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Daniel Adleman et Chris Vanderwees

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Lacan's Psychoanalytic Rhetoric and the Power of Non-Understanding

Daniel Adleman
University of Toronto

Chris Vanderwees
Toronto Psychoanalytic Society

Lacan *Parle*

Due to their respective disciplinary silos, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Kenneth Burke's "new rhetoric" are rarely spoken of in the same breath. In this article, we zero in on Jacques Lacan's watershed approach to psychoanalytic oratory and his pioneering ideas about the rhetorical tradition's relevance to psychoanalysis. While he does not seem to have been aware of Burke's body of work, we argue that Lacan's recondite rhetoric of psychoanalysis reverberates with a number of critical vectors of Burkean thought. The optics that emerge from underscoring Lacan's status as a rhetorical practitioner and theorist have profound implications for the entwined legacies of psychoanalysis and the new rhetoric.

During the early 1950s, Jacques Lacan gave private seminars on Wednesdays at lunchtime in Sylvia Bataille's living room at 3 Rue de Lille in Paris.[1] Before a small gathering of psychoanalytic trainees, he lectured on the canonical case histories, including Dora, the Rat Man, and the Wolf Man. He also engaged the group in close readings of Freud's books on dreams, parapraxes, and jokes. Lacan eventually relocated his private

1 Lacan's early private seminars took place on Wednesdays from 1951 to 1953. For more on these early years of the seminar, see Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan and Co*.

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seminars to the Saint-Anne Hospital, where they evolved into the much more public Seminar in 1953. Élisabeth Roudinesco recounts that the early years at "the amphitheatre at Sainte-Anne acted as a kind of research laboratory for everyone who attended the lectures … The atmosphere resembled that of a Socratic symposium" (260). In his seminars, Lacan reinvented psychoanalysis as a modern quasi-Socratic dialectical process that evolved into "a technique which substitutes the strange detours of free association for the sequence of the Dialogue" ("Some" 12).

Rather than focusing on its Socratic dialectical dimension, rhetorician Kenneth Burke would likely have characterized the socio-pedagogical environment as an expansive parlour. For Burke, the parlour represents a charged, open-ended rhetorical crucible, where speakers and listeners, operating as both orators and audiences, engage in interminable, far-reaching conversations. While the Socratic philosopher, who properly understands the Truth, ironically feigns ignorance in order to win over his dialectical interlocutors, the scene of Burkean rhetoric admits of no such hard-and-fast distinctions. The philosophical dialogue, according to Burke, is merely one of many possible varieties of rhetorical gatherings: "Bring several *rhetoricians* together," writes Burke, and "let their speeches contribute to the maturing of one another by the give and take of question and answer, and you have the *dialectic* of Platonic dialogue" (*A Rhetoric* 53). While those in attendance may seek out "a higher order of truth" (53), the endeavour may never transcend the realm of mere "opinion," which the rationalist philosopher too readily dismisses as inconsequential.

Viewed from this Burkean angle, Lacan's rhetorical method and the ongoing parlour that it has engendered (which far transcends the space of the rooms in which he spoke) figures not as a knowing philosopher's dissemination of his proper understanding of the objective Truth (as viewed from an imagined God's-eye-view) but as an ingenious act of rhetorical choreography. In Lacan's galvanic parlour, interlocutors' opinions (the signifiers they produce and the attitudes they betoken) come freely into relief, and the psychoanalyst's hallowed status as the "subject supposed to know" the truth of their patients' and acolytes' desires is productively undermined. What we are left with is a noisy rhetorical scene in which the status of truth is much murkier than Plato would have it, but this void opens a space for the vital work of psychoanalysis.

In order to present a more rhetorically-informed perspective on the style and import of Lacan's pedagogical method, we will begin by presenting the context, coordinates, and mise-en-scène of Lacan's parlour. We will then zero in on pivotal aspects of his rhetorical method, including

Daniel Adleman is an Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Toronto's Innis College, where he teaches "A Brief History of Persuasion, Digital Rhetoric, Writing for Social Change, and Rhetoric of Health and Medicine." His work has appeared in *Cultural Studies, Cultural Politics*, *communication +1*, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, and *Routledge Companion to Humanism and Literature*. He and Chris Vanderwees recently co-authored *Psychoanalysis and the New Rhetoric: Freud, Burke, Lacan, and Philosophy's Other Scenes* (Routledge, 2022), which explores both the influence of psychoanalysis on the new rhetoric and the rhetorical dimensions of psychoanalysis and clinical psychology.

his unprecedented integration of rhetorical theory into his ideas about psychoanalysis, in order to make the case that Lacan's unique pedagogical rhetoric was engineered to perform, through its suasive effects, the very same revelatory transformation of subjectivity that it theorized and analyzed as its lines of inquiry. His migration away from a moribund philosophical investment in the idea of Truth, and its proper arbiters, creates a space for subjects to carve out their own provisional interpretations of their utterances. And this rhetorical manoeuvre, Lacan's *unheimlich* manoeuvre on the seductive figure of the Socratic Truth, is germane not only to the practice of psychoanalysis and clinical counseling but also, more broadly, to the entire spectrum of humanistic inquiry concerning the circulation of opinions, attitudes, subjectivity, and pedagogy.

Chris Vanderwees is a psychoanalyst, registered psychotherapist, and clinical supervisor in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of *On the History and Transmission of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 2024), co-author with Daniel Adleman of *Psychoanalysis and the New Rhetoric* (Routledge, 2023), co-editor with Kristen Hennessy of *Psychoanalysis, Politics, Oppression and Resistance* (Routledge, 2022), and translator of Betty Milan's *Analyzed by Lacan* (Bloomsbury, 2023). He is also an affiliate of the Toronto Psychoanalytic Society and a member of the Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis.

Setting the scene

Following the schisms within the French psychoanalytic schools and his "excommunication" from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1963 (for refusing to adhere to the standard fifty-minute therapeutic session), Lacan continued his Seminar at the École Normale Supérieure from 1964 through 1968. Philosophers, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, anthropologists, sociologists, mathematicians, literary theorists, and students across the humanities and social sciences were in attendance. The popularity of the Seminar snowballed both despite and because of Lacan's peculiar style and manner of address. When the *Écrits* was published in 1966, it sold five thousand copies in its first two weeks, even before reviews appeared in the press. The release of the nine-hundred-page tome broke numerous sales records when reprints were issued as mass-market paperbacks in two volumes (Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan* 328). The works collected in the *Écrits* had been delivered predominantly as oral presentations to psychoanalytic trainees, conference presentations, and public lectures, and (not unlike the seminars) these writings persist as residues of a discourse that was transmitted through an evanescent voice.

