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Psychoanalysis in France

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The science invented by Freud has known very different destinies in France and America.

Briefly (all too briefly in a context where any elision is suspect) American psychoanalysis has become ego psychology, a practice aimed at shoring up that agency in the psyche that Freud said “is not even master in its own house.”[27] Ego psychology would help the ego gain domination, although a certain reading of Freud finds that the ego’s necessarily fragile, defensive, illusory mastery is the knot of neuroses, the obstacle to happiness.

“A certain reading of Freud”: French and American psychoanalysis can be seen as divergent readings of Freud. But to locate the difference, or the cause of that difference, or its center, in a “reading” is already to be on the side of French Freud. Thanks to the work of Jacques Lacan, the development peculiar to French psychoanalysis has been not a growth from Freud but a continual, detailed reading of Freud, reading his most radical moments against his most conservative, in view of a constant vigilance against Freud’s and our own tendencies to fall back into psychologism, biologism, or other commonplaces of thought from which his new science was a radical break.

This careful reading, always struggling to hold psychoanalysis’ most audacious frontiers, considers the American effort to help the “master of the house” subdue mutinies as ideologically in keeping with the effort to save the threatened nuclear family, based upon traditional sex roles, by strengthening the “master’s” domination—that is to say, in keeping with the therapeutic effort to help men and women adjust to their sexually determined social roles. Seen from Paris (even if Paris be in London, New Haven, Baltimore, or Rome), Freud’s lot in America has been cooptation: the bold Freud silenced, the timid Freud intoned.

In America, Freud's biologistic side is revised in keeping with the developments of modern biochemistry.[28] In France, Freud's biologism is read as a weak moment, a fearful wish to ground his new science, the science of the Unconscious, in an old science. But the Unconscious is no proper object for biology, and Freud's biological analogies are retreats from the uncharted paths he was exploring back to the relatively safe confines in which he was schooled. The refusal to scurry back to the familiarity of biology opens up a militant psychoanalysis which no longer betrays feminism (by prescribing and abetting adjustment to the roles "destined" by one's anatomical difference), but provides feminist theory with a possibility of understanding "internalized oppression," a concept most efficient when operating within a science of the Unconscious.[29] The emphasis on the "reading of Freud" differentiates "psychoanalytic literary criticism" in France and in America (although this drawing of lines may be schematic, even paranoid). In France, since the Freudian text is apprehended in its materiality, it cannot be reduced to a univocal system of ideas which would then be applied to other books, literary ones, as a grid for meaning. Rather than a stable image of the psyche which grounds the interpretation of psychic manifestations, including literary language, French Freud simply provides symptoms along with contradictory efforts—either to repress/domesticate/coopt those eloquent productions (the symptoms/texts) or to elucidate/analyze/read them. Freud is not a tool, not even some revelatory Word, but a dynamic of repression, a plural text like any other.

The French reading of Freud has located a particularly troublesome textual knot in psychoanalysis' investigation of sexual difference and female sexuality. Lacan has declared the need for delineation of this problematic in "Propos directifs pour un Congrès sur la sexualité féminine" *(Ecrits,* Paris: Seuil, 1966). Lacan's clearest and most concise articulation of a theory of sexual difference appears in "La Signification du phallus" (also in *Ecrits*).[30] For two longer considerations by Lacan of the "woman question" ("What *does* woman want [anyway]?"—a question Lacan said Freud asked but was afraid to answer), see *Télévision* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) and *Séminaire XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

In *La Sexualité féminine dans la doctrine freudienne* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), Moustapha Safouan has traced a map for following the vicissitudes of female sexuality in Freud's work. Although a clear and complete inventory, Safouan's book is not a sufficiently critical reading. That "sufficiently critical reading" (necessarily) comes from an overt feminist. Luce Irigaray's *Speculum* (Minuit, 1974) is both a meticulous, psychoanalytic reading of Freud on women and a sharp, mocking critique of the sexist assumptions that constitute a network of timid moments in Freud (biologistic, psychologistic, deterministic, downright protective of the sexual status quo).[31] Both Irigaray and Safouan have learned to read Freud from Lacan, but, whereas the latter systematizes and reduces the audacity out of Lacan/Freud, the former challenges the unavoidable tendency toward conservatism, teasing out what is most insolent in psychoanalysis so as to loosen the hold of Freudian oppression of women.

It is inevitable that Irigaray should turn the critique directly on Lacan, whom she finds sorely guilty of profiting from phallocentrism. This critique, as well as further exposition

of her reading of Freud, can be found in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977). She condemns Lacan's reactionary positions, yet she does so by using Lacanian strategies and formulations (embracing Lacan at his wildest). But ultimately her entire relation to Freud/Lacan is beyond either embrace or condemnation; it is a reading.

