LACANIAN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Theory and Practical Applications

Michael J. Miller
## Contents

Acknowledgments  ix
About the Patients  xi
Introduction: AnOther Psychoanalysis  xiii

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Shattering Discourse to Bring Forth Speech</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Evidence and Psychotherapy: A History of Case Histories</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Strength in Letters</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aggressiveness in Psychotherapy</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Organa Non Grata</em></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Che Vuoi?</em> The Letter and the Desire of the Other</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References  207
Index  213
1

Shattering Discourse to Bring Forth Speech

Whether it wishes to be an agent of healing, training, or sounding the depths, psychoanalysis has but one medium: the patient’s speech.


Jacques Lacan, a rising star on the psychoanalytic scene, although already a controversial figure for his variable-length session, found himself in January of 1953 the newly elected president of the Société Psychanalytique de Paris (SPP) (Nobus, 2000, p. 193). He was, via that institution and its affiliation with the International Psychoanalytic Association, invited to address the upcoming Annual Congress of Romance Language–Speaking Psychoanalysts in Rome on the subject of speech and language. “In the meantime,” he tells us, “serious disagreements,” largely over Lacan’s use of the variable length session, “led to a secession within the French group” (1953/2002, p. 31).¹ Lacan in turn resigned his position at the SPP 6 months after attaining it to join those who had seceded in the newly formed Société Française de Psychanalyse (SFP).

Despite the mounting political tension surrounding Lacan, he was allowed to make the address he had been invited for, and the members of the SFP were allowed to attend. During that

¹ My references to essays contained in Écrits will correspond to Fink’s pagination (Lacan, 2002, 2006).
address, nicknamed the “Rome Discourse,” Lacan circulated a paper entitled “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” a work that might be seen (or heard) as the “newborn’s cry” (1953/2002, p. 32) of a Lacanian psychoanalysis. At the least, it provides the reader with one possible starting point from which to understand Lacan’s agenda, which was at the core of the “serious disagreements” to which he alludes. That agenda was “to revamp the foundations our discipline derives from language” (p. 32).

With this paper, Lacan made plain what was at stake in his “return to Freud.” His aim was to bring psychoanalysis back to what he saw as Freud’s greatest discovery: simply put, that the “talking cure” was about talking.

Lacan also commented extensively on what, in his view, psychoanalysis was not about, and the tone of his critique leaves little doubt as to one aggravating factor in the rift between Lacan and his contemporaries. Unfortunately, this tone set the stage for a lasting schism between Lacan’s vision of psychoanalysis and that of Kris, Loewenstein, Hartmann, Balint, and Winnicott, whose views (though hardly all one) have largely been constitutive of the impact made by psychoanalysis on current American psychodynamic therapy (see, for example, Jacobs, 1991; Maroda, 1999, 2001; McWilliams, 1994). Here we see a perennial problem with Lacan: In his attempts to move psychoanalytic praxis into the “symbolic” realm of productive dialogue, his politics and his rhetoric often leave us stuck in what Lacan (1988b) called “the imaginary,” a narcissistic world of “us and them”; rivals who will not concede even to speak each other’s names (Fink, 2004; Schneiderman, 1983).

THE “NEWBORN’S CRY” OF A LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS

While any number of Lacan’s texts will provide the reader with examples of what he found wrong with analysis as taken up by his contemporaries, it seems fitting to turn to the first cries of the
newborn *enfant terrible* to orient ourselves. In “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (1953/2002), Lacan wastes little time in voicing what he sees as the problem:

One can trace over the years a growing aversion regarding the functions of speech and the field of language. It is responsible for the “changes in aim and technique” that are acknowledged within the psychoanalytic movement, and whose relation to the general decline in therapeutic effectiveness is nevertheless ambiguous. (p. 34)

This “aversion regarding the functions of speech and the field of language” is to be found in an emphasis, in “the literature that we call our ‘scientific activity,’” that is, a psychoanalysis as interpreted by ego psychologists and object-relations theorists, on “[t]he function of the imaginary … the concept of libidinal object relations … [and] the importance of countertransference” (pp. 242–243).

For Lacan, these new emphases in psychoanalysis constituted a shift away from the “symbolic” register—the proper domain of psychoanalysis, which involves a discourse between the “Subject” and the “Other”—and toward the “imaginary” register, by way of which two egos relate either in friendly identification (“me and somebody like me”) or via adversarial posturing.

