FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION
Lecture Sixteen: The Psychological Approach (2)

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)

Freudianism in a state of exhaustion in mid-century: used as a tool kit of easy explanations for works of literature. "The efforts of psychoanalytic critics became all too predictable, and Freud's exhilarating discoveries hardened into efforts to fit literature onto procrustean couches" (M. Skura).

Lacan rescued the Freudian system for the 2nd half of the 20th c. by turning it from a biologically based into a language-based psychology. This is framed
(a) philosophically by the antithetical orientations of representationalism (language/mind represents reality) and anti-representationalism (there is no way of forming an independent test of accuracy of representation; there is no mind- or language-independent reality);
(b) linguistically by Saussure's theory: sign (word) made up of signal (sound pattern) and signification (concept), obtaining its meaning by the differential relations with other signs in the system of language.

Freud approached latent (unconscious) meanings in the mind through analysis of manifest (conscious) meanings; the manifest meaning being illusory, the latent meaning being the genuine one, that is, something (although summed up verbally) that refers to something else, which exists outside language. For Lacan (see "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" [1957]) there is only discourse both at the conscious and the unconscious levels. His formula: S/s: "the signifier over the signified"; only the signified is another signifier—a word-to-word relation.

Signifying functions in language: (1) metonymy: in "thirty sails" for "thirty boats" the connection between boat and sail is nowhere but in the signifier, and it is in the word-to-word connection that metonymy is based; (2) metaphor: "love is a pebble laughing on the shore" is not the conjunction "of two signifiers equally actualized," but the use of "two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the hidden signifier then remaining hidden through its (metonymic) relation to the rest of the chain" "one word for another."
☛Placing Freud's way of reading dreams within the tenor-vehicle structure of metaphor may be helpful in understanding the nature of Lacan's treatment of Freud.

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The ego is like an empty egg; a linguistic function, "that which says *no* or *me*, I, which says *one*, which speaks about others, which expresses itself in different registers" (*Seminar Bk I*, 3 [1953-54], emphasis in the original).

The unconscious speaks through dreams; dream-images are signifiers; meaning-creation is like meaning-creation in language; mechanisms operating in dream-work: condensation and displacement; corresponding to the way metaphor and metonymy work. As in language, meaning is generated without reference to anything outside the particular signifying chain used by the unconscious, so the S/s formula holds.

What makes the unconscious speak? What or who speaks when we dream (commit slips of the tongue, indulge in fantasies, spin stories, etc.)? "[W]ho is this other, to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my own identity, it is still he who wags me?" Lacan's answer: it is desire in the unconscious: the **O**ther that speaks. "[T]he unconscious is the discourse of the Other," of "a radical alterity" that cannot be assimilated like the other; it is the discourse of "the beyond in which the recognition of desire is bound up with the desire of recognition" by the world as that world is constituted by language→desire must be verbalized.

☛The beyond may sound like something ultimate and thus carry mystical overtones; Lacan, however, fits it into his system: it is the domain in which "the recognition of desire"—the dream, the fantasy, the slip of the tongue—happens; this is bound up with "the desire of recognition," which the psychoanalyst fulfils when he/she gives it verbal form; meaning arises through the "signifier-to-signifier" (cf. "word-to-word") relationship, along the signifying chain, thus the pattern remains.

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Language, the imaginary, the symbolic, the real and the subject-object (= the human being and the world) relationship. Transposition of the Freudian pre-Oedipal/Oedipal phases into linguistic terms.

Imaginary: mirror stage, happy, narcissistic union with mother, no distinction between subject and object.
Symbolic: world of language—work, homogeneous adult relationships, authority, law: the domain of the father—"the specular *I*" gives way to "the social *I*"; the world of "the name of the father" < *le non/nom du père* ("The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" [1977]). The relation of the symbolic to the imaginary: not "a simple relation of succession to the imaginary domain whose pivot is the fatal intersubjective relation": the imaginary may reach into the symbolic (*Seminar Bk I*).
Real: the world in its natural, material state, the world "before speech." It can be neither true nor false, so it is not = it has no being as being exists only "in the register of speech." As a result, "the hole, the gap of being as such is hollowed out in the real" (*Seminar Bk I*).

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Seminar (1955) on Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1845). The story's characters are "defined by their position in relation to this radical subject" [= the stolen letter]. "In so far as they [the characters] have entered into [. . .] the movement peculiar to the letter, they each become, in the course of successive scenes, functionally different in relation to the essential reality which it [the letter] constitutes." "[F]or each of them the letter is his unconscious," as its contents remain hidden (= language functioning, yet not functioning, as creator of the symbolic). As signifier it creates its own signified: the character who happens to hold it. It is, therefore, the "true signification of the wandering truth" = it is "the symbol [. . .] displaced in its pure state." Truth in this reasoning is the real, unmediated by language, therefore destructive.

"Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*" (1959). Hamlet caught between the narcissistic-imaginary and phallic-symbolic phases at a point where, motivated by his castration fear and by his mother being the object of his desire, he ought to strike symbolically at the phallus, that is, he ought to rebel against the authority of the father; of this he is deprived as King Hamlet has been killed by Claudius (one cannot strike at a ghost). The phallus has disappeared, yet it is there embodied by Claudius. He strikes only when he is mortally wounded = when his narcissism is ended.

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Shoshana Felman's "Turning the Screw of Interpretation" (1982). "The Turn of the Screw" is a detective story where the detective work is done before the crime is committed. How the Other reads the unconscious of the governess. Origin of the narrative in transference (successive narrators); no privileged signifier, no fixed meaning.