
THE WORKS OF
JACQUES LACAN
An Introduction

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*'... an association in which the free development of each
is the condition of the free development of all'*

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CHAPTER ONE

FIRST WORKS (1926–33)

LACAN'S first articles were published between 1926 and 1933 while he was training as a psychiatrist. Most of them were written in collaboration with other authors, and were on neurological and psychiatric topics. They culminated in his major work of this period, his doctoral thesis 'Paranoid psychosis and its relation to the personality' (1932), which was based on observations of several patients, but which concentrated on the details of one female psychotic, whom he called Aimée.

Some of these early papers were pure neurology, on Parkinsonism, neurosyphilis and eye-movement abnormalities; two were on hysteria; and several were concerned with the organic features of various mental disorders, and were consistent with orthodox psychiatric thought. It is in Lacan's first publication as sole author ('Structure of paranoid psychoses', 1931a) that one can see the beginnings of an original contribution and hints of later preoccupations with structure and language. He wrote, for example, that progress in psychiatry would be made by studying the 'mental' structures common to different clinical syndromes, and that an analysis of these structures was indispensable to classification of mental disorders, and would also be valuable in assessing prognosis and treatment. He wrote that he had formed this opinion as a result of his studies of patients suffering from delusions. He was particularly interested in their disorders of language, and in applying linguistic methods to

the understanding of the written manifestations of delusional language. He added that his research had convinced him that no psychical phenomenon could arise completely independently of the subject's personality. This attitude is basic to psychoanalytic thinking, which Lacan was soon to embrace, and contrasts with most psychiatric opinion, which to this day maintains that psychotic phenomena cannot be understood in terms of the previous personality of the subject, but arise instead as a result of an organic 'process' or illness, e.g., some as yet undiscovered biochemical lesion which produces the symptoms automatically, for example by causing some kind of brain damage.

Lacan elaborated a number of these ideas in the thesis (1932, p.351) which is of interest for several reasons. Although often couched in academic language, and owing much to his teachers and to contemporary psychiatry, particularly in Germany, it contained some original ideas which laid the basis for his subsequent work and to which he returned. While not a psychoanalyst, Lacan used some analytic concepts in his account of his patient Aimée at a time when Freud was not well-known in France. He also raised issues which are still being debated about the nature of mental disorders.

One should perhaps stress how difficult it was at this time, in France, to take a serious interest in psychoanalysis. Indeed, it seemed to be a somewhat subversive topic. This resistance to psychoanalysis in France forms one important backdrop to Lacan's early career, and perhaps helps to understand not only his later 'subversive' approach to psychoanalysis, but also much of the 'missionary zeal' with which he approached the dissemination of analytic ideas.

Lacan's intention in the thesis was to show that his patient's psychosis could be understood as the reaction of her personality to events in her life, and involved conflicts within her personality. The case study demonstrated the purely psychological sources of the psychosis: that is, that it

had a psychological meaning which involved intelligible connections between her psychotic symptoms and the events of her life, and that these psychological sources were enough to explain the psychosis. Such an approach had already been developed by a few German psychiatrists, notably Bleuler and Kretschmer, and of course Freud; by Meyer in America; and to some extent by Janet in France. But it seems that Lacan's thesis was the first French attempt to interpret a psychosis in terms of the total history of the patient – that is, by bringing to light as much detail as possible about her background, including her conscious and unconscious intentions. The thesis included a selection of Aimée's copious writings, which were produced at the height of her psychosis, and virtually stopped when it abated.

The literary qualities of Aimée's work were appreciated and discussed by members of the surrealist movement, and Lacan's connections with the surrealist movement form another important key to understanding his early and subsequent career. Aimée was not only a patient of Lacan's, but was also a *cause célèbre* for the surrealists. Lacan wrote articles for the surrealist magazine *Minotaure*, one of which concerned the case of the murderous Papin sisters (the case apparently formed the basis for Genet's play *The Maids*). Lacan's subsequent anti-establishment attitude, his talent for abuse, as well as his poetic voice, owe much to the surrealist movement. Surrealism's overturning of the place of conscious reason, its questioning of the reality of the object, its cultivation of the absurd, and its emphasis on the omnipotence of desire, do seem to have provided Lacan with many of his basic attitudes. However, it would not be true to state that he produced automatic writing in the surrealist mould. On the contrary, his writing has always born the marks of considerable elaboration.

