Jacques Lacan

Jacques Lacan

A Critical Introduction

Martin Murray

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Stopping and Starting

About

This book is 'about' Jacques Lacan. Perhaps this is obvious or straightforward. Yet the fact that the word 'about' is included in the first sentence of this introduction in inverted commas (or 'scare quotes') indicates something else. It indicates that what Lacan was 'about' *isn't* obvious and that showing and addressing this might not be straightforward.

Thus the inverted commas indicate a problem. Yet they also indicate a solution to that problem. Both the problem and the solution are outlined below.

Here is the problem: it *is* difficult to say (because it is difficult to know) what Lacan was 'about'. This is most obviously true of his pronouncements: his essays, papers, talks, seminars and books. He spoke or wrote in riddles. Quite often, he contradicted himself. It's a challenge to write about him clearly, simply and accurately because it's difficult to understand what he meant. To make things worse, he didn't want to be understood – at least some of the time. For various reasons, it is hard to know what he was 'about' *intellectually*.

Lacan was also *personally* difficult. He sometimes seemed mad or even pernicious and he often seemed obscure. Yet this didn't seem to bother him. Indeed, his eccentric behaviour seemed willed. It's thus hard to discern what his intentions were. Why did he act as he did? These questions indicate another reason for the inverted commas around the word 'about' above. The question 'what was Lacan 'about?' doesn't just mean 'what did his ideas mean?' It also means: 'what was he up to?'

Thus in trying to discern what Lacan was 'about' one has to grapple both with what he said and meant and with what he did and why he did it. How might one begin to do this? There is a way; in fact there is more than one way.

A first (and obvious) way is to try to comprehend what Lacan *meant to say*. As indicated above, this is easier said than done. Yet it's not impossible. Lacan's pronouncements were opaque, but if one knows what was beneath them, one can decipher them. What was beneath them (often) was ideas. These ideas usually partook of theories and philosophies. Some of these were Lacan's and some of them were taken by him from others and adapted to his own purposes. All of the theories and philosophies that Lacan used can be understood (although some are more readily comprehensible than others). This book is firstly an attempt to convey and explain all of this. It is an attempt to show what the ideas that Lacan produced or borrowed meant. It is also an attempt to do this accurately and clearly.

Yet Lacan's ideas, apart from sometimes being difficult to understand in themselves, are made more complex by his use of them. The theories that he borrowed or adapted are either obscured by his language, or altered from their source form, or mixed up with each other. This is even true about Lacan's 'original' ideas.

Furthermore, understanding Lacan's use of his own and other peoples' ideas not only involves understanding them, but also understanding him. He was complex just as his ideas were and there are links between these two 'facts', or types of complexity. All of this means that it is difficult – even impossible – to come at Lacan 'head on'. One has to come at him and his ideas another way, or more exactly in other *ways*.

Mountain

What is called 'Lacan' is quite massive and strange. Inverted commas are being used this time to stress as much. When people use the terms 'Lacan' or 'Lacanian' or 'Lacanianism' they are sometimes referring to him and sometimes referring to other things, including his ideas, his theories, his personal life, his professional involvements, his (or a) psychoanalytic orientation, his (or a) philosophical orientation, his aesthetic influences, his institutional involvements (and battles), his intellectual legacy, his professional legacy, his followers, his empire, his (or a set of) ethics and his (or a) clinical approach. There are a very large number of phenomena and an even larger number of issues covered by the word 'Lacan'. They are great in their number, complexity, constitution and degree of crossover. Once again, they are not well explained by Lacan (or, often, Lacanians). In some ways this is understandable. It's because the phenomena and issues that attend Lacan are multiple and entangled and often so obscure that

they *can't* just be approached straightforwardly. They're best approached slowly and carefully and variously.

