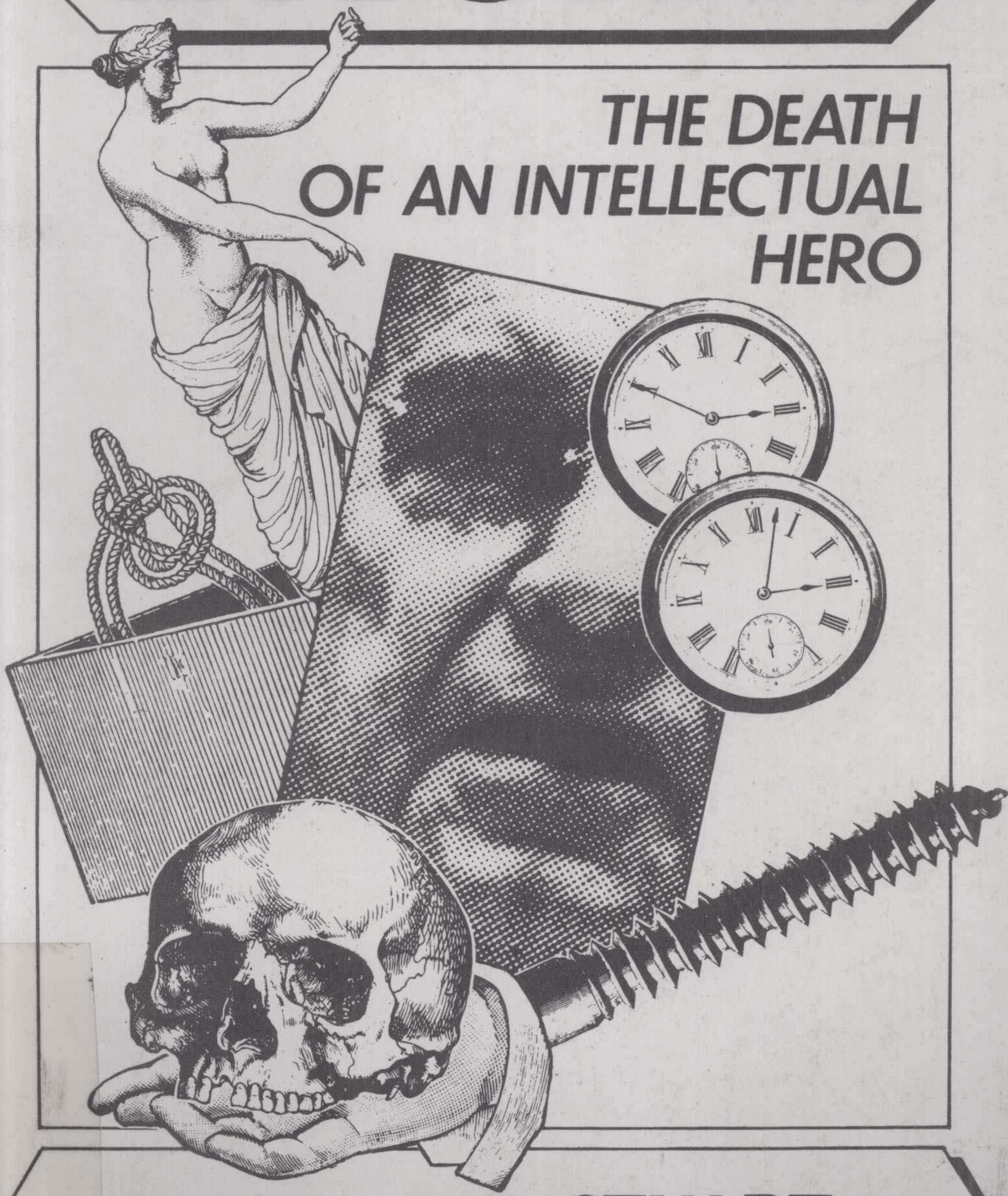


# ■ JACQUES ■ LACAN

## THE DEATH OF AN INTELLECTUAL HERO



■ STUART ■  
**Schneiderman**



JACQUES  
LACAN the death  
of an  
intellectual  
hero

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## prologue

I WENT TO PARIS TO BE PSYCHOANALYZED BY JACQUES Lacan. For several years I had labored through his writings, handicapped by an imperfect knowledge of the French language and a basic ignorance of psychoanalytic practice. Despite this, I found in Lacan's work a sense of intellectual excitement and courage that seemed to be lacking in my literary studies.

