



**HOW TO READ**

**LACAN**

Slavoj Žižek

## HOW TO READ

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# LACAN

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

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*For Tim, the youngest  
dialectical materialist  
in the world!*

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## SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

### How am I to read *How to Read*?

This series is based on a very simple, but novel idea. Most beginners' guides to great thinkers and writers offer either potted biography or condensed summaries of their major works, or perhaps even both. *How to Read*, by contrast, brings the reader face-to-face with the writing itself in the company of an expert guide. Its starting point is that in order to get close to what a writer is all about, you have to get close to the words they actually use and be shown how to read those words.

Every book in the series is in a way a masterclass in reading. Each author has selected ten or so short extracts from a writer's work and looks at them in detail as a way of revealing their central ideas and thereby opening doors onto a whole world of thought. Sometimes these extracts are arranged chronologically to give a sense of a thinker's development over time, sometimes not. The books are not merely compilations of a thinker's most famous passages, their 'greatest hits', but rather they offer a series of clues or keys that will enable readers to go on and make discoveries of their own. In addition to the texts and readings, each book provides a short biographical chronology and suggestions for further reading, Internet resources, and so on. The books in the *How to Read*

series don't claim to tell you all you need to know about Freud, Nietzsche and Darwin, or indeed Shakespeare and the Marquis de Sade, but they do offer the best starting point for further exploration.

Unlike the available second-hand versions of the minds that have shaped our intellectual, cultural, religious, political and scientific landscape, *How to Read* offers a refreshing set of first-hand encounters with those minds. Our hope is that these books will, by turn, instruct, intrigue, embolden, encourage and delight.

Simon Critchley  
New School for Social Research, New York

## INTRODUCTION

Let's try to practise a little brain-washing on ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

In 2000, the 100th anniversary of the publication of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* was accompanied by a new wave of triumphalist acclamations of the death of psychoanalysis: with the new advances in brain sciences, it is buried where it always belonged, in the lumber-room of pre-scientific obscurantist quests for hidden meanings, alongside religious confessors and dream-readers. As Todd Dufresne puts it,<sup>2</sup> no figure in the history of human thought was more wrong about all its fundamentals – with the exception of Marx, some would add. It was only to be expected that in 2005 the infamous *Black Book of Communism*, listing all the Communist crimes,<sup>3</sup> was followed by *The Black Book of Psychoanalysis*, listing all the theoretical mistakes and clinical frauds of psychoanalysis.<sup>4</sup> In this negative way, at least, the profound solidarity of Marxism and psychoanalysis is now displayed for all to see.

There is something to this funeral oratory. A century ago, in order to situate his discovery of the unconscious in the history of modern Europe, Freud developed the idea of three successive humiliations of man, the three 'narcissistic illnesses', as he called them. First Copernicus demonstrated that the Earth revolves around the Sun, and thus deprived us humans of the central place in the universe. Then Darwin demonstrated our emergence from blind evolution, and took

away our place of honour among living beings. Finally, when Freud unveiled the predominant role of the unconscious in psychic processes, it turned out that our ego does not even rule in its own house. Today, a century later, a starker picture is emerging: the latest scientific breakthroughs seem to inflict a whole series of further humiliations on the narcissistic image of man: our mind itself is a mere computing machine, processing data; our sense of freedom and autonomy is the user's illusion of this machine. In the light of today's brain sciences, psychoanalysis itself, far from being subversive, seems rather to belong to the traditional humanist field threatened by the latest humiliations.

So is psychoanalysis really outdated today? It seems that it is, on three connected levels: (1) of scientific knowledge, where the cognitivist–neurobiologist model of the human mind appears to supersede the Freudian model; (2) of the psychiatric clinic, where psychoanalytical treatment is rapidly losing ground to pills and behavioural therapy; (3) of the social context, where the Freudian image of a society and social norms that repress the individual's sexual drives no longer seems a valid account of today's predominant hedonistic permissiveness.

Nonetheless, in the case of psychoanalysis the memorial service may be premature, celebrated for a patient who still has a long life ahead. In contrast to the 'evident' truths embraced by the critics of Freud, my aim is to demonstrate that it is only today that the time of psychoanalysis has come. Seen through the eyes of Lacan, through what Lacan called his 'return to Freud', Freud's key insights finally emerge in their true dimension. Lacan did not understand this return as a return to what Freud said, but to the core of the Freudian revolution of which Freud himself was not fully aware.

Lacan started his 'return to Freud' with the linguistic reading of the entire psychoanalytic edifice, encapsulated by what

is perhaps his single best-known formula: 'The unconscious is structured as a language.' The predominant perception of the unconscious is that it is the domain of irrational drives, something opposed to the rational conscious self. For Lacan, this notion of the unconscious belongs to the Romantic *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) and has nothing to do with Freud. The Freudian unconscious caused such a scandal not because of the claim that the rational self is subordinated to the much vaster domain of blind irrational instincts, but because it demonstrated how the unconscious itself obeys its own grammar and logic: the unconscious talks and thinks. The unconscious is not the preserve of wild drives that have to be tamed by the ego, but the site where a traumatic truth speaks out. Therein lies Lacan's version of Freud's motto *Wo es war, soll ich werden* (Where it was, I am to become): not 'The ego should conquer the id', the site of the unconscious drives, but 'I should dare to approach the site of my truth.' What awaits me 'there' is not a deep Truth that I have to identify with, but an unbearable truth that I have to learn to live with.

How, then, do Lacan's ideas differ from the mainstream psychoanalytical schools of thought and from Freud himself? With regard to other schools, the first thing that strikes the eye is the philosophical tenor of Lacan's theory. For Lacan, psychoanalysis at its most fundamental is not a theory and technique of treating psychic disturbances, but a theory and practice that confronts individuals with the most radical dimension of human existence. It does not show an individual the way to accommodate him- or herself to the demands of social reality; instead it explains how something like 'reality' constitutes itself in the first place. It does not merely enable a human being to accept the repressed truth about him- or herself; it explains how the dimension of truth emerges in human reality. In Lacan's view, pathological formations like

neuroses, psychoses and perversions have the dignity of fundamental philosophical attitudes towards reality. When I suffer obsessional neurosis, this 'illness' colours my entire relationship to reality and defines the global structure of my personality. Lacan's main critique of other psychoanalytic approaches concerns their clinical orientation: for Lacan, the goal of psychoanalytic treatment is not the patient's well-being, successful social life or personal fulfilment, but to bring the patient to confront the elementary coordinates and deadlocks of his or her desire.

With regard to Freud, the first thing that strikes the eye is that the key used by Lacan in his 'return to Freud' comes from outside the field of psychoanalysis: in order to unlock the secret treasures of Freud, Lacan enlisted a motley tribe of theories, from the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, through Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, up to mathematical set theory and the philosophies of Plato, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. It follows that most of Lacan's key concepts do not have a counterpart in Freud's own theory: Freud never mentions the triad of Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, he never talks about 'the big Other' as the symbolic order, he speaks of 'ego', not of 'subject'. Lacan uses these terms imported from other disciplines as tools to make distinctions that are implicitly already present in Freud, even if he was not aware of them. For example, if psychoanalysis is a 'talking cure', if it treats pathological disturbances only with words, it has to rely on a certain notion of speech. Lacan's thesis is that Freud was not aware of the notion of speech implied by his own theory and practice, and that we can only develop this notion if we refer to Saussurean linguistics, speech acts theory and the Hegelian dialectics of recognition.

Lacan's 'return to Freud' provided a new theoretical foundation for psychoanalysis with immense consequences also

for analytic treatment. Controversy, crisis, scandal even, accompanied Lacan throughout his career. Not only was he, in 1953, forced to cut links with the International Psycho-Analytic Association (see Chronology), but his provocative ideas disturbed many progressive thinkers, from critical Marxists to feminists. Although, in the Western academia, Lacan is usually perceived as some sort of postmodernist or deconstructionist, he sticks right out from the space that these labels denote. All his life, he was outgrowing labels attached to his name: phenomenologist, Hegelian, Heideggerian, structuralist, poststructuralist; no wonder, since the most outstanding feature of his teaching is permanent self-questioning.

Lacan was a voracious reader and interpreter; for him, psychoanalysis itself is a method of reading texts, oral (the patient's speech) or written. What better way to read Lacan, then, than to practise his mode of reading, to read others' texts *with* Lacan. That is why each chapter of this book will confront a passage from Lacan with another fragment (from philosophy, from art, from popular culture and ideology). The Lacanian position will be elucidated through the Lacanian reading of the other text. Another feature of this book is a sweeping exclusion: it ignores almost entirely Lacan's theory of what goes on in psychoanalytic treatment. Lacan was first of all a clinician, and clinical concerns permeate everything he wrote and did. Even when he reads Plato, Aquinas, Hegel, Kierkegaard, it is always to elucidate a precise clinical problem. The very ubiquity of these concerns is what allows us to exclude them: precisely because the clinical is everywhere, one can short-circuit the process and concentrate instead on its effects, on the way it colours everything that appears non-clinical – this is the true test of its central place.

Instead of explaining Lacan through his historical and



theoretical context, *How to Read Lacan* will use Lacan himself to explain our social and libidinal predicament. Instead of pronouncing an impartial judgement, it will engage in a partisan reading – it is part of the Lacanian theory that every truth is partial. Lacan himself, in his reading of Freud, exemplifies the power of such a partial approach. In his *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, T. S. Eliot remarks that there are moments when the only choice is the one between sectarianism and non-belief, junctures when the only way to keep a religion alive is to perform a sectarian split from its main body. By means of his sectarian split, by cutting himself off from the decaying corpse of the International Psycho-Analytic Association, Lacan kept the Freudian teaching alive. Fifty years later it is up to us to do the same with Lacan.<sup>5</sup>

## 1

## EMPTY GESTURES AND PERFORMATIVES: LACAN CONFRONTS THE CIA PLOT

Is it with the gifts of Danaoi\* or with the passwords that give them their salutary non-sense that language, with the law, begins? For these gifts are already symbols, in the sense that symbol means pact and that they are first and foremost signifiers of the pact that they constitute as signified, as is plainly seen in the fact that the objects of symbolic exchange – pots made to remain empty, shields too heavy to be carried, sheaves of wheat that wither, lances stuck into the ground – all are destined to be useless, if not simply superfluous by their very abundance.

Is this neutralization of the signifier the whole of the nature of language? On this assessment, one could see the beginning of it among sea swallows, for instance, during the mating parade, materialized in the fish they pass between each other from beak to beak. And if the ethologists are right in seeing in this the instrument of an activation of the group that might be called the equivalent of a festival, they would be completely justified in recognizing it as a symbol.<sup>6</sup>

\*‘Danaoi’ is Homer’s term for the Greeks who laid siege to Troy. The gift was the Trojan horse, which enabled the Greeks to penetrate Troy and destroy it. In classical times, ‘Greek gifts’ became a byword for favours that may seem beneficial but will damage the receiver, from a line in Virgil: ‘Timeo Danaos, et dano ferentes’ – I fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts.

Mexican soap operas are shot at so frantic a pace (every single day a 25-minute episode) that the actors do not even get the script so as to learn their lines in advance; they wear tiny receivers in their ears that tell them what to do, and they learn to act out what they hear ('Now slap him and tell him you hate him! Then embrace him! . . .'). This procedure provides us with an image of what, according to the common perception, Lacan means by 'the big Other'. The symbolic order, society's unwritten constitution, is the second nature of every speaking being: it is here, directing and controlling my acts; it is the sea I swim in, yet it remains ultimately impenetrable – I can never put it in front of me and grasp it. It is as if we, subjects of language, talk and interact like puppets, our speech and gestures dictated by some nameless all-pervasive agency. Does this mean that, for Lacan, we human individuals are mere epiphenomena, shadows with no real power of our own, that our self-perception as autonomous free agents is a kind of user's illusion blinding us to the fact that we are tools in the hands of the big Other that hides behind the screen and pulls the strings?

There are, however, many features of the big Other that get lost in this simplified notion. For Lacan, the reality of human beings is constituted by three intertangled levels: the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. This triad can be nicely illustrated by the game of chess. The rules one has to follow in order to play it are its symbolic dimension: from the purely formal symbolic standpoint, 'knight' is defined only by the moves this figure can make. This level is clearly different from the imaginary one, namely the way in which different pieces are shaped and characterized by their names (king, queen, knight), and it is easy to envision a game with the same rules, but with a different imaginary, in which this figure would be called 'messenger' or 'runner' or whatever. Finally,

real is the entire complex set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player or directly cut the game short.

The big Other operates at a symbolic level. What, then, is this symbolic order composed of? When we speak (or listen, for that matter), we never merely interact with others; our speech activity is grounded on our accepting and relying on a complex network of rules and other kinds of presuppositions. First there are the grammatical rules that I have to master blindly and spontaneously: if I were to bear these rules in mind all the time, my speech would break down. Then there is the background of participating in the same life-world that enables me and my partner in conversation to understand each other. The rules that I follow are marked by a deep divide: there are rules (and meanings) that I follow blindly, out of habit, but of which, if I reflect, I can become at least partially aware (such as common grammatical rules); and there are rules that I follow, meanings that haunt me, in ignorance (such as unconscious prohibitions). Then there are rules and meanings I know of, but must not be seen to know of – dirty or obscene innuendos that one passes over in silence in order to keep up the proper appearances.

This symbolic space acts like a yardstick against which I can measure myself. This is why the big Other can be personified or reified in a single agent: the 'God' who watches over me from beyond, and over all real individuals, or the Cause that involves me (Freedom, Communism, Nation) and for which I am ready to give my life. While talking, I am never merely a 'small other' (individual) interacting with other 'small others': the big Other must always be there. This inherent reference to the Other is the topic of a low-grade joke about a poor peasant who, having suffered a shipwreck, finds himself

marooned on an island with, say, Cindy Crawford. After having sex with him, she asks how it was; his answer is, great, but he still has one small request to complete his satisfaction – could she dress herself up as his best friend, put on trousers and paint a moustache on her face? He reassures her that he is not a secret pervert, as she will see once she has granted the request. When she does, he approaches her, gives her a dig in the ribs, and tells her with the leer of male complicity: ‘You know what happened to me? I just had sex with Cindy Crawford!’ This Third, which is always present as the witness, belies the possibility of an unspoiled innocent private pleasure. Sex is always minimally exhibitionist and relies on another’s gaze.

In spite of all its grounding power, the big Other is fragile, insubstantial, properly *virtual*, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only in so far as subjects *act as if it exists*. Its status is similar to that of an ideological cause like Communism or Nation: it is the substance of the individuals who recognize themselves in it, the ground of their whole existence, the point of reference that provides the ultimate horizon of meaning, something for which these individuals are ready to give their lives, yet the only thing that really exists are these individuals and their activity, so this substance is actual only in so far as individuals believe in it and act accordingly. It is because of the virtual character of the big Other that, as Lacan put it at the very end of his ‘Seminar on the Purloined Letter’, a letter always arrives at its destination. One can even say that the only letter that fully and effectively arrives at its destination is the unsent letter – its true addressee is not flesh-and-blood others, but the big Other itself:

The preservation of the unsent letter is its arresting feature. Neither the writing nor the sending is remarkable (we often make drafts of letters and discard them), but the gesture of keeping the message when we

have no intention of sending it. By saving the letter, we are in some sense ‘sending’ it after all. We are not relinquishing our idea or dismissing it as foolish or unworthy (as we do when we tear up a letter); on the contrary, we are giving it an extra vote of confidence. We are, in effect, saying that our idea is too precious to be entrusted to the gaze of the actual addressee, who may not grasp its worth, so we ‘send’ it to his equivalent in fantasy, on whom we can absolutely count for an understanding and appreciative reading.<sup>7</sup>

Is it not exactly the same with the symptom in the Freudian sense of the term? According to Freud, when I develop a symptom, I produce a coded message about my innermost secrets, my unconscious desires and traumas. The symptom’s addressee is not another real human being: before an analyst deciphers my symptom, there is no one who can read its message. Who, then, is the symptom’s addressee? The only remaining candidate is the virtual big Other. This virtual character of the big Other means that the symbolic order is not a kind of spiritual substance existing independently of individuals, but something that is sustained by their continuous activity. However, the provenance of the big Other is still unclear. How is it that, when individuals exchange symbols, they do not simply interact with each other, but always also refer to the virtual big Other? When I talk about other people’s opinions, it is never only a matter of what I, you, or other individuals think, but also of what the impersonal ‘one’ thinks. When I violate a certain rule of decency, I never simply do something that the majority of others do not do – I do what ‘one’ doesn’t do.

This brings us to the dense passage with which we opened this chapter: in it, Lacan proposes no less than an account of the genesis of the big Other. For Lacan, language is a gift as dangerous to humanity as the horse was to the Trojans: it offers itself to our use free of charge, but once we accept it,

it colonizes us. The symbolic order emerges from a gift, an offering, that marks its content as neutral in order to pose as a gift: when a gift is offered, what matters is not its content but the link between giver and receiver established when the receiver accepts the gift. Lacan even engages here in a bit of speculation about animal ethology: the sea swallows that pass a caught fish from beak to beak (as if to make it clear that the link established in this way is more important than who will finally keep and eat the fish) effectively engage in a kind of symbolic communication.

Everyone who is in love knows this: a present to the beloved, if it is to symbolize my love, should be useless, superfluous in its very abundance – only as such, with its use-value suspended, can it symbolize my love. Human communication is characterized by an irreducible reflexivity: every act of communication simultaneously symbolizes the fact of communication. Roman Jakobson called this fundamental mystery of the properly human symbolic order ‘phatic communication’: human speech never merely transmits a message, it always also self-reflectively asserts the basic symbolic pact between the communicating subjects.

The most elementary level of symbolic exchange is a so-called ‘empty gesture’, an offer made or meant to be rejected. Brecht gave a poignant expression to this feature in his play *Jasager*, in which a young boy is asked to comply freely with what will in any case be his fate (to be thrown into the valley); as his teacher explains, it is customary to ask the victim if he agrees with his fate, but it is also customary for the victim to say yes. Belonging to a society involves a paradoxical point at which each of us is ordered to embrace freely, as the result of our choice, what is anyway imposed on us (we all *must* love our country, our parents, our religion). This paradox of willing (choosing freely) what is in any case compulsory, of pretending

(maintaining the appearance) that there is a free choice although effectively there isn’t one, is strictly co-dependent with the notion of an empty symbolic gesture, a gesture – an offer – that is meant to be rejected.

Something similar is part of our everyday codes of behaviour. When, after being engaged in a fierce competition for a job promotion with my closest friend, I happen to win, the proper thing to do is to offer to withdraw, so that he will get the promotion, and the proper thing for him to do is to reject my offer – this way, perhaps, our friendship can be saved. What we have here is symbolic exchange at its purest: a gesture made only to be rejected. The magic of symbolic exchange is that, although at the end we are where we were at the beginning, there is a distinct gain for both parties in their pact of solidarity. Of course, the problem is: what if the person to whom the offer to be rejected is made should actually accept it? What if, having lost the competition, I accept my friend’s offer to get the promotion after all, instead of him? A situation like this is properly catastrophic: it causes the disintegration of the semblance (of freedom) that pertains to social order, which equals the disintegration of the social substance itself, the dissolution of the social link.

The notion of the social link established through empty gestures enables us to define in a precise way the figure of *sociopath*: what is beyond the sociopath’s grasp is the fact that ‘many human acts are performed . . . for the sake of the interaction itself’.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the sociopath’s use of language paradoxically matches the standard commonsense notion of language as a purely instrumental means of communication, as signs that transmit meanings. He *uses* language, he is not caught up in it, and he is insensitive to the performative dimension. This determines a sociopath’s attitude towards morality: while he is able to discern the moral rules that regulate social interaction,

and even to act morally in so far as he establishes that it suits his purposes, he lacks the 'gut feeling' of right and wrong, the notion that one just cannot do some things, regardless of the external social rules. In short, a sociopath truly practises the notion of morality developed by utilitarianism, according to which, morality designates a behaviour we adopt by way of intelligently calculating our interests (in the long run, it profits us all if we try to contribute to the pleasure of the greatest possible number of people): for him, morality is a theory one learns and follows, not something one substantially identifies with. Doing evil is a mistake in calculation, not a guilty act.

Because of this performative dimension, every choice we confront in language is a meta-choice, that is to say, a choice of choice itself, a choice that affects and changes the very coordinates of my choosing. Recall the everyday situation in which my (sexual, political, or financial) partner wants me to strike a deal; what he tells me is basically: 'Please, I really love you. If we get it together here, I will be totally dedicated to you! But beware! If you reject me, I may lose control and make your life a misery!' The catch here, of course, is that I am not simply confronted with a clear choice: the second part of this message undermines the first part – somebody who is ready to damage me if I say no to him cannot really love me and be devoted to my happiness, as he claims. So the real choice that I face belies its terms: hatred, or at least a cold manipulative indifference towards me, underlies both terms of the choice. There is also a symmetrical hypocrisy, which consists in saying: 'I love you and will accept whatever your choice will be; so even if (you know that) your refusal will ruin me, please choose what you really want, and do not take into consideration how it will affect me!' The manipulative falsity of this offer, of course, resides in the way it uses its 'honest' insistence that I can say no as an additional pressure

on me to say yes: 'How can you refuse me, when I love you so totally?'

We can see now how, far from conceiving the Symbolic that rules human perception and interaction as a kind of transcendental a priori (a formal network, given in advance, that limits the scope of human practice), Lacan is interested precisely in how the gestures of symbolization are entwined with and embedded in the process of collective practice. What Lacan elaborates as the 'twofold moment' of the symbolic function reaches far beyond the standard theory of the performative dimension of speech as it was developed in the tradition from J. L. Austin to John Searle:

The symbolic function presents itself as a twofold movement in the subject: man makes his own action into an object, but only to return its foundational place to it in due time. In this equivocation, operating at every instant, lies the whole progress of a function in which action and knowledge alternate.<sup>9</sup>

The historical example evoked by Lacan to clarify this 'twofold movement' is indicative in its hidden references:

in phase one, a man who works at the level of production in our society considers himself to belong to the ranks of the proletariat; in phase two, in the name of belonging to it, he joins in a general strike.<sup>10</sup>

Lacan's (implicit) reference here is to Georg Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*, a classic Marxist work of 1923 whose widely acclaimed French translation was published in the mid-1950s. For Lukacs, consciousness is opposed to mere knowledge of an object: knowledge is external to the known object, while consciousness is in itself 'practical', an act that changes its very object. (Once a worker 'considers himself to belong to the ranks of the proletariat', this changes his very

reality: he acts differently.) One does something, one counts oneself as (declares oneself) the one who did it, and, on the base of this declaration, one does something new – the proper moment of subjective transformation occurs at the moment of declaration, not at the moment of the act. This reflexive moment of declaration means that every utterance not only transmits some content, but, simultaneously, *conveys the way the subject relates to this content*. Even the most down-to-earth objects and activities always contain such a declarative dimension, which constitutes the ideology of everyday life. One should never forget that utility functions as a reflective notion: it always involves the assertion of utility as meaning. A man who lives in a large city and owns a Land-Rover (for which he obviously has no use) doesn't simply lead a no-nonsense, down-to-earth life; rather, he owns such a car in order to *signal* that he leads his life under the sign of a no-nonsense, down-to-earth attitude. To wear stone-washed jeans is to *signal* a certain attitude to life.