In a sense Lacan (or Lacanianism) is like a mountain. A mountain is a sort of edifice. When one first approaches it (especially 'on foot' or 'from the bottom') one can't see it, or one can only see part of it. It's even possible that one doesn't see it at all, because one can be too close to something to see it and/or because one hasn't seen it before and doesn't recognise it. It's even arguable that a mountain *can't* be seen fully (even from the air, because some of it will always be concealed, at least by shadow). Thus if one is going to get a sense of the mountain at all (and certainly if one is going to try to 'conquer' it), one has to find a way of approaching it, which includes finding a way of 'looking at it' so that one can *see* it properly. Furthermore, if one is going to try to understand it more fully (and 'conquer it' more fully) one should also approach it in other and different ways. After all, mountains are very different from different angles and there is often more than one way 'up' them.

In this book, Lacan (and Lacanianism) *is* approached and considered in a number of ways. One can put this differently by saying that the book looks at many different facets of Lacan. In fact, it deals with all of the facets of him implied in the listing of the phenomena related to him above. It deals with Lacan's personal life, his professional life, his artistic interests, his institutional involvements, his ideas (and so on). It often deals with these separately, although periodically and in the end, it considers them together. In doing this, of course, the book is attempting to get a sense of 'the mountain' *gradually* and from one perspective at a time (or sometimes two or even three at at a time). Importantly, it is not attempting to see or show Lacan 'all at once'. It nevertheless engages with a hope that by the end, much of him might have become 'visible' after all.

Here again is another sense in which this book is 'about' Lacan. It is arguably the most important sense. This book considers Lacan partially, gradually, variously and (sometimes) indirectly. It considers what is *about* him; it moves *about* him. The reader's patience is humbly requested in this respect. It might sometimes seem as if this book is off-topic; it isn't. *Everything being considered here has to do with Lacan*, even if it isn't obviously 'essential' to him or 'derivative' of him. 'Lacan' is best considered in all of his manifestations: biographical, psychoanalytic, psycho-biographical, historical, artistic, theoretical, philosophical, institutional, political, personal and so on. He can and should be looked at in many ways; he can and should be looked at in *other* ways.

Art

This last point can be sharpened with reference to another analogy, that of modern or contemporary art. Lacan was certainly influenced by such art and in many respects, he was like it. He could be seen to resemble an abstract painting or sculpture. Examples might include any of Jackson Pollock's 'drip' paintings of the late 1940s, or Carl Andre's 'Equivalents' series of the 1960s, many of which comprised touching rows of bricks stacked two-high. In both cases, some people are drawn to these artworks and some people are repelled by them. Some find them beautiful and profound and some find them ugly and senseless. Yet in either case people don't necessarily know what they mean.

Responses to Lacan, like responses to these particular examples of modern art, are mixed and/or polarised. He is loved and hated, accepted and dismissed. Like them, he is difficult, sometimes impossible, to understand *at least at first sight*.

If one were trying to understand Lacan, one might sometimes have to refer to writing *about* one's object, just as one might have to in an attempt to understand modern art. Such writing attempts to *explain* its object. It might note, for instance, that Pollock's painting is a sort of record of the action he undertook when he made it (which is why it is called 'action painting'). In the case of Andre, it might point out that the 'Equivalents' are made out of stuff that doesn't normally appear in art galleries (but on building sites) and that they therefore suggest that art is not *confined* to galleries. Now the point about such writing in these cases is that it is *something other than the art itself*. In order to understand modern art, one has to look *elsewhere*. It doesn't speak – or rather speak clearly – *for itself*. In more or less exactly the same way, one can't really understand Lacan very well *by just looking at him* (or his work), just as one cannot always understand modern art by doing so.

Reiteration

The point here is that understanding Lacan requires looking at something *different*. It means, once again, looking *about* him – not *at* him, at something *about* him – not him. Thus an important sense in which this book is 'about' Lacan is the sense in which it (necessarily) refers to something *other* than him.