My previous exploration of literature, especially Shakespeare, had prepared me well to appreciate Lacan. His writings are finely wrought, even overwrought, and they do not easily make sense. In this they resemble poetry, and like poetry they yield to critical thinking. Yet this resemblance is a ploy, a rhetorical ploy. This was my thought when I decided that it would be contradictory for me to continue explicating texts when I knew nothing of the experience from

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which the texts were drawn. Thus I left Buffalo and a career as professor of English to become a Lacanian psychoanalyst.

My transition, or passage, or translation, is the subject of this book. Rather than offer a critical commentary on Lacan's texts or an elaboration of his theory, I want to re-enact my experience of psychoanalysis with Jacques Lacan, rhetorically.

Lacan lived for eighty tumultuous years and made a very successful career out of saying things that just about no one could understand. He provoked a series of bitter struggles within the world of psychoanalysis, which led in the 1960s to his expulsion from the International Psychoanalytic Association. Deprived of professional recognition and a world stage, Lacan was limited to being outrageous in Paris. He had his own Freudian school there, and among his friends were Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alberto Giacometti, André Malraux, Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

In the mid-sixties general Parisian opinion had it that Lacan was "*le seul génie du moment*." At the time few took this too seriously; it was only another intellectual fad. The years would prove them wrong. The importance and influence of Lacan deepened, and, within an environment stud-ded with brilliant intellectual stars, his word gained an authority reserved only for the very great. And within the world of psychoanalysis only Freud had the same kind of personal following and respect, to say nothing of the same hostility.

Admittedly, these judgments are debatable. All the more because Lacan's writings are so difficult of access that readers generally can't get enough of a grip on the material to formulate their own judgments. The responsibility for this is necessarily Lacan's. He seems to have gone to great lengths to prevent people from finding out what he had to say. Some have tried to justify this as a teaching device, and a good argument has been made to the effect that this is in-

deed psychoanalytic. Yet nothing obliges us to follow Lacan through the realm of the abstruse. If his theory has validity, one should be able to articulate it with clarity and precision. This is a task I have set myself.

Still, my decision to write the book was not altogether autonomous. In some sense it was imposed on me by the place I inhabit. That is a fancy way, a Lacanian way, of saying that the form of my book is the result of several years of dialogue about Lacan with American psychoanalysts and intellectuals. Lacan thought that American analysts were irrevocably opposed to him and that his thought could never be accepted in this country. We can't tell whether or not Lacanian theory will be embraced by Americans. On the subject of outright American hostility, Lacan was wrong. My own experience with the American psychoanalytic community has shown me that there is a clear interest in seeking out those places where Lacan made contributions that might help analysts on these shores in their theorization and practice. So I dedicate this book to all of those Americans who have wanted to learn more about Lacan, who have discussed and debated the salient points of theory and practice, and who have often taught me as much about Lacan as I have taught them.

Jacques Lacan died in Paris on September 9, 1981.

# 1

A WELL-KNOWN LOGICAL PARADOX READS AS FOLLOWS: This statement is false. Would it be equivalent if the first sentence in this book read: This is not the beginning. If the book were a fiction, if I were beginning *in medias res* or anywhere else, the statement would not be paradoxical. But then you might say: That in itself is a paradox, the fact that the statement is not paradoxical.

This book is not an introduction to Lacan. And yet I know full well that I intend to address the book to a general reader, not a specialist in matters psychoanalytic, not a specialist in Lacan, to someone who is simply trying to get a handle on Lacan. Is it a sleight of hand to begin this introduction with the statement: This book is a conclusion. However much I may wish to introduce you to Lacan—a man who was my analyst and mentor—this is now impossible because Lacan is dead. But, then again, I am what is called a Lacanian, and one of the things that means is that maybe I will do it anyway.

