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LADY IN WAITING

My reading of Lacan's *Seminar 13, The Object of Psychoanalysis*, as is usually the case for me in reading Lacan, a troubled one.¹ I used a method which was recommended to me, and has borne fruit previously, which is to read, reread and reread, taking detailed notes each time. Despite my taking this route in my research, I found I could not penetrate the text, as if I were simply skimming over the surface of it. In addition to this sense of exclusion, I had the persistent thought that I *should* know how to find a way in, and that I should be already in the process of writing my presentation for a deadline which was looming. These were thus questions of impossibility, knowing and time. I had nothing, the task seemed impossible and time was running out. I took this experience to supervision, without my usual careful preparation. In other words, I came to supervision with nothing other than what I didn't have, which was the barren attempt to know the text. "There is no love", said my supervisor in response to my dilemma. Her statement, which addressed the question of love rather than knowledge, opened the way to something that I was already aware of, but which was occluded in my fruitless attempts to know. I realized that, rather than finding a way in, the seminar had found its way into me. An *incorporation* if you like. This incorporation came in the form of associations from my life which had arrived unbidden whilst reading, which I had promptly disregarded. These memories had been ignored in my struggles to understand the text, or to 'make sense' of something. This attempt to make sense could be said to belong to the 'order of knowledge,' in the form of knowledge which comes pre-packaged. I had engaged in an act of forgetting, under the command of knowing, that only this phrase "no love", said in the context of arriving at supervision with what I didn't have, produced a remembering which was fruitful. And further, the remembering brought a presence with it which was new, rather than a re-finding of something lost. I would name this presence something unforgotten rather than remembered.

In the process of beginning to write the presentation via these associations rather than via a preformed knowledge, I realized that my initial and failed attempt at writing via an understanding of the text was to write as if I wasn't there, to somehow capture a knowledge using an unseen I. This is reminiscent of the unseen eye of science. In other words, I was attempting to arrive at the moment of my presen-

tation with everything stitched up in terms of knowledge. Thus, it was only in the inclusion of myself, or more precisely that which inhabits me that is not my own, where something had room to move and could begin to flow.

Which brings me to one of my ‘un-forgettings,’ a fragment of card on which my father had written a poem I had found some years ago. This poem had returned to me as I read Lacan’s lessons, and yet this returning gift I had put aside as I attempted to understand what was in front of me. It had become a forgotten penetration. My father had died about five weeks earlier, at age 93, whilst in hospital being treated for an infection. Whilst his death had been shocking to me, and I knew I was in grief, I could still sense with dread something there waiting for me. It was only as I wrote my experience of reading Lacan’s seminar into my writing that at last this dreadful thing arrived. It came in the form of a terrible gaping hole or chasm in the place where my father once was. An unsymboliseable realisation producing a horror of nothingness and a flood of tears and anguish. And yet this anguish and nothingness became a place that produced something. A productive place had occurred in the very act of writing myself into my writing, by way of associations that had brought back my forgettings.

Here is his poem, which works a question of truth and knowledge.

He writes:

*I go through old photos
They point and say that was you in your heyday
Full of energy and knowledge, giving out with the word
Pure Hubris, construction
There are your two beautiful children
Your beautiful wife
All love and joy
What trickster came
Like the snake in the garden I walk on my belly for the rest of my days
Was it ever me
Were they them

Just make joy and beauty
What more can the gods ask of us*

My parents’ separation when I was nine is a knowledge that is hidden in the beauty of those family photos my father refers to. The surfaces of the pictures, which are beautiful surfaces, point and say “that was you” and “there are your” implying a subject that is whole and possessed, and yet also in the image of that subject lies a trickster. The trickster is, as I read it, what points to what is not there in a surface of beauty and joy, a beautiful surface in which a forgetting occurs. It points to the

disappearance of the subject in the very act of capturing the image of the subject. It is what is there *as not there*, what fades in the very moment of its capture. My father writes, “was it ever me, were they them.” The subject disappears from its own beauty, a beautiful surface in a moment of fading.

The moment of representation produces a *pas de sujet*, something which in the act of representation points ineffably to what is not there. This is the divided subject between the being of knowledge and the being of truth, where a knowledge of what appears as missing becomes masked by a fetishized (non)presence. The first error, as Lacan names it, is one of biology in taking the penis as the phallus. Lacan takes the *pas-de* in *pas-de* penis and transfers it to the *pas-de* savoir. To quote from “Science and Truth”, Lacan’s first lesson in *The Object of Psychoanalysis*:

Let us, on the other hand, recognise the subject’s efficacy in the *gnomon* he erects, a *gnomon* that constantly indicates truth’s site to him.²

A *gnomon* is a sundial, a vertical shaft erected for the shafts of light, which records via its shadow the movement of celestial bodies. Gno, in *gnomon*, is from the root to know. And, as Lacan says, the knower knows they are a knower whether they know something or not. In my father’s poem, the trickster presents the *gnomon* as the truth, producing an error, whereas the *gnomon* points to the truth as disappearance. As in the beautiful photos, so too the writer who fades in the very moment of representing his disappointment. *Was it ever me*.

