*Review In Depth*

# The lexical thing

SHIVA KUMAR SRINIVASAN

**An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis**
by Dylan Evans
Routledge, London and New York,
1996; 239 pp; 14.99 pounds

**Psychoanalyzing:**
**On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter**
by Serge Leclaire
(Translated by Peggy Kamuf)
Stanford University Press, Stanford
1998; 154 pp; $12

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was fond of ruminating on Michel de Montaigne's axiom on style. For both, style is the very essence of Man. Their preoccupation with the 'rise of the human subject' in the early modern period did not preclude an investigation into the problem of style. It may even be argued that it is precisely the problem of style—the so-called 'self-fashioning' of Renaissance Man—that drives their inquiries into the nature of the human subject. If Lacan desubstantivizes the humanist notion of the subject, it is in the service of stylistics. The Lacanian unconscious does not cater to 'the romantic divinities of night'. It is not the font of creation that the romantic poets valorized. With his theory of the signifier and, later, that of the letter, Lacan (unlike Carl Jung) *depopulated the unconscious* at one stroke. The analyst takes on the more humble role of an editor. It is his task to punctuate the analysand's discourse, his or her chain of signification.

The analytic editor is first of all a reader. It is to the ethical necessity of *reading* Freud that Lacan dedicated his psychoanalytic project. For Lacan, psychoanalysis was not reducible to a set of axioms that are external to the 'poetics of the Freudian corpus'. The doctrinal meaning of psychoanalysis is to be sought in the insistence of the Freudian text. Freud's metaphorical vehicles are not external to the tenor of his conceptual schemas. It is not surprising therefore that when it was *his* turn to formulate a supplement to Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacan should write in a style that prevents easy access. Lacan does not address those who are in a hurry to do psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic insights cannot be formalized once and for all. As the Yale critic Shoshana Felman puts it in another context: they have to be recuperated again and again in the act of reading. This is precisely what the intrepid Dylan Evans has attempted in his highly readable reference book.

**The Letter**

Evans sets out his theory of lexicography in a theoretically informed preface to the dictionary. He begins with Lacan's contention that psychoanalytic terms can only be understood in a topological relation with others. The common stock of words used by different psychoanalytic schools might give the impression that they are all 'dialects of the same language'. But this, according to the author, is far from being the truth. Each psychoanalytic language has its own lexis and syntax and must be understood in its specificity.

This claim, as we will discover in reading Serge Leclaire, is not just a feature of Lacan's style of writing but is essential to the ethics of the Lacanian clinic. The Lacanians will take the notion of the 'letter' quite literally. It is both a principle of clinical psychoanalysis and the very trajectory of the unconscious. The unconscious will always have its way. Punning on the double meaning of the term 'letter', Lacan had argued in his famous reading of Poe's *The Purloined Letter* that 'a letter always arrives at its destination'. Hence, as Serge Leclaire's subtitle points out, psychoanalysis is 'the practice of the letter'.

Evans' dictionary too is a contribution in this direction. He is fully conscious of the accusations that are routinely made about the psychotic closure of the Lacanian system. The dictionary is a way of opening up the system to those who are not yet insiders. An interesting way of using Evans' dictionary is to explore terms like code, communication, interpretation, language, letter, sign, signifier, signification, speech, symbol, etc.

**Interpretation**

Lacanian interpretation is not an attempt to fit the facts of a case to a preexisting hermeneutic grid. And again, though Freud himself resisted the temptation to interpret through symbols, such interpretations had become fairly commonplace when Lacan began his career. Not only were these interpretations therapeutically useless, they also promoted bad habits of mind in both the patient and the analyst. This is the so-called 'wild analysis' that Freud had warned against. Intelligent patients could often interpret their own symptoms with minimal assistance from the analyst. In fact, patients often went into analysis to merely have the analyst authenticate their symptoms.

It became increasingly difficult for the analyst to keep up with their patients. Hence Lacan argued that psychoanalysis should move away from a classical notion of interpretation where the analyst sought to bring out the hidden meaning of the patient's discourse. The linear movement of interpretation from the signifier to the signified was inverted by Lacan. He wanted to move from the signified to the signifier. Interpretation ceased to be about generating sense. It was an attempt to frame that part of the patient's discourse which resisted signification. It was this quest for the kernel of nonsense that would keep the patient's chain of associations in motion. The psychoanalyst was not to remain obsessed with the reality of the facts proffered by the patient but to explore the real of desire and *jouissance* (enjoyment). The analyst must resist the temptation to empathize with the patient. The focus was not on the Good of the patient but precisely on his Eros. Otherwise, psychoanalysis would lose its identity and become a form of counselling. That is why Lacan argued that the task of the analyst was not to understand the patient but to *listen*, and, when necessary, to interrupt.

