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On the diagonal: Jacques Lacan's reading lists

ABSTRACT: This article addresses the theme of the special issue – that which is right in front of our eyes – by way of the problem of reading Jacques Lacan's seminars. It begins with a brief publication history of the seminars, including the centrality to this process of their editor, Jacques-Alain Miller, as well as some of the controversies and disputes arising from this editorship. It then goes on to consider how Lacan in the seminars rejects the classical critical mode of *explication de texte*, offering instead a model of reading drawn from the psychoanalytic clinic – reading as a form of extraction. This mode is then more specifically defined as surface extraction, with mining as an analogue. It is a reading strategy that Lacan also calls reading 'diagonally', *en diagonale* in the French, translated simply as 'skimming' but with references in Lacan's usage as wide as mathematics and set theory. This method is then compared with Freud's claim in 'The Moses of Michelangelo' and elsewhere that psychoanalysis fastens onto 'secrets and concealed things', which are right out in the open, waste matter (*der Abhub*) that bypasses conscious perception. As a sort of experiment the article then puts this mode of extraction to work on Lacan's own seminar. Where readers of Lacan usually plunder his texts for formulae, mathemes or aphorisms, the approach here is to fasten on a regular, but seemingly inconsequential feature of Lacan's seminars – the texts that he recommended, and sometimes insisted, that his audience should read. From these, the article constructs some Lacanian reading lists, concentrating particularly on *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, but also drawing on a number of recently translated or still untranslated seminars, such as *Seminar VI: Le désir et son interprétation*, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, *Seminar XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre*, *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, and *Seminar XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*. The article concludes by asking what Lacan's reading suggestions and the manner in which he made them tell us about a specifically psychoanalytic teaching practice.

Un certain nombre d'entre vous – je m'exprime ainsi parce que mes ambitions sont modestes – ont, je l'espère, lu l'article que j'ai fait passer dans le troisième numéro de la revue La Psychanalyse.
-Jacques Lacan, *Les formations de l'inconscient*¹

Surface extractions: Lacan reading

For all those who have been stymied by the dense thickets of the *Écrits*, it is some consolation that Jacques Lacan considered his own writing to be unreadable, not even meant for reading. He said so, with apparent amusement, in his seminar *Encore* in 1973: 'Those *Écrits*, it's widely known that they're not easy to read. If I can make a little autobiographical confession – that's exactly what I thought. I thought [...] they're not for reading.'² In his 'Postface' to *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* he suggested, however, that it was a different matter with his first transcribed Seminar:

Ainsi se lira – ce bouquin je parie.
Ce ne sera pas comme mes *Écrits* dont le livre s'achète: dit-on, mais c'est pour ne pas le lire.³

The 'Post-face', also written in 1973, is characteristically unreadable, posing a significant challenge to translation, but the following is an approximation of its first words: 'So it will be read, this old book, I wager. It won't be like my *Écrits*, a book purchased, so they say, in order not to be read.' The 'bouquin' will be read, he wagers, precisely because it is not an *écrit*. It is a view shared by most of Lacan's readers and followers: although they are opaque and tangled in their own way, the seminars are relatively legible, not entirely 'illisible', a status Lacan reserves for the *Écrits*.⁴

Lacan's seminars, which first began to appear in the mid-1970s, and still continue to emerge thirty-five years after his death, come with a separate set of health warnings. If failure of understanding is the abiding experience of readers of the *Écrits*, then suspicion, especially among initiates, has been the rule for the published seminar. It is not that the text is unintelligible, unreadable, but that its authenticity is in doubt, that it is incomplete, even inaccurate. Established by Lacan's son-in-law Jacques-Alain Miller on the basis of stenographers' notes and available recordings, it is subject to all the vagaries of such a process: errors or omissions in transcription, inaudible or damaged sections of tape, and competing versions. Nor can any published version transmit the idiosyncrasies and apparatus of spoken discourse. We can only guess if this or that utterance of Lacan is pronounced with stridency, sincerity or irony. We have no sense of the pace of his speech, which was often glacially slow and punctuated by long pauses; nor does the text record his frequent deep sighs, and occasional anguished cries. It is even said that he emitted a range of animal sounds, all part of the 'theatrical, ludic' side of the seminar.⁵

Controversies around Miller's own role as editor and co-author have also been well documented. He is accused of both cleaning up the text too much and not cleaning it up enough. On the one hand he has created a recognizable brand, numbering the originally unnumbered seminars from I to XXV, and printing each with a white cover, red and black lettering on the front and spine. While individual sessions were not divided by Lacan into sections, Miller has numbered each session from 1 to 3 or 4, as well as interpolating titles for each session and sub-section. With many recordings and notes of Lacan's seminars in circulation, it has also been determined that Miller has deleted material, rearranged and inserted phrases, and even rewritten entire paragraphs. The result, according to his detractors, is a clearer, more systematic Lacan, a Millerian Lacan.

At the same time, the co-author has failed to correct basic factual or linguistic errors made by Lacan, and censured translators who have made such corrections themselves. Invoking Lacan's wish that the seminars be published without any scholarly apparatus, Miller persisted for many years in publishing them without notes, without even an index or bibliography. The practice has been challenged, and doubts cast on Lacan's supposed wishes, with critics arguing that a proper edition of the seminar should publish all possible variants of Lacan's speech and provide footnotes for contemporary allusions and for the many, often arcane, literary and philosophical references. In more recently published seminars Miller has relented in quixotic fashion. At the end of *Séminaire XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* (2007) can be found an index and two and a half pages of 'A few references to Lacan by Lacan, and to others'. *Séminaire XIX: ...ou pire* (2011) has Annexes and Index,

with a 'Bibliothèque' that furnishes notes to key references, but with no apparent aspiration to be exhaustive. The lengthy notes for *Séminaire VI: Le désir et son interprétation* (2013) are slyly Nabokovian, punctuated by Miller's whimsical personal memories, and numerous blithe references to Wikipedia.