After his expulsion from the École Normale Supérieure, Lacan was able to continue at the Paris Law Faculty for another decade.[2] At this point, the Seminar became an overcrowded spectacle with a charged dra-

2 "In March 1969 [Lacan] received a letter from Robert Flacelière, the director of the ENS, telling him that the Salle Dussane would not be available to him for his seminar the following year. No serious reason was given for the expulsion, but it is common knowledge that Flacelière had complained of hearing too much talk about 'phalluses' at the school, and had been annoyed to see the sidewalk in the rue d'Ulm blocked by smart automobiles at Wednesday lunchtimes" (Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan* 341–42).

matic atmosphere. The audience poured in from all over the world. One would have to arrive hours beforehand and wait in a long line in order to secure a seat, and attendees clambered on top of each other to see the great orator in the flesh. Packed crowds of cigarette smokers generated a floating miasma in the grand lecture hall. The audience chattered excitedly until he entered alongside his entourage. "Lacan, looking very majestic with his mane of white hair," writes Roudinesco, "would often arrive in a checked purple suit and a gray astrakhan overcoat; he always wore a light-colored shirt with a mandarin collar" (*Jacques Lacan* 344). He would eye the audience and exhale, adding a plume to the fog. Gradually, the crowd would settle into murmurs. Then, an assistant would bring him the microphone. Maria Pierrakos, the stenographer of the Seminar's last twelve years, recalls the moment: "[T]he Master … ascends the podium and begins to speak. Mystical silence falls; the only noise is the tense scratching of pens and agitated switching on of tape recorders: how could one bear to lose even a single word?" (8–9).[3] It is a question worth taking seriously. The frenzy of notetaking, transcription, and translation seemed to bespeak a pervasive anxiety that the vapours of Lacan's discourse might slip through the cracks and vanish from the archive.

Lacan fascinated people, occasionally shocking them, as he held their attention with an animated performance almost every other Wednesday afternoon throughout the Seminar's twenty-seven-year run. The Seminar became a para-academic gathering pond, where people of every stripe hoped to achieve some measure of clarity about the operations of the unconscious. Half a century later, his author function continues to attract readers, incite curiosity, and provoke intense transferences (ranging from adoration and respect to confusion and contempt). In this essay, we probe the rhetorical dimensions of the Lacanian phenomenon as Lacan's oratory persuaded and entertained his audience, hailing it into being as a cultural force that persists to this day. It is, therefore, confounding that so few scholars have probed the enduring import of the *rhetorical* dimensions of Lacan's discourse

Here, we take up Lacan's eccentric style and its relationship to his enigmatic expositions on psychoanalysis (see David Sigler). Reflecting on its amalgam of style and substance, Barbara A. Biesecker has compared what she calls Lacan's "new psychoanalysis" to Burke's new rhetoric (222). Bringing Lacan's method into resonance with Burke's, she suggests one way of understanding Lacan's rhetorical practice during his Seminar is

3 Pierrakos was Lacan's stenographer from 1967 to 1979. She later became a psychoanalyst.

that, in true Burkean form, he conducted his discourse through a supple union of form, content, and purpose. As a result of his erudite oratory, his presentations elicited powerful identifications—or, as Burke would put it, "consubstantiality" (a sense of shared substance)—from his audience. His listeners were vigorously interpellated as active participants in the parlour as he enlisted them to work through a dense fog of interpretations, images, and attitudes (Biesecker 229–31). According to Biesecker's rhetorically-informed view, Lacan's oratory not only addressed and analyzed psychoanalysis but enacted it. Even to this day, his written discourse sends out complex rhetorical effects into his readership. When we encounter Lacan's work, we engage with a rhetoric that not only describes unconscious processes of clinical psychoanalysis but also strives to *engender* a variation of these very processes through his singular manner of expression.

The history of rhetoric also constituted some of Lacan's explicit subject matter. Lacan was keenly aware of first-century Roman scholar Quintilian's rehabilitation of rhetoric. Whereas Quintilian's predecessors understood rhetoric as the art of persuasion, Quintilian redefined rhetoric as the art tasked with the systemic education of young people whose training in virtue and eloquence aids them in becoming good citizens equipped to speak well on a broad range of subjects. In the *Écrits*, Lacan points to Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* [*Institutes of Oratory*] as a handbook of rhetorical strategies that double as defence mechanisms. Because analysis is conducted through speech, defence mechanisms must be understood as largely rhetorical.[4] Although Freud, with his emphases on condensation and displacement, gets remarkably close to this insight, Lacan explicitly formalized it by routing psychoanalysis through not just philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics but also, importantly, rhetoric. In "The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956," Lacan emphasizes the importance of rhetoric and suggests that the analysand's defence mechanisms would be "hard to conceptualize without resorting to the tropes and figures, those of speech or words that are as true as in Quintilian, and which run the gamut from accismus and metonymy to catachresis and antiphrasis, and on to hypallage and even understatement" (390). If unconscious desire is structured like a language, as Lacan famously suggested, we might go a step further and claim that, in both the Seminar and analysis, this desire is transmitted in rhetoric that addresses

4 Lacan mentions Quintilian's rhetorical theories several times in "The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956" as well as in "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," which was delivered as a talk in 1957.

an "other" or group of others (what rhetoricians call an audience) through the rhetorical vehicle of speech.

"My writing … is made not to be read."

But decades after his death, most of Lacan's audience consists of readers who encounter him primarily through his writing (and the writing of those who take it up). In a "Postface" to *Seminar XI*, not included in Alan Sheridan's English translation, Lacan addresses the question of reading directly: "This seminar will be read—I bet this book on it. It will not be like my *Écrits*, which is purchased but not read. It is no accident that the *Écrits* are difficult … My writing … is made not to be read" (251, our translation). Of course, a great deal of Lacan's speech was perhaps not meant to be consumed in a readerly vacuum. It was designed to be heard and directly encountered from within the vibratory theatre of the Seminar. Nevertheless, in the postface, Lacan implies that his written discourse exerts a pedagogical influence over his readers' interpretive reading process and, by extension, helps them cultivate a rarefied faculty of critical listening.

