

*Jacques Lacan*

# TELEVISION

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A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment

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Microscopia:  
An Introduction to the Reading of  
*Television*  
Jacques-Alain Miller

(The scene takes place in New York)

She: Here's your book back! Don't mention it to me again! (She violently throws the book on the floor.) This man doesn't want people to understand him!

I: Oh! Oh!

She: He doesn't, I'm telling you! I have read it three times since yesterday and could make neither heads nor tails of it! It drove me crazy!

I: Well, that's not bad for starters.

She: You think it suits you to try to be funny? It is not the kind of thing one gives a woman to read when one wants to please her, and you are no better than your master. I could not sleep a wink last night because of it.

I: It certainly doesn't show—anger must suit you quite well.

She: You think you are so gallant! Well, don't think you can assuage me with such inane flattery.

I: I wouldn't dream of it. It is not my fault that you are even more beautiful than usual when irritated.

She: I am not irritated—I am enraged and horrified.

I: That's you on the book cover.

She: How's that?

I: Look for yourself. (He picks up the small book and holds it out to her.) You can't tell what she's looking at, but you can see that she's fending it off.

She: Indeed. (She takes the book and considers the picture.)

I: She's perhaps just thrown this book down; she backs away in horror, and in an instant the veil will fall back over her face and she'll no longer see anything.

She: Who decided to put that picture on the cover?

I: I did. I was expecting you.

Written in August 1987.

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Translated by Bruce Fink.

She: And where does it come from, Mr. Clever?

I: It is rather well-known. It comes from Pompeii. It's one of the most beautiful things there. You enter a huge room and find a fresco taking up three walls whose colors are so fresh that time fades away. It tells a story which no one has ever really been able to decipher, but it does clearly involve an initiation. In the middle, mystical wedding ceremonies are depicted: the hierogamy or sacred marriage of Dionysus and Ariadne. This enchanting place I would like to take you to some day is called the . . .

She: Yes, you would like to be my Dionysus and I your Ariadne.

I: The *Villa of Mysteries*.

She: Well, that is exactly what this *Television* book is to me.

I: But "mystery" means that one eventually sees the truth.

She: And what is that truth?

I: At the end of a "mystery," after having followed out the entire prescribed course of an ascetic program, one was placed before . . . the ultimate truth.

She: Which was?

I: A phallus, I confess.

She: Ah, there we have it: "Woman does not exist" and the truth is the phallus. Let me tell you that I made up my mind a long time ago about this ultimate truth that you and your kind claim to teach the world. You have nothing to teach me, and I led you to this admission just to see if it was still the same old song and dance. Well if that is what one finds at the end, at least we got it out in the open right at the outset. I bid you good evening.

I: So you have found a satisfying flaw in short order—thanks only to a misunderstanding, however. First you complained you did not understand anything, and now you have got it all figured out. You've understood nothing but your fantasy. That is what usually happens.

She: So you are starting in with insults already?

I: My dear Ariadne, I never said psychoanalysis was an initiation and that at the cost of a few shudders it would lead you to phallic revelation, after which you would have but to be united with God by a sacred bond. The analyst is not Dionysus. He cannot ensure you the peaceful *jouissance* of an accomplished sexual relationship. The first name for *jouissance* in Freud's work is castration—the same castration your Amer-

ican analysts have left by the wayside, and of which they no longer have even the slightest notion.

She: I can make neither heads nor tails of what you say. You speak in aphorisms.

I: If you would be so kind as to give me your hand—there, palm open, fingers straight, a poor hand which doesn't want to know anything—give me your hand, put it in mine, and sit beside me, I could dispel these mysteries. It would suffice for you to lend me a little part of yourself, this small ear, and that would be the thread—yes, the invisible thread, Ariadne—which would allow me, the new Theseus, to kill the Minotaur.

She: And you would thus abandon me on the island of Naxos . . .

I: Where you might be found by your Dionysus.

She: You are asking me to be your patient?

I: No, just to be patient and kind. Let us read together this short book which tormented you so. I will speak for you. If one of us must be in the position of analyst, it won't be me but rather you. I will make you judge or mistress of what I say.

She: Should I be displeased, or should you lose me in the maze of your labyrinth, will you back up and begin afresh?

I: As often as you like. That is what is involved in my speaking for you.

She: While we play this game, must I have confidence in you, believe that you know something I don't, and that there is something to know?

I: No doubt.

She: But that is what I am not sure of.

I: That is the game. As long as you are curious, that will do. But don't expect me to play the scholar. In fact, as I will be speaking for you, as I will be tailoring what I say to what you can understand, in this game, you are the one who knows. Your knowledge here will define the level; the whole of my discourse will be designed for your ears alone; I will be content only if you are; and when I speak your language, as I hope to do, it will be as though it were coming from you.

She: From me?

I: Yes, from you. Thus it will be as if what I transmit to you were coming out of your own mouth—whereas one might think you were but its passive receiver. And when you say, "I've always known that," I won't be angered.