Frustration with Miller's approach has led to the circulation in the analytical community and online of competing versions of the seminars claiming to be true records, more authentic than the official texts.⁶ Many such texts were already available in Lacan's lifetime, some of them even approved by him, and Miller has of course drawn on these for his versions. When attempts were made to publish more than just samizdat copies, Miller exercised his rights as legatee (with Lacan's daughter Judith Miller), and availed himself of the courts. Miller's heavy-handedness in dealing with pirate editions only stoked further the suspicions about the flaws in the official text and fed the appetite for a true transcription of the seminar, with comprehensive notes.

Desire, as Lacan said many times, is the inevitable companion of prohibition and the law, and for Lacanians outside Miller's camp the seminar has been highly productive of desire. But desire for what? For some final, complete transcription that would once and for all pin down Lacan's exact utterances? For a scholarly apparatus that would close off forever every single allusion, explicate every neologism and provide a key to all concepts? Even if such comprehensiveness were possible, would it actually be desirable? It is of course important to check the possible variants where they are available against the established text, but the differences are not as abundant as all that.⁷ As for the provision of a detailed scholarly apparatus, there can hardly be a reader of the text who has not wished at some point for a footnote to explain some impenetrable Lacanian allusion, but there may in fact be good reasons to leave such wishes unsatisfied. Lacan, erudite though he was, himself encouraged a reading of Freud unencumbered by such an apparatus. In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he asks his audience to return to Freud's early text, the *Entwurf*, but to do so 'without wondering along with the annotators, commentators and connotators who have edited it whether this or that refers to Herbart, Helmholtz, or anyone else.'⁸ He was impatient with those commentators who worried over sources and genealogies of influence, considering it a mode of avoidance of the challenge of the text itself. He gave equally short shrift to *explication de texte*, the careful textual analysis that usually accompanies an elaborate scholarly apparatus. In a session of *Seminar X: Anxiety*, for example, he says that for Freud anxiety functions as a signal, and he claims that he could easily point his audience to the relevant passage in Freud's text, but that he has too much ground to cover and doesn't want to 'dwell too long at the level of textual explanations [*explication de texte*].' What Adrian Price translates as 'dwell too long' is in fact 'stagner', to stagnate.⁹

And yet, if Lacan is known for anything, it is as the most original and important reader of Freud in the 20th century. So, in what way does a Lacanian mode of reading depart from *explication de texte*, which Lacan says is too slow for the urgent matters at hand? There is no simple answer to this question, because in Lacan's texts, Seminars and *écrits* alike, reading – the verb 'lire' and the noun 'la lecture' – is not a signifier that stands still, and is often tied up with equally complicated distinctions and connections Lacan makes between the letter, the signifier, and the written. One place to start would be to note that instead of explication, Lacan practiced a kind of

extraction from texts. Where he is loathe to say that he has explicated this or that text of Freud, or even worse, interpreted it, he often notes what he has extracted from it – the French verb is *extraire*. ‘Recall if you will’, he says in *Seminar X*, ‘what I extracted from the inaugural step in Freud’s thought... *The Interpretation of Dreams*’: that the unconscious is *ein anderer Schauplatz*.¹⁰ In *Seminar VII* he reads a passage from *Civilization and its Discontents* and remarks that his audience might have mistaken it for de Sade, had he not told them where he’d extracted it from.¹¹ When in *Encore* he tells of a talk in Milan where he promised he would revisit or redo his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, he explains ‘je la réextrais’, I re-extracted it.¹² Even when he is archly dismissive of Erich Fromm’s *Sigmund Freud’s Mission*, he pauses to acknowledge that Fromm has ‘extrait’ from Freud phrases of great value.¹³ The term resonates further in Lacanian psychoanalysis: in *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan says that from the loss of *jouissance* can be extracted surplus *jouissance*;¹⁴ in *Encore* he suggests that the introduction of difference allows for the extraction of signifiers from *lalangue*.¹⁵

A dentist extracts teeth, sometimes painfully, and it is to this sort of operation that Lacan alludes when he admits, in *Seminar XVIII*, that the *Écrits* had to be actively extracted from him.¹⁶ In general though, Lacan’s extractions tend towards the geological and mineral rather than the dental. When he refers to re-extracting elements from his *Ethics* in an otherwise baffling anecdote in *Encore* about railways and his trip to Milan, it is the mining metaphor that provides the key. It will be entirely lost, and therefore unreadable, in any translation, but the French word for iron – *le fer* – appears here first in *chemin de fer* (railway), followed in short order by *referai* (re-do), *conférence*, then *référence*, all in the context of that re-extraction that Lacan is carrying out on his own (yet-to-be-published) Seminar on ethics.¹⁷ It is a fine illustration of the double working of signifiers operating in their differences from each other, and *lalangue*, in its echoing poetic non-meaning, as well as the ways that the signifier ‘iron’ can be mined from this same *lalangue*. Put another way, a signifier is not meaningful, but *insistent*.

Not so much a reading then, but a kind of mining. The miner must understand the geological composition of the field, must be able to distinguish one element from another, but is not after the entirety of its elements. The mining process drills down to the desired contents, and ignores the rest. This model, which is and isn’t a kind of reading, clearly emerges from the psychoanalytic clinic, where the analyst must learn a special form of listening, which disregards the greater bulk of the analysand’s discourse, while preparing to seize on the stray element, the *lapsus*, the repetition, the insistent word, the thought that the analysand dismisses as unimportant. The analyst will feel a great temptation to interpret the extracted element, to offer a reading of it, but should resist, since it is up to the analysand to do this work herself, once the analyst has performed the extraction.

Mining tends to suggest a surface-depth model, with the desired element concealed deep in the earth, but there are other sorts of mining. The process is complicated and costly, but in tar or oil sands, miners must practice surface extraction to get at the desired element. In huge fields such as the Athabasca Oil Sands in Northern Alberta, petroleum deposits are mixed in with sand, clay and water, and the main work is to separate out the petroleum through sifting methods such as steam assisted gravity drainage. Like the petroleum in oil sands, a *lapsus* is no further below the surface than

any of the other words in the analysand's speech. If psychoanalysis is a form of mining, and its raw stuff, the speech of the subject, is all out in the open, then the field of extraction is closer to tar sands than deep pit.

