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Foucault and Lacan on Velázquez:
The Status of the Subject of
Representation

"This is why what characterizes the human sciences is not that they are directed at a certain content (that singular object, the human being); it is much more a purely formal characteristic: the simple fact that, in relation to the sciences in which the human being is given as an object (exclusive in the case of economics and philology, or partial in that of biology), they are in a position of duplication, and that this duplication can serve *a fortiori* for themselves".¹ This is, summed up in a few lines, the central thesis developed by Michel Foucault in his masterpiece, *Les mots et les choses* [*The Order of Things*]. It is a question here of an elision: the elision of man as "content" of the sciences which are supposed to take him as object, and this from the fact of a displacement which is made at the expense of the study of representations. It is also a matter here of a duplication: representations, by the fact of language (something Freud had grasped as early as the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*), duplicate what is elided, namely man, and attest to his presence in this hollow of concealment.

Foucault glimpsed this paradox at the very birth of the sciences of man in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He states, with Lacan, that Descartes introduced a new experiment leading to the modern *cogito* where the "I think" no longer implies the self-evidence of the "I am," due to the fact that where there is thought, the "I" is not yet present. Or not necessarily, to wit for example, in what will be said *ex post facto* about the mode of affinity of an author's thought to his Age, or to the forms of representation which he will admittedly help in creating, but in which he also takes part unbeknownst to himself.

Velázquez, a court painter but a modern painter nevertheless, makes this elision and duplication vibrate in the domain of his art. One testimony to this is the strange picture painted in 1656,

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originally entitled "The Royal Family," which was metonymically designated by the title of *Las Meninas* around the year 1800. In it one sees depicted the Infanta Margarita, two of her ladies-in-waiting, a girl dwarf and a male dwarf, Velázquez himself and an uncle of the artist, as well as the royal couple who appear in reflection in a mirror. The impression of disquieting strangeness, which has provoked so many commentaries on this work, is indeed clearly correlated with an elision and a duplication. The elision is that of the royal couple who only appear as a reflection on the image proffered by the painting, by means of the mirror placed "at the back" of the perspective. The duplication is that of the picture within the picture; we actually see the rear of a canvas (the subject of which is a mystery) represented to the left of the pictorial space, a canvas which cuts out a surface whose representation is made present by its absence in the picture.

Lacan disputed Foucault's superb commentary on *Las Meninas* from the moment it appeared. He undertook a criticism of it, in friendly but firm fashion, in three lectures, one of which was addressed directly to Foucault as he sat in the hall. He sided against the Foucauldian thesis in the name of what psychoanalysis is able to set forth concerning the

scopic drive of vision and the gaze. To keep this paper within bounds, I shall limit myself here to a scrutiny of the commentaries of Foucault and Lacan regarding the question of the subject of representation.

A Bit of King

In the very fine pages that begin his opus, Foucault invites us along a well-flagged route within the suddenly familiar space of the picture. The marker from which we depart is the painter, whose gaze rests on an invisible point out ahead of the canvas and, in so doing, captures our own. Foucault notes that this pure reciprocity is triangulated by the presence of the canvas in the picture: the painter gets ready to paint, but who, pray, is he painting, since the spectator could be anybody? By this witty ruse, the calm passer-by is snapped up into a place beyond the pictorial surface by a movement of oscillation, in which he finds himself involved without knowing it. Someone invisible appeals to a question about what is visible. A gaze, the painter's, induces one to pose questions to oneself about a vision (what could be sketched on the obverse of the picture?).

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But, suddenly, another movement imposes itself, though this one is inverted. It has its origin in a vision (displayed, and yet elided) in the mirror hanging on the back wall, by which the royal couple offer themselves to the spectator's gaze. The latter can find in the mirror a sort of answer to the puzzle, viz., the presence of the royal couple as the painter's model, on the ground he occupies, and, consequently, on the hidden surface of the picture.

It is around this figuring of monarchic power that, in Foucault's contention, the game of representations is both concentrated and ordered in a manner prescribed by the lines of composition, as well as underlined by the scene mounted for the sovereigns' benefit and which is looking at them: the presentation of the Infanta in her ball gown. The object and subject of the picture become confused at this point where painter, king and spectator make everything one and are, nevertheless, divided. For Foucault, this is where man² is born, not specified in his roles, but unified in the interception of the picture he executes, where the artist forms part of the representation of the world. This subjective position refers, in fact, to the modern cogito, insofar as the subject emerges as split with regard to knowing what it is in the order of the world: king, painter or spectator. The reality principle is here placed in doubt.