Which brings me to another association whilst reading the seminar. A family portrait again, another beautiful surface which Lacan makes use of in his seminar. My first encounter with Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* was during a trip to Spain in my early twenties. Its enormous scale, the depth of the colours, the realism and the light stunned me at the time, however what transfixed me was the effect it had on me as a viewer in the act of viewing. My experience is one of hunting, my eye roving for somewhere to settle, and yet being unable to rest. This continual movement, the inability to simply ‘take in’ the scene is contrasted with other paintings such as landscapes with a clear single vanishing point and single perspective designed in such a way as to allow the eye to settle in a classical harmony. On a first pass, *Las Meninas* appears as a family portrait, but one is immediately struck by the very direct gaze of the painter depicted. In other portraits where a subject may be looking directly out of the scene at the vanishing point of the viewer’s eye looking in, that seemingly direct look is assumed to be a theoretical point of the painter’s eye composing the scene, an immobile viewing point of a representation, shielding the viewer from the intensity and anxiety that a direct gaze may produce. In that more settled experience, one is more or less aware of the surface of the canvas, that this is a painting one is looking at. A representation. But in the case of *Las Meninas* there is a painter gazing out with brush poised in the act of representing the very point at which the eye looking at the surface of the painting occupies, which makes this viewing eye a *seen eye*, an object of representation that is in the act of attempting to take in a representation. This makes of *Las Meninas*, as many includ-

ing Lacan and Foucault have noted, a representation of representation, twisted in upon itself. This is what Lacan calls a “trap for the eye.” There are as many theories about *Las Meninas* as there are those who have produced a theory, and yet, much like theories on hysteria, *Las Meninas* is what remains outside those attempts to capture it.

Las Meninas, which translates as “Ladies in Waiting”, was commissioned by Philip IV and completed in 1654, the Cartesian moment and the invention of modern western science. It depicts in its structure what falls away in the very act of representation. The act of representation cannot capture it all, leaving the not-all which falls out of representation. As Lacan writes, the Cartesian I, in “I think”, thinks “therefore I am.” The Cartesian “therefore I am” fails to fully represent. These two I’s are a duplicity between being as nothing and the being that thinking gives rise to. This relationship is a division, which is the very foundation of the subject. Any judgement that is made of this subject, any representation, cannot be made by an objective or unseen eye as it must take as its beginning the very duplicity of the subject attempting to represent it. There is a complete dissociation between these two I’s, or two perspectives. As Lacan says, the scene of representation contains within it a look, which is a look without an eye, looking back at the subject in the act of representation. This is the very subject implicated in both the being prior to thinking, and the being thought. These two beings produce a torsion, the Moebius strip on which one side is stamped knowledge and the other truth.

Lacan prescribes as reading for the group in attendance at his seminar, the first chapter of Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, *Las Meninas*, which I also took as prescribed reading. I take a quote from the last paragraph of this chapter.

Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velázquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us. And, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which its offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation—of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject—which is the same - has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.³

At the very point of the invention of modern Western science, the Cartesian ‘I’ cannot carry itself over to the other ‘I’ of therefore I am. What is foundational fades in a necessary disappearance. In *Las Meninas*, Velázquez represents himself painting this gap, gazing out and painting the very point of torsion produced between these two ‘I’s.

It is science that sutures this gap, the place of torsion. Studying psychology many years ago, I was taught to write “the writer” instead of the first person ‘I’. “The writer” is written into the text as an invisible point of observation of a world, which is manipulated under certain repeatable and controlled conditions. I write in my lab reports, “the writer observed.” This is psychology’s tilt at science, at an object which is repeatable and verifiable. This writer has no body, other than a body of knowledge. The body is dis-placed. There is no body which lacks, only a gap in a body of knowledge that will be filled eventually. The *pas-de penis* to *pas-de savoir*. In this suturing, the writer’s observation is not an independent variable, it does not change the world. It is an unblinking, unmoved and unmoving eye, an observation free of a world which includes the observer. This is a ritual or incantation that produces an unseen eye, which was a spell I was attempting to weave in my attempt to know the text. “The writer” performs an experiment and subsequently reports from this unseen perspective, which is named the laboratory. In the etymology of laboratory, we have labour and we have a “room set aside.” The repeated labour of science’s suturing is the very place *Las Meninas* is structured to look directly at.