The model of extraction should not be mistaken for a reading practice which consists in picking and choosing what one wants from a text in order to get it to say what you would prefer it to say, while smoothing over complexity and contradiction. It is, however, a procedure that accepts from the outset that the text will never be fully encompassed, with all its workings accounted for. Not only does extraction abandon the intense, concentrated approach of the *explication de texte*, but it sees a benefit precisely in the distracted reader, just as the analyst will never hear the *lapsus* or insistent phrase if she is listening intently for it, but will adopt a state of semi-reverie in order to pick out the seemingly meaningless parts of the analysand's speech. Lacan is regularly off-hand about the writings of his contemporaries, but what we might sometimes take for contempt may in fact be an expression of this tactic of distraction. For example, with reference to Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *The Title of the Letter* – an exhaustive close reading of Lacan's own 'The Instance of the Letter' – Lacan observes that he has never been read so closely and that his own students are certainly much less attentive to his texts than Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe. He directs his audience to read this text, remarking that it is a work of love, written 'with the worst of intentions', but then admits that he has himself only read the last twenty or thirty pages, and those only skimming.¹⁸ The phrase in French is 'j'ai lues en diagonale', literally to read diagonally.¹⁹

Lacan appears to have started using the phrase in his seminar after it had been used about him, pejoratively. In his first seminar of 1969, on January 8th, he starts by wishing his audience a Happy New Year. He then goes on to say that he has received a New Year's gift in the form of an article about him in the *Nouvelle Revue française*, entitled 'Quelques extraits du style de Jacques Lacan'.²⁰ The article, by Georges Mounin, was in fact entitled 'Quelques traits du style de Jacques Lacan', a small, but striking difference (features or characteristics of Lacan's style, rather than extracts, as Lacan [or Miller] has it). Lacan first implies that he has not yet read the article, but that he has heard from others that it is not up to much. A little later, he goes on to note that the author suggests that the linguist Hjelmslev is important to Lacan when he is not, but makes no mention of Jakobson, when he is. But Lacan says he cannot be sure since he has only read the piece 'en diagonale', a phrase, he notes, that Mounin himself uses.²¹ He says no more about what he means, and that appears to be the end of it. But Lacan was not finished with Mounin, returning to him in his seminar of June 18th, 1969. Only then does it become clear that Mounin had accused Lacan of having only read Saussure 'en diagonale'. Lacan retorts that it means one thing when he reads *Le Monde* this way, but something entirely different with Saussure, and that Mounin shows astonishing ignorance of the possible usages of the word 'diagonal', including its 'fecundity' in mathematics. He goes on to invoke Cantor's diagonalisation argument, which is used in mathematics as a proof for infinite or uncountable sets. As Lacan puts it in his interpretation, for every series that pretends to be complete one can find (*on peut extraire*) some further entity that does not fit in the set.²² Diagonalisation, then, is a mode of reading alert to the heterogeneous element, the singularity. So, to return to *Encore* and Lacan's comments on Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, to read diagonally may seem an act of contempt, but it may also be

an ideal technique for extraction. Nor should we forget that Lacan designates the barred subject with an oblique slash that cuts diagonally.

Seminar scum: Reading Lacan

Lacan's writings and seminars have been subjected to a great deal of explication, as the many introductions to his work testify. His texts also encourage a very specific sort of mining, yielding up formulae and neologisms that can be pulled intact from their surroundings and reproduced in new contexts: 'the unconscious is structured like a language', 'desire is the desire of the other', the graph of sexualisation, *hommelette*, *jouis-sens*, just a few examples of what can be easily extracted. Much of the reading of Lacan has been devoted to telling us what Lacan meant by these formulae and neologisms. The need for such readings is indisputable, but they are rarely psychoanalytic readings. A psychoanalytic reading does not set out to explicate what a text means to say, but what it does not. It does not look to disinter a text's thesis, but fastens on the inconsequential, the unimportant element, that nevertheless insists. It is an oblique reading, one that cuts diagonally, as Lacan puts it. At the same time, its extractions do not aim at the cream, but at the scum. This is a term – *der Abhub* – that Freud uses in his essay 'The Moses of Michelangelo', where he describes psychoanalysis as attempting to reveal 'secrets and concealed things', which are not hidden, but ignored, because they compose the waste products of our observations.²³

What was reading for Lacan? In the spirit of reading obliquely, of skimming off the *Abhuben* that are right there in front of our eyes, we might begin by asking, what would Lacan have us read? That is, what sorts of reading lists did he produce for his Seminars? Formally none, of course, but with a little surface mining a couple can be extracted from Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (as will become clear, this list is not to be confused with a bibliography):

Required reading

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*

Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade*

Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*

Lautréamont, *les Chants de Maldoror*

Marx, *On the Jewish Question* or 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'

Sophocles, *Antigone*

Recommended reading

Henry Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*

De Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*

Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*

Esprit Flechier, *Memoires sur les Grands Jours D'Auvergne*

Freud, *Civilisation and its discontents*

Freud, *Entwurf einer psychologie*

Freud, 'Repression'

Freud, Letter 52 to Fliess

Freud, 'On Narcissism'

Freud and Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*

Kant, *Critique of Judgment*

Lessing, *Laocoon*

Luther, *Sermons*

Matthew (gospels)

Rene Nelli, *L'amour et les mythes du Coeur*
Pierre Perdu, *La joie d'amour*
Benjamin Perret, *Anthologie de l'amour sublime*
Racine, *Phedre*
St Paul, Epistle to the Romans

The published seminars, sixteen and counting, are transcriptions of public utterances, and although Jacques-Alain Miller does not reproduce Lacan's sighs, his laughs, or his pauses, he has allowed many other contextual traces to remain. In early seminars especially, such remainders, or *Abhuben*, include questions from the audience, and in the earliest, such as *Seminar II*, dialogue and debate between Lacan and those attending what was then a true seminar rather than a large public lecture. Lacan often addresses this audience directly or calls attention to the occasion; and he regularly steps aside, surrendering the floor to invited guests who give textual resumés or briefings on specialist topics. Such contributions are only rarely reproduced, but they remind us that each seminar was a performance, with audience and participants.²⁴

