

Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1986, 358 pages, \$24.95.

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It is now more than six years since the death of Jacques Lacan, and the work of textual mourning proceeds apace, appropriately enough for a psychoanalytic theorist whose writing so often stressed the link between mortality and the chain of signifiers. By now, in fact, we have an entire literature of introductory texts on Lacan, a circumstance which both attests to and further secures his position in the pantheon of recent French thinkers.

Yet it will not do to exaggerate; books devoted solely to Lacan and available in English still number fewer than ten, and it is with some surprise that one realizes that Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* is the first book which directly proposes to provide a methodical introduction to Lacan's thought as a whole. Previously published texts certainly provide such an introduction *de facto*, but their declared intentions seem nonetheless quite different from those of Ragland-Sullivan. Either (like Anthony Wilden, Anika Lemaire, and the Jane Gallop of *Reading Lacan*) they provide commentaries keyed to specific essays in Lacan's *Ecrits*, or (like Martin Stanton, Sherry Turkle, Shoshana Felman, and the Jane Gallop of *The Daughter's Seduction*) they consider the impact of Lacanian psychoanalysis on wider realms of literary theory, intellectual history, and cultural politics. Even books which do provide an overview of Lacan's thought, such as those of Catherine Clément and Stuart Schneiderman, are quite consciously both partial and personalized.

It is Ragland-Sullivan alone, then, who bravely declares that her purpose is "to lay out the complex and elusive ideas of Jacques Lacan for the interested English-speaking reader as clearly and comprehensively as possible." Strictly, of course, such a project is quite impossible; both the sheer bulk of Lacan's writing and its notorious stylistic obduracy help to make it peculiarly resistant to survey, summary, and synthesis. From the preceding list of commentators and strategies one might even get a sense that survey and synthesis are inappropriate to the intellectual spirit of the master. While Freud was careful to write a whole series of introductions to psychoanalysis, Lacan seems willing to present the difficulty of his text as proper and necessary to its purpose.

Now Ragland-Sullivan is quite conscious of such problems. This is clear as immediately as the first page of her preface, which compares her methods with those of Anika Lemaire, whose revised doctoral dissertation was the first guidebook to any large sample of Lacan's writing, and was published complete with a preface by Lacan: "In the preface of Anika Lemaire's book, Lacan described the *Ecrits* as "unsuitable for a thesis, particularly an academic thesis: they are antithetical by nature" (. . .) I have taken this admonition seriously and have used the Seminars to illustrate the *Ecrits* and not the

reverse." However, such an assessment of Lemaire represents an evasion of the impossibility of the task of any book which proposes to survey or synthesize Lacan. One does not conveniently escape from the "antithetical" subversions of Lacan's style by simply shifting the textual terrain from the *Ecrits* to the Seminars; even if there is some evidence that Lacan saw the *Ecrits* as the particular repository of what in his work is "antithetical," the 24 volumes of the Seminar (a transcribed record of Lacan's teaching from 1955 to 1980) are more than capable of posing difficulties for the reader. Had Lemaire in fact included the Seminars in her discussion, Lacan might just as easily have included them in his jocular repudiation of her work.

Instead of trying, somewhat unconvincingly, to distinguish her project from that of Lemaire, Ragland-Sullivan might have taken her cue from the contradictory status of this preface which is jocular imprimatur as well as repudiation; this is to say she might have accepted and tried to incorporate the playful and surrealist qualities of Lacan's thinking. The problem is not that she is unaware of these qualities, nor even that she would be unable to incorporate them without falling into feeble imitation of Lacan; it is that she might succeed only in further infuriating those readers who have turned to her precisely in search of relief from the dialectical difficulties and densities of Lacan's prose. The result is a book which offers considerable amounts of help to such readers, while also declaring that it must finally disappoint those who hope that "someone will explain Lacan to them in their own terms."

If up to this point I have labored the impossibility upon impossibility which constitutes Ragland-Sullivan's task, it is most assuredly not in order to protect the mystique of the difficulty of Lacan. Rather I hope to make possible a better judgement of the achievement of *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, which is clearly the best available study of the length and breadth of Lacan's work. Valuable especially for its communication of the scope and deep structures of Lacan's thought, the book is also remarkable for the detail, accuracy, and specificity of its analyses, which regularly give the lie to the cruder and less careful generalisations elsewhere represented as the thinking of Lacan. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan has obviously meditated on her subject for a number of years, and the result is an account of Lacan which contrives to be both faithful and fresh.