After an introduction, Lacan discussed the concept of personality, and ultimately put forward his own notion,

which was based on three parameters: the subject's history, his image of himself, and his social relations. This notion implied firstly, that the subject had a comprehensible psychological development in time, a 'lived history', which followed a definite pattern and was based on structures common to everyone; secondly, that the subject had a consciousness of himself as someone who thought, spoke and had intentions. This also included the more or less 'ideal' images that he had of himself; and thirdly, that the subject was not isolated but was affected by others, and his conduct and values were influenced by them. This fact could produce various tensions and conflicts between the subject and others.

Lacan then reviewed in great detail contemporary ideas on the aetiology of paranoid psychosis, comparing psychiatrists like himself, who considered that – with the exception of psychoses with obvious organic causes, such as severe drug abuse – they could be explained as reactions of the personality; with psychiatrists who thought that they were determined by an organic process. It may be said that a fair proportion of psychiatrists now hold a middle view. Lacan also discussed the possible contributions of organic causes in general, rejecting them as non-essential in the case of Aimée.

Next, he gave the details of Aimée's case history. We have had to piece together the details of the case from different parts of the thesis as his presentation was detailed and complex, interweaving the various aspects of Aimée's personality and her psychotic reactions.

Aimée was admitted to a mental hospital after attacking and wounding a well-known Parisian actress, whom she did not know personally, with a knife. When questioned by the police she said that this actress had been spreading scandal about her, and was also associated with a certain famous writer who had supposedly revealed many details of Aimée's private life in a book. Aimée was clearly suffering from delusions of being persecuted, which in fact cleared up three

weeks after her internment in prison, though she stayed a further eighteen months in hospital, where Lacan obtained the details of her history.

Aimée was 38 years old on admission, and had been separated from her husband, who had custody of their son, for six years. She came from a village family, with three younger brothers and two older sisters, and had had regular work in the administration of a railway company from the age of eighteen. Her father appeared rather tyrannical, but Aimée was the only one to stand up to him, and to his constant criticisms of her appearance and dress. Aimée and her mother had a close and intense relationship, and when talking about her Aimée would often break into tears, repeatedly saying that she should never have left her and that they were like two friends. The mother appeared to suffer from delusions of being persecuted by the neighbours, whom she blamed for her daughter's problems. While the mother was pregnant with Aimée her eldest child died tragically, in front of her eyes – she fell into an open furnace and expired from severe burns.

Aimée was particularly fond of playing with her brothers and was rather a tomboy, although her eldest sister did have a large, even dominant influence on her in childhood (and in her later life, as we shall see). She had a great love of nature, and used to enjoy solitary day-dreaming in the countryside; these intense reveries seemed to be indicative of a fertile and expansive, though rather precarious, imaginative life. Two episodes when she was an adolescent deeply affected her and later inspired pieces of writing: the first was the death from tuberculosis of a close girlfriend. The second was described by the family as typical of Aimée's behaviour. The family was going out, but she had spent so long on preparing herself that the others left without her. She went to join them by crossing a field, but had the misfortune to irritate a bull from which she just managed to escape. The theme of the pursuing bull often returned in her dreams and writings as an evil omen.

Aimée's first love affair took place in her early twenties in a small town, with the local 'Don Juan'. After seducing her one month before she left, he admitted that she was merely the object of a bet. Nonetheless, for three years and while living in another town, she continued to dream of an ideal liaison with him and was constantly occupied with totally unrealistic thoughts about him. She was frigid in her subsequent sexual encounters. When she moved to the Paris region her tormentor suddenly, for no obvious reason, became the object of her hate and scorn. This sudden change of love to hate seemed typical of her personality, as we shall see.

For four years, until her marriage, Aimée had an intimate friendship with a female colleague from work who was her complete opposite. The woman came from an aristocratic family fallen on hard times and felt that the work she was forced to do was inferior to her station; so she spent her time trying to impose her moral and intellectual leadership on the small world of her colleagues. She was also a great organizer of soirées, where conversation and bridge games continued well into the night. It was from her friend that Aimée learned the name of the actress she later stabbed, for this actress was the neighbour of the friend's aunt, and of Sarah Bernhardt, whom the friend's mother knew at convent school. The two actresses later became Aimée's major persecutors.