The published texts also contain many traces of the pedagogical scene of the seminar. For Lacan, the seminar was a key element in his training of analysts. Even if the audience contained philosophers, literary critics, anthropologists, linguists, and mathematicians, he frequently emphasized that his intended interlocutors were psychoanalysts, and that the seminar was where he did his teaching. At first, this was formally the case, with Lacan a training analyst certified by the IPA and delivering seminars at the Hôpital Sainte-Anne under the auspices of the Paris Psychoanalytic Society. When he was stripped of this status in 1963, Lacan found a home in educational establishments, first the École Normale Supérieure, and then, from 1969, the Faculty of Law at the Panthéon. But the seminar never had any formal University status, was never part of the curriculum, was never accredited in those establishments. Attendance at the seminar for four or five years could never result in the receipt of a degree or certificate; there was no final exam, even if the training analysts in attendance desired to become analysts in Lacan's 'School'.²⁵

As a teacher then, Lacan had an institutional setting, but limited institutional authority. His students may have supposed him to be a Master, but he was not officially invested with any such status. Even for a teacher as unconventional as Lacan, so keen to short-circuit the Master's discourse, this posed some practical problems. It was essential that his students work for themselves, and not fall into the imaginary traps laid by a charismatic speaker who might seem to provide ready-made answers. Even if imaginary identifications are a necessary dimension of the teaching situation, a necessary motivating factor, training analysts had to pass through this stage, to traverse it. One way Lacan warded off such identifications was to speak in a notoriously opaque discourse. His tangled syntax, apparent lack of a structure, and refusal to provide sign-posts forced his auditors to work hard at listening to him. Even so, divested of Professorial authority – 'je ne procède pas en professeur' he said – he was evidently faced with many who came along to consume his words passively.²⁶ Or at least this was the view that he often expressed when he complained, possibly ironically, possibly playfully, about their failings, their lack of commitment, or as he put it on the 25th of May, 1960, their insufficient 'zeal':

There is nevertheless one thing you could do between now and the next time, and that is to read it.²⁷

He is referring to Sophocles' *Antigone*, the main text for the May 25th session, as well as the next two on June 1st and 15th. He goes on:

I don't suppose that alerting you (*de vous en avoir sonné la cloche*) last time by telling you that I would be talking about *Antigone* was even enough to make you glance at it (*à vous le faire même parcourir*), given the average level of zeal you display. It would, however, not be without interest if you did so before next time.²⁸

Having just finished speaking of a stage character who was far from short of zeal, Lacan reprimands his class for failing to take a hint and sets them some homework for the next meeting. He falls short, though, of the commanding mode of the Professor setting reading, since this is an authority he does not wield. He is reduced instead to coaxing and cajoling in order to get them to do what he wants. His position, in other words, is closer to the one now occupied by the University teacher in an epoch, a half century on, when both the Master's and the University discourse have suffered serial erosions, with mastery and knowledge de-supposed by information and electronic storage. Earlier in the year he had even more openly joked about the ambiguous status of any assignment he gave them, setting a seasonal chore in the final session of 1959, on 23 December. They would find, he indicated, St Paul's Epistle to the Romans 'good company' for their 'devoirs de vacances' ('holiday homework').²⁹

At the very beginning of *Encore*, Lacan tells his audience (if that is the right word)³⁰ that he is astonished that they are still there, still with him, and wonders why. Their continued presence signals an expectation, a faith in Lacan's capacity to deliver the goods. This expectation is of course also a demand, and Lacan's own teaching tells us that any demand is addressed to an Other which is assumed to be consistent, coherent. In other words, the demand is impossible, because Lacan hasn't got the goods to give, although he can always try to give what he does not have.³¹ An exhortation to his audience to read this or that, framed by his disappointment or dissatisfaction, is one way of returning that demand to them, of implicating them as addressees by introducing his own desire into the teaching situation. The reading lists for *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* are a record of those demands, that desire.

There are two lists, because not all Lacan's exhortations to read are alike. His demands vary in degree and intensity, with an apparent hierarchy of importance. First among required texts are those which pose a test or trial for the reader. In *Seminar VII*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* fall into this category. Of Aristotle, Lacan challenges his audience 'comme un exercice, d'en faire l'épreuve', while of Kant he says 'il faut avoir traversé l'épreuve de lire ce texte'.³² With the inconsistency that marks his translation, Dennis Porter renders the latter correctly as a 'test' but fails to capture the passage or movement implied by 'traversé', while in the former, he translates only 'exercise', ignoring completely the key word *épreuve*. It is not only in the *Ethics* that Lacan uses the word *épreuve*, and not only in reference to reading. It returns consistently throughout the seminar, introduced in different contexts and with changing weight and emphasis. In *Seminar II*, Lacan refers to the logical puzzle of the three prisoners as an *épreuve* for the three concerned, each of whom must, in this inter-subjective game, make a decision which amounts to a leap in stating whether it is a black or a white disc on his back.³³ In

Seminar VI Lacan calls the experience of attending his seminar an *épreuve* for his auditors, and in *Seminar XI* the fort-da game is an *épreuve* for Freud's grandson in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.³⁴

Épreuve is a signifier which also insists in *Encore*, and which is companion to 'frayage', that forward movement, that breaking of new ground that Lacan attributes to Freud and which he seeks to continue. To take just one instance, at the very end of *Encore* we find this rhetorical question:

Isn't it on the basis of the confrontation with this impasse, with this impossibility by which the real is defined, that love is put to the test? (*qu'est mis à l'épreuve l'amour?*)³⁵

It is not entirely clear what impasse puts love to the test here, but a good guess is the absence of a sexual rapport, and the 'inadequacy' of any *jouissance*. The concept of the *épreuve* must allude more generally to the courage that Lacan takes to be a prerequisite for psychoanalysis.³⁶ Unlike some forms of counseling, there is no consolatory or comforting dimension to psychoanalysis. Instead, the analysand must come up with the answer herself, if necessary through the intense pressure of the Lacanian short session. So when Lacan asks his auditors to put themselves to the test or trial of a text, his choice of words is far from insignificant. The texts in question, he implies, will lead the reader into impasses that are the subject of Lacan's seminar as well. Just like psychoanalysis itself, we must put ourselves to the test of these texts, Lacan suggests, precisely because they do not provide any readymade answers.

