

## Interview with Jacques-Alain Miller

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On the ninth of September 1981, Jacques Lacan died after having said these final words, "I am obstinate . . . I am disappearing," and an important new chapter in the history of psychoanalysis ended. Elisabeth Roudinesco (the second volume of whose monumental *History of Psychoanalysis in France*, concerning the Lacan years, will be in the bookstores next week) writes that "like Charcot at la Salpetriere and like Freud in Vienna, from 1969 on Lacan became the iconoclastic physician of a society sick with its symptoms, its manners and its modernity. He assumed its troubles and its triumphs." But it is apt if even his historian notes that one can only grasp the essential nature of a trajectory that escapes the eye, in the man's style, in his manner of writing or of quoting. Lacan, she concludes, "cannot be narrated, he can only be guessed at and deciphered. He speaks from within a body of work ...." This work is largely made up of the *Seminars* that he gave throughout his life starting with the Wednesdays of 1951 when at his home on the rue de Lille he analyzed the great texts of Freud. Jacques-Alain Miller is responsible for the publication of the *Seminars* and has just brought out the seminar that Lacan gave in 1960 in the Department of Professor Delay at Sainte-Anne, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. He has consented to answer some questions for *Le Matin*.

LE MATIN: It is five years since the appearance of the last seminar. There are those who have tried to promote a polemic concerning the conditions under which the text has been established. Could you explain concretely how you proceed?

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is the sixth volume to appear of the series projected by Dr. Lacan in 1973. It follows

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the seminar on *The Psychoses* that I was just finishing editing at the time of his death. *The Ethics* has appeared in the bookstores five years to the very day since his death. There are reasons for the delay. It was a seminar that took place in the lecture hall of Professor Delay during the academic year 1959-60. It was taken down at the time in shorthand and typed up as is in four copies. Lacan kept two copies of the original typed version and I worked from those exactly as I did when he was alive. His death did not interrupt that work, that desire.

LE MATIN: Lacan had a reputation for being hermetical. It turns out that we find ourselves in the presence of a thought that is perfectly accessible or, better yet, in the process of being created.

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER: I should perhaps explain the way in which Lacan prepared his seminars. The preparation of a seminar took a whole week. He arrived at his seminar each week with numerous pages of notes; there were sentences, schemas, and references that most of the time did not constitute a coherent text, so that during the two hours of the lecture there was an activity of creation. One can assume that he followed one path or the other, depending on the reactions of his audience and as a function of the difficulties or the zest he felt in making a given point. He often said himself that he only used a part of the notes he prepared.

The next seminar picked up at the point where he had left off, but obviously the work during the week displaced the original intention, the former purpose. We don't, therefore, have a reading, but an improvisation that had been worked on, prepared by a long period of reflection, solicitous of its audience and designed for it. Many things are therefore simply referred to and not fully worked through—either because he didn't think he had the time to say them or because something else demanded his attention at that moment—but they remain extremely suggestive.

To bring the lecture to a close, at the end of the hour he came up with an appropriate piece of bravura, a provocative thought, a reference to Harpo Marx, or to Prévert's matchboxes. All of which undoubtedly explains the extraordinarily lively character of his style of presentation.

LE MATIN: One even sees how certain external events intervene on occasion ....

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JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER: Yes, the subterranean rumblings of the news of the day can be heard. At the time of the war in Algeria, for example, when Lacan speaks about *Antigone*, we were living through a period when many young people, some of whom were very close to him, were engaged in activities that could be described as subversive.

I suppose you also had in mind his comments on the character of the left-wing intellectual and the right-wing intellectual. Lacan's position is very Hegelian; many of those left-wing intellectuals, who were so attractive in the moral positions they adopted, according to him carried virtue to the point . . . of knavery. You could see how they protested at the activities of a youth that had only taken seriously, acted out, their ideals. You could see them say "that's not what I meant" But let us reassure your readers; the right-wing intellectual isn't any better off!

LE MATIN: Let us come to the point. As far as an ethics of psychoanalysis is concerned, Lacan wonders what he "could include in it." He registers in effect "the deep dissatisfaction that all psychology leaves us with," including psychoanalysis, relative to the problem of our actions. "In the end," he writes, "it leaves us outside."

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER: You mustn't, in fact, expect to find a system of ethics in this seminar. Not that Lacan didn't have a very clear idea of what such a system could be. Elisabeth Roudinesco reports that when he was fifteen years old, he drew a kind of atlas of the conceptual relations of the parts of Spinoza's *Ethics* on the walls of his bedroom! Also in this seminar he makes constant references to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and to Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* .... It is certain that there is nothing comparable in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

If there isn't a system, there is nevertheless a systematics, I will even say an implied systematics, which isn't very prodigal in axioms. The best known is the one that is formulated in the last lecture, the famous "Don't give up on your desire." But be careful. It is less a positive principle than a negative one. It introduces the notion that "One is never guilty unless one has given up on one's desire." And which desire is involved here? It is important to know which one. You won't find out by simply being obstinate. Desire is not a caprice. Don't imagine that those are vain quibbles. It is by the route of the most detailed analysis of the word, of Kant's word and Sade's word, that Lacan treats the question of ethics.

