# LACAN AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

**Jan Marta**

Lacan could be called the post-Structuralist theoretician *par excellence*. No one better embodies the cult of the intellectual hero, no one played to a fuller house with a longer run in the Parisian intellectual theatre season. Although Foucault's contribution to philosophy and Said's potential contributions to politics and political theory may appear to be rivals, no one has so well represented the intellectual from another academic speciality who has had such a great impact on both that specialty and literary theory. Yet post-Structuralism is fraught with philosopher-literati. Lacan, however, with his medical and psychiatric training, and his interest in philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, and mathematics, transgresses the boundaries of many an academic specialty both in the influences on, and the impact of his work.

Still, Lacan's initial enterprise and staunchly maintained purpose was to reread Freud – he might say read Freud; others might say misread Freud. He presented himself as a disciple and an exegete. Lacan always called himself a Freudian, leaving to others the option of labelling themselves Lacanian. This work of exegesis draws him closer to the literary critic. Furthermore, Lacan's own style can be called post-Structuralist or post-Modernist. He privileges the materiality of language, forcing the reader back to the signifier. Understanding his text depends as much on the reconstruction of what is not there as on the interpretation of what is there. While Lacan attributes a Gongoresque style to the speaking unconscious, he also adopts a Gongoresque or metaphysical style that turns on the conceit of language. Thus he both harkens back to the seventeenth century while maintaining a contemporaneity of style that also forms a stylistic metaphor of his ideas.

Lacan is post-Structuralist in the sense of being post-Saussurean. His main contribution is the redefinition and resituation of the subject. Lacan has provided a semiotics of the subject, giving psychoanalysis a place within semiotics, at a time when the subject has been largely ignored by

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the new mode. It might be argued that neither semiotics, psychoanalysis, or literary theory could have done without this articulation of the subject among them. Certainly, one of Lacan's major contributions in all these areas has been recognized as his redefinition of the subject.

The decentered-subject of post-Structuralism is not Lacan's innovation but Freud's. Freud displaced the center of the subject from Descartes' center in the conscious, in the *cogito,* to the unconscious. Lacan, however, made the unconscious, and therefore the subject, dependent on the Other. This will be made more explicit later in terms of the *Nom-du-Père* and the *stade du miroir.*

Unlike Freud, Lacan did not view the subject as *having* neuroses but as being spoken by a disturbed unconscious. This is the pathological corollary of Lacan's theory that the unconscious is structured like a language; that the unconscious is a language. The unconscious speaks the subject. This is where Lacan's theory has its greatest indebtedness to post-Saussurean linguistics. Lacan stated categorically, in an uncharacteristically clear, often-quoted passage:

> the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language, that a material operates in it according to certain laws, which are the same laws as those discovered in the study of actual languages, languages that are or were actually spoken. (Smith and Kerrigan, 1983, p. 21)

Freud, on the other hand, had characterized the unconscious as anarchical. Lacan defines the language of the unconscious in Saussurean terms of a closed system of signs composed of signifiers and signifieds – however, with modifications:

> As a follower of Saussure's structuralism, Lacan accepts the division of the verbal sign into signifier and signified, word and concept. But the relation of signifier to signified is not "simple, clear, concrete, and direct"; not only is it arbitrary, arising out of the discriminatory lexicon of a natural language, but its meaning is burdened with history and tinged by association. No signifying word can be uttered that does not have overlapping signification with other words. The signified slides under the signifier. (Smith and Kerrigan, p. 16)

The Lacanian "I" is fluctuating, dependent upon the other signifiers in the system.

Semiotics and the Oedipal complex, which Freud derived as the model of psychic development in both the male and the female, join together in Lacan's innovation of the *"Nom-du-Père,"* the "Name-of-the-Father," which in French is homophonic with the *"Non-du-Père,"* the no, or law of the Father. For Lacan the Name-of-the-Father is "the signifier of the pervasive

law structuring human existence" (Smith and Kerrigan, p. 21). It is the signifier of the symbolic order of existence, "the signifier 'which in the Other, as locus of the signifier, is the signifier of the Other as locus of the law' " (ibid.).

The primacy of the signifier in Lacan's theory is evident in the homonymity of *nom* and *non,* which is key to the understanding of the role of the "Name-of-the-Father." Similarly the French *assujetissement,* subjection, contains the word *sujet,* or subject, which helps fully express the meaning in Lacan's assertion that the subject is subject to language.

Lacan's vocabulary is filled with words and neologisms which capture his meaning precisely, metaphorically, while frustrating the translator. Lacan's primacy of the signifier in fact defies translation, which is the attempt to render the same signified by a necessarily different signifier. His famous word plays can only be approximated.

