

PURITANISM AND JOUISSANCE

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My starting point is a question put by Vincent Dachy to the CFAR seminar series on jouissance.

Why is there not an exact term for jouissance in the English language? Why does jouissance remain untranslated, perhaps untranslatable and does this problem of translation cause something of an impasse in terms of Lacan's reception in England and the English speaking world?

Must Lacan in English always be a "sort of cultural translation" as some have argued? [Benvenuto, 1994, p.ix], And what does Lacan and Lacanianism in England mean?

And yet we know that Lacan was something of a declared Anglophile. There is his interest in Jeremy Bentham and also evidence, particularly in the period of the 1960s and 70s, of a deep interest in the analytical philosophy and logic of Russell and Frege.

(Although, how much the above philosophy can be described as English is open to some debate).

In many ways it is easier to conceptualise Bentham's philosophy as developing out of the Scottish Enlightenment tradition and in his excellent overview of the whole area The Origins of Analytical Philosophy [1994], the Fregean scholar, Michael Dummett, argues that analytical philosophy owes more to German and Viennese sources and is, in many ways, un-English, although appropriated by that most English of places Oxford in the 1950s. Dummett places particular emphasis on Frege's debate with Husserl: opening up a wider area for discussion about the relationship of phenomenology and Analytical philosophy.

Having said this and having also digressed a little, I want now to propose a hypothesis (which is admittedly a little tongue in cheek) that the English resistance to Lacan is connected to another English resistance, the English refusal in the C17th to accept an absolute monarchy and coupled to this the attempt during the English Reformation to establish a puritan ethic and thus master the jouissance of the Age.

However, having just proposed my hypothesis I am already working against the historical evidence; for example, England and Englishness is not just a socially constructed and historically specific moment. It is itself a signifier. One authority, the English historian Christopher Hill, has argued that England and our sense of what Englishness is emerged from our linguistic relationship to France. Indeed Hill points out that the use of the English language languished for over 300 years, and it only began to be reused in the mid to late 1300s.

Most people, particularly nobles, including the Kings of England, spoke French and Hill notes that the oldest piece of Parliamentary English, dates from only 1386 and that what we know as the origin of English literature, the poetry of Chaucer, Langland, Gower and the poet of Gawain and the Green Knight, and Pearl, appeared in a rush. Without any irony, Hill comments that the One Hundred Years war with

France might have had something to do with the decline of French as both a spoken and written language, but Hill saves the thrust of his argument for his contention that it was the development of the printed word and in particular the printing of the Bible in the English vernacular that led to the emergence of English as a language and the English sense of itself as a nation. Indeed, another authority states that during the English Revolution over 20,000 religious pamphlets were published in England [Roberts, 1984].

My attempt then to argue that in the English ethic that emerges during the period of the C17th is an ethic on the side of, and not beyond, the pleasure principle and is therefore an attempt, albeit a failed one, to master jouissance which will run aground for a precise historical and biographical reason.

Put simply, this “puritan ethic” as it appeared in its Calvinistic guise was developed by a Frenchman and its foundational base was not England, but Geneva. John Calvin had broken with Catholicism under the influence of the Protestant evangelists.

The briefest sketch of Calvin’s doctrine would state that men suffered from an absolute depravity after the Fall, that there was no possibility of salvation except for an elected few and these elect few were predestined to be saved by God. Nobody knew who was destined for salvation and who was damned and therefore one took an almost Pascalian wager and acted as if one was saved. This paradoxically led to two things:

- 1) A universal suffrage in terms of religious participation and,
- 2) The belief that one did not rely on good works for salvation; within reason, one could do and produce what one liked. This of course led to the development of capitalism and production, for the market was no longer the moral or religious place it had been in the medieval era.

The other and earlier side of this sixteenth and seventeenth century religious coin is the movement associated with the teachings of Martin Luther. Luther was a German Augustinian monk, who inhabited a small province at the back and beyond of Wittenberg.

Luther had been to Rome and was angered by the wealth of the church. He printed 95 theses condemning papal practice. These were first printed in Latin, but later re-printed in the German vernacular. In 1520 Luther was excommunicated. The historian Roberts described how “before a wondering audience he burnt the bull of excommunication in the same fire as the books of canon law”.