Yet again, the reader's acceptance, or indulgence, of this strategy is requested in advance. What follows will often refer to subjects, theories,

philosophies, thinkers, people, institutions and practices that are *not* Lacan and that are *not* – in themselves – Lacanian. Examples include Descartes, dialectics, Freud, phenomenology, the International Psychoanalytic Association, Breton, Structuralism and Hegel. It's actually not possible to understand Lacan wholly or thoroughly without referring to these people and things. Much of this book will do that. May the reader forgive it for its apparent digressions and trust that they're really not digressions at all. All of the different ways of looking at Lacan adopted in this book lead back to him because they are all 'about' him in the end. One has to get out of Lacan, to get back in to him. It now only remains now to show that this is true.

Beginning

Beginnings are a problem. They're difficult to locate; they're hard to decide on. How does one start? Where does one start?

These questions imply other, more particular ones. Is this beginning right? Should it be starting in a different way? Should it, for example, be getting straight to the point by stating who and what Lacan was, where and when he was born, how he lived and what he said and did? Is *this* the appropriate start? It seems factual after all. Yet this doesn't necessarily make it *true*.

Does Lacan's story truly begin with his life and work? Might it not have begun before he was born, in the stories of the lives of his forbears? Equally, might it have begun *after* his death but *before now*, in assessments of him by his peers, family, critics and biographers? In both cases things would have already begun and *this* beginning might be too late. It might, alternatively, have come too soon. Maybe Lacan's story hasn't really been told yet. Perhaps too little is known or too little has been shown about the detail of his character and the quality of his work to make a sound judgement about him *now*.

Does the subject of Lacan properly start, or has it already started, or will it start, *somewhere else*? Do any of these possibilities make *this* start a false one? What's the specific problem here?

Specific problems correspond with general ones. The problem with *any* beginning is that it always *could* be different: it might not be the best one; it might not be what it seems; it might be elsewhere; it might not be a beginning at all (this problem even persists *after* one has begun – the beginning could always *have been* different too).

Beginning is complex. Yet it's both possible and necessary; here's how.

Resumption

Psychoanalytic practice comes up against the problem of beginning just mentioned – or at least a problem that is very similar. A patient – or analysand – comes to the consulting room with an issue that is difficult for him to articulate. It is complex and obscure and painful. What's more, it both implies and obscures other issues, ones to do with the past. It sometimes seems as if *prior* issues need to be dealt with before the current one can be addressed. Yet the current issue is both the barrier and the key to understanding what has gone before. Where to begin?

Perhaps surprisingly, the psychoanalyst's answer to this question is: anywhere. Psychoanalysts start with something arbitrary. They first of all ask their patients – or 'analysands' – to say the first thing that comes to mind. Being unpremeditated, and hence uncontrolled, this first thing might be something unexpected. Yet it might also imply *something else*.[1] This something else might give way to *other* associations that are related with each other and indeed with the problem that the patient bought into the consulting room in the first place. All might form part of a network of associations or *relations* that could begin to outline – and illustrate and perhaps even explain – 'the subject' at hand (where this subject is both the problem – the crux of it – and/or the patient 'himself').

This description of clinical psychoanalytic methodology is pertinent to the 'problem' or 'subject' of Lacan that the chapter began with. Perhaps one might 'begin' by approaching Lacan in a loosely psychoanalytic way.

One might then start with something *associated with Lacan* (rather than something determinative of him or declarative about him). It wouldn't matter if the association in question were loose, but it would have to lead somewhere else. This in turn, might set off the sort of relational matrix described above, which, with luck, might trace what 'analysis' bears a general hope of attaining: truth, in this case truth about 'Lacan' (including why he did and said what he did and what he meant by it).

To start this process off, of course, one would have to say something random, that is say the first thing that comes to mind. Just as much as anything else, this might be *vinegar*.