While not rejecting this interpretation, Lacan aims the cutting-edge of his critique elsewhere. It is in fact at the interior itself--not of the reality principle--but of what is accountable to this principle's division between pleasure and pain, that his sword will cut. From now on, it is no longer a matter of a division of the subject with regard to his place within the world, but of the subject's relation to what divides him in his own pleasure as king, as painter or as spectator, beyond the pleasure principle.

Lacan admits directly, along with Foucault, that there is no way of speculating about what the painter intended to do. What he intended to do, he has done; the artwork is there in its raw existence. Again like Foucault, Lacan asserts that the mystery, the "hook"

of the picture, invites a question on the desire of the Other. It puts into play the neurotic question *par excellence*: "What does the Other want?"

One should not, however, stop at their agreement, a superficial one on the whole. Lacan's point of view is, in fact, the opposite of Foucault's: whereas Foucault is concerned to demonstrate that the rear side of the reversed canvas depicts the King and the Queen, Lacan believes that it is "futile" to consider the personages one by one. The picture must be apprehended in its antipsychological

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globality For we, the spectators, are placed in the window from where the daylight trickles, from the right, over the entirety of the painted surface, and concerning which Lacan posits that it illuminates the court scene, in milky fashion, through the window of fantasy The picture, indeed, like any picture, is to be construed as in the theatre: a theatre designed to calm the gaze of the person who contemplates it, to offer him the fare on which he feasts, on which he satisfies himself, thus giving rise to the Apollonian aspect of painting. The eye as organ satisfies itself through the sight. But the gaze, on the other hand, can grasp the picture as a lure and seek beyond the veil of the painting to proclaim what satisfies it; nevertheless, something of the spectator's *jouissance* itself is located within the picture, unwilling to let itself be teased out. At dead center of the canvas, the self-portrait of Velázquez indicates by its gaze (which Lacan describes as "phantom-like") a *jouissance* from its being depicted there. He appeals also to a desire. The same goes for the phrase which Lacan deposits on the lips of the Infanta, whose gaze seems to say: "Show me."

By virtue of this fact, the author of the picture, although appearing to be divided, is not divided after the fashion in which Foucault frames things (anybody, king, painter); if he is divided, it is in the act of painting. Lacan makes his point clear through recourse to geometric optics and to the system of perspective, where the position of the painter in the act of painting can be grasped by calculating the distance between where he has placed himself and the scene which he wishes to capture. To this end, Lacan invokes the "second eye" which the early perspectivists spoke of (Albrecht Dürer, L.-B. Alberti); indeed, he gives the figures for the point at which the painter enjoys [*jouit*], while resting his gaze on the representation which he renders up. One might say that Velázquez's attempt in this picture is to extricate himself, through the Imaginary means of a "trick" representation with respect to the laws of perspective, from seduction by those eyes which summon the spectator to lay down his gaze. And this is by means of the movement of inclusion/exclusion where the spectator, and the painter as well, is snapped up into the picture and from which he is excluded. This issue is not confined to the seventeenth century.

There is, indeed, something bizarre about this picture, self-evident for whoever can see it. If we ask ourselves the question of knowing, not what the painter wanted to do, but how he has managed to represent himself in the picture, we will have then

logically to entertain the hypothesis of a mirror placed where the virtual spectator stands, and of a painter who surveys the whole scene in this mirror in order to freeze it on his canvas. This being the case, it is totally out of the question that he can see the two monarchs. The choice is unavoidable: either the mirror or the King and Queen, not both. This coming apart at the seams produces a feeling of discomfort that prevents the spectator from identifying himself, be it as king, painter, or plain art-lover.

The subject jumps (\$), it vacillates, it is not identified, or to be more exact, it is not "normally" divided in its place as spectator. In *Seminar Eleven*, Lacan categorizes what is manifested in such uneasiness under the heading of castration anxiety, subsequently summed up in the formula "having to jump out of place."

This picture offers no easy hideaway; it excites neither the unalloyed pleasure of being the satiated spectator, nor that of being the model whom the painter would be looking at: the passerby is no longer master of his own vision, which has been duped by the bizarreness of the composition. Contrary to what Foucault suggests, he is not ushered into the artist's place; he "jumps" rather into a *no man's land* [English in the original] where he cannot conceive of himself as viewer. There is, as Lacan puts it, an "elision of the gaze" itself.³ The King is in bits, the resources of the ego ideal are exhausted. Something expells itself from the picture which is the subject of the drive. It is in the very heart of his *jouissance* as relaxed spectator that the gallery-Boer has to suffer a division, pointed up by the geometry of perspective in structural terms, but which the conventions of perspective generally allow one to ignore via the game of specular identification.