The unsurpassed master of such analysis was Claude Lévi-Strauss, for whom food also serves as 'food for thought'. The three main modes of food preparation (raw, baked, boiled) function as a semiotic triangle: we use them to symbolize the basic opposition of ('raw') nature and ('baked') culture, as well as the mediation between the two opposites (in the procedure of boiling). There is a memorable scene in Luis Buñuel's *Phantom of Freedom* in which relations between eating and excreting are inverted: people sit at their toilets around the table, pleasantly talking, and when they want to eat, they silently ask the housekeeper: 'Where is that place, you know?' and sneak away to a small room in the back. As a supplement to Lévi-Strauss, one is thus tempted to propose that shit can also serve as a 'food for thought': the three basic types of toilet-design in the West form a kind of excremental counterpoint to the Lévi-Straussian triangle of cooking. In a traditional

German toilet, the hole in which shit disappears after we flush water is way up front, so that shit is first laid out for us to sniff at and inspect for traces of any illness; in the typical French toilet the hole is far to the back, so that shit may disappear as soon as possible; finally, the American toilet presents a kind of synthesis, a mediation between these two opposed poles – the toilet basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it, visible, but not to be inspected. No wonder that, in the famous discussion of different European toilets at the beginning of her half-forgotten *Fear of Flying*, Erica Jong mockingly claims that 'German toilets are really the key to the horrors of the Third Reich. People who can build toilets like this are capable of anything.' It is clear that none of these versions can be accounted for in purely utilitarian terms: a certain ideological perception of how the subject should relate to the unpleasant excrement that comes from within our body is clearly discernible in it.

Hegel was among the first to interpret the geographic triad of Germany–France–England as expressing three different existential attitudes: German reflective thoroughness, French revolutionary hastiness, English moderate utilitarian pragmatism. In terms of political stance, this triad can be read as German conservatism, French revolutionary radicalism and English moderate liberalism; in terms of the predominance of one of the spheres of social life, it is German metaphysics and poetry versus French politics and English economics. The reference to toilets enables us to discern the same triad in the most intimate domain of performing the excremental function: ambiguous contemplative fascination; the hasty attempt to get rid of the unpleasant excess as fast as possible; the pragmatic approach to treat the excess as an ordinary object to be disposed of in an appropriate way. It is easy for an academic to claim at a round table that we live in a post-ideological universe – the

moment he visits the restroom after the heated discussion, he is again knee-deep in ideology.

This declarative dimension of symbolic interaction can be exemplified by means of a delicate situation in human relationships. Imagine a couple with a tacit agreement that they can engage in discreet extramarital affairs. If, all of a sudden, the husband openly tells his wife about an ongoing affair, she will have cause to panic: 'If it's just an affair, then why are you telling me this? It must be something more!' The act of publicly reporting on something is never neutral; it affects the reported content itself, and although the partners learn nothing new by means of it, it changes everything. There is also a big difference between the partner simply not talking about secret adventures and *explicitly stating that s/he will not talk about them* ('You know, I think I have the right not to tell you about all my contacts; there is a part of my life which is of no concern to you!'). In the second case, when the silent pact is rendered explicit, this statement itself cannot but deliver an additional aggressive message.

What we are dealing with here is the irreducible gap between the enunciated content and the act of enunciation that is proper to human speech. In academia, a polite way to say that we found our colleague's intervention or talk stupid and boring is to say: 'It was interesting.' So if instead we tell our colleague openly: 'It was boring and stupid', he will be fully entitled to feel surprised and to ask: 'But if you found it boring and stupid, why didn't you simply say that it was interesting?' The unfortunate colleague is right to take the direct statement as involving something more, not only a comment about the quality of his paper but an attack on his very person.

Does exactly the same not hold for the open admission of torture by the high representatives of the US administration? The popular and seemingly convincing reply to those who

worry about the recent US practice of torturing suspected terrorist prisoners is: 'What's all the fuss about? The US are only openly admitting what not only they, but also other states, do and have been doing all the time. If anything, we have less hypocrisy now!' But this invites a simple counter-question: 'If the high representatives of the US mean only this, then why tell us now? Why not just carry on in silence, the way they did before?' When we hear people like Dick Cheney making obscene statements about the necessity of torture, we should ask them: 'If you just want to torture suspected terrorists in secret, then why are you saying it publicly?' That is to say, the question to be raised is: What more does this statement contain, that has caused you to make it?

The same goes for the negative version of declaration: no less than the superfluous act of mentioning, the act of *not* mentioning or concealing something can create additional meaning. When, in February 2003, Colin Powell addressed the UN assembly in order to advocate the attack on Iraq, the US delegation asked for the large reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* on the wall behind the speaker's podium to be covered with a different visual ornament. Although the official explanation was that *Guernica* did not provide the right visual background for the televised transmission of Powell's speech, it was clear to everyone what the US delegation was afraid of: that *Guernica*, the painting that commemorates the catastrophic results of the German aerial bombing of the Spanish city during the civil war, would give rise to the 'wrong kind of associations' if it were to serve as the background to Powell advocating the bombing of Iraq by the far superior US air force. This is what Lacan means when he claims that repression and the return of the repressed are one and the same process: if the US delegation had refrained from demanding its concealment, probably no one would associate

Powell's speech with the painting displayed behind him – it was this very gesture that drew attention to the association and confirmed its truth.

Recall the unique figure of James Jesus Angleton, the ultimate cold warrior. For almost two decades, until 1974, he headed the counterintelligence section of the CIA, with the task of unearthing moles within its ranks. Angleton, a charismatic, highly idiosyncratic figure, literary and educated (a personal friend of T. S. Eliot, even physically resembling him), was prone to paranoia. The premise of his work was his absolute belief in the so-called Monster Plot: a gigantic deception coordinated by a secret KGB 'organization within the organization', whose aim was to penetrate and totally dominate the Western intelligence network and thus bring about the defeat of the West. For this reason, Angleton dismissed practically all KGB defectors offering invaluable information as phoney defectors, and sometimes even sent them back to the USSR (where they were put on trial and shot, since they were true defectors). The ultimate outcome of Angleton's reign was total paralysis – crucially, in his time, not one true mole was discovered and apprehended. No wonder that Clare Petty, one of the top officials in Angleton's section, brought his boss's paranoia to its logical self-negating climax by concluding, after a long and exhaustive investigation, that Anatoli Golitsyn (the Russian defector with whom Angleton was engaged in a true *folie à deux*, shared madness) was a fake and Angleton himself the big mole who had successfully paralysed the USA's anti-Soviet intelligence activity.

One is tempted to raise the question: What if Angleton was a mole justifying his activity by the search for a mole (for himself, in the real-life version of Kevin Costner's *No Way Out* plot)? What if the true KGB Monster Plot was the very project to put in play the idea of a Monster Plot and thus to

immobilize the CIA and neutralize in advance any future KGB defectors? In both cases, the ultimate deception assumed the guise of truth itself: there was a Monster Plot (it was the very idea of the Monster Plot); there was a mole in the heart of the CIA (Angleton himself). Therein resides the truth of the paranoid stance: it is itself the destructive plot against which it is fighting. The acuity of this solution – and the ultimate condemnation of Angleton's paranoia – is that it doesn't matter if Angleton was just sincerely duped by the idea of a Monster Plot, or if he was the mole: in both cases, the result is exactly the same. The deception resided in our failure to include in the list of suspects the very idea of (globalized) suspicion.

Recall the old story about a worker suspected of stealing: every evening, when he was leaving the factory, the wheelbarrow he was pushing in front of him was carefully inspected, but the guards could find nothing, it was always empty. At last they got the point: what the worker was stealing was wheelbarrows. This reflexive twist pertains to communication as such: one should not forget to include in the content of an act of communication the act itself, since the meaning of each act of communication is also to reflexively assert that it is an act of communication. This is the first thing to bear in mind about the way the unconscious operates: it is not hidden in the wheelbarrow, it is the wheelbarrow itself.



## 2

## THE INTERPASSIVE SUBJECT: LACAN TURNS A PRAYER WHEEL

And what is a Chorus? You will be told that it's you yourselves. Or perhaps that it isn't you. But that's not the point. Means are involved here, emotional means. In my view, the Chorus is people who are moved.

Therefore, look closely before telling yourself that emotions are engaged in this purification. They are engaged, along with others, when at the end they have to be pacified by some artifice or other. But that doesn't mean to say that they are directly engaged. On the one hand, they no doubt are, and you are there in the form of a material to be made use of; on the other hand, that material is also completely indifferent. When you go to the theatre in the evening, you are preoccupied by the affairs of the day, by the pen that you lost, by the cheque that you will have to sign the next day. You shouldn't give yourselves too much credit. Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you.<sup>11</sup>

Although the scene described here by Lacan is a very common one – people at a theatre enjoying the performance of a Greek tragedy – his reading of it makes it clear that something strange is going on: it is as if some figure of the other – in this case, the Chorus – can take over from us and experience for us our innermost and most spontaneous feelings and attitudes,

inclusive of crying and laughing. In some societies, the same role is played by so-called 'weepers' (women hired to cry at funerals): they can perform the spectacle of mourning for the relatives of the deceased, who can devote their time to more profitable endeavours (like dividing the inheritance). Something similar happens with the prayer wheels of Tibet: I attach a piece of paper with the prayer written on it to the wheel, turn it around mechanically (or, even more practically, let the wind or water turn it round), and the wheel is praying for me – as the Stalinists would have put it, 'objectively' I am praying, even if my thoughts are occupied with the most obscene sexual fantasies. To dispel the illusion that such things can happen only in 'primitive' societies, think about the canned laughter on a TV show, when the reaction of laughter to a comic scene is included in the soundtrack itself. Even if I do not laugh, but simply stare at the screen, tired after a hard day's work, I nonetheless feel relieved after the show, as if the soundtrack has done the laughing for me.

To properly grasp this strange process, one should supplement the fashionable notion of interactivity with its uncanny double, *interpassivity*.<sup>12</sup> It is commonplace to emphasize how, with new electronic media, the passive consumption of a text or a work of art is over: I no longer merely stare at the screen, I increasingly interact with it, entering into a dialogic relationship with it (from choosing the programmes, through participating in debates in a Virtual Community, to directly determining the outcome of the plot in so-called 'interactive narratives'). Those who praise the democratic potential of the new media generally focus on precisely these features: on how cyberspace opens up the chance for a large majority of people to break out of the role of the passive observer following a spectacle staged by others, and to participate actively not only in the spectacle, but more and more in establishing the rules of the spectacle.

The other side of this interactivity is interpassivity. The obverse of interacting with the object (instead of just passively following the show) is the situation in which the object itself takes from me, deprives me of, my own passivity, so that it is the object itself that enjoys the show instead of me, relieving me of the duty to enjoy myself. Almost every VCR aficionado who compulsively records movies (myself among them) is well aware that the immediate effect of owning a VCR is that one effectively watches *fewer* films than in the good old days of a simple TV set. One never has time for TV, so, instead of losing a precious evening, one simply tapes the film and stores it for future viewing (for which, of course, there is almost never time). Although I do not actually watch the films, the very awareness that the films I love are stored in my video library gives me a profound satisfaction, and occasionally enables me to simply relax and indulge in the exquisite art of *far niente* – as if the VCR is in a way *watching them for me, in my place*. VCR stands here for the big Other, the medium of symbolic registration. It seems that, today, even pornography functions more and more in an interpassive way: X-rated movies are no longer primarily the means to excite the user for his (or her) solitary masturbatory activity – just staring at the screen where ‘the action takes place’ is sufficient, it is enough for me to observe how others enjoy in the place of me.

Another example of interpassivity: we all know the embarrassing scene in which a person tells a tasteless bad joke and then, when no one laughs, himself bursts out laughing, repeating ‘That was funny!’ or some such remark – that is to say, acts out himself the expected reaction of the audience. The situation here is similar to, but nonetheless different from, that of canned laughter: the agent who laughs in our place (i.e. through whom we, the bored and embarrassed public,

nonetheless laugh) is not the anonymous big Other of the invisible artificial public, but the teller of the joke himself. His compulsive laughter is similar to those sounds like ‘Oops!’ that we feel obliged to utter when we stumble or do something stupid. The mystery of this last case is that it is also possible for another person who merely witnesses our blunder to say ‘Oops!’ *for us*, and it works. The function of the ‘Oops!’ is to enact the symbolic registration of the stupid stumbling: the virtual big Other has to be informed about it. Recall the typical tricky situation in which all the people in a closed group know some dirty detail (and they also know that all the others know it), but when one of them inadvertently blurts out this detail, they nonetheless all feel embarrassed – why? If no one learned anything new, why do they all feel embarrassed? Because they can no longer *pretend* that (act as if) they do not know it – in other words, because now *the big Other knows it*. Therein resides the lesson of Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’: one should never underestimate the power of appearances. Sometimes, when we inadvertently disturb the appearance, the thing itself behind appearance also falls apart.

This interpassivity is the opposite of Hegel’s notion of *List der Vernunft* (cunning of Reason), where *I am active through the Other*: I can remain passive, sitting comfortably in the background, while the Other does it for me. Instead of hitting the metal with a hammer, the machine can do it for me; instead of turning the mill wheel myself, water can do it: I achieve my goal by way of interposing between me and the object on which I work another natural object. The same can happen at the interpersonal level: instead of directly attacking my enemy, I instigate a fight between him and another person, so that I can comfortably observe the two of them destroying each other. (This is how, for Hegel, the absolute Idea reigns

throughout history. It remains outside of the conflict, letting human passions do the work for it in their mutual struggles. The historical necessity of the passage from republic to empire in ancient Rome realized itself by using as its instrument Julius Caesar's passions and ambitions.) In the case of interpassivity, on the contrary, *I am passive through the Other*. I concede to the Other the passive aspect (enjoying) of my experience, while I can remain actively engaged (I can continue to work in the evening, while the VCR passively enjoys for me; I can make financial arrangements for the deceased's fortune while the weepers mourn for me). This brings us to the notion of *false activity*: people do not only act in order to change something, they can also act in order to prevent something from happening, so that nothing will change. Therein resides the typical strategy of the obsessional neurotic: he is frantically active in order to prevent the real thing from happening. Say, in a group situation in which some tension threatens to explode, the obsessional talks all the time in order to prevent the awkward moment of silence that would compel the participants to openly confront the underlying tension. In psychoanalytic treatment, obsessional neurotics talk constantly, inundating the analyst with anecdotes, dreams, insights: their incessant activity is sustained by the underlying fear that, if they stop talking for a moment, the analyst will ask them the question that truly matters – in other words, they talk in order to keep the analyst still.

Even in much of today's progressive politics, the danger is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to be active and to participate. People intervene all the time, attempting to 'do something', academics participate in meaningless debates; the truly difficult thing is to step back and withdraw from it. Those in power often prefer even a critical participation to silence – just to engage us in a dialogue, to make sure that our

ominous passivity is broken. Against such an interpassive mode, in which we are active all the time to make sure that nothing will really change, the first truly critical step is to *withdraw into passivity* and to refuse to participate. This first step clears the ground for a true activity, for an act that will effectively change the coordinates of the scene.

Something akin to this false activity is encountered in the Protestant notion of Predestination. The paradox of Predestination is that the theology which claims that our fate is determined in advance and that our redemption does not depend on our acts served as the legitimization of capitalism, the social system that triggered the most frantic productive activity in the history of humanity. The very fact that things are decided in advance – that our attitude to Fate is that of a passive victim – prompts us to engage in incessant frenetic activity. We act all the time in order to sustain the big Other's (in this case: God's) fixity.

Such a displacement of our most intimate feelings and attitudes onto some figure of the Other is at the very core of Lacan's notion of the big Other; it can affect not only feelings but also beliefs and knowledge – the Other can also believe and know for me. In order to designate this displacement of the subject's knowledge onto another, Lacan coined the notion of the *subject supposed to know*. In the TV series *Columbo*, the crime – the act of murder – is shown in detail in advance, so that the riddle to be solved is not whodunit, but how the detective will establish the link between the deceitful surface (the 'manifest content' of the crime scene, to use the term from Freud's theory of dreams) and the truth about the crime (its 'latent thought'): how he will prove to the culprit his or her guilt. The success of *Columbo* attests to the fact that the true source of interest in the detective's work is the process of deciphering itself, not its result.

Even more crucial than this feature is the fact that not only do we, the spectators, know in advance who did it (since we directly see it), but, inexplicably, the detective Columbo himself immediately knows it: the moment he visits the scene of the crime and encounters the culprit, he is absolutely certain, he simply knows that the culprit did it. His subsequent efforts do not concern the riddle 'Who did it?', but how he should prove the culprit's guilt to the culprit. This strange reversal of the normal order has theological connotations: in an authentic religious belief, I first believe in God and then, on the ground of my belief, become susceptible to the proofs of the truth of my faith; here too, Columbo *first* knows with a mysterious but nonetheless absolutely infallible certainty who did it, and *then*, on the basis of this inexplicable knowledge, proceeds to gather proofs.

In a slightly different way, this is how the psychoanalyst as the 'subject supposed to know' functions in the treatment: once the patient is engaged in the treatment, he has the same absolute certainty that the analyst *knows* his secret (which only means that the patient *is* a priori 'guilty' of hiding a secret, that there *is* a secret meaning to be drawn from his acts). The analyst is not an empiricist, probing the patient with different hypotheses, searching for proofs; instead, he embodies the absolute certainty (which Lacan compares to the certainty of Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*) of the patient's unconscious desire. For Lacan, this strange transposition of what I already know in my unconscious onto the figure of the analyst is at the core of the phenomenon of transference in the treatment: I can only arrive at the unconscious meaning of my symptoms if I presuppose that the analyst already knows their meaning. The difference between Freud and Lacan is that, while Freud focused on the psychic dynamics of transference as an intersubjective relationship (the patient transfers onto the figure of

the analyst his feelings about his father, so that when he seems to talk about the analyst, he 'really' talks about his father), Lacan extrapolated from the empirical wealth of transference phenomena the formal structure of the presupposed meaning.

The more general rule that transference exemplifies is that, often, the invention of some new content can only occur in the illusory form of returning to the past original truth. To return to the subject of Protestantism: Luther accomplished the greatest revolution in the history of Christianity thinking that he was merely unearthing the truth obfuscated by centuries of Catholic degeneration. The same goes for national revival: when ethnic groups constitute themselves as nation-states, they commonly formulate this constitution as returning to ancient and forgotten ethnic roots. What they are not aware of is how their 'return to' constitutes the very object to which it returns: in the very act of returning to tradition, they are inventing it. As every historian knows, Scottish kilts (in the form they are known today) were invented in the course of the nineteenth century.

What many readers of Lacan fail to notice is how the figure of the subject supposed to know is a secondary phenomenon, an exception, something that emerges against the more fundamental background of the *subject supposed to believe*, which is the constitutive feature of the symbolic order.<sup>13</sup> According to a well-known anthropological anecdote, the primitives to whom certain superstitious beliefs were attributed (that they descended from a fish or from a bird, for example), when directly asked about these beliefs, answered: 'Of course not – I'm not that stupid! But I have been told that some of our ancestors actually did believe that . . .' In short, they transferred their belief onto another. Are we not doing the same with our children? We go through the ritual of Santa Claus, since our children (are supposed to) believe in it and we do not want to

disappoint them; they pretend to believe so as not to disappoint us and our belief in their naivety (and to get presents, of course). Is not this need to find another who 'really believes' also that which propels us in our need to stigmatize the other as a religious or ethnic fundamentalist? In an uncanny way, some beliefs always seem to function at a distance: in order for the belief to function, there has to be some ultimate guarantor of it, some true believer, yet this guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never present in person. How, then, is belief possible? How is this vicious cycle of deferred belief cut short? The point, of course, is that, for the belief to be operative, the subject who directly believes need not exist at all: it is enough precisely to presuppose his existence, to *believe* in it, either in the guise of the mythological founding figure who is not part of our reality, or in the guise of the impersonal actor, the unspecified agent – 'They say that . . .'/ 'It is said that . . .'

This, at least, seems to be the predominant status of beliefs today, in our era that claims for itself the title 'post-ideological'. Niels Bohr, who had aptly replied to Einstein's 'God doesn't play dice' ('Don't tell God what to do!'), also provided the perfect example of how a fetishist disavowal of belief works in ideology. Seeing a horseshoe on Bohr's door, a surprised visitor remarked that he didn't believe in the superstition that it brought luck. Bohr snapped back: 'I don't believe in it either; I have it there because I was told that it also works if one does not believe in it!' Perhaps this is why 'culture' is emerging as the central life-world category. With regard to religion, we no longer 'really believe', we just follow (various) religious rituals and behaviours as part of a respect for the 'life-style' of the community we belong to (non-believing Jews may obey kosher rules 'out of respect for tradition'). 'I do not really believe in it, it is just part of my culture' seems to be the predominant mode of the displaced belief, characteristic of

our times. 'Culture' is the name for all those things we practise without really believing in them, without taking them quite seriously. This is why we dismiss fundamentalist believers as 'barbarians', as anti-cultural, as a threat to culture – they dare to take their beliefs seriously.

It may seem that we are dealing here with the phenomenon described long ago by Blaise Pascal in his advice to non-believers who would like to believe, but cannot bring themselves to accomplish the leap of faith: 'Kneel down, pray, act as if you believe, and belief will come by itself.' Or, as Alcoholics Anonymous put it more succinctly today: 'Fake it until you make it.' Today, however, in our fidelity to a cultural life-style, we turn Pascal's logic around: 'You believe too much, too directly? You find your belief too oppressing in its raw immediacy? Then kneel down, act as if you believe, and you will get rid of your belief – you will no longer have to believe yourself, since your belief will be objectified in your act of praying!' That is to say, what if one kneels down and prays not so much so as to embrace one's own beliefs, but instead to get rid of them, of their intrusion, to secure a breathing space? To believe – to believe directly, without mediation – is an oppressive burden which, happily, can be offloaded onto another by the practice of a ritual.<sup>14</sup>

This brings us to the next feature of the symbolic order: its non-psychological character. When I believe through another, or have my beliefs externalized in the ritual I mechanically follow, when I laugh by means of canned laughter, or do the work of mourning through weepers, then I accomplish a task that concerns my inner feelings and beliefs without really mobilizing these inner states. Therein resides the enigmatic status of what we call 'politeness': when, upon meeting an acquaintance, I stick out my hand and say 'Good to see you! How are you today?', it is clear to us both that I am not completely

serious (if my acquaintance suspects that I am genuinely interested, he may even feel unpleasantly surprised, as though I were aiming at something too intimate and none of my business – or, to paraphrase the old Freudian joke, ‘Why are you saying you’re glad to see me, when you’re *really* glad to see me?’). Yet it would still be wrong to designate my act as hypocritical, since in another way I *do* mean it: the polite exchange renews a kind of pact between the two of us; likewise I do ‘sincerely’ laugh through canned laughter (the proof is the fact that effectively I do feel relieved).