During an interview with Italian journalists in Rome at the French Cultural Centre in 1974, Lacan once responded to a question about the difficulty a layperson may experience when reading his *Écrits*: "I did not write them in order for people to understand them, I wrote them in order for people to read them. Which is not even remotely the same thing … What I have noticed, however, is that, even if people don't understand my *Écrits*, the latter do something to people" (*Triumph* 70–71). Part of Lacan's inimitable rhetorical style entailed creating stumbling blocks to the experience of understanding so that enthusiasts would metamorphose into the most rarefied variety of semiotician, the psychoanalytic reader. Following Burke and Lacan, we highlight the importance of this claim that rhetoric *does something*.[5] We are interested in the status of Lacan's discourse as a speech-act that enacts psychoanalytic pedagogy by inviting his audiences to engage in the rhetorically fraught act of interpretation. Gilbert Chaitin asserts that Lacan reinterpreted Freud in a manner that paid unprecedentedly careful attention to his language and "assimilated virtually every key psychoanalytic concept to a rhetorical function" (688). While the seminars and the *Écrits* are often criticized for not satisfying the demand for perspicuous communication, we seek to highlight the

5 In this respect, Lacan's discourse and its motives might be read through Burke's dramatistic hexad for analyzing language as a medium for communication: act (what it does), scene (when or where it was done), agent (who did it), agency (how was it done), purpose (why it was done), and attitude. In many ways, this dramatistic frame for understanding the mediality of language comports with the theatricality of the Seminar, aligning rhetoric, theatre, psychoanalysis, and even philosophy within a Burkean choreographic frame.

rhetorical function of Lacan's own discourse and its pivotal role in the constitution of what we might call "Lacanese."

Many readers, understandably, tend to struggle to make sense of a cryptic discourse that is apparently intended to be heard or read but not understood. Even so, Lacanian theory and practice influenced a generation of French intelligentsia (not to mention the clinical practices of psychoanalysts all over the world) through the dissemination of his oft-polemical writings on psychoanalytic training and treatment. Given the vast number of seminars, many of which remain untranslated, we focus primarily on three lectures recently translated and collected under the English title, *Talking to Brick Walls*. Lacan presented these lectures in the chapel at Sainte-Anne Hospital as a supplement to *Seminar XIX* for junior psychiatrists in 1971 and 1972. The lectures provide a survey of some of Lacan's major theoretical contributions, with particular emphasis on the relationship between psychoanalytic knowledge, truth, and jouissance.

We suggest that one framework for conceptualizing the elusive (difficult to catch), allusive (suggestive), and illusive (deceptive or misleading) style of Lacan's discourse is to read it as exemplifying the very notion of the *objet petit a*. The object-cause of desire, as formulated by Lacan, can never be obtained but sets one's desire in motion in relation to the Other. By operating through a style that antagonizes the audience's faculty of understanding (and even our conception of what it means to understand discourse), Lacan's discourse both activates readerly desire and renders it reflective. In this way, the rhetorical form of Lacan's discourse is just as instructive about psychoanalytic practice as it is about the discipline's content. The sophisticated interoperation of this form and content, the manner in which they are co-implicated, conveys the tension between understanding and non-understanding on the part of the analyst, who listens to the analysand's free associations but never, in spite of appearances, exercises interpretive mastery over their significance.

Symbolic action and the voice

Lacan's Seminars can be understood as a form of what Burke referred to as "symbolic action," the embodied effects that discourse sends out into the world. A follower and audience member of Lacan's Seminar, Philippe Sollers observes: "The most important thing is Lacan's body speaking … [Lacan's] Seminar makes it clear that it is the body that comes out of the voice and not the other way round. The great importance of his physical posture sheds light on the way he could listen, or intervene during the sessions" (3, our translation). Sollers understands the Seminar as some-

thing like improvisatory performance art showcasing Lacan's poetic acts of association. "Lacan would allow his audience to *watch him think*," writes Sergio Benvenuto. "Lacan always improvised; he would twist his discourse around, wrestle with it. In short, he allowed us to watch the labour of the word, at once loose and troublesome" (2). Each session of Lacan's Seminar was prepared in several pages of notes, but it ultimately took on the trappings of a spontaneous speech that allowed audiences to feel like witnesses to the grammar of his unfolding thoughts on psychoanalytic theory and praxis. He worked through complex theories of psychic life and enacted these conceptualizations through his performances, which often drew attention to the body's entanglement in the voice. Since Lacan's writings, transcriptions, and translations have outlived him, it is all the more important not to forget that the Seminar was a live event organized around the bodily presence of an engaging orator sending out symbolically charged ripples into an enraptured and mystified immediate audience.

Benvenuto writes that the most important features of Lacan's Seminar were "the rhythm of his discourse, the changes in tone and timber of his voice, and his pauses and falsettos" (2). This aspect of the real of the Seminar is lost, and what we have are only traces or copies of the original event. In *Twenty-First Century Psychoanalysis*, Thomas Svolos notes the significance of Lacan's dramatic presence:

> I never met Lacan, never saw him, never heard him speak. When we talk about Lacan's Legacy … there is a gulf between the notion of a legacy among those who knew Lacan, who heard him, who went into analysis with him; and those without that personal connection. If, like me, you have no personal experience of the man, I think you will have missed something important about him, something associated with his corporeal existence. (13)

When we read Lacan's Seminars, avers Svolos, we reckon with the presence of an absence. Even if we can no longer immerse ourselves in the immediate experience of the Lacanian theatre, we must still recognize the uncanny effects of Lacan's oration. Lacan's corporeal presence is withdrawn from any present day reading of his *corpus*, but students of psychoanalysis must find a way to conjure an appreciation of the material traces of his performed oratory in order to attune ourselves to the singular rhetorical effects of the Seminar.

During those Wednesday afternoons, Lacan's vocal folds came together, vibrating as his breath passed through the smooth muscle tissue of his lar-

ynx. His voice reverberated in the hall as it entered the ears of the audience. Sometimes it erupted through a groan or came as a whisper that was barely discernible to those assembled in the front row. Part of his rhetorical allure emerged out of his deployment of inflection and intonation, along with his curious facial expressions, animated movements, and pensive postures. Roudinesco describes Lacan's oratorial style as an integral component of a psychotropic dramaturgy:

> He spoke in fits and starts, with now and then a sigh or a roar. He always brought with him a few sheets of paper covered with notes in sketches; these served to maintain the suspense created by his intermittent delivery. Sometimes he muttered, like Oedipus at Colonus trying by ominous silence to suspend the course of time; sometimes he raised his voice like Hamlet facing death, as if to contradict the slowness of impending thought. At once sombre and tumultuous, he could bring forth from broken speech or imperfect memory the rigorous logic of an unconscious whose ebb and flow he seemed to echo. (*Jacques Lacan* 260)

He spoke his body through dramatic gestures, sounds, and punctuating moments of silence. Rather than interpreting or teaching in the ponderous, imperious style of what he termed the "master's discourse," Lacan delivered a performance that insidiously inserted his audience within "the analytic discourse," the rhetorical microcosm of psychoanalysis. An important implication of this change of discursive register is that he purloined his audience from the position of passive recipients of wisdom and placed them, perhaps even in spite of their intentions, in the difficult position of engaged interpreters.