Aimée and her friend grew intimate. Aimée lived in her shadow, delighting in the fact that she was the only person she, Aimée, knew who was 'a bit out of the ordinary'. However, encouraged by her friend, she reacted with constant hostility to colleagues, especially the women, whom she despised as petty and silly, though she was clearly also jealous of them. She began to feel that she was masculine and was very attracted by masculine characteristics; but after a series of unsatisfactory affairs with men, she married a colleague who seemed a fairly down-to-earth and secure person, though not particularly sensitive and rather verbally

aggressive. She tried at first to attend to her wifely duties, but soon husband and wife fell out. She remained frigid and then became pathologically jealous of him, imagining he was having affairs with other women. She would stay mute for weeks on end, and neglected her housework. Then a decisive event occurred – eight months after the marriage her eldest sister came to live with them after the death of her own husband, many years her senior. This sister had had a hysterectomy at the age of 27, for some unknown reason, and was ruled by a great need to mother someone. She took over the household duties, then took over Aimée's husband and tried to rear their child, while criticizing Aimée's conduct and morals. However, she also filled an emotional void in the life of Aimée, who passively accepted her sister's domination.

Lacan was struck by the contrast between the *words* Aimée used to praise her sister's qualities, and her habitually ice-cold *tone*, indicative of extreme but unrecognized ambivalence towards the woman. Only occasionally, when her attention was distracted, was she able to express in words her real feelings of resentment. Here it is also worth mentioning the peculiar attitude Aimée had towards her job: she was devoted to it to such an extent that she was nicknamed the 'workhorse' by her colleagues, though at the same time she professed to despise it. This attitude was an example of what Lacan called a 'vital conflict' in Aimée's personality, although such conflicts were more striking in the case of the ambivalent relationships that she had with the important people in her life (e.g., her sister, son, friend, husband) which were made up of extremes of devotion and contempt.

Aimée's symptoms began to appear at the age of 28, when, after four years of marriage and still working in the same office as her husband, she became pregnant. She began to think that her colleagues were talking against her and criticizing her conduct. She thought that people in the street were whispering about her and despised her, that there were

newspaper articles directed against her and threatening to kill her unborn child. She was tormented by nightmares of coffins, she once cut up the tyres of a colleague's bicycle with a knife, and one night threw a pitcher of water and then an iron at her husband. Nevertheless she enthusiastically prepared clothes for the child. But the baby, a girl, was stillborn, choked by the umbilical cord, and from this point the crystallization of Aimée's hostile delusions began. When her friend, who was now living in another town, phoned up after the delivery Aimée considered it strange and felt delusionally convinced that the woman must have been responsible for the baby's death. She stopped attending church, and spent many hours hostile, mute and locked indoors.

The following year, however, Aimée gave birth to a second child – a boy. During her pregnancy she was depressed and her delusions continued, but after the birth she became passionately attached to the boy, refusing to let anyone else look after him for the first five months. She breast-fed him for fourteen months, during which time she became more and more hostile, querulous, and afraid that others might harm him. Meanwhile her sister began to impose her will on Aimée and wanted to be in charge of the child's education. It was now that Aimée's delusions intensified. She applied for a permit to go to America, where she was going to make her fortune as a writer for the sake of her child, whom she had begun to neglect; meanwhile she had delusions that her child had been taken away. Her family had her placed in a mental hospital (all this was some six years before the incident with the actress), and she remained there for six months in an acute psychotic state, with delusions and hallucinations. The family then removed her into their own care, not cured but able to look after the child, although soon after this her sister and her husband took charge of him.

At her own request she was transferred to Paris, where, alone and isolated, her delusions continued to flourish. The actress she later stabbed (not named in the thesis), Sarah Ber-

nhardt, and a successful woman writer became her main persecutors, and she thought that they wanted to harm her child, whom she managed to visit sporadically. She also began to write literary pieces for publication. Lacan considered this work very important as clinical material, as it revealed many aspects of her mental state at the time of the delusions, as well as highlighting various aspects of her personality and the relations between creativity and the psychotic state. For example, Aimée railed against her women persecutors because they were famous, adulated by the public and living in luxury, corruption and falseness; while she herself desperately wanted to be a famous writer and to have an influence on the world. But she was able to convey these conflicts poetically and, as it were, give to her acute delusional ideas a 'higher level' of expression in her writings.

She claimed to hate artists, poets and journalists, as they had ganged up to provoke murder, war and corruption which they then relished. But she herself wanted peace and brotherly love between all peoples and races. She longed for the reign of children and women, who would be dressed in white; the reign of evil on earth would disappear; there would be no war and all people would be united. She expressed intense love for children and hatred for the cruelty of adults and for frivolous mothers. The world was heading for war (not untrue) and she hoped that the English Prince of Wales would hold a conference at Geneva to bring peace to troubled Europe. In fact she turned to the Prince many times, at first for protection against another persecutor, a well-known writer to whom she had appealed on her first admission but then accused of some vague liaison with the actresses. Later on she expressed her platonic love for the Prince of Wales in her letters, two novels and poetry all of which she dedicated and sent to him. They were later returned by Buckingham Palace with a dry note from a private secretary.

