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BOOK PROFILE: *LACAN AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE*,  
BY CHARLES SHEPHERDSON

A profile of Charles Shepherdson, *Lacan and the Limits of Language*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. 222 pages. \$80.00 (hardcover); \$24.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-082322767-9.

**L**acan and the *Limits of Language* is the latest work from Charles Shepherdson, one of the foremost readers of Lacan's work. As scholars acquainted with Lacan's work will agree, understanding Lacan is notoriously difficult. Shepherdson's knowledge of Lacan's system is such that he is able to point out the shortcomings of established, yet facile, readings of Lacan's work. He compels the reader to ask deeper questions of Lacanian psychoanalysis and indeed, to question the very aim of psychoanalysis. Shepherdson does not simply "read" Lacan, which alone would certainly be useful enough, but he also shows how Lacan's particular brand of psychoanalytic thinking can cut to the heart of polemical cultural debates today.

*Lacan and the Limits of Language* is a compilation of essays written for various occasions. The book starts with, as Shepherdson himself remarks, an encyclopedia article on the "Real," and ends with a chapter on psychoanalysis and race written for an edited collection. Along the way there are essays written for journals and conferences, such as one on *Antigone* and another on Julia Kristeva's *Tales of Love*, as well as an essay in honor of Teresa Brennan.

The title of the book, *Lacan and the Limits of Language*, is aptly chosen. Shepherdson states, "Lacan brought to light many aspects of human existence that are irreducible to language" (xiv). Is there a limit to remembering? A limit of the Real? A limit of the law, of language, of representation? Where does mourning end and melancholia begin?

Readers familiar with his previous work, in particular *Vital Signs*, will no doubt recognize some of the themes he returns to in this recent collection of essays. In his preface, Shepherdson notes that three main themes emerge in these essays: 1) "the question of the body, which Lacan is often wrongly said to neglect," 2) the relation between Lacan, Heidegger and Derrida in terms of their fundamental problems such as the relationship between "structure" and "history," and finally, 3) Lacan's relation to topics he is said to neglect, such as race, affect and the body (ix). Even from this short summary one may note that Shepherdson is concerned with two main things: correcting misreadings of Lacan and with situating Lacan among other philosophical camps. Indeed, Shepherdson points out that academic disciplines have become "overly territorialized," each enforcing

separation and allegiance, rather than comparison and productive criticism (ix). Here he wishes to make broad strokes indicating where Lacan's work may intersect with other thinkers. This is not a systematic comparison of Lacan with other thinkers but rather an in-depth reading of Lacan's thought that may foster other scholars of figures such as Heidegger, Hegel, Foucault, or Derrida to develop these points of contact.

In this review I wish to give an overview of each chapter. It should be noted that the six chapters of the book can be read independently, but also as a coherent whole. Shepherdson's focus on particular issues, such as the problem of sexual difference or the way Lacan has been misunderstood as simply "ahistorical," appear in several chapters. Nevertheless I think it will be useful to provide a brief overview of each chapter with a discussion of its themes, since the chapters do well as "stand-alone" works. I will then discuss the usefulness of this volume as a whole for scholars both familiar and unfamiliar with Lacan's work.

Chapter One, "The Intimate Alterity of the Real," is a wide-ranging portrait of the register of the Real. Discussing the "trace" of Derrida, the incest prohibition of Levi-Strauss, and the critiques leveled at Lacan by Judith Butler, this chapter is much more than an encyclopedia-style article. Shepherdson's premise that the Real is not truly outside the Symbolic but is rather more like an excluded interior, a "void within the structure," confronts the simplistic understanding of Lacan that would suggest that all reality is simply a discursive construction of the Symbolic Order. Citing problems of incorporation, such as orifices, mourning, and object relations, Shepherdson shows that the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition has long refused to think of the body in terms of a divide between inside and outside. Instead, Shepherdson shows that for Lacan, the body is intimately bound to the three registers. The Imaginary and Symbolic are the external devices that constitute the void, the Real of the body, "the symbolic containment of lack" (5).

As noted earlier, one of the aims of this volume is to correct misreadings of Lacan. Critics of Lacan have often said that his theories suggest an ahistorical framework that avoids specific cultural and social realities of any given time period. Following Zizek, Shepherdson insists that psychoanalysis is antihistorical, not ahistorical, and thus conceives of time differently than critics that insist on the cultural construction of reality. Shepherdson points out that the two tendencies of our times, one to view everything as social construction, the other a return to "reality" in the form of genetics and biology, are not acceptable. Shepherdson argues that Lacan accepts neither of these, instead asking us to think about the limit of representation. Giving examples such as the phallus, incest and gold, Shepherdson looks at how these nodal points, these quilting points, are the "signifier of signifiers" of a given system, which show us how the Real and the Symbolic are ultimately linked together. Their outcomes cannot be understood by polarized debates but rather by "a theory that aims to understand the corporeal materialization of this impasse" (20).