Psychoanalysis, as part of its acculturation to an American paradigm, has become focused on “communication” between egos *as the curative factor in psychoanalytic treatment*. The analyst’s ego communicates with, becomes a model for, and props up the ego of his analysand; that is, the psychoanalyst has been relegated simply to influencing the patient to be more like him.

“[P]sychoanalysis in the United States has been inflected toward the adaptation of the individual to the social environment, the

---

2 Lacan (1953/2002) makes mention of the “convergence that occurs between the alien status of a group dominated by immigrants and the distance it is lured into taking from its roots by the function called for by … cultural conditions” (p. 39). Psychoanalysis, for Lacan, has become acculturated: an American immigrant who has forgotten her roots. Lacan’s distaste for American culture is evident at several points in this essay, which again is not necessarily helpful to his cause here. As Gallop (1985) puts it, “The problem of translating or transferring the *Écrits* into the American scene is not simply to get the *Écrits* into American, but what to do about the America that is already in the *Écrits*” (p. 57).
search for behavior patterns, and all the objectification implied in
the notion of ‘human relations’” (p. 39). Rather than remain true
to itself as an exploration of the symbolic and linguistic systems
that structure the unconscious subject, as per his reading of Freud,
psychoanalysis according to Lacan has become little more than a
glorified exercise in behavior modification; a mirage of “commu-
nication,” which leaves the subject without her own history (p. 39),
has come to replace the proper analytic experience.

Further, Lacan argues that the analyst is mistaken in his notion
that language and speech are fundamentally inadequate to the
psychoanalytic project. As a result of this supposed mistake, the
practice of analysis has become focused on an illusory something
situated beyond speech, which makes itself known in an interper-
sonal, affective way.

Already, characterizing this focus of clinical practice as a mis-
take is bound to strike us as counterintuitive. To speak from my
own experience as a student of psychodynamic therapy (which
I imagine is not entirely unique), I have been trained to “follow
the affect” of my patients and to pay constant attention to my
countertransference feelings, and even to regard them as typi-
cal of the position that the client must tend to put others in. So
interpersonal, relational experience as well as the importance of
affect have been central to my own training, perhaps as a result of
the influences Lacan was protesting. Yet some have gone further
than the emphasis I have described and recommend that we actu-
ally engage these feelings in the session: to let the client know, for
example, that I might be feeling angry “for”—or even with—him
(see, for example, Jacobs, 1991; Maroda, 1999, 2001).

Intervention based at least partially on these interpersonal,
intuitive aspects of our experience with the patient has sometimes
been presented in psychodynamic training as preferable to acting
on the basis of a prefabricated, intellectualized construction we
may have reached. Indeed, some would maintain that to intervene
based on the latter is often nothing short of colluding with the cli-
ent, for we often see her as already too intellectually defended, and
to make such a mistake would be to encourage her destructive interpersonal patterns via the defense with which I have allowed myself to become complicit, while what is really needed is for the client to be brought back to an authentic, interpersonal expression of an affective state that lies beyond words.³

Karen Maroda (2001) brings this idea to its logical (and perhaps chilling) conclusion when, discussing her disclosure of her anger with a client, she writes: “I realized how important the expression of my affect was to breaking through to Sally and patients like her. Sadism was preferable to my neutrality” (p. 34, emphasis added).

Not so, says Lacan (1953/2002), with some contempt of his own:

[N]othing could be more misleading for the analyst than to seek to guide himself by some supposed “contact” he experiences with the subject’s reality. This vacuous buzzword of intuitionist and even phenomenological psychology has become extended in contemporary usage in a way that is thoroughly symptomatic of the ever scarcer effects of speech in the present social context. But its obsessive value becomes flagrant when it is recommended in a relationship which, according to its very rules, excludes all real contact. (p. 39)

For Lacan, to entirely base an approach to treatment upon such interpersonal “contact,” using as our guide our own countertransference fantasies, feelings, and intuitions, boils down to little more than an exercise in narcissism. To intervene based upon hunches about the patient’s affect, and to privilege an affectively based “contact” beyond that of language, is to miss the point of Freud’s “Promethean” discovery as illustrated in The Psychopathology of

³ Curiously, though, work with language (the “one medium” of psychoanalysis, according to Lacan) has often been somehow equated with the defense of intellectualization: Too much focus on words takes away from a focus on wordless affect. This substitution of “language” for “intellect” seems a bit dubious, given that, on examination, affect is communicated and constituted largely by language. This is not to say that there is no preverbal component to affect, but rather to note that once affect has language to describe it, it is necessarily informed by that language. “Feeling blue” is arguably a different experience than tristesse, if only by means of the fact that each occurs within a different cultural context and brings different associations with it, which in turn give the affective experience its own specific timbre.
Everyday Life (1904), Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905b), The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” (1909), and “Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria” (1905a), to name a few—that the subject exists and is always to be found in language itself.