What this means is that the emotions I perform through the mask (the false persona) that I adopt can in a strange way be more authentic and truthful than what I assume that I feel in myself. When I construct a false image of myself which stands for me in a virtual community in which I participate (in sexual games, for example, a shy man often assumes the screen persona of an attractive promiscuous woman), the emotions I feel and feign as part of my screen persona are not simply false: although (what I count as) my true self does not feel them, they are nonetheless in a sense true. Suppose that, deep down, I am a sadistic pervert who dreams of beating up other men and raping women: in my real-life interaction with other people, I am not allowed to express this true self, so I adopt a more humble and polite persona. In this case, doesn’t it follow that my true self is much closer to what I adopt as a fictional screen persona, while the self of my real-life interactions is a mask? Paradoxically, it is the very fact that I am aware that, in cyberspace, I move within a fiction that allows me to express my true self there – this is what, among other things, Lacan means when he claims that ‘truth has the structure of a fiction’. This fictional status of truth also allows us to delineate succinctly what is false about ‘reality’ TV shows: the life we get in them is as real as decaf coffee. In short, even if these shows are ‘for

real’, people still act in them – they simply *play themselves*. The standard disclaimer in a novel (‘The characters in this text are a fiction; any resemblance to real-life characters is purely accidental’) holds also for the participants of reality soaps: what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real. The best comment on reality TV is the ironic version of this disclaimer recently used by a Slovene author: ‘All characters in the following narrative are fictional, not real – but so are the characters of most of the people I know in real life, so this disclaimer doesn’t amount to much . . .’

In one of the Marx brothers’ films, Groucho, when caught in a lie, answers angrily: ‘Who are you going to believe, your eyes or my words?’ This apparently absurd logic renders perfectly the functioning of the symbolic order in which the social mask matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears it. This functioning involves the structure of what Freud called ‘fetishist disavowal’: ‘I know very well that things are the way I see them, that the person in front of me is a corrupted weakling, but I nonetheless treat him respectfully, since he wears the insignia of a judge, so that when he speaks, it is the law itself that speaks through him.’ So, in a way, I do believe his words, and not my eyes. This is where the cynic who believes only hard facts falls short: when a judge speaks, there is in a way more truth in his words (the words of the institution of the law) than in the direct reality of the person of that judge; if one limits oneself to what one sees, one simply misses the point. This paradox is what Lacan aims at with his *Les non-dupes errent* (Those in the know are in error): those who do not let themselves be caught in the symbolic fiction, who continue to believe their own eyes, are the most in error. What is missed by the cynic who believes only his eyes is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our reality. A corrupt priest who preaches about

virtue may be a hypocrite, but if people endow his words with the authority of the Church, it may prompt them to do good deeds.

This gap between my direct psychological identity and my symbolic identity (the symbolic mask or title I wear, defining what I am for and in the big Other) is what Lacan (for complex reasons that we can here ignore) calls ‘symbolic castration’, with the phallus as its signifier.<sup>15</sup> Why is phallus for Lacan a signifier and not simply the organ of insemination? In the traditional rituals of investiture, the objects that symbolize power also put the subject who acquires them into the position of exercising power – if a king holds the sceptre in his hands, and wears the crown, his words will be taken as royal. Such insignia are external, not part of my nature: I don them; I wear them to exercise power. As such, they ‘castrate’ me, by introducing a gap between what I immediately am and the function that I exercise (I am never complete at the level of my function). This is what the infamous ‘symbolic castration’ means: the castration that occurs by the very fact of me being caught in the symbolic order, assuming a symbolic mask or title. Castration is the gap between what I immediately am and the symbolic title that confers on me a certain status and authority. In this precise sense, far from being the opposite of power, it is synonymous with power; it is what gives power to me. So one has to think of the phallus not as the organ that immediately expresses the vital force of my being, but as a kind of insignia, a mask that I put on in the same way that a king or judge puts on his insignia – phallus is a kind of organ without a body which I put on, which gets attached to my body, but never becomes an organic part, forever sticking out as its incoherent, excessive prosthesis.

Because of this gap, the subject cannot ever fully and immediately identify with his symbolic mask or title; the subject’s

questioning of his symbolic title is what hysteria<sup>16</sup> is about: ‘Why am I what you’re saying that I am?’ Or, to quote Shakespeare’s Juliet: ‘Why am I that name?’ There is a truth in the wordplay between ‘hysteria’ and ‘historia’: the subject’s symbolic identity is always historically determined, dependent upon a specific ideological context. We are dealing here with what Louis Althusser called ‘ideological interpellation’: the symbolic identity conferred on us is the result of the way the ruling ideology ‘interpellates’ us – as citizens, democrats, Christians. Hysteria emerges when a subject starts to question or to feel discomfort in his or her symbolic identity: ‘You say I am your beloved – what is there in me that makes me that? What do you see in me that causes you to desire me in that way?’ *Richard II* is Shakespeare’s ultimate play about hystericization (in contrast to *Hamlet*, the ultimate play about obsession). Its topic is the progressive questioning by the king of his own kingship – What is it that makes me a king? What remains of me if the symbolic title ‘king’ is taken away?

I have no name, no title,  
No, not that name was given me at the font,  
But 'tis usurp'd: alack the heavy day,  
That I have worn so many winters out,  
And know not now what name to call myself!  
O that I were a mockery king of snow,  
Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke,  
To melt myself away in water-drops!

In the Slovene translation, the second line is rendered as: ‘Why am I what I am?’ Although this clearly involves too much poetic licence, it does convey the gist of the predicament: deprived of its symbolic titles, Richard’s identity melts like a snowman’s in the sun.

The problem for the hysteric is how to distinguish what he or she is (his true desire) from what others see and desire in him or her. This brings us to another of Lacan's formulas, that 'Man's desire is the other's desire.' For Lacan, the fundamental impasse of human desire is that it is the other's desire in both subjective and objective genitive: desire for the other, desire to be desired by the other, and, especially, desire for what the other desires. Envy and resentment are a constitutive component of human desire, as Augustine knew so well – recall the passage from his *Confessions*, often quoted by Lacan, which describes a baby jealous of his brother sucking the mother's breast: 'I myself have seen and known an infant to be jealous though it could not speak. It became pale, and cast bitter looks on its foster-brother.' Based on this insight, Jean-Pierre Dupuy<sup>17</sup> proposed a convincing critique of John Rawls's theory of justice: in the Rawls model of a just society, social inequalities are tolerated only in so far as they also help those at the bottom of the social ladder, and in so far as they are not based on inherited hierarchies, but on natural inequalities, which are considered contingent, not signifying merit.<sup>18</sup> What Rawls doesn't see is how such a society would create the conditions for an uncontrolled explosion of resentment: in it, I would know that my inferior status is fully justified, and would be deprived of blaming my failure on social injustice.

Rawls proposes a terrifying model of a society in which hierarchy is directly legitimized in natural properties, missing the simple lesson of a tale about a Slovene peasant who is told by a good witch: 'I will do to you whatever you want, but I warn you, I will do it to your neighbour twice!' The peasant thinks fast, then smiles a cunning smile and tells her: 'Take one of my eyes!' No wonder that even today's conservatives are ready to endorse Rawls's notion of justice: in December 2005, David Cameron, the newly elected leader of the British

Conservatives, signalled his intention to turn the Conservative Party into a defender of the underprivileged when he declared: 'I think the test of all our policies should be: what does it do for the people who have the least, the people on the bottom rung of the ladder?' Even Friedrich Hayek<sup>19</sup> was on the right track here when he pointed out that it is much easier to accept inequalities if one can claim that they result from an impersonal blind force. So the good thing about the 'irrationality' of success or failure in free-market capitalism (recall the old motif of the market as the modern version of an imponderable Fate) is that it allows me precisely to perceive my failure (or success) as 'undeserved', contingent. The very injustice of capitalism is a key feature that makes it tolerable to the majority (I can accept my failure much more easily if I know that it is not due to my inferior qualities, but to chance).

Lacan shares with Nietzsche and Freud the idea that justice as equality is founded on envy: our envy of the other who has what we do not have, and who enjoys it. The demand for justice is ultimately the demand that the excessive enjoyment of the other should be curtailed, so that everyone's access to enjoyment will be equal. The necessary outcome of this demand, of course, is asceticism: since it is not possible to impose equal enjoyment, what one *can* impose is an equally shared *prohibition*. However, one should not forget that today, in our allegedly permissive society, this asceticism assumes precisely the form of its opposite, of the generalized injunction 'Enjoy!' We are all under the spell of this injunction, with the result that our enjoyment is more hampered than ever – recall the yuppie who combines narcissistic self-fulfilment with the utterly ascetic discipline of jogging and eating health food. This, perhaps, is what Nietzsche had in mind with his notion of the Last Man – it is only today that we can



really discern the contours of the Last Man, in the guise of the prevailing hedonistic asceticism. In today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their damaging properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol . . . so it goes on. What about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while features like wife-beating remain out of sight)? Virtual reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product divested of its substance: it provides reality itself divested of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real – in the same way that decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing. Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything – on condition that it is stripped of the substance that makes it dangerous.

Jenny Holzer's famous truism 'Protect me from what I want' renders in a very precise way the fundamental ambiguity of the hysterical position. It can either be read as an ironic reference to the standard male chauvinist wisdom that a woman left to herself gets caught up in self-destructive fury – she needs to be protected from herself by benevolent male domination: 'Protect me from the excessive self-destructive desire in me that I myself am not able to dominate.' Or else it can be read in a more radical way, as pointing towards the fact that in today's patriarchal society, woman's desire is radically alienated: she desires what men expect her to desire, desires to be desired by men. In this case, 'Protect me from what I want'

means: 'Precisely when I seem to express my authentic innermost longing, "what I want" has already been imposed on me by the patriarchal order that tells me what to desire, so the first condition of my liberation is that I break the vicious cycle of my alienated desire and learn to formulate my desire in an autonomous way.' Was not this same ambiguity clearly discernible in the way the Western liberal gaze saw the Balkan war in the early 1990s? At first sight, the Western intervention may seem to have answered the implicit call of the Balkan nations: 'Protect us from what we want!' – from our self-destructive passions that have led to ethnic cleansing and gang rapes. What, however, if we read the imagined Balkan call 'Protect us from what we want!' in the second and opposite way? To accept fully this inconsistency of our desire, to accept fully that it is desire itself that sabotages its own liberation, is Lacan's bitter lesson.

This brings us back to the subject supposed to know, who is the hysteric's ultimate Other, the target of his or her constant provocations. What the hysteric expects from the subject supposed to know is to provide the solution that will resolve the hysterical deadlock, the final answer to 'Who am I? What do I really want?' This is the trap the analyst has to avoid: although, in the course of the treatment, he occupies the place of the one who is supposed to know, his entire strategy is to undermine this place and to make the patient aware that there is no guarantee for one's desire in the big Other.

## 3

## FROM *Che vuoi?* TO FANTASY: LACAN WITH EYES WIDE SHUT

And why the Other with a capital O? For a no doubt mad reason, in the same way as it is madness every time we are obliged to bring in signs supplementary to those given by language. Here the mad reason is the following. You are my wife – after all, what do you know about it? You are my master – in reality, are you so sure of that? What creates the founding value of those words is that what is aimed at in the message, as well as what is manifest in the pretence, is that the other is there qua absolute Other. Absolute, that is to say he is recognized, but is not known. In the same way, what constitutes pretence is that, in the end, you don't know whether it's a pretence or not. Essentially it is this unknown element in the alterity of the other which characterizes the speech relation on the level on which it is spoken to the other.<sup>20</sup>

This passage should surprise anyone acquainted with Lacan: it equates the big Other with the impenetrability of another subject beyond the 'wall of language', putting us at the opposite end of the predominant image Lacan presents of the big Other, that of the inexorable logic of an automatism that runs the show, so that when the subject speaks, he is, unbeknownst to himself, merely 'spoken', not master in his own house. What, then, is the big Other? Is it the anonymous mechanism of the symbolic order, or another subject in his or her radical alterity,

subject from whom I am for ever separated by the 'wall of language'? The easy way out of this predicament would have been to read in this discrepancy the sign of a shift in Lacan's development, from the early Lacan focused on the inter-subjective dialectic of recognition, to the later Lacan who puts forward the anonymous mechanism that regulates the interaction of subjects (in philosophical terms: from phenomenology to structuralism). While there is a limited truth in this solution, it obfuscates the central mystery of the big Other: the point at which the big Other, the anonymous symbolic order, gets subjectivized.

The exemplary case is divinity: is what we call 'God' not the big Other personified, addressing us as a person larger than life, a subject beyond all subjects? In a similar way, we talk about History asking something of us, of our Cause calling us to make the necessary sacrifice. What we get here is an uncanny subject who is not simply another human being, but the Third, the subject who stands above the interaction of real human individuals – and the terrifying enigma is, of course, what does this impenetrable subject want from us (theology refers to this dimension as that of *Deus absconditus*)? For Lacan, we do not have to evoke God to get a taste of this abyssal dimension; it is present in every human being:

man's desire is the Other's desire, in which the *de/of/* provides what grammarians call a 'subjective determination' – namely, that it is *qua/as/* Other that man desires . . . This is why the Other's question – that comes back to the subject from the place from which he expects an oracular reply – which takes some such form as 'Che vuoi?', 'What do you want?' is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire.<sup>21</sup>

Lacan's formula is ambiguous. 'It is *qua* Other that man desires' first means that man's desire is structured by the

'decentred' big Other, the symbolic order: what I desire is predetermined by the big Other, the symbolic space within which I dwell. Even when my desires are transgressive, even when they violate social norms, this very transgression relies on what it transgresses. Paul knows this very well when, in the famous passage in Romans, he describes how the law gives rise to the desire to violate it. Since the moral edifice of our societies still revolves around the Ten Commandments – the law that Paul referred to – the experience of our liberal-permissive society confirms Paul's insight: it continually demonstrates that our cherished human rights are, at their core, simply rights to break the Ten Commandments. 'The right to privacy' – the right to adultery, committed in secret, when no one sees me or has the right to meddle in my life. 'The right to pursue happiness and to possess private property' – the right to steal (to exploit others). 'Freedom of the press and of the expression of opinion' – the right to lie. 'The right of free citizens to possess weapons' – the right to kill. And, ultimately, 'freedom of religious belief' – the right to worship false gods.

There is, however, another meaning of 'man's desire is the Other's desire': the subject desires only in so far as it experiences the Other itself as desiring, as the site of an unfathomable desire, as if an opaque desire is emanating from him or her. Not only does the other address me with an enigmatic desire, it also confronts me with the fact that I myself do not know what I really desire, with the enigma of my own desire. For Lacan, who follows Freud here, this abyssal dimension of another human being – the abyss of the depth of another personality, its utter impenetrability – first found its full expression in Judaism, with its injunction to love your neighbour as yourself. For Freud as well as for Lacan, this injunction is deeply problematic, since it obfuscates the fact that, beneath

the neighbour as my mirror-image, the one who resembles me, with whom I can empathize, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of one about whom I finally know nothing. Can I really rely on him? Who is he? How can I be sure that his words are not a mere pretence? In contrast to the New Age attitude that ultimately reduces my neighbours to my mirror-images, or the means to the end of my self-realization (as is the case in Jungian psychology, where others around me finish up as externalizations/projections of the disavowed aspects of my own personality), Judaism opens up a tradition in which an alien traumatic kernel forever persists in my neighbour – the neighbour remains an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence that hystericizes me. The core of this presence, of course, is the neighbour's desire, an enigma not only for us, but also for the neighbour. For this reason, Lacan's 'Che vuoi?' does not simply ask: 'What do you want?' but rather: 'What's bugging you? What is it in you that makes you so unbearable not only for us, but also for yourself, that you yourself obviously do not control?'

The temptation to be resisted here is the ethical domestication of the neighbour – for example, what Emmanuel Levinas did with his notion of the neighbour as the abyssal point from which the call of ethical responsibility emanates. What Levinas obfuscates is the monstrosity of the neighbour, a monstrosity on account of which Lacan applies to the neighbour the term Thing (*das Ding*), used by Freud to designate the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability. One should hear in this term all the connotations of horror fiction: the neighbour is the (Evil) Thing that potentially lurks beneath every homely human face. Think about Stephen King's *The Shining*, in which the father, a modest failed writer, gradually turns into a killer beast who, with an evil grin, goes on to slaughter his entire family. No wonder,

then, that Judaism is also the religion of divine Law which regulates relations between people: this Law is strictly correlative to the emergence of the neighbour as inhuman Thing. That is to say, the ultimate function of the Law is not to enable us not to forget the neighbour, to retain our proximity to the neighbour, but, on the contrary, to keep the neighbour at a proper distance, to shield us against the monstrosity next door. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (trans. Stephen Mitchell, New York: Vintage, 1990):

There exists a creature that is perfectly harmless; when it passes before your eyes, you hardly notice it and immediately forget it again. But as soon as it somehow, invisibly, gets into your ears, it begins to develop, it hatches, and cases have been known where it has penetrated into the brain and flourished there devastatingly, like the pneumococci in dogs which gain entrance through the nose . . . This creature is Your Neighbor.

It is for this reason that finding oneself in the position of the beloved is so violent a discovery, even traumatic: being loved makes me feel directly the gap between what I am as a determinate being and the unfathomable X in me that causes love. Lacan's definition of love – 'Love is giving something one doesn't have . . .' – has to be supplemented with ' . . . to someone who doesn't want it.' Is this not confirmed by our most elementary experience when somebody unexpectedly declares passionate love to us? The first reaction, preceding the possible positive reply, is that something obscene, intrusive, is being forced upon us. In the middle of Guillermo Arriaga's *21 Grams*, Paul, who is dying of a weak heart, gently declares his love to Cristina, who is traumatized by the recent death of her husband and two young children. The next time they meet, Cristina bursts out into a complaint about the violent nature of declaring love:

You know, you kept me thinking all day. I haven't spoken to anyone for months and I barely know you and I already need to talk to you . . . And there's something the more I think about the less I understand: why the hell did you tell me you liked me? Answer me, because I didn't like you saying that at all. You can't just walk up to a woman you barely know and tell her you like her. Y-o-u-c-a-n't. You don't know what she's going through, what she's feeling. I'm not married, you know. I'm not anything in this world. I'm just not anything.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Cristina looks at Paul, raises her hands and desperately starts to kiss him on the mouth; so it is not that she did not like him and did not desire carnal contact. The problem for her was, on the contrary, that she did want it – the point of her complaint was: What right did he have to stir up her desire? It is from this abyss of the Other as Thing that we can understand what Lacan means by what he calls the 'founding word', statements that confer on a person some symbolic title and make him or her what they are proclaimed to be, constituting their symbolic identity: 'You are my wife, my master . . .' This notion is usually perceived as an echo of the theory of performatives, of speech acts that accomplish in the very act of their enunciation the state of affairs that they declare (when I say 'This meeting is closed,' I thereby effectively close the meeting).<sup>23</sup> However, it is clear from the passage that opens this chapter that Lacan aims at something more. Performatives are, at their most fundamental, acts of symbolic trust and engagement. When I tell someone 'You are my master!' I oblige myself to treat him in a certain way and, in the same move, I oblige him to treat me in a certain way. Lacan's point is that we need this recourse to performativity, to the symbolic engagement, precisely and only in so far as the other whom we confront is not only my mirror-double, someone like me, but also the elusive absolute Other who ultimately remains an unfathomable mystery. The main function

of the symbolic order with its laws and obligations is to render our co-existence with others minimally bearable: a Third has to step in between me and my neighbours so that our relations do not explode in murderous violence.

Back in the 1960s, in the era of 'structuralism' (theories based on the notion that all human activity is regulated by unconscious symbolic mechanisms), Louis Althusser launched the notorious formula of 'theoretical anti-humanism', allowing, demanding even, that it be supplemented by practical humanism. In our practice we should act as humanists, respecting others, treating them as free persons with full dignity, as creators of their world. However, in theory we should always bear in mind that humanism is an ideology, the way we spontaneously experience our predicament, and that a true knowledge of humans and their history should treat individuals not as autonomous subjects, but as elements in a structure that follows its own laws. In contrast to Althusser, Lacan advocates that we recognize *practical anti-humanism*, an ethics that goes beyond the dimension of what Nietzsche called 'human, all too human', and confronts the inhuman core of humanity. This means an ethics that fearlessly stands up to the latent monstrosity of being human, the diabolic dimension that erupted in the phenomena broadly covered by the label 'Auschwitz'.

Perhaps the best way to describe the status of this inhuman dimension of the neighbour is with reference to Kant's philosophy. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant introduced a key distinction between negative and indefinite judgement: the positive statement 'the soul is mortal' can be negated in two ways. We can either deny a predicate ('the soul is not mortal'), or affirm a non-predicate ('the soul is non-mortal'). The difference is exactly the same as the one, known to every reader of Stephen King, between 'he is not dead' and 'he is undead'.

The indefinite judgement opens up a third domain that undermines the distinction between dead and non-dead (alive): the 'undead' are neither alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous 'living dead'. And the same goes for 'inhuman': 'he is not human' is not the same as 'he is inhuman'. 'He is not human' means simply that he is external to humanity, animal or divine, while 'he is inhuman' means something thoroughly different, namely the fact that he is neither human nor inhuman, but marked by a terrifying excess which, although it negates what we understand as humanity, is inherent to being human. And perhaps one should risk the hypothesis that this is what changes with the Kantian philosophical revolution: in the pre-Kantian universe, humans were simply humans, beings of reason, fighting the excesses of animal lusts and divine madness, while with Kant, the excess to be fought is immanent and concerns the very core of subjectivity itself. (Which is why, in German Idealism, the metaphor for the core of subjectivity is Night, the 'Night of the World', in contrast to the Enlightenment notion of the Light of Reason fighting the darkness around.) In the pre-Kantian universe, when a hero goes mad he is deprived of his humanity, and animal passions or divine madness take over. With Kant, madness signals the unconstrained explosion of the very core of a human being.

How are we to avoid the traumatic impact of being too directly exposed to this terrifying abyss of the Other? How are we to cope with that hazardous encounter with the Other's desire? For Lacan, fantasy provides an answer to the enigma of the Other's desire. The first thing to note about fantasy is that it literally teaches us how to desire: fantasy does not mean that when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot get it in reality I fantasize about eating it; the problem is rather, how do I know that I desire a strawberry cake in the first place? This is

what fantasy tells me. This role of fantasy hinges on the deadlock in our sexuality designated by Lacan in his paradoxical statement 'There is no sexual relationship' – there is no universal guarantee of a harmonious sexual relationship with one's partner. Every subject has to invent a fantasy of his or her own, a 'private' formula for the sexual relationship – the relationship with a woman is possible only inasmuch as the partner adheres to this formula.

A couple of years ago, Slovene feminists raised a hue and cry against a poster for sun lotion issued by a large cosmetics factory depicting a number of suntanned female rears clad in clinging swimsuits and accompanied by the slogan 'To each her own factor.' Of course, this ad was based on a tacky double entendre: the slogan ostensibly referred to the sun lotion, which was offered to customers with different sun factors so as to suit different skin types; however, its entire effect was based on its obvious male-chauvinist reading: 'Each woman can be had, if only the man knows her factor, her specific catalyst, what turns her on!' The Freudian viewpoint is that each subject, female or male, possesses such a 'factor' which regulates her or his desire: 'a woman, viewed from behind, on her hands and knees' was the 'factor' for Wolfman, Freud's most famous patient; a statuesque woman without pubic hair was John Ruskin's factor. There is nothing uplifting about our awareness of this factor: it is uncanny, horrifying even, since it somehow dispossesses the subject, reducing her or him to a puppet-like level beyond dignity and freedom.