But Luther was far more than ‘just’ critical of the Church of Rome. Indeed in his seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Lacan constructs a complex defence of Luther’s teaching and this is my final reason for abandoning my earlier hypothesis. For, in this seminar, Lacan tells how “the Freudian project has brought us down to earth”. Man, he says, is no longer concerned with inhabiting cosmological projections, for like the Feuerbachian inversion of Hegel’s speculative metaphysics “the Freudian project has caused the whole world to re-enter us, has definitely put it back in its place, that is to say in our body, and nowhere else” [P.92].

Lacan reminds us that before the advent of modern man, “both scientific and theological thought were preoccupied by something that Freud did not hesitate to

mention and call by its name, but about which we never speak anymore, the figure who was a long time known as the Prince of this world, *Diabolus* himself" [P.92].

Here Lacan says the symbolic is united with the diabolic, with all those forms that seventeenth century theological preaching so powerfully articulated.

It is at this point that Lacan implores us to read Luther. Not only, he says, the Table talk but the Sermons as well. In doing this he believes we will discover "images that are very familiar to us, because they have been invested with the quality of scientific authentication", derived from our daily experience of psychoanalytic practice [P.92].

Lacan is trying to draw a direct affiliation between the Freudian experience and what later in the seminar he describes as the "filiation or cultural paternity that exists between Freud and a new direction - one that is apparent at the break which occurred towards the beginning of the sixteenth century, but whose repercussions are felt up to the end of the seventeenth century" [P.97].

Not to recognise this filiation, Lacan adds, "constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding of the kind of problems Freud's intellectual project was trying to address" [P.97].

Here we need to ask ourselves, what were these Freudian problems? And index this to a further question posed by Lacan, what do Luther and Freud have in common?

We will find our first answer to this question by exploring Freud's relations to the Church Fathers as a whole. Indeed, throughout his teaching, Lacan implores us to read religious authors; "not those" he says "who are all sweetness and light", but those like Luther who speak of Man's dereliction and fall, and God's original hatred for us, a hatred that existed before the beginning of the world. Lacan says that this is fully articulated by Luther in his famous saying that "man is the waste matter that falls into the world from the Devil's anus" [P.93].

This pre-dates and also reforms the Heideggerian idea of a human being as a being thrown into the world: thrown to death. (We might also add Samuel Beckett's black and humorous aside "that astride of a grave it is a difficult birth").

We are born then into something and this something is already a beyond. A beyond of both the good and of the pleasure principle. It is a world where life is already substituted by the signifier 'death'.

For Lacan argues that Freud is trying to tell us "the same thing as Saint Paul", namely that what governs us on the path of our pleasure is not sovereign good, and that moreover beyond a certain limit, we are in a thoroughly enigmatic position relative to that which lies within *das Ding*, because there is no ethical rule which can act as a mediator between our pleasure and its real rule [P.95].

This false desire for the Good, that is the leading of a happy and virtuous life, has (says Lacan) "been the eternal object of the philosophical quest in the sphere of ethics" [P.96].

We might refer here, as an example, to Socrates discussion in the Gorgias as to whether or not a virtuous life can be taught, and his elenctic demonstration in the Meno with the slave boy that it cannot be taught but only recollected.

Through a reading of Civilisation and its Discontents (1929) Lacan argues that Freud radically denied the Good. For Freud is concerned, like Luther, with the problem of evil, and this Lacan links to what he describes as Freud's central question: the question of the Father.

Lacan refers us to Luther's dispute with Erasmus. Erasmus had reminded Luther, (whom Lacan refers to as that "excitable mad man from Wittenberg") that the authoritative Christian tradition, from the words of Christ to Saint Paul, Augustine and the Church Fathers (we could add here the name of Aquinas) led one to believe that works, good works, were not nothing, and that to be sure the tradition of the philosophers on the subject of the Sovereign Good (here we should mention Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, arguably the key text for Lacan in this context) was not to be thrown out [P.97].

Luther in his return service to Erasmus, emphasised not a fundamental or sovereign goodness between men, but an evil at the heart of all things. Lacan formalises this by saying that Luther was aware that at the heart of man's destiny is the Thing, and this Thing is the cause of "the most fundamental human passion" [P.97].

This original and foundational evil is, says Lacan, what Freud deals with in Totem and Taboo when he depicts the Father as "the tyrant of the primitive horde, the one against whom the original crime was committed and who for that very reason introduced the order, essence and foundation of the domain of law" [P.97]; and it is for this reason that Lacan argues that the Father (we could substitute the word God) is always dead, always the Father of law, always, that is, "the Name of the Father".