2

Sweet and Sour

Transformation

Vinegar is often fermented from wine, which is itself fermented out of fruit. Fermentation is a process of transformation by agitation of specific elements of a given substance. It transforms the taste of what is fermented. For example, it turns saccharine grape juice into tangy wine. Yet this alteration of taste is not unidirectional and does not always eliminate sweetness and tend towards the sour. Wine can, for instance, retain the fruitiness of its source as well as being acidic. Its flavour can involve contrasts, between honeyed and nutty or creamy and tart. The secondary fermentation by oxidisation of the alcoholic content of wine into vinegar can also have unpredictable effects. It will often acetify the liquid, make it taste sharp rather than fruity and turn smooth wine into harsh vinegar. Yet it can also produce tastes that multiply, vary or contrast with prior ones, producing vinegar that is, for example, saccharine and astringent or smooth and dry.

Now all of this is interesting enough, but how is it relevant? How does it relate to the subject of this book, the subject at hand?

Entrance

By the time of his death in 1981, Jacques Lacan was a well-known, controversial and influential French psychoanalyst and intellectual. Yet what was he at the time of his birth? Perhaps this seems like an odd question. At birth he hadn't become what he was yet. Perhaps questions about birth are beside the point here.

Yet Lacan came into the world in certain circumstances (just as everyone else did) and these will have had some influence on him. Even if his circumstances didn't *determine* his fate, they were relevant to what happened – or what could have happened – to him. Even if he overcame and/

or ignored them, they indirectly shaped who he was (because he would then have become who he was *despite* them). Thus the circumstances that attended Lacan's birth might have had some *indirect* – one might say *opposite* or *negative* – influence on him (he might have repudiated them) and/or may have influenced him positively by shaping what he was. He might have been effected, influenced or changed by his circumstances, *even if he thought that he wasn't*.

In general the formation – one might say fermentation – of Lacan's character was subject to a play of forces, some of which aligned with his will and some of which didn't. From the outset, this play influenced what he *might have been*. The types of being that fall into this category, – that is the list of 'things' that Lacan *might have been* – is strikingly long and revealing, as what follows will show. It ranges from merchant to politician (he avoided becoming the former and dreamt about becoming the latter) from general practitioner to philosopher (ditto) and from failure to achiever (his school reports were critical; his career was an apparent success).

So what was the subject of this book born into and what was he inclined or disinclined to be?

Lacan was born in Paris in 1901 into a family that could legitimately claim membership of the bourgeoisie. His grandfather had married into this class in the mid-late nineteenth century when he wed a woman whose forebears had long been makers of a popular brand of vinegar.

Jacques' paternal grandfather Emile Lacan was a merchant whose wife Marie Julie was the daughter of Paul Dessaux, owner of *Dessaux Fils,* manufacturers of wine vinegar based in Orléans. Paul had inherited the business from *his* father Charles-Prosper. Around the beginning of the nineteenth century Charles-Prosper was an enterprising employee of the Greffier-Hazon vinegar making company. He left this firm, competed with it and eventually took it over. When he passed *Dessaux Fils* on to Paul it was in good shape but threatened by competition with other firms including ones that manufactured spirit vinegar.[1] Paul's daughter Marie Julie married Emile Lacan in 1866. Shortly afterwards Paul died and the family firm was taken over by his brother Ludovic. The young heir modernised and expanded the business to include manufacture and distribution of a wide range of condiments. He fought off his competitors. His in-law Emile assisted him in the construction of a business empire. Emile was a smart and effective salesman – his own father had been a grocer and draper from Château-Thierry. At the end of the nineteenth century after years of successful commercial travel Emile settled in Paris. His son Alfred – Jacques' father – followed in his father's footsteps but without travelling.

He became Dessaux's chief Paris agent. By the time that he had attained this position the actual and commercial family that his in-laws had built up and that he had become an important member of was established and successful. It remains so today. The Dessaux-Lacan clan had used labour, guile and thrift to build a legacy that ensured their heirs became and stayed solid members of the French bourgeoisie. Jacques' forebears – his father's fathers – had come up in the world.