Aimée also had a short period of 'dissipation', as she cal-

cold tone – the recognition of her hostile attitude remained unconscious.

When Aimée returned to her family from the six-month stay in the mental hospital, she again looked after her son, but after a while obtained permission to be transferred to Paris where she lived alone and in isolation (her ‘independence’), allowing her sister to replace her totally as wife and mother. This situation of ‘vital conflict’ seemed to give fuel to her delusions, which increased in intensity and elaboration. The more she was ‘freed’ from her responsibilities as a mother and as a family member, and pursued her ‘liberation’ from them, the more her delusional symptoms constituted themselves. They pushed out of the delusional system at this time in what Lacan called ‘thrusts’ (*poussées*), cited by him as an example of the ‘fertile moments’ (*moments féconds*) of a delusion.

The delusional system broke down when Aimée moved from the delusional idea to the act – that is, when she wanted to *look* her enemy in the eye and recognize her, which then led to the attack on the actress. Even though the act in itself did not bring any immediate relief, it took Aimée one step away from the stubborn, enveloping delusional system towards a different level of recognition – in this case to an external confrontation where she ‘looked the consequences in the eye’.

The existence of several persecutors, and the absence of a real relationship between them and Aimée, emphasized their symbolic meaning in the delusion. They seemed to represent the reproaching sister, and Aimée’s image of herself with all its contrasting characteristics, and her unfulfilled ambitions. By hating the persecutors she in effect protected her sister from her hate, and this element of protection was another important function of the delusions. The persecutors tended to follow a type, representing for her the image of a woman who could enjoy freedom and social power, the kind of woman she dreamed of becoming, who represented her

ideal. Thus the same image which represented her ideal was also the object of her hate.

By means of the stabbing, she turned her persecutor into her victim. What she stabbed in her victim was only the symbol of her own idea. One could see, in the *paranoid structure*, how the images were turned into persecutors or ‘internal enemies’, and externalized as symbols. At the moment of the gesture itself Aimée’s delusions found no immediate relief, but when she was found guilty before the law and imprisoned the delusions disappeared. Presumably this was because when she herself was punished directly by the law, she realized that the target of her attack was herself, and that the actress meant no harm. It was as if the paranoid structure had accomplished another of its purposes – the carrying out of self-punishment by the law – and that the wish behind the delusions was one of unconscious self-punishment, probably in order to deal with her enormous guilt over her attitude to her child because of her desire to live a free and liberated life. For this reason, Lacan suggested that Aimée’s psychosis merited a separate clinical category with a good prognosis – ‘self-punishment paranoia’ (*paranoïa d’autopunitio*), a term which owed its origin to Freud’s concept (SE 14, pp. 332-333) of those who are ‘criminals from a sense of guilt’. Freud described how certain criminal acts give relief to subjects who suffer from oppressive feelings of guilt before the crime. He also described how children can be quite often naughty on purpose to provoke punishment, and then are quiet and happy after the punishment.

Aimée’s life was dominated by gross, unrecognized conflicts within her personality. The delusional system attempted to deal with these conflicts by turning them into external persecutors. This was a way of keeping the conflicts at a distance from herself, but, of course, they were still her internal enemies as they arose from within herself and continued to harass her. She was dominated by her delusions as she was dominated by her real objects. It was only when she finally

took an active role, in the attack, even though against a displaced target, that she came closer to recognizing that her real target was herself. Lacan linked in detail these conflicts in her personality to psychoanalytic concepts of psychical structure and personality development. In brief, he considered that there was a fixation, or disturbance, at an early stage of super-ego formation, the stage when the subject is assimilating the constraints and ideals of his parents and their substitutes, and is becoming a social being. We will return to this topic briefly in the next chapter (see p. 51) when we discuss some of Freud's concepts.

One of the important themes of the thesis was the role of Aimée's ideal images, which became targets for her conflicting love and hate. Perhaps one could trace a connection between Lacan's interest in the role of ideal images and his formulation of the mirror phase four years later, where he was to elaborate the role of the image in the subject's personality.