When Lacan was alive I published four essays that purported to be introductions. They say something like: Here he is, my old friend Lacan, I want you to meet him; I have

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profited from knowing him and maybe you will too. Noble sentiments, you may think, decorous, courteous, *comme il faut*. Of these introductions one was published in 1971 in *Diacritics*; one appeared in *Psychology Today* in 1978; and the last two were included in a volume about the school of Lacan that I edited and translated for Yale University Press, entitled *Returning to Freud* (1980). After that I stopped writing introductions, and started asking myself why I stopped. One thought that crossed my mind was that writing introductions, proposing to introduce people to a man who was anything but decorous, is a contradiction in terms. My good intentions were sundered by an internal contradiction. Philippe Sollers, critic, novelist, and a friend of Lacan's, said that Lacan had bad manners—no, not bad, execrable. Now why would I want to introduce you to someone who had execrable manners? Perhaps I am neurotic and want you to share my neurosis?

If I am, you might counsel me a few sessions of psychoanalysis to resolve my inner conflicts. Why not? Of course, Lacan was my analyst and my analysis terminated several years ago. Besides, Lacan is dead, and if I want to return to him to ask him a question, I can only do so through a fiction or a dream. So what would Lacan have said about my abjuring the art of writing introductions? Perhaps it would have gone something like this: "*Cher ami*, the answer is clear, you wrote four introductions and then stopped because you don't know how to count beyond four." Lacan never did address me in those terms, but that is neither here nor there. The statement is characteristic of the way he thought about things; he could have said it. As a matter of fact, during his seminars Lacan sometimes mused about how high his analysts could count.

Now you see that I should have shown some circumspection before trying to introduce you to a man who talked like that. Unless, of course, I had said: This man is a Zen master. On that note I could have made a proper introduction. The

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problem is that Lacan always insisted on being thought of as a Freudian psychoanalyst. Everyone knows that Freudian psychoanalysts, whatever their quirks, don't talk like that, they don't indulge in quasi-sophistical, narcissistic mumbo-jumbo. If you think you are having a problem with Lacan, just think how the classical and orthodox Freudians felt when Lacan looked at them and said: "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère."

Actually, to be honest, Lacan never said that to the group of orthodox Freudians called the International Psychoanalytic Association. He might just as well have, for they reacted to him phobically. What is interesting and at the same time Lacanian is that these lies I am inventing tell more about certain situations than truths or facts do.

Before going any further I will tell you that Lacan was wrong: I can count beyond four. This does not make him a bad analyst. As Edward Glover said, there is a therapeutic effect to inexact interpretation. The point is: What did Lacan mean when he spoke of counting up to four? Certainly, he did not mean one, two, three, four, five . . . This I have known how to do since the moment I discovered that my fingers were digits. Most people think that such things are trivial, as common sense tells them. And yet most people also learn to count on their fingers, assuming of course that they learn to count, and how is it that these same digits, being identified as one, two, three, four, five, are also my fingers?

If it were merely a question of the fingers on one hand, then I would have no difficulty counting beyond four, up to five. The problem would arise in getting to six. For the sake of argument, let us limit ourselves to the one hand and ask how I get to six. You must remember doing this: you go back to the beginning and recount the same fingers. Thus finger one becomes finger six or else the first digit becomes the sixth digit. Obviously this is another logical problem, because you cannot do arithmetic very well if the first digit and

the sixth are the same. And, besides, by now you must think that your psychoanalyzed author has lost his mind. How could anyone justify psychoanalysis and the results of a psychoanalytic treatment when he can arrive at a statement like the following: Someone who has completed a successful psychoanalysis spends his time wondering about the sixth finger on his right hand or whether or not he knows how to count to four. Would it not be better to say that I emerged from my psychoanalysis a whole person, an authentic being, fulfilled and contented, able to work and to love? After all, those are things that everyone wants and strives for through endless analysis or therapy. What kind of nonsense would have it that those things are not the question in analysis and that what we should really concern ourselves about is how someone counting on the fingers of one hand can get to the number six?