However, the thing to add at once is that the desire staged in fantasy is not the subject's own, but the *other's* desire, the desire of those around me with whom I interact: fantasy, the phantasmatic scene or scenario, is an answer to: 'You're saying this, but *what is it that you actually want by saying it?*'

The original question of desire is not directly 'What do I want?', but 'What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for those others?' A small child is embedded in a complex network of relations, he serves as a kind of catalyst and battlefield for the desires of those around him. His father, mother, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, fight their battles in his name; the mother sends a message to the father through her care for the son. While being well aware of this role, the child cannot fathom just what kind of object he is for these others, just what kind of games they are playing with him. Fantasy provides an answer to this enigma: at its most fundamental, fantasy tells me what I am for my others. This intersubjective character of fantasy is discernible even in the most elementary cases, like the one, reported by Freud, of his little daughter fantasizing about eating a strawberry cake. What we have here is by no means the simple case of the direct hallucinatory satisfaction of a desire (she wanted a cake, didn't get it, so she fantasized about it). The crucial feature is that, while tucking into a strawberry cake, the little girl noticed how her parents were deeply satisfied by the sight of her enjoyment. What the fantasy of eating a strawberry cake was really about was her attempt to form an identity (of the one who fully enjoys eating a cake given by the parents) that would satisfy her parents and make her the object of their desire.

Since sexuality is the domain in which we get closest to the intimacy of another human being, totally exposing ourselves to him or her, sexual enjoyment is real for Lacan: something traumatic in its breathtaking intensity, yet impossible in the sense that we cannot ever make sense of it. This is why a sexual relation, in order to function, has to be screened through some fantasy. Recall the encounter between Sarah Miles and her illicit lover, the English officer, in David Lean's

*Ryan's Daughter*: the depiction of the sexual act in the midst of the forest, with waterfall sounds supposed to render their subdued passion, cannot but strike us today as a mishmash of clichés. However, the role of the absurd sound accompaniment is profoundly ambiguous: by way of emphasizing the ecstasy of the sexual act, these sounds in a way dematerialize the act and rid us of the weight of its presence. A small mental experiment makes this point clear: let us imagine that, in the midst of such a pathetic rendering of the sexual act, the music is suddenly muted, and all that remains are quick, snappy gestures, their painful silence interrupted by the occasional rustle or groan, compelling us to confront the inert presence of the sexual act. In short, the paradox of the scene from *Ryan's Daughter* is that the waterfall sound itself functions as the phantasmatic screen that filters out the Real of the sexual act.

The singing of the International in *Reds* plays exactly the same role as the waterfall sound in *Ryan's Daughter*: the role of the phantasmatic screen that enables us to sustain the Real of the sexual act. *Reds* integrates the October Revolution – for Hollywood the most traumatic historical event – into the Hollywood universe by staging it as the metaphorical background for the sexual act between the movie's main characters, John Reed (played by Warren Beatty himself) and his lover (Diane Keaton). In the film, the October Revolution takes place immediately after a crisis in their relationship. By delivering a fierce revolutionary oration to the turbulent crowd, Beatty mesmerizes Keaton; the two exchange desirous glances, and the cries of the crowd serve as a metaphor for the rebirth of passion. The key mythical scenes of the revolution (street demonstrations, the storming of the Winter Palace) alternate with the depiction of the couple's lovemaking, against the background of the crowd singing the International. The mass scenes function as vulgar metaphors for the sexual

act: when the black mass approaches and encircles the phallic railway, is this not a metaphor for Keaton who, in the sexual act, plays the active role, on top of Beatty? Here we have the exact opposite of that Soviet socialist realism in which lovers would experience their love as a contribution to the struggle for socialism, making a vow to sacrifice all their private pleasures for the cause of the revolution and to drown themselves in the masses: in *Reds*, on the contrary, revolution itself appears as a metaphor for the successful sexual encounter.

The common wisdom, usually attributed to psychoanalysis, about sexuality as the universal hidden referent of every activity – whatever we do, we are 'thinking about *that*' – is here inverted: it is real sex itself which, in order to be palatable, must be filtered through the asexual screen of the October Revolution. Instead of the proverbial 'Close your eyes and think of England!', we have here 'Close your eyes and think of the October Revolution!' The logic is the same as that of a native American tribe whose members have discovered that all dreams have some hidden sexual meaning – all except the overtly sexual ones: these are just where one has to look for another meaning. (In his recently discovered secret diaries, Wittgenstein reports that, while masturbating at the Front during World War I, he was thinking about mathematical problems.) And it is also the same in reality, with so-called real sex: it also needs some phantasmatic screen. Any contact with a real, flesh-and-blood other, any sexual pleasure that we find in touching another human being, is not something evident, but something inherently traumatic, and can be sustained only in so far as this other enters the subject's fantasy frame.

What, then, is fantasy at its most elementary? The ontological paradox, scandal even, of fantasy resides in the fact that it subverts the standard opposition of 'subjective' and 'objective': of course, fantasy is by definition not objective

(referring to something that exists independently of the subject's perceptions); however, it is also not subjective (something that belongs to the subject's consciously experienced intuitions, the product of his or her imagination). Fantasy rather belongs to the 'bizarre category of the objectively subjective – the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don't seem that way to you'.<sup>24</sup> When, for example, we claim that someone who is consciously well disposed towards Jews nonetheless harbours profound anti-Semitic prejudices he is not consciously aware of, do we not claim that (in so far as these prejudices do not render the way Jews really are, but the way they appear to him) *he is not aware how Jews really seem to him?*

In March 2003, Donald Rumsfeld engaged in a brief bout of amateur philosophizing about the relationship between the known and the unknown: 'There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.' What he forgot to add was the crucial fourth term: the 'unknown knowns', things we don't know that we know – which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the 'knowledge that doesn't know itself', as Lacan used to say, the core of which is fantasy. If Rumsfeld thinks that the main dangers in the confrontation with Iraq are the 'unknown unknowns', the threats from Saddam or his successors about which we do not even suspect what they may be, what we should say in reply is that the main dangers are, on the contrary, the 'unknown knowns', the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves, but which nonetheless determine our acts and feelings.

This is also one of the ways to specify the meaning of

Lacan's claim that the subject is always 'decentred'. His point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by objective unconscious mechanisms that are decentred with regard to my self-experience and, as such, beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but, rather, something much more unsettling: I am deprived of even my most intimate subjective experience, the way things 'really seem to me', deprived of the fundamental fantasy that constitutes and guarantees the core of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it.

According to the standard view, the dimension that is constitutive of subjectivity is that of phenomenal (self-)experience: I am a subject the moment I can say to myself: 'No matter what unknown mechanism governs my acts, perceptions, and thoughts, nobody can take from me what I am seeing and feeling right now.' Say, when I am passionately in love, and a biochemist informs me that all my intense sentiments are just the result of biochemical processes in my body, I can answer by holding onto the appearance: 'All that you're saying may be true, but, nonetheless, nothing can take from me the intensity of the passion that I am experiencing now . . .' Lacan's point, however, is that the psychoanalyst is the one who, precisely, *can* take this away from the subject: the analyst's ultimate aim is to deprive the subject of the very fundamental fantasy that regulates the universe of his (self-)experience. The Freudian subject of the unconscious emerges only when a key aspect of the subject's (self-)experience (his fundamental fantasy) becomes inaccessible to him, primordially repressed. At its most radical, the unconscious is the inaccessible phenomenon, not the objective mechanisms that regulate my phenomenal experience. So, in contrast to the commonplace that we are dealing with a subject the moment an entity displays signs of inner life (of a phantasmatic experience that



cannot be reduced to external behaviour), one should claim that what characterizes human subjectivity proper is, rather, the gap that separates the two, namely the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject. It is this inaccessibility that makes the subject 'empty', as Lacan put it.

We thus obtain a relationship that totally subverts the standard notion of the subject who directly experiences himself via his inner states: a strange relationship between the empty, non-phenomenal subject and the phenomena that remain inaccessible to the subject. In other words, psychoanalysis allows us to formulate a paradoxical phenomenology without a subject – phenomena arise that are not phenomena *of* a subject, appearing *to* a subject. This does not mean that the subject is not involved here – it is but precisely in the mode of *exclusion*, as divided, as the agency that is not able to assume the very core of his or her inner experience.

This paradoxical status of fantasy brings us to the ultimate point of the irreconcilable difference between psychoanalysis and feminism, that of rape (and the masochistic fantasies sustaining it). For standard feminism, at least, it is an axiom that rape is a violence imposed from without: even if a woman fantasizes about being raped or brutally mistreated, this is either a male fantasy about women, or a woman does it in so far as she has 'internalized' the patriarchal libidinal economy and endorsed her victimization – the underlying idea is that the moment we recognize this fact of daydreaming about rape, we open the door to male-chauvinist platitudes about how, in being raped, women only get what they secretly wanted, and how their shock and fear only express the fact that they were not honest enough to acknowledge their desire. So the moment one mentions that a woman may fantasize about being raped, one hears it objected that 'This

like saying that Jews fantasize about being gassed in the camps, or that African-Americans fantasize about being lynched!' From this perspective, the split hysterical position of the woman (complaining about being sexually misused and exploited while simultaneously desiring it and provoking the man to seduce her) is secondary, while, for Freud, this split is primary, constitutive of subjectivity.

The practical conclusion from this is that while (some) women really may daydream about being raped, this fact not only in no way legitimizes the actual rape, but renders it all the more violent. Let us take two women: the first is liberated and assertive, active; the other daydreams in secret about being brutalized, even raped, by her partner. The crucial point is that, if both of them are raped, the rape will be much more traumatic for the second woman, *on account of the very fact that it will realize in 'external' social reality the 'stuff of her dreams'*. There is a gap that for ever separates the phantasmatic kernel of the subject's being from the more superficial modes of his or her symbolic or imaginary identifications. It is never possible for me to fully assume (in the sense of symbolic integration) the phantasmatic kernel of my being: when I venture too close, what occurs is what Lacan calls the *aphanisis* (the self-obliteration) of the subject: the subject loses his/her symbolic consistency, it disintegrates. And perhaps the forced actualization in social reality itself of the phantasmatic kernel of my being is the worst, most humiliating kind of violence, a violence that undermines the very basis of my identity (of my self-image).<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the problem with rape, in Freud's view, is that it has such a traumatic impact not simply because it is a case of brutal external violence, but also because it touches on something disavowed in the victim herself. So, when Freud writes: 'If what [subjects] long for most intensely in their phantasies is presented to them in reality,

they none the less flee from it,<sup>26</sup> his point is that this occurs not merely because of censorship, but rather because the core of our fantasy is unbearable to us.

A couple of years ago, a charming commercial for a beer was shown on British TV. It started with the familiar fairy tale encounter: a girl is walking by a stream, sees a frog, takes it gently onto her lap, kisses it, and of course the ugly frog is transformed into a beautiful young man. However, the story isn't over: the young man casts a hungry glance at the girl, draws her towards him, kisses her and she turns into a bottle of beer that the man holds triumphantly in his hand. For the woman, the point is that her love and affection (signalled by the kiss) turn a frog into a beautiful man, a full phallic presence; for the man, it is to reduce the woman to a partial object, the cause of his desire. On account of this asymmetry, there is no sexual relationship: we have either a woman with a frog or a man with a bottle of beer. What we can never obtain is the natural couple of the beautiful woman and man: the phantasmatic counterpart of this ideal couple would have been the figure of *a frog embracing a bottle of beer* – an incongruous image which, instead of guaranteeing the harmony of the sexual relationship, highlights its ridiculous discord.<sup>27</sup> This opens up the possibility of undermining the hold a fantasy exerts over us through our very over-identification with it: by way of embracing simultaneously, within the same space, the multitude of inconsistent phantasmatic elements. That is to say, each of the two subjects is involved in his or her own subjective fantasizing – the girl fantasizes about the frog who is really a young man, the man about the girl who is really a bottle of beer. What modern art and writing oppose to this is not objective reality but the 'objectively subjective' underlying fantasy which the two subjects can never enact, a Magrillesque painting of a frog astride a bottle of beer, with

the title 'A man and a woman' or 'The ideal couple'. (The association with the famous surrealist 'dead donkey on a piano' is here fully justified, since the surrealists also practised such over-identification with incongruous fantasies.) And is this not the ethical duty of today's artist – to confront us with the frog embracing the bottle of beer when we daydream of embracing our beloved? In other words, to stage fantasies that are radically desubjectivized, that cannot ever be enacted by the subject?

This brings us to a further crucial complication: if what we experience as 'reality' is structured by fantasy, and if fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real, then *reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*. In the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality, and it is in dreams that we encounter the traumatic Real – it is not that dreams are for those who cannot endure reality, reality itself is for those who cannot endure (the Real that announces itself in) their dreams. This is the lesson Lacan draws from the famous dream reported by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, dreamt by the father who falls asleep while keeping watch over his son's coffin. In this dream, his dead son appears to him, pronouncing the terrible appeal: 'Father, can't you see that I am burning?' When the father wakes up, he discovers that the cloth on his son's coffin has caught fire, ignited by a falling candle. So why did the father wake up? Was it because the smell of the smoke got too strong, so that it was no longer possible to prolong his sleep by containing the event in an improvised dream? Lacan proposes a much more interesting reading:

If the function of the dream is to prolong sleep, if the dream, after all, may come so near to the reality that causes it, can we not say that it might correspond to this reality without emerging from sleep? After

all, there is such a thing as somnambulistic activity. The question that arises, and which indeed all Freud's previous indications allow us here to produce, is – *What is it that wakes the sleeper?* Is it not, in the dream, another reality? – the reality that Freud describes thus: *Dass das Kind an seinem Bette steht*, that the child is near his bed, *ihn am Arme fasst*, takes him by the arm and whispers to him reproachfully, *und ihm vorwurfsvoll zuraunt: Vater, siehst du denn nicht*, Father, can't you see, *dass ich verbrenne*, that I am burning?

Is there not more reality in this message than in the noise by which the father also identifies the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door? Is not the missed reality that caused the death of the child expressed in these words?<sup>28</sup>

So it was not the intrusion from external reality that awakened the unfortunate father, but the unbearably traumatic character of what he encountered in the dream – in so far as 'dreaming' means fantasizing in order to avoid confronting the Real, the father literally woke up so that he could go on dreaming. The scenario was as follows: when the smoke disturbed his sleep, the father quickly constructed a dream that incorporated the disturbing element (smoke–fire) in order to prolong his sleep; however, what he confronted in the dream was a trauma (of his responsibility for the son's death) much stronger than reality, so he awakened into reality in order to avoid the Real.

In contemporary art, we often encounter brutal attempts to 'return to the real', to remind the spectator (or reader) that he is perceiving a fiction, to awaken him from the sweet dream. This gesture has two main forms that, although opposed, amount to the same effect. In literature or cinema, there are (especially in postmodern texts) self-reflexive reminders that what we are watching is a mere fiction, as when the actors on screen address us directly as spectators, thus ruining the illusion of the autonomous space of the narrative fiction, or the writer directly intervenes in the narrative through ironic

comments. In theatre, there are occasional brutal events that awaken us to the reality of the stage (like slaughtering a chicken on set). Instead of conferring on these gestures a kind of Brechtian dignity, perceiving them as versions of alienation, one should rather denounce them for what they are: the exact opposite of what they claim to be – *escapes from the Real*, desperate attempts to avoid the real of the illusion itself, the Real that emerges in the guise of an illusory spectacle.

What we confront here is the fundamental ambiguity of the notion of fantasy: while fantasy is the screen that protects us from the encounter with the Real, fantasy itself, at its most fundamental – what Freud called the 'fundamental fantasy', which provides the most elementary coordinates of the subject's capacity to desire – cannot ever be subjectivized, and has to remain repressed in order to function. In Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* recall the apparently vulgar conclusion of the film. After Tom Cruise confesses his night's adventure to Nicole Kidman and they are both confronted with the excess of their fantasizing, Kidman – upon ascertaining that now they are fully awake, back into the day, and that, if not for ever, at least for a long time, they will stay there, keeping the fantasy at bay – tells him that they must do something as soon as possible. 'What?' he asks, and her answer is: 'Fuck.' End of the film, the final credits roll. The nature of the *passage à l'acte* ('passage to the act') as the false exit, the way to avoid confronting the horror of the phantasmatic netherworld, was never so bluntly stated in a film: far from providing them with a real-life bodily satisfaction that will supersede empty fantasizing, the passage to the act is presented as a stopgap, as a desperate preventive measure aimed at keeping at bay the spectral netherworld of fantasies. It is as if her message is 'Let's fuck right now, and then we can stifle our teeming fantasies, before they overwhelm us again.' Lacan's quip about

awakening into reality as an escape from the real encountered in the dream holds true more aptly than anywhere else of the sexual act itself: we do not dream about fucking when we are not able to do it; rather we fuck in order to escape and quell the exorbitant power of the dream that would otherwise overwhelm us. For Lacan, the ultimate ethical task is that of the true awakening: not only from sleep, but from the spell of fantasy that controls us even more when we are awake.

## 4

## TROUBLES WITH THE REAL: LACAN AS A VIEWER OF *ALIEN*

Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man, namely the *hommelette*, or the lamella.

The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something – I will tell you shortly why – that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal – because it survives any division, and scissiparous intervention. And it can turn around.

Well! This is not very reassuring. But suppose it comes and envelops your face while you are quietly asleep . . .

I can't see how we would not join battle with a being capable of these properties. But it would not be a very convenient battle. This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ – I can give you more details as to its zoological place – is the libido.

It is the libido, qua pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction. And it is of this that all the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives, the equivalents.<sup>29</sup>

Every word has a weight here, in this deceptively poetic description of the mythic creature called by Lacan the 'lamella' (which can vaguely be translated as 'manlet', a condensation of 'man' and 'omelet'), an organ that gives body to libido. Lacan imagines the lamella as a version of what Freud called 'partial object': a weird organ that is magically autonomous, surviving without the body whose organ it should have been, like the hand that wanders around alone in early Surrealist films, or the smile in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that persists alone, even when the Cheshire Cat's body is no longer present: "All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. "Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!" The lamella is an entity of pure surface, without the density of a substance, an infinitely plastic object that can incessantly change its form, and even transpose itself from one medium to another: imagine a 'something' that is first heard as a shrill sound, and then pops up as a monstrously distorted body. A lamella is indivisible, indestructible, and immortal – more precisely, undead in the sense this term has in horror fiction: not the sublime immortality of the spirit, but the obscene immortality of the 'living dead' which, after every annihilation, reconstitute themselves and shamle on. As Lacan puts it, the lamella does not exist, it *insists*: it is unreal, an entity of pure semblance, a multiplicity of appearances that seem to enfold a central void – its status is purely phantasmatic. This blind, indestructible insistence of the libido is what Freud called the 'death drive', and here we should bear in mind that 'death drive' is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life,

an 'undead' urge that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, generation and corruption. Freud equates the death drive with the so-called 'compulsion-to-repeat', an uncanny urge to repeat painful past experiences that seems to outgrow the natural limitations of the organism affected by it and to persist even beyond the organism's death. The link between death drive and partial object is clearly portrayed in Andersen's fairy tale 'The Red Shoes', the story of a girl who puts on magic shoes that move on their own and compel her to dance on and on. The shoes stand for the girl's unconditional drive, which persists, ignoring all human limitations, so that the only way the poor girl can get rid of them is to cut off her legs.

For any avid cinema-goer, it is hard to avoid the feeling that one has seen all this before. Lacan's description not only reminds one of the nightmare creatures in horror movies; more specifically, it can be read, point by point, as describing a movie shot more than a decade after he wrote those words, Ridley Scott's *Alien*. The monstrous alien in the film so closely resembles Lacan's lamella that it is as if Lacan somehow saw the film before it was even made. Everything Lacan talks about is there: the monster appears indestructible; if you cut it into pieces, it merely multiplies; it is something extra-flat that all of a sudden flies up and envelops your face; with infinite plasticity, it can morph itself into a multitude of shapes; in it, pure evil animality overlaps with machinic blind insistence. The alien is libido as pure life, indestructible and immortal. To quote Stephen Mulhall:

The alien's form of life is (just, merely, simply) life, life as such: it is not so much a particular species as the essence of what it means to be a species, to be a creature, a natural being – it is Nature incarnate or sublimed, a nightmare embodiment of the natural realm understood as utterly subordinate to, utterly exhausted by, the twinned Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond representation as it is in its monstrosity, the lamella nonetheless remains within the domain of the Imaginary, although as a kind of image that endeavours to stretch the imagination to the very boundary of the unrepresentable. The lamella inhabits the intersection of the Imaginary and the Real: it stands for the Real in its most terrifying imaginary dimension, as the primordial abyss that swallows everything, dissolving all identities – a figure well known in literature in its multiple guises, from E. A. Poe's maelstrom and Kurtz's 'horror' at the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, to Pip from Melville's *Moby-Dick* who, cast to the bottom of the ocean, experiences the demon God:

Carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes . . . Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke to it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.

This Real of the lamella is to be opposed to the scientific mode of the Real. For those used to dismissing Lacan as just another 'postmodern' relativist, this may come as a surprise: Lacan is resolutely anti-postmodern, opposed to any notion of science as just another story we are telling ourselves about ourselves, a narrative whose apparent supremacy over other – mythic, artistic – narratives is grounded only in the historically contingent Western 'regime of truth' (to use a term rendered popular by Michel Foucault). For Lacan, the problem is that this scientific Real

is precisely what we completely lack. We are totally separated from it . . . We shall never totally clarify the relationship between those beings-of-language [*parletres*] that we sexuate as man and those beings-of-language that we sexuate as woman.<sup>31</sup>

The idea that sustains this passage is much more complex than it may appear, so we have to be very precise here. What is it that separates us humans from the 'real Real' targeted by science, what makes it inaccessible to us? It is neither the cobweb of the Imaginary (illusions, misperceptions), which distorts what we perceive, nor the 'wall of language', the symbolic network through which we relate to reality, but another Real. This Real is for Lacan the Real inscribed in the very core of human sexuality: 'There is no sexual relationship.' Human sexuality is marked by an irreducible failure, sexual difference is the antagonism of the two sexual positions between which there is no common denominator, enjoyment can be gained only against the background of a fundamental loss. The myth of the lamella presents the phantasmatic entity that gives body to what a living being loses when it enters the (symbolically regulated) regime of sexual difference. Since one of the Freudian names for this loss is 'castration', one can also say that the lamella is a kind of positive obverse of castration: the non-castrated remainder, the indestructible partial object cut off from the living body caught in sexual difference.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the Lacanian Real is a much more complex category than the idea of a fixed trans-historical 'hard core' that forever eludes symbolization; it has nothing to do with what the German Idealist Immanuel Kant called the 'Thing-in-itself', reality the way it is out there, independently of us, prior to being skewed by our perceptions: '. . . this notion is not at all Kantian. I even insist on this. If there is a notion of the real, it is extremely complex and, because of this, incomprehensible, it cannot be comprehended in a way that would make an All out of it.'<sup>32</sup> How, then, are we to find our way and introduce some clarity into this conundrum of the Reals? Let us begin with Freud's dream of

Irma's injection, selected by him to open his magnum opus *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

The 'latent thought' this dream expresses is Freud's feeling of guilt and responsibility for the failure of his treatment of Irma, a young patient of his. The dream's first part, Freud's confrontation with Irma, ends with him looking deep into her throat; what he sees there renders the Real in the guise of the primordial flesh, the palpitation of the life substance as the Thing itself, in its loathsome dimension of a cancerous growth. The dream's second part, the comic conversation among the three doctors, Freud's friends, who offer different excuses for the failure of the treatment, ends up with a chemical formula (for trimethylamine) writ large. Each part thus concludes with a figuration of the Real: first, the real of the lamella, of the terrifying formless Thing; then the scientific Real, the real of a formula that expresses nature's automatic and senseless functioning. The difference hinges on the different starting point: if we start with the Imaginary (the mirror-confrontation of Freud and Irma), we get the Real in its imaginary dimension, the horrifying primordial image that cancels the imagery itself; if we start with the Symbolic (the exchange of arguments between the three doctors), we get language deprived of the wealth of its human sense, transformed into the Real of a meaningless formula.