In her account of the Seminar, Roudinesco characterizes Lacan's free-associative theoretical performances as bizarre inversions of the therapist-patient hierarchy:

> Lacan yelled and made noises, some of them scarcely human. Lacan cajoled, caressed, seduced, shouted. Lacan imitated the cries and whistles of animals, as if to remind himself of the Darwinian origin of the totemic meal: "*père Orang*," he said. Guttural noises, chuckles, ruminations: he let his body speak as much in its silences as in a gasp accompanying some histrionic gesticulation. Lacan was theatrical, ludic, similar to Charcot's hysterics, always inclined to invent the most exuberant figures of discourse. (*Lacan: In Spite* 60)

Roudinesco's account conjures a portrait of a speaker engaged in a mysterious glossolalia that seemed to invite bewildered interpretation. The fluctuations of his voice, posture, energy, and breath brought the vibratory presence of his embodied jouissance into the play of his cryptic discourse. Lacan echoes the Aristotelian perspective on rhetoric as a "substance" or "body of persuasion" (Walker 48). In *Counter-Statement*, Burke refers to a "natural dogmatism of the body," the fact that body's appetites (in Lacanian terms, its "needs") can become "a generator of belief" (*Counter-Statement* 105). We posit that Lacan's Seminar aimed at a demonstrative embodiment of psychoanalysis, conveying the extent to which the dogmatic body is inextricably interwoven with symptomatic speech. This revelation, in turn, reinforces the premise of the talking cure, the revolutionary idea that just as the body has a subterranean impact on one's speech, language exercises an uncanny effect on the life of the body. The parlour audience was placed in the unsettling position of taking all this embodied semiotic distortion in through Lacan's speech and processing it through their interpretive mill wheels as they assumed the uncomfortable role of analyzing the master analyst and interpreting his interpretations.

Drawing on Lacanian theory, Mladen Dolar writes that what the subject's body and language share is the invocatory object of the voice; this object remains separate in its emanation of the ephemeral *objet petit a*, which can only emerge in the speaker's link to an audience or listener:

> The voice stems from the body, but is not its part, and it upholds language without belonging to it, yet, in this paradoxical topology, this is the only point they share—and this is the topology of the *objet petit a* … In order to conceive the voice as the object of the drive, we must divorce it from the empirical voices that can be heard. Inside the heard voices is an unheard voice, an aphonic voice, as it were. For what Lacan called *objet petit a* … does not coincide with any existing thing, although it is always evoked only by bits of materiality, attached to them as an invisible, inaudible appendage, yet not amalgamated with them: it is both evoked and covered, enveloped by them. (73–74)

When the subject releases a hitherto unrevealed utterance, the exposure of this cluster of signifiers to the light of day may give rise to a fleeting experience of a particular subjective truth (for patient and analyst alike). In the context of the Seminar, Lacan's voice became a vector of rhetorical persuasion, holding the audience's attention and commingling with his utterances to create a dialectical tension between non-understanding

and understanding. His oratory created the impression that somewhere in the midst of this oracular discourse, some kind of truth may spring forth from the fog.

Style and sub-stances

To say that Lacan's style challenges audiences is an understatement. He openly resisted speaking or writing in a more colloquial or understandable manner: "I absolutely refuse," he once told his audience, "to give you my teaching in the form of a little pill" (*My Teaching* 4). Two early commentators on the *Écrits* in English, John P. Muller and William Richardson, have likened Lacan's discourse to Freud's description of the dream as a rebus, a puzzle composed of words and pictures, which appears non-sensical but requires association and lateral thinking to solve:

> The encrustation with rhetorical tropes, the kaleidoscope erudition, the deliberate ambiguity, the auditory echoes, the oblique irony, the disdain of logical sequence, the prankish playfulness and sardonic (sometimes scathing) humor—all of these forms of preciousness that Lacan affects are essentially a concrete demonstration in verbal locution of the perverse ways of the unconscious as he experiences it. (3)

His oratory created the impression that somewhere in the midst of this oracular discourse, some kind of truth may spring forth from the fog.

Lacan's style defied the typical expectation that a therapeutic interlocutor's utterances and demeanour be soothingly intelligible. His discourse refused typical reasoning, aiming at a dimension beyond human consciousness that might be glimpsed through the diffusions and diffractions of free association.[6] Philosopher Alain Badiou characterizes the associative theoretical cobwebs woven through Lacan's discourse as "made up of layers and strata whose arrangements have nothing systematic to them. Lacan puts into circulation and makes available … a whole series of notions that are at the same time complex and singular, which are sometimes dispersed, sometimes connected. It is up to the reader to take them one by one or link them up" (Badiou and Roudinesco 64). The complexity of his discourse manifests itself as a challenge to reading strategies and rereading tactics;

6 Lacan's rhetoric is far from apolitical. In an interview, Raul Moncayo reminds us that there is also a political edge to Lacan's rhetoric that one could construe as protective or defensive: "I also understood something else about Lacan. People will say 'Why can he not write clearly or just in regular prose? Why do you have to make it so complicated?' And then I understood something political. If it's too simple and you can clearly extract some kind of meaning out of it, it can be accepted, but it can also be rejected. If it's not so clear, then it is not easily reduced to a stereotype that can be rejected" (Vanderwees 16–17).

the cumulative result of this semantic distortion field is a mobile army of interpretations and associations that the analysand is left to makes sense of and orchestrate.

This discourse continues to produce strong reactions from both readers who find it utterly unpalatable and those who understand it as a provocation to reorient themselves toward their own desires. Most admit that their initial encounters with Lacan provoked some mixture of bewilderment, indignation, frustration, and vulnerability in response to his uncanny command of language. Ellie Ragland's first confrontation with Lacan's paradoxical style resonates with these sentiments:

> My colleague threw these volumes on my desk and said, "this man is unreadable and he's a mean person … You like this sort of thing, so, here, take it!" I went home that day and I started reading the "Discourse of Rome" from 1953. This paper would be called "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" in the *Écrits*. It was terrible. I couldn't stop. I was getting a headache, a stomach-ache. I was getting hungry, but I couldn't stop reading. I was completely mesmerized. (Quoted in Vanderwees, *Speaking*)

Ragland's description expresses the potential for ambivalence, situated between repulsion and attraction, to Lacan's discourse. Lacan virtuosic oratory draws attention to language as a medium that operates through wordplay, polysemic maxims, allusions to obscure texts, abstruse philosophical concepts, and seemingly intentional equivocations.