She: Now I am sure you are making fun of me. Or else you are simply trying to disguise with your seductive words the fact that you are the master and I the pupil.

I: Don't believe it. It is true that I want to be in your good graces, and that we will not get far if I am not. But there is more to it than that: I am trying gradually to introduce you to the logic of the locus of the Other; I am placing you in this locus, and its logic implies that the very message one addresses to it comes from it.

She: You don't expect me to say yes to this pretty paradox, do you?

I: Don't say yes—it will suffice for you not to always say no. Don't love me; just try to be unbiased and perhaps just slightly, ever so slightly, kindly disposed. Don't forget that I am at your mercy, and that a word from you could make me return to nothingness. Should you stop up your ear or stand up and leave, I, insofar as I speak, immediately disappear, as I speak but from the place you offer me.

She: As you speak but from the locus of the Other.

I: Exactly.

She: Fine, I accept your "locus of the Other," as you call it in that hyperbolic language of yours I won't ever get used to. But don't dream for a minute that you have won me over. Convoluted sentences have no power over me. I would not even consider being kindly disposed—you can count on me, on the contrary, to be rigorous, ruthless, and merciless.

I: *La Belle Dame sans merci!* Though I may be taken for a masochist, I confess I could not be more pleased. For that situates our discussion in the appropriate register: that of courtly love, not of catechism. Of all women, a poet chooses one single woman and makes of her his Lady [*Dame*], which means—I don't know if you are familiar with the Latin root—she who commands. He dedicates all of his art to her, she alone inspiring his song composed of word games and finds; she is the only reference of his verses and the sole object of his passion. To be worthy of this, she remains in her place, consenting to nothing, suggesting but the *tests* through which the troubadour may prove himself. And all that, in the end, to obtain what from her? A nothing: a sign. Not even a yes, but a response which suffices to reverse his decline, allowing him to escape from nothingness.

She: They don't sleep together?

I: In the end, no doubt, but we don't really know for certain. And even so, it is never said that they screw.

She: We aren't like that anymore nowadays.

I: It marked the style of love in the West for longer than you think. Brought to a climax and historically attested to as a social practice, it is what Freud, in his analysis of love and the lover's dependency resulting therefrom, called *verliebte Hörigkeit*. The merciless lady is a man's fantasy, though it is not necessarily a simple matter to find women willing to play the role.

She: I read something like that in the book you gave me.

I: That's right, and we'll come to it. I mentioned courtly love, so far from us now as a practice, to simply indicate to what lengths men can go to . . . make Woman exist.

She: Oh that is enough of this "Woman"! It is meaningless, and if it is not, its meaning is totally—how shall I say?—unstable.

I: That is how the French proverb goes: "Woman unstable often be, who trusts in her, right mad be he" [*Souvent femme varie, bien fol qui s'y fie*]. And that's why the troubadour invented an unchanging and impossible woman for himself, who could act as his guiding star. I too need a compass, and it is you who are my Polaris.

She: Here, when one heads off into the unknown, one goes West . . .

I: So be it; be my unexplored frontier.

She: It was the Minotaur you wanted to reach.

I: You are my Minotaur.

She: Well then, I can't be Ariadne, and you will be eaten.

I: Let us set aside ancient mythology—I want to be as American as you. Let's see—if I try to illustrate the Lady, the inhuman partner, by drawing upon your mythology, what do I come across? Moby Dick, of course! And Ahab's leg is not such a bad example to show that castration . . .

She: Oh yes, you're right! I am Ariadne, the Minotaur, Moby Dick—let's have done with it. I observe that you no sooner situate me in the locus of the Other of your invention than you cast me as a whale and imagine I'm going to eat you.

I: That—let us call a spade a spade—is an interpretation. Congratulations. Bravo! I must kiss you.

She: Have you finished, sir, with your exuberance? Coming back to this short book, you proposed to read it with me. That is why I am still at your side, and I fully expect you to engage in its explanation. You were confident you could comment upon it in my language, and in such a way as to make me believe my own words were coming out of your mouth. That is what I expect of you now.

I: At your service. Would you be so kind as to begin by posing me a question?

She: Well, I am curious to know if such an allusive, veiled, opaque text could have been broadcast by French television. For you say in your advertisement simply that its broadcast was “announced.”

I: Ah, I see that she who questions me also know how to read me! It is true that when it went to press, we were not sure it would be broadcast: there is a little story I should tell you concerning its broadcast. It all began with a telephone call I received from someone I did not know, a certain Benoît Jacquot, who told me he had gotten the go-ahead from the French Television Research Service to do a program on Jacques Lacan. He wanted to do it with me, so he said, rather than with a specialist in popularization—and you can take my word for it that there were plenty of them around.

She: Which won him, I imagine, your esteem and sympathy?

I: Certainly, but not my approval.

She: You refused?

I: No, I referred him to Dr. Lacan.

She: Dr. Lacan?

I: Yes, that’s what I called him during his lifetime.

She: That’s strange!