Since language structures the unconscious, and language is necessarily Other, following Saussure's definition of the relationship between signifier and signified as being arbitrary, and of the signifier deriving its signification from its relation to other signifiers in a closed system, Lacan's subject is doubly determined. Lacan is certainly no less deterministic than Freud was. Lacan's subject, under normal circumstances is also alienated in that language bars him from reality. The acquisition of language simultaneously represents a loss. Significantly this occurs at the time of the subject's recognition of his own reflection in the *stade du miroir* as described by Freud in the *Fort! Da!* of his grandson, and in Lacan's reinterpretation of the episode. Leavy, in his article "The Image and the Word: Further Reflections on Jacques Lacan" (Smith and Kerrigan, pp. 3–20), ably describes the interrelation between the *stade du miroir,* language, and the subject's alienation, and dependence on the Other:

> The child's self-awareness is not a given but comes from outside, literally from the reflection of the mirror, but more important from the "specular" recognition of its existence as a "you" by the attending parents. Its "me" and later its "I" are not autonomous, not even autogenous, so to speak, but are conferred imputations. It is a gift with strings attached; because it is derived from another's bounty, it is subject to another's caprice.
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> To be sure, prior to the "me" there is already an experiencing subject, making itself known through its demands, originally nonverbally, and, it seems not even organized with respect to its constituent body parts. This true subject is unconscious of self, and when it has acquired language, speaks itself. On the other hand, language too is a source of misrecognition. It is a gift of the outside world, and being arbitrary, not matched to the requirements of the subject. Language is procrustean; it is not made to fit individuals but fits the subject to itself. (ibid., p. 10)

Language is, however, necessary to the psychological well-being of the subject. Language necessarily mediates the world in which the subject lives, allowing him to repress via symbolism the horror of the real. If this does not happen, if he does not acquire the capacity to symbolize via acceptance of the *Nom-du-Père,* he will be exposed to the real in all its immediacy:

> The symbolic castration required by the Law of the Father, which intervenes in the dual relation between infant-as-phallus and mother's desire, establishes the price one pays for becoming a subject—subject to the law of language which henceforth structures human desire through metaphor and metonymy.
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> This structure radically determines our lives as human subjects, as subject to its Law: it subjects us to primordial loss, the loss of fantasized totalization in symbolic castration, the loss incurred in sepation from the immediacy of maternal symbiosis, the loss of that part of ourselves and our desire that henceforth finds expression only in the bits and pieces of metaphoric substitution and an unending metonymic displacement. To be finitely human means to live as decentered subjects split and barred from unconscious desire, forced to channel our wants through the narrow defiles of the signifier, which offers a limited satisfaction by affording us symbolic presences. The alternative is either death or psychosis, where there is neither presence nor absence and no speaking subject. (Smith and Kerrigan, pp. 30–31)

Unlike the immediacy of the real, signification depends on absence or lack:

> Lack is intrinsic to the signifier as signifier. When we speak or read a word, we do not stop at the mere sound or drops of ink (unless we are psychotic). We see through the word *to* another that is absent. This absent other is, first of all, all the other words as the background against which the word has salience. Second, we see through the word as signifier to its retrospective and prospective impact on the other words in the sentence. Third, we are given in the word the symbolic presence of what is signified. The word *refers,* it is never taken simply in itself substantively. It has no substance in itself except as a kind of medium that always comports an *other,* many others; it always slips equivocally and referentially along a polyphonic multiregister that establishes multileveled resonances. The real, on the contrary, is a kind of static whole as well as a kind of black hole void of internal relations. To "live in the real" means then to experience not just "loss of self" but an unbearable plenitude; . . . (ibid., p. 28)

Implicit in this discussion of Lacan's theories is his distinction between the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real orders of experience, which coexist and intersect in the subject (Lacan, 1968, p. 161). The Symbolic represents and structures both the other orders, the Real being what is real for the

subject, and the Imaginary being dominated by identification and duality (Silverman, 1983, p. 157).

No article on Lacan fails to acknowledge the difficulty of his style. Experienced readers of Lacan confess their frustrations while attempting, if not to justify, at least to redeem the obscurity of Lacan's text. Thus Lacan's style is variously described as a personal quirk, a metaphor for his thought, a psychoanalytic technique such that the reader must "work through" the text in order to come to know it, and simply as a pedagogic technique. Lacan, the thinker and professor, "does not write for idiots." The extension of these analogies and their precepts offers the potential for interesting observations and dilemmas. What is the reader-analysand to do when he has worked through Lacan's text – is he to bury it as he buries the result of his analysis, to "pass through" the rhetoric into the resumption of his life? Kerrigan in fact suggests that the healthiest thing to do with Lacan is to let him sink in, that, "The truly fertile critiques of Lacan will come from those who, tossed in the churn of his texts, have been permanently changed by him" (Smith and Kerrigan, p. xvi). Indeed those who allow themselves to be impregnated with his thought become Lacanian not only in their philosophy or psychoanalytical practice, but also in their style. However, does the reader-analysand read differently if he posits himself as a training analysand? Is there a rite of passage other than the knowledge of Lacan's text to his practicing as a Lacanian?