Lacan communicated to his audience in a disorienting but seductive mode. In *Psychoanalytic Thinking*, Donald Carveth elucidates his own experience of reading Lacan:

> The Lacanian text not only frustrates by its obscurity, frequently having led me at least to the point of giving up in exasperation and angrily dismissing the man, but to make matters simultaneously better and worse, every so often it seemed to offer a comprehensible insight of sufficient importance to make it impossible to overcome the transference attachment to this object. Perhaps, one felt, if only one read on, tried harder, consulted yet another secondary source promising to elucidate the Lacanian mysteries, sources, which themselves, I found, were increasingly more obscure than the object they promised to illumine—perhaps then all would become clear and one would find oneself in possession of a rare and valuable type

> of psychoanalytic wisdom of which Lacan and the Lacanians appeared to hold a monopoly. (134)

Carveth highlights the often-maddening experience of trying to comprehend Lacan's discourse while attempting to follow his numerous allusions and intertextual references. At the same, this very mode of incomprehensibility, paradoxically, fosters in Carveth a desire to know more. Readers may follow one subordinate clause after another in the edited transcriptions, seeking the main idea that might illuminate or give meaning to the rest. This rhetorical situation seems to set the stage for the figure of Lacan to emerge as a subject-supposed-to-know, the arbiter of truth whose auratic wisdom catalyses his audience's transferential desires.

In *Seminar VIII*, Lacan investigates the analyst's aura as the subject-supposed-to-know through the Ancient Greek concept of the *âgalma*, the term that Alcibiades employs, in Plato's *Symposium*, to describe the concealed but enticing mystical object that he believes resides inside Socrates' body. The *âgalma* is a hidden gem that cannot be directly accessed. Lacan notes that the word connotes admiration, envy, jealousy, agony, and indignancy (*Seminar VIII*, 141). Seemingly speaking to all of these resonances, Alcibiades describes his experience of an *âgalma*, a mystical substance that accounts for his mentor's preternatural charisma. The *âgalma* is, according to Lacan, a metaphor for the hallucinatory experience of *objet petit a*, the mythical object-cause that seems to reside in the subject's object of desire, subtending and generating their passion while evading direct scrutiny.

Because of Lacan's polysemic, polyphonic discourse, the reader's or listener's encounter with his work may bring out a transferential relation to him as the *sujet supposé savoir*, the one who possesses the *âgalma*, the hidden object-cause of desire. Such a mainspring of libidinal investment harbours its own dangers to the treatment process. In order to stave off countertransference or counterproductive "empathy" with the patient, the ethical analyst must set aside their own desire (however much the patient might be seeking it out) in order to help the analysand find and clarify their own. By the same token, the impossibility of reducing Lacan's discourse to a cohesive message produces a lack that brings out the reader's desire to engage in the simultaneously psychoanalytic and rhetorical practices of deciphering and free association. By constantly performing a metonymic discourse that never arrives at a definitive meaning or says exactly what it means, Lacan demonstrates that no signifying chain is ever intact or internally consistent. It should come as no surprise, then, that fresh interpretive frames on Lacan's discourse are constantly being generated. This is why contemporary readers may undergo what they experience as

a form of poetic therapy as their own interpretive desires come into relief through their encounters with his hermeneutically slippery texts.

Lacan writes that the "symptom is a truth-value" and "speech defines the place of what is called truth" (*Talking* 45, 19). Lacanian psychoanalytic treatment, therefore, aims at translating the truth-value of the analysand's bodily symptom into speech. The form of truth that interests Lacan here is not a universal or institutional truth but rather the singular truth of each subject, a form of knowledge that emerges in the subject's relation to the Symbolic. The psychoanalyst must situate their discourse in the space between truth and knowledge (occupying the place of the *objet petit a* or the subject supposed to know in the transference) in order to allow the know-how (*savoir*) of the analysand's symptoms to surface. Nevertheless, the subject remains divided, as there can be no totalization or pure form of knowledge since access to the unconscious is always indirect. According to Lacan, it is through speech that the subject engages with *savoir*, symbolic knowledge, and takes up a relation to his or her own unconscious desire. This truth, however, can never be fully articulated. It can appear only as a semblance and can only ever be, as Lacan maintains, "half-said." The analysand speaks interminably during analysis in the hope that casting out all these lines might lead to a big catch; all the while the competent analyst must, above all else, hold their tongue and listen attentively so as not to overturn the boat.

A passion for ignorance

Those who approach Lacan's text with the transactional intention of accumulating knowledge and arriving at a more optimal plateau of self-awareness along a trajectory to achieving happiness may have another thing coming. Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis have written that Lacan's theoretical poetry sends out productively unsettling rhetorical effects:

> No one likes to feel stupid. A very rare person indeed is she who, having struggled to make sense of Lacan's *Écrits,* has not entertained such thoughts of vulnerability. This vulnerability is only exacerbated if a Lacanian seminar or essay has been recommended as reading material by a friend or professor whom we respect. It is a vulnerability that can very quickly turn to frustration, intimidation, and even anger. (208)

And not everyone will come around to experiencing this blindside as therapeutic. Still, Lacan provided no apology for his manner of speaking. On this matter, he exclaimed, "There's nothing I can do about it—my style is

what it is" (*Seminar V* 23). The reader is left alone to find their way within a dense cloud of signifiers.

The opacity of Lacanian discourse is likely to have a distressing effect on readers placed in the unnerving position of grappling with these signifiers' simultaneous suggestiveness and intractability. Muller and Richardson suggest that Lacan's rebus-like work presents a deliberate "hermetic obscurity" that can become "infuriating," and this partially explains the process of interpellation at stake: "The reader feels that something significant is being said if only he could find out what it is" (3). During *Seminar II*, Lacan remarked on the pedagogical logic of his psychoanalytic-rhetorical strategy:

> The attention you're willing to give to quite straightforward things is somewhat wavering. We are confronted by this singular contradiction … that the less you understand the better you listen. For I often say very difficult things to you, and I see you hanging on every word, and I learn later that some of you didn't understand. On the other hand, when you're told things that are very simple, that are almost too well known, you are less attentive. (141)

Against the grain of popular philosophical and psychological doctrines of clear communication, Lacan employed his polysemic, intertextual rhetoric in order to wield his audience's attention and impel them to reflect on their habitual interpretive strategies.

Lacan's discourse is, above all else, directed toward a particular audience, the psychoanalytic community: "Do not … get the idea that I address everyone at large," says Lacan in "Television" (which is, ironically, a transcript of his oration that was broadcast on French television). "I am speaking to those who are savvy, to the nonidiots, to the supposed analysts" ("Television" 3). In spite of public fascination with Lacan's oratory, he insisted that he was speaking primarily to psychoanalysts and the broader psychoanalytic community, which he addressed as his Other:

> I may reasonably suppose there to be analysts listening now also … I expect of the supposed analysts nothing more than their being this object thanks to which what I teach is not a self-analysis. On this point, they alone, among those who are listening, are sure to understand [*entendre*] me. But even in understanding nothing an analyst plays this role I have just defined … I would add that these analysts who are such only insofar as they are object—the object of the analysand—it hap-

> pens that I do address them, not that I am speaking to them, but that I speak about them: if only to disturb them. Who knows? This could have some effects of suggestion. (4)

His rhetoric does not lend itself easily to the listener's understanding but, rather, places the audience in the position of analyst-in-training, who must not presume to know the truth of the analysand's (or, in this case, Lacan's own) desire. Unlike Socrates, whose ironic disavowal of his own wisdom functioned as a rhetorical trap, the savvy analyst recognizes that they *genuinely* do not understand the truth of the patient's desire, and, more importantly, even if they could somehow fully comprehend its motivational structure, disrupting the flow of the patient's speech to impose an interpretive frame is, more often than not, selfish and antithetical to treatment.

