Lacan
A Beginner’s Guide
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Acknowledgment

When I asked Sham Ambiavagar to edit this book, it was still in the form of an early draft and much of what I had intended for it was drawn from my years of lecturing on the subject, from my own analysis, and from my clinical practice. Sham’s questions highlighted occasional weaknesses in the Lacanian edifice or in my understanding of it; however, as a non-clinician, her research was book-based and her understandings derived by a mixture of insight and logic, rather than clinical experience. Her argumentative approach forced me to account for what my years of Lacanian practice revealed of the theory – and it seems to me that many of Lacan’s greatest insights were intuitive and clinically derived, and not logical philosophical constructs. Sham’s insistence upon attempting a unified theory, whether or not one may indeed be arrived at, has also contributed to the readability of the final product, although I would not wish to pretend that there are no holes in it, which hopefully will continue to attract constructive contributions. In addition, my mother tongue is French and I speak English, while hers is English and she can speak French. We had to negotiate over the meaning of words and the impossibility or unhelpfulness of direct translation. This led us sometimes to unusual ways of translating concepts or fragments of texts, which I think are useful as they preserve the French meaning better than exact translations, which do not work in the spirit of English. Overall, the process of working with Sham was unexpectedly rich and complex and without it this book would not exist.
Jacques Lacan was first of all a psychiatrist, and as a clinician, he was more concerned with what he did not know or understand than what he did. His inability to ‘make do’ with a poor explanation led him to consider and explore all models available to psychiatrists in the first part of the twentieth century. After having worked with some of the most brilliant proponents of organic psychiatry, he found in psychoanalysis the most helpful theoretical model to understand and treat the complex patients he was dealing with. However, Lacan was to become more than just a disciple of Freud: he believed that Freudian theory was not a perfect edifice but a work in progress, and wanted to contribute towards what he saw as a developing model. His attitude towards the development of theory was modern in that he was willing to examine any body of science that could clarify or shed new light on the phenomena he was trying to explain, and consequently, he drew inspiration from biological psychiatry, genetic psychology, and philosophy; later, structural linguistics, anthropology, and even mathematics joined the range of theoretical models he used.

The result was extraordinary, and its richness has attracted students in fields far from psychoanalysis or psychiatry; indeed, although Lacan’s model is not a philosophical one, it has become most fashionable among students of philosophy: one could go so far as to say that in the English-speaking world, it is largely philosophers and academics in English and Critical Studies departments who have kept Lacanian thought alive. Certainly, in the field from which Lacan himself came – that of psychiatry – his work is mostly ignored. This may be because philosophers
and academics in the humanities are, in one respect, better equipped to deal with his writings than students of psychiatry or psychology: they are better prepared to try to understand a thinker whose productions are sometimes irritatingly obscure. There are three reasons behind the obscurity, which arise mostly from the manner in which Lacanian theory was formulated.

Most Lacanian theory has been gathered from Lacan’s spoken teachings; his technique was that of the philosophers of the classical world, who expounded and developed their ideas in a discourse with their pupils; he wrote very little for publication. In even the most lucid speaker, transcriptions from speech are often problematic; the speech of a man who engaged his audience by many means other than pure logical exposition becomes quite obscure when written down. In order to make his points, Lacan often relied on dramatic devices (the well-timed pause, the leaving of a half-finished thought hanging in the air …), the impact of his own personality, and perhaps most of all, on the ability of his audience to arrive of their own accord at the desired conclusion (by making the final mental connections themselves, as one should in analysis) – and this mode of expression makes frustrating reading. The only writings Lacan can be held responsible for are his *Ecrits*, which were, it seems, rather painfully extracted from him by a publisher in 1966; in these, he maintains his abstruse, suggestive style – leading the reader towards an idea, but never becoming absolutely explicit, unless by means of a ‘matheme’ (see below). I would also suggest that Lacan’s impenetrable style was due, surprisingly, to a kind of intellectual caution, which made him wary of making sloppy and indefensible pronouncements, and that his fear of being misconstrued, coupled with a natural ineptness in communication, led to him literally tying his meanings up in verbal knots, hedging about every half-statement with half a dozen qualifying sub-clauses, and obsessively weighing each and every word.
Secondly, the controversy that surrounded his working life and the strong passions he engendered in his followers and detractors have made it quite difficult to discover what he actually said: Lacan became mythologised, even when he was alive. His seminars – the main arena in which he expounded his ideas – were inherited by Jacques-Alain Miller, his son-in-law and disciple, who has kept tight control over their release. Some of his most important ideas have never been published, but are only referred to in other works. Also, he thought on his feet – the ideas expounded in his seminars were never intended to be cast in stone – and there are contradictions and discrepancies in his recorded utterances – recorded, it must be noted, by faithful followers subject to their own preconceptions and interpretations.