The duration of the Lacanian psychoanalytic session was not the 50-minute hour mandated by the International Psychoanalytic Association but the so-called short or variable session. A patient who was waiting in Lacan's clinic would not know exactly when he would be called in or when the session—once begun—would end. The main work of analysis was not in the session but *in between* the sessions. This makes it almost impossible for the patient to 'prepare' for a session.

By cutting a session short or extending it longer than the patient's expectation, the analyst forces the patient to come to terms with the significance of the session. Why was he unable to hold the analyst's attention? Both the duration and the point of 'cutting' the session take on an interpretative significance. To cut the session correctly, the analyst needs to be quick on his feet. The desire to understand will therefore actually impede the task that the analyst sets himself. Hence, the analyst must think with his ears and not with his heart or mind.

**On the Ear**

But what does it mean to listen? Freud had argued that the analyst must listen with 'free floating attention'. In other words, the analyst must not preempt the patient with oedipal clichés. But is such listening possible? Can the analyst suspend the hermeneutic fruits of his knowledge and training and *really listen*?

Leclaire begins his book with an account of the kind of ear that the analyst must develop in order to facilitate such a form of psychoanalysis. He calls it 'the practice of the letter'. Leclaire's ethics of listening is not unlike the Lacanian ethics of reading. If the analyst resists the 'lure' of the signified and follows the trail of the letter—wherever it might lead—it opens up psychoanalysis to the exhilarating path of *singularity*. Psychoanalysis ceases to merely verify its discoveries: it takes on the more challenging task of falsification.

Jacques-Alain Miller has argued in a different context that the contemporary patient—unlike the type that the early Freudians encountered—is a Popperian. He is always trying to falsify the analyst's interpretation. To use a classical model of interpretation with its battery of myths, plots and symbols would only inspire the ridicule of such a patient who may well be an expert on James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. The analyst must seek to frame the real of the symptom, its modalities of *jouissance*, and not its supposed reference to a trauma that may well not have happened in the

historical (mimetic) sense of the term. Hence, the analyst must attend to the style or form of the patient's speech.

The patient's speech is all that the analyst has to go by. Whether or not psychoanalysis can effect a cure, both the method and the ethics of psychoanalysis revolve around the problem of speech. The only demand made of the patient is to be true to the rule of free association, which is to say whatever comes to his or her mind no matter how ridiculous it might be in the patient's own estimation.

For Lacan, speech is endowed with associations that are not reducible to the Saussurean notion of *parole*. It is imbued with anthropological, theological and metaphysical implications. In his early work, he believed that psychoanalysis should facilitate 'full speech' in opposition to the 'idle speech' of the neurotic. Though this position is amended later, speech remains the quintessence of the human subject for Lacan.

What is the analyst supposed to do with speech? For Leclaire—who builds on the work of Lacan—the simplest formulation of the analyst's task is 'to listen to something *other* than the mere meaning of the words pronounced and to bring into the open the libidinal order they manifest' (my emphasis). What is this *other* that insists on being heard? Why is it so discomforting to listen to this other? What should the analyst do to prevent his own desire from interfering with the analysis?

Leclaire discusses at length Freud's own recommendations on the art of listening in his paper on technique. Much as the analyst would like to attain the 'evenly-suspended attention' that Freud sets up as an ideal, he finds himself falling short. The temptations of 'deliberate attention' are overwhelming. And, again, the analyst must not make a fetish of an ideal. Just as there are patients who free-associate without saying anything, there must be analysts who do not listen despite their free-floating attention. As Leclaire points out, 'this neutrality of the analyst aims only to describe a certain affective or libidinal position, since, as everyone knows who has ever been around a psychoanalyst, your average Freudian is anything but the totally unprejudiced scholar'. The analyst must learn to avoid both the dangers of excessive systematization and anarchy in his attempt to punctuate the discourse of the patient.

**Pleasure/Desire**

Leclaire tries to provide examples of what such an interpretation might look like. These examples are derived both from Freud's case histories and his own practice. The most celebrated example is the case of the Wolf Man in which Freud discovered an obsession with the letter 'V' that haunts the patient's discourse in various permutations and combinations. This 'V' is a letter that denotes in turn the shape of a butterfly's wing, a woman with her legs open, the significance of the fifth hour, the ears of a wolf, and, in a process of doubling and inversion, the letters 'W' and 'M'. The point of the analysis was to trace the trajectory of this letter as it provides the unconscious foundations of the 'combinations' in the Wolf Man's psyche. The letter then becomes the 'stigmata of pleasure' with the ability to become detached like an object from the body of the subject. What then is the difference between the letter of desire and the object of *jouissance*? Though the same bodily zone may take the form of a letter or an object, their difference lies in the fact that the letter serves a thetic function while the object serves a stable function. The object of *jouissance* comes in place of the lost letter of desire. Leclaire derives the elementary structure of the unconscious by deploying just three terms: subject, object and letter. 'In sum', he writes, '*three correlative functions make up the elementary structure of the unconscious: the object as stable function, the subject as function of alternating commutation, and finally the letter as thetic function*'.

