

STAGES OF FORMATION

Martin Murray

Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, translated by Barbara Bray, Polity Press, Cambridge 1997, 574pp; £25 cloth.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's best-known paper 'The Mirror Phase as Formative of the Function of the I' (first version 1936, revised version 1949) claims to describe a moment or state that is crucial to the formation of the human self. In receiving an image of itself in reflection, Lacan argues, the human infant first sees itself as a unified being. This situation is ideal and figural as well as actual, and stands for accession to identity in general. It is also at least as deceptive as it is veracious. What seems identical is grasped by way of reflection, which can only take place in something else: a mirror, or more exactly an image. Whether it is internal or external this image must be minimally alterior; otherwise the self would only, and tautologically, know itself as what it already knows itself as. The self's epistemological and ethical condition, though not impossible, is problematic. It sees itself in terms of what it in some sense isn't, which means it might not know itself as well as it thinks it does. Its truth, got through what it is not, always might be false.

Elisabeth Roudinesco's *Jacques Lacan* shows how Lacan's life both might be judged by and might have given rise to his theories. In doing so it provides an admirable account of a body of work that is alternately obscure and brilliant, and of a man who was capable of both integrity and duplicity. Yet it is neither simply exegetic nor psychobiographical, and contains astute commentary on, and scrupulous descriptions of, political and historical dimensions of Lacan's life. This much might be expected of Roudinesco, who is also the author of an excellent, comprehensive history of French psychoanalysis.¹

Roudinesco reveals that from the outset Lacan was subject to the egoistic division, and concomitant egotistical self-assertion, or phantasised eradication of that division, that his own work was to chart so insistently. He was both a melancholy and a precocious child. Born into a family of petite-bourgeoise semi-provincial Catholic vinegar merchants, he soon rebelled against the mediocrity and conformism of his upbringing. This rebellion, which in some respects only ended with his death, betrayed a thorough ambivalence. Lacan became both more and less bourgeoise, particularly as an adolescent and young man. He affected haute-bourgeoise manners and the dress of a dandy, and even flirted with the chauvinistic philosophy of Charles Maurras. However, he was also drawn to the anarchism of dada and to surrealism in its first, revolutionary, phase which

1. Elisabeth Roudinesco, *La Bataille de cent ans: histoire de la psychanalyse en France vol 1*, Ramsay, Paris 1982; *La Bataille de cent ans: histoire de la psychanalyse en France vol 2*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1986; vol. 2 trs. Jeffrey Mehlman as *Jacques Lacan and Co. A History of Psychoanalysis in France 1925-1985*, Free Association Books, London 1990.

was ambiguously Freudian and Marxist. He could be said to have cultivated the 'aristocratic radicalism' sometimes attributed to Nietzsche, who was one of his boyhood heroes.

The young Lacan eventually became a medic. The choice was only made after some deliberation, and with reluctance to give up other career options, particularly academic philosophy. Perhaps because of his philosophical interests, Lacan took up psychiatry during the 1920s. The profession brought him into contact with a number of eminent teachers, notably Clérambault, whose work in a science which was in neither decline nor infancy was both traditional and radical. Clérambault began to pay close attention to psychical as well as organic dimensions of illness. This involved elucidating relations between symptoms that implied that they had some meaning for the subject who suffered them. Most influentially, Clérambault showed that erotomaniac subjects, who were deluded that they were the object of another's excessive affection and aggression, had become so as the consequence of a desire. In many such cases, he argued, an inadmissible sexual urge is transformed into something acceptable by way of projection and paranoia. The (usually female) erotomaniac sees her desire in another (so that she can disown it) and as aggression (so that it can be seen as something other than desire).

During the 1930s and 1940s Lacan both absorbed and developed these and other radical psychiatric ideas, and did so with an intellectual boldness, breadth and complexity that was to lead his forebears, including Clérambault, to judge them non-psychiatric and invalid. Lacan's innovations were often couched in the language of, and were heavily influenced by, modern Germanic philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis. Lacan's generation of French intellectuals used such ideas to challenge both the stuffy, chauvinistic, Cartesian rationalism of the academy and the naive or dogmatic scientism of the training hospital.

