

Review Essay

‘Who Are You Kidding?’

Malcolm Quinn¹

The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by Russell Grigg, New York and London WW Norton and Co. 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0-393-06263-2 (hardcover) ISBN-10: 0-393-06263-5 (hardcover).

Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis : Reflections on Seminar XVII. Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (eds.) Durham and London: Duke University Press 2006. ISBN: 0-8223-3707-x (cloth) ISBN: 0-8223-3719-3 (paperback).

On the cover of the paperback edition of Clemens and Grigg’s collection ‘Reflections on Seminar XVII’, there is a photograph of a grinning Daniel Cohn-Bendit, confronting a policeman in front of the Sorbonne on May 6 1968. Clemens and Grigg’s introduction underlines this historical reference, by naming three important contexts for Lacan’s Seminar XVII ‘The Other Side of Psychoanalysis’¹ These three orientation points are an atmosphere of intellectual dissent that followed the student uprising of 1968, the establishment of the Department of Psychoanalysis at Université de Paris VIII (Vincennes) and the relocation of Lacan’s seminar from the Ecole Normale Supérieure to the Faculté de Droit, in the Place du Panthéon. An adequate reading of Seminar XVII, requires that we should be precise about the disjuncture between the establishment of the Department of Psychoanalysis on the one hand, and the vagrancy of Lacan on the other. This precise point of reference is missed if we focus only on the time of 1968 and its immediate aftermath. Instead, it can be located in the authorizing of a particular kind of dissent, a critique of Lacan that continues to pose problems for his fans in the contemporary university. An approach to this

¹ Address for correspondence: Dr Malcolm Quinn, Research Centre, Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts, London, Merton Hall Road, London SW19 3QA. (m.quinn@wimbledon.arts.ac.uk)

critique can be made by reading Appendix A of Russell Grigg's translation of Seminar XVII, the 'Impromptu at Vincennes' of 3 December 1969, before plunging in to the text of the Seminar itself. In this 'Impromptu', Lacan first of all raises the issue of 'Unités de Valeur' (the credit points awarded for university courses) before being interrupted by a student who declares that it is psychoanalysis, not credit points, that is at stake at that moment. Lacan responds by referring to the position of knowledge (S_2) in the place of agency in the university discourse, one of the four discourses that structure Seminar XVII. His interlocutor replies in the following way:

Who are you kidding here? The university discourse is in the credit points. That up there is a myth and you are asking that we believe in a myth . . . don't have us think that the university discourse is up on the board. Because that is just not true. (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]: 201)

This statement relies on the assumption that, firstly, there is an immanent critique of the university, and secondly, that Lacan's formulas of discourse are pseudo-scientific authorisations of a psychoanalytic myth. This particular critique of Lacan has persisted up to the 'Sokal Affair' of 1994 and beyond, and it is by no means easy to refute, even by Lacan-friendly academics. The problem for academic Lacanophiles can be framed as follows: exactly how do you demonstrate that the university discourse is up there on the board? Every commentary on Seminar XVII is required to climb this mountain all over again. Slavoj Žižek's contribution to 'Reflections on Seminar XVII' begins by framing this problem, stating that we should be careful to distinguish the university discourse as a form of social bond, from academic interpretive machinery:

Lurking behind the reproach of belonging to the university discourse is, of course, the question of the relationship of psychoanalysis and cultural studies. The first fact to note here is that what is missing in cultural studies is precisely psychoanalysis as a social link, structured around the desire of the analyst. (Clemens and Grigg 2006: 107)

As a solution to this problem, Žižek offers a dialectical equation, in which cultural studies and the clinic have to learn from each other's radical difference in order to survive. His subsequent appeal to the value of a 'sectarian' Lacanian practice discloses the problems of this approach and the persistence of the attitudes that produced the stand-off at Vincennes. How can a 'sect of the signifier', with its