What will the analysis finally uncover about the subject, the letter and the object? For Leclaire, the analysis will seek to bring to light the particular set of letters to which the subject is subjected. What are these letters from a set of all possible letters to which the subject is knotted in its moment of trauma? What sort of an object will console the subject in place of the repressed letter of desire? In what way will the subject use speech to wrestle with the intractable problem of its *jouissance*? Leclaire concludes by arguing that the end of analysis will spell out the particular formula of letters on which the subject is fixated thereby framing the singular manner in which the subject *suffers its lack*.

**Shiva Kumar Srinivasan teaches in the department of humanities and social sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur.**

**SAHITYA AKADEMI**

**NEW ENGLISH PUBLICATIONS**

MODERN CLASSICS

**Gora**, by Rabindranath Tagore
Tr. Sujit Mukherjee
pp. xxiv+498 Rs. 185/-
ISBN: 81-266-0272-7

**Kayar**, by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai
Tr. N. Sreekantan Nair
pp. vi+736 Rs.275/-
ISBN: 81-260-0320-0

**The Ancestor**, by Gopinath Mohanty
(Oriya Novel Dadi Budha)
Tr. Arun Kr. Mohanty
pp. viii+68 Rs.40/-
ISBN: 81-260-0276-X

**Marthanda Varma**,
by C.V. Raman Pillai
(Malayalam Novel)
Tr. B.K. Menon
pp. 382 Rs.150/-
ISBN: 81-260-0468-1

AWARD WINNING BOOKS

**Hypocrites**, by Anna rm Sudama
(Rajasthani Novel Meva Ra Roonkh)
Tr. Nagrmal Sahal
pp. iv+172 Rs.85/-
ISBN: 81-260-0234-4

**The Last Exit**, by Nirmal Verma
(Hindi Short Stories)
Tr. Kuldip Singh
pp.154 Rs.70/-
ISBN: 81-260-0638-2

**Upara** (Autobiography)
by Laxman Mane, Tr. A.K. Kamat
pp. 212 Rs.100/-
ISBN: 81-260-0231-8

**The Branded**, by Laxman Gaikwad
(Marathi Novel Uchalya)
Tr. P.A. Kolharkar
pp. xii+234 Rs.110/-
ISBN: 81-260-0486-X

**A Movement For Literature**
(Tamil Literary Treatise)
byKa. Naa. Subramaniam
Tr. venkat Swaminathan
pp. x+142 Rs. 60/-
ISBN: 81-260-0480-0

ANTHOLOGIES

White Whispers
(Selected Poems of Salabega)
Tr. Niranjan Mohanty
pp. viii+110 Rs. 50/-
ISBN: 81-260-0483-5

**Modern Gujarati Poetry** (A Selection)
Tr. Suguna Ramanathan
& Rita Kothari
pp. xviii+86 Rs. 45/-
ISBN : 81-260-0294-8

**Non Fictional Indian Prose In English (1960-90)**
Ed. by Shayamla A. Narayan
pp. xxiv+224 Rs.110/-
ISBN : 81-260-0294-8

**An Anthology of Sindhi Partition Poetry**
Tr. Anju Makhija & others
pp. xxii+76 Rs. 45/-
ISBN : 81-260-0588-2

**Medieval Indian Literature An Anthology: Volume-I**
Survey in all Languages and Selections in Assamese, Bengali and Dogri
Chief Ed. K. Ayyappa Paniker
pp. xix+874 Rs. 450/-
ISBN : 81-260-0365-0

**Medieval Indian Literature Volume - II**
Chief Editor: K. Ayyappa Paniker
pp. xiv+1006 Rs.500/-
ISBN :81-260-0648-X

SELECTED SHORT STORIES

**Contemporary Kashmiri Short Stories**
Compiled by Hriday Kaul Bharati
Tr. Neerja Mattoo
pp. 110 Rs. 50/-
ISBN: 81-260-0594-7

SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS

**Nativism: Essays in Criticism**
Ed. Makarand Paranjape
pp. xvi+256 Rs.100/-
ISBN : 81-260-0168-2

**Contemporary Indian Literature**
(A Survey of Literature in Fifteen Indian Languages and English)
Foreword by S. Radhakrishnan
pp. 388 Rs.100/-

**Suniti Kumar Chatterji**
(A Centenary Tribute)
Ed. by Udaya Narayan Singh and Shivarama Padikkal
pp. x+218 Rs.100/-
ISBN : 81-260-0353-7

Mail your Orders to:

SAHITYA AKADEMI
Swati Building, Mandir marg
New Delhi 110001
Phone: 3735297 3364207
Fax: 091--11-3382428 3364207