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Nevertheless, there is in a very precise sense a particular orientation in the ethics of this book. It is to begin with an ethics that is specific to the psychoanalytic experience; it formulates what the analyst should aim for in the cure, if he wants his action or, better still, his act to be, let us say, logical or in conformity with the very structure of the experience. It is, therefore, a specialized ethics, the ethics of psychoanalysis, in the same way that there might be elsewhere an ethics of medicine, of politics or, why not, the university, ethics which are distinct. Yet the ethics we are concerned with obviously has repercussions, a vaster scale: it raises the question of the social order, distribution at the level of utility, what Lacan called "the service of goods," what he was to call later "the discourse of the master," and what there is that may be irreducible in desire or asocial in *jouissance*. Without in the least pleading for the utopian liberation of desire but without misconstruing the truly clinical consequences of the sacrifices of *jouissance* that are preached by the master.

LE MATIN: A vaster scale because Lacan does not hesitate to confront the great ethical systems from Aristotle to Kant, Sade, and Jeremy Bentham. So as to denounce *en bloc* the fraud of hedonist moralities. And in an even larger way, what might be called the "merchants of happiness."

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is, in effect, not at all hedonist. On the contrary. It's hard. What Lacan calls *jouissance* is not pleasure; it is rather closer to un-pleasure; it is that secret satisfaction which, for example is at the heart of the symptom and attaches the subject to his sickness. And it is that *jouissance* which constitutes the pivot around which he turns, although the use of the word *jouissance* itself in this seminar is not very frequent. How does one understand such an ethics? First, it cannot be associated with a golden mean in Aristotle's sense: it is always profoundly extremist (*extremale*), so to speak, and it hurts (*fait mal*). . . . Second, the dimension involved was opened by Newton and by Kant. Newton and modern science—that is the infinite universe, the end of the cosmos, whose closure permitted balance, a condition of the golden mean; Kant and the universal axiom is limitlessness in morals, and indetermination. "Act always according to a law valid for all" does not say anything more about the nature of the good.

Consequently, third, we have Sade, whose perverse path reveals what the new absolute is which may be discerned there in an implicit form:

*jouissance* without limit and without measure in its connection to pain. Fourth, this *jouissance* is obviously completely contrary to the utilitarian concepts. It serves nothing except perhaps the worst.

LE MATIN: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis is then, as you note in the title of the final chapter, a paradoxical ethics.

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER: Certainly, it's the ethics implied by what Freud called the death drive, a concept which, it must be admitted, has always horrified psychoanalysts. Freud's pupils, with a few exceptions such as Melanie Klein, have rejected it to a man. The death drive is at bottom the Freudian figure that Lacan deciphers through *jouissance*. *Jouissance* doesn't work for the good of the individual. If it is a good, it is one which goes against any well-being. That is why Lacan can say, he who does not give up on his desire does not open up a path to happiness!

The ethics which presides in the analytical experience is not for Lacan an ethics that one could decide to embrace, an ethics to which one could commit oneself. How does one realize its ideals? In a kind of way, it is an ethics without an ideal.

LE MATIN: A curious response to the demand of the analysand; a curious ethics that gives rise for the analyst to discomfort, *Hilflosigkeit*.

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER: It is certain that Lacan always was—and this is something he bore witness to—to the end of his life a troubled man, someone who was never at peace. He said himself that he must have had a superego that never left him alone for him to impose on himself such a diabolical work schedule.

LE MATIN: One final question. Why did you choose Sade for the cover of the *Ethics*?

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER: Yes, that was a risk I took. It is the imaginary portrait of Sade by Man Ray to which Lacan refers in his *écrit*, "Kant with Sade." *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is not Sade. But Sade, according to Lacan, expresses the truth of Kant and helps to read Freud and the death drive. He crosses the (imaginary) limits that the respect of the image of one's neighbor imposes in ethical discourse, to the point of producing the real of *jouissance*. I also thought of illustrating the book with a picture of Saint Martin sharing his cloak. Saint Martin dresses the beggar because he thinks that the beggar is cold, that he has a need for heat. But perhaps, Lacan suggests, the beggar had not

merely a need but also a desire; perhaps he desired, and why not, Saint Martin to fuck him ....

Let me add one more thing. I am convinced that this seminar, which was given a quarter of a century ago, is a book for the present time. It is certain that as far as courtly love is concerned new exegeses have appeared. We no longer speak in the same way about Greek tragedy after Vernant and Vidal-Naquet. The works of Sade at that time were still hidden in the back rooms of bookshops. But nothing has appeared, certainly not in psychoanalysis, that is superior to what is worked out here. To my mind the last Foucault, for example, is best understood against the background of this *Ethics*, and is in obvious contrast to it. The resources of

thought that are stored there haven't yet been touched. After all, the great untimely works never grow old!

*Interview by Jean-Paul Morel*

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