But what is at stake for Lacan is more than simply an appreciation of one of the philosophical underpinnings of Freud’s work. Rather, “[b]ringing psychoanalytic experience back to speech and language as its foundations is of direct concern to its technique” (Lacan, 1953/2002, p. 76).

To better understand what it might mean for Lacan to be accusing his contemporaries of propagating a narcissistic psychoanalysis, we must return briefly to his conception of the ego, noting that he maintained that this concept of Freud’s, too, was misappropriated by the ego psychologists. Lacan accuses ego psychology of misconstruing the ego as a “reality function” (although this is in fact reflective of Freud’s later conceptions of it) and insinuates that his acculturated peers have been mistakenly seduced by the belief that “the subject’s ego is identical to the presence that is speaking ...” (p. 88).

For Lacan, nothing could be further from the truth. As we see first in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function” (1949/2002), Lacan sets up the ego as the symptom upon which he begins to construct the imaginary register. Briefly put, the ego for Lacan is the locus of mistaken identity: a misrecognition by the subject of itself as a two-dimensional image. Maintaining that he is in line with Freud on this question, he refers to the ego (1953/2002) as “the system of the subject’s objectifications” (p. 88). The ego for Lacan is itself an objectification; the fundamental objectification, a primary symptom that sets the stage for ensuing symptoms over the course of a lifetime, which finally lead the patient to psychoanalysis. If this is the nature of the ego, then it must be counterproductive for the analyst to simply align herself with the patient’s ego: This would be nothing other than strengthening the disease in hope of a cure.
This is precisely the direction in which Lacan sees psychoanalysis heading as it strays from its engagement in speech and language in favor of attending to affect, countertransference, intuition, and the like as they culminate in a curative relationship between analyst and patient. Michael Balint’s (1968) notion of a “two-body psychology” is used as an example:

Analysis is becoming the relation of two bodies between which a fantasmatic communication is established in which the analyst teaches the subject to apprehend himself as an object. Subjectivity is admitted into analysis only as long as it is bracketed as an illusion, and speech is excluded from a search for lived experience that becomes its supreme aim. (Lacan, 1953/2002, p. 304)

In the search for an intersubjective, two-body, perhaps emotionally corrective relationship, analysis succeeds only in objectifying the patient, giving her an even stronger (read: more restrictive) ego than the one that led her to the analyst in the first place, and imprisoning her subjectivity even more radically than it had been before. Worse yet, the analyst can only give the patient one kind of new ego: one that is modeled on the analyst’s own. As Lacan puts it, we risk the subject’s “being captured in an objectification—no less imaginary than before—of his stationary state, indeed, of his statue, in a renewed status of his alienation” (p. 43). For Lacan, then, when that statue is to be sculpted by the hands of the analyst for whom the patient has become a mirror of sorts, analysis has become a narcissistic project. Gallop (1985) puts it succinctly: “The enterprise of ego psychology reshapes the analysand’s images into ones that better correspond to ‘reality’—that is, to the analyst’s reality. … The analysand … has simply substituted the analyst’s imaginary for his own” (p. 61).

FOLLOWING THE LETTER: THE ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE

Lacan proposes that this impasse, brought about along the imaginary axis between two egos, is to be avoided by attending to the symbolic axis: the register of speech and language. This is not to
be taken as a purely intellectual exercise, and not therefore as collusive with a patient’s intellectual defenses. Indeed, why equate language with intellectual defenses at all? Rather, we find in the end that speech and language are the best indicators we have of a patient’s subjectivity, and that if we are to meet the subject at all, it must be by the road of his speech rather than that of our imaginary identifications: “The analyst’s art must … involve suspending the subject’s certainties until their final mirages have been consumed. And it is in the subject’s discourse that their dissolution must be punctuated” (p. 251).

