

Séminaire de préparation – Mardi 3 mars 2020

L'Éthique de la psychanalyse

Leçon 13 Texte de Terry Ball – Discutants Julien Alliot, Virginia Hasenbalg

Marc Darmon – Virginia [Hasenbalg] et Julien Alliot s'étaient chargés de discuter cette leçon et de traduire les questions en anglais pour permettre un dialogue avec Terry Ball. Donc, on va changer de programme. On va, peut être, demander à Julien de nous lire le texte que nous a envoyé Terry Ball et Virginia Hasenbalg commentera et discutera cette leçon.

Virginia Hasenbalg – On passe le micro, peut-être ?

Julien Alliot – Donc je vais tenir le rôle de madame Hubert, ce soir, puisque je vais transmettre le texte de quelqu'un d'autre.

Texte de Terry Ball

Lacan sets the scene for the poem.

In the opening remarks of this Lesson XIII, Lacan prepares the scene for his reading of the poem by Arnaut Daniel. He reminds us of some important points that will be helpful and relevant for approaching an understanding of what is achieved in the poem. He will say that the poem, paradoxically, succeeds in effecting a sublimating goal. His commentary on the poem will point to how this sublimating effect is achieved and how this achievement is consistent with his understanding of sublimation. He begins:

“[...] the problem we face is that of establishing the link between sublimation and idealisation. Before we leave the subject of sublimation as I have outlined it for you around the notion of the *Thing* – and it may still seem enigmatic and veiled for very good reasons – I would like to present you with a text, as it were as a note, on the subject of what might be called the paradoxes of sublimation” (p. 161[English]*/271[French-ALI]).

Lacan then proceeds to underscore, in general terms, the fact that sublimation is paradoxical: “Sublimation is not, in fact, what the foolish crowd thinks; and it does not on all occasions necessarily follow the path of the sublime. The change of object doesn't necessarily make the sexual object disappear – far from it ; the sexual object acknowledged as such may come to light in sublimation. The crudest of sexual games can be the object of a poem [as is the case in the poem he will read] without for that reason losing its sublimating goal.” (p. 161/271)

The poem which he will read is of interest to Lacan because it demonstrates the paradoxes of sublimation. The paradoxes relate to the following. In the poem, there is a change of sexual object, however, this does not cause the object to disappear. And still, even though the sexual object does *not* disappear, the sublimating effect is achieved.

Lacan elsewhere speaks about sublimation, situating it around the notion of the *Thing*. Sublimation “[...] raises an object...to the dignity of the Thing” (p.112/184). Lacan will point out how, in the poem, the sexual object, the idealised woman, is put *in the place* of the Thing. It is questionable whether or not sublimation, in the poem, follows the path of the sublime, and, if it does, how one is to understand the term, *sublime*, in this context ? Lacan reminds us of the problem of the link between sublimation and idealisation. Idealisation is central to the phenomenon of courtly love. The poem highlights this problem in that the notion of the ideal Lady is brought into sharp focus at the same time as it is being derided.

As a preparation for looking at Lacan's commentary on the poem, it is worth briefly recalling some of the points that he has previously addressed, and which are relevant to his commentary.

Firstly, there is the notion of the Thing around which Lacan has formulated his idea of sublimation. He has based the notion of the Thing on Freud's account of *das Ding*.

Over the course of this seminar, Lacan speaks about the deep ambiguity relating to the Thing/*das Ding*. He speaks of the maternal Thing, "the mother, insofar as she occupies the place of that thing, of *das Ding*" (p. 67/120). This *das Ding* is "[...] posited as exterior, as the prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget," (p. 71/127). However, insofar as it is "[...] the mother, [it] is also the object of incest, [and therefore] is a forbidden good" (p. 70/125).

Lacan also speaks of the Thing as the beyond-of-the-signified (p. 54/100) and will go on to speak about the field of the Thing which he places at "[...] the point of origin of the signifying chain." (p. 214/379) It is as a function of it being situated beyond the signified, though it is at the point of origin of signification, that "the subject keeps its distance and is constituted in a kind of relationship characterised by primary affect, prior to any repression [...]" (p. 54/100). He has emphasised that this is an absolutely essential "[...] distance between the subject and *das Ding*" (p. 69/123). The Thing is only ever circled and "[...] man [in order to follow the path of his pleasure] must [literally] go round it" (p.95/159). *Literally* is here used quite literally, that is to say, it is because of the 'letter' that the human subject can go around it. In other words, it is because of signification that the Thing can be circled. It is because of signification that there is sublimation.

