Afterword

Well, a rebus is a rebus is a rebus. What we have seen in these pages is a selection of texts, chosen by Lacan himself to introduce the English-speaking reader to his thought. Or should we not rather say to his style? For they convey, at least to us, less clearly an impression of *what* Lacan thinks than *how*. Allegedly, he is sharing with us through his *Écrits* his own experience of how the unconscious works, and we are left with the task of interpreting these writings more or less as we would a dream, searching for a signification that *in*sists in the web of signifiers he has spun rather than *con*sists in any particular thing he has said. In other words, these *écrits* offer us, like dreams for Freud, essentially a rebus.

This means that understanding them is not exactly guesswork but, nonetheless, a highly precarious business, and sharing our impressions with the reading public may be utter folly. After all, it exposes us to the embarrassment of being told how wrong we are, especially when the master's many disciples are there to say, "that's not what he meant at all." Yet we take this risk, for we feel that with the publication of this translation the

time has come to begin to discern the value of Lacan's efforts so as to be able to profit from them, especially if they can offer some help in clinical practice. And this must be, we feel, a collective effort on the part of his English-speaking readers, for which the present pages pretend to be no more than a first assay. As such it offers, at most, some tools for the task, perhaps to be discarded when more sophisticated instruments are available.

The texts in *Écrits: A Selection* cover a signficant span of years (1948–1960). In that sense they are representative of the general drift of Lacan's concerns during a decisive period of his development. We have already indicated (Chapter 9), how that drift appears to us in this particular group of essays. In broader terms, however, it is worth remarking on one characteristic in particular that seems to mark the whole movement: the ever more radical depersonalization of the subject. We recall that Lacan's earliest professional interest focused on the function of image and the role of milieu in personality formation. By 1960, the term "personality" has no place in the articulation of his own thought. Instead, we hear only of "subject," "ego," and "I," where the "ego" is clearly not the "I" but an object present to the experience of the subject, fulfilling an imaginary function there. What, then, is the "I"? And just what sort of ontology does it presuppose? By the end of the present collection, it would seem that the most we can say is that the "I" has a sheerly linguistic role, the function of shifter, not signifying but simply designating the speaker. But who is the speaker?

Is it the "subject"? Since discourse is multileveled and since words always say more than they pronounce, the speaker does not coincide with the conscious presence speaking, but appears in parapraxes as unaware of what is being said. The speaker, then, includes an "unconscious." In 1953 (Chapter 3), it is the "unconscious" of the subject, the *Kern unseres Wesens*, who appears to utter "full" speech in distinction from the "empty" speech of the ego. This relatively straightforward duality is not so difficult to comprehend, but by 1960 (Chapter 9), we no longer hear of the unconscious of the subject but rather of "the

subject of the unconscious." This subject, like the "I" that fades from discourse, appears to be not a perduring, substantial entity, but rather a kind of intermittent presence caught between desire and discourse, subject to the laws of language and their impersonal processes. The subject becomes more and more "decentered," then, in these formulations as the consequences of Lacan's fundamental structuralism become more rigorously pursued.

Another index of this increasing radicalization is the manner in which Lacan formulates the "laws" of the unconscious. In 1957 (Chapter 5), these laws were formulated after the manner of structural linguistics, according to which the basic paradigm of the bipolar correlation of the phonemes is ordered according to the axes of combination and selection to form signifiers that relate to one another along these axes, i.e., as metonymy and metaphor. The unconscious, structured like a language, follows the same laws, too. In 1960 (Chapter 9), however, Lacan's drift toward the mathematization of these laws (e.g., set theory, irrational numbers, quasi-topological graphs to diagram discourse), already hinted at along the way, is very apparent. So significant is this shift that one highly authorized interpreter, Jacques-Alain Miller (editor of Lacan's seminars), tells us recently (1978) that the most precise formulation of these laws is that the unconscious "consists in a ciphering," so that the earlier essay, "The Agency of the Letter," might properly be retitled now as "The Agency of the Cipher" (*L'Instance du chiffre*, p. 11). Such a development in the direction of mathematics in general and topology in particular marks a shift, too, in the philosophical mood of Lacan's thought from the more "ontological" tones of Hegel and Heidegger (1953) to the more astringent formalizations of the philosophy of science and mathematics (1960). In any case, this direction is perhaps the most difficult and problematic aspect of the recent evolution of Lacan's thought.

Ideally, of course, all this calls for a rigorous critique that should be preceded by a concise and accurate summary of the essentials of Lacan's conceptual framework. Indeed, such a dis-

cussion should form part of the conclusion of any careful study. But that is just the point: what we write here is not in conclusion, for a "conclusion" would be a closing word, and what we terminate these pages with is not a closing but rather an opening word, i.e., one that opens up the study of these selected texts for others by sharing with them the results of our own initial efforts at understanding. Summary and critique must wait for another day, when we have greater familiarity with the rest of the *Écrits* and with the seminars (many still unpublished), on which most of them are based.

Similarly, to another day must be left the expansion of, or extrapolation upon, Lacan's doctrine as it has emerged here. We have in mind not only such matters as the clinical application of these concepts but the exploration of certain issues which have not been treated in the texts made available in this collection, and which invite consideration. For example, in the discussion of the symbolic order should not something be said about the relation between the verbal signifiers and behavioral comportment, when the latter is not merely a matter of relatively superficial "body language" but is part of the discourse of a whole cultural context—that phenomenon which sociolinguistics has made its own (e.g., Mohatt and Erickson, 1979)? But such a question leads to other still broader issues, whose number is beyond limit.

When all is said and done, one thing, we feel, is certain: however obscure Lacan's thought, no one, after listening to him, can ever read Freud in the same way again. Working from the German original, Lacan reads Freud with a rigor and care that forces his own readers into a searching reconsideration of all of Freud's most fundamental insights, thus stimulating the transmission of psychoanalysis through a radical return to its source.

Is the result a distortion? Surely Lacan goes beyond what Freud said to experience what he did not say and could not say. At its very best, this may be what Heidegger would call a "retrieve" *(Wiederholung)* of Freud, the re-collection of Freud's

"unsaid." At its best! If the result is more Lacan than Freud, then it must stand on its own merits and submit to the scrutiny proper to any "original" thought—i.e., one that descends into the origins of the matter at issue to reemerge with a new life of its own. This much can be said for Lacan, at least: he has indeed returned to the origins of psychoanalysis and in that sense enabled it to be born again. Whether that rebirth by passage through the dark, inscrutable world of the Lacanian rebus is worth the pangs that it costs, the reader must decide.

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