obscure diagrams and formulas, explain itself to cultural studies without losing its central purpose? How can the desire of the analyst be manifest in an academic text? In the past, Žižek has tried to address this problem by experimenting directly on the social bond between the writer and the reader, but never in a consistent fashion. In 'Reflections on Seminar XVII', a more thorough analysis of the terms of this problem is offered in the chapter 'Toward a New Perversion: Psychoanalysis' by Dominique Hoens, who isolates three important characteristics of Seminar XVII. These are that the master's discourse is the condition of the possibility of the subject, and therefore of the analyst's discourse; that discourse in general stands between language (which is a condition of discourse) and speech (which is not); and, finally, that 'discourse' is Lacan's most highly developed way of formulating an alternative to the idea of intersubjectivity. These characteristics, argues Hoens, reveal the uniqueness of psychoanalysis, a discourse generated out of the conditions of modernity, but which has existed in an eccentric, weak but nonetheless important position within it (Clemens and Grigg 2006: 88-92).

Hoens is also precise in the manner in which he refers Lacan's critique of intersubjectivity through the four discourses in Seminar XVII, to the explicit critique of 'existential form' by means of 'logical form' in his 'Prisoner's Sophism' of 1945ⁱⁱ. In this way, we are able to understand the scandal that Lacan was promulgating at Vincennes – an 'inhuman' demonstration of the social bond as a dynamic encounter between the signifier and *jouissance*. At Vincennes, the social bond is on the board – or perhaps on the slab. However, it is important to add that Lacan offers his 'reduction' of the social bond as a critique of the commodification of knowledge, and of a society of students who are stamped as units of credit. There is a need, therefore, to establish a distinction between the alienation of the social bond in the four discourses, and its alienation in the commodity. Achieving this distinction depends upon an understanding of the four discourses as 'contra-mythic', while the commodity is precisely the 'myth of the calculable', the metaphysics of surplus *jouissance*. Yet it is precisely the accusation of myth-making that was flung at Lacan in Vincennes, and which continues to require a sufficient answer from his academic legatees. I would single out Dominique Hoens chapter as the best answer to this problem available within the sixteen contributions in Russell and Grigg's collection, simply because Hoens provides a reasoned explanation as to why psychoanalysis

should respond to its critics by emphasising its own uniqueness and its eccentricity with respect to culture.

In his mission to present psychoanalysis as a unique form of the social bond in Seminar XVII, Lacan spent a lot of time struggling with the mythic architecture of Freudianism. He did this by way of a critique of the Oedipus complex as 'Freud's dream' (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]: 117). This critique builds a position where the master's discourse can emerge and distinguish itself from the Freudian father, who is now reduced to an agent of the master's discourse. In 'Reflections on Seminar XVII' chapters by Paul Verhaeghe and Russell Grigg engage with this crucial issue. Verhaeghe stresses rightly that the enjoyment that is forbidden in Freud, and also in the Lacan of 'The Ethics of Psychoanalysis', is rendered impossible in Seminar XVII, by the S_1 of the master signifier (Clemens and Grigg 2006: 29-31). This master signifier places us in an impossible relationship to *jouissance* which we pursue along the chain of signifiers S_2 , which constitute knowledge (*savoir*). The university discourse, as the modern form of the master's discourse (and which Lacan argues is instituted equally in the University of Vincennes and 'The Soviet Union of Socialist Republics') is dedicated to harnessing this chain of knowledge/*jouissance* as a social product. This product is at once reduced to a calculable value and made available as a mythical form of the social bond.

A startling parable of this kind of operation, and of the conflicted place of the university as institution within the social bond established by the university discourse, can be found in Robert Musil's novel 'The Man Without Qualities'. Musil's hero, Ulrich, a young academic who has 'accomplished something in his field' stops wanting to be a promising scholar when one day he reads the expression 'a racehorse of genius':

Ulrich instantly grasped the fateful connection between his entire career and this genius among racehorses . . . He had [attempted to] become a great man, only to find that when as a result of his varied exertions he perhaps could have felt within reach of his goal, the racehorse had beaten him to it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ulrich thus finds himself propelled without warning from the sphere of 'master's knowledge' accumulated by generations of philosophers and academics, and which is

easily distinguishable from the technical ‘know-how’ of the subaltern and the slave, towards the modern universe of surplus *jouissance*. Here, as Musil puts it, ‘a horse . . . [has] an advantage over a great mind in that their performance and rank can be objectively measured’^{iv}. Ulrich’s crisis places the university as an institution in a conflicted relationship, both with the principle of mastery and the means of its dissolution in the world of commodities. It can be argued that the university discourse, as the discourse of capital and the commodity, contains the beginning and the end of the university as an institution. The beginning of the university is in the philosopher’s appropriation of the embodied knowledge of the slave, its summit is the ‘cunning of the reasoner’ typified by Hegel, and its decline occurs through the statistical measurement and commodification of individual instances of mastery.