Lacan has introduced the notion of *das Ding* from the beginning of this seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis in order to approach "the fundamentally conflictual position of man relative to his satisfaction" (p. 95/159). He is referring to Freud's paper, "On Narcissism: an introduction". Sublimation is the means by which man can 'go around' *das Ding* thereby gaining some satisfaction within his conflictual position. "One thing only alludes to the possibility of the happy satisfaction of the instinct drive, and that is the notion of sublimation" (p.293/528).

As well as speaking about the deep ambiguity relating to the Thing, Lacan also speaks about the emptiness of the Thing. He has used the analogy of the vase. He has said that, "[...] at the level of the *Vorstellungen* [the Thing/*das Ding*] is not *nothing*, but literally is not. It is characterised by its absence, its strangeness, [...]" (p. 63/114, 5). It *literally* is not, because the Thing is "[...] a primordial function which is located at the level of the initial establishment of the gravitation of the unconscious *Vorstellungen* [...]" (p. 62/114). Again, the term, *literally*, here is to be taken literally.

[The emptiness of the Thing is brutally depicted in the poem]

The "question of *das Ding* is attached to whatever is open, lacking, or gaping at the centre of our desire [...]" (p. 84/146).

Secondly, there is the notion of the 'change of object' [which 'doesn't necessarily make the object disappear'] and the sublimating effect. Lacan, later in the seminar [22.6.60], will say that "[...] sublimation is the satisfaction of the drive with a change of object, that is, without repression [...]" (p. 293/529). He goes on, "[i]f the drive allows the change of object it is because it [the drive] is already deeply marked by the articulation of the signifier" (p. 293/529). That is to say, the drive exists as subjected to the articulation of the signifier and it is precisely because the drive is subjected to the signifier that the sexual object can change.

These points in relation to the Thing, signification, change of object and sublimation throw some light on what is achieved in the poem *vis-à-vis* sublimation. These points are also relevant to some of Lacan's comments on Hans Sperber's article which Madame Hubert summarises.

Lacan introduces the poem

In this Lesson XIII, Lacan reads a poem by Arnaut Daniel¹ (a troubadour “famous for his extraordinarily rich formal inventiveness” (p. 161)), a poem which has baffled even the specialists in the field. He presents this poem as evidence of the paradoxes of sublimation.

Because of the poem’s raw manner of spot-lighting the sexual object, Lacan remarks that the poem goes even beyond pornography and verges on scatology. However, the poem presents more than graphic pornographic or scatological images; it also presents, according to Lacan, a casuistic moral argument.

The crudity of the poem is enhanced by the fact that it is set in the context of a courtly love liaison between the Lady, Dame Ayma, and her lover, Bernart. Courtly love in the Middle Ages is a topic which Lacan has already addressed in some earlier Lessons in this seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis. Courtly love is founded on “idealisation” – idealisation of the object and the Lady. Lacan comments on how, during the Middle Ages, there was “the celebration of the idealised object” (p.100/165) and not least, the idealised Lady. This phenomenon of the idealised object / idealised Lady is inherently linked to sublimation. This can be seen in the songs and poems of the time, composed by the troubadours and in which the feminine object is purified and idealised. In this way, and by means of this purified representation, the feminine object is desexualised and de-humanised. Lacan will later say that “[t]he inhuman character of the object of courtly love is plainly visible” (p. 214/380). In this context of courtly love, this poem by one of the most renowned troubadours, a ‘grand master of love’ (Petrarch), is so very unusual. “There aren’t two poems like this in the literature of courtly love –” (161). It is a *hapax*.

[Lacan reads the poem]

Lacan comments on the poem

When Lacan finishes his reading of the poem he first remarks on how extraordinary it is that this poem not only has been preserved but has also found its way into about twenty manuscripts.