Hence Lacan stressed the non-constitutionalism of Clérambault's work, claiming that symptoms have meaning *for* the subject, rather than in terms of any objectively identifiable physical state, or biological cause. In doing so he was advancing a type of argument made first by Brentano and later, as phenomenology, by Husserl. However, Lacan's 'phenomenology', like all of his adoptions of others' ideas, is not 'pure.' For both Brentano and Husserl the idea, and thus meaning, is presented lucidly for, and also by, the subject in consciousness. For Lacan the meaning of the symptom for the subject is first of all obscure, and can only be elucidated by way of what is not conscious. Now this non-consciousness, which bears important information about a personal *history*, has a number of different characteristics and dimensions. It resists conscious apprehension by the subject except in a distorted and disturbing form, and thus resembles the unconscious as described by Freud. However, the material borne by the state of non-consciousness described by Lacan, unlike the sort described by Freud, is not only or primarily infantile and familial, but is to do with a broader

environment and personal history (including, for example, work relations), although it is no easier to assimilate to consciousness for all that. The meaning of the subject is to be sought in what is inside, outside, and prior to, and hence other than, its presently conscious state. It is therefore only through the *other* that the subject can make any sense of itself. As suggested earlier, this necessary alterity of subjectivity is irreducible. Because, in this state of affairs, the (self)same is only got at otherwise, its recognition is dialectical. Because the alterity which allows (self-)recognition is irreducible, such recognition is never absolutely certain, or positive.

Lacan's early method thus amounts, to use Adorno's phrase, to a kind of negative dialectic. In doing so it takes its inspiration from the teaching of the Russian emigré philosopher Alexandre Kojève whose seminars Lacan attended in Paris in the 1930s along with Merleau-Ponty, Bataille, Queneau and others. Kojève's work was crucially important in the transportation of modern German philosophy into France. He took dialecticism and historicism from Hegel, anti-idealism from Marx, anti-positivism from Heidegger and offered them all to Lacan. Never one to think that enough is enough, Lacan added the Freudianism just mentioned, and adopted a written and spoken style which was a bizarre mixture of baroque academicism and surrealism that would go on to both seduce and infuriate his increasingly large public.

Roudinesco writes lucidly and informatively about this important, often ignored, first part of Lacan's career. She rightly understands the peculiarly modern intellectual position he adopted in it, of a dialectician who did not believe in synthesis. She also finds a thesis in his personal life manifest as both integrity and conflict. Lacan was both a loyal and a duplicitous husband, a generous and a parsimonious father and a passionate and paranoid friend. When his first marriage, to Marie-Louise Blondin, broke down their three children were not told that he had taken up with another woman until two of them chanced on the couple in the street. The other woman, whom Lacan later wed, was Sylvia Bataille, an actress and political activist whose intelligence and fervour matched his own and who was the ex-wife of Georges Bataille, who was one of Lacan's friends. They lived in separate but adjoining apartments and conducted a relationship of ostensible civility, though it involved affairs. Lacan had close friendships with many people, most of them members of the Parisian intelligentsia. Some, like Merleau-Ponty and Lévi-Strauss, liked and respected Lacan but were bemused by his ideas. Others, who were generally less well-known and more involved with psychoanalytic theory and practice, admired and even worshipped him. Lacan alternately, and quite passionately, loved and mistrusted them all.

Lacan produced his best known, most influential work between 1949 and 1960. During this period he developed his earlier ideas in terms of three themes: language, the subject and the unconscious. Like many French intellectuals of the 1950s he became fascinated by the work of the early

twentieth-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose two great contributions to linguistic science are the notion of linguistic arbitrariness and the notion of linguistic value. The notion of linguistic arbitrariness involves an assertion that manifest linguistic elements (more particularly signifier and sign) bear no necessary relation to the linguistic or real elements (more particularly signified and referent) to which they ostensibly refer (this amounts to saying, for example, that the term 'hatred' or the term 'cat' might be used to invoke something other than what they currently or apparently do). The notion of linguistic value follows from this. Linguistic elements can't be determined by way of fixed concepts or things but they *can* be discerned by way of their relations to and differences from each other ('hatred' is understood in comparison with 'love', 'cat' in comparison with 'dog'). These 'values' make up a structure, which is the objective structure of language. Lacan maintained some aspects of Saussure's argument and altered others. More precisely, he stressed the notion of arbitrariness by declaring the 'autonomy of the signifier' (accentuating Saussure's anti-empiricism), prioritised differential, and hence negative linguistic functions over 'positive relations' (countering Saussure's tendency towards positivism) and sought to do so in a spirit of 'conjectural' scientism (both continuing and questioning Saussure's objectivism). The subject, in this setup, only recognises itself by way of the linguistic structure or order that precedes and instructs its formation, which Lacan calls that of 'the signifier'. Because the signifier only ever appears negatively, that is by way of other signifiers that it is not, and because each of these also only appears otherwise, the subjectivity informed by the signifier only appears negatively and otherwise too. The subject thus only accedes to meaning in an anticipatory or deferred, and hence always incomplete, way. What informs the subject is irreducibly 'ex-centric' to it, frustrates any possibility of its integration or recognition of itself in consciousness, and is hence unconscious.

