

*Conversations with Lacan. Seven Lectures for Understanding Lacan* by Sergio Benvenuto. London: Routledge, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-367-14879-9. ISBN: 978-0-367-14881-2. ISBN: 978-0-429-05375-7.

It is by no means easy, perhaps not even possible, to give a straightforward account of Lacan's ideas. Dr Benvenuto considers that the *Écrits* (1966) were soon judged unreadable and from the time of its publication in 1966, the seminars increasingly 'impenetrable' (p.14). His French, reminiscent of the incomprehensibility of the Latin of Marius Victorinus, demands of the reader a certain masochism. Moreover, the live performance of the seminars - which allowed Lacan to avoid the difficulty of committing thought to paper - may, to some extent, resist coherence, in a way that academic lectures do not. The author does not put it quite like this but he does refer to Lacan's theory as 'performative' (p.4) and - mirroring the ever more abstract titles of the seminars themselves - decreasing in lucidity as the years passed. Yet, at the same time, he thinks that realising that these were live performances and that Lacan's delivery was a form of 'thinking in motion' (p.4) helps us to read the seminars.

Lacan himself read extensively and despite, like Freud, taking a decidedly dim view of philosophy, frequently referred to philosophers and philosophical ideas, as he did to literature, anthropology and many other disciplines. This reflected the highly literate circle he cultivated. But this is not the same as saying he expounded the ideas of those he read or even that he really tried to understand them. His relationship to the work of others, including that of Freud, was more elastic. By making reference to others or quoting them anachronistically, often out of context, he was able to use them as a hanger on which to drape his own abstractions and give them an air of importance they might not otherwise have had. Indeed, as one reads his work, it is difficult not to get a sense that he liked to wrap up his ideas in complexity. Something that has drawn analogies with Heraclitus who was known famously, in Antiquity, as *Obscurus* (Cic. De fin. II, 5, 15; Benvenuto p.179). Quite how one understands this is a matter of opinion. Many consider it artificial; a mere affectation. But others have suggested that the form Lacan's work takes - his whole approach - tells us something important about the work itself. Seeing it like this, as a 'particular use of language', might well remind one of Wittgenstein. Yet Wittgenstein's asceticism - evident in his way of life (for example, his relationship with money) and in the restrained quality of his writing - was the converse of Lacan's 'excess' or profligacy.

Benvenuto tackles the thorny matter of the difficulty of understanding Lacan by suggesting that it is a mistake to try to translate his ideas into ordinary language. As if, somehow, the enigmatic, rambling manner in which Lacan spoke was the only possible way to convey something essential. Rather, one should realise that he used words as abstract painters bring one's attention away from, say, a landscape to the canvass itself ('this is not a pipe'), that he turned expressions around, as Oscar Wilde did, to bring out a truth ('to the pure all things are impure') and intentionally spoke in a form that could be described as 'thinking unconsciously' (p.6-7). Two things are to be said on this. First, to say this is already to give an explanation of sorts, by suggesting a context in which his work can be set, and thus understood. Secondly, as its subtitle indicates ('for understanding'), the book is taken up with explaining Lacan's cardinal ideas ('a clarified Lacan' p. 63) and where they are situated in relation to twentieth century thought in general including non-Lacanian traditions in psychoanalysis. In point of fact, the author comments throughout on contemporary practice and trends. One interesting example of this concerns his views on today's nigh universal insistence on the value of empathy (p.34).

Having summarily dismissed a quasi-scientific reading of psychoanalysis (its relationship to science fluctuating even in Freud's own thought), the author says he aims to avoid what he calls a 'devotional philology' and 'militant exegesis' (p. vii-x). The former referring to a way of treating the text as an historical object through which one can gain access to the original author's ideas; the latter, considering the text as the source of absolute truth, rather in the way a fundamentalist might read the bible. In practice, however, it is often hard to draw a fine line between these two hermeneutical approaches and traces of the former can be detected throughout this study, prefaced with expressions such as 'for Lacan...' and 'according to Lacan...'. Benvenuto prefers to describe his own approach as a deconstruction. He had, in fact, attended the seminar between 1967 and 1974 and was both clearly entertained and enthralled by Lacan's ideas. Moreover, he brings to this 'introduction' (he thinks one can only write introductions to Lacan, p.158), a not inconsiderable degree of learning, exhibited in an effortless style. His familiarity with philosophy - and not just continental philosophy - as well as the doctrines of the innumerable psychoanalytic groups or 'sects' (he considers them religions and views schism a sign of life p. 160) is vast. With a myriad of insights and anecdotes this book manages, where countless others have failed, to elucidate many of Lacan's concepts, obscured, as they are, by a style of presentation that is unsystematic, 'not schematic but fluid and bubbly' (p. 157) and manifold neologisms not readily tolerated by Anglo-Saxon readers.