He also notes the narrator’s stance (the poet’s stance?) in relation to the subject matter of the poem. It is one of defending the knight’s (Bernart’s) decision to refuse to comply with the Lady’s orders “to put his mouth to her trumpet.” Lacan notes that two other *troubadours*, Lord Raymond de Durfort and Lord Trumalec, indicate, in their texts (elsewhere), that they are on the side of the Lady, that is, they defend her and her request/order. They are on the other side of the dubious debate. Lacan does not pursue this debate here.

Lacan’s interest in the poem is in its paradoxically sublimating effect. He speaks of how the poem opens up for us “[...] a strange perspective on the deep ambiguity of the *sublimating imagination* [...]” (p. 162/274). As he has said earlier, far from the sexual object disappearing, “the sexual object [...] may come to light in sublimation” (p.161/271). This is, in fact, what happens to the sexual object in this poem; it comes to light. Commenting on the poem, Lacan says:

“We here find ourselves faced with something which appears as a sort of sharp reversal of that which in meaning is veiled, and something which appears to us as a sort of singular retaliation, the idealised woman being suddenly brutally at the place of the Thing, skilfully constructed and elaborated with the aid of refined signifiers” (p. 163/KOM/TB)**/275).

¹ Arnaut Daniel (1150-1210) was an Occitan [Languedoc] troubadour [court poet] of the 12th century, praised by Dante as "the best smith", and called a "grand master of love" by Petrarch. In the 20th century he was lauded by Ezra Pound in *The Spirit of Romance* as the greatest poet to have ever lived. He invented the *sestina*.

Is it the case that this ‘sharp reversal of that which in meaning is veiled’ means that there is an unveiling, a brutal unveiling which acts as a retaliation in that the object/idealised woman is *not* purified and veiled in the process of being signified, but, instead, is actually exposed? The idealised woman in courtly love is de-sexualised and de-humanised as a result of her being represented as purified. In contrast, in relation to the representation of courtly love, there is here, in the poem, a sharp reversal in that the object/idealised woman is presented as not at all as purified, nonetheless, she is represented as de-sexualised and de-humanised. This representation has been achieved by using “refined signifiers” which have been carefully constructed to represent her – though it is not her, *per se*, it is the sexual object at the place of the Thing, a place which is empty and beyond signification.

The idealised Lady/object in the poem is in stark contrast to the idealised Lady/object of courtly love. It is the contrast between an object that is in the spotlight and one that has disappeared, respectively.

In the poem, the change of object is achieved by means of the signifiers which cause the object to come to light. In contrast, in courtly love, the change of object is achieved by means of the signifiers that cause the object to disappear. In both cases, however, the sublimating effect is achieved in that the sexual object, visible or not visible, is de-sexualised and de-humanised.

Lacan continues:

“We thus find ourselves faced with the following, this Lady, the one who is in the position of the Other and of the object, is brutally found putting forth in its rawness *the emptiness of a Thing* which turns out in its nakedness to be the Thing, *her* Thing, that which is to be found at her very core in its cruel emptiness” (p. 163/KOM/TB**/275).

This Lady, is “in the position of the Other and of the object”, that is, in the position of the prehistoric, unforgettable and impossible to forget Other, the maternal Thing, the mother, insofar as she occupies the place of that Thing, this Other that is the original sexual object and the ‘object of incest’ which is forbidden. This “Other [...] [is] something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me [...]” (p. 71/127, 8). It is something ‘exterior’, the lost object that exists *as lost*. It is the object that exists from ‘before the experience of satisfaction’ (Safouan, p. 4). It is the ‘prehistoric’ Other existing outside of the veil of the signifiers. And the relationship to it is the “[...] kind of relationship characterised by primary affect, prior to any repression [...]” (p. 54/100).

This Lady in the poem is in the position the prehistoric Other, the *before-language-Other*, the *outside-of-language-Other*, the *prior-to-any-repression-Other*, the *beyond-of-the-signified-Other*, the *dumb-reality*. This Other is exposed in all its rawness in the poem. The Lady is “brutally found putting forth in its rawness *the emptiness of a Thing* [...]” (p. 163/KOM/TB**/275).

What is captured in the poem is the rawness of the emptiness of the Thing which, though represented by the signifier, is not *veiled* by this representation, but, instead, is actually exposed by the signifiers, the “refined signifiers” which are skilfully constructed by the poet, Arnaut Daniel, the master of love.