I: No, it’s not strange. He was, as you know, a doctor—a psychiatrist—and he had every right to that title. But it is true that I also called him doctor because he seemed to me truly learned [*docte*], a full-fledged doctor like St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor . . .

She: Lacan, the Satanic Doctor!

I: Lacan agreed to see Benoît. And to my surprise, he accepted on the spot. I understood why when I met Benoît: he was quite young, not a media star, nor looking to make a stepping stone of this project—he was really interested in it. I too immediately took a liking to him. When the program was finished, the research service didn’t want to broadcast

it. They thought it would be incomprehensible to the public at large.

She: There you have it!

I: They asked Benoît and me to cut three-quarters of it, and to replace the excisions with explanations I was to give.

She: Which is precisely what you are willing to do for me.

I: Well, there was no question of doing so. What did those impudent people expect from Lacan? Did they think he would speak like them just to please them?

She: But you speak like I do.

I: I don’t have to force myself. And I am not Lacan. In any case, it was a test of strength. We would not accept any compromises whatsoever, and the directors of the television station were worried about having a scandal on their hands; they wanted to show how open-minded they were—they had already broadcast programs with Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Francois Jacob—but would suffer accusations of obscurantism; the uproar caused by the cancelling of Lacan’s seminar at the Ecole Normale Supérieure was still fresh in people’s minds. In short, tempers heated up amid pressure, threats, and rage; the president of the television network gave in and the program was broadcast in two installments, the first at the end of January and the second at the beginning of February, both times at ten o’clock in the evening.

She: You want to prove to me that it was a battle?

I: It was a battle. The red carpet was never rolled out for us. Or if it was, we walked alongside it.

She: What is it that you call *manuductio* in the preface?

I: It is the Latin term for the marginal notes designed as a guide for the reader. Would you like to know where I got the idea? *Pilgrim’s Progress* which I was rereading at that time—and so much the worse if that leads you to criticize me.

She: I didn’t say anything.

I: *Ductio*, is to conduct or lead, and *manu* is by the hand, and it is yours that I am now holding in mine.

She: Couldn’t you have said something more about the notes?

I: In providing them, I attested first of all that the text could be followed, indicating as well, most simply, how to read Lacan. For you cannot make anything of it if you try to read it quickly, and besides it can’t be done for you end up throwing down the book. You should real-

ize that Lacan is to be read sentence by sentence, that every rhetorical flourish is in fact built upon a structure, and that his playing with language corresponds to lines of reasoning. I showed these marginalia to the doctor one evening at his home in the rue de Lille. For two full hours he poured over them, one by one. When he was through—he had already put on his coat—I was still seated at the worktable—I told him it would be good if he put in a word to distance himself from what was, after all, but my reading, leaving the way open to others. Still standing, he took out his pen again and, without saying a word, wrote this line: “He who questions me also knows how to read me.”

She: You were rather proud of that, I imagine.

I: I was moved, and surprised. I had to bear up under it also, as it didn't exactly win me friends all around. But I didn't take it as destined for me alone—nor did I when he designated me, seven years later, as the “at-least-one who reads him.” It made an example of me, no doubt, the living proof that the set of his readers was not empty—I was thus a witness. Which is not to say that I was the only one. You see here that I am never named; so why not understand it as follows: to question him is to know how to read him. That then applies to you as well. Knowing-how-to-read is required here, but instead of involving saying “yes,” it involves asking questions.

She: Now I am supposed to say “yes”?

I: Yes.

She: So I take up this book which, albeit short, requires a knowing-how-to-read specific to it, and I read. I'll show you right away what is wrong, in the very first paragraph: “I always speak the truth.” That would be fine if it were true, but it seems we are supposed to believe it just because he says so.

I: Exactly!

She: Does he always speak the truth? How can we know? We have to take his word for it . . .

I: That's right!

She: . . . blindly, which doesn't fit in with the spirit of open questioning you seem to recommend. “I always speak the truth” is not a truth confirmed by experience—it's more like a lot of bragging! But at any rate it can be understood without a great deal of academic exegesis—it's written in everyday language. The second sentence is acceptable: “Not

the whole truth, because there's no way, to say it all.” The idea that one is unable to speak the whole truth, that knowledge is always incomplete, seems to me perfectly admissible: it shows a promising modesty which favorably contrasts with the preceding boastfulness.

I: You don't think something other is perhaps at stake here than moral qualities?

She: I continue my reading: “Saying it all is literally impossible”—yes, we got that already, he's repeating himself. But why does he add: “literally impossible”? I can't understand what that “literally” is doing there. And why then the phrase “words fail”? That's not true—the unfinished work will be taken up by others. And, to finish off the paragraph, the last sentence is altogether incomprehensible: “Yet, it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real.” In the space of a few short lines, starting with the sentence “I always speak the truth”—which, after all, is limpid—he arrives at an obscure aphorism, and I already no longer know what the truth is.

I: It couldn't be put better.

She: The whole of Lacan is in that paragraph.