While reviewing the familiar ground of Lacan's core ideas, Benvenuto considers his early work the more significant (he calls it the 'second phase' which begins in 1953 with the first seminar), identifying a decline in intelligibility from the mid-1960's with the publication of the *Ecrits* (p.14). It was during this second stage that he re-cast Freudian thought in terms of language (p.50). This was, perhaps, in part, an attempt to make intelligible Freud's fundamental, yet most problematic, definitions - those of consciousness and self-consciousness. Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* had been inspired by his reading of Aristotle. This led him to challenge his mentor Husserl's neo-Kantian ideas. Husserl had two different versions of consciousness one of which, called 'experiences', *Erlebnisse* (p.89), is nearer to the Freudian view of conscious psychical processes. These he understood as objects of possible immediate knowledge or inner perception. In order to get away from this, Heidegger used the word 'disclosure' rather than consciousness - understanding, being one mode of disclosure. This led him to a concern for what he called one's 'ownmost' relation to death; to the way in which beings are grounded in another being; and how we forget the question of being and are left merely with traces of being which essentially unfold as the oblivion of being. These and many more Heideggerian concerns can easily be detected in Lacan's early seminars.

The Oedipus myth is one of the founding fables of psychoanalysis. Benvenuto calls it Freud's '*commedia dell'arte*' (p.133). Lacan shifted the Oedipus complex from Jewish to Christian discourse by introducing the notion of the *Nom du Père*. We know that the extant textual tradition already represented a reconstruction or recension of the fable - twelve versions of the myth being found in antiquity, though most only in fragments - something Freud seems not to have noticed. In other words, the Oedipus complex is, from the start, positioned within a certain tradition that looks backwards to a lost *Vorlage*. The Name-of-the-Father is one of the most apparent of examples, among many, of Christian metaphors that run through the seminars (p. 137) and introduces another layer of allegory built up, as it were, on the foundations of the original source. This aspect has been largely overlooked in the literature. One of the earliest examples of the phrase is found in the pericope Matt 28:16-20. Here it is used in relation to baptism, as the opening of the Trinitarian variant of the baptismal formula. A triadic epistemology is expounded by Augustine in the *De Trinitate* - a text saturated with the theology of the Greek Fathers. Here he argues that the mind is made up of three elements all of which relate to one another. Ultimately, he says, the soul (*anima*) discovers itself to be the

image of the Trinity (Aug. *De Trin.* 15. 6.10). As *anima* translates *psuchē* (*die Seele*) this is, clearly, no mere excursus. Quispel (1974), citing the *Excerpta ex Theodoro* and the *Gospel of Philip*, argues that Valentinian baptism takes its effect from a belief that the Name of God descended on Christ at his own baptism and in baptism, the act of naming is thought to have a precise transformative effect. From Justin onwards we find the covenantal analogy without any reference to infant baptism. Here, baptism is seen as the typological fulfilment of circumcision. Justin refers to it as a second circumcision, the new circumciser, the spiritual Joshua, as the stone that circumcises by means of words (*Dialogue with Trypho* 113-4). Origen, discussing the significance of Christ's circumcision had argued that it was a representative 'act', which is attributed to the Christian in baptism that brought to an end the requirement for physical circumcision.

The fact that baptism is a sacrament is not lost on Benvenuto who sees, intriguingly, the idea of baptism and, indeed, all the sacraments, lying behind Lacan's later interest in the 'matheme' and the way in which analysts become members of a Lacanian school - what Lacan called the *la passe* (p.122; 127). The sacramental discourse is, of course, one of signification. From the eleventh century, the Latin word *sacramentum*, which originally referred to the oath taken by a soldier, and had been used in the Vulgate to translate the Greek *mustērion*, carried both the sense of a *sacrum* and a *signum* and from this to a 'thing'. This was achieved through a distinction, originating with William of Auxerre, between the matter (*materia*) and form of the sacrament, the former referring, in the case of baptism, to water and the latter to the threefold verbal formula. While the worthiness or unworthiness of the person administering the sacrament was not thought to invalidate it (*ex opere operato*), grace was only received if the recipient was suitably disposed. Therefore, if the recipient lacked faith or repentance, the sacramental 'act' might be valid but not efficacious. Three of the seven sacraments - baptism, confirmation and holy orders - were thought to imprint an indelible mark or 'character' on the soul and for that reason could not be repeated. The Latin *mysterium* (secret) carried more the sense of something hidden, beyond what was signified by the sign.