In the final analysis, this sounds like Zen. Did you ever try to listen to the sound in “sounds like”? It may be a worthwhile spiritual exercise. It even brings to mind the most famous Zen koan: the sound of the one hand clapping. Now this Zen koan is an enigma; as a matter of fact, it is probably a better riddle than the one about counting to six using one hand. But the point is that the two riddles are the same: if you figure out what the sound of one hand clapping is, then you will know how to count to six with one hand. It is not quite accurate to say that the sound of the one hand clapping is the sixth digit on my right hand, but it is close enough for the moment.

If you read about Zen koans you will know that the correct response to this koan is that the student or novice extends his hand. That is the sound of the one hand clapping. A soundless sound, a name for something that is not. Or better, to use Lacan’s term, extending the hand signifies the sound of one hand clapping, soundlessly and also wordlessly. Exemplary instance of what Lacan called “a discourse without words.”

In mathematics there is a notation for the sound of the one hand clapping. The set of all the sounds made by one hand clapping is the empty set. The notation is  $\emptyset$ . Now this empty set has a particular function in counting ordinal numbers. The count begins with the empty set and it means that the set of the empty set is one, that is to say, the empty set is written in the brackets that are used in mathematics to designate a set. And you may know that, in order to count to two, you take the set composed of the empty set and the set of the empty set, of 0 and 1, if you like. When Lacan talked about how high people could count, he was talking about the kind of counting that takes place in these terms. And it is no simple matter to keep going this way: three is the set comprising the empty set, the set of the empty set, and the set comprising the empty set and the set of the empty set. At the very least this shows that mathematics would not have advanced too far if it had had to use words. This will not prevent me from showing you that I know how to count to four: four is the set comprising the empty set, the set of the empty set, the set comprising the empty set and the set of the empty set, and the set comprising the empty set and the set of the empty set and the set comprising the empty set and the set of the empty set. Thus, counting up to four is no mean feat. Five is simply the set comprising all the sets designating 0, 1, 2, 3, 4. Note also in this formulation how important the punctuation is: the brackets in set theory and in logic function as punctuation, and as soon as things get a little complicated, they become essential if we are to find our way.

I will spare you the count up to six. From what I have said up to now, the sound of the one hand clapping is not the sixth finger on the one hand; it is the empty set without which we could not count at all in ordinal arithmetic. Once its principle is established, we can count on and on, if we so choose.

Is this simply a sterile exercise, lacking in the marrow of

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human emotion? Why would Lacan, a man who wanted to effect psychoanalytic cures, spend his time with subjects that are manifestly outside his field? Or, here is a better question, what are the psychoanalytic versions of these numbers, given that numbers are important in psychoanalysis and also that analysis tends irreducibly to retain some content: analysis cannot be entirely formalized, Lacan said.

In Lacan's theory the empty set has more than one manifestation: what comes to mind most immediately is the empty grave, the empty tomb. I believe Anthony Wilden to have been the first to accent its importance in *The Language of the Self*. The empty grave is important not because of its relationship to death, considered here as a fact of nature, but rather because of its symbolization of the place against which we have to confront the dead. If the dead were at home in their graves, then they would be buried, classed, and we would be finished with them. If the grave is empty, we have to deal with them. The empty grave has a significant role in the story of Christ as well as in that of Hamlet—the appearance of the ghost suggests to Hamlet that the grave has been opened and emptied. Also, there are two central figures in Freudian theory who are noteworthy for not having been buried, for having disappeared without a trace: Oedipus and Moses. (Admittedly, the descendants of Theseus know the site of the grave of Oedipus, but this does not obviate the fact that when Oedipus dies, the place of his grave is unmarked; he disappears. This is a way of signifying the empty set, of marking it with a sign, a sign that is kept secret and is passed down from father to son.)