I: I quite agree.

She: He brags, repeats himself, makes erroneous claims and disappears into the shadows, while shooting off a lot of fireworks.

I: Yes, in a burst of sparks, as if he were taking the commander's hand.

She: The commander?

I: You know, at the end of Don Juan. . . . All of Lacan is, in fact, like that—he always ends up by giving his hand to the powers of shadow and horror. . . . “*Archeronta movebo*” are the words Freud takes from Virgil's mouth at the beginning of the *Traumdeutung*: “I will mobilize Acheron's” infernal gods. Lacan is simpler with his “I always speak the truth,” but that also leads him to his Acheron—what he calls the real.

She: You are as fuzzy a thinker as your master, instead of being clear like me. That doesn't impress me in the least, and I expect you to be as demonstrative as I concerning these three sentences.

I: I drink in your words. Your imperative is mine. I am tired of synopses. Besides, in psychoanalysis, everything comes down to a question of details. Unconscious formations such as slips of the tongue, bungled actions and puns have no being apart from detail. And what would

an interpretation be worth if it could be generalized for everyone? Lacan's style brings you back to matters of detail—so let's go into the details. "The divine details" as Nabokov so justly says.

She: Poe, for his part, doesn't want people to seek "truth in detail" . . .

I: Well, let us look at this book, *Television*, under a microscope.

She: "I always speak the truth"—so what do you have to say about that?

I: Plenty! First of all, when you say "I always speak the truth," I can attribute it to you; for "I," jumping from mouth to mouth, though ever identical, has no other referent than the person who says it at any given moment. "I" is one of the words Roman Jakobson, following Jespersen, calls "shifters," to indicate that they have no meaning but in the actuality of speech. No one ever speaks without at the same time saying "I speak the truth."

She: Except for the person who says "I am lying."

I: You hit the nail right on the head. It is precisely because there can be no speech which is not situated in the dimension of truth that "I am lying" constitutes a real paradox, and that Lacan immediately assumes here the posture—and there is a certain theatricality here, I must confess, or rather spectacularity as we're dealing here with television, as there was at his seminar as well—the posture of Anti-Epimenides. And the latter is truer than Epimenides, for truth and lies are in no way symmetrical.

She: How's that? I can tell the truth or tell a lie, and that alternative clearly defines a symmetrical relationship.

I: There is no doubt a truth which is but the opposite of falsehood, but there is another which stands over or grounds both of them, and which is related to the very fact of formulating, for I can say nothing without positing it as true. And even if I say "I am lying," I am saying nothing but "it is true that I am lying"—which is why truth is not the opposite of falsehood.

Or again we could say that there are two truths: one that is the opposite of falsehood, and another that bears up both the true and the false indifferently. I'm not sure my mentioning Frege and Russell in this context would serve as a guarantee in your eyes.

She: You certainly don't expect me, in any case to take them for Lacanians!

I: Frege invented a little sign, drawn as follows, ∴, which he placed at the beginning of his conceptual writing formulas to mean "it is thusly" or "it is to be understood." As for Russell, read the lecture in *Meaning and Truth* on the primary character of affirmation and the derivative character of negation. Freud says as much in his article "*Die Verneinung*" where, when a patient, discussing a dream, claims "It was *not* my mother," the analyst is called upon to make the interpretation that it was indubitably her, for the word is present, and the negation beside it is the mark of repression.

She: But look now, he who says "It was *not* my mother" when it was is not telling the truth.

I: As concerns the level at which the sentence is enunciated, you are right. But as concerns the level we call enunciation, you are wrong: "mother," the word "mother," was said, and that is enough.

She: Oh, the idea is that "I always speak the truth" at the level of enunciation, even if, at level of the enunciated, "I am lying"?

I: Exactly, and that is precisely what founds "the locus of the Other" as the locus of truth—the truth which has no opposite.

She: Thus you have a notion of truth which includes both true and false?

I: Indeed I do, like speech itself. So much so that Lacan wrote a fine prosopopeia of the truth, which you can read whenever you like, wherein you will find these words: "I, the truth, am speaking." For your part, you say: "It was *not* my mother." But the truth, for its part, speaks through what you say, and says something else to which you simply lend your mouth. It is the truth—that no degree of mastery can domesticate—which whirls and wanders about, captivates you, throws you off track, and makes you slip up; it is the Freudian truth, that of slips of the tongue and puns, that one cannot catch: " 'You see, you are already ruined,' it says; I take back what I've said, I defy you, I run for cover, and you say I'm being defensive."

She: If that is the truth, I no longer understand how lacking the words stops us from speaking the whole truth. On the contrary, I always find the words I need.