This measured and calculated value, genius by the furlong, is then transformed by agents of mastery into commodified forms of the social bond, what Lacan calls ‘fake stuff, advertising stuff, things that are there to be sold’ (Lacan 2007[1969-70]: 126). Matthew Sharpe’s chapter of Russell and Grigg’s collection, ‘The “Revolution” in Advertising and University Discourse’ takes up the theme of ‘advertising capital’, noting that in Seminar XVII, Lacan is concerned to make a distinction between modern science and the university discourse, with science being allied to more explicit instances of mastery, rather than to the hegemony of ‘surplus *jouissance*’ (Clemens and Grigg 2006: 304). However, Sharpe also claims that, within the discourse of advertising, the incitement to enjoy is a dissimulation of ‘the brute reality of extant social authority’ (Ibid: 311). This conflict between mastery as the ‘truth’ of the university discourse, and the dominant position of S_2 , within this discourse, is taken up by many of the contributions to ‘Reflections on Seminar XVII’. In his chapter ‘Bureaucratic Speech Acts and the University Discourse’, Geoff Boucher argues that while the claim that blind authority of the master’s discourse is the hidden truth of the university discourse remains valid, the university discourse ‘has become increasingly dominant in its own right.’ (ibid: 277). In ‘Common Markets and Segregation’, Marie-Hélène Brousse argues that ‘The clinic of an epoch corresponds to the master’s discourse of that epoch’ and that psychoanalysis now has to take account of the shift from prohibition and classification to ‘evaluations and procedures’ (ibid: 260). Brousse offers a contemporary perspective on what it is that leads Lacan to suggest, at the close of Seminar XVII, that one of the benefits of the

analyst's discourse inheres in its ability to incite the unambiguous production of the signifier of mastery, and thus the possibility of distinction, honour, and of shame (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]: 180-182). The cultural effacement of shame is the central theme of Jacques-Alain Miller's contribution to 'Reflections on Seminar XVII'. Miller claims that: 'The disappearance of shame means that the subject ceases to be represented by a signifier that matters.' (Clemens and Grigg 2006: 18). He also argues that for Lacan, 'making ashamed is an effort to reinstate the agency of the master signifier' which is lost in the objective calculus and vulgar myths of the commodity (Ibid: 23).

At the risk of identifying myself as one who willingly seeks the abnegation of mastery, I will state that no-one deserves condemnation for their contribution to 'Reflections on Seminar XVII'. The book as a whole is a useful companion to the seminar. Inevitably, a collection of sixteen essays focused on a single seminar have produced some needless repetition, as well as many points of agreement on Lacan's key motifs and themes. Russell Grigg, however, does deserve to be pulled up short for a major fault in the published form of his translation of Seminar XVII. In Grigg's translation, the complex relations of impossibility and impotence in the four discourses, are repeatedly replaced by the figure of a euro sign occupying the dead centre of each discourse (Lacan 2007 [1969-70]: 29 and elsewhere). While this might be an apt illustration of the depredations of the commodity form on the social bond, it hardly needs stating that a full and accurate transcription of the discourses as they would have appeared 'up on the board' is absolutely central to an understanding of Seminar XVII. These transcriptions are necessary not as illustrations, but as the form in which Lacan reconfigures our understanding of the social bond.

References

ⁱ *L'Envers de la psychanalyse* ('The Other Side of Psychoanalysis') is actually the title given by Jacques-Alain Miller. Lacan pointed out in his first lesson that he had decided to call his Seminar *La Pyschanalyse à l'envers* (Psychoanalysis Upside Down).

ⁱⁱ Lacan, J. (1988 [1945]) 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty: A New Sophism' trans. Marc Silver and Bruce Fink, *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, 2(2), p. 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Musil, R. (1995) *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike, London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, pp 41-42.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p.42.