What then is the set of the empty set? In Lacan's theory this can only be the signifier as one, as singular. We can also say that it is the singular subject, though the subject is not singular unless the signifier as one establishes the concept of oneness. This signifier may be a ghost, or the secret that is kept by the descendants of Theseus, but it is preeminently for Lacan the proper name. The problem we will see later is

that the empty grave is also a subject; so the human subject is always split between a mark and a void.

Am I then saying that the theory of psychoanalysis can be constructed out of the empty grave and the signifier? Yes. But, you might object, if this is what Lacan was up to, then he certainly deviated from Freud. These were not Freud's terms, as an examination of the Freudian text establishes beyond doubt. My answer is to recommend that you not be too hasty in drawing a conclusion here, in dismissing Lacan's argument before you know what it is. I would suggest that you look at photographs of Freud's office and note with care the staggering number of funerary objects, objects dug up from the earth by archaeologists. Freud was passionately involved with the process of emptying the earth of human artifacts. He hoarded them himself to such an extent that his offices almost resemble a tomb. And why shouldn't we consider this to be a text in the same way we consider Freud's writings to be a text?

I will not pursue this argument any further for the moment. This book, the one you have in your hands, is designed to demonstrate these points. For the moment we have the elements we need to count, and we can look in a different way at some of the numbers that appear habitually in Freud. I have said that the empty set, whose name is zero, corresponds to the empty grave. I could also have said that it represents the mother's lack of a phallus, a discovery that Freud considered crucial for development. The set of the empty set is the signifier, but why not also see in it the phallic function, so important for Freud and Lacan? The number two appears commonly in psychoanalytic theory as the ego and its object, as me and you, as mother and child, and even in the obsession some people have with dividing the world into inner and outer. Three was one of Lacan's favored numbers; it refers to the triangulation of the Oedipus complex in Freud, and Lacan used it in theorizing the imaginary, real, and symbolic orders, and the Borromean knot. The number

four is perhaps the trickiest, but remember that Freud declared once that there are four people involved in every sex act. Lacan has a number of instances where the number four is in play: the schema for intersubjectivity says that there are subject, ego, object, and Other, and a later theorization shows discourse being formed by the movement of four fundamental terms, two signifiers (because at least two are necessary for any signifier to make sense), a barred subject (perhaps this is another representation of the empty grave), and an object called the object *a* (a trace or remainder, as in the Freudian memory trace).

Let us pause here and survey the ground we have covered. What I have been doing in a somewhat circumspect fashion is introducing some of the basic reasoning behind Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis. Remember that extending your hand as the response to the Zen koan of the sound of the one hand clapping also resembles a gesture of introduction: Please allow me to introduce myself . . . But I also said that this book is not an introduction; it is a conclusion. And if you know a little about Zen, you know that the extending of one hand is *not* a gesture of introduction. The novice or candidate must study Zen for years before he gains enough knowledge to respond to the koan. The gesture of introduction is in fact the conclusion of a long process of spiritual discipline, a spiritual ascesis, as Lacan would have called it.

So I have set about to write this conclusion because Lacan's grave is empty. In common parlance this suggests that he has not been properly mourned. In order to be mourned properly Lacan has to be recognized, and we know that he suffered from lack of recognition throughout his life. At least he thought so. He said he was one of those people who will be better recognized after death. This means that Lacan as a living human being was too much of a distraction to people, that the man provoked passions too violent to permit the intellectual activity that can lead to recognition. I would add that Lacan's death intensified the passion of his



followers. Thus I am obliged to talk about the man, about the passions that followed him to the grave, and beyond it.

Now, you might ask, by what right do I presume to talk about Lacan the man? Isn't this indiscreet gossip-mongering? Not if I knew the man and thus can write of my own experience with him. This in its turn may lead to the following objection: Since you were in analysis with Lacan, how could you know the man? All of your experiences are only projections on the blank surface that the analyst presented to you. If we know anything about the transference, we know that it is a fundamental falsification of human experience.