Given the testing nature of Lacan's own discourse, it is clearly high praise for Kant and Aristotle when he characterizes them as essential trials. That the most important reading for Lacan is a form of *épreuve* also suggests that his model of reading is experiential. This model is clearest when he recommends Lautréamont to his audience, or rather, assumes that at least some of them partake of the poet:

There is no better example of such a work than the one which I hope some of you at least are addicted to (*certaines d'entre vous ont eu la pratique*) – addicted to in the same sense as 'addicted to opium'³⁷

In the English translation Porter takes a shortcut, when it is not so much addiction that is at stake but praxis, or simply use. Some of them at least, Lacan hopes, are users of Lautréamont, because *Maldoror* is one of the best examples of the way in which the work of art is an experience which can rip the subject from its psycho-social moorings ('L'oeuvre d'art est ici une expérience qui, par son procès, arrache le sujet à ses amarres psycho-sociales').³⁸ It is precisely this sort of claim that sets alarm bells ringing for readers of Lacan who suspect him of a latent logocentrism, or even a Romantic privileging of experience. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, and after them Derrida, do not hesitate to bring this charge, particularly with reference to the special status Lacan gives, again and again, to the clinical scene, to the words spoken between analyst and analysand. Lacan treats 'psychoanalytic experience', Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe say, as a truth 'beyond-the-text'; and for Derrida, the presence of the phrase 'Experience proves' in 'The Subversion of the Subject' is enough of a smoking gun to require no further commentary.³⁹

There is no denying that Lacan persistently invokes the lessons learnt in the analytic situation and privileges this scene. There is more to be learnt there, he thinks, than from the literature of the vast majority of post-Freudian psychoanalysis, which, in his view, has betrayed the basic discovery of analysis – that ‘it speaks’. It is also true that he refers to this scene repeatedly and approvingly as ‘psychoanalytic experience’. The crucial question, then, is what ‘experience’ means in Lacanian discourse. Is it a final court of arbitration that trumps all theoretical, textual, or otherwise ‘mediated’ knowledge? Would Lacan really go down such a subjectivist path given the extent to which he puts the subject in question? Or is experience – the experience of reading Aristotle, for example – closer to what Lacan later calls, in *Seminar XI*, an ‘encounter’? Encounters are with the real, the real is impossible, and so the encounter is missed, a failed encounter. Is it an ineffable truth that is encountered in Lautréamont, or precisely the opposite, some impasse, or aporia? In this context, Jacques-Alain Miller helpfully points out that Lacan’s use of ‘experience’ was a deliberate move away from the word ‘treatment’, which implies one-way traffic between patient and healer, rather than the shared dialogical work of psychoanalysis.⁴⁰ Certainly nowhere in Lacan is clinical experience ever assumed to be immediately given or a form of pure presence. As far as reading goes, this is the logic that Lacan has developed by the time of *Encore*, when he returns to *The Nicomachean Ethics*, which he now claims to be more or less unreadable, at least in the French translation, and cannot be ‘comprehended’ because of its historical distance, although he still advocates ‘l’épreuve de la lecture’.⁴¹ *Expérience* in French can also, of course, simply mean experiment.

For texts that he considers indispensable, Lacan reserves one further formulation in *Seminar VII*:

‘mes leçons *incitent* à lire Freud’

‘ceux qui [...] n’ont pas fait jusqu’ici l’expérience de [*Critique of Practical Reason*] [...] je les *incite* à combler là-dessus’

‘Maurice Blanchot que je vous cite continue [...] Je vous *incite* à faire l’effort de lire le livre’

‘À ceux qui peuvent pareillement avoir été surprise, je voudrais les *inciter* [...] à s’informer d’une façon peut-être un peu précise, par la lecture de certains textes courts’⁴²

Lacan *incites* his audience to read Kant, Blanchot, Marx, and as one might expect, the texts of Freud in general. He uses the same word each time, but Porter tries four different translations, missing wildly with ‘those of you who are inspired by my lectures to read Freud’ and ‘I invite those who’; getting closer with ‘I would encourage them to’; and scoring a palpable hit with ‘I urge you to make the effort’.⁴³ ‘Urge’ is surely correct, since what is at stake is an urgent demand, on a par with putting oneself to the test of Aristotle. The word can also be directly translated as ‘incite’. Although the French ‘incite’ has a wider set of meanings than the English, the notion that one ‘incites’ others to revolt is still very much present in the French. Given the powerful potential effect on the subject that Lacan attributes to some texts, there is

no doubt that when he says ‘my teaching incites you to read Freud’, this is not far off saying ‘I incite you to revolution’.