The rawness of the emptiness of the Thing turns out, in its nakedness, to be the Thing, *her* Thing. The signifiers expose the emptiness; they do not veil it.

Lacan continues:

“[...] this Thing, here, is in a certain sense unveiled with a quite particularly cruel and insistent power” (p. 163/KOM)**/275).

[The painting from 1866, which Lacan bought in 1954, comes to mind: The Origin of the World [*L'Origine du Monde*], by Gustav Courbet. It, also, is one of a kind.]

The Thing is unveiled. The sexual object is unveiled. With this change of object, the sublimation effect is achieved even though the object does not disappear but, on the contrary,

is brought to light. The change of object often means that the object disappears. In this poem, however, the change of object causes the object to come to light, nevertheless, there *is* a change of object and the sublimating effect is achieved.

Lacan uses the word, 'derision', when he goes on to reference the myth of *Daphnis et Chloe* in which Syrinx is transformed into the pipe of Pan's flute:

"[...] on the level of derision that is to be found in the strange poem that I brought to your attention here, we find the same structure, the same model of an emptiness at the core, around which is articulated that by means of which desire is, in the end, sublimated" (p. 163/275,276).

Lacan introduces Madame Hubert /Sperber's article

At this point in his seminar, Lacan introduces Madame Hubert who will give her summary of Hans Sperber's (1912) article, "On the Influence of Sexual Factors on the Origin and Development of Language". The relevance of this article, he says, is that it touches on points relevant to sublimation. Lacan notes that Ernest Jones commented on Sperber's article in *his* [Jones's] article (1916), "The Theory of Symbolism", reminding us also that he [Lacan] has written a commentary on Jones's article, "In Memory of Earnest Jones: on his Theory of Symbolism," (1959).

I jump forward for a moment to lesson XIV of the 16th March 1960 (the following lesson) and to where Lacan refers back to Madame Hubert's summary of Sperber's article and where he links it to what he has been saying about sublimation. He briefly critiques the article, saying that, while it is useful to look at 'what might be called the sexual roots in Indo-European languages (langues)', Sperber's remarks, however, do not acknowledge the '[...] function of the signifier or the creation of signification through the metonymic and metaphoric use of signifiers [...]' (p. 168/288). We do not find the...

"[...] signifying structure as such here; nothing implies that the oppositional element which forms the structure of the use of signifiers – and is already fully developed in the *Fort-Da* from which we took our original example – is given in the natural sexual call" (p.169/290).

In other words, he says that "the sexual call [...] cannot give us even the most primitive structuring element of language" (p. 169/290).

The immediate relevance of this point here [tonight] is that sublimation is dependent on the fact of signification and the signifier. Sublimation is dependent on the fact that the drive is 'articulated'; the drive is not the equivalent of 'natural instinct'. Later on, in lesson XXV [*leçon XXV*] (22.6.1960), Lacan spells out this point, namely, that, because, and only because the drive is "marked by the articulation of the signifier" (p. 293/529), the change of object, on which sublimation depends, is possible. He further explains that it is primarily the metonymic axis of signification which inherently implies the change of object. In other words, the change of object is a displacement.

Still, even though Lacan is critical of Sperber's article, he thought it useful to present it "because of what is to be found on its horizon" (though not actually demonstrated) namely,

"[...] the radical relationship that exists between [...] the principal actions of agriculture, such as that of opening the belly of the earth [...] and, not so much the sexual act as, the female sexual organ" (p. 168/289).

Sperber's article is of interest and will focus our thought, says Lacan, because "[...] the female sexual organ, or, more precisely, the form of an opening and an emptiness, is at the centre of all the metaphors concerned [...]" (p. 169/289). [Mention of the form of 'an emptiness' immediately brings to mind Arnaut Daniel's poem and how it presents the emptiness of the Thing.]

I do not want to say any more about this lesson (*leçon XIV*) because that would be to pre-empt the work of the next session on 17th March [this year] however, I draw attention to Lacan's

comments on Sperber's article (presented by Madame Hubert) in order to select a couple of points from this article.

