freud, S.E., Vol. XVIII, pp. 1-63.

[10] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book II (1954-55)*, trans. by Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988.)

[11] *Cit.*

[12] Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1966), pp. 237-322; Engl.transl. "The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis", *Ecrits. A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publ., 1977,) pp. 30-113.

[13] Translated in the previous issue of *JEP* as *For the Love of Lacan, cit.*

[14] Lacan, *Le Séminaire, XX. Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975.)

Bio:

Frida Saal (1936 -1998) was a practicing psychoanalyst in Mexico City since 1975, after having been trained in Argentina. She taught in the Post-Graduate Department of Psychology of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), as well as in the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Psicoanalíticos. She was the co-author, with Marta Lamas, of the book *La Bella (In)Diferencia* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1991); *Palabra de Analista* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1998). She was also the co-author of several other books, among them *A medio siglo de 'El malestar en la cultura' de Sigmund Freud* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1981); *Psicología: Ideología y Ciencia* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1981); *El lenguaje y el inconsciente freudiano* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1982).