I: My friend, *the* truth and the *whole* truth are not the same thing. How could you make a whole of vagabond truth? It doesn't allow itself to be shut up in such a prison. There is always more (*Encore*) to be said. The truth shuns as much the Whole as the One, and that is why it is Other. If you are not tired of my appeals to logicians, I would suggest you read Tarski's "The Notion of Truth in Formalized Languages"; for he demonstrates therein that truth is undefinable within the language one speaks. To define it, one must step outside of that language, as is done in formalized languages which are numbered and hierarchized; at the  $n + 1$  level, you establish the  $n$ -level truth; this uncoupling of levels, termed "metalanguage" by Carnap, cannot be carried out in the case of the language we speak, for it is not formalized. And that is the meaning of Lacan's aphorism that there is no such thing as a metalanguage: there is no other language than the language, or at any rate the mother-tongue [*la langue*], we speak. To name that language, Lacan coined the term "*lalangue*"; we'll come across it again further along.

She: Well, I let you vaticinate to your heart's delight, but right-mindedness must nonetheless object to your concept of truth. I call "true" a statement which says what is the case, and "false" one which says what is not. And I'll stick to my guns.

I: I don't know if that is what right-mindedness involves, but "what is the case" comes right out of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. You know its memorable conclusion: "what cannot be said must be passed over in silence." That is unacceptable in psychoanalysis, which espouses a thoroughly antithetical ethic, as it is precisely about what cannot be said that one *must* speak—which provides an occasion to prove that words do not suffice to say everything. We must here establish something, failing which we will be unable to agree on anything further, and that is that what is said is not to be measured against what is.

She: Could you say that again? I got the impression you accept no reality outside of language, and if that is the case, well, good evening; I will leave you to your reveries.

I: One can, however, by means of something which is not reverie but rather a metaphysical method, suspend one's belief in external reality, lending credence to an entirely inner one—that of Descartes' *cogito*. And in fact it was upon the basis of this *cogito*, the residue of this hyperbolic disaster, that Lacan came up with the idea of grounding the subject

to which psychoanalysis applies: the subject of the unconscious. But we are getting ahead of ourselves here, and to reply to what you said, this time I'll refer to Freud and his practice. You recall that, confronted with the Wolf man, Freud stubbornly tried to coordinate statements with facts; indeed, he wanted to establish what was the case, and hone in on—in external reality—the primal scene in which he saw what his patient could not say. But hasn't it been established that he gave up that method? and that no analyst since has had recourse to it? and that if there is such a thing as verification in analysis, it is within the patient's statements? This accounts for the fact that the kind of speech involved in the experience which stems from Freud's work has no outside.

She: So, it certainly is simple: one can say whatever one likes!

I: Analytic experience has no other principle—that's what Freud called free association. Say everything! What one finds, however, is that "one is unable to do so." A logic is at work which prohibits it. That is the very meaning, if I dare say, of the unconscious. That's what leads Freud to speak, in *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety*, of primal repression, which is as such impossible to eliminate. It is not a question of simple incapacity, but rather of impossibility. Incapacity can be sensed; impossibility takes the form of a conclusion—derived from the whole course of an analysis. And when you thus encounter impossibility, you encounter reality—not "external reality," but a reality in some sense within discourse which results from its impasses. This impasse-reality is what Lacan, in his terms, calls the "real." Let us grant him that much: the real is the impossible. When discourse runs up against something, falters, and can go no further, encountering a "there is no" [*il n'y a pas*—and that by its own logic—that's the real. According to antiquity's definition, truth is related to the real as *adequatio rei intellectus*, correspondence of the thing to the mind. But if the truth is not that at all, nor exactitude, either truth is not related to any real whatsoever, or it is related to the real but by the impossible-to-say.

She: This real of Lacan's which cannot be said but about which one must speak—isn't it what Freud simply called "trauma"?

I: Lacan's real is always traumatic; it is a hole in discourse; Lacan said "*trou-matique*" [literally "hole-matic"]; in English one could perhaps say "no whole without a hole"? I would be inclined to translate Lacan's "*pas-tout*"—one of his categories—by (*w*)hole.

She: The real is not at all reality as it is usually understood.

I: No, not at all. The real depends upon the logic of discourse, the latter delimiting or closing in on the real with its impasses; thus the real is not a “thing-in-itself,” nor does it constitute a whole; for Lacan there are only “bits-of-real.”

She: You have said nothing of the adverb “literally.”

I: Indeed, I was hoping to spare you its explanation. This is how I understand it: you may well intend to say the whole truth—that makes sense. But the signs slip away; they create obstacles. Permit me some more logic here: as you know, at the turn of the century, set-theoretical paradoxes were discovered; their effect was to shake the hitherto established belief in the foundations of mathematics; in order to deal with them, Hilbert forged the concept of formal systems. A system is called formal when it allows one to reason, at an elementary and supposedly intuitive level, with signs or materials. As a mathematical domain, it is thus translated into a system, *S*; and one proceeds to demonstrate that it is consistent—i.e. that one cannot demonstrate therein both *A* and not-*A*. This ambition implies that *S* includes everything needed to carry out such demonstrations, as well as the definition of truth which is valid therein. Surprise! “One is unable to do so.” Barely formulated, this program was undermined by Gödel’s incompleteness theorems, which provide, for any and every system which would attempt to formalize arithmetic, an undemonstratable formula. No discovery since 1931 has been more important in mathematical logic than that impossibility, related to the handling of signs which are entirely material. Gödel adapted, and he says as much explicitly, the ancient paradox “I am lying.” A fine English edition of his complete works is undergoing preparation, the first volume of which came out last year<sup>1</sup>; see page 149 and pages 362–363.