The thesis was a generally successful attempt to make psychological sense of paranoid psychosis, in which Lacan tried to uncover the psychological structures underlying the psychosis, by examining the relations between the psychosis and the patient's biography, intentions and motives. He considered that he had demonstrated the importance of the role of *méconnaissance*, the refusal to recognize wishes and desires, in psychosis. *Méconnaissance* reveals itself when the psychotic patient wants to impose his own intentions on what he perceives as, for example, the chaos of the world. The patient does not perceive that this world chaos is really a manifestation of his own chaotic being, and that what he takes to be his true intentions are really only the 'reverse image' of his own being. Thus Aimée railed against negligent mothers, but was a negligent mother herself. Freud described a similar phenomenon in his descriptions of 'projection' (SE 12, p.63), the mechanism whereby the subject refuses to recognize certain wishes as his own, and attributes them instead to other people.

Along with the description of *méconnaissance*, which emphasized Aimée's failure to recognize knowledge about herself, Lacan also showed that there is what one could call 'paranoid knowledge': knowledge that belongs to the paranoid structure, and makes sense if one undertakes a detailed history. Thus Aimée's fear of being a negligent mother was transformed, in the paranoid structure, into a hate of negligent mothers – knowledge of her fear was produced in a paranoid form, which can be interpreted by the physician. Paranoid knowledge is based on the sense of persecution, and has a generalized irrational element, e.g., the fear of being attacked by anonymous persecutors; but it also contains elements of the subject's personality, and so an exploration of such forms of knowledge can provide insights into the subject's psyche. Lacan considered that paranoid knowledge is not only a clinical fact, but corresponds to the stage in the subject's genesis when ego and objects are first being distinguished, and when in addition both ego and objects are becoming imbued with aspects of permanence, identity and substantiality.

Lacan appears to infer that the very structure of the ego, on which personality is based, is paranoid. One can indeed see in the structure of paranoid knowledge some equivalence to the childhood phenomenon of what Lacan called 'transitivism' – the child who strikes another says he has been struck, and the child who sees another fall, cries (see below, p. 58). One can also see how this concept leads on to that of the mirror stage, in which Lacan described the formation of the ego in more detail, and within a clearly psychoanalytic framework. (In parenthesis, it is interesting to note that paranoia was a concern of the surrealists as well. For example, Salvador Dali in 1930 wrote in '*La femme invisible*' (quoted in Rosemont, 1978 p. 137), that he used the 'paranoid-critical method' in his art. This was a 'spontaneous method of "irrational knowledge" based on the critical and systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations'.)

The topic of psychosis remained important for Lacan in his later work. He was fascinated by the psychotic's means of communication, the strange allusions and associations, verbal games, neologisms, and the various ways in psychosis that language can be fragmented. In the psychotic patient one seems to detect the limits of language, yet Lacan was at pains to emphasize that madness has a meaning. There is an almost 'anti-psychiatry' attitude in the thesis which is similar to that of Laing, the radical psychiatrist and author of *The Divided Self*. Both Laing and Lacan emphasized that madness has a meaningful structure, and both were dissatisfied with the traditional, orthodox psychiatric model, although in Lacan's case there is less social polemic. The thesis also displays a refusal to be confined within the usual professional limits in that it includes references to and discussion of many thinkers such as Spinoza, Bergson, Descartes, James and Russell. The thesis not only contained several of the themes that would occupy Lacan in later years, but also marked the beginning of his style.

CHAPTER TWO

'THE MIRROR STAGE'
(1936)

BY 1934, Lacan had joined the Société Psychanalytique de Paris, of which he became a full member just before the war. In 1936 he presented his paper on the mirror stage to the International Psychoanalytic Congress in Marienbad, but it was not published. Its contents are outlined in his article on the family in the *Encyclopédie Française* (1938), while the paper in the *Ecrits* (1966) is a revised version which he delivered at the Zurich International Psychoanalytic Congress in 1949.

The mirror stage was a new addition to psychoanalytic theory, and we will give a short account of some of the relevant classical psychoanalytic concepts before tackling Lacan's contribution. These proposed some revision of the concepts of the ego and of narcissism.

In Freud's theory of the mind, the psychical apparatus was differentiated into a number of systems or 'agencies', each of which had distinct properties and functions, but which interacted dynamically and in conflict with each other.* Two theories of these agencies can be identified in Freud's writings. The first theory, dating from about 1900 – the 'first topography' – distinguishes between the unconscious, pre-conscious and conscious, while the 'second topography',

* In chapter 6 (p. 107) we argue that the old English word 'instance' is more faithful to Freud's use of the German 'Instanz' than 'agency'.