But this requires the analyst to listen, to take up the patient’s speech, in a way that is different from what we are used to, or intuitively comfortable with. The analyst is not to listen for what the patient means: “I know what you mean” is the alignment of speech with the imaginary register, and thereby with the ego, which is the problem in the first place. It tells the subject that his speech is unimportant and that what matters is that the analyst’s ego is identified with the patient’s: “I understand you. I am like you. You are like me.”

Instead, we might say that the analyst is not to take the patient at her word. Better put, he is not to invest in her word, the word spoken in service of the ego’s intentions. Rather, he is to take the patient at her word. Hence an exchange between analyst and patient like the following:

P: And when I get home, I’d like to relax, sit down in front of the TV and turn er on—turn it on.
A: Turn er on?
P: I meant to say “turn it on.” You know what I mean.
A: Hm. You said “turn er on.”

This attention to the letter, rather than the “spirit” or intention of the patient’s speech, lies at the heart of Lacan’s “return to Freud.” Lacan maintains what he sees as fidelity to Freud by regarding symptoms, fantasies, and dreams (and of course, the speech of the patient) as conforming to the structure of
language. And language does not operate via a singular relationship between signified and signifier (Saussure, 1986; Lacan, 1957/2002, 1988a), but is characterized by a complex interrelationship via metaphor and metonymy between one signifier and others. Using this Freudian/Saussurian conception of language, Lacan (1953/2002) redefines psychoanalytic anamnesis not as a means of finding out some ultimate objective reality (p. 47), but as a symbolic matter of discovering truth via a re-understanding (or re-membering) of the text of the patient’s speech in its various forms.

The unconscious is the chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a lie: It is the censored chapter. But the truth can be refound, most often it has already been written elsewhere. Namely, in … the hysterical symptom [that] manifests the structure of a language, and is deciphered like an inscription which, once recovered, can be destroyed without serious loss; in archival documents, too: These are my childhood memories; in semantic evolution: this corresponds to the stock of words and acceptations of my own particular vocabulary, as it does to my style of life and my character; in traditions, too, and even in the legends which … convey my history. (p. 50)

Symptoms, memories, dreams, and speech itself, then, are to be regarded in psychoanalysis as all conforming to the structure of language, and the attention of the analyst must privilege their symbolic (or linguistic) nature over and above the kind of interpersonal, egoic contact discussed above.

But the kind of privileged attention given to this register by the analyst is also at issue. Lacan is not advising the analyst to correct grammatical mistakes, for example, or to help the subject improve his public speaking skills. Rather, with Freud, Lacan recognizes the overdetermination and ambiguity of the signifier, and advocates listening to the patient’s speech (in all its forms) as Freud listened to the dream: as a cipher of sorts, which can yield meaning(s) altogether different from what it presents on its face, if only its letter is followed.
[The analyst] takes the description of an everyday event as a fable addressed as a word to the wise, a long prosopopeia as a direct interjection, and, contrariwise, a simple slip of the tongue as a highly complex statement, and even the rest of a silence as the whole lyrical development it stands in for. (p. 44)

We must thus take up Freud’s work again starting with the *Traumdeutung* to remind ourselves that a dream has the structure of a sentence, or, rather, to keep to the letter of the work, of a rebus—that is, a form of writing … (p. 57)

And if [Freud] teaches us to follow the ascending ramification of the symbolic lineage in the text of the patient’s free associations, in order to detect the nodal points of its structure at the places where its verbal forms intersect, then it is already quite clear that *symptoms can be entirely resolved in an analysis of language*, because a symptom is itself structured like a language: A symptom is language from which speech must be delivered. (p. 58, emphasis added)

If this is how the analyst is to listen, how then is he to act? This question, and often its apparent lack of an answer, seem to have plagued the proposition of a Lacanian praxis from the beginning. Indeed, another dimension of “Function and Field” was an answer to criticism he had received for his “short sessions,” which he argues for as a sort of (re)punctuation of the speech the patient brings to analysis. But we need not embrace this controversial technique in order to understand some of the implications for practice inherent in a language-based approach to psychoanalysis.