She: All of that is behind the word “literally” here?

I: Lacan often referred to this example of Gödel’s.

She: You hand me up, my dear, a whole shelfful of mathematical logic to explain three sentences of this book. It’s all out of proportion.

I: Ah, but these three sentences are very dense. . . . What knowledge must one assume one’s public to have? Lacan asks the question a bit

1. *Collected Works of Kurt Gödel, Volume 1*, edited by Solomon Feferman et al., Oxford University Press, 1986.

further on. He answers by saying that, for his part, he speaks to those in the know, to the *cognoscenti*.

She: Well, it seems to me that at least on television, where he could reach the most people, he should have spoken to those not in the know. But he not only doesn’t speak to them, he insults them by calling them—calling us—*idiots*. His approach is haughty, contemptuous, anti-pedagogical, and downright anti-democratic.

I: It’s a lot more complicated than that. In any case it is not my approach.

She: Yes, you, right, you converse with an idiot!

I: No, I converse with the truth!

She: I am the truth?

I: At least, as long as you are dissatisfied with me! You are seeking the weak point in the knowledge I offer up; I am working for you, you make me trip up—it’s never quite right! So I have to re-explain. But your argument does affect me. Who do you think Lacan has in mind when he says the idea was suggested to him that he “speak in such a way that idiots understand me”?

She: You?

I: I am convinced of it.

She: You should know if you suggested it.

I: Ah, I don’t believe I did so. But that would not have stopped Lacan from thinking I had, and to hand me over this . . . interpretation. What is true is that I wanted, as I declare further on, to ask him *the least substantial questions*. I would have liked him, I admit—I too always speak the truth—to take the occasion to lay out his doctrine in a popular form. My reference was and still is the Enlightenment. That was Lacan’s reference as well, but in his own way. “Everyman,” the cultivated interlocutor representing humanity reduced to its rational aspect, supposed to know how to think, as Kant says, as anyone else would, is the idiot. The universal man is in fact *idiôtês*<sup>2</sup>—the Greek term for particular. Diderot is cleverer than that, taking as his interlocutor Rameau’s Nephew, the most singular of men, and endowing himself with common sense. What happens if you take someone who is not in the know as your Other? For, if according to our initial convention you receive from him the message you

2. Derived meanings: “foreign to such or such profession, ignorant.”

send him, you are thus worth nothing more and teach nothing to anyone, regardless of what you think. You manage only to be understood by idiots.

She: Well that's not so bad for starters!

I: To make oneself understood is not the same as teaching—it is the opposite. One only understands what one thinks one already knows. More precisely, one never understands anything but a meaning whose satisfaction or comfort one has already felt. I'll say it to you in a way you won't understand: one never understands anything but one's fantasies. And one is never taught by anything other than what one doesn't understand, i.e., by nonsense. If the psychoanalyst holds in abeyance his understanding of what you say, that gives you the chance to do the same, and it is from that you may learn something—to the extent to which you take a distance from your fantasies.

She: And despite all that, you at first pushed Lacan towards popularization until he himself stopped short?

I: It didn't happen quite like that. And despite what may seem to have been the case upon first glance, this beginning was truly a *captatio benevolentiae*, as the ancient orator recommended, an exordium designed to ensure the public's goodwill. Lacan makes an avowal—he says “I confess” in the second paragraph—which at first calls for one to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” which in France is the oath required of a witness testifying before the tribunal; Lacan goes on to correct this in the digression we have already examined. This avowal aims at justifying the style he adopted in his television appearance: the same as at his seminar.

She: Why does he say “the present comedy”?

I: Every interview is a comedy, as is perhaps every bond built up by speech—including even analysis, Freud's reference to tragedy notwithstanding. In any case, it is theater. Lacan never shied away from theatrics—it goes hand in hand with the use of discourse. The bores reproached him for it; they reason badly. What we agreed upon beforehand was that I would converse with Lacan in front of the cameras. But that was not possible, for after every cut, when it was time to start up again, Lacan shifted a bit—in his discourse. Each time he gave an additional twist to his reflexions which were unfolding there, under the spotlights, thwarting any chance of bridge-building. We stopped after two hours; I gave

him in writing a list of questions; and he wrote this play, *Television*, in about two weeks' time; I saw him every evening and he gave me the day's manuscript pages; then he read or acted out—with a few improvised variations—the written text you have before you. He made a springboard of this false start.

She: Why does he say “a failure then, but thereby, actually, a success”?

I: In psychoanalysis bungled actions are the successful ones. They are failures as far as meaning is concerned, i.e., in terms of their signifying intention, but they are successful as far as the truth—arising from misunderstanding—is concerned. A slip of the tongue is as good as a pun.