But this is not the end of the story. To these two Reals, we have to add a third, that of a mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable 'something' that makes an ordinary object sublime – what Lacan called *l'objet petit a* (the object small a). There is, in science fiction horror movies, a figure of the alien opposed to that of the unrepresentable and all-devouring monster of Scott's *Alien*, a figure immortalized in a whole series of films from the 1950s whose most famous representative is *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. An ordinary American is

driving somewhere in the half-abandoned countryside when his car breaks down and he goes for help to the closest small town. Soon he notices that something strange is going on in the town – people are behaving in a strange way, as if they are not fully themselves. It becomes clear to him that the town has been taken over by aliens who have penetrated and colonized human bodies, controlling them from within: although the aliens look and act exactly like humans, there is as a rule a tiny detail that betrays their true nature (a strange glint in their eyes; too much skin between their fingers or between their ears and heads). This detail is the Lacanian *objet petit a*, a tiny feature whose presence magically transubstantiates its bearer into an alien. In contrast to Scott's alien, which is totally different from humans, the difference here is minimal, barely perceptible. Are we not dealing with the same in our everyday racism? Although we are ready to accept the Jewish, Arab, Oriental other, there is some detail that bothers us in the West: the way they accentuate a certain word, the way they count money, the way they laugh. This tiny feature renders them aliens, no matter how they try to behave like us.

We have to distinguish here between *l'objet petit a* as the cause of desire and the object of desire: while the object of desire is simply the desired object, the cause of desire is the feature on whose account we desire the object, some detail or tic of which we are usually unaware, and sometimes even misperceive it as an obstacle, in spite of which we desire the object. This distinction throws a new light on Freud's thesis that a melancholic is not aware of what he has lost in the lost object. The melancholic is not primarily the subject fixated on the lost object, unable to perform the work of mourning on it; he is, rather, the subject who possesses the object, but has lost his desire for it, because the cause that made him desire this object has retreated and lost its efficiency. Far from

accentuating to the extreme the situation of frustrated desire, melancholy occurs when we finally get the desired object, but are disappointed with it.

In this precise sense, melancholy (disappointment with all positive, empirical objects, none of which can satisfy our desire) is the beginning of philosophy. A person who, all his life, has been used to living in a certain city and is finally compelled to move elsewhere is of course saddened by the prospect of being thrown into a new environment – but what is it that makes him sad? It is not the prospect of leaving the place that was for years his home, but the much more subtle fear of losing his attachment to this place. What makes me sad is my creeping awareness that, sooner or later – sooner than I am ready to admit – I will integrate myself into a new community, forgetting and forgotten by the place that now means so much to me. In short, what makes me sad is the awareness that I will lose my desire for (what is now) my home.

The status of this object-cause of desire is that of an anamorphosis. A part of the picture which, looked at from straight in front, appears as a meaningless blotch takes on the contours of a known object when we shift our position and look at the picture from an angle. Lacan's point is even more radical: the object-cause of desire is something that, viewed from in front, is nothing at all, just a void: it acquires the contours of something only when viewed at a slant. The most beautiful instance in literature occurs when, in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Bushy tries to comfort the Queen, worried about the unfortunate King on a military campaign:

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows,  
Which shows like grief itself, but is not so;  
For sorrow's eye, glazed with blinding tears,  
Divides one thing entire to many objects;  
Like perspectives, which rightly gazed upon

Show nothing but confusion, eyed awry  
Distinguish form: so your sweet majesty,  
Looking awry upon your lord's departure,  
Find shapes of grief, more than himself, to wail;  
Which, look'd on as it is, is nought but shadows  
Of what it is not.

(*Richard II*, II, ii, 14–24)

This is *objet a*: an entity that has no substantial consistency, which in itself is 'nothing but confusion', and which acquires a definite shape only when looked at from a standpoint slanted by the subject's desires and fears – as such, as a mere 'shadow of what it is not'. *Objet a* is the strange object that is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself in the field of objects, in the guise of a blotch that takes shape only when part of this field is anamorphically distorted by the subject's desire. Let us not forget that the most famous anamorphosis in the history of painting, Holbein's *Ambassadors*, concerns death: when we look from the proper lateral angle at the anamorphically extended blotch in the lower part of the painting, set amongst objects of human vanity, it reveals itself as a skull. Bushy's consolation can be read together with Richard's later monologue, in which he locates Death in the void in the middle of the hollow royal crown, as the secret master-jester who lets us play the king and enjoy our authority, only to pierce our swollen shape with a needle and reduce us to nothing:

for within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,  
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
As if this flesh which walls about our life,



Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus  
Comes at the last and with a little pin  
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!

It is usually said that Richard finds it difficult to accept the distinction between 'the king's two bodies', and to learn to live as a common human being divested of the royal charisma. However, the lesson of the play is that this operation, simple and elementary as it appears to be, is ultimately impossible to perform. To put it succinctly, Richard starts to perceive his kingship as an effect of anamorphosis, a 'shadow of nothing'; however, getting rid of this insubstantial spectre does not leave us with the simple reality of what we effectively are – it is as if one cannot simply counterpose the anamorphosis of charisma and substantial reality, as if all reality is an effect of anamorphosis, a 'shadow of nothing', and what we get if we look at it straight on is a chaotic nothing. So what we get after we are stripped of symbolic identifications, 'demonarchized', is nothing. The 'Death' figure in the middle of the crown is not simply death, but the subject himself reduced to the void, Richard's position when, confronted with Henry's demand to resign the crown, he basically replies: 'I know no "I" to do it!'

HENRY BOLINGBROKE      Are you contented to resign the crown?

KING RICHARD II      Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be;  
Therefore no 'no,' for I resign to thee.  
Now, mark me how I will undo myself;  
I give this heavy weight from off my head  
And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand . . .

(*Richard II*, VI.i. 200–05)

This apparently confused reply to Bolingbroke's question relies on a complex reasoning, based on a brilliant exercise in

what Lacan called *lalangue* (a neologism that some translate as 'llanguage': language as the space of illicit pleasures that defy any normativity: the chaotic multitude of homonymies, word-plays, 'irregular' metaphoric links and resonances). It plays with three different ways to write (and understand) what we pronounce as 'Ay, no; no, ay'. Richard's words can be read simply as a redoubled refusal, accompanied with the exclamatory 'ay'. In so far as the most common meaning of 'ay' in Shakespeare is 'yes', they can be read as signalling oscillation: 'Yes, no; no, yes'. Or, if we understand 'ay' as 'I' they can also be read as a refusal, but this time based on a denial of the very existence of the I, a condensed form of 'I (say) no (because there is) no I (to do it)'. This same point can be made also in the third reading, which understands it as (a homophony of) 'I know no I': 'You want me to do it, but since you want me to be nothing, to totally undo myself, who am I to do it? In such a situation, there is no I to do it, to give you the crown!' One can also translate this exchange into a modern idiom, in the mode of the (in)famous and sometimes quite delightful John Durband's translations of Shakespeare into today's vernacular English:

HENRY                    I've got just enough of this crap! I want a clear  
answer: will you give me the crown? Yes or no?

RICHARD                No and no, no no! OK, if you insist, I'll do it, but  
first I would like to draw your attention to a slight problem: your  
demand involves an untenable pragmatic paradox! You want  
me to give you the crown and thus make you a legitimate ruler,  
but the very situation in which you put me reduces me to  
nobody and nothing and thus deprives me of the very authority  
that would make the gesture you want me to perform a working  
performative! So, since you call the shots and hold me in your  
power, why not, I'll just give you the damned crown – but I  
warn you, this act of mine is merely a bodily gesture, not a  
true performative that would make you a king!

There is a memorable scene in *City Lights*, one of Charlie Chaplin's absolute masterpieces. After he swallows a whistle by mistake, the Tramp gets an attack of hiccups, which leads to a comical outcome. Because of the movement of air in his stomach, each hiccup generates a weird sound of whistling coming from inside the body. The embarrassed Tramp desperately tries to cover up these sounds, not knowing what to do. Does this scene not stage shame at its purest? I am ashamed when I am confronted with the excess in my body, and it is significant that the source of shame in this scene is sound: a spectral sound emanating from within my body, sound as an autonomous organ without body, located in the very heart of my body and at the same time uncontrollable, like a kind of parasite, a foreign intruder.

What all this amounts to is that for Lacan the Real, at its most radical, has to be totally de-substantialized. It is not an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the fissure within the symbolic network itself. The Real as the monstrous Thing behind the veil of appearances is the ultimate lure that lends itself easily to New Age appropriation, as in Joseph Campbell's notion of the monstrous God:

By monster I mean some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all your standards for harmony, order and ethical conduct . . . That's God in the role of destroyer. Such experiences go past ethical judgements. This is wiped out . . . God is horrific.<sup>33</sup>

What is the lure here? Apropos the notion of the Real as the substantial Thing, Lacan accomplishes a reversal that can be illuminated by the passage from the special to the general theory of relativity in Einstein. While the special theory already introduces the notion of curved space, it conceives of this curvature as the effect of matter: it is the presence of matter that curves space, i.e. only an empty space would not be curved.

With the passage to the general theory, the causality is reversed: far from *causing* the curvature of space, matter is its *effect* and the presence of matter signals that space is curved. What can all this have to do with psychoanalysis? Much more than it may appear: in a way that echoes Einstein, for Lacan the Real – the Thing – is not so much the inert presence that curves symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but, rather, an effect of these gaps and inconsistencies.

This brings us back to Freud who, in the development of his theory of trauma, changed his position in a way strangely homologous to Einstein's above-mentioned shift. Freud started with the notion of trauma as something that, from outside, intrudes into our psychic life and disturbs its balance, throwing out of joint the symbolic coordinates that organize our experience – think of a brutal rape, or of witnessing (or suffering) a torture. From this perspective, the problem is how to symbolize the trauma, how to integrate it into our universe of meaning and cancel its disorienting impact. Later, Freud opted for the opposite approach. His analysis of 'Wolf-man', his famous Russian patient, isolated as the early traumatic event that marked his life the fact that, as a child of one and a half, he witnessed the parental *coitus a tergo* (sexual act in which the man penetrates the woman from behind). However, originally, when this scene took place, there was nothing traumatic in it: far from shattering the child, he just inscribed it in his memory as an event whose sense was not at all clear to him. Only years later, when the child became obsessed with the question 'Where do children come from?' and started to develop infantile sexual theories, did he draw out this memory in order to use it as a traumatic scene embodying the mystery of sexuality. The scene was traumatized, elevated into a traumatic Real, only retroactively, in order to help the child to cope with the impasse of his symbolic

universe (his inability to find answers to the enigma of sexuality). In step with Einstein's shift, the original fact is here the symbolic deadlock, and the traumatic event is resuscitated to fill in the gaps in the universe of meaning.

Does exactly the same not hold also for the Real of a social antagonism? Anti-Semitism 'reifies' (by embodying it in a particular group of people) the antagonism inherent in society: it treats Jewishness as the Thing that, from outside, intrudes into the social body and disturbs its balance. What happens in the shift from the position of strict class struggle to Fascist anti-Semitism is not just a simple replacement of one figure of the enemy (bourgeoisie, the ruling class) with another (Jews); the logic of the struggle is totally different. In the class struggle, the classes themselves are caught up in the antagonism that is inherent to the social structure, while for the anti-Semite the Jew is a foreign intruder who causes social antagonism, so that all we need do in order to restore social harmony is to annihilate Jews. That is to say, in exactly the same way that Wolf-man as a child resurrected the scene of parental coitus in order to organize his infantile sexual theories, a Fascist anti-Semite elevates the Jew into the monstrous Thing that causes social decadence.

Lacan often resorts to the scientific Real and evokes examples from the 'hard sciences' in order to clarify the conundrums of the psychoanalytic Real. Are these references meant to be merely metaphors, didactic borrowings with no inherent cognitive value, or do they involve a theoretical link between the two domains? Although Lacan tends to downplay his borrowings, reducing them to didactic tools, the case is often more ambiguous.

Let us take Lacan's characterization of the 'hard sciences' as dealing with what he calls *savoir dans le réel* (knowledge in the real): it is as if there is a knowledge of the laws of nature

directly inscribed into the Real of natural objects and processes – for instance, a stone 'knows' what laws of gravity to obey when it is falling. It may seem that therein lies the difference between nature and history: in human history, 'laws' are norms that can be forgotten or otherwise disobeyed. An archetypal scene from cartoons relies for its comical effect precisely on the confusion of these two levels: a cat walks out in the air at the top of a cliff; it falls only after it looks down and becomes aware that it has no support beneath its feet – as if it has momentarily forgotten the natural laws its body has to obey, and has to be reminded. However, to pass from comedy to tragedy, when a political regime disintegrates in historical reality, can one not, along similar lines, distinguish between its two deaths, symbolic and real? There are weird epochs when a regime, for a limited period, persists in power, although its time is clearly up, as if it goes on living because it doesn't notice that it is dead. As Hegel wrote, Napoleon had to be defeated twice to get the point: his first defeat in 1813 could still be taken as a mere accident of history; it is only his repeated defeat at Waterloo that verifies how his passing expresses a deeper historical necessity.

Are such paradoxes really the exclusive domain of human history? At its most daring, quantum physics seems to allow for just such a cartoon paradox, the momentary suspension, 'forgetting', of knowledge in the real. Imagine that you have to take a flight on day x to pick up a fortune the next day, but do not have the money to buy the ticket; but then you discover that the accounting system of the airline is such that if you wire the ticket payment within twenty-four hours of arrival at your destination, no one will ever know it was not paid prior to departure. Similarly:

the energy a particle has can wildly fluctuate so long as this fluctuation is over a short enough time scale. So, just as the accounting system of the airline 'allows' you to 'borrow' the money for a plane ticket provided you pay it back quickly enough, quantum mechanics allows a particle to 'borrow' energy so long as it can relinquish it within a time frame determined by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle . . . But quantum mechanics forces us to take the analogy one important step further. Imagine someone who is a compulsive borrower and goes from friend to friend asking for money . . . Borrow and return, borrow and return – over and over again with unflagging intensity he takes in money only to give it back in short order . . . a similar frantic shifting back and forth of energy and momentum is occurring perpetually in the universe of microscopic distance and time intervals.<sup>34</sup>

This is how, even in an empty region of space, a particle emerges out of Nothing, 'borrowing' its energy from the future and paying for it (with its annihilation) before the system notices this borrowing. The whole network can function like this, in a rhythm of borrowing and annihilation, one borrowing from the other, displacing the debt onto the other, postponing the payment of the debt. What this presupposes is a minimal gap between things in their immediate brute reality and the registration of this reality in some medium (of the big Other): one can cheat in so far as the second event is delayed with regard to the first. What makes quantum physics so strange is that one can cheat 'in reality', with one's being.

The great counterpoint to quantum physics, Einstein's theory of relativity, also offers unexpected parallels with Lacanian theory. The starting point of the theory of relativity is the strange fact that, for every observer, no matter in what direction and how fast he moves, light moves at the same speed; in an analogous way, for Lacan, no matter whether the desiring subject approaches or runs from his object of desire, this object seems to remain at the same distance from him.

Who doesn't remember the nightmarish situation from dreams: the more I run, the more I stay rooted to the spot? This paradox can be neatly solved by the difference between the object and the cause of desire: no matter how close I get to the object of desire, its cause remains at a distance, elusive. Furthermore, the general theory of relativity solves the antinomy between the relativity of every movement with regard to the observer and the absolute velocity of light – which moves at a constant speed independently of the point of observation – with the notion of curved space. In a parallel way, the Freudian solution to the antinomy between the subject's approaching or running away from his objects of desire and the 'constant speed' (and distance from him) of the object-cause of desire resides in the *curved space of desire*: sometimes the shortest way to realize a desire is to bypass its object-goal, make a detour, postpone its encounter. What Lacan calls *objet petit a* is the agent of this curving: the unfathomable X on account of which, when we confront the object of our desire, more satisfaction is provided by dancing around it than by making straight for it.

Today's physics is caught in a strange duality: the theory of relativity gives the best account of how nature functions at the macroscopic (cosmic) level, and quantum physics the best account of how it functions at the microscopic (subatomic) level. The problem is simply that the two theories are incompatible, so that the central aim of present-day physics is to formulate a 'unified' TOE – theory of everything – that would reconcile the two. We should not be surprised, then, to find an echo of this duality in Freudian theory: on the one side the hermeneutics of the unconscious, interpretations of dreams, slips of the tongue or other such 'mistakes', symptoms (exemplified in Freud's three early masterpieces *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *The Joke and*

its Relation to the Unconscious); on the other side a more positivist account of our psychic apparatus as a machine for dealing with libidinal energies, bringing about the metamorphoses ('vicissitudes') of drives (whose first major study is Freud's volume on theories of sexuality). At the conceptual level, this split is best exemplified by the two terms that Freud sometimes uses as interchangeable: the Unconscious (whose formations are to be interpreted) and the Id (the site of the unconscious energies). How to reconcile these two faces of the Freudian edifice? One of the many neologisms in late Lacan is the notion of *le sinthome* ('sinthom', which strikes up a whole series of associations, from 'Saint Thomas' to 'healthy tone' to 'synthetic man'). In contrast to symptoms (coded messages of the unconscious), sinthoms are a kind of atom of enjoyment, the minimal synthesis of language and enjoyment, units of signs permeated with enjoyment (like a tic we compulsively repeat). Are sinthoms not *quanta of enjoyment*, its smallest packages? Are they not, as such, a Freudian equivalent of superstrings, destined to reconcile the two faces of modern physics, relativity theory and quantum mechanics? Although Lacan is often reproached for neglecting the link between psychoanalysis and the natural sciences on which Freud always insisted, this link is alive and well in his work.

## 5

## EGO IDEAL AND SUPEREGO: LACAN AS A VIEWER OF *CASABLANCA*

Nothing forces anyone to enjoy except the superego. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance* – Enjoy!<sup>35</sup>

Although *jouissance* can be translated as 'enjoyment', translators of Lacan often leave it in French in order to render palpable its excessive, properly traumatic character: we are not dealing with simple pleasures, but with a violent intrusion that brings more pain than pleasure. This is how we usually perceive the Freudian superego, the cruel and sadistic ethical agency that bombards us with impossible demands and then gleefully observes our failure to meet them. No wonder, then, that Lacan posited an equation between *jouissance* and superego: to enjoy is not a matter of following one's spontaneous tendencies; it is rather something we do as a kind of weird and twisted ethical duty.

This simple, although unexpected, thesis encapsulates the way Lacan reads Freud. Freud uses three distinct terms for the agency that propels the subject to act ethically: he speaks of ideal ego (*Idealich*), ego-ideal (*Ich-Ideal*) and superego (*Über-Ich*). He tends to identify these three terms: he often uses the expression *Ichideal oder Idealich* (Ego-Ideal or ideal ego), and

the title of chapter 3 of his short booklet *The Ego and the Id* is 'Ego and Superego (Ego-Ideal)'. Lacan introduces a precise distinction between these three terms: 'ideal ego' stands for the idealized self-image of the subject (the way I would like to be, the way I would like others to see me); Ego-Ideal is the agency whose gaze I try to impress with my ego image, the big Other who watches over me and impels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize; and superego is this same agency in its vengeful, sadistic, punishing aspect. The underlying structuring principle of these three terms is clearly Lacan's triad Imaginary-Symbolic-Real: ideal ego is imaginary, what Lacan calls the 'small other', the idealized mirror-image of my ego; Ego-Ideal is symbolic, the point of my symbolic identification, the point in the big Other from which I observe (and judge) myself; superego is real, the cruel and insatiable agency that bombards me with impossible demands and then mocks my botched attempts to meet them, the agency in whose eyes I am all the more guilty, the more I try to suppress my 'sinful' strivings and meet its demands. The cynical old Stalinist motto about the accused at show trials who professed their innocence ('The more innocent they are, the more they deserve to be shot') is superego at its purest.

What follows from these precise distinctions is that, for Lacan, superego 'has nothing to do with moral conscience as far as its most obligatory demands are concerned':<sup>36</sup> superego is, on the contrary, the anti-ethical agency, the stigmatization of our ethical betrayal. So which one of the other two is the proper ethical agency? Should we – as some American psychoanalysts have proposed, relying on a couple of Freud's ambiguous formulations – set up the 'good' (rational-moderate, caring) Ego-Ideal against the 'bad' (irrational-excessive, cruel, anxiety-provoking) superego, trying to lead the patient

to get rid of the 'bad' superego and follow the 'good' Ego-Ideal? Lacan opposes this easy way out. For him, the only proper agency is the fourth one missing in Freud's list of three, the one sometimes referred to by Lacan as 'the law of desire', the agency that tells you to act in accord with your desire. The gap between this 'law of desire' and Ego-Ideal (the network of socio-symbolic norms and ideals that the subject internalizes in the course of his or her education) is crucial here. For Lacan, the seemingly benevolent agency of the Ego-Ideal that leads us to moral growth and maturity forces us to betray the 'law of desire' by way of adopting the 'reasonable' demands of the existing socio-symbolic order. The superego, with its excessive feeling of guilt, is merely the necessary obverse of the Ego-Ideal: it exerts its unbearable pressure upon us on behalf of our betrayal of the 'law of desire'. The guilt we experience under superego pressure is not illusory but actual – 'the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire,'<sup>37</sup> and superego pressure demonstrates that we effectively *are* guilty of betraying our desire.

Let us go to an example of the gap that separates the Ego-Ideal from the superego, that of the well-known brief scene three-quarters into one of the greatest Hollywood classics, Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*,<sup>38</sup> in which Ilse Lund (Ingrid Bergman) comes to Rick Blaine's (Humphrey Bogart's) room to try to obtain the letters of transit that will enable her and her Resistance leader husband Victor Laszlo to escape from Casablanca to Portugal and then to America. After Rick refuses to hand them over, she pulls a gun and threatens him. He tells her: 'Go ahead and shoot, you'll be doing me a favour.' She breaks down and tearfully tells him the story of why she left him in Paris. By the time she says: 'If you knew how much I loved you, how much I still love you,' they are

embracing in close-up. The scene dissolves to a 3½-second shot of the airport tower at night, its searchlight circling, and then dissolves back to a shot from outside the window of Rick's room, where he is standing, looking out, and smoking a cigarette. He turns into the room, and asks her: 'And then?' She resumes her story . . .