At the same time, the book seems rather uncertain about its project and its prospective readership; it wants to be both an elucidation, aimed at interested parties unfamiliar with Lacan, and a re-evaluation of some of the main lines of Lacan's thought, aimed at a more knowledgeable audience of scholars and clinicians. The result is a species of advanced introduction, perhaps too demanding for some of those who come to it knowing nothing of Lacan, yet perhaps consciously calculated to be used together with the previous commentaries, many of which are invoked in the text. Reference to other scholars is in fact sufficiently frequent that one wishes for a bibliography at the end; Ragland-Sullivan mentions two bibliographies in preparation and a third in French, but might have provided at least a list of works cited.

The advanced introduction is a genre becoming more and more characteristic of the English-speaking assimilation of French theory, and yet in the case of *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, there is a sense in which the associated uncertainty of audience becomes positively annoying; what likely reader of this book will value the journalistic trick of preceding a name with an identifying tag, as in "the childhood development researcher Burton L. White," "the French critic Julia Kristeva," and "the Marxist Louis Althusser"? There are even moments when this uncertainty devolves into a loss of intellectual credibility, as in a history of the concept of subjectivity in French literature which needed either to be expanded beyond the point of *précis* or left in the classroom. At another moment, Marx is represented as proposing that the

individual is a "cog in a social wheel," a formulation which seems quite distant from *Capital*, but close to the consciousness of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

However, such lapses are only lapses, embarrassments in a text whose general tenor is serious and intellectually sophisticated, and whose basic strategy is to superimpose one explanatory model on another and another. We can see this strategy at work within individual chapters, as for example the first, which collates Lacan's *dire*s on subjectivity, proposes "the quadrature of the subject" as his basic model of the individual, sets off on the whirlwind history of French literature just mentioned, and finally reinscribes the whole under the rubric of childhood development and developmental psychology. The strategy is also visible from chapter to chapter; the second chapter is organized around Lacan's "four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis" (the unconscious, repetition, desire, transference), the third considers the mathematical models so important to Lacan in the final years of his teaching, the fourth considers his reorientation of psychoanalysis in terms of linguistic structure, and the fifth deals with his importance for theories of female sexuality and feminism.

The result is that the logic of the book is not distinguished by its consecutive quality; at moments, the reader might be forgiven for thinking that he or she is being asked to start over again almost from scratch. Yet what does emerge with some consistency across the variety of approaches is a faithful image of certain abiding themes in Lacan's work. Above all, we learn of Lacan's utter commitment to the primal eminence of the unconscious, his corollary notion of the subject as discontinuous, contingent, and contradictory, and his ensuing philosophical pessimism. The latter is readily transposed into a pessimism about philosophy, an abiding mistrust of what Ragland-Sullivan calls the "certainty and arrogance of conscious discourse." As we have noted, however, Ragland-Sullivan will not rely on mere assertion or ritual generalisation; she is careful, for example, to explain that the standard account of the contradictory nature of the Lacanian subject should be tempered with a recognition that the Lacanian "moi" is intrinsically unified, indeed maintains its psychological significance precisely as the illusion of a grounding unity.

The same "moi" (the subject of being as opposed to the "je" which is the subject of speaking) is also the key to the extent to which Ragland-Sullivan reorients the Lacan already received in English. This follows in part from the importance for her book of the first two volumes of Lacan's Seminar; the second volume, dating from academic year 1954/55, is titled "The moi in Freudian theory and psychoanalytic technique." The Seminars represent a new beginning in the history of Lacan's teaching, and the early volumes are especially concerned to distinguish between his concept of subjectivity and that which had been elaborated in New York and elsewhere under the rubric of ego psychology. The distinction in question is emblemized in the problem of translating the word "moi"; in traditional psychoanalytic usage, "moi" is rendered as ego, which is clearly not the most helpful translation of Lacan's usage. Ragland-Sullivan closely follows the text of the Seminar in her discriminations between moi and je, in her account of the moi as an object for the je, and in her felicitous formulation that moi and je are "two modes of meaning fighting to occupy the same space"—that of the individual subject. At the same time, she introduces certain agenda items of her own, perhaps most important her stress on the regularity with which the first other (on which the moi is based) is the mother. This gives rise to an entire rhetoric of fusion and separation, which has consequences both for the developmental psychology of the first chapter and the feminism of the last.

The obvious advantage of introducing the developmental model into the first chapter is that the reader versed in psychology or psychoanalysis but not in Lacan will have a familiar base-datum for purposes of comparison. The disadvantage is that it arguably

represents a distortion of Lacan, especially insofar as Ragland-Sullivan proceeds without directly considering the possible drawbacks of the tactic.

