

# CORRESPONDENCE

## For Lacan

Dear Radical Philosophy,

John Bird's article on Lacan (RP 30) was so vehement that some response is necessary. But replying to Bird raises a problem. Bird has pitted himself against Lacan, and this makes any reply seem to speak for Lacan - a role it is impossible to fulfill.

The exposition and criticism in a few pages of an important body of work must involve oversimplification and incompleteness, and Bird acknowledges this. His exposition condenses Lacan's thought to three basic processes: the entry of the subject into language; the development of self, other and ego; and the Oedipus complex. Exposition was hampered, he emphasises, by the particular difficulty of Lacan's prose. His criticism is concerned with Lacan's failure to contribute anything new to psychoanalysis, or even to return to the real Freud; but it is focussed, once again, on Lacan's difficulty. This is the charge I want to look at first. Bird assumes a link between difficulty in exposition and difficulty as a criticism that I could not see. Does difficulty automatically condemn a work? Or is Lacan's difficulty of a particularly damning kind? Bird did not explain why a Lacanian text could be invalidated on this ground; but several arguments have been advanced to justify the difficulty in Lacan's work, and he would have done well to examine them.

One reason often given for Lacan's difficulty is that he uses a specific vocabulary, which has to be acquired by study, as in any science. Certainly, there is a specialist language of current psychoanalytic theory, whose understanding requires knowledge of a theoretical corpus. Bird himself relies on this language. Although he tries to explain Lacan in 'non-Lacanian language', as if specialist knowledge were unnecessary, his article is not much less complex than Lemaire's book, which he thinks incomprehensible. And, like her, he has to quote paragraphs of Lacan's allegedly impenetrable prose to make his points.

Although there is little doubt of the specificity of Lacan's discourse, the nature of this specificity remains a problem. What makes an interpretation analytic in the Lacanian sense? The best criterion seems to be a clear theoretical relation between the language of the unconscious and concepts of the body.

This is always a difficult relation to work with because the body quickly assumes the status of a given. But Bird ignores the relation altogether. He is content to see language as a mediator between society and the subject, a perspective which loses the sense of Lacan's statement 'the unconscious is structured *like* a language' (my emphasis).

This brings me to a second explanation, which Lacan himself offered, for the difficulty of Lacanian texts. The resemblance of the unconscious to language must intrude into linguistic explanations, he claimed. Condensation and displacement are displayed in the metaphors and metonymies of the text, for instance, at the same time as the text itself explains how the unconscious itself is structured, like itself, in metaphor and metonymy. Bird does not give this argument enough credence. This intrusion of the unconscious at all levels of language is disruptive and problematic, but it allows for multiple interpretations of Lacan's work. It is this difficulty that is responsible for the excitement Lacan's texts have stirred up, for the pleasure as well as the fury they provoke. A number of new directions have developed from attempts to come to grips with the difficulty of the work. But Bird seems determined to ignore the productiveness of Lacan's difficulty, even though in a perverse sense his own article relies upon it.

The two criticisms Bird makes of Lacan that have superficially nothing to do with difficulty are that Lacan's innovations are few, and that he does not return, as claimed, to the truth of Freud's work. First of all, these charges themselves set up a contradiction, because the demand that psychoanalytic theory should be true to Freud would compel it to avoid new directions instead of seeking them out - as Bird also wants it to do. Bird is looking into the past and future for an absolute psychoanalytic truth. Lacan's work on meaning, which Bird ignores, often points out that we can only recapture his (Lacan's) or anyone else's definitive meaning in a *myth* of absolute truth, although the texts are always open for anyone, including Bird, to use in any way they want.

What Bird calls 'Freudian' in Lacan's work (his opposition to ego psychology and to therapy as a justification) he approves of. He assimilates the 'unFreudian' parts of Lacan's work to romantic critiques of psychoanalysis and condemns them all. But Lacan's 'return to Freud' is more than a restatement, and his anti-biologism has nothing to do with romanticism. He has radically changed psychoanalysis by writing structuralist linguistics into it. Bird does

not realise all the implications that Lacan's treatment of language has for psychoanalysis, and this misunderstanding underlies all his criticism. What is important in Lacan's use of Saussure, for instance, is his insistence on the bar within the sign, the independent movement on either side of it, and the autonomy of signifiers. Bird's main emphasis is on the unity of the sign: precisely not on the dislocation which makes romantic meaning problematic, and which has been productive in psychoanalysis. The metaphorical sense of the statement that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' is lost in Bird's article, because he takes the unconscious subject as the implicit foundation for language and sexuality, and never questions it. His initial schema, which draws a rigid distinction between subject and society, suggests that Lacan was trying to bring the inside out, to 'subvert the ego and re-instate the id', using the language as the intermediary. This converts the metaphor in Lacan's statement to an equation. If the unconscious *is* a language, instead of being *like* a language, then language can appear as an agent of socialisation. But for Lacan, language is outside *and* inside; we live in language at the same time as we are lived by it. The very division between individual and society is made by and in language.