Velázquez's Cogito

We know that Lacan calls the Cartesian *cogito* into question by the simple notation: *cogito: ergo sum*. In the same way, thanks to his artifice of composition in *Las Meninas*, Velázquez prevents both himself and us from thinking an "I paint what I see." He sees, indeed, more than he paints since, if the surface of the picture were identical to the spectacle seen in a mirror by the painter, then there would no longer be any room for the royal couple, around whom, according to Foucault, he organizes the entire painting.

There is no "I paint myself painting" possible in this canvas, the formula of which is not "I see myself being seen," but rather, as

Lacan points out, "you cannot see me from where I am looking at you." The picture is in this sense exemplary: it traps the gaze, but since it introduces the impossible (and by no means just the hidden), as a result of the actual surface of the plane canvas, it brings about that division consonant with the status of the psychoanalytic unconscious which demands of the subject that it be thought in the place where it does not think.

Where is this vanished subject, then, and what is albeit offering itself up to division? Foucault has grasped the givens of the problem very well, but the solution he proposes is different from the one offered by Lacan in his recourse to the object *a*. In this regard, we may read the passage where Foucault very ably grasps the question that lies lurking: "In this form," he says, "the cogito will not therefore be the sudden and illumin-

ating discovery that all thought is thought, but the constantly renewed interrogation as to how thought can reside elsewhere than here, and yet so very close to itself; how it can be in the forms of non-thinking'?"⁴

Lacan draws out Foucault's reflexions on this point by adding that this question actually has an answer. It is in the degree to which the unconscious, as psychoanalysis has specified it, is not the "unthought" of Foucault. Beyond any referral of the interplay of images and representation to a point of return which would ramify, in Foucault's fine expressions "the being of thought right down to the inert network of what does not think," there is for Lacan "the privileged object, discovered by analysis, the object a." "This object supports that which, in the drive, is defined and specified by the fact that the coming into play of the signifier in the life of man enables him to bring out the meaning of sex. Namely, that for man, because he knows the signifiers, sex and its significations are always capable of making present the presence of death."⁶

In the trace of Velázquez's brush on the canvas, Lacan discovers the hallmark of this "being-toward-death" in three ways. In the first place, by noticing that the group of characters arranged or frozen in this picture called "The King's Family" are captured for all eternity as in death. It is Time the Murderer who seizes the Infanta and her ladies-in-waiting in an epitome of anguish--something which is, anyway, true for every portrait. Second, Lacan points out that, by means of the portrait of the Infanta, the whole destiny of a Monarchy is being represented --one which the King is impotent to make endure--as well as his own possible death, at the precise intersection of the picture's lines. Lastly, the truly hidden object here is figured by the female genitals, "a prepubertal gap," so

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perfectly concealed from view beneath the finery and pomp, and nevertheless present at the very center of the picture. The ultimate point at which the object *a* makes itself meaningful and comes to represent itself is not for Lacan, therefore, the mirror, but this point of the female body particularly suitable for evoking the figure of the edge and the reversal, particularly suitable for evoking absence, particularly suitable for pointing out that one can only grasp the object *a* in outline.

This is a figure for castration with no specularly because it is not represented in the picture and yet lies heavy with all the weight of its absence. Lacan's solution proves, therefore, to be totally opposed to Foucault's: the subject is not abolished only in its signifying division; it is found again in its being at the point where all representation ends up lacking. By separating himself from Foucault, Lacan does not, then, invite us to any post-Structuralism, nor to any "post-Modernism"; he shows us, rather, the Freudian way. That of the Freud of 1938, that of the heritage passed on by Freud at death's door.

Translated by Henry W. Sullivan

Notes

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1989), pp. 50-53, under the section "Bibliotheque: Des references de J. Lacan." The talk itself was delivered on January 22, 1988. We are grateful to the author for permission to reproduce the article here.

1) Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon, 1970, p. 354. (Originally published as *Les mots et les choses* [Paris: Gallimard, 1966]).

2) *Ibid.*, p. 338.

3) Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton, paperback ed. 1981, p. 75. (Originally published as *Le Seminaire, Livre XI, Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* [Paris: Seuil, 1973]).

4) M. Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

5) *Ibid.*

6) J. Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 257.