In normal circumstances and according to psychoanalytic common sense, this would be a valid objection. With Lacan, though, there are no normal circumstances, and common sense, psychoanalytic or otherwise, is thoroughly unreliable. One of my own peculiar habits of thought tells me this: if everyone believes that an analysand knows very little about his analyst, then that analysand probably knows his analyst rather well, perhaps even better than the analyst's own friends and relations. Most people think that the knowing resides with the analyst, that the analyst knows a lot about his patient. Some people even believe that this disparity in knowledge works to the analyst's advantage, permitting him to exercise power over his patient. To counter these beliefs, Lacan quoted Socrates to the effect that the analyst knows nothing except Eros. If the comparison is germane, the analyst's skill consists in helping someone else to find out what he knows. And we should not fail to note that this last sentence is grammatically equivocal: is the *he* in "he knows" the analyst or the analysand? We can say that it is both: the analysand will discover what he himself knows, but he may well think that this knowledge resides with the analyst. He may therefore be led to ferret out that knowledge or to try to induce the analyst to tell him, or else to read the analyst's words and gestures for clues to the knowledge the analyst retains.

As a general rule, and Lacan was no exception, analysts do not reveal their personalities or feelings, their opinions or biographies, to their analysands. They rarely talk about themselves, and even more rarely will they take a patient into their confidence. The mistake we tend to make, and Lacan was at pains to correct it, is in thinking that when we know about someone this means that we know their life history, their personality, their feelings and emotions. Lacan's view was that all of the above is merely camouflage or persiflage, a buffer that permits people to enter the commerce of everyday life without tearing each other apart.

There are ways of fine-tuning the personality to make the human being more agreeable, more palatable, in human society. Combine these with what is called standing in the community and one arrives at the ideal of respectability. So far as I can tell, in America analysts are deeply concerned with their respectability. Europeans never cease harping on the fact that America is a puritanical country where respectability counts for too much. One would be hard pressed, however, to say that the French are any less concerned with respectability; a country that is still infatuated with aristocracy must retain some notions, and rather precise ones at that, about how to behave in polite society. Good manners and the other accoutrements of social interaction are codified in France at a level that would be beyond the imagination of most Americans. In this atmosphere Lacan was not a respectable man; as the British would put it, he didn't care a fig for respectability. Perhaps Lacan was too enamoured with his role of *enfant terrible* of the psychoanalytic world; perhaps he cherished unduly the position of the heretic or renegade. Whatever the reason, Lacan did not seek respectability—he sought respect. And he received it: not for his pleasant personality, not because he was such a good fellow, not because he was so easy to get along with, but rather because people were in awe of him and approached him with a mixture of fear and reverence. This quality was present to

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every analysand who walked through the door of his office at 5 rue de Lille.

The Doctor, as he was called respectfully, or the Old Man, as he was called somewhat less respectfully, did not think that psychoanalysis was a respectable profession; he judged it to be a subversive and revolutionary occupation. One day at his seminar Lacan was trying to explain his impenetrable prose style: if they knew what I was saying, he offered, they would never have let me say it. This has a slightly paranoid tinge, but that does not mean he was wrong.

You do not have to be fully conversant with the ways and means of the American psychoanalytic establishment, the orthodox Freudians, I mean, to know that Lacan's constant defiance of respectability did not endear him to them. My impression is that the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, the center of American Freudianism, contains some of the most respectable people I have ever met. That, however, is only half the story. I must also tell you that on one occasion I got the impression that there is a darker side to the respectability of the NYPI. Several years ago I attended a meeting of the society that comprises this institute. This meeting was in honor of Edith Jacobson, eminent psychoanalyst who had just retired. After the usual encomiums and a fine talk by Otto Kernberg, the time came for everyone to adjourn to another room for champagne and cookies. Before the assembled respectable analysts could move from their seats, the master of ceremonies took the microphone to ask them if they would please remain seated until Dr. Jacobson had time to traverse the auditorium and the corridor and was settled in the room containing the champagne and cookies. The m.c. averred that, in their enthusiasm for the refreshments across the hall, the assembled respectable analysts might trample poor Dr. Jacobson, thus abbreviating her retirement.

Now, on the other side of the Atlantic, Lacan had managed to create a reputation for being strange, bizarre, inso-