Irigaray is not the only French psychoanalyst both profoundly influenced by Lacan, and yet taking exception to certain conservative moments in his theory. One of the most subtle interrogations of Lacan's authority has been conducted by Jean Laplanche, an ex-student of Lacan's. Laplanche's *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* can be read as a clear and fascinating introduction to Lacanian theory, but it also contains a barely perceptible swerve away from the central thrust of that theory.[32] Such is Laplanche's non-authoritarian strategy that he does not belligerently declare his difference, assert his step beyond. But the difference is signaled in Jeffrey Mehlman's introduction to the English translation of *Vie et mort: "[Life and Death]* is deeply in accord with the general orientation of Lacan's reading of Freud, and yet it never invokes—or intimidates its readers with—the magisterial pronouncements of that author. More remarkably still, *Life and Death* ultimately never appeals to the authority of Freud himself (p. ix). As opposed to Lacan's "magisterial pronouncements,' Laplanche refuses intimidation. He refuses the authority of psychoanalysis and in that remains closer, not to Freud or Lacan, but to psychoanalysis at its most radical. Mehlman continues: "For what has authority in this reading is, in the final analysis, the perverse rigor with which a certain bizarre structure of Freud's text persistently plays havoc with the magisterial pronouncements—or authority—of Freud." At its most powerful psychoanalysis undercuts its own authority.

Laplanche diverges from Lacanian theory in his description of the originary intersubjectivity of sexuality. Whereas Lacan describes that original incursion of others into the infant's psyche as a wound, a lack, a proto-castration, Laplanche adds that it is also a boon; even more, it is absolutely necessary to the child's survival. The "vital order" is not only "*infested,* but also *sustained*" (p. 48) by "that *alien internal entity* which is *sexual excitation*" (p. 24). Lacan does state that the sexual (the intersubjective) is structurally necessary in the constitution of the very ego which seeks to defend itself against that contamination. But by emphasizing the disruptive, violent, infesting side of the sexual rather than the sustaining aspect, and by championing the intrusive sexual over against the conservative, defensive, virginal ego, Lacan maintains a phallic thrust to his science, supported by an investment in the prudishness of the ego and the correlate desire to violate that ego. This turns his battle against ego psychology into an untenable vendetta against the ego. Laplanche, on the other hand, states in the conclusion to *Life and Death* that the ego is necessary so that the unconscious fantasies might "take form" (pp. 125-126).

Life and Death grew out of Laplanche's collaboration with another ex-student of Lacan's, Jean Baptiste Pontalis, to produce the *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*.[33] This is the largest of Laplanche's published cooperative efforts. Perhaps the very possibility of a long, devoted collaboration whose goal is to elucidate the vocabulary of other people with more prestige (in particular, Freud and Lacan) is the refusal of authority.

A review of Laplanche and Pontalis' *Vocabulaire,* by the late psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham, appears in an issue of the journal *Critique* on psychoanalysis (249, 1968). Abraham's brilliant review, "L'Ecorce et le noyau," points to psychoanalysis' potential for the working out of our Oedipal fantasies, its potential for changing our societal sexual structures. He sees the Oedipal/castration complex as part of a dialogue with the mother, which places it not in a separate history of the self's individuation (access to mastery) but in an always intersubjective scenario. Like Laplanche, Abraham also published joint efforts, collaborating with Maria Torok. The work of Abraham and Torok is collected in two volumes recently released by Aubier-Flammarion: *Cryptonymie: Le Verbier de L'Homme aux Loups* and *L'Ecorce et le Noyau.* Part of the eccentric subversion of their work is an uncovering of the distorting effects of the psychoanalyses ego. *Cryptonymie* is introduced by Abraham's friend Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher who himself wrote a critique of Lacan, "Le Facteur de la vérité" *(Poétique,* 21, 1975), which condemns Lacan's phallocentric system.

Abraham's last text is a sixth act to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with a theoretical interlude, thus placing psychoanalytic theory in a different, non-masterful relation to literature.[34] This different relationship is precisely the focus of *Yale French Studies* 55-56, *Psychoanalysis and Literature,* edited by Shoshana Felman. In her lucid and concise introduction she suggests that we "reverse the usual perspective in an attempt to disrupt this monologic master-slave structure" (p. 6) where "literature is submitted to the authority, to the prestige of psychoanalysis" (p. 5). Psychoanalysis has usurped for itself a power, an authority which reduces and abuses literature's otherness. Just as psychoanalysis when not coopted as ego psychology calls into question the authority of the ego, so it must question its own equally illusory and defensive prestige. Not that Felman would have the positions reversed, not that literature should have authority over psychoanalysis, but rather that the effect of such a reversal would be a total disruption of "the position of mastery as such" (p. 7).

