

EDITORIAL

This issue of *NFF* is devoted, in large part, to Lacan on logical time and anticipated certainty.\* But to some of Lacan's quick-read critics, it seems that the French psychoanalyst possessed a disconcerting "logic" and too much "certainty." The reactionary British historian Paul Johnson, a former editor of *The New Statesman*, devoted a single sentence to Lacan in his *Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Eighties* (1983). Indicting the spread of Structuralism and Marxism after World War II as supposedly pernicious to the individual, free will and moral conscience, he wrote: "In psychology [sic], Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud (hitherto largely ignored in France) to provide a new determinism of human behaviour, based on signs, signals, codes and conventions which, when analysed, left little room for human choice" (p. 695). What interest, if any, could this stigmatizing, snap judgment hold for us? Does Lacanian teaching provide, as alleged, "a new determinism of human behaviour?" What is missing here?

Let us set aside "psychology"-which Lacan *deplored-as well as* the concept of "behavior" or behaviorism (which studies only the final, quantified effects of the signifying chain of causality in visible actions). As we know, Lacan's lifelong concern was with the analysis of human subjects, not with semiotic analysis as such ("signs, signals, codes"). One of Lacan's early breakthroughs, indeed, was the *deconstruction* and inversion of Saussure's sign in order to establish the logic of the signifier. And, inasmuch as the signifier in language is prior to the genesis of the subject, it is indeed true that the signifier performs a

\*We are grateful to Jacques-Alain Miller and Judith Miller for granting us the privilege of publishing this heretofore untranslated écrit; and to Bruce Fink and Marc Silver for their careful translation of it into English.

1

decisive role in "determining" the structure of any individual subjectivity. But when the effects of the *signifier-as against* the sign-are submitted to scrutiny in the encounter of psychoanalysis, is it still true that we are left with "little room for human choice?"

Here we are really at the nub of Lacan's teaching on freedom. It is only by taking the measure of the enormous determinism involved in passing, as he says in Seminar Eleven, through the Oedipal defile of the signifier, that any human subject can come to know, through analysis, the portion of freedom that may be allowed to him. Lacan notated the split subject as a barred S (\$), precisely to illustrate that it existed in ignorance of its own division and unconscious motivation. The process of becoming human through language and the drama of the family novel (Freud's *Familienroman*) means that the subject is enchained in culture, but without knowing it. If we may paraphrase the opening of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*: "Man is born free (in Nature), but everywhere he is in chains (of Culture)."

Of late, a variant determinism has caught the headlines in American journals. *Time* reported a \$3 billion project-the Human Genome Project headed by Nobel laureate James Watson-to explore DNA and map the genome or "the complete set of instructions for making a human being" (March 20, 1989, p. 62). "What will this baby be?" asks *Time*: "Football star? Scholar? Rock guitarist? Although the child's future will be heavily influenced [sic] by environment, much of his or her fate may already have been predetermined. Encoded in the genome, the DNA in the infant's 46 chromosomes, are instructions that affect not only structure, size, coloring and other physical attributes, but also intelligence, susceptibility to disease, life-span and even some aspects of behavior" (p. 63).

Let us be allowed to set aside this "behavior" just once more, and look at the fallacy in all this. What the genome contains is a complete set of instructions for making a human *animal*, not a "human being". The human being as a subject of desire, is a product of language and speech. The "DNA" involved here, if this is not an impertinent comparison, is the signifying chain that pre-exists the human being *sensu stricto*. As Jacques-Alain Miller once observed in Chicago: "Biological facts exist in psychoanalysis, but only insofar as they have gone through language and speech" (*NFF* 1.2 [1987]: 16). Football stars, scholars and rock guitarists are neither animals nor products of nature, but effects of culture who signify by their acquired, creative skills; by their stellar mastery of the Symbolic Order.

2

More worrisome is the out-of-sight agenda implicit in this thinking: the fashionable tendency to attribute all of civilization's discontents- anxiety, phobias, depression, psychosis, schizophrenia, alcoholism- to genetically predetermined and biological causes, in order to be rid of the *responsibility and guilt* for such malaises. For Lacan, however, there were no guilty analysands in analysis, only humans suffering from symptoms that do not wish their good. To project the causality of the signifier away from its source in language, speech and desire and into biology, looking for cures in biological medicine and drug therapies, is actually a good illustration of the Spanish proverb: *pedir peras al olmo* ("begging for pear fruits off an elm-tree").

One may say that, for Lacan, the issue really lies in causality; even in the absolute extension, beyond any laws of physics or nature, of the principle that there is *no* effect without a cause. So "silly" actions, slips, blunders, and nonsensical accidents, are neither silly nor do they lack sense. More importantly, certain "behaviors" (let's use this term now to mean a visible effect) that defy logic-the man who continues to smoke two packs a day when already dying of emphysema- have their causality in a *jouissance*, or death drive beyond repetition and beyond the pleasure principle, which can find no explanation in biology.

What of "moral conscience" then? Lacan's Seminar Seven on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* treats for hundreds of pages of the ethical relationship between desire and action. Freedom and determinism are really a fractious couple who, having changed their names from Desire and Law, go on living with each other after the divorce. What worries one in the 1980s about the reactionary retreat to the autonomous ego and biological predeterminism of the late 19th century is the nagging feeling that, for many people, any form of determinism is actually more comforting than any piece of freedom that could be had by challenging one's own illusions of consciousness.

*The Editors*

3