In his article, Sperber argues that sexual activity, in its strictly physical sense, is the source of language because this activity fulfils the requirements for the development of language. He outlines the six following conditions:

- Firstly, at least two individuals participate in the situation.
- At least one individual, A, is in an emotional state, which leads him to call out.
- Thirdly, certain forces must come into play to oblige individual B to react in a consistent manner.
- Fourthly, B's reaction should be desirable to A, otherwise A would have no interest in provoking B's reaction through his calls.
- Fifthly, the situation should arise often, and remain the same.
- Sixthly, the situation should be a simple one" (p. 278 [Fr]/KOM**).

Sperber's hypothesis is that "[...] *sexual arousal [excitation] is probably the main source of the first manifestations of speech [la parole][...]*" (p. 279 [Fr]/KOM**).

Also, that language development correlates with cultural development, for example, "[...] the *call [cri] of seduction* was not possible before the formation of the family" (p. 279 [Fr]/KOM*). And in the same way, language development correlates with cultural progress, for example (he proposes) that the use of tools for work was "accompanied by expressions similar to calls of seduction because they were sexually cathected" (p. 280 [Fr]/KOM*).

Lacan's criticism that Sperber's remarks do not acknowledge the "function of the signifier or the creation of signification through the metonymic and metaphoric use of signifiers" (p. 168) can be illustrated in the following statement from Sperber's article:

"Sexual cathexis means here that the phantasmatic activity of primitive man presented a certain analogy with human sexual organs, that we saw in the work with tools, *the image of the sexual act*" (p. 280 [Fr]/KOM*).

We note that Sperber's focus is on the physicality of the sexual act rather than on the *human* sexual act, that is the act-as-subjected-to-the-symbolic.

Sperber (Madame Hubert) goes on to refer to the tension involved in physical, agricultural work, saying that it is similar to sexual tension which demands a discharge and the "emission of sounds", like those emitted in the sexual act. Once again, Sperber is referring to the act in its physicality. We also note that the "emission of sounds" is completely different to the articulation of signifiers. The emission of sounds is a natural, physical reaction. The 'sound' which is emitted is not a signifier, it does not comply with the signifying structure, that is to say, there is no "*oppositional* element which forms the structure of the use of signifiers [*fort-da*]" (p. 169/290). The sound is a "standardised cry that accompanies an activity" (p. 169/290), like we hear especially from birds, but it is not a signifier.

It is clear that Sperber's theory does not acknowledge the import of the subjection to the symbolic which is inherent in the human subject.

Sperber proposes that the image of the earth parallels that of the womb, the image of seeds parallels that of semen and the image of the plough parallels that of the phallus. The physicality, again, is to the forefront.

Lacan had introduced Madame Hubert's summary of Sperber's article by referring to Jones's (1916) article on symbolism in which Jones refers to Sperber's article. Jones is critical of Sperber's hypothesis. He does not agree with Sperber's interpretation which posits that ploughing symbolises copulation. Lacan, in this seminar, says that, while ploughing does *not* symbolise copulation, it may be "a symbolic copulation". He says, "[t]he copulation between

the ploughman and the earth is not a symbolisation but the equivalent of a symbolic copulation” (p. 164/277).

With reference to that last point, the symbolic copulation of the ploughman with the earth, I will finish by quoting a couple of lines from the Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967). His epic poem, *The Great Hunger*, describes and reflects on the frustrations of a farmer, “Patrick Maguire”. The poem opens with the line, “Clay is the word and clay is the flesh...” It speaks of the mother “who praised the man who made a field his bride...” And it describes how “The twisting sod rolls over on her back / The virgin screams before the irresistible sock.

As an aside:

The following lines from this epic poem, *The Great Hunger*, by poet, Patrick Kavanagh (who was a contemporary of Lacan) are somewhat uncanny:

“Once one day in June when he was walking
Among his cattle in the Yellow Meadow
He met a girl carrying a basket
And he was then a young and heated fellow.
... He rushed beyond **the thing**
To the **unreal**. And he saw **Sin...**
...And that girl was gone and he was counting
The dangers in the fields where love ranted
He was helpless. He saw his cattle
And stroked their flanks in lieu of wife to handle.” [Emphasis added]

*English version: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII.* (Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Dennis Porter. Routledge Press, 1992.

**Translated from the French (ALI) version by Kieran O’Meara.