"Attentive listening is of the utmost importance in psychoanalysis," writes Bruce Fink. "[I]f we are focused solely on understanding (listening in the imaginary register instead of the symbolic), we will let an awful lot slip by" (268). Lacan's refusal to speak or write in a fashion that consolidates "common sense" about the rules of discourse puts the reader in the agonizing position of enduring and working through their confusion. Reading and puzzling over Lacan's writing can, as a result, be an exceptional exercise for analysts who seek to enhance their clinical listening techniques by attending to the myriad ways that language always already exceeds our capacity to understand it. As Kenneth Burke writes of the concept of "understanding," the very pretence of "standing under" something in order to "get to the bottom" of it suggests that we are separated from its essence from the outset (*A Grammar* 23). And yet the symbolic order is structured in such a fashion that we are constantly deluded into believing that we can arrive at a stable plateau of comprehension, that we can "get it" once and for all.[7]

7 Several commentators have observed that Lacan's discourse resembles the language of psychosis as it persistently unfurls in derailment, incoherence, intellectualization, grandiosity, and Joycean word play. Jon Mills, for instance, writes that "[i]f you were to randomly open any texts of Lacan's and begin to read, you might immediately think that the man is mad. In a word, his writing is psychotic: it is fragmentary, chaotic, and at times incoherent" (11). Lacan spent his early years as a psychiatric intern listening to patients struggling with psychosis and schizophrenia at the Sainte-Anne Hospital. Psychosis was the subject of his doctoral thesis, in which he presented the now famous case of "Aimee," whose paranoia, hallucinations, and delusional speech were not, he believed, nonsensical at all. He posited that such manifestations were actually important and meaningful to the patient. Unlike many psychiatrists of his time, Lacan understood psychotic speech as the patient's unconscious offering itself

Against understanding

In *Critique and Conviction*, Paul Ricoeur recalls his experience of confusion at the semiotic spectacle of Lacan's Seminar: "I remember going home one afternoon and saying to my wife, 'I've just come from the seminar; I didn't understand a thing!' At that moment the phone rang; it was Lacan who asked me, 'What did you think of my talk?' I told him, 'I didn't understand a thing.' He hung up on me" (Ricoeur 70). Ricoeur's frustration with Lacan's refusal to clarify his discourse is quite understandable. Nevertheless, Lacan's obstreperous response suggests that a doctrinaire philosophical commitment to "understanding" his discourse may actually close down free association and limit the potential for interpretation to do its work.

In many cases, Lacan's rhetoric points to the conclusion that, in psychoanalysis, it is probably better that analysts do not understand; that is to say, an analyst who assumes to have a clear comprehension of a case or empathizes profoundly with the analysand may already be delusional. Instead of presuming to understand the subject's experience, he encouraged analysts to listen without understanding so as to evade sliding into assumptions and countertransference (their own charged interpretive desires). Bruce Fink outlines the treacherous projections involved in any so-called understanding of the analysand's account of their own experience:

> It is the job of analysts to listen in the symbolic register, in other words, to pay careful free-floating attention so that we hear what the analysand actually says, not just what he intended to say or what we believe he meant to convey. For what we believe he meant to convey is, after all, always a projection on our part, and projection is part and parcel of the

openly to the clinician, and he proposed that this opaque rhetoric actually "says some things very clearly" (*Seminar III* 122). Juliet Mitchell has suggested that it also resembles its subject matter, that is, what Lacan calls the split subject or the subject of the unconscious: "The matter and manner of all Lacan's work challenges this notion of the human subject: there is none such. In the sentence structure of his most public addresses and of his written style the grammatical subject is either absent or shifting or, at most, only passively constructed. At this level, the difficulty of Lacan's style could be said to mirror his theory" (4). Lacan provided his listeners and readers with an opportunity to practise interpretation in relation to the symbolic action of a rhetor who might initially present as incomprehensible. Over time, however, his discourse becomes more intelligible as a form of symbolic action that does what it describes and performs the operations of the unconscious.

> imaginary register. Just as the analysand may believe he knows precisely what we meant despite our deliberately having made a polyvalent interpretation (one that syntactically and/or contextually allows for several different readings), projecting onto us and our speech a single intended meaning, we too are projecting whenever we imagine we know what he meant. We form images of ourselves as the kind of people who are capable of performing the difficult task of understanding others. But, strictly speaking, all we can know is what was actually said and that likely there were competing intentionalities that led to the words actually uttered, all speech essentially constituting a compromise formation of sorts. (Fink 269–70)

The analyst must instead occupy something like an unironic version of Socrates' *rhetorical* claim to know nothing.

When the analyst interprets from a *topos* of understanding, this imposition simply exposes their own countertransferential implication in the arc of therapy and, thereby, jeopardizes the treatment. In this respect, the presumption to understand might be considered a part of the analyst's own resistance to the treatment and an abandonment of "the discourse of the analyst." This analytic station dictates that the analysand's own associations (not the analyst's frames) produce vital knowledge about their symptoms. Deigning to "understand" the analysand, by pinning down the meaning of their discourse, could disastrously fortify their defences and stem the flow of their speech. The analyst must instead occupy something like an unironic version of Socrates' *rhetorical* claim to know nothing (or, in the analyst's case, not claim to know anything), but the psychoanalyst has to actually *mean it* in order to precipitate the very unusual form of unperipatetic dialogue that is the psychoanalytic session.

By subverting his audience's wishes to derive clear meanings from his discourse, Lacan sought to disrupt identifications with his own thinking and to challenge listeners to echolocate the symbolic aspects of language. He insisted that what is most important in listening to the analysand's account of a dream, for instance, is not that the analyst distil meaning or make sense of the content but, rather, that they pay close attention to the rhetorical tropes:

> Ellipsis and pleonasm, hyperbaton or syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition—these are the syntactical displacements; metaphor, catachresis, antonomasia, allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche—these are all semantic condensations; Freud teaches us to read in them the intentions—whether ostentatious or demonstrative, dissimulating or persuasive, retaliatory

> or seductive—with which the subject modulates his oneiric discourse. (Lacan, "The Function" 221–22)

Celebrating these syntactical displacements and semantic condensations, Lacan encourages analysts to attune themselves to the particularities of the analysand's discourse. This task necessarily involves asking questions and making occasional interpretations, but the interpretations are best made from the position of non-understanding, whereby the analyst may simply repeat a word or phrase or offer a polyvalent statement so as to allow the analysand to continue to associate and to interpret further for themselves. The Seminar itself obliquely reflects this clinical scenario as Lacan situates his audience in this position of non-understanding, which they discover is, counterintuitively, the position of the analyst.