Felman describes the repressive, traditional American relationship of psychoanalysis to literature in the same terms that Irigaray describes the relationship of psychoanalysis to women. Felman states that the maintenance of psychoanalysis authority demands a suppression of literature's plurality and otherness in favor of a unified theoretical discourse. Irigaray, likewise, finds that psychoanalysis presumption to the truth about women necessitates an exclusion of woman's plural sexuality and all that which is other (and not merely complementary) to phallic sexuality and its unified sexual theory. In both cases, otherness is suppressed to preserve the theory's consistency. Theory's authority is guaranteed by its consistency. Yet French psychoanalysis has been devoted to exposing its own inevitable inconsistencies. Felman's defense of literature's irreducibility and Irigaray's assertion of women's plurality are in keeping with this effort to delineate the contradictions in psychoanalysis mastery.

If one sees the questioning of authority as an essential feminist effort, then the dialogue between psychoanalysis and literature, as Felman outlines it, may be invaluable for a feminist rethinking of power. According to Felman, "there is one crucial feature which is constitutive of literature but is essentially lacking in psychoanalytic theory, and indeed in

theory as such: irony. Since irony precisely consists in dragging authority as such into a scene it cannot master . . . literature, by virtue of its ironic force, fundamentally deconstructs the fantasy of authority" (p. 8). Felman's view of irony subscribes to the theory that irony always exceeds the ironist's control; it necessarily cuts both ways. Once literal meaning is called into question in one instance, it cannot ever be assumed.

If irony undercuts authority, then Lacan's writing, which is full of the most disconcerting irony, is not "magisterial pronouncement."[35] By adding an ironic tone to the discourse of authority, he makes it impossible to take the authority seriously. Thus the question of whether Lacan is authoritarian is a question of how he is read. As Felman suggests, literary perspective is inextricably implicated in psychoanalysis. Freud/Lacan is neither respected nor rejected (that would be falling prey to the transference fantasy where the psychoanalyst is either loved or rejected but never questioned as omniscient), but read.

Notes

1. American theorists who draw upon psychoanalysis to examine sexual difference and differentiation include Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and The Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); and Jane Flax, "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and Within Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 4:2 (June 1978): 171-91. By the "maternal," I mean that component of relationships between women in which an idealized relation to the mother is reflected. This element in female bonding is present whether or not biological motherhood is involved.

2. See the introductory studies in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3: 4 (Summer 1978): Elaine Marks, "Women and Literature in France," pp. 832-42; and Carolyn G. Burke, "Report from Paris: Women's Writing and the Women's Movement," pp. 843-55.

3. See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* ed. Leon Roudiez, tr. Tom Cora, Alice Jardine and Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980), a collection other essays. See also Julia Kristeva, "On the Women of China," *Signs* 1: 1 (Autumn 1975): 57-81; Josette Féral, "China, Women and the Symbolic: Interview with Julia Kristeva," *Sub-Stance* 13 (1976): 9-18; and Kristeva, *About Chinese Women* (New York: Urizen Books, 1977).

4. "This Sex Which Is Not One," a translation of the title essay of *Ce sexe quin'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), appears in *New French Feminisms,* ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1980). "When Our Lips Speak Together," Carolyn Burke's translation of Quand nos lèvres se parlent," (*Ce Sexe* .. .), is forthcoming in *Signs* 6:1 (Autumn 1980).

5. The only English-speaking feminist theorist to undertake a reconsideration of Freud has been Juliet Mitchell, whose *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Pantheon, 1974) appeared when most other American readers were opposed to the terms of her analysis.

6. For a sociological analysis of Lacan's significance in France, which, however, does not discuss the implications of his work for feminists there, see Sherry Turkic, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud's French Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

7. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16: 3 (Autumn 1975): 7.

8. The term was proposed by Jeffrey Mehlman, the editor of *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972), to suggest differences between the French and American interpretations.

9. Lacan's dictum, "The unconscious is structured like a language," should perhaps be understood metaphorically. On his use of linguistics, see Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 38-64.

10. For a fuller account of the Name-of-the-Father in relation to the Oedipus complex, see Lemaire, *Lacan,* pp. 78-92, and Martha Noel Evans, "Introduction to Jacques Lacan's Lecture: 'The Neurotic's Individual Myth," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 78 (1979): 386-404.

