

STAGES OF FORMATION

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Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, translated by Barbara Bray, Polity Press, Cambridge 1997, 574pp; £25 cloth.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's best-known paper 'The Mirror Phase as Formative of the Function of the I' (first version 1936, revised version 1949) claims to describe a moment or state that is crucial to the formation of the human self. In receiving an image of itself in reflection, Lacan argues, the human infant first sees itself as a unified being. This situation is ideal and figural as well as actual, and stands for accession to identity in general. It is also at least as deceptive as it is veracious. What seems identical is grasped by way of reflection, which can only take place in something else: a mirror, or more exactly an image. Whether it is internal or external this image must be minimally alterior; otherwise the self would only, and tautologically, know itself as what it already knows itself as. The self's epistemological and ethical condition, though not impossible, is problematic. It sees itself in terms of what it in some sense isn't, which means it might not know itself as well as it thinks it does. Its truth, got through what it is not, always might be false.

Elisabeth Roudinesco's *Jacques Lacan* shows how Lacan's life both might be judged by and might have given rise to his theories. In doing so it provides an admirable account of a body of work that is alternately obscure and brilliant, and of a man who was capable of both integrity and duplicity. Yet it is neither simply exegetic nor psychobiographical, and contains astute commentary on, and scrupulous descriptions of, political and historical dimensions of Lacan's life. This much might be expected of Roudinesco, who is also the author of an excellent, comprehensive history of French psychoanalysis.¹

Roudinesco reveals that from the outset Lacan was subject to the egoistic division, and concomitant egotistical self-assertion, or phantasised eradication of that division, that his own work was to chart so insistently. He was both a melancholy and a precocious child. Born into a family of petite-bourgeoise semi-provincial Catholic vinegar merchants, he soon rebelled against the mediocrity and conformism of his upbringing. This rebellion, which in some respects only ended with his death, betrayed a thorough ambivalence. Lacan became both more and less bourgeoise, particularly as an adolescent and young man. He affected haute-bourgeoise manners and the dress of a dandy, and even flirted with the chauvinistic philosophy of Charles Maurras. However, he was also drawn to the anarchism of dada and to surrealism in its first, revolutionary, phase which

1. Elisabeth Roudinesco, *La Bataille de cent ans: histoire de la psychanalyse en France vol 1*, Ramsay, Paris 1982; *La Bataille de cent ans: histoire de la psychanalyse en France vol 2*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1986; vol. 2 trs. Jeffrey Mehlman as *Jacques Lacan and Co. A History of Psychoanalysis in France 1925-1985*, Free Association Books, London 1990.

was ambiguously Freudian and Marxist. He could be said to have cultivated the 'aristocratic radicalism' sometimes attributed to Nietzsche, who was one of his boyhood heroes.

The young Lacan eventually became a medic. The choice was only made after some deliberation, and with reluctance to give up other career options, particularly academic philosophy. Perhaps because of his philosophical interests, Lacan took up psychiatry during the 1920s. The profession brought him into contact with a number of eminent teachers, notably Clérambault, whose work in a science which was in neither decline nor infancy was both traditional and radical. Clérambault began to pay close attention to psychical as well as organic dimensions of illness. This involved elucidating relations between symptoms that implied that they had some meaning for the subject who suffered them. Most influentially, Clérambault showed that erotomaniac subjects, who were deluded that they were the object of another's excessive affection and aggression, had become so as the consequence of a desire. In many such cases, he argued, an inadmissible sexual urge is transformed into something acceptable by way of projection and paranoia. The (usually female) erotomaniac sees her desire in another (so that she can disown it) and as aggression (so that it can be seen as something other than desire).

During the 1930s and 1940s Lacan both absorbed and developed these and other radical psychiatric ideas, and did so with an intellectual boldness, breadth and complexity that was to lead his forebears, including Clérambault, to judge them non-psychiatric and invalid. Lacan's innovations were often couched in the language of, and were heavily influenced by, modern Germanic philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis. Lacan's generation of French intellectuals used such ideas to challenge both the stuffy, chauvinistic, Cartesian rationalism of the academy and the naive or dogmatic scientism of the training hospital.

Hence Lacan stressed the non-constitutionalism of Clérambault's work, claiming that symptoms have meaning *for* the subject, rather than in terms of any objectively identifiable physical state, or biological cause. In doing so he was advancing a type of argument made first by Brentano and later, as phenomenology, by Husserl. However, Lacan's 'phenomenology', like all of his adoptions of others' ideas, is not 'pure.' For both Brentano and Husserl the idea, and thus meaning, is presented lucidly for, and also by, the subject in consciousness. For Lacan the meaning of the symptom for the subject is first of all obscure, and can only be elucidated by way of what is not conscious. Now this non-consciousness, which bears important information about a personal *history*, has a number of different characteristics and dimensions. It resists conscious apprehension by the subject except in a distorted and disturbing form, and thus resembles the unconscious as described by Freud. However, the material borne by the state of non-consciousness described by Lacan, unlike the sort described by Freud, is not only or primarily infantile and familial, but is to do with a broader

environment and personal history (including, for example, work relations), although it is no easier to assimilate to consciousness for all that. The meaning of the subject is to be sought in what is inside, outside, and prior to, and hence other than, its presently conscious state. It is therefore only through the *other* that the subject can make any sense of itself. As suggested earlier, this necessary alterity of subjectivity is irreducible. Because, in this state of affairs, the (self)same is only got at otherwise, its recognition is dialectical. Because the alterity which allows (self-)recognition is irreducible, such recognition is never absolutely certain, or positive.