The question of implications for practice will guide this book. For the moment, however, I suggest that the mystery of “what Lacanians actually *do*” already begins to be unraveled by the attitude Lacan proposes we take in *listening*, something perhaps too quickly regarded in our everyday way of thinking as passive. Listening, on examination, is not passive at all: The way we listen has direct implications for the other ways we act in any exchange, psychotherapeutic or not. We respond to another person, thereby co-constituting the conversation, the other’s “meanings,” and any action that is taken in regard to them by the listener or the speaker. This is no less the case in psychoanalysis.
For example, we can look again at the analyst’s response to the slip of the tongue above. From this, we can see that the analyst shows an interest in what is actually said, in the letter of the patient’s speech. He punctuates the syllable that the (ego of) the patient didn’t mean to say, but that somehow slipped out anyway. By highlighting or punctuating the slip, even with the simple repetition he first utters, the analyst has already acted. This charts a course of conversation in the session markedly different from the one that might have ensued should the analyst have passed the slip over in favor of the intention of the patient’s ego-determined meaning. In that case, he may have said something like “yes, I know! You’re exhausted by the end of the day, what with your long hours at work. It must be very frustrating not to be able to sit back and relax when you get home.” Instead, the analyst sees the slip itself as the unconscious Subject (whose intentions are not the same as the ego’s) speaking, and follows the letter. He may then pursue the patient’s associations to “turn er on,” which include “turn her on,” reminding the patient of his wife, who does not seem to be sexually interested in him. The patient then hears “turner on” again, and is reminded of Ted Turner, the television magnate whose marriage with Jane Fonda ended in divorce. Our patient remembers that during his parents’ divorce, one of his mother’s chief complaints seemed to be that his father watched too much television. She often said that this made her feel like a “plain Jane” and that her husband was “more fond o’ television” than he was of her.

One stray syllable could yield all this and more, yet without a specific type of attention from the analyst, these connections might go unnoticed and unexplored. Here we see what Lacan refers to as a “refraction” of the signifier into its many contexts for the subject, which can be read not just in a linear way, but also synchronically: One word sounds a number of meanings and associations simultaneously. Lacan employs the metaphor of a musical score with a number of staves, each of which plays simultaneously when the subject speaks. Without making any
interpretation of the meaning of the slip, we find by following the letter in our example a “score” that reads something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn er on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turn [wife] on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted Turner/Jane Fonda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s watching television leads to mother’s anger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In one beat of a song playing on the radio, the casual listener may hear a unified tone, while a trained musician may hear in that same beat a number of distinct sounds coming from the bass, the saxophone, the lead guitar, the rhythm guitar, and the drum cymbal. Similarly, while in everyday communication we might hear only a nonsensical slip that seems unimportant, here the “slip of the tongue” becomes “a highly complex statement” whose components can be explored and heard distinctly through the refracting lens of the patient’s associations. Just as there are qualitative differences between the way a trained musician and the casual listener will hear music, we find a difference between proper psychoanalytic listening and everyday listening. If the analyst acts on this kind of listening by encouraging the patient to elaborate on those constitutive staves of his score, a conversation that is distinct from the everyday (and that is arguably therapeutic) is bound to result.

Lacan, then, is advocating a radical shift for psychoanalysis away from this everyday conversation, at least insofar as it occurs in the treatment setting. Away from the pursuit of what is constructed as beyond language, away from the ego as a master of reality, away from a “two-body psychology” that runs on ineffable interpersonal contact. Those, he says, who take these latter as the centerpieces of psychoanalysis “are the very people who, making their objective what lies beyond language, react to analysis’ ‘Don’t touch’ rule by a sort of obsession. If they keep going in that

4 A similarly structured example is to be found in Fink (2004, pp. 90–91).
direction, I dare say the last word in transference reaction will be
sniffing each other” (1953/2002, p. 57).

Lacan sees these trends as aspects of a case of mistaken identity:
the belief that Freud’s work occurred in the register of the imaginary. With his “return to Freud,” Lacan asserts that this mistake
runs the risk of leaving behind the essence of psychoanalysis—the
curative properties of the symbolic register, of language itself. The
stock he puts in this claim is unmistakable when we read the words
“symptoms can be entirely resolved in an analysis of language.”

Hence Lacan’s (1953/2002) advice to a young psychoanalyst:
“Do crossword puzzles” (p. 266).

---

5 This is reflective of Lacan’s early characterization of psychoanalysis, which was reworked
and added to a number of times throughout his career. Generally speaking, this book
takes for its theoretical point of departure Lacan’s early work.