The question that at once arises here is, of course: what happened *in between*, during the 3½-second shot of the airport – did they do it or not? Maltby is right to emphasize that, as to this point, what we see is not simply ambiguous; it rather generates two very clear, although mutually exclusive, meanings – yes and no; the film gives unambiguous signals that they did it, and simultaneously unambiguous signals that they cannot have done it. On the one hand, a series of codified features signals that they did do it, and that the 3½-second shot stands for a much longer duration (the dissolve on the couple passionately embracing conventionally signals the performance of the act after the fade-out; the postcoital cigarette is another standard signal; so is the vulgar phallic connotation of the tower). On the other hand, a parallel series of features signals that nothing happened, that the 3½-second shot of the airport tower corresponds to real narrative time (the bed in the background is undisturbed; the same conversation seems to go on without a break). Even in the final conversation between Rick and Laszlo at the airport, when they directly refer to the night's events, their words can be read in both ways:

RICK: You said you knew about Ilse and me?

VICTOR: Yes.

RICK: You didn't know she was at my place last night when you were . . . she came there for the letters of transit. Isn't that true, Ilse?

ILSE: Yes.

RICK: She tried everything to get them and nothing worked. She

did her best to convince me that she was still in love with me. That was all over long ago; for your sake she pretended it wasn't and I let her pretend.

VICTOR: I understand.

Well, I certainly *don't* understand – did they do it or not? Maltby's solution is to insist that this scene provides an exemplary case of how *Casablanca* 'deliberately constructs itself in such a way as to offer distinct and alternative sources of pleasure to two people sitting next to each other in the same cinema,' that it 'could play to both "innocent" and "sophisticated" audiences alike'.<sup>39</sup> While, at the level of its surface narrative line, the film can be constructed by the spectator as obeying the strictest moral codes, to the sophisticated it simultaneously offers enough clues to construct an alternative, sexually much more daring narrative line. This strategy is more complex than it may appear: precisely because you know that you are as it were 'covered' or 'absolved from guilty impulses'<sup>40</sup> by the official story line, you are allowed to indulge in dirty fantasies. You know that these fantasies are not 'for serious', that they don't count in the eyes of the big Other. Our only correction to Maltby would be that we do not need *two* spectators sitting side by side: *one and the same spectator* is sufficient.

To put it in Lacanian terms: during the critical 3½ seconds, Ilse and Rick did not do it for the big Other (in this case the decorum of public appearance, which must not be offended), but they did do it for our dirty phantasmatic imagination. This is the structure of inherent transgression at its purest: Hollywood needs both levels in order to function. This, of course, brings us back to the opposition between Ego-Ideal and obscene superego. At the level of Ego-Ideal (which here equates to the public symbolic law, the set of rules we are meant to observe in our public speech), nothing problematic happens, the text is clean, while, at another level, the text

bombards the spectator with the superego injunction 'Enjoy!' – i.e. give way to your dirty imagination. To rehearse it again, what we encounter here is a clear example of the fetishistic split, the disavowal-structure of '*Je sais bien, mais quand même . . .*' (*I know very well, but all the same . . .*): the very awareness that they did not do it gives free rein to the opposite conclusion. You can indulge in it, because you are absolved from guilt by virtue of the fact that, for the big Other, they definitely did *not* do it. Appearances *do* matter: you can have your multiple dirty fantasies, but it matters that some less incriminating version will be integrated into the public domain of the symbolic law, as recorded by the big Other. This dual reading is not simply a compromise on the part of the symbolic law, in the sense that the law is interested only in keeping up appearances, and leaves you free to exercise your fancy on condition that it does not encroach upon the public domain. The law itself needs its obscene supplement, it is sustained by it.

The infamous Hays Production Code of the 1930s and 40s was not simply a negative censorship code, but also a positive (productive, as Michel Foucault would have put it) codification and regulation that generated the very excess whose direct depiction it forbade. The prohibition, in order to function properly, had to rely on a clear awareness of what really did happen at the level of the outlawed narrative line. The Production Code did not simply prohibit some contents, rather it codified their enciphered articulation, as in the famous instruction from Monroe Stahr to his scriptwriters in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*:

At all times, at all moments when she is on the screen in our sight, she wants to sleep with Ken Willard . . . Whatever she does, it is in place of sleeping with Ken Willard. If she walks down the street she is walking to sleep with Ken Willard, if she eats her food it is to give

her enough strength to sleep with Ken Willard. *But* at no time do you give the impression that she would even consider sleeping with Ken Willard unless they were properly sanctified.<sup>41</sup>

We can see here how the fundamental prohibition, far from functioning in a merely negative way, is responsible for the excessive sexualization of the most common everyday events. Everything the poor starved heroine does, from walking down the street to having a meal, is transubstantiated into the expression of her desire to sleep with her man. We can see how the functioning of this fundamental prohibition is properly perverse, in so far as it unavoidably gets caught in the reflexive flip by means of which the very defence against the prohibited sexual content generates an excessive all-pervasive sexualization – the role of censorship is much more ambiguous than it may appear. The obvious retort to this point would be that we are thereby inadvertently elevating the Hays Production Code into a subversive machine more threatening to the system of domination than direct tolerance: are we not claiming that the harsher is direct censorship, the more subversive are the unintended by-products generated by it? The way to answer this reproach is to emphasize that these unintended perverse by-products, far from genuinely threatening the system of symbolic domination, are its built-in transgression, its unacknowledged obscene support.

In Western literature, the first figure fully aware of this is Ulysses, and it was Shakespeare's genius to deploy this aspect of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* – no wonder that, even today, this play causes such confusion among its interpreters. At the war council in Act I where the Greek (or 'Grecian', as Shakespeare has it in what may now be called Dubya-speak) generals try to account for their failure to occupy and destroy Troy after eight years of fighting, Ulysses intervenes from a traditional 'old values' position, locating the true cause of the



Greek failure in their neglect of the centralized hierarchic order where each individual keeps his proper place:

The specialty of rule hath been neglected:  
And, look, how many Grecian tents do stand  
Hollow upon this plain, so many hollow factions.

. . . O, when degree is shaken,  
Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,  
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenitive and due of birth,  
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
But by degree, stand in authentic place?  
Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets  
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters  
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores  
And make a sop of all this solid globe:  
Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike his father dead:  
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,  
Between whose endless jar justice resides,  
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.  
Then every thing includes itself in power . . .

What, then, causes this disintegration that ends up in the democratic nightmare of everyone participating in power? Later in the play, when Ulysses wants to convince Achilles to rejoin the battle, he invokes the metaphor of time as the destructive force that gradually undermines the natural hierarchic order: in the course of time, your old heroic deeds will be forgotten, your glory eclipsed by new heroes – so if you want to continue shining in your warrior glory, rejoin the fray:

Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,  
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,  
A great-sized monster of ingratitude:  
Those scraps are good deeds past; which are devour'd  
As fast as they are made, forgot as soon  
As done: perseverance, dear my lord,  
Keeps honour bright: to have done is to hang  
Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail  
In monumental mockery . . .

O, let not virtue seek  
Remuneration for the thing it was; for beauty, wit,  
High birth, vigour of bone, desert in service,  
Love, friendship, charity, are subjects all  
To envious and calumniating time.

(III,iii. 147–176)

Ulysses' strategy here is profoundly ambiguous. In a first approach, he merely restates his argumentation about the necessity of 'degrees' (ordered social hierarchy), and portrays time as the corrosive force that undermines old true values – an arch-conservative motif. However, on a closer reading, it becomes clear that Ulysses gives to his argumentation a singular cynical twist: how are we to fight against time, to keep old values alive? Not by observing them, but by supplementing them with the obscene *Realpolitik* of cruel manipulation, of cheating, of playing one hero off against the other. It is only this dirty underside, this hidden disharmony, that can sustain harmony (Ulysses plays with Achilles' envy, he refers to emulation – the very attitudes that work to destabilize the hierarchic order, since they signal that one is not satisfied by one's subordinate place within the social body). Secret manipulation of envy – the violation of the very rules and values Ulysses celebrates in his first speech – is needed to counteract the effects of time and sustain the hierarchic order of 'degree'. This might be Ulysses'

version of Hamlet's famous 'The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!' The only way to 'set it right' is to counteract the transgression of the Old Order with its *inherent transgression*, with crime devised in secret to serve that Order. The price we pay for this is that the Order that thus survives is a mockery of itself, a blasphemous facsimile of Order.

That the public law needs support from some hidden superego obscenity is today more actual than ever. Recall Rob Reiner's *A Few Good Men*, a court-martial drama about two US marines accused of murdering a fellow soldier. The military prosecutor claims that the act was deliberate murder, whereas the defence (Tom Cruise and Demi Moore – how could they fail?) succeeds in proving that the defendants followed the so-called 'Code Red', the unwritten rule of a military community that authorizes the clandestine beating by night of a fellow soldier who has broken the ethical standards of the Marines. Such a code condones an act of transgression, it is illegal, yet at the same time it reaffirms the cohesion of the group. It has to keep the cover of the night, unacknowledged, unutterable – in public, everyone pretends to know nothing about it, or even actively denies its existence (and the climax of the film is, predictably, the outburst of rage from Jack Nicholson, the officer who ordered the beating: his public explosion is, of course, the moment of his fall).

While violating the explicit rules of community, such a code represents the spirit of community at its purest, exerting the strongest pressure on individuals to enact group identification. In contrast to the written explicit Law, such a superego obscene code is essentially spoken, if in secret, somewhere out of sight. Therein resides the lesson of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*: the figure of Kurtz is not a relic of some barbaric past, but the necessary outcome of modern power itself, the power of the West. Kurtz was a perfect soldier and as such, through

his over-identification with the military power system, he has turned into the excess that the system has to eliminate. The ultimate insight of *Apocalypse Now* is that power generates its own excess, which it has to annihilate in an operation that mirrors what it fights (Willard's mission to kill Kurtz is non-existent for the official record: 'It never happened,' as the general who briefs Willard points out).

Here we enter the domain of covert operations, of what power does without ever admitting it. In November 2005, US Vice President Dick Cheney said that defeating terrorists meant that 'we also have to work . . . sort of the dark side . . . A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion.' Is he not talking like a reborn Kurtz? In a debate about the fate of Guantanamo prisoners on NBC in mid-2004, one of the weird arguments for the ethico-legal acceptability of their status was that 'they are those who were missed by the bombs': since they were the target of US bombing and happened to survive it, and since this bombing was part of a legitimate military operation, one cannot complain of their fate when taken prisoner in the aftermath. The argument suggests that whatever their situation, it is better, less severe, than being dead. This reasoning tells more than it intends to: it puts the prisoner almost literally into the position of the living dead, those who are in a way already dead (their right to live forfeited by being legitimate targets of murderous bombings), so that they are now cases of what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*, the man who can be killed with impunity since, in the eyes of the law, his life no longer counts. If the Guantanamo prisoners are located in the space 'between the two deaths', occupying the position of *homo sacer*, legally dead (deprived of a determinate legal status) while biologically still alive, the US authorities who treat them in this way are also in a kind of in-between legal status,

the counterpart to *homo sacer*. Acting as a legal power, their acts are no longer covered and constrained by the law. Instead they operate in an empty space that is still within the realm of the law.

So when, in November 2005, President Bush emphatically proclaimed: 'We do not torture' and simultaneously vetoed the bill, proposed by John McCain, that simply legalizes this fact by explicitly prohibiting the torture of prisoners as detrimental to US interests, we have to interpret this inconsistency as an index of the tension between the public discourse, society's Ego-Ideal, and its obscene superego accomplice. Another proof, if proofs are still needed, of the enduring actuality of the Freudian notion of the superego.

## 6

## 'GOD IS DEAD, BUT HE DOESN'T KNOW IT': LACAN PLAYS WITH BOBOK

The true formula of atheism is not *God is dead* – even by basing the origin of the function of the father upon his murder, Freud protects the father – the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*.<sup>42</sup>

In order to properly understand this passage, one has to read it together with another thesis of Lacan. These two dispersed statements should be treated as the pieces of a puzzle to be combined into one coherent proposition. It is only their interconnection (plus the reference to the Freudian dream of the father who doesn't know that he is dead)<sup>43</sup> that enables us to deploy Lacan's basic thesis in its entirety:

As you know, the father Karamazov's son Ivan leads the latter into those audacious avenues taken by the thought of the cultivated man, and in particular, he says, *if God doesn't exist . . . – If God doesn't exist, the father says, then everything is permitted*. Quite evidently, a naïve notion, for we analysts know full well that if God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer. Neurotics prove that to us every day.<sup>44</sup>

The modern atheist thinks he knows that God is dead; what he doesn't know is that, unconsciously, he continues to

believe in God. What characterizes modernity is no longer the standard figure of the believer who secretly harbours doubts about his belief and engages in transgressive fantasies; today we have, on the contrary, a subject who presents himself as a tolerant hedonist dedicated to the pursuit of happiness, and whose unconscious is the site of prohibitions: what is repressed is not illicit desires or pleasures, but prohibitions themselves. 'If God doesn't exist, then everything is prohibited' means that the more you perceive yourself as an atheist, the more your unconscious is dominated by prohibitions that sabotage your enjoyment. (One should not forget to supplement this thesis with its opposite: if God exists, then everything is permitted – is this not the most succinct definition of the religious fundamentalist's predicament? For him, God fully exists, he perceives himself as His instrument, which is why he can do whatever he wants: his acts are redeemed in advance, since they express the divine will . . .)

Instead of bringing freedom, the fall of the oppressive authority thus gives rise to new and sterner prohibitions. How are we to account for this paradox? Think of the situation known to most of us from our youth: the unfortunate child who, on Sunday afternoon, has to visit his grandmother instead of being allowed to play with friends. The old-fashioned authoritarian father's message to the reluctant boy would have been: 'I don't care how you feel. Just do your duty, go to your grandma's and behave yourself there!' In this case, the child's predicament is not bad at all: although forced to do something he clearly doesn't want to, he will retain his inner freedom and the ability to (later) rebel against the paternal authority. Much more tricky would have been the message of a 'postmodern' non-authoritarian father: 'You know how much your grandmother loves you! But, nonetheless, I do not want to force you to visit her – go there only if you really want to!' Every child

who is not stupid (which is to say most children) will immediately recognize the trap of this permissive attitude: beneath the appearance of free choice there is an even more oppressive demand than the one formulated by the traditional authoritarian father, namely an implicit injunction not only to visit Grandma, but to do it voluntarily, out of the child's free will. Such a false free choice is the obscene superego injunction: it deprives the child even of his inner freedom, instructing him not only what to do, but what to want to do.

For decades, a classic joke has circulated among Lacanians to exemplify the key role of the Other's knowledge: a man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a seed but a man. When he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and is allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back trembling. There is a chicken outside the door and he is afraid that it will eat him. 'My dear fellow,' says his doctor, 'you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man.' 'Of course *I* know that,' replies the patient, 'but does the chicken know it?' Therein resides the true stake of psychoanalytic treatment: it is not enough to convince the patient about the unconscious truth of his symptoms, the unconscious itself must be brought to assume this truth.

The same holds true for the Marxian theory of commodity fetishism:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very tricky thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.<sup>45</sup>

Marx does not claim, in the usual way of Enlightenment discourse, that critical analysis should demonstrate how a commodity – what appears a mysterious theological entity –

emerged out of the 'ordinary' real-life process; he claims, on the contrary, that the task of critical analysis is to unearth the 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' in what appears at first sight just an ordinary object. Commodity fetishism (our belief that commodities are magical objects, endowed with an inherent metaphysical power) is not located in our mind, in the way we (mis)perceive reality, but in our social reality itself. In other words, when a Marxist encounters a bourgeois subject immersed in commodity fetishism, the Marxist's reproach to him is not: 'The commodity may seem to you to be a magical object endowed with special powers, but it really is just a reified expression of relations between people,' but rather: 'You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations (that, for example, money is just a kind of voucher entitling you to a part of the social product), but this is not how things really seem to you. In your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers.' We can imagine a bourgeois subject attending a course in Marxism where he is taught about commodity fetishism. Having finished the course, he comes back to his teacher, complaining that he is still the victim of commodity fetishism. The teacher tells him: 'But you know now how things stand, that commodities are only expressions of social relations, that there is nothing magical about them!', to which the pupil replies: 'Of course I know all that, but the commodities I am dealing with seem not to know it!' This is what Lacan aimed at in his claim that the true formula of materialism is not 'God doesn't exist', but 'God is unconscious'. Suffice it to recall what, in a letter to Max Brod, Milena Jesenska wrote about Kafka:

Above all, things like money, stock-exchange, the foreign currency administration, type-writer, are for him thoroughly mystical (what they effectively are, only not for us, the others).<sup>46</sup>

Here Jesenska touches Kafka at his Marxist best: a bourgeois subject knows very well that there is nothing magic about money, that money is just an object that stands for a set of social relations, but he nevertheless acts in real life as if he believes that money is a magical thing. This, then, gives us a precise insight into Kafka's universe: Kafka was able to experience directly these phantasmatic beliefs that we 'normal' people disavow. Kafka's 'magic' is what Marx referred to as the 'theological freakishness' of commodities. If, once upon a time, we publicly pretended to believe, while deep inside us we were sceptics or even engaged in obscene mocking of our public beliefs, today we tend publicly to profess our sceptical/hedonist/relaxed attitude, while inside us we remain haunted by beliefs and severe prohibitions. And it is against this background that one can locate Dostoevsky's mistake. Dostoevsky provided the most radical version of the idea that 'If God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted' in 'Bobok', his weirdest short story, which even today continues to perplex interpreters. Is this bizarre 'morbid fantasy' simply a product of the author's own mental sickness? Or is it a cynical sacrilege, an abominable attempt to parody the truth of the divine Revelation as disclosed in the Holy Bible?<sup>47</sup> In 'Bobok', an alcoholic literary man named Ivan Ivanovich is suffering from auditory hallucinations:

I am beginning to see and hear strange things, not voices exactly, but as though someone beside me were muttering, 'bobok, bobok, bobok!'

What's the meaning of this bobok? I must divert my mind.

I went out in search of diversion, I hit upon a funeral.

So he attends the funeral of a distant relative. Afterwards he lingers in the cemetery, where he unexpectedly overhears the cynical, frivolous conversations of the dead:

And how it happened I don't know, but I began to hear things of all sorts being said. At first I did not pay attention to it, but treated it with contempt. But the conversation went on. I heard muffled sounds as though the speakers' mouths were covered with a pillow, and at the same time they were distinct and very near. I came to myself, sat up and began listening attentively.

He discovers from these exchanges that human consciousness goes on for some time after the death of the physical body, lasting until total decomposition, which the deceased characters associate with the awful gurgling onomatopoeia 'bobok'. One of them comments:

The great thing is that we have two or three months more of life and then – bobok! I propose to spend these two months as agreeably as possible, and so to arrange everything on a new basis. Gentlemen! I propose to cast aside all shame.

The dead, realizing their complete freedom from earthly conditions, decide to entertain themselves by telling tales of their existence during their lives:

'... meanwhile I don't want us to be telling lies. That's all I care about, for that is the one thing that matters. One cannot exist on the surface without lying, for life and lying are synonymous, but here we will amuse ourselves by not lying. Hang it all, the grave has some value after all! We'll all tell our stories aloud, and we won't be ashamed of anything. First of all I'll tell you about myself. I am one of the predatory kind, you know. All that was bound and held in check by rotten cords up there on the surface. Away with cords and let us spend these two months in shameless truthfulness! Let us strip and be naked!'

'Let us be naked, let us be naked!' cried all the voices.

The terrible stench that Ivan Ivanovich smells is not the smell of the decaying corpses, but a moral stench. Then Ivan Ivanovich suddenly sneezes, and the dead fall silent; the spell is lost and we are back into ordinary reality:

And here I suddenly sneezed. It happened suddenly and unintentionally, but the effect was striking: all became as silent as one expects it to be in a churchyard, it all vanished like a dream. A real silence of the tomb set in. I don't believe they were ashamed on account of my presence: they had made up their minds to cast off all shame! I waited five minutes – not a word, not a sound.

(All passages are from [www.kiosek.com/dostoevsky/library/bobok.txt](http://www.kiosek.com/dostoevsky/library/bobok.txt).)

Mikhail Bakhtin saw in 'Bobok' the quintessence of Dostoevsky's art, a microcosm of his entire creative output that expresses its central motif: the idea that 'everything is permitted' if there is no God and no immortality of the soul. In the carnivalesque underworld of life 'between two deaths', all rules and responsibilities are suspended, the undead can cast aside all shame, act insanely, and laugh at honesty and justice. The ethical horror of this vision is that it displays the limit of the 'truth and reconciliation' idea: what if we have a perpetrator for whom the public confession of his crimes not only does not give rise to any ethical catharsis in him, but even generates an additional obscene pleasure?

The 'undead' situation of the deceased is opposed to that of the father from one of the dreams reported by Freud, who goes on living (in the dreamer's unconscious) because he doesn't know that he is dead. The deceased in Dostoevsky's story are fully aware that they are dead – it is this awareness that allows them to cast away all shame. So what is the secret the deceased keep hidden from every mortal? In 'Bobok', we do not hear

any of the shameless truths – the spectres of the dead withdraw at the very point at which they should finally ‘deliver their goods’ to the listener and tell their dirty secrets. Maybe the solution is the same as that at the end of the parable of the Door of the Law from Kafka’s *The Trial*, when, on his deathbed, the man from the country who has spent years waiting to be admitted by the guardian learns that the door was here only for him? What if, in ‘Bobok’ too, the entire spectacle of the corpses promising to spill their dirtiest secrets is staged only to attract and impress poor Ivan Ivanovich? In other words, what if the spectacle of the ‘shameless truthfulness’ of the living corpses is only a fantasy of the listener – and of a *religious* listener, at that? We should not forget that the scene Dostoevsky paints is not that of a godless universe. The talking corpses experience their life after (biological) death, which is in itself a proof of God’s existence – *God is here, keeping them alive after death, which is why they can say everything*.

What Dostoevsky stages is a religious fantasy that has nothing whatsoever to do with a truly atheist position – although he stages it to illustrate the terrifying godless universe in which ‘everything is permitted’. So what is the compulsion that pushes the corpses to engage in the obscene sincerity of ‘saying it all’? The Lacanian answer is clear: *superego* – not as ethical agency, but as the obscene injunction to enjoy. This provides the insight into what is perhaps the ultimate secret that the deceased want to keep from the narrator: their impulse to shamelessly tell all the truth is not free, the situation is not ‘Now we can finally say (and do) all that we wanted, but were prevented by the rules and constraints of our normal lives.’ Instead, their impulse is sustained by a cruel superego imperative: the spectres *have* to engage in their obscene activities. If, however, what the undead hide from the narrator is the compulsive nature of their obscene enjoyment, and if we are dealing with a religious fantasy, then

there is one more conclusion to be made: that *the undead are under the compulsive spell of an evil God*. Therein resides Dostoevsky’s ultimate lie: what he presents as a terrifying fantasy of a godless universe is effectively a Gnostic fantasy of an evil, obscene God. A more general lesson should be drawn from this case: when religious authors condemn atheism, they all too often construct a vision of the ‘godless universe’ which is a projection of the repressed underside of religion itself.