The neophyte is further assaulted with the assurance that Lacan's text is but a poor imitation of the man's personal teaching and that the written canon is but a fragment of the body of imparted knowledge. What does this say about the thinker-author whose main contribution was the primacy of the word? Perhaps the answer lies in the importance in Lacan's view of the *lack*. His text depends on the unsaid, the lack of the word, as much as his concept of psychic development of the subject depends on the lack, or the lost *objets a*. Further, it is the lack of Lacan's text which forces the reader to focus, one might say in vain, on the word. What is more, Lacan's style forces the reader's attention on the process of reading in a way comparable to the child's learning to read. One may already know how to read, but one must learn how to read Lacan – and from him to "misread" Freud – not only in terms of vocabulary and thought content but in terms of how to retain each sequential segment of the sentence until finally the sentence allows the parts and the whole to be understood. This is in fact the process inherent in the reception of any message and one that is emphasized by the written message with its possibilities for delay, contradiction, and so on. (Possibilities Proust, for example, exploited in the literary text.) Rarely does the experienced reader maintain an awareness of this process unless, of course, he is confronted by a text like Lacan's. In this

way the process of reading Lacan's text reflects the psychoanalytic process of rememoration.

Paradoxically, Lacan's writing style also reveals him to be a highly synthetic thinker rather than a strictly analytical one. That is, Lacan's text cannot be easily divided into little portions with appropriate labels as to their subject matter. A text stands as a whole, yet also as an integral part of the written canon which in itself forms part of the larger verbal canon of both the spoken seminars and the written works. Lacan rarely sets out in a clear orderly fashion his definition of a concept let alone provides a step-by-step guide through his theories. To understand any one element of Lacan's theory one has to be familiar with many others. Lacan assumes this familiarity and does not stop to explain to the uninitiated; the lecture is not repeated for the student who missed class. Also, Lacan is notorious for modifying his theory of a concept over time without acknowledging the resulting differences in the concept as used at different time periods through his work. The diachronous is turned back on the synchronous. In some cases this can be critical to interpretation, for example, in the difference over time between the concepts of the unconscious. Kerrigan has called what we refer to as synthetic, "deeply intuitive" (Smith and Kerrigan, p. xxxv). This is not contradictory but rather tends to ally the thinker with the exegete.

Schneiderman offers another explanation as to the indirectness of Lacan's speech. He suggests that Lacan was aware of the necessity because of the sociopolitical climate post-World War II—more so even than the intellectual climate of the time—to speak in a veiled manner. This protected Lacan from censure and protected the receiver of his message from too great a trauma. Lacan in fact thus practiced the psychoanalytic technique of only revealing to the patient as much as he could handle at one time. This in effect harkens back to the medical ethic, *Primum non nocere*. Only those who are ready for knowledge of his text will achieve it, their readiness being demonstrated by the work they have already done to reach this level. The work involved in understanding makes the knowledge acquired a part of the reader in the way no easily acquired knowledge could be.

The indirectness of Lacan's speech confers upon it a quasi-mystical or at least religious quality. The great books of religion similarly rely on the "not said" and on the metaphor, or the opacity of language. Also, the early phases of a religion often have similar sociopolitical reasons necessitating indirectness. Jesus was partially obliged to speak in parables by the persecution of the Jews and the Romans, as were the early Christians required to be secretive.

As the religious word is the word of truth or God (Allah, etc.) it similarly has a timelessness about it. The diachronous is not acknowledged as an axis of change for the concept. The new God of Love of the New Testament is portrayed as being one with the punitive God of the Old Testament. This timelessness is reproduced in Lacan's canon.

The religiosity of Lacan's style coheres with the psycho-theologic significance, or religious overtones Kerrigan recognizes in Lacan's concept of the "word" (ibid., p. xix). Indeed, herein may lie the answer to the role of the "word" in Lacan's style. Lacan's stress on the desire for death as the principle informing the subject reproduces in psychoanalytic terms the self-sacrifice and loss or sacrifice of the love object of the Christian myth. Yet, as for St. John, in the beginning for Lacan was the Word.

Death, religion, and the word all subscribe to Lacan's *jouissance*, the sexual pleasure which, often metaphorically equated to a mystical experience, is also a metaphor and a temporary satisfaction of the desire for death, and which can be achieved through the word, in the sublimation but not the repression of the drive:

> In other words—for the moment, I am not fucking, I am talking to you. Well! I can have exactly the same satisfaction as if I were fucking. That's what it [sublimation] means. Indeed, it raises the question of whether in fact I am not fucking at this moment. (Lacan during a seminar, quoted in Smith and Kerrigan, p. xxiii)

Whatever Lacan may be doing in his seminars and writings, his contributions to psychoanalytic and literary thought remain to be contended with for their radical difference if nothing else. In this we can concur with Kerrigan; "Whatever our answer, we are not done with interpreting Lacan, for he is not the sort of author who can be made obsolete by the detection of serious flaws in his thinking" (ibid., p. xxii).

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**Correspondence to: Jan Marta, M.D., 140 Sunrise Drive, Hamilton, Ont., L8K 4C6, Canada.**