What Lacan is plotting for us here is the relation of law and evil, the law and *das Ding*. Elsewhere in the seminar, speaking of the death of the Father, Lacan remarks how "the Christian tradition alone pursues to the end the task of revealing what is involved in the primordial crime of the primordial law".

Here Lacan is also staging the relationship of law to desire and this may give me the opportunity to resurrect my earlier hypothesis, that Reformation Christianity attempted to master jouissance: for Lacan says that "the mystery of the original act", articulated by Freud in Totem and Taboo (1913) as the murder of the Father, is designed to hide something: for not only does the murder of the Father not open up the path to jouissance that the presence of the Father was supposed to prohibit, but in fact, it strengthens the prohibition.

The jouissance being referred to is the jouissance acquired by the Father from his relation to the women: that is his ability to have them all. With the establishment of the symbolic law, the raising of the totem, following the guilt which followed the killing of the Father, access to the women is regulated and barred.

Given Lacan's equation of the Thing with Sin, in his comments on St. Paul's epistles and also his argument in the seminar that the lack of the woman occupies for the man the place of the Thing (there is Lacan's point that "The question of *das Ding* is still attached to whatever is open, lacking or gaping at the centre of our desire" p.84). It is interesting to note that Lacan, via a play on words, attempts to transform the original damage, that is the original non-rapport of the relation between man and woman, into our Dame which Lacan says is "the archaic French sense of our Lady" (p.84). We sin, that is, before our Lady. Can we therefore say that it is not women who are sinful, but that men sin before The woman; that is the Lady as the Thing?

At this point, I want to refer to Lacan's comments on the famous image of the potter, shaping and fashioning of a vase, an image that Lacan appropriates from Heidegger's essay on *das Ding* [P.120].

"Now if you consider" says Lacan [P.121] "the vase ... as an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the centre of the real that is called the Thing, this emptiness as represented in the representation, presents itself as *nihil*, as nothing". By this Lacan means that the potter is involved in creation ex-nihilo, that is, he is creating something out of nothing. Lacan says that the potter is just like "the mythical creator", who starts with a hole and fashions a signifier out of an empty place. Eventually, just like the creator, the potter steps back and stands amazed at the goodness of the work. "It is always fine" says Lacan "from the side of the work" [P.120] but the work is both more and less than the work. In Marxist terms there is the surplus in the product and yet this surplus, this supposed symptom of capital, is paradoxically a surplus of nothing. The surplus of no-thing.

Later in the seminar, Lacan identifies The woman, as depicted in the courtly love tradition, as occupying the place of this No-thing. Discussing a ten line stanza by the troubadour poet Arnould Daniel, Lacan remarks that: "The idealised woman, the Lady, who is in the position both of the Other and the object, finds herself suddenly and brutally positing, in a place knowingly constructed out of the most refined of signifiers, emptiness in all its crudity, a thing that reveals itself in its nudity to be the Thing, her thing, the one that is to be found at the centre of her very heart in its cruel emptiness" [P.163].

Later, discussing the same poem, Lacan tells how "the woman responds for once from her place and instead of playing along, at the extreme point of his invocation to the signifier, she warns the poet of the form she may take as signifier. I am, she tells him, nothing more than the emptiness to be found in my own internal cesspit" [P.215].

A moment before returning to Daniel's poem, Lacan had linked this cruel emptiness to the Freudian death drive. Freud's death drive points to a site that Lacan believes Freud designated "alternatively as impassable or as the site of the Thing" [P.213]. Freud, Lacan argues, evokes the death instinct in so far as sublimation is fundamentally creationist and Lacan goes on to argue that the moment of creation-ex-nihilo gives 'birth' to the historical dimension of the drive. The drive is structured through the signifier. For Lacan says, in the beginning was the Word, that is to say the signifier and he argues that it is paradoxically the birth of this signifier out of nothing "which reveals a creationist perspective and allows one to glimpse the possibility of the radical elimination of God".

This 'radical elimination' is depicted for Lacan by the materialisation of the signifier and the corresponding materialisation and therefore secularisation of God on earth. The word, perhaps even the printed word of the seventeenth century, killed God, but as we now know, it paradoxically killed a God who was already dead.

Bibliography.

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