Between incitement and *épreuve*, then, (and of course the ‘pratique’ of Lautréamont) we have accounted for the required reading for anyone putting themselves to the test of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. In addition to the texts that Lacan urges upon his auditors, the *Ethics* is punctuated by constant recommendations for further reading, yet more *Abhuben* out in the open for any who care to pay attention. ‘Je vous prie’, ‘je vous demande’, ‘lisez et vous verrez’, ‘je vous conseille’, ‘essayez un peut de lire’: these are some of the gentler encouragements with which Lacan issues his advice on reading. Like any reading list, this longer one reveals as much by what it leaves out as what it includes. It also tells us in what areas Lacan felt his audience was deficient. In *Seminar VII* he favours what we might call ‘classic’ texts of literature, philosophy, and religion, although he allows onto his list contemporary historical works providing context for his discussion of courtly love poetry. Apart from these historical works, though, and the notable exception of Blanchot, Lacan recommends few works by the living. He may mention Melanie Klein or Ernest Jones, but he quite pointedly fails to ask his audience to read his fellow psychoanalytic thinkers. In the case of Fromm’s *Sigmund Freud’s Mission*, he goes so far as to recommend against reading it.⁴⁴ What are we to make of such omissions? Lacan rarely praises any of his contemporaries and is often openly dismissive of them, but he clearly knew the contemporary analytic literature intimately, and could count on an audience of analysts, especially training analysts, to be steeped in it. In fact, any normal reading list for a course in analysis would presumably be composed of such recent specialist literature instead of older texts. It is a commonplace to say that Lacan conducted a return to Freud; he even made the claim once or twice himself. His reading lists show what this meant in practice – it meant precisely clearing the heads of his psychoanalytic audience of the most recent ‘literature in the field’. It meant going back and reading closely what was usually taken as read – the texts of Freud, all of them. It meant taking Freud’s advice in *The Question of Lay Analysis* and making the study of poetry, philosophy, and the history of religion central to the training of analysts.⁴⁵

Foutez le camp

Repetitions with a difference mark Lacan’s seminars over the years, so it is worth making comparisons with a later and an earlier reading list. Here are Lacan’s reading recommendations in *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-55*:

Required

Freud, *Aus den Anfangen der Psychoanalyse*
(letters to Fliess and the *Entwurf*)
-----, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*
-----, *The Ego and the Id*
-----, *Group Psychology*
-----, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, esp Ch 7 and
Dream of Irma’s injection.
Molière, *Amphitryon*
Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*

Recommended

Michael Balint, ‘On Genital Love’
Condillac, *Traité des sensations*
Nicolas de Cusa
Julian Offray de la Mettrie, *L’homme-machine*
Descartes, *De l’homme*
Ronald Fairbairn, ‘Endopsychic structure
considered in terms of object relations’
Freud, ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’
-----, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*
-----, *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*
-----, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*
-----, ‘Neurosis and Psychosis’
-----, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*
Giraudoux, *Amphitryon 38*
Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*
Parmenides
Plato, *Meno*
Plautus, *Amphitryon*
Poe, 'The Purloined Letter'
Proudhon

Then from *Seminar 18: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* (1970-71) we can extract the following:

Required

Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*
Lacan, 'Seminar on the Purloined Letter'
Meng-tzu (Mencius)

Recommended

Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes*
Bruno Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds*
Madeleine David, *Le débat sur les écritures et l'hieroglyphe aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*
Freud, *Massenpsychologie und ich-Analyse*
Lacan, 'Radiophonie' in *Scilicet 2/3*
Lacan, 'The Instance of the Letter'
Hermann Nunberg, *Problems of Bisexuality as Reflected in Circumcision*
Poe, 'The Purloined Letter'
Proust
Alfred Métraux, essay in *L'écriture*
Paul Lorenzen, *Métamathématique*
I.A. Richards, *Mencius on the Mind*
Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender*
Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*

Freudian texts dominate *Seminar II*, for which *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is lodestar, while in *Seminar XVIII* there is only a single Freudian text recommended. From these lists we can gather that after nearly twenty years of the seminar, the objective of reading Freud has more or less been achieved, and the urgency with which that task was undertaken has now shifted to Lacan's own writings. Between *The Ethics* and *Seminar XVIII* the *Écrits* had appeared and Lacan refers to them with regularity in this later seminar as well as *Encore*.⁴⁶ That he directs his auditors to Stoller, Bettelheim and Nurenberg suggests a more conciliatory attitude to the literature in the field, or it may simply suggest that the adversary has changed: Derrida is clearly at stake in Lacan's many excursions in this *Seminar XVIII* on the *écrit* and *écriture*, but he fails to even name this rival, alluding to him only indirectly, and disparagingly, by way of Alfred Métraux.⁴⁷

In *Seminar XVIII* Lacan challenges his audience again to put themselves to the *épreuve* of Aristotle, and mentions that they may 'pratiqué Proust'.⁴⁸ His method of making recommendations changes though. On no fewer than five occasions he tells them that 'il vaut la peine' (it is worth the pain/trouble) or that they can 'se donner la peine' (take the pain/trouble) to read something. The phrase echoes with Lacan's humourous badgering of his audience in *Seminar VII*, and its repetition suggests that he still finds their efforts falling short. In relation to Meng-tzu he says that he will not bother trying to 'drug' them into reading it, because he does not hold out the least hope that they will put their noses into it:

Je ne vois pas, après tout, de raison de vous faire droguer, puisque je n'ai véritablement aucun espoir que vous fassiez l'effort de foutre le nez.⁴⁹

He reserves his most withering accusation for the beginning of the session on March 17th, 1971, when he asks them who has made the effort to read pages 30 to 41 of the *Écrits* (part of the ‘Seminar on the Purloined Letter’) as he had expressly suggested at the previous meeting. Their response, when he asks them to raise their hands, or at least a finger, does not satisfy Lacan, who presses them, asking for someone to say something about it, threatening that he may have an ‘attack of the nerves’ if he gets no response.⁵⁰ This little piece of comic theatre finishes with these words from Lacan, addressed to an individual, or to the crowd, we cannot know:

Écoutez, vous, est-ce que vous les avez relues, ces pages?
Vous ne les avez pas relues? Foutez le camp.⁵¹