With understated erudition, Benvenuto carries the reader along easily through the turmoil and chaos of Lacan's complex ideas, without any trace of hagiography but nevertheless, in his own words, 'charitably', 'resisting the temptation to dismiss as illogical – or stupid, or false – everything that at first seems complete nonsense' (p.157). This does not, however, mean that everything Lacan said or wrote was logical, intelligent and true or that it made sense but that it can only be accepted or dismissed after it has been carefully considered. One of the difficulties here, however, is that even in some of his key ideas he is inconsistent. Yet the same could be said of Plato and of many other thinkers down the ages.

Lacan was certainly a complicated, restless and baroque character ('a dandy' p. 5). In all his transcriptions of Freudian thought, he drew heavily on 'the most prominent themes of Parisian culture' and 'the spirit of the times' (p.50). That is to say, on fashions in thinking as, above all else, he wanted to 'create an effect' (p.3). Hence his 'dazzling' apophthegms (p.4) and a distinctive vernacular ('the analyst is shit') or '*Grundsprache*' (p.87). But beyond his flamboyance, showmanship and wit - which, in itself, helped create around him a kind of mythology - there were, undoubtedly, flashes of brilliance. He certainly brought to Freudian discourse an original, if heterodox, perspective. Inevitably, however, elements of his personality penetrate his thought and although widely read, he seems to have lacked the measured discipline, rigour and balance necessary for real scholarship. Notwithstanding, his disciples have relentlessly sought to structure a coherent theory from his corpus by stressing the development of his key ideas. Trying, as it were, to fit together things that may not fit together - for Benvenuto this is a 'dead end' because many of Lacan's concepts he himself defined in contradictory terms (p.158). In the idealised reading, however, incoherence itself is

often given a quasi-mystical status. An absence of meaning being evidence of an arcane epistemology that defies comprehension and all efforts to decipher the text. Benvenuto's deconstructive approach offers us more penetrating insights, observing that Lacan begins with paranoia, in his doctoral thesis of 1932, and ends by returning to psychosis. This, he suggests, gives a shape to his work which hitherto seemed unstructured and arbitrary and without any obvious order.

Ultimately, whether one considers Lacan's thought to have been of outstanding significance and originality (the 'true ring' p. 41), as persistent enthusiasts tell us, may be a matter of belief. In each of the seminars, with extremely lengthy and complex digressions in which he refers to a wide range of authors and topics from varied disciplines, Lacan seems, at first, to say a lot. However, on closer examination, much appears to be mere embellishment and is, in consequence, ultimately redundant. As a result, books on Lacan always run the danger of repeating uncritically, endlessly, the same few things and of trying to find meaning in what is meaningless. A unique aspect of this study is that it is, in part, a memoir. Experience is, thus, a word that not surprisingly, recurs throughout (e.g. p.80). Benvenuto ascribes to the seminar to a certain 'seduction' which seems, in the end, to have become a self-seduction, as Lacan's own speech increasingly generated a momentum that he himself was perhaps unable to control. Adopting Heidegger's turn of phrase, Benvenuto writes that 'what the master really transmits is not so much a formal thinking, but a certain style of being-in-the-world' (p.158). It is perhaps not inconceivable, therefore, that this book is a record of the author's personal struggle to understand the 'passion for Lacan' he felt as a student in Paris all those years ago (p.73) and how the text of the seminars has changed in his mind from something akin to an absolute, 'a teaching that would never be swept away' (p.2), to become one of his own 'precious texts' into which he can turn back (*eis biblia*), now and then, with a kind of nostalgia and reverence 'like one may turn back to the memory of one's deceased parents' (p.x; cf. p.73). If this is the case and the author's opinion of Lacan has changed after a lifetime's immersion in his corpus, that is surely, nothing more than we might expect of any serious engagement with the work of another.

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### References

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