Lacan's early method thus amounts, to use Adorno's phrase, to a kind of negative dialectic. In doing so it takes its inspiration from the teaching of the Russian emigré philosopher Alexandre Kojève whose seminars Lacan attended in Paris in the 1930s along with Merleau-Ponty, Bataille, Queneau and others. Kojève's work was crucially important in the transportation of modern German philosophy into France. He took dialecticism and historicism from Hegel, anti-idealism from Marx, anti-positivism from Heidegger and offered them all to Lacan. Never one to think that enough is enough, Lacan added the Freudianism just mentioned, and adopted a written and spoken style which was a bizarre mixture of baroque academicism and surrealism that would go on to both seduce and infuriate his increasingly large public.

Roudinesco writes lucidly and informatively about this important, often ignored, first part of Lacan's career. She rightly understands the peculiarly modern intellectual position he adopted in it, of a dialectician who did not believe in synthesis. She also finds a thesis in his personal life manifest as both integrity and conflict. Lacan was both a loyal and a duplicitous husband, a generous and a parsimonious father and a passionate and paranoid friend. When his first marriage, to Marie-Louise Blondin, broke down their three children were not told that he had taken up with another woman until two of them chanced on the couple in the street. The other woman, whom Lacan later wed, was Sylvia Bataille, an actress and political activist whose intelligence and fervour matched his own and who was the ex-wife of Georges Bataille, who was one of Lacan's friends. They lived in separate but adjoining apartments and conducted a relationship of ostensible civility, though it involved affairs. Lacan had close friendships with many people, most of them members of the Parisian intelligentsia. Some, like Merleau-Ponty and Lévi-Strauss, liked and respected Lacan but were bemused by his ideas. Others, who were generally less well-known and more involved with psychoanalytic theory and practice, admired and even worshipped him. Lacan alternately, and quite passionately, loved and mistrusted them all.

Lacan produced his best known, most influential work between 1949 and 1960. During this period he developed his earlier ideas in terms of three themes: language, the subject and the unconscious. Like many French intellectuals of the 1950s he became fascinated by the work of the early

twentieth-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose two great contributions to linguistic science are the notion of linguistic arbitrariness and the notion of linguistic value. The notion of linguistic arbitrariness involves an assertion that manifest linguistic elements (more particularly signifier and sign) bear no necessary relation to the linguistic or real elements (more particularly signified and referent) to which they ostensibly refer (this amounts to saying, for example, that the term 'hatred' or the term 'cat' might be used to invoke something other than what they currently or apparently do). The notion of linguistic value follows from this. Linguistic elements can't be determined by way of fixed concepts or things but they *can* be discerned by way of their relations to and differences from each other ('hatred' is understood in comparison with 'love', 'cat' in comparison with 'dog'). These 'values' make up a structure, which is the objective structure of language. Lacan maintained some aspects of Saussure's argument and altered others. More precisely, he stressed the notion of arbitrariness by declaring the 'autonomy of the signifier' (accentuating Saussure's anti-empiricism), prioritised differential, and hence negative linguistic functions over 'positive relations' (countering Saussure's tendency towards positivism) and sought to do so in a spirit of 'conjectural' scientism (both continuing and questioning Saussure's objectivism). The subject, in this setup, only recognises itself by way of the linguistic structure or order that precedes and instructs its formation, which Lacan calls that of 'the signifier'. Because the signifier only ever appears negatively, that is by way of other signifiers that it is not, and because each of these also only appears otherwise, the subjectivity informed by the signifier only appears negatively and otherwise too. The subject thus only accedes to meaning in an anticipatory or deferred, and hence always incomplete, way. What informs the subject is irreducibly 'ex-centric' to it, frustrates any possibility of its integration or recognition of itself in consciousness, and is hence unconscious.

Roudinesco's exposition of Lacan's work during this period is competent but somewhat unenthusiastic. Perhaps she is simply tired of it, having dealt with it so thoroughly elsewhere. A similar fate seems to have befallen important institutional disputes Lacan and some of his colleagues were involved in, notably those between dissident French psychoanalytic institutions and the International Psychoanalytic Association. Rather than detailing these disputes, Roudinesco refers the reader to her earlier historical work. That this work demonstrated the historical, political and personal significance of these disputes so brilliantly might have been an argument for reiterating them in, as much as leaving them out of, the current text.

Roudinesco's description of the final phase of Lacan's intellectual life, which ran from about 1960 to his death in 1981, is even more uninterested than the one she gives of his mid-century work. His later intellectual interests - Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Joyce, logic, topology, and

mathematics - are sometimes treated cursorily, ironically or not at all. Roudinesco seems suspicious of the influence of Lacan's son-in law, the logician Jacques Alain Miller, on Lacan during this period and on his legacy subsequently. Although this suspicion blunts her appreciation of some of Lacan's later ideas, which are too easily dismissed as incomprehensible, it is supported by detailed, typically astute accounts of recent Lacanian institutional wrangles.

Roudinesco also includes some fascinating personal and historical material regarding Lacan's involvement in political and intellectual upheavals in Paris from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. All in all, she provides perhaps the best, and certainly the most detailed, account of Lacan's life and work to date.