Keeping hold of the metaphor in Lacan's work allows us to ask how the unconscious is *not* like a language; how other discourses may be like languages; and how the unconscious intrudes on and is itself commandeered by other discourses. The metaphor guarantees a continuous metonymy in Lacanian texts, and in the theoretical developments from them which are often dismissed as fashion because of this very fluidity. Bird is not able to bear the ambiguities this introduces into psychoanalysis: the fact that, for Lacan, the return of true speech to the subject in analysis is never complete because the subject is made incomplete in language; that distinctions between truth and untruth, new and old, Freud and non-Freud, are always a kind of blindness; and movement - 'difficulty' - can never be finished with.

At the end of his article, Bird consoles himself by making a sort of zen contrariness into the truth of Lacan's work: 'Perhaps when I throw up my hands in horror and burn the works of Lacan out of frustration, then Lacan himself will be able to say, "at last, you understand"'. This is the flip-side of a slavish deference to Lacan, which he also shows. He is pre-occupied with the choice between accepting and rejecting Lacan's authority, as if making it would resolve the frustration that Lacan's difficulty causes him. It is often a problem that difficulty, however productive, merely displaces power from the discourse to the mythical figure of the author. There at least we can hope to find a true interpretation. But this determining place is always being taken away from Lacan *le maître* by the independent movement of the discourse that is called his. Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, have tried to replace the either/or division which characterises psychoanalysis (that of phallic presence/absence) with multiple divisions overlying and displacing each other, and with chains linked by 'and', which do not oppress desire but allow it to produce itself endlessly and changelessly. Derrida has set in motion again the 'letter', which was coming to rest as the ideal origin and end-point of all Lacanian theory. I think it would have been more productive if Bird had brought language in from the periphery of his concerns, and worked on the continuing difficulty it provides in Lacan's work, instead of rejecting it to fight a mythical tyrant.

Corinne Squire

## Collectivity and Comment

Dear Radical Philosophy,

Noël Parker's letter in *Radical Philosophy* 29 requested opinions on editorials and comment columns, and it seemed to us there are some important perspectives on the subject that could do with airing which were not discussed in the letter. We think there are two points which are important in the production of radical theoretical journals which have a bearing on editorial procedures. They are not entirely distinct, but here they are.

The first is that we feel it is important for radical journals to encourage an active readership, rather than to passify them, as it were. In the context of *Radical Philosophy*, the impression one gains from occasional comments is that you desire a readership which participates in the journal - the best indication of which is perhaps the correspondence sections you have lately featured. We think this has important implications, because we don't think the more conventional editorial procedures such as formal editorials and comment columns are really conducive to an active readership.

The second point is that we also feel that in the production of radical theory it is important to develop the idea of it as part of a process of collective debate and discussion, as against tending to present it as formal and definitive position-pieces from opposed individuals.

It is because of this we feel *Radical Philosophy* would be better off without the comment column. We are not suggesting you should avoid commenting on e.g. the Afghanistan situation - but rather you could perhaps open up a 'discussion' section where such topics might be better situated (this would obviate the problem identified by Noel Parker: 'whereas we may agree on what it is worth discussing, we are much less likely to agree on what is to be said'). In the editorial column in the place of a 'comment' you might give an introduction and rundown of the contents of each issue. This more informal approach would we feel lend support to the more collectively-minded aspects of theory production: we think it would be a shame if you didn't encourage them.

Yours faithfully, Seumas Caimbeul and Iain Grand

*The Collective very much appreciates comment from readers on how the magazine should be put together and on specific articles - hence the recent revival of the correspondence column. We therefore welcome Seumas Caimbeul and Iain Grand's letter and Corinne Squire's, and would be pleased to receive further letters (for publication or not). I hope that, in particular, discussion of the scope for political comment in the magazine will continue and will not therefore comment specifically on the above points at this stage.*

Noel Parker, Secretary to the Editorial Collective