This is very similar to the discussion in the final chapter, "Human Diversity and the Sexual Relation," where race and sexual difference take center stage. Rejecting the common polemical discussion where race is either a social construction or a given biological fact, Shepherdson shows how psychoanalysis refuses this divide. The chapter discusses how sexual difference, which has likewise been discussed on the same bipolar lines, cannot be discussed in this binary either. Shepherdson notes that social constructivist theory has traditionally erased the realities of the body (i.e. women bear children and men do not, or the fact that certain genetic diseases are racially distributed), while biology has conversely avoided the heavy influence of culture on the body (i.e. the significance of the "phallus" or child-bearing, culturally speaking, or how economics influence the health of particular racial groups). This confrontation of the "real" of biology and the "symbolic" constructions of society points to a common misunderstanding of Lacan. Lacan has often been considered ahistorical and unconcerned with the social aspects of the subject. Here Shepherdson is at his finest, showing how theorists have paid so much attention to the realm of the Symbolic that they have created the idea that there is nothing but the Symbolic in Lacan's work. Indeed, they have neglected the Imaginary and the Real. He artfully demonstrates how the concepts of race and sexual difference are not just Symbolic constructions but are intimately connected to the realms of the Real and the Imaginary.

Two of the chapters return to Shepherdson's first love, literature. "The Atrocity of Love" is a close examination of Lacan's lectures on Antigone, lectures that are included in Lacan's volume on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis. Shepherdson focuses on three aspects: 1) the text of Antigone itself, 2) Hegel's interpretation, and 3) Aristotle's *Poetics*, and issues that derive from Aristotle's text, namely catharsis and *jouissance*. In Chapter Four, "Telling Tales of Love," Shepherdson discusses Kristeva via Plotinus and Ovid. Reading Kristeva's work on Ovid, he questions whether one can say narcissism is a "historical" event that can be said to exist differently in historical periods. Shepherdson suggests that while the subject is inscribed in history, narcissism itself cannot simply be "reduced [to] the narrative that seek[s] to describe it" (xv). Instead, narcissism underlies the stories that philosophy and literature tell about it. In fact, philosophy and literature conceal the truth of narcissism, placing it into various artistic, literary forms. Narcissism thus creates a false history for the subject: the event of narcissism "gives rise to a 'past' that only emerges later, as a lost origin – one that the subject, moreover, projects into the future, in order to 'recover' and possess this time that never was" (118).

The chapter, "Emotion, Affect, Drive," on the work of Teresa Brennan, is likewise concerned with clarifying aspects of psychoanalytic issues. Reading Brennan, he asks what the difference between affect and emotion is, seeing as Brennan did not distinguish between the two. Shepherdson's chapter suggests that the divide between affect and emotion needs to be thought through more carefully with Freud and Lacan, and that such a clarification would have helped Brennan's discussion. Shepherdson's development of Brennan's argument regarding the modern ego as an intersubjective entity, deeply enmeshed in social forces and no

longer autonomous, is particularly useful to the themes of *Lacan and the Limits of Language*.

Chapter Five is also concerned with the idea of memory. Shepherdson questions where memory resides, what place memory has in terms of the structure of time, and how we can understand the place of the registers in regards to memory. Here Shepherdson discusses memories of the imaginary (guilt, narcissism), memories that are given meaning in the Symbolic, and memories that have not been remembered, memories that exist at the limit of remembering, in the Real.

There is much to commend in this work. The idea of the intersubjective ego, one formed by culture, social forces and history, is highly developed here. The close readings of both Freud and Lacan show us how cognizant each was of the faults of oppositional thinking. Shepherdson makes a strong argument for a self-reflexive psychoanalytic tradition that is aware of how the answer we find, both in psychoanalysis and without, are informed by the particular socio-historical world the question inhabits. Nevertheless, this is not a book, or indeed even a chapter, for those unversed in Lacan. While Shepherdson hopes to build a bridge to others in the theoretical world of continental philosophy, it is not an easy bridge to cross with this text. *Lacan and the Limits of Language* is a demanding book that assumes a great deal of foreknowledge by the reader. But for those interested in Lacan, and willing to struggle with all of his complexity and brilliance, Shepherdson is a helpful guide indeed.

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