I have used here the term ‘Gnosticism’ in its precise meaning, as the rejection of a key feature of the Judaeo-Christian universe: the externality of truth. There is an overwhelming argument for the intimate link between Judaism and psychoanalysis: in both cases, the focus is on the traumatic encounter with the abyss of the desiring Other, with the terrifying figure of an impenetrable Other who wants something from us, but does not make it clear what this something is – the Jewish people’s encounter with their God whose impenetrable Call disrupts the routine of human daily existence; the child’s encounter with the enigma of the Other’s (in this case, parental) enjoyment. In clear contrast to this Jewish-Christian notion of truth as relying on an external traumatic encounter (the divine Call to the Jewish people, God’s call to Abraham, the inscrutable Grace – all totally incompatible with our inherent qualities, even with our innate ethics), both paganism and Gnosticism (the reinscription of the Jewish-Christian stance back into paganism) conceive the path to truth as the ‘inner journey’ of spiritual self-purification, as the return to one’s true Inner Self, the self’s ‘rediscovery’. Kierkegaard was right when he pointed out that the central opposition in Western spirituality is between Socrates and Christ: the inner journey of remembrance versus rebirth through the shock of the external encounter. Within the Jewish-Christian field, God Himself is the ultimate harasser, the intruder who brutally disturbs the harmony of our lives.

Traces of Gnosticism are clearly discernible even in today's cyberspace ideology. The cyberspace dream of the Self freed from its attachment to its natural body by turning itself into a virtual entity floating from one to another contingent and temporary embodiment is the scientific-technological realization of the Gnostic dream of the Self getting rid of the decay and inertia of material reality. No wonder that the philosophy of Leibniz is one of the predominant philosophical references of cyberspace theorists: Leibniz conceived the universe as composed of 'monads', microscopic substances each of which lives in its own self-enclosed inner space, with no windows onto its environs. One cannot miss the uncanny resemblance between Leibniz's 'monadology' and the emerging cyberspace community in which global harmony and solipsism strangely coexist. That is to say, does our immersion in cyberspace not go hand in hand with our reduction to a Leibnizian monad which, although 'without windows' that would directly open up to external reality, mirrors in itself the entire universe? More and more, we are monads with no direct windows onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only virtual simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever in the global network, synchronously communicating with the entire globe.

The space in which the (un)dead can talk without moral constraints, as imagined by Dostoevsky, prefigures this Gnostic-cyberspace dream. The attraction of cybersex is that, since we are dealing only with virtual partners, there is no harassment. This aspect of cyberspace – the idea of a space in which, because we are not directly interacting with real people, nobody is harassed and we are free to unleash our dirtiest fantasies – found its ultimate expression in a proposal that recently resurfaced in some circles in the US, a proposal to 'rethink' the rights of necrophiliacs (those who desire to have

sex with dead bodies). Why should they be deprived of it? The idea was put forward that, in the same way that people grant permission for their organs to be used for medical purposes in the case of their sudden death, one should also allow them to grant permission for their bodies to be given to necrophiliacs. This proposal is the perfect exemplification of how the Politically Correct anti-harassment stance realizes Kierkegaard's old insight that the only good neighbour is a dead neighbour. A dead neighbour – a corpse – is the ideal sexual partner of a 'tolerant' subject trying to avoid any harassment: by definition, a corpse cannot be harassed; at the same time, a dead body *does not enjoy*, so the disturbing threat of excess enjoyment to the subject playing with the corpse is also eliminated.

'Harassment' is another of those words that, although they seem to refer to a clearly defined fact, function in a deeply ambiguous way and perpetrate an ideological mystification. At its most elementary, the term designates brutal facts of rape, beating, and other modes of social violence that, of course, should be ruthlessly condemned. However, in the prevailing use of the term 'harassment', this elementary meaning drifts imperceptibly into the condemnation of any excessive proximity of another real human being, with his or her desires, fears and pleasures. Two themes determine today's liberal tolerant attitude towards others: respect for otherness and openness towards it, and the obsessive fear of harassment. The other is OK in so far as his presence does not intrude, in so far as the other is not really other. Tolerance coincides with its opposite: my duty to be tolerant towards the other effectively means that I should not get too close to him, not intrude into his/her space – in short, that I should respect his/her intolerance towards my over-proximity. This is what is more and more emerging as the central 'human right' in late-capitalist



society: the right not to be harassed, i.e. to be kept at a safe distance from the others.

The courts in most Western societies now impose a restraining order when someone sues another person for harassing him or her (stalking, or making unwarranted sexual advances). The harasser can be legally prohibited from knowingly approaching the victim, and must remain at a distance of more than 100 yards. Necessary as this measure is, there is nonetheless in it something of the defence against the traumatic Real of the other's desire: is it not obvious that there is something dreadfully *violent* about openly displaying one's passion for and to another human? Passion by definition *hurts* its object, and even if its addressee gladly agrees to occupy this place, he or she cannot ever do it without a moment of awe and surprise. Or, to vary yet again Hegel's dictum that 'Evil resides in the very gaze that perceives Evil all around itself': intolerance towards the Other resides in the very gaze that perceives all those around it as intolerant trespassing Others.

One should be especially suspicious about the obsession with sexual harassment of women when it is voiced by men: after barely scratching the 'pro-feminist' PC surface, one soon encounters the old male-chauvinist myth of women as helpless creatures who need protection not only from intruding men, but ultimately also from themselves. For the male chauvinist posing as a feminist, the problem is not that they will be unable to protect themselves, but that they may start to enjoy being sexually harassed – that the male intrusion will set free in them a self-destructive explosion of excessive sexual enjoyment. In short, what one should focus on is what kind of notion of subjectivity is implied in the obsession with the different modes of harassment: the 'Narcissistic' subjectivity for which everything others do (address me, look at me . . .) is potentially a threat, so that, as Sartre put it long ago, *L'enfer*,

*c'est les autres* (Hell is other people). With regard to woman as an object of disturbance, the more she is covered, the more our (male) attention focuses on her and on what lies beneath the veil. The Taliban not only forced women to walk in public completely veiled, they also forbade them to wear shoes with excessively solid (metal or wooden) heels, and ordered them to walk without making too loud a clacking noise that might distract men, disturbing their inner peace and dedication. This is the paradox of surplus-enjoyment at its purest: the more the object is veiled, the more intensely disturbing is the minimal trace of its remainder.

This is the case even with the growing prohibition of smoking. First, all offices were declared 'smoke-free', then flights, then restaurants, then airports, then bars, then private clubs, then in some campuses a radius of 50 yards around the entrances to the buildings, then – in a unique case of pedagogical censorship, reminding us of the famous Stalinist practice of retouching the photos of the *nomenklatura* – the US Postal Service removed the cigarette from stamps with the photo-portraits of blues guitarist Robert Johnson and of Jackson Pollock. These prohibitions target the other's excessive and risky enjoyment, embodied in the act of 'irresponsibly' lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply with unabashed pleasure (in contrast to Clintonite yuppies who do it without inhaling, or who have sex without actual penetration, or food without fat) – indeed, as Lacan put it, *Once God is dead, nothing is permitted any more*.

One of the standard topics of today's conservative cultural critique is that, in our permissive era, children lack firm limits or prohibitions. This lack frustrates them, driving them from one excess to another. It is only a firm limit set up by some symbolic authority that can guarantee stability and satisfaction – satisfaction brought about by way of violating the

prohibition, of transgressing the limit. To clarify the way that denegation functions in the unconscious, Freud referred to the reaction of one of his patients to a dream of his centred on an unknown woman: 'Whoever this woman in my dream is, I know it is not my mother.' A clear negative proof, for Freud, that the woman *was* his mother. What better way to characterize today's typical patient than to imagine his opposite reaction to the same dream: 'Whoever this woman in my dream was, I am sure it has something to do with my mother!'

Traditionally, psychoanalysis was expected to allow the patient to overcome the obstacles that deprived him or her of access to normal sexual satisfaction: if you can't achieve it, go to the analyst who will enable you to get rid of your inhibitions. Today, however, we are bombarded from all sides by different versions of the injunction 'Enjoy!', from direct enjoyment in sexual performance to enjoyment in professional achievement or in spiritual awakening. Enjoyment today effectively functions as a strange ethical duty: individuals feel guilty not for violating moral inhibitions by way of engaging in illicit pleasures, but for not being able to enjoy. In this situation, psychoanalysis is the only discourse in which you are *allowed not to enjoy* – not forbidden to enjoy, just relieved of the pressure to do so.

## 7

## THE PERVERSE SUBJECT OF POLITICS: LACAN AS A READER OF MOHAMMAD BOUYERI

Strictly speaking, perversion is an inverted effect of the phantasy. It is the subject who determines himself as an object, in his encounter with the division of subjectivity . . . It is in so far as the subject makes himself the object of another will that the sado-masochistic drive not only closes up, but constitutes itself . . . the sadist himself occupies the place of the object, but without knowing it, to the benefit of another, for whose jouissance he exercises his action as sadistic pervert.<sup>48</sup>

This passage throws a new light on political totalitarianism. A true Stalinist politician loves mankind, yet carries out horrible purges and executions – his heart is breaking while he does it, but he cannot help it, it is his Duty towards the Progress of Humanity. This is the perverse attitude of adopting the position of the pure instrument of the big Other's Will: it is not my responsibility, it is not me who is really doing it, I am merely an instrument of the higher Historical Necessity. The obscene enjoyment of this situation is generated by the fact that I conceive of myself as *exculpated for what I am doing*: I am able to inflict pain on others with the full awareness that I am not responsible for it, that I merely fulfil the Other's Will. The sadistic pervert answers the question 'How can the subject be

guilty when he merely realizes an objective, externally imposed, necessity?' by subjectively assuming this objective necessity, by finding enjoyment in what is imposed on him.

When confronted with the task of liquidating the Jews of Europe, Heinrich Himmler, chief of the SS, struck the heroic attitude that 'Somebody has to do the dirty job, so let's do it!' It is easy to do a noble thing for one's country, even to sacrifice one's life for it – it is much more difficult to commit a crime for one's country. In her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt provided a precise description of this sidestep that Nazi executioners accomplished in order to be able to endure the horrible acts they performed. Most of them were not simply evil, they were well aware that they were doing things that brought humiliation, suffering and death to their victims. The way out of this predicament was that 'instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!'<sup>49</sup> In this way, they were able to turn on its head the logic of resisting temptation: the temptation to be resisted was the very temptation to succumb to an elementary pity and sympathy in the presence of human suffering; their 'ethical' effort was directed towards the task of resisting this temptation not to humiliate, torture and murder. My violation of spontaneous ethical instincts of pity and compassion is transformed into the proof of my ethical grandeur: to do my duty, I am ready to assume the heavy burden of inflicting pain on others.

The same perverse logic operates in today's religious fundamentalism. When, on 2 November 2004, the Dutch documentary filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam by the Islamist extremist Mohammad Bouyeri, a letter was found stuck into a knife wound in his belly, addressed to his friend Hirshi Ali, a female Somali member of the Dutch

parliament known as a fierce fighter for the rights of Muslim women.<sup>50</sup> If there ever was a 'fundamentalist' document, this is one. It begins with the standard rhetorical strategy of imputing terror to the opponent:

Since your appearance in the Dutch political arena you have been constantly busy criticizing Muslims and terrorizing Islam with your statements.

In Bouyeri's view, Hirshi Ali – not himself – is the 'unbelieving fundamentalist', and in fighting her, one fights fundamentalist terror. This letter demonstrates how the sadistic stance that generates suffering and terror in its addressee is only possible after the sadist subject makes himself the instrument-object of another's will. Let us look in more detail at the key passage of the letter which focuses on death as the culmination of human life:

There is but one certainty in our entire existence, and that is that everything comes to an end. A child who comes into this world and fills the universe with his first cries of life will finally leave this world with a death rattle. A blade of grass which can stick out of the dark earth and is touched by the sunlight and fed by falling rain, will finally rot into dust and disappear. Death, Mrs Hirshi Ali, is a shared theme of everything in creation. You, I, and the rest of creation cannot break loose from this truth.

There will come a Day when one soul will not be able to help another soul. A Day of horrible tortures and painful tribulations which will go together with the terrible cries being pressed out of the lungs of the unjust. Cries, Mrs Hirshi Ali, which will cause chills to run up someone's spine, and cause the hair on their head to stand straight up. People will appear to be drunk with fear even though they aren't drunk. On that Great Day the atmosphere will be filled with *fear*.

The step from the first to the second paragraph is crucial here, of course; from the general platitude on how everything

passes and disintegrates, how all living ends in death, to the much more constrained, properly apocalyptic, notion of this moment of death as the moment of truth, the moment at which every creature confronts its truth and is isolated from all its links, deprived of all solidary support, absolutely alone facing the merciless judgement of its Creator – this is why the letter goes on to quote the description of Judgement Day from the Quran: ‘On that day man will flee from his brother. And the mother from the father. And the woman from her children. And every one of them on that Day shall have an occupation which is enough for them. Faces [of the unbelievers] will be covered with dust on that Day. And they will be ringed in darkness. These are the sinful unbelievers.’(Quran 80:34–42.) Then comes the key passage, the staging of the central confrontation:

Of course you as an unbelieving extremist don’t believe in the scene that is described above. For you this is just a fictitious dramatic piece out of a Book like many. And yet, Mrs Hirshi Ali, I would bet on my life that you will break into a *sweat of fear* when you read this.

You, as an unbelieving fundamentalist, of course don’t believe that there is a Higher Power who runs the universe. You don’t believe in your heart, with which you repudiate the truth, that you must knock and ask this Higher Power for permission. You don’t believe that your tongue with which you repudiate the Direction of this Higher Power is subservient to His laws. You don’t believe that this Higher Power grants life and Death.

If you really believe in all of this, then you will not find the following challenge a problem. I challenge you with this letter to prove that you are right. You don’t have to do much for that, Mrs Hirshi Ali: wish death if you are really convinced that you are right. If you do not accept this challenge, you will know that my Master, the Most High, has exposed you as a bearer of lies. ‘If you wish death, then you are being truthful.’ But the wicked ‘never wish to die, because of what their hands (and sins) have brought forth. And Allah is the all-knowing over the purveyors of lies.’ (2: 94–5.) *To prevent myself*

*from having the same wish come to me as I wish for you, I shall wish this wish for you: Master give us death to give us happiness with martyrdom.’(Italics added.)*

Each of these three paragraphs is a rhetorical pearl. In the first, it is the direct jump from the fear we humans will experience when, at the moment of death, we face God’s final judgement, to the fear that the addressee of this very letter, Hirshi Ali, will experience while reading it. This short-circuit between the fear induced by direct confrontation with God in the moment of truth, and the fear engendered here and now by reading this letter, is a trademark of perversion: Hirshi Ali’s concrete fear of being killed, aroused by Bouyeri’s letter, is elevated into an embodiment of the fear a mortal human being is expected to feel when confronted with the divine gaze. The pearl in the second paragraph is the precise example used to evoke the omnipotence of God: it is not only that Hirshi Ali doesn’t believe in God – what she should believe is that even her very slander of God (the tongue with which she is doing it) is also determined by God’s will. The finest pearl is hidden in the last paragraph, in the way that the challenge addressed to Hirshi Ali is formulated: in its brutal imposition of (not only the readiness to die, but) the wish to die as the proof of one’s truthfulness. We get here an almost imperceptible shift that signals the presence of the perverse logic: from Bouyeri’s readiness to die *for* the truth to his readiness to die as direct *proof* of his truthfulness. This is why he not only does not fear death, but actively wishes to die: from ‘If you are truthful, you should not fear death,’ a pervert passes to ‘If you wish death, you are truthful.’ This section ends in an unbelievable annexation of another person’s will: ‘I shall wish this wish for you.’ Bouyeri’s underlying reasoning is precise and consistent in its apparent incoherence: he will do what he has

to do 'to prevent myself from having the same wish come to me as I wish for you'. What can this mean? Is it not that, by wishing death, he is doing precisely what he wanted to prevent? Doesn't he accept the same wish (that of death) that he wishes for her (he wishes her dead)?

The letter does not challenge Hirshi Ali on her false beliefs; the accusation is rather that she does not really believe what she claims to believe (her secular slanders), that she doesn't have what is called 'the courage of her own convictions': 'If you really believe what you claim to believe, then accept my challenge, wish to die!' This brings us to Lacan's depiction of the pervert: the pervert displaces division onto the Other. Hirshi Ali is a divided subject, inconsistent with herself, lacking the courage of her own beliefs. To avoid getting caught in such a division, the letter's author will embrace the death wish, taking upon himself what she should have believed. So the letter's final pronouncement should not surprise us:

This struggle which has broken out is different from those of the past. The unbelieving fundamentalists have started it and the true believers will end it. There will be no mercy shown to the purveyors of injustice, only the sword will be lifted against them. No discussions, no demonstrations, no petitions: only DEATH will separate the Truth from the Lies.

There is no space left for symbolic mediation, for argumentation, reasoning, proclamations, preaching even – the only thing that separates Truth from Lie is death, the truthful subject's readiness and wish to die. No wonder Michel Foucault was fascinated by Islamic political martyrdom. In it, he discerned the contours of a 'regime of truth' different from the West's, a regime in which the ultimate indicators of truth are not factual accuracy, consistency of reasoning, or the sincerity of one's confessions, but the readiness to die.<sup>51</sup>

The late Pope John Paul II propagated the Catholic 'culture of Life' as our only hope against today's nihilist 'culture of death', whose manifestations are unbridled hedonism, abortions, drug addiction and blind reliance on scientific and technological development. Religious fundamentalism (not only Muslim, but also Christian) confronts us with another morbid 'culture of death' which is much closer to the very heart of the religious experience than believers are ready to admit.

The question we should confront here is: What, then, does the pervert miss, in his endeavour to absolutely separate Truth from Lies? The answer is, of course: *the truth of the lie itself*, the truth that is delivered in and through the very act of lying. Paradoxically, the pervert's falsity resides in his very unconditional attachment to truth, in his refusal to hear the truth resonating in a lie. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Shakespeare provided a breathtakingly refined insight into the entanglement of truth and lies. Count Bertram, who on the King's orders has been forced to marry Helen, a common doctor's daughter, refuses to live with her and consummate the marriage, telling her that he will agree to be her husband only if she obtains the ancestral ring from his finger and bears his child – events that Bertram means to prevent. At the same time, Bertram tries to seduce the young and beautiful Diana. Helen and Diana concoct a plan to bring Bertram back to his lawful wife. Diana agrees to spend the night with Bertram, telling him to visit her chamber at midnight; there, in darkness, the couple exchange their rings and make love. However, unknown to Bertram, the woman with whom he spent the night was not Diana but Helen, his wife. When they are later confronted, he has to admit that both of his conditions for recognizing the marriage are met. Helen obtained his ring and bears his child. What, then, is the status of this bed-trick?

Right at the end of Act III, Helen herself provides a wonderful definition:

Why then to-night  
Let us assay our plot; which, if it speed,  
Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed  
And lawful meaning in a wicked act,  
Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact:  
But let's about it.

We are effectively dealing both with a 'wicked meaning in a lawful deed' (what can be more lawful than a consummated marriage, a husband sleeping with his wife? And yet the meaning is wicked: Bertram thinks he is sleeping with Diana) and with a 'lawful meaning in a wicked act' (the meaning – Helen's intention – is lawful, to sleep with her husband, but the act is wicked: she deceives her husband, who takes her to bed thinking that he is cheating on her). Their affair is 'not sin, and yet a sinful fact': not sin, because what happens is merely a consummation of marriage; but a sinful fact, something that involved intentional cheating by both partners. The true question here is not 'All's well that ends well' – whether the final outcome (nothing wrong effectively happened, and the married couple is reunited, the marriage bond fully asserted) cancels the sinful tricks and intentions – but a more radical one: what if the rule of law can only be asserted through wicked (sinful) meanings and acts? What if, in order to rule, the law has to rely on the subterranean interplay of cheatings and deceptions? This is what Lacan aims at with his paradoxical proposition *Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* (There is no sexual relationship): was not Bertram's situation during the night of love the fate of most married couples? You make love to your lawful partner while 'cheating in your mind', fantasizing that you are doing it with another partner.

The actual sex relationship has to be sustained by this phantasmatic supplement.

*As You Like It* proposes a different version of this logic of double deception. Orlando is passionately in love with Rosalind, who, in order to test his love, disguises herself as Ganymede and, as a male companion, interrogates Orlando about his love. She even takes on the personality of Rosalind (in a redoubled masking, she pretends to be herself, to be Ganymede who plays at being Rosalind) and persuades her friend Celia (disguised as Aliena) to marry them in a mock ceremony. In this ceremony, Rosalind literally feigns to feign to be what she is: truth itself, in order to win, has to be *staged* in a redoubled deception – in an analogous way to *All's Well*, in which marriage, in order to be asserted, has to be consummated in the guise of an extra-marital affair.

Appearance similarly overlaps with truth in one's ideological self-perception. Recall Marx's brilliant analysis of how, in the French revolution of 1848, the conservative-republican Party of Order functioned as a coalition of the two branches of royalism (Orleanists and Legitimists) in the 'anonymous kingdom of the Republic'.<sup>52</sup> The parliamentary deputies of the Party of Order perceived their republicanism as a mockery: in parliamentary debates, they made royalist slips of the tongue and ridiculed the Republic to let it be known that their true aim was to restore the monarchy. What they were not aware of is that they themselves were duped as to the true social impact of their rule. They unknowingly established the conditions of bourgeois republican order that they so despised (by for instance guaranteeing the safety of private property). So it is not that they were royalists who were just wearing a republican mask: although they experienced themselves as such, it was their 'inner' royalist conviction that was the deceptive front masking their true social role. In short, far

from being the hidden truth of their public republicanism, their sincere royalism was the phantasmatic backer of their actual republicanism – it was what provided the passion in their activity. Is it not the case, then, that the deputies of the Party of Order were also *feigning to feign* to be republicans, to be what they really were?

From the Lacanian perspective, what then is *appearance* at its most radical? Imagine a man who is having an affair unbeknownst to his wife. When he is meeting his lover, he pretends to be on a business trip or some such. After some time, he musters up his courage and tells his wife the truth: that when he is away, he is staying with his lover. However, at this point, when the façade of happy marriage falls apart, the mistress breaks down and, out of sympathy with the abandoned wife, avoids meeting her lover. What should the husband do in order not to give his wife the wrong signal? How does he prevent her from concluding that the fact that he is going on fewer business trips means that he is returning to her? He has to *fake* the affair and leave home for a couple of days, generating the false impression that the affair is continuing, while in fact he is just staying with some friend. This is appearance at its purest: it occurs not when we put up a deceptive screen to conceal a transgression, but when we feign that there is a transgression to conceal. In this precise sense, fantasy itself is for Lacan a semblance: it is not primarily the mask that conceals the Real beneath, but, rather, the fantasy of what is hidden behind the mask. So, for instance, the fundamental male fantasy of the woman is not her seductive appearance, but the idea that this dazzling appearance conceals some imponderable mystery.