In a lecture presented to students at Yale University in 1975, Lacan claimed that analytic interpretation operates according to a different logic: "In no case should a psychoanalytical intervention be theoretical, suggestive, that is to say imperative; it must be ambiguous. Analytic interpretation is not meant to be understood; it is made to produce waves" ("Yale" 35). This brand of interpretation is meant to send out rhetorical effects that rock the listener's boat. This mandate calls for a soft touch, which Lacan contended is exponentially more valuable than overflowing empathy or a pretence of definitive understanding within a narrow interpretive frame.

Lacan proposed that the analyst deliver "oracular speech," which could allow for a multiplicity of different understandings when it is heard. One example of such an interpretive oracular act might be a polyvalent question regarding what the analysand has said, perhaps a particular repetition they have uttered; the question would then be overdetermined and the analysand would take it up along a particular line of interpretation that becomes activated. This activation of associations is catalyzed not by the analyst's understanding but by their attentive "close listening" practice. Lacan was, not incidentally, fond of American writer Edgar Allan Poe's mysteries and conceived of the analyst's task as akin to that of detective work. The analyst, like the classical detective, is trained to ask trenchant questions and "to remember everything having to do with the signifier even if he does not always know what to do with it" ("Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" 8). No clue can ever be neglected because it might be linked to other clues required to help the analysand find the underlying pattern. The analyst does not know the truth of the matter, but they can certainly guide the analysand in attending to pathways hiding in plain sight.

Bumping into brick walls

Lacan provides a few insights into the motivations underlying his own discourse in a supplement to his seminars, which has been published under the title *Talking to Brick Walls*. He opened these talks with the promise of edifying his audience, but he admits that this education may only arrive in dialectical tension with ignorance. When we presume to understand, we foreclose on opportunities to pursue another association, memory, trace, or approach to the given material. "[T]he most dangerous situation for a psychoanalyst," writes Jacques André, "is to think he or she is speaking the same language as the patient" (557). In this regard, the analyst's drive to understand has nothing to do with the discourse of the analysand but, rather, involves the imposition of constructions. These constructs are not necessarily always fatuous, but, as André continues, they often run "the risk of adding another screen to the screens that are already there, screens that contribute to the situation of nothing being heard—and thus of nothing changing" (563). Lacan is very clear that if anyone is to understand, construct, or interpret anything in psychoanalysis, it ought to be the analysand rather than an "empathetic" analyst. "Most therapy," one analysand said of the empathetic listening approach, "is like rent a friend—the therapist just tells you what they think you want to hear" (Anonymous). This astute indictment of the pitfalls of contemporary therapeutic approaches is why we are wary of ego psychology and relational approaches to therapy. In spite of some therapists' best intentions, "understanding" and "empathy" all-too-often amount to a failure to listen attentively to the patient's discourse. This pervasive misrecognition of the proper role of the therapist impelled Lacan to alert us to the importance of the Symbolic register (wherein the meanings of our utterances always exceed anyone's grasp, including that of the analyst) while cautioning us against the Imaginary lures of understanding, empathy, and identity.

Perhaps this is why Lacan insisted that ignorance is a "passion" and gestured toward the word's meaning in both Buddhism and Christian theology as a strong emotion or suffering that was once thought to be "the highest form of knowledge" (*Talking* 5). Lacan designated truth as a form of non-knowledge and reiterated the point that "analytic discourse lies precisely on the palpable frontier between truth and knowledge" (10). His readers experience this limit when they endeavour to grasp the relationship between his style and the meaning of his discourse. If psychoanalysis is a discipline designed to aid the analysand in their search for subjective truth, analysts must listen to this speech as aiming at something beyond commonplace understandable knowledge. "Namely, the one who knows

that he knows is the ego," says Lacan. "If the unconscious is something surprising, it's because this kind of knowledge is something else" (16). Lacan's rhetoric obliquely encourages psychoanalysts to sustain an openness to the pursuit of unknown knowledge alongside their analysands. In this way, he reaffirms the significance of *savoir*, a knowledge which the subject does not know he or she knows.

In *Seminar II*, Lacan introduces the metaphor of the *le mur du langage*, "the wall of language" (244). We encounter the virtual wall of language when we experience intractable linguistic impasses as barriers to clear communication and mutual understanding. In the original French, Lacan crafts puns out of the wordplay of wall [*mur*], mirror [*miroir*], and love [*amour*] so as to bring out connotations of the Imaginary (the register of bounded identity and comprehensible discourse) at stake with the wall of language. Lacan remarks that, even for the most studied communicators, this wall seems to disrupt, block, or invert discourse. Therefore, "The entire development of the analysis consists in the progressive displacement of this relation, which the subject can grasp at any moment, beyond the wall of language, as being the transference, which is his and in which he doesn't recognize himself" (*Seminar II* 246). The analyst must interpret the analysand's discourse but remains "up against the wall—up against the wall of language … on the same side of the wall as the patient." Nevertheless, "it is off this wall—which is the same for him as for us—that we shall try to respond to the echo of his speech" ("Function" 260). Without any "immediate" access to the patient's desire, the analyst is there to listen for the echo and provide a rhetorically informed reply to the cascade of signifiers, and none of this esoteric dialectical choreography hinges on a proper "understanding" of the patient's subjectivity.

Highlighting the experience of incomprehension that some listeners or readers discover in the encounter with his discourse, Lacan wonders if he has not been speaking to anyone in particular all this time but perhaps only to the brick walls [*murs*] within the Chapel of the Sainte-Anne: "How is one to know to whom I am speaking? … I'm speaking to the chapel, that is, to the brick walls. This bungled action is becoming increasingly successful. Now I know to whom I've come to talk, to the very same I've always talked to at Sainte-Anne—to the brick walls … I've always been talking to the brick walls here" (*Talking to Brick Walls* 80). Figuring the unresponsive interlocutor as a brick wall conveys the position of the analyst as a "blank screen," whose role is to help the analysand hear their own discourse as it echoes from the walls of the consulting room. In psychoanalytic treatment, "one has to tune one's voice to the reverberation off the walls" (*Talking to*

Brick Walls 86). For the analysand, it is largely a matter of listening together with the analyst so as to hear what was not previously accessible within their hermetically sealed monologue.