Roudinesco's exposition of Lacan's work during this period is competent but somewhat unenthusiastic. Perhaps she is simply tired of it, having dealt with it so thoroughly elsewhere. A similar fate seems to have befallen important institutional disputes Lacan and some of his colleagues were involved in, notably those between dissident French psychoanalytic institutions and the International Psychoanalytic Association. Rather than detailing these disputes, Roudinesco refers the reader to her earlier historical work. That this work demonstrated the historical, political and personal significance of these disputes so brilliantly might have been an argument for reiterating them in, as much as leaving them out of, the current text.

Roudinesco's description of the final phase of Lacan's intellectual life, which ran from about 1960 to his death in 1981, is even more uninterested than the one she gives of his mid-century work. His later intellectual interests - Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Joyce, logic, topology, and

mathematics - are sometimes treated cursorily, ironically or not at all. Roudinesco seems suspicious of the influence of Lacan's son-in law, the logician Jacques Alain Miller, on Lacan during this period and on his legacy subsequently. Although this suspicion blunts her appreciation of some of Lacan's later ideas, which are too easily dismissed as incomprehensible, it is supported by detailed, typically astute accounts of recent Lacanian institutional wrangles.

Roudinesco also includes some fascinating personal and historical material regarding Lacan's involvement in political and intellectual upheavals in Paris from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. All in all, she provides perhaps the best, and certainly the most detailed, account of Lacan's life and work to date.

STARTING SOMETHING

Mark Bevir

Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, Granta, London 1997, 416pp; £12.99 paperback.

How do I begin this review? Now that I have done so, how does my beginning plot the rest of this review? Said's elegant exploration of such issues was published in the US in 1975 and is now published in the UK for the first time. A beginning, he tells us, is to be defined in contrast to an origin. Origins are divine, mythical, ideal presences - Yeats' 'self-born mockers of man's enterprise.' Beginnings are secular, human, constantly re-examined. An origin is a stable source that both guarantees and explains what it leads to, as, for many thinkers, God made the world, authors created their work, and our reason underlay our action. A beginning is a tentative, provisional step made without the assurance provided by a claim to the authority of an origin. Said explores the nature of beginnings by drawing on history, philosophy, and critical theory as well as literature: indeed, *Beginnings* played a role in the shift in literary criticism from explicating the inner workings of texts in their historical, social and political contexts. Said's focus, however, is literary modernism as it developed from 1875 to 1930.

In Said's view, the novel was the principal attempt to give beginnings an authoritative role during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Narrative fiction reflected the desire to mime the biological processes of life and death. The classic novel sought to authorise itself by reflecting the linear movement from parents to children. Hence the popularity of autobiographical and biographical forms as in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tom Jones*. Literary modernism arose out of a crisis in this dynastic notion of beginning and origin. No matter how far back one pursues a genealogy, one only ever reaches another person - another child with parents. The biological idea of beginning leads, therefore, not to an origin, but to an endless regress. It was to avoid this regress that many classic novels had as their leading protagonists orphans, outcasts, solitary figures, or parvenus. Modernists, often acutely aware of the crisis of the genealogical mode of authorisation, turned to the non-linear ties of complementarity and adjacency. They rejected the idea of reaching an origin by tracing back from beginning to beginning. In modernist writing, the origin, whether as the author of a text, or God as the maker of the world, or the unconscious as the basis of subjectivity; the origin in all its forms becomes an opaque object that we can approach only through the inadequate tool of language. Conrad's darkness never before us but sensible about us, Kafka's trial which is always planned but never takes place, these are typical modernist

metaphors for our relation to original, ideal presences. Modernism retains mythical or utopian evocations of an origin, but the origin remains inaccessible, hidden from view.

The hidden nature of the origin creates the perpetual fact of error. We have no authoritative source by which to validate our impressions, beliefs, narratives. Thus, all knowledge remains at best provisional, something we have constantly to re-examine and re-explore. Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* and Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* attempt to reconstruct an event that is presumed to have happened: neither author nor reader witnesses the event, which remains opaque even after the novel has striven to bring it into view. Authors do not even have knowledge of themselves, so they sometimes treat themselves as objects of interpretation. Here again Conrad is exemplary, with his narrator, Marlow, reflecting on both his distance from his subject and his entanglement with the tale he narrates. Finally, writing itself becomes deeply problematic, for the author has no basis from which to begin. 'My task appears to me,' Conrad wrote, 'as sensible as lifting the world without that fulcrum which even that conceited ass, Archimedes, admitted to be necessary'. No wonder modern writers are often figures of suffering, plagued by self-doubt, the anxiety of being derivative, and the burden of production.

Said examines also the form of criticism appropriate to literary modernism. Although he identifies the French structuralists as the most insightful contemporary theorists, it is by returning to the beginning made by Vico that he describes his own position. Whereas the structuralists believe we must forsake origins and beginnings, Said wants to hang on to a modernist notion of beginning. He argues, correctly I believe, that modernism is not solely an elegiac, negative movement, but also a positive affirmation of new artistic forms that are open to the world in new ways. A modernist beginning respects the obligation to recognise that we write in a given context but cannot appeal to an origin to authorise its context. A modernist beginning recognises the need for sympathetic imagination to intend a text, which then needs to be ceaselessly re-examined.