‘Listen, you, have you reread them, those pages?’ he asks. ‘You haven’t reread them? Get the hell out of here!’ Lacan did not have the Professor’s power to dismiss them, and in any case, the entire routine is clearly a joke shared with the audience, even if Lacan’s frustration is real. What makes this more than an amusing anecdote about the attitude of a *maître à penser* to academic decorum, a little fragment of *Abhub*, punctuating the procession of truly psychoanalytic concepts? In fact, the attitude – Lacan’s propensity for clowning – is of interest in its own right, for it tells us much about his ambiguous relation to what he calls the Master’s discourse, and his attempts to be *objet a* to his audience rather than Master.⁵² And given his own avowals about the difficulty of reading the *illisible Écrits*, it is striking that he reserves his most shrill and unreasonable demands for the reading of his own text, bringing to the fore the impossibility of the demand. His passionate-humorous outburst about reading, or about the failure to read, also reminds us of the stakes of reading in psychoanalysis: that reading is an intractable problem, that it must be done, but that there is something in us that strongly resists doing it, and a corresponding desire that someone else will do it for us. At the same time, people don’t stop trying to read Lacan. ‘Why should they need these *Écrits* which are, it seems, incomprehensible?’ Lacan asked a year after their publication. His answer: ‘Perhaps they need to have a place from which they can see that they’re talking about something they do not understand.’⁵³ It is also worth asking why Lacan kept coming back to conduct his seminar each year, and kept issuing reading recommendations, if he was so dissatisfied with his congregation, and so convinced they paid no heed to these recommendations? The Lacanian answer to this question is that he came back *because* he was dissatisfied.

The final question we might ask is how far Lacan’s reading ‘along the diagonal’ departs from the protocols of rubbish-scouring proposed by Freud in ‘The Moses of Michelangelo’. In that essay Freud cited as inspiration for psychoanalytic reading practice the Russian art-connoisseur Ivan Lermolieff, who insisted

that attention should be diverted from the general impression and main features of a picture, and [...] stress [laid instead] on the significance of minor details, of things like the drawing of the fingernails, of the lobe of an ear, of halos and such unconsidered trifles⁵⁴

The key of course is what *use* is made in the analytic situation of the unconsidered trifles, those fingernails, lobes and halos. Or, since Freud’s primary analytic material was auditory, how the analyst translates the detritus of speech into meaning. Foucault

puts it like this: ‘Freud turned the utterances of the ill, until then considered only noise, into something to be treated as a message.’⁵⁵ On this front Thomas Svolos draws a firm line between Freud and Lacan:

To put it quickly, the Freudian act of reading consisted in finding the Oedipal meaning in what to Freud’s analysands were the meaningless stuff of their lives – the dreams, symptoms, bungled actions and so forth. For the Freudian analysand, their unconscious formations had no meaning, and Freud read them otherwise, as rich in Oedipal signification. For Lacan, to read Otherwise is to read the very signifier of the lack in the Other, to be able to read something in a place where the Other lacks, where it fails to give meaning.⁵⁶

Oedipus was not quite the master signifier to Freud that many of his interpreters assume, and yet it is true that he wanted to return meaning to psychic material otherwise despised as meaningless, while Lacan resisted interpretation and shunned meaning. And yet, perhaps the difference is not so great after all. What is lacking in the Other, as well as missing from the specular image, if not the *objet a*? The *objet a* Lacan everywhere identifies as waste matter, as a precipitate of the process of subject formation. If we were to return the Lacanian concept back to the German scene where it originated, might not one translation of *objet a* even be... *Abhub*?⁵⁷

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Notes

¹ Lacan, *Les formations de l'inconscient*, 9.

² Lacan, *Encore*, 29. My translation.

³ Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux*, 309. Adrian Price tries: 'Thus shall be read – this book I am betting. It shall not be like my *Écrits*, the volume of which gets bought: but in order not to read it, so they say.' Lacan, 'Postface to the French Edition of *Seminar XI*,' 17.

⁴ Lacan, *Encore*, 37. Lacan says they share this feature with the writing of Phillippe Sollers. On the relative legibility of the seminars, see, for example, Maria Scott, who says 'The same level of difficulty is not usually attributed to Lacan's seminars, which are generally perceived to be relatively transparent in their meaning'. Scott, 'Lacan's "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*" as Anamorphic Discourse', 334. On the *matheme* as the supposedly unreadable kernel of Lacan's writings and seminars, see Aoki, 'Letters from Lacan'.

⁵ Roudinesco, *Lacan, envers, et contre tout*, 74.

⁶ The site <http://gaogoa.free.fr/SeminaireS.htm> usefully tabulates a number of these sites and provides links.

⁷ Marc de Kesel, perhaps the most careful and comprehensive reader of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, excoriates Miller for his editorial interventions, shows in great detail how this changes the gist of what Lacan is saying, but then also relies for the most part on the official text, which leads one to believe that most of it is in fact passably accurate. De Kesel refers to the 'inexcusably substandard editions in which [the seminars] have been published [...] Miller [...] intervenes literally in every single paragraph: shortening and rearranging sentences, changing the order of passages, adding words or leaving them out.' de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, 7.

⁸ Lacan, *Ethics*, 29.

⁹ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 47; Lacan, *Angoisse*, 59.

¹⁰ Lacan, *Anxiety*, 32; Lacan, *Angoisse*, 43.

¹¹ Lacan, *L'éthique*, 217.

¹² Lacan, *Encore*, 54.

¹³ Lacan, *L'éthique*, 35.

¹⁴ Lacan, *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, 106.