She: Why does Lacan prefer erring [*errement*] to error [*erreur*]?

I: It is not simply that he prefers the former, for he exhibits this choice: instead of crossing it out, he leaves both. Stress is thereby placed on the erring one finds in the title of the seminar he began at the end of 1973, *les Non-dupes errent*, a homophonous retake of the seminar title he had announced in 1963, *les Noms-du-Père*, but definitively decided not to give after the first lesson. An error, Lady Truth, is local, whereas erring goes straight to principles. Let us get some perspective on the question: the subject is naturally erring—in speech certainly, like the truth which I qualified as vagabond; discourse structures alone give him his moorings and reference points; signs identify and orient him; if he neglects, forgets, or loses them, he is condemned to err anew. He must thus allow himself to be fooled by these signs to have a chance of getting his bearings amidst them; he must place and maintain himself in the wake of a discourse and submit to its logic—in a word, he must be its dupe.

She: A minute ago you were talking about the truth, and now you say one must let oneself be taken in by signs and become the dupe of a discourse.

I: You are forgetting that truth is not exactitude, nor has it any existence apart from signs. These signs are no doubt fictions, organized into a discourse, but truth itself has a fictional structure, being but the effect of discourse.

She: Do you expect an idiot like me to understand what you are saying? Phrase it differently. I no longer know what you mean by “discourse.”

I: Ah, that would be grand if you were *the idiot* [*l'Idiotie*] for me, such that there would be no other like you—that is how it is for every woman! You are right, for I neglected to introduce the concept of discourse—distinct from that of speech—and we won't get far in our reading of *Television* if I am unable to give you at least an idea of it. The word “discourse” nowadays has a general, vague, common use, which is why I took it for granted in speaking with you; Lacan uses it too, but be careful, for starting in the seventies, Lacan gives it an unusual meaning—technical, as it were, or in any case constructed. He creates four schemas of discourse which constitute the determinate modes of enunciation. I will not burden you with the list right away; don't forget that I am taking you by the hand and that I promised you a stroll along these cliffs, not a rude climb up them. We will go step by step, and that is only appropriate in the case of discourse as it can be taken apart. If I tell you that every kind of discourse involves and prescribes a hierarchy of values, you think you understand. Well that to me is adequate, and I will further simplify by positing that every discourse institutes one value as supreme. If you admit that you understand that as well, I ask you to take but one additional step in considering that this value is incarnated in a sign. Yes, a sign. I can help you picture it with the example of Constantine who saw in a dream . . . well, but you know all that.

She: Not so very well that it would be pointless to refresh my memory.

I: Constantine saw in a dream the sign of the cross, and received the promise that he would be victorious if he placed it on his banners: “*In hoc signo vinces*” [“with this sign you will vanquish”]. We owe the Christian Empire to that. You will agree that the image is a beautiful and memorable one; let us transpose it for the case of discourse. Every discourse, or at least every discourse which recruits, thus proposes its Constantinian sign—in a word, that *in the name of which* one speaks. Have I sufficiently prepared you now for the concept “master signifier”?

She: I didn't see that term anywhere in this book.

I: You saw its converse. I've introduced discourse, in Lacan's sense, by the “master's discourse”; indeed, it furnishes the matrix; the subject therein calls upon a master, and . . .

She: How do you understand that?

I: Truth is not (w)hole, and as it is ungraspable, the erring subject is

fundamentally feeble; he always requires a master, an Other who will be the master.

She: Well sir, that is not psychoanalysis, it is political philosophy, and hardly salubrious at that. I'd much rather believe in man's natural goodness.

I: I beg to differ: it *is* psychoanalysis, and it happens to formalize Freudian identification. Why do you thus think the subject is a subject who identifies if not because in and of himself, so to speak, he is lacking in identity? That is what Lacan writes with the following symbol—lend me your pen— $\$$ , a capital S crossed out, which he undoubtedly borrows from Heidegger; the latter, in his essay *Die Linie*, crosses out the word “being.” This is also what makes the subject depend upon the “master signifier,”  $S_1$ , which identifies him and tells him who he is; he pays for it with the repression of his truth; and that's why, lacking understanding, he stands under the master signifier:  $\frac{S_1}{\$}$ . I have begun writing for you the master's discourse; you perhaps already see, as I'm using the words “identification” and “repression,” that it is also the discourse of the unconscious.

She: You ask me to see, but I don't see at all.

I: You don't see anything, but it is perhaps beginning to look at you. You rise up in the name of freedom. For the moment, I will show you the discourse of which the master's is the converse. Lacan in no way presents himself as the herald of the master's discourse, but rather of the analyst's. The analyst's discourse is not what the analyst says; it condenses the structure of analytic experience, laying down the coordinates of the enunciation created therein. This discourse is different from the other, firstly, in that it situates at the place of the “master signifier” something which does not identify and is not by nature a sign, namely an object.