To demonstrate the structure of such redoubled deception, Lacan recalled the story of the competition in ancient Greece, between the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios, to see who could

paint a more convincing illusion.<sup>53</sup> Zeuxis produced a picture of grapes so realistic that hungry birds were lured into pecking at it. Parrhasios won when he painted a curtain on the wall of his room. When Zeuxis came to visit him, he asked Parrhasios to ‘Please draw the curtain and show me what you painted!’ In Zeuxis’ painting, the illusion was so convincing that the image was taken for the real thing; in Parrhasios’ painting, the illusion resided in the very notion that what the viewer saw was a humdrum curtain screening the hidden truth. For Lacan, this is also the function of the feminine masquerade: she wears a mask to make us respond like Zeuxis in front of Parrhasios’ painting – *OK, take off the mask and show us who you really are!* Likewise, we can imagine Orlando, after the mock wedding ceremony, turning to Rosalind-Ganymede and telling her: ‘You played Rosalind so well that you almost made me believe you were her; now you can return to what you are and be Ganymede again.’ It is no accident that the agents of such double masquerades are always women: a man can only pretend to be a woman; only a woman can pretend to be a man who is pretending to be a woman, because only a woman can *pretend to be what she is* – to be a woman.

To account for this specifically feminine status of pretending, Lacan refers to a woman who wears a concealed fake penis in order to convey that she is phallus:

Such is woman concealed behind her veil: it is the absence of the penis that makes her the phallus, the object of desire. Evoke this absence in a more precise way by having her wear a cute fake one under a fancy dress, and you, or rather she, will have plenty to tell us about.<sup>54</sup>

The logic is here more complex than it may appear: it is not merely that the obviously fake penis evokes the absence of the ‘real’ penis; in a strict parallel with Parrhasios’ painting, the

man's first reaction upon seeing the contours of the fake penis is: 'Take that ridiculous fake off and show me what you've got underneath!' The man thereby misses how the fake penis is the real thing: the 'phallus' that the woman is, is the shadow generated by the fake penis, i.e. the spectre of the non-existent 'real' phallus beneath the cover of the fake one. In this precise sense, the feminine masquerade has the structure of mimicry, since, for Lacan, in mimicry I do not imitate the image I want to fit into, but those features of the image that seem to indicate that there is some hidden reality behind. As with Parrhasios, I do not imitate the grapes, but the veil: 'Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind.'<sup>55</sup> The status of phallus itself is that of a mimicry. Phallus is ultimately a kind of blotch on the human body, an excessive feature that does not fit the body and thereby generates the illusion of another hidden reality behind the image.

This brings us back to perversion. For Lacan, a pervert is not defined by the content of what he is doing (his weird sexual practices). Perversion, at its most fundamental, resides in the formal structure of how the pervert relates to truth and speech. The pervert claims direct access to some figure of the big Other (from God or history to the desire of his partner), so that, dispelling all the ambiguity of language, he is able to act directly as the instrument of the big Other's will. In this sense, both Osama bin Laden and President Bush, although political opponents, share the structures of a pervert. They both act upon the presupposition that their acts are directly ordered and guided by divine will.

The recent tide of religious fundamentalism in the US – around half of US adults have beliefs that can be considered 'fundamentalist' – is sustained by the predominance of a perverse libidinal economy. A fundamentalist does not believe, he

knows it directly. Both liberal-sceptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe, in the proper sense of the term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision that installs all authentic beliefs, a decision that cannot be based on a chain of reasonings, on positive knowledge. Think of Anne Frank, who in the face of the terrifying depravity of the Nazis, in a true act of *credo quia absurdum*, asserted her belief that there is a divine spark of goodness in every human being, no matter how depraved he or she is. This statement does not concern facts, it is posited as a pure ethical axiom. In the same way, the status of universal human rights is that of a pure belief: they cannot be grounded in our knowledge of human nature, they are an axiom posited by our decision. (The moment one tries to ground universal human rights in our knowledge of humanity, the inevitable conclusion will be that people are fundamentally different, that some have more dignity and wisdom than others.) At its most fundamental, authentic belief does not concern facts, but gives expression to an unconditional ethical commitment.

For both liberal cynics and religious fundamentalists, religious statements are quasi-empirical statements of direct knowledge: fundamentalists accept them as such, while sceptical cynics mock them. No wonder that religious fundamentalists are among the most passionate digital hackers, and always prone to combine their religion with the latest findings of science. For them, religious statements and scientific statements belong to the same modality of positive knowledge. The occurrence of the term 'science' in the very name of some of the fundamentalist sects (Christian Science, Scientology) is not just an obscene joke, but signals this reduction of belief to positive knowledge. The case of the Turin Shroud (a piece of cloth that was allegedly used to cover the body of the dead



Christ and had stains of his blood) is instructive here. Its authenticity would be a horror for every true believer (the first thing to do would be to analyse the DNA of the bloodstains and resolve empirically the question of who Jesus's father was), while a true fundamentalist would rejoice in this opportunity. We find the same reduction of belief to knowledge in today's Islam, which abounds with hundreds of books by scientists that 'demonstrate' how the latest scientific advances confirm the insights and injunctions of the Quran: the divine prohibition of incest is confirmed by recent genetic knowledge about the defective children born of incest. The same goes for Buddhism, where many scientists play on the motif of 'the Tao of modern physics', of how the contemporary scientific vision of reality as a substanceless flux of oscillating events has finally confirmed the ancient Buddhist ontology.<sup>56</sup> One is compelled to draw the paradoxical conclusion that in the opposition between traditional secular humanists and religious fundamentalists, it is the humanists who stand for belief, while fundamentalists stand for knowledge. This is what we can learn from Lacan about the rise of religious fundamentalism: its true danger does not reside in its threat to secular scientific knowledge, but in its threat to authentic belief itself.

Perhaps the proper way to end this book is to mention the case of Sophia Karpai, the head of the cardiographic unit of the Kremlin Hospital in the late 1940s. Her act, the opposite of the perverse elevation of oneself into an instrument of the big Other, deserves to be called a true ethical act in the Lacanian sense. Her misfortune was that it was her job to twice take electrocardiograms of Andrei Zhdanov, on 25 July 1948 and again on 31 July, days before Zhdanov's death from heart failure. The first ECG, taken after Zhdanov displayed

some heart symptoms, was inconclusive (a heart attack could be neither confirmed nor excluded), while the second surprisingly showed a more favourable picture (the intraventricular blockage had disappeared, a clear indication that there was no heart attack). In 1951 she was arrested on the charge that, in league with other doctors treating Zhdanov, she had falsified clinical data, erasing the clear indications that a heart attack *had* occurred, and so depriving Zhdanov of the special care needed by the victim of a heart attack. After harsh treatment, including continuous brutal beating, all the other accused doctors confessed. 'Sophia Karpai, whom her boss Vinogradov had described as nothing more than "a typical person of the street with the morals of the petty bourgeoisie"', was kept in a refrigerated cell without sleep to compel a confession. She did not confess.<sup>57</sup> The impact and significance of her perseverance cannot be overestimated: her signature would have dotted the final *i* in the prosecutor's case on the 'doctors' plot', immediately setting in motion machinery that, once rolling, would have led to the death of hundreds of thousands, maybe even to a new European war (according to Stalin's plan, the 'doctors' plot' was intended to demonstrate that the Western intelligence agencies had tried to murder top Soviet leaders, and thus to provide an excuse to attack Western Europe). Karpai held out just long enough for Stalin to enter his final coma, after which the entire case was immediately dismissed. Her simple heroism was crucial in the series of details which, 'like grains of sand in the gears of the huge machine that had been set in motion, prevented another catastrophe in Soviet society and politics generally, and saved the lives of thousands, if not millions, of innocent people.'<sup>58</sup>

This simple persistence against all odds is ultimately the stuff ethics is made of – or, as Samuel Beckett puts it in the last

words of the absolute masterpiece of twentieth-century literature, *The Unnameable*, a saga of the drive that perseveres in the guise of an undead partial object, ‘in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.’<sup>59</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge 1992, p. 307 (cited below as *Ethics*).
- 2 See Todd Dufresne, *Killing Freud: 20th Century Culture and the Death of Psychoanalysis*, London: Continuum Books 2004.
- 3 *Le livre noir du communisme*, Paris: Robert Laffont 2000.
- 4 *Le livre noir de la psychanalyse: vivre, penser et aller mieux sans Freud*, Paris: Arènes 2005.
- 5 One final note: since this book is an introduction to Lacan, focused on some of his basic concepts, and since this topic is the focus of my work in the last decades, there was no way to avoid some cannibalization of my already-published books. To compensate, I have taken great care to give to each of these borrowed passages a new twist here.
- 6 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits. A Selection*, translated by Bruce Fink, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2002, p. 61–2 (cited below as *Ecrits*).
- 7 Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*, London: Picador 1994, p. 172.
- 8 Adam Morton, *On Evil*, London: Routledge 2004, p. 51.
- 9 *Ecrits*, pp. 72–3.
- 10 *Ecrits*, pp. 72–3.
- 11 *Ethics*, p. 247.
- 12 I rely here on Robert Pfaller, *Illusionen der Anderen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2003.
- 13 See Michel de Certeau, ‘What We Do When We Believe’, in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1985, p. 200.
- 14 The same goes for marriage: the implicit presupposition (or, rather, injunction) of the ideology of marriage is that, precisely, there should be no love in it. The Pascalian formula of marriage is therefore not ‘You don’t love your partner? Then marry him or

- her, go through the ritual of shared life, and love will emerge by itself!', but, on the contrary 'Are you too much in love with somebody? Then get married, ritualize your love relationship, so as to cure your passionate attachment, and replace it with boring routine – and if you can't resist passion's temptation, there are always extramarital affairs . . .'
- 15 'Signifier' is a technical term, coined by Saussure, which Lacan uses in a very precise way: it is not simply the material aspect of a sign (as opposed to 'signified', its meaning), but a feature, a mark, which represents the subject. I am what I am through signifiers that represent me, signifiers constitute my symbolic identity.
- 16 Lacan identifies hysteria with neurosis. The other main form of neurosis, obsessional neurosis, is for him a 'dialect of hysteria'.
- 17 Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Avions-nous oublié le mal? Penser la politique après le 11 septembre*, Paris: Bayard 2002.
- 18 See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge (Ma): Harvard University Press 1971 (revised edition 1999).
- 19 See Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994.
- 20 *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*, London: Routledge 1981, p. 48.
- 21 *Ecrits*, p. 300.
- 22 Guillermo Arriaga, *21 Grams*, London: Faber & Faber 2003, p. 107.
- 23 The link between Lacan and J. L. Austin, the author of the notion of performative, was Emile Benveniste.
- 24 Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, New York: Little, Brown & Company 1991, p. 132.
- 25 This is also the reason why *men who actually perform rapes do not fantasize about raping women* – on the contrary, they fantasize about being gentle, about finding a loving partner; rape is rather a violent *passage à l'acte* emerging from their incapacity to find such a partner in real life.
- 26 Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, New York: Macmillan 1963, p. 101.
- 27 Of course, the obvious feminist point would be that what women witness in their everyday love experience is rather the opposite scenario: you kiss a beautiful young man and, after you get too close to him, i.e. when it is already too late, you find that he is actually a frog, maybe an alcoholic frog.

- 28 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1979, pp. 57–8 (cited below as *FFC*).
- 29 *FFC*, pp. 197–8. Here is a case of how, in reading Lacan, one should pass from a Seminar to the corresponding *écrit* – the *écrit* corresponding to *Seminar XI* is 'Position of the Unconscious', which contains a very dense, but also more precise, formulation of the myth of the *lamella*. *L'objet petit a* (the object small a, where 'a' stands for 'the other', the 'object small other' – following Lacan's wish, the term is often left untranslated) is Lacan's neologism with multiple meanings. Principally it designates the object-cause of desire: not directly the object of desire, but that which, in the object we desire, makes us desire it.
- 30 Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, London: Routledge 2001, p. 19.
- 31 Jacques Lacan, *Le triomphe de la religion, précédé de Discours aux catholiques*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 2005, pp. 93–4 (cited below as *Triomphe*).
- 32 *Triomphe*, pp. 96–7.
- 33 Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, New York: Doubleday 1988, p. 222.
- 34 Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*, New York: Norton 1999, pp. 116–19.
- 35 Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality (The Seminar, Book XX)*, New York: Norton 1998, p. 3.
- 36 *Ethics*, p. 310.
- 37 *Ethics*, p. 314.
- 38 I rely here on Richard Maltby, "'A Brief Romantic Interlude": Dick and Jane go to 3½ Seconds of the Classic Hollywood Cinema', in *Post-Theory*, David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, eds, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1996, pp. 434–59.
- 39 Maltby, p. 443.
- 40 Maltby, p. 441.
- 41 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1960, p. 51.
- 42 *FFC*, p. 59.
- 43 So that, combining this dream with the dream we interpreted in Chapter 3 about the dead son who appears to the father with the terrible appeal 'Father, can't you see that I'm burning?', Lacan's statement can also be paraphrased as the reproach to the God-Father: 'Father, can't you see that you're dead?'

- 44 *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, New York: Norton 1988, p. 128.
- 45 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1990, p. 163.
- 46 Quoted from Jana Cerna, *Kafka's Milena*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1993, p. 174.
- 47 The very beginning of the story involves a strange denial of Rimbaud's *Je est un autre*: 'This is not me; this is an entirely other person.'
- 48 *FFC*, p. 185.
- 49 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1963, p. 98.
- 50 Available at <http://www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/320>.
- 51 See Janet Avery and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2005.
- 52 See Karl Marx, 'Class Struggles in France', *Collected Works*, vol. 10, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1978, p. 95.
- 53 See *FFC*, p. 103.
- 54 *Ecrits*, p. 310.
- 55 *FFC*, p. 99.
- 56 One of the ridiculous excesses of this joint venture of religious fundamentalism and the scientific approach is taking place today in Israel, where a religious group convinced of the literal truth of the Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah will come when a calf that is totally red is born, is expending huge amounts of time and energy to produce such a calf, through genetic engineering.
- 57 Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime*, New York: HarperCollins 2003, p. 307.
- 58 Brent and Naumov, p. 297.
- 59 Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy*, London: Calder Publications 2003, p. 418.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1901** 13 April, Jacques-Marie-Émile Lacan is born in Paris, to a family of solid Catholic tradition. He is educated at the Collège Stanislas, a Jesuit school. After his *baccalauréat* he studies medicine and later psychiatry.
- 1927** Starts clinical training, works at Sainte-Anne's hospital. A year later he works in the Special Infirmary Service where Clérambault had a practice.
- 1932** Awarded doctorate for his thesis, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*.
- 1933** The richness of his thesis, especially the analysis of the case of Aimée, makes him famous with the Surrealists. Between this year and 1939 he takes Kojève's course at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, an 'Introduction to the reading of Hegel'.
- 1934** He marries Marie-Louise Blondin, mother of Caroline, Thibaut and Sibylle. While in analysis with Rudolph Loewenstein, Lacan becomes a member of La Société Psychoanalytique de Paris (SPP).
- 1940** Works at Val-de-Grâce, the military hospital in Paris. During the German Occupation, he does not take part in any official activity.
- 1946** In 1946, the SPP resumes its activities and Lacan, with Nacht and Lagache, takes charge of training analyses and supervisory controls and plays an important theoretical and institutional role.
- 1951** The SPP begins to raise the issue of Lacan's short sessions, as opposed to the standard analytical hour.
- 1953** In January Lacan is elected President of the SPP. Six months later he resigns to join the Société Française de Psychanalyse (SFP) with D. Lagache, F. Dolto, J. Favez-Boutonier among others. In Rome, Lacan delivers his report, 'Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage'. On 17 July he marries Sylvia Maklès, mother of Judith. That autumn Lacan starts his seminars at the Hôpital Sainte-Anne.

- 1954** The first ten seminars elaborate fundamental notions about psychoanalytic technique, the essential concepts of psychoanalysis, and its ethics. During this period Lacan writes, on the basis of his seminars, conferences and addresses in colloquia, the major texts that are found in *Ecrits* in 1966.
- 1956** Celebrities are attracted to his seminars (Jean Hyppolite's analysis of Freud's article on *Dénégation*, given during the first seminar, is a well-known example). Alexandre Koyré, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the ethnologist Marcel Griaule, Emile Benveniste among others attend his courses.
- 1962** SFP members want to be recognized by the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA). The IPA issues an ultimatum: Lacan's name must be crossed off the list of didacticians.
- 1963** Two weeks before the expiry of the deadline set by the IPA (31 October), the committee of didacticians of the SFP gives up its courageous stand of 1962 and pronounces in favour of the ban: Lacan is no longer one of the didacticians.
- 1964** Lacanians form a Study Group on Psychoanalysis organized by Jean Clavreul, until Lacan officially founds L'École Française de Psychanalyse, which soon becomes L'École Freudienne de Paris (EFP). With Lévi-Strauss and Althusser's support, he is appointed lecturer at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes.
- 1965** In January Lacan begins his new seminar on 'The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis' at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. His audience is made up of analysts and young students in philosophy at the ENS, notably Jacques-Alain Miller.
- 1966** *Ecrits*, Paris: Seuil 1966. The book draws considerable attention to the EFP, extending far beyond the intelligentsia.
- 1967** Lacan presents the *Acte de Fondation* of the EFP; its novelty lies in the procedure of *passé*. The *passé* consists of testifying, in front of two *passés*, to one's experience as an analysand and especially to the crucial moment of passage from the position of analysand to that of analyst. The *passés* are chosen by their analysts (generally analysts of the EFP) and should be at the same stage in their analytic experience as the *passant*. They listen to him and then, in turn, they testify to what they have heard in front of a committee for approval composed of the director, Lacan, and of some AE, *analyste de l'école* (analyst of the school). This committee's function is to select the analysts of the School and to elaborate, after the selecting process, a 'work of doctrine'.

- 1969** The issue of the *passé* keeps invading the EFP's life. 'Le quatrième groupe' is formed around those who resign from the EFP disputing over Lacan's methods for the analysts' training and accreditation. Lacan takes a stand in the crisis of the university that follows May 1968: 'If psychoanalysis cannot be articulated as a knowledge and taught as such, it has no place in the university, which deals only with knowledge.' The ENS director finds a pretext for telling Lacan that he is no longer welcome at the ENS at the beginning of the academic year. Moreover, the journal *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* has to cease publication, but Vincennes appears as an alternative. Michel Foucault asks Lacan to create and direct the Department of Psychoanalysis at Vincennes. Thanks to Lévi-Strauss, Lacan moves his seminars to the law school at the Panthéon.
- 1974** The Vincennes Department of Psychoanalysis is renamed 'Le Champ freudien' with Lacan its director and Jacques-Alain Miller its president.
- 1980** On 9 January, Lacan announces the dissolution of the EFP and asks those who wish to continue working with him to state their intentions in writing. He receives over one thousand letters within a week. On 21 February, Lacan announces the founding of the school *La Cause freudienne*, later renamed *L'école de la Cause freudienne*.
- 1981** 9 September, Lacan dies in Paris.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Disregarding occasional short texts (introductions and after-words, transcribed improvised interventions and interviews, etc.), Lacan's oeuvre clearly falls into two groups: seminars (conducted in front of a growing public every week during the school year from 1953 till his death) and *écrits* (written theoretical texts). The paradox pointed out by Jean-Claude Milner is that, in contrast to the usual division between secret oral teaching and printed works for the general public, Lacan's *écrits* are 'elitist', readable only to an inner circle, while his seminars are intended for a wider audience, and, as such, are much more accessible. It is as if Lacan first directly develops a certain theoretical line in a straightforward way, with all its oscillations and blind alleys, and then goes on to condense the result in precise, but compressed, ciphers. In fact, Lacan's seminars and *écrits* relate like the discourse of analysand and analyst during treatment. In seminars, Lacan acts as analysand: he 'free-associates', improvises, skips and jumps, addressing his public, which is thus put into the role of a kind of collective analyst. In comparison, his writings are more condensed, formulaic; they throw out unreadable, ambiguous propositions that often appear like oracles, challenging the reader to start working on them, to translate them into clear theses and provide examples and logical demonstrations of their sense. In contrast to the usual academic procedure, where the author formulates a thesis and then tries to sustain it through arguments,

not only does Lacan more often than not leave this work to the reader, but often the reader must even determine what exactly is Lacan's actual thesis among the multitude of conflicting formulations or the ambiguity of a single oracular formulation. In this precise sense, Lacan's *écrits* are like an analyst's interventions, whose aim is not to provide the analysand with a ready-made opinion or statement, but to set the analysand to work.

So what and how to read? *Écrits* or seminars? The only proper answer is a variation on the old 'tea or coffee' joke: Yes, please! One should read both. If you go directly to the *écrits*, you won't get anything, so you should start – but not stop – with the seminars since, if you read nothing but the seminars, you also won't get it. The impression that the seminars are clearer and more transparent than the *écrits* is deeply misleading: they often oscillate, experiment with different approaches. The proper way is to read a seminar and then go on to read the corresponding *écrit* so as to 'get the point' of the seminar. We are dealing here with a temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* (crudely translated as 'action deferred') which is proper to the analytic treatment itself: the *écrits* are clear, they provide precise formulas, but we can only understand them after reading the seminars that fill in their background. Two outstanding cases are *Seminar VII* on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* and the corresponding *écrit* 'Kant avec Sade', as well as *Seminar XI* on the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* and 'The Position of the Unconscious'.

More than half of Lacan's seminars are now available in French; the English translations that follow with a couple of years' delay are usually of a high quality. The *écrits* are now available only in selection (the new translation by Bruce Fink is much better than the old one; Fink has also translated the complete *Écrits*, which will appear soon). Lacan himself conferred on Jacques-Alain Miller the task of editing his seminars

for publication, designating him as 'the (only) one who knows how to read me'. In this, he was right: Miller's numerous writings and his own seminars are by far the best introduction to Lacan. At his best, Miller accomplishes the miracle of rendering an obscure page from the *écrits* completely transparent, so that one is left wondering: 'How is it that I didn't get it myself?' For the individual seminars, there are volumes 'Reading Seminar . . .', published by the SUNY Press (with the exception of the last one, on *Seminar XVII*, due from Duke University Press).

Here are some other indispensable books:

The best short general introduction to Lacan: Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, London: Routledge 2005.

The best clinical introductions: Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999; Darian Leader, *Why Do Women Write More Letters Than They Post?*, London: Faber & Faber 1996.

The best essays on Lacan and philosophy: Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1994; Alenka Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real*, London: Verso 2000.

The best of what Lacanians refer to as the 'connections of the Freudian Field' (Lacanian reading of cultural and social phenomena): Eric Santner, *My Own Private Germany*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996; Mladen Dolar, *Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge: MIT Press 2006.

For a biography of Lacan, Elisabeth Roudinesco's *Jacques Lacan: An Outline of a Life and a History of a System of Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1999) can still be considered the best, providing a tremendous amount of data (although its interpretations are sometimes problematic).

And, last but not least, of the numerous websites dedicated to Lacan, the best is still lacan.com, run in New York by the indefatigable Josefina Ayerza.

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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, philosopher and psychoanalyst, heads the International Center of Humanities at Birkbeck College. His numerous books, translated into more than thirty languages, include *The Parallax View* and *Lacan: The Silent Partners*. SIMON CRITCHLEY is the series editor and a professor of philosophy at The New School in New York City.



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