To conclude Said highlights some problematics for which he hopes his study will act as a beginning. Among them is the question of the cultural domination of one domain over another. Later, Said himself wrote an enormously influential study of this problematic in *Orientalism*. For anyone interested in the development of one of the major scholars of our time, therefore, *Beginnings* is a vital text - even a beginning. But perhaps the beginning here should be Said's previous study of Conrad, or even some earlier event. No, we cannot privilege any particular beginning of this kind; after all, the modernists have shown us how forlorn, how endlessly recursive, is the quest for a linear or biological quest for an origin. I had to begin this review by overcoming flux in an act of wilful intent. I had to do so for that is the fate of a modern consciousness.

BOOKNOTES

Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1998, 180pp; £11.95 paperback; £39.50 cloth.

Miller's theory derives from two sources: ethnography (79 shoppers in North London); and theories of sacrifice and consumption (Georges Bataille). Miller's insight is 'that shopping is a regular act that turns expenditure into a devotional ritual that constantly reaffirms some transcendent force, and thereby becomes a primary means by which the transcendent is constituted.'

Shopping is made up of three moments. The first is that of popular discourse where shopping is thought of as selfish consumption. This is placed theoretically as the 'vision of excess.' However, the shopper transforms herself in the act of provision shopping by doing two things: saving money in order to consume more and buying for the members of the household. At the theoretical level, Miller calls this 'thrif' and 'devotion.' He collapses the theory of sacrifice upon the ritual of shopping. The shopper (the woman invariably) engages in classic sacrificial consumption. The shopping is distinguished from the 'treat' which is for pure expenditure, for her, while the shopping is for the idealised images of the members of the household, for example healthy food, suitable clothes. The household becomes the ritual's transcendent value. The shopper has sublated her desires into that of the household. Her objects are, contrary to feminist concerns with domestic labour, devotional. The shopper, the ritual provider, understands her sacrifice as an act of love. Hence the logic of shopping 'is not one of economics ... but of objectification.'

Miller's Hegelian assumptions are provocative and testing. That Bataille's notion of pure expenditure was itself primarily directed at Hegel's 'restricted economy' means that there is much to mull over and debate. That feminist research is developing theories of emotional work means that these ideas of devotion are helpful. In short, an exhilarating book.

Norman Crowther

Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1997, 369pp; £14.50 paperback, £26.50 cloth.

This wide-ranging book unearths and challenges the spectral tenets of cosmopolitanism as articulated through the thesis of globalisation. In a highly entertaining and thorough dissection of the 'new' cosmopolitanism, Brennan argues that it is indeed not new, but founded on existing Western-oriented values, beliefs and structures. Brennan traces this movement across a varied but totalled terrain to note a theory of cosmopolitanism expressed

within academia, the media and political and economic discourses and institutions. Through this analysis, Brennan uncovers an uncritical celebration of postmodernity and perceptions of differentiation, for example, cultural syncretism and cultural specificity, that fail to note the discourses of Western hegemony informing and sustaining these discussions.

This iniquitous counter-narrative is unveiled in a variety of ways. Synthesising W.E.B. Du Bois' Marxism and activism as intellectual biography with a reading of his *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (1945), Brennan points to the discourses of cosmopolitanism engaging the political without incorporating a concerted politics. An example being how the 'post-colonial' is embracing without critiquing the existing relations between 'North' and 'South' or within the three worlds. Cosmopolitanism's defence of the third world, through arguments such as the retention of culturally specific practices and values - as well as preserving certain socioeconomic and political interests of the industrially advanced world - is revealed as fuelling exoticised representations of the 'other' while measuring them against the metastandards of cosmopolitanism. Using Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis, Brennan suggests that dissent against internationalism (Americanism) becomes re-articulated as ethnic or sectarian dissension, preserving the triumphal (moral) hegemony of liberal democracy and free markets.

At Home in the World is ostensibly an American-centric book, intending to be introspective and self-critical. An important dilemma of self-reflexivity, however, is the extent to which one can expect to be insightful about oneself. In his discussion of C.L.R. James' *American Civilization* (1993) and its concern with happiness as an expression of an elusive 'socialist desire', Brennan states that, 'the America project is in many ways a more thorough and sustained example of James' applied cultural theory than *Beyond a Boundary*.' The privileging of, the arguably pedestrian, *American Civilization* over a nominally quasi-autobiographical, social and cultural critique of the experience of colonialism internalises a variety of American exceptionalism.

Brett St Louis