She: I have seen that term: “I expect of supposed analysts nothing more,” says Lacan, “than their being this object thanks to which what I teach is not a self-analysis.” He adds, furthermore, that concerning that point, these “supposed analysts” alone can understand him. I am no analyst—not even a supposed one—and this “object” means nothing to me.

I: This object is called “small *a*” by Lacan. It will require a bit of patience on your part to grasp the basic elements of this concept. Let me first explain why the master and the analyst give their names to two op-

posite discourses. What is the fundamental mode of enunciation to which analysis introduces the subject? This mode gets its name from Freud: free association. Free association goes against repression to the extent to which it unleashes the identifications which stabilize the subject in his symptom; it puts repression to the test of the truth one always says, regardless of what one says, and which is, notwithstanding, not (w)hole, which is an impasse, and which is related to the real by its impossibility. The analyst consequently does not identify, he de-identifies, and there is no need to seek elsewhere the principle behind Lacan's critique of so-called "orthodox" analyses, these latter projecting no other end for an analysis than identification with the analyst.

She: Yet the analyst is certainly the master in his "discourse"—he is the one who commands.

I: He occupies that place, but he neither governs nor educates—he doesn't propose any ideals. As soon as Freud offered up his *Massenpsychologie*, his followers—Rado and then Strachey—hastened to make of the analyst a new ego ideal, going against both the letter and spirit of Freud's work. This was not altogether un-insightful, for there is no discourse which lacks the place of the master. But an analyst's job is not to occupy it as a master, nor as a signifier—by that I mean an identificatory factor—nor even as a subject, for he does not give himself over to any drift in speaking, and he shuns interlocution. What is he? He is that silence in the name of which the patient speaks. But he must be there; he provides his body; and he holds the place of what cannot be said. In short, he incarnates the impossible.

She: You mean to say that he is . . . the real?

I: As a fiction, of course.

She: The real as a fiction—what a paradox!

I: That is what the Master says to Jacques in Diderot's novel: "There is perhaps no other head under the sun which contains as many paradoxes as does yours." To which Jacques replies: "A paradox is not always a falsehood." The master place is never occupied but by what Lacan called a *semblant*,<sup>3</sup> which one might translate in your language as a "make-believe."

3. *Translator's note: Semblant* was still in currency in English in Carlyle's time; cf. *Heroes v.* (1841) 284, "Thou art not true; thou art not extant, only semblant." It took on the meanings of "seeming," "apparent," and "counterfeit."

She: If I follow you—and make no mistake about it, I do not agree with any of it, I am simply playing along with your paradox—it is the analyst who occupies this place in the analyst's discourse. But you have not told me what he makes believe he is.

I: I had to prepare you for it first: he is the make-believe of the lost object. That is the function Freud discovered in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and that Karl Abraham made the crux of his theory of development from which he derived the first premises of the "partial object"; Melanie Klein, his student, located the partial object at the center of psychic economy, going so far as to show that at the end of analysis, in separating from his analyst, an analysand has to mourn the loss of this object. And hence it was that Winnicott glimpsed the transitional object. That is what Lacan sums up, condenses, justifies and constructs with object *a*. To be fair, something Georges Bataille contributed in "Heterology" is at work there as well—I imagine you read the translation of his work in the spring 1986 issue of *October*.<sup>4</sup>

She: Lacan was thus a Kleinian? Is that the secret to this whirlwind of references which has left me, I confess, rather dizzy?

I: No, Lacan was not a Kleinian, though he was the first in France, during the Second World War, to decipher and praise her work; nor was he Winnicottian, though he was the first to have published Winnicott in French. The fact, if you can believe it, is that "Ego-psychology"—stemming from the work of Anna Freud and Heinz Hartmann—still predominates in America; as a Chicago analyst was telling me yesterday, it has become like wallpaper for American analysts: it's so much in evidence that no one pays attention to it anymore. Ego-psychology so thoroughly deflected Freud's work from its authentic perspective that it is currently suffering the return of what it rejected in the guise of "object relations theory," which is no less partial. Crossing one with the other in varying quantities, as is now done in your country, is no substitute for Lacan's "return to Freud."

She: Lacan! Lacan! Lacan! Do something for me now!

4. No. 36, translated by Annette Michelson.

*Prefatory Note*

1. "A broadcast on Jacques Lacan," was what the Service de la Recherche de l'O.R.T.F. wanted.<sup>1</sup> Only the text here published was broadcast. To be aired in two parts under the title *Psychoanalysis at the end of January*. Director: Benoît Jacquot.
2. I asked the person who replied to you to sift through what I heard of what he had said to me. The flour has been gathered in the margin, in the form of *manuductio*.

J.-A. M., *Christmas 1973*

He who interrogates me  
also knows how to read me.

J. L.

1. O.R.T.F., at the time, named the French national broadcasting agency (Office de la Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française), a special department of which, the Service de la Recherche, is dedicated to cultural and experimental programs. [Footnotes for *Television* are by Denis Hollier.]