Not unlike the words of an analysand in treatment, Lacan's speech reverberates back to him from these walls but also resonates as something else for those in the audience (who occupy the position of ersatz analysts). He told his chapel audience, "It cannot be said that my speech, which does nonetheless bear a particular relationship to my discourse, has absolutely not been understood." He continued, "More to the point, one can say that the number of you here is proof of that. If my speech were incomprehensible, I don't really see what you would be doing here in such large numbers, especially given how these numbers are made up of people who come back" (*Talking to Brick Walls* 38). Against the cult of proper understanding, Lacan suggests that the listener or reader may never completely understand him per se, but they may nonetheless cultivate a method for navigating their own way within the dense symbolic fog of his teachings as it commingles with and activates their interpretive desires.

In *Seminar V*, Lacan asks his audience to make an effort to follow his style as illustrative of the importance of listening in psychoanalysis:

> Since the point … is to speak in a valid way about the creative functions that signifiers exercise over signifieds[,] … not simply to speak about speech but to speak wholly in keeping with speech … so as to evoke its very functions, perhaps there are internal necessities of style that are required—such as conciseness, illusion, and even a few barbs, which are elements needed for entering the field where they dominate not only its avenues but its entire texture. (23)

With a style that draws attention to the innovative symbolic action of his own discourse, Lacan postulates that no member of the audience hears him in the same way as any other. He therefore "endeavor[s] to make it so that access to this meaning is not easy" (*Talking* 86). This call for interpretation requires that they "put something of [their] own into it, which is a salubrious secretion, and even a therapeutic one" (*Talking* 87).[8] The paradoxical sub-stance of Lacan's rhetoric situates the audience as analysts who

8 Bruce Fink has also translated this passage nicely: "I strive to ensure that access to the meaning [of what I say] not be too easy, such that you must contribute some elbow grease of your own (or work hard at it)" (178). Lacan concludes his introduction to *Écrits* (titled "Overture to this Collection") with a very similar statement.

listen without understanding. In so doing, his inscrutable discourse calls for an interpretive response, which arises from the recipients' attempts to contend with their own network of associations and make some kind of "sense" of them amidst all of the nonsense.

"[I]nterpretation neglects and destroys in search for hidden meanings," writes Jean Baudrillard, continuing with, "This is why interpretation is what, *par excellence*, is opposed to seduction, and why it is the least seductive of discourses" (53). The seductive quality of Lacan's discourse derives from its short-circuiting of immediate comprehension and definitive interpretations while providing pedagogical apertures to its somewhat alien, somewhat familiar symbolic logic. With the supportive aid of an analyst who is attuned to this symbolic logic, the analysand may also begin to gain a measure of traction with their own rhetorical economy. Perhaps they even begin to recognize their own desires lurking around the edges of their speech patterns.[9]

For Lacan, the psychoanalyst is a teacher of rhetoric but not a teacher who relies on the university discourse: "The psychoanalyst is a rhetor (*rhêteur*): to continue equivocating, I would say that he 'rhetifies' (*rhêtifie*), which implies that he rectifies. The analyst is a rhetor, namely, that '*rectus*,' a Latin word, equivocates with '*rhêtification*'" (Lacan *Seminar XXV*, trans. Gallagher).[10] Here, he invokes the etymology of the word "rectify," which suggests not only setting aright but producing something new (*facere*). The cumulative semiotic effect is a remarkably Burkean understanding of rhetoric as a power for benevolent rather than deceptive "sophism." Returning to this motif in *Seminar XX*, Lacan encouraged analysts to acknowledge that the "universe is a flower of rhetoric." This "literary echo may perhaps help us understand that the ego (*moi*) can also be a flower of rhetoric" (56). Rather than providing empathy, advice, or answers, the Lacanian analyst plays a modest role, merely planting the seeds for the

9 Analysts do have to intervene in the register of symbolic action in many circumstances. Lacan suggested, for instance, that analysts must become readers who, despite appearances to the contrary, have a "duty to interpret" [*devoir d'interpréte*] as analysts (*Le Séminaire* 252). However, analysts must not presume to understand but must, rather, remain attuned to the many potential openings at stake in language. While attempting to occupy a position of non-understanding, the analyst maintains a supportive listening presence and helping the analysand to speak about the symptom. The analyst's listening presence may help the analysand become reflexively acquainted with personal demand and desire through attention to the repetition of subjective signifiers.

10 For numerous practical examples of methods for undertaking interpretations that are not based in the traps of understanding, see Bruce Fink's *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique.*

analysand to reconstruct their history through "chains of speech" ("Variations" 277). This fecund rhetorical manoeuvre may even aid them in integrating their barbed history into their present and give root to a new array of perspectives about what it means to be a speaking being entangled in a densely networked world.

The order of symbols simultaneously divides and connects us.

Michel de Certeau writes that Lacan engages in a "rhetoric of withdrawal" that "grounds speech just as he theorizes about it and just as he upholds its act" (21).[11] Lacan's rhetoric of withdrawal is bound up with a radical ethics of speech that opens up a space for his extended audience to, as Burke put it, "interpret our interpretations" (*A Rhetoric* 6). Operating from this ethical topos, Lacan advises his audience to exercise caution. As analysands listen for the echoes of their words (which are transmitted from their mouths to the analyst's ears and back through his mouth in slightly modified form), they must come to recognize that even the most skilled clinician "is bound to the walls by a definition of discourse" (100). After all, any discourse or theoretical scaffolding, including Lacan's, is saddled with its own limitations, oversights, and obstructions; thus, recognizing and integrating the limits of the analyst's authority is, for Lacan, of paramount importance to the therapeutic process.

Just after Lacan uttered his claim that he had been speaking to brick walls, a woman from the audience yelled out: "We should all leave if you're talking to brick walls" (80). A mercurial Lacan replied, "Who is speaking to me?" and then, glancing at her, admitted that "talking to brick walls does indeed concern a few people" after all (80–81). It was a momentary exchange that seemed to radiate out of the frustrated murmur of the flesh-and-blood others lurking just outside the confines of the prison house of language.

The incident evokes one of Simone Weil's aphorisms about a paradox of speech that bespeaks a surplus of common ground between rhetoric and psychoanalysis, two kindred disciplines that probe the unknowable limits of connection and eloquence: "Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication … Every separation is a link" (145). The order of symbols simultaneously divides and connects us. It is, paradoxically, both our most powerful instrument and

11 Michel de Certeau suggested that Lacan's *Seminar* embodied an ethics of speech that "could not be reduced to a descriptive catalogue of 'manners' (or tropes) of ornamenting the discourse." Instead, it operated according to "the logic of 'displacements' (*Verschiebungen*) and . . . 'distortions' (*Entstellungen*) which the relationship to the other produces in language" (26).

our most alienating milieu. No philosophy or self-help movement offers the hope of preventing us from ever bumping into walls or succumbing to mirages. But the echoes of Lacan's refulgent rhetoric from within the symbolic fog might just galvanize us to embark on an uncertain journey out of the house of mirrors organized around "understanding" toward newly configured plateaus of eloquence, insight, and transformation.

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