Any attentive reading of the Seminars will lay to rest the *canard* that Lacan has no interest in empirical cases, that he is too busy retheorizing Freud to bother with the clinic; at moments in the Seminar on the psychoses, the reader's understanding is in fact impeded by the frequency of reference to recent case presentations. Yet there is little evidence that Lacan was especially interested in the developmental narratives devised by Freud and his followers; one might even suppose that Lacan takes his distance from the psychoanalytic fetish of the child. Thus the essay on the mirror-stage, presented by Ragland-Sullivan as an empirical contribution to developmental psychology and as the origin of "an organized unconscious mode of perception, adult fixations, Desire, etc.," seems to be exceptional in Lacan's writing and is marked by parodic and metaleptic elements which complicate any simply progressive or developmental logic. This is most clear insofar as the meaning of the mirror-stage is dependent on the subsequent experience of Oedipalisation. Similar kinds of questions might be raised about Ragland-Sullivan's discussion of "introjection by the newborn baby" and assertion that "alien images first constitute the ego," as if the very distinction between inside and outside is not in fact something which is retroactively applied to the earliest of experiences.

As we have noted, the idea of the mother as prototypical other is also important in Ragland-Sullivan's final chapter, an account of Lacan's importance for discussions of gender identity which argues that he comes closer than any other modern thinker to "demystifying the basic causes and differences in sexual personality." Unlike Freud, who inclined toward regressive biological explanations of gender, Lacan sees the acquisition of a gender identity as a "structural, symbolic, and representational drama." This, of course, is the familiar argument of a whole school of feminists who first turned to Lacan around the time that Juliet Mitchell published *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974). In Ragland-Sullivan's hands, the theme becomes rather more a celebration of Lacan's genius and rather less a political cutting edge; the final paragraph of the book actually warns against "communist egalitarianism" and feminist utopias, while an earlier paragraph presents Lacan as finding the basis of all political ideology in a "structural lack in being." My objection is not that this is untrue, but that it is a truism; the alternative of scepticism about politics is just as ideological, just as much an expression of the "lack in being."

If Ragland-Sullivan slightly surprises this reader by not engaging more directly with the problematics which have emerged out of the 15-year flirtation of feminism with psychoanalysis, the reason is that the real agenda of this chapter is to deal with a number of writers who have ventured to publish criticism of Lacan. These foolhardy souls include Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze, "the Marxist Louis Althusser," and Colin MacCabe, who is said to "succumb to the temptation of finding fault with Lacan where no fault is to be found." Ragland-Sullivan is routinely convincing in her demonstrations that Lacan's critics have misinterpreted or misunderstood him, but the resulting impression is nonetheless a little disturbing. Instead of a sense that criticism of Lacan to date has been facile or misplaced (which is doubtless the case), we are left with a sense that Lacan is invulnerable to the corrections of mere mortals. Once again, one simply wishes that Ragland-Sullivan had addressed such questions directly; she certainly pulls no punches in her basic intellectual assessment of Lacan, calling him "the most important thinker in France since René Descartes," the most important "in Europe since Freud and Nietzsche."

A similar kind of commentary might be made about the book's treatment of Lacan's relationship with philosophy. As Ragland-Sullivan's title suggests, she is very serious

about what Stephen Melville has called Lacan's "tacit claim for the adequacy of a science of mind to the task and place of philosophy." However, there is nothing tacit about her contention that "while philosophy substantivises concepts into systems, Lacan talks about the structures that lie behind the drive to formulate systems." With this, Ragland-Sullivan denotes Lacan's philosophical ambition, indeed his interest in displacing philosophy as such. Yet her account of relations between Lacan and philosophy begins to seem rather one-sided; one wishes for an analysis of philosophy as an Imaginary other for Lacan. Like Althusser and Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and Derrida, Lacan is conceivable only in the context of a national educational system which values philosophy very highly; Lacan's distinct departure from Freud's determination to avoid philosophy is bound up with the expression of his intellectual ambition as an effort to deconstruct or displace philosophy.

Finally, then, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* is an important and valuable book; my objections and reservations are testimony of the extent to which it is intellectually engaging. I have developed a criticism that Ragland-Sullivan does not more openly theorize the purpose and tactics of her book, and that what we have seems torn between elucidation and active interpretation. What I have not said so far is that this also means that the book is interesting on more than one level, while Ellie Ragland-Sullivan takes her place among the very few commentators capable of providing a simultaneously faithful and original interpretation of Lacan.