- ¹⁵ ‘C’est l’introduction de la différence comme telle dans le champ, qui permet d’extraire de la langue ce qu’il en est du signifiant.’ Lacan, *Encore*, 129.
- ¹⁶ ‘Il a vraiment fallu qu’on me les extraie, ceux qui j’ai rassemblés un beau jour’. Lacan, *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 79.
- ¹⁷ Lacan, *Encore*, 54. ‘Chemin’ and ‘cheminer’ (path and path-making) and ‘frayer la voie’ and ‘frayage’ (clearing the way, path-breaking) are words ever-present in Lacan’s discourse, which places a high value on keeping on the move, on breaking new ground. Lacan often invokes Freud in this context, but there is also an implicit reference to Heidegger’s various ‘Wege’, including the *Holzwege* and *Feldweg*. Lacan reports that in Milan he gave a talk about the absence of a sexual relation; that he was reported by the Italian press as saying ‘women do not exist’; and that he was subsequently challenged about this by a member of the M.L.F. Having just commented in the Seminar on the purpose of ‘ricanement’ (giggling, snickering) in his audience, his condescending, casually sexist remarks about the Italian feminist then solicited in the same audience, or at least part of it, appreciative laughter. As is often the case, Lacan’s sexism is both transparent and hard to pin down: his monitory remarks on laughter and the fact that the M (Movement) of M.L.F. ties directly to his theme of path-breaking make one wonder what exactly he is up to.
- ¹⁸ Lacan, *Encore* (English), 65.
- ¹⁹ Lacan, *Encore*, 63.
- ²⁰ Mounin, ‘Quelques traits du style de Jacques Lacan.’
- ²¹ Lacan, *D’un Autre à l’autre*, 91-95.
- ²² Lacan, *D’un Autre à l’autre*, 377.
- ²³ Freud, ‘The Moses of Michelangelo,’ 265.
- ²⁴ One of the advantages of the online versions of the seminars is that some of them do reproduce these interventions.
- ²⁵ In the final session of *Seminar XVI*, on 25 June 1969, Lacan spoke openly about his dispute with his hosts, the ENS, who had advised him he was no longer welcome the next year. As a parting shot to the University, caught up in post-1968 arguments about credit structures, he issued 340 certificates to his audience, 190 dated by his hand, the other 150 by his secretary Gloria. In the previous session, of 18 June, he had explained to his audience that he would be distributing some ‘little papers’ that were not diplomas, but ‘a little sign that will remain to you of your presence here this year’, Lacan, *D’un Autre à l’autre*, 378. My translation.
- ²⁶ Lacan, *L’éthique*, 244. In *Seminar XVI*, he notes that it is not the ENS that authorizes his teaching and that his utterances ‘ne [...] se produisent [pas] au niveau de l’École normale’, Lacan, *D’un Autre à l’autre*, 376.
- ²⁷ Lacan, *Ethics*, 253 (translation modified).
- ²⁸ Lacan, *L’éthique*, 296; Lacan, *Ethics*, 253-4.
- ²⁹ Lacan, *L’éthique*, 101.
- ³⁰ Lacan sometimes says his audience is ‘convoquer’, which would make them a convocation.
- ³¹ One of Lacan’s definitions of love. See, for example, Lacan, *L’envers de la psychanalyse*, 58.
- ³² Lacan, *L’éthique*, 30 & 94.
- ³³ Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory*, 287-90.
- ³⁴ Lacan, *Le désir et son interprétation*, 53; Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux*, 73.
- ³⁵ Lacan, *Encore*, 131; Lacan, *Encore* (English) 144.
- ³⁶ And not just Lacan. Paul Roazen reports that ‘To a patient Freud explained that one needed three things to succeed in an analysis – the first was courage, the second was courage, and the third was courage.’ Roazen, *Freud and his Followers*, 54.
- ³⁷ Lacan, *L’éthique*, 237; Lacan, *Ethics*, 201.
- ³⁸ Lacan, *L’éthique*, 237.
- ³⁹ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, 138; Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 303.
- ⁴⁰ Miller, ‘Contraindications,’ 68.
- ⁴¹ Lacan, *Encore*, 49-50, 61 & 64.
- ⁴² Lacan, *L’éthique*, 56, 88, 236 & 246. Emphasis added.
- ⁴³ Lacan, *Ethics*, 44, 72, 207 & 200.
- ⁴⁴ Lacan, *Ethics*, 26.
- ⁴⁵ Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, 348-49.
- ⁴⁶ Miller claims that 1964 and Seminar XI, the first one that he attended, mark turning points in Lacan’s seminar, with the work of the return to Freud now complete, and the new project the proper development of a specifically Lacanian theory. See Miller, ‘Contexts and Concepts’. This now standard thesis is confirmed by Moustapha Safouan, who says that Lacan’s move from Sainte-Anne to

the ENS marks a shift in emphasis, away from references to psychoanalytic writings, with the exception of Freud, and towards further developments of his own distinctive Lacanian vocabulary and framework (Safouan, *Lacanian*, location 3699 – Kindle edition.) Comparison of the reading lists I have constructed for Seminars II, VII and XVIII partly confirms this view, but not entirely. Clearly, the reading of Freud has gradually become less important, to the extent that he is no longer required reading in 1970-71, when in 1954-55 Freud dominated that category. This does not mean, however, that psychoanalytic texts no longer preoccupy Lacan, as the presence of his own texts demonstrates. What is more, there are some texts which regularly reappear, suggesting a continuity of textual reference points. Poe's 'Purloined Letter' is there in 1954-55 and again in 1970-71; Aristotle is a constant; and *The Nicomachean Ethics* is as central to *Encore* as it was to *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

⁴⁷ In this context Lacan glosses his own older idea of a 'parole pleine' (full speech) hinting that it does not fall into logocentrism: 'la parole dépasse toujours le parleur, le parleur est un parlé'. Lacan, *D'un discours*, 78.

⁴⁸ Lacan, *D'un discours*, 94.

⁴⁹ Lacan, *D'un discours*, 51.

⁵⁰ 'faire un crise de nerfs'. Lacan, *D'un discours*, 95. We could interpret this threat as follows: Lacan at this point positions himself in the hysteric's discourse (the other three discourses, worked out first in *Seminar XVII L'envers de psychanalyse*, being the master's, the university, and the analyst's discourse). The hysteric is characterized by a demand for a master, but at the same time a great dissatisfaction with any master, and doubt about the master's masterfulness.

⁵¹ Lacan, *D'un discours*, 95.

⁵² See Clément, *Vies et légendes de Jacques Lacan*, especially Chapter 1.

⁵³ Lacan, *My Teaching*, 106.

⁵⁴ Freud, 'Moses of Michelangelo,' 265.

⁵⁵ Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, 559. My translation.

⁵⁶ Svolos, 'Jacques Lacan, Reader,' 46.

⁵⁷ Rob Lapsley, my collaborator in the close reading of Lacan's seminars, must be considered a co-author of this piece, although if he had written it, he would no doubt have written something completely different.