11. The subtitle of Rich's groundbreaking study. *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1976); although Rich is not centrally concerned with psychoanalysis, her observations have numerous affinities with the French writers discussed in this article.

12. Julia Kristeva. *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974). For a useful account of Kristeva's special use of the term "semiotic" ("*le* semiotique" rather than "*la* semiotique"), see Philip E. Lewis, "Revolutionary Semiotics," *Diacritics* 4: 3 (Fall 1974): 28-32. For the following abbreviated account of the semiotic and the symbolic, I am greatly indebted to Alice Jardine, who further clarifies their functioning in her papers, "Theories of the Feminine: Kristeva," delivered at the Modern Languages Association Annual Convention, New York, 1978, and "In Pursuit of the Speaking Subject: Logos and Locus in Woolf and Wittig," delivered at the Northeastern MLA Meeting, Albany, New York, Spring 1978. Any errors in interpretation are, however, entirely my own.

13. If the semiotic expresses itself in the infant's world as babble, rhythm, melody, and gesture, then in the adult's it returns in word play, prosodic effects, nonsense, and laughter—all relatively uncensored traces of the unconscious.

14. On the mirror stage in relation to language, see Lemaire, *Lacan,* pp. 78-81, 176-79.

15. Jardine, “The Speaking Subject,” p. 5.

16. Some feminists have criticized Kristeva for her association of the semiotic with the maternal. However, she is not attempting to define an “essence” of the female, but rather to understand the processes of signification and to expand the realm of the signifiable; see Jardine, “Theories of the Feminine,” pp. 5-6.

17. Kristeva used this phrase in a discussion of women’s writing in relation to the avant-garde, in “Postmodernism?”, a lecture delivered at the Modern Language Association Forum on Postmodernism, December 1978.

18. In *Telquel* 74 (Winter 1977): 39-49.

19. *Of Woman Born,* p. 225.
20. Ibid., p. 226.

21. Ibid., p. 220.

22. One reason for this apparent lack of dialogue may be that American and French theoretical discourses are quite dissimilar in style as well as assumptions. While American scholars are trained to work within the language of their disciplines, Kristeva, like many French intellectuals, draws ideas from a variety of different fields and interweaves disparate methodological codes.

23. Paris: Editions dc Minuit, 1979.

24. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Washing Blood,” *Feminist Studies 4:2* (June 1978): 1. This essay introduces the very rich special issue entitled “Toward a Feminist Theory of Motherhood,” which does not, however, examine recent French theories on the subject.

25. *Of Woman Born,* p. 226.

26. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1929), p. 88; DuPlessis cites this phrase in “Washing Blood,” p. 1.

27. “One of the Difficulties of Psychoanalysis,” in *Character and Culture* (New York: Collier, 1963), p. 189.

28. See, for example, Karl H. Pribram and Merton McGill, *Freud’s ‘Project’ Reassessed* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

29. For further explanation of the differences between French and American Psychoanalysis, and the greater radical potential of the former, see Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Louis Althusser, “Freud and Lacan” in *Lenin and Philosophy (Monthly Review,* 1971); *French Freud, Yale French*

Studies 48, edited by Jeffrey Mehlman; and Jane Gallop, "The Ghost of Lacan, the Trace of Language," *Diacritics* 5:4.

30. This paper appears in the English translation of *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 1977).

31. For a fine critical reading of the more and the less phallocentric moments in Freud's notion of castration, see Jean Laplanche, "La Castration, ses précurseurs, et son destin" *Bulletin de Psychologie* XXVII:311, 312, 314.

32. Paris: Flammarion, 1970. All quotations are from the translation by Jeffrey Mehlman, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976).

33. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968. Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1974).

34. For an excellent discussion of the import of this and Abraham's work in general from an implicitly feminist viewpoint, see Peggy Kamuf, "Abraham's Wake," *Diacritics* 9, 1 (Spring 1979): 32-43. Coincidentally, *Yale French Studies* 55-56 *(Psychoanalysis and Literature)* has an article by Lacan on Hamlet. The two pieces together would provide an interesting contrast on the two psychoanalysts.

35. Felman puts forth a similar argument for Lacan, holding that his language is poetic rather than discursive, in "La méprise et la chance," *Arc* 58 (1974). This issue of *l'Arc,* a special number on Lacan for which all the contributors are women, also includes one of Irigaray's critiques of Lacan. For a further discussion of this *Arc* and Lacan's relation to women, see Jane Gallop, "The Ladies' Man," *Diacritics* 6:4.