Lacan's First Disciple

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ABSTRACT: A distinguished historian of ideas long associated with detailed narratives and analyses of the lives and ideas of the founding figures of psychoanalysis interviews Marc-François Lacan, younger brother of Jacques Lacan and a Benedictine monk. Much is revealed in this essay, originally published in French, of the thinking of both men, most startlingly perhaps of the extent to which there are religious elements in the background and even the thought of Jacques Lacan, that commanding personality in French psychoanalytic circles.

Psychoanalysis in France has attained a unique status today. It is not just a matter of the large number of different French psychoanalytic organizations, or the quantity of practitioners in the profession. But one group alone, out of more than a dozen, does form the largest unit in the International Psychoanalytic Association first set up by Freud in 1910. Although Jacques Lacan was effectively driven out of the IPA in the early 1950s, it is a sign of the special impact he has had that despite all the controversies associated with Lacan he remains the central figure in the history of French psychoanalysis. The liveliness and vitality of psychoanalysis in contemporary France owes an immense debt to the inspiration that Lacan succeeded in providing.

There are no bookstores in the world as filled with fresh texts on psychoanalysis as now can be found in Paris. The fact that the long-awaited multi-volume Freud-Ferenczi correspondence first started to appear in French, before either German or English, is a sign of the special interest psychoanalysis evokes in France. Nowhere else in the world has psychoanalysis been able to become so secure a part of university life as there, although something not too dissimilar has been taking place in Argentina. French analysts are culturally sophisticated in an unusual way. Lacan liked to think that he had accomplished a "return" to Freud, and in my own experience of meeting many surviving early analysts who knew Freud personally I can say that I have never met as interesting a group of analysts, apart from the ones who were once around Freud, as can be found in Paris today.

Understanding Lacan's writings, his theories as well as his reported practices, is not an easy matter. And so when I heard that Lacan had a brother still alive, a Benedictine monk who was an intellectual in whom Lacan con-

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fided, it seemed to me one way to get a handle on Lacan’s contribution was by trying to meet this brother.

On September 24, 1992, while in Paris on a short lecture trip, I went to interview Marc-Francois Lacan. I had heard earlier that he was living in a monastery near Paris, but it turned out that he had recently moved to Notre Dame de Ganagobie in Peryuis, near Marseilles.

My motives in trying to see Marc-Francois were unclouded by any partisanship. I had been in Paris in 1991 and earlier in 1992, both times briefly. As a student of the history of ideas, with a special interest in psychoanalysis, I knew how important the work of Jacques Lacan had become to the life of the mind. The influence of Lacan’s teachings had long since extended far beyond France, but only while I was in Paris did I begin to feel that I had begun to know enough to start asking some intelligent questions.

Once, on the very day that Lacan’s analytic couch, among other items, was being auctioned off in Paris, I had had a most congenial meeting with Judith Miller, Lacan’s favorite daughter from his second marriage. I was expected to see her at 5 rue de Lille, where he had practiced for so many years. On that day I walked from where I was staying on the Ile St. Louis to Lacan’s old apartment, but I was so ignorant of where I was headed as actually not to know, when instructed to turn toward the Left Bank, which bank of the Seine was the left. As I habitually do with my interviews, especially when I do not know where I am going, I arrived early. I found the street easily enough, and looked at the plaque on the apartment-house wall commemorating the fact that Lacan had once practiced there. The only other psychoanalyst I know to have been so honored is Freud himself. I went to a small cafe nearby, reading a book while having a late breakfast, until the time for my appointment arrived.

At the appropriate occasion I headed for rue de Lille, but only then at the front gate of No. 5 did I realize that I had not been given the code to get in. So I went back to the concierge, who telephoned Judith Miller. She told me that there had been family problems that day, but if I waited she would come by shortly. She brought with her Luke, a son, and also Gloria, who had worked with Lacan for years as a private secretary. They opened up the apartment for me, showing me something of how elegant it had once looked. I did not know then why some of the pieces of furniture and paintings were missing. I felt I had stumbled rather badly when I inquired whether the apartment would be turned into a museum, thinking of Freud’s house on Maresfield Gardens in London; such an approach was plainly far too static to match the fluidity of Lacan’s thinking.

Luke’s job was to help translate both the French and English. I do recall the shy amusement we three felt, as Judith showed me one painting, when I understood directly from her French, after a few seconds of uncertain looking, that the picture was intended to be of a male orgasm. The most striking single aspect of what I learned that day came from Luke. He picked up a