Jacques' maternal line charted a similar trajectory. His mother Emilie was the daughter of Charles Baudry, a goldbeater who bought property. Jacques' grandfather on his mother's side thus rose from the position of labourer to that of craftsman to that of investor. He was able to retire in old age and provide both Emilie and her sister Marie with respectable dowries. (Roudinesco, 1990, pp. 3–6) It might be an exaggeration to say that life was sweet for all of Charles-Prosper and Charles' descendants. Yet neither was their destiny a sour one. By the twentieth century most were privileged and well-off if not happy. They and their antecedents had invested their money and energies into their work and had profited from this investment. The story of the Dessaux-Lacans is therefore one of hardship overcome, work done and rewards granted. By the time Jacques was born his ancestors had been striving since at least 1800 to grant themselves, their families and their descendants respectability, wealth and *la bonne vie*. They had succeeded, although not without cost.

Autonomy

Jacques would also succeed and would also pay a price for his success. Yet he didn't compare his own experience with that of his forebears. At least he never did so publicly or in any of his much read writings or listened-to addresses. When he published an essay about the people he considered to be *his* antecedents, he didn't mention his family or its history.[2] (EC, pp. 51–7) Neither, apparently, did he do so privately. Why is this so? In her biography of Jacques Lacan, Elisabeth Roudinesco proffers a few facts that might suggest an answer to this question. She does this while recounting something of the history and mythology of vinegar-making. Roudinesco says that, as well as being a condiment and preservative, vinegar was originally a cheap and vulgar wine, a short cut to oblivion for the long-suffering peasant. She adds an even more striking fact reported by some historians. At first, the fermentation of vinegar was quickened in a base and secret manner, through the addition of human excrement. (Roudinesco, 1990, p. 3) What does this suggest? The

means that gave Jacques and his family the good life had its origins in commonality and shit. Did he reflect on this fact and make anything of it? He didn't seem to.

This might seem surprising. Jacques wasn't one to suppress a good or revealing idea if it occurred to him. He also knew the importance of what happens to one, of what shapes one, of the force and significance of one's individual and family history. He was, after all, a psychoanalyst. Yet he was keen to leave his past behind. This involved not acknowledging the influence of history, upbringing or experience on *him*. This is only the first of many paradoxes about Lacan that will be noted in what follows. He was a psychoanalyst who doesn't appear to have psychoanalysed himself.

Elisabeth Roudinesco provides material that amplifies this paradox. She stresses Lacan's acute sense of his own autonomy. He was 'by temperament a free man' who considered himself 'self-made'. This meant that he repudiated any influence on or shaping of him by his family, especially where this might have involved curtailment of what he wanted, how he wanted to see himself, or what he wanted to be. 'Lacan would acknowledge no outside authority whatsoever over his person or the managing of his desires.' Roudinesco doesn't explore the implications of this point much, but she does make her subject seem *very* paradoxical by making it. Lacan theorised and stressed the relevance of individual history to the formation of 'personality', but ignored its effect on his own.[3] He took the idea of authority seriously in his work but didn't take the fact of it seriously in his life.[4]

Indeed, Lacan didn't just repudiate authority and family. He disavowed society and history: he was keen to escape his class. This was despite the fact that his forebears had stopped being peasants long ago. Although he did have class identifications, these didn't correspond with his parents'. They placed him at least at the level of the 'haute-bourgeoisie', one step up the social ladder from his mother and father, who hadn't transcended 'petit-bourgeois' status. Lacan saw himself as unique, as someone whose fate hadn't been determined by his social or familial origins. He emphatically didn't see himself as the son of a vinegar merchant.

Repetition

Despite – or perhaps because of – his repudiation of his family's influence on him, Lacan's fate does look like theirs. He did work hard and he was successful – at least superficially. Yet the qualifications made to this claim are important ones. To say that he may have succeeded *superficially* and