In lesson 14 of *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan says:

The power of mathematics, the frenetic pace of our science reposes on nothing other than the suture of the subject, from the thinness of this scar, and after all, in speaking about a scar of this suture, you must not believe that I am using a term that a mathematician would reject...⁴

Science reposes on *nothing other*. Repose is an interesting word to use in relation to the frenetic pace of science. Repose is resting, but it is also to be situated in a particular place. Lacan highlights here something that inhabits a single point or place of rest and yet proceeds at a frenetic pace, a pace which has a certain delirium. It conjures an image of a frenetic suturing, a means by which the frenetic pace of knowledge continues to suture the subject of science. A delirium of *nothing other*, which put another way is of sameness rather than difference. This suturing does not close the gap, but is rather an eternal closing of the gap. Science proposes an object which is not yet known but knowable, which produces a kind of mania at the point of the suture, “the frenetic pace” as Lacan calls it. Religion places God in that gap, the God of the gaps. Science frenetically, reliably, repeatedly, closes the gap.

Lacan says in “Science and Truth”:

...the fact is that science, if one looks at it closely, has no memory. Once constituted, it forgets the circuitous path by which it came into being; otherwise stated, it forgets a dimension of truth that psychoanalysis seriously puts to work.⁵

The science which came into being, as Lacan puts it, is the very being of the Cartesian subject, which is a subject sustained in the labour of forgetting. This science is the very putting to work, the labour, of an act of forgetting. As is said, those who forget are condemned to repeat, and repeatability is one of the rules of the scientific

method. This is a repeated forgetting which allows one to stay in place and yet proceed at a frenetic pace. The way that science reposes on this thinness of this scar could be thought of as a kind of ‘re-mainia,’ which has no end, and so no beginning either. Lacan on the other hand proposes that psychoanalysis, a psychoanalysis which relies on the sutured subject of science, is an infinite adjournment of psychoanalysis as science. The subject supposed to know, the being of knowledge in the form of the analyst, is aligned with the symptom of the sutured subject, listening in a kind of laboratory of deferment. This being is *Las Meninas* or a perpetual Lady in Waiting, waiting for the not-all which falls from the representation of the Cartesian subject. The psychoanalytic clinic engages this Cartesian being as witness to the act of eliding a truth, a truth which Lacan says psychoanalysis seriously puts to work at the site of the thinness of the suture of this scar. There is a thinness to this scar, which we might name as a ‘thing-ness,’ a scar of the trace of das Ding.

And what object do we find glowing at the centre of *Las Meninas* but the Infanta. This is the idealized image of a king who marries his niece in an attempt to live forever, a king who keeps it in the family. As the king’s line fades, that fading is masked with a shining thing. Its shining is generated by the idealizing scopophilic lens encircling it. In *Las Meninas*, unlike Velázquez’s other depictions of the Infanta, she is both a gap and that screen which elides the gap, both nothing and everything. She is, to borrow from Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which is Not One*, “A hole in the scopophilic lens.”⁶ This is the point of the emptying of the Other’s gaze leaving the subject’s gaze, no longer supposed, alone with itself. The gaze encircles an absence where something is erected memorializing a lost thing.

Lacan names the transfer of the object at the end of analysis as a rendezvous and a recognition. The recognition is not the image reflected in the mirror from the single perspective of the idealized ‘I’ of being, but the strange anamorphic object one must view from elsewhere. It is an object from elsewhere, *alien but also in human*. In human, and thus at the point of this rendezvous recognized as alien-in-human. The ambiguity of the belonging of this inhuman object is an ambiguity produced by the distance between the *objet a* and the I, or in the case of *Las Meninas*, the distance of the painter from the canvas. In that distance we find the lady in waiting, which we might think of as a listening that is not “lady-like” but born of an absence which does not “get to the point.” It is a listening with *an-other* ear as Luce Irigaray puts it.⁷ Perhaps this other ear is a wild front ear, a frontier always just out of reach.

Notes

1. This writing is an edited version of a 2023 presentation at the Freudian School of Melbourne which was a response to three lessons in Lacan’s 1965-66 seminar *The Object of Psychoanalysis*.

2. Jacques Lacan, “Science and Truth”, *Écrits: the First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink, H elouise Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 745.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 18.
4. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Object of Psychoanalysis, Book XIII (1965-66)*, translated by Cormac Gallagher, unpublished. Available at www.lacaninireland.com.
5. Lacan, "Science and Truth", p. 738.
6. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 26.
7. Irigaray, p. 29.