Thirdly, Lacan was an inventor of concepts and freely ascribes to common words new meanings within his theoretical model – just as would a philosopher, or, for that matter, any inventor. Accordingly, in order to understand his theory, readers must learn to accept new definitions for words, and drop the assumptions they may already have; acquiring the Lacanian vocabulary is a prerequisite for being able to understand his theoretical models, particularly as they became more and more complex, building upon concepts he invented and named. This is an intellectual approach that students of philosophy are perhaps more used to than medical students, and which may explain why Lacanian ideas are more often discussed in humanities departments of universities than in a clinical context.

This is a pity, because Lacan’s work, like Freud’s, is not philosophy, but a meta-psychology – a theoretical framework within which to understand the individual. It is best understood in the context of a therapeutic relationship between an analysand and an analyst: in other words, a patient and a therapist. This is why students of pure philosophy may have problems with central Lacanian concepts – they have not witnessed in a patient what he is talking about; it is also why clinical practitioners may be
able to grasp and apply his concepts intuitively, while being quite unable to explain them in logical terms. Lacan, despite the fuzziness of his communication style, strove desperately hard for intellectual rigour; it was perhaps this that made his relationship with words so fraught, and it was certainly this that drove him increasingly towards mathematical formulae to express without ambiguity what he meant; but at the end of the day, it is not pure logic but clinical relevance that validates Lacan’s model, and this book attempts to bridge the gap between the two.

Author’s note

As this book is intended for readers without a background in psychoanalysis or psychology, I have introduced concepts early on by way of some deliberate over-simplifications, and then built upon the understandings so conveyed with the addition of layers of complexity; I hope that at the end, what is gained by the reader will be a relatively faithful understanding of his ideas. For the sake of clarity, I have capitalised certain words, which Lacan never did – Real, Imaginary, Symbolic, Subject, Phallus; this is to avoid any even fleeting ambiguity, as these words also have other commonplace meanings that may intrude as a distraction. By capitalising these words, I wish to designate these particular, Lacanian meanings, so that I may use the words with their other meanings, uncapitalised, without risk of confusion.
If the 1890s saw the birth of psychoanalysis, then the 1920s saw it reach a kind of adolescence, where across Europe, it was breaking free of its parental boundaries and seeking its place in the wider intellectual world. As an attractive and intriguing newcomer, it was courted by many different, older disciplines – medicine, art, literature – whose practitioners took it up with enthusiasm, used and abused it, gossiped about, and fought over it. Equally, it worried others in those and other fields, who felt it to be an upstart threat. Psychoanalysis itself, with the promiscuous spirit of exploration and creativity of youth, absorbed far-reaching and sometimes unexpected influences: from the surrealists, from linguists, from poets. In Paris, the 1920s also saw the intellectual blossoming of a generation of young psychiatrists whose relationship with the new science (to use the word in its broad sense) was to lay the foundations of French psychoanalysis as it is today.

Psychoanalysis in France had different roots from its Viennese parent: Viennese psychoanalysis grew up with middle-class neurotics on the couch; French psychoanalysis grew up with psychotic patients in the bleak wards of mental asylums. It was also something of a late developer, with the medical establishment there not really taking the new ideas into their bosom until the 1920s. Then, at St. Anne’s Hospital in Paris – the French capital’s main mental hospital – two departmental heads, Gaëtan de Clérambault (at the l’Infermerie Psychiatrique de la Préfecture
de Police) and Henri Claude, began to have a far-reaching impact on the development of psychoanalysis in their country. The contribution of the former was accidental – Clérambault himself never ‘took’ to the new idea – but Henri Claude was enthusiastic about it, and in his unit at St. Anne Hospital, an analysand of Freud’s, Eugénie Sokolnicka, was allowed to analyse the younger psychiatrists. With Claude’s encouragement, many of these people – or their own analysands – were to become the founder members of the French psychoanalytic movement, René Laforgue, Edouard Pichon, René Allendy, and Sophie Morgenstern among them. In 1926, under the firmly steering hand of Princess Marie Bonaparte, they founded the Société Psychanalytique de Paris (SPP), which became the most important psychoanalytical organisation in France, and remains one of the two French groups officially affiliated to the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA).

Clérambault was a controversial figure because of his eccentric and difficult personality, and had no time for psychoanalysis, but he was an extraordinary clinician whose detailed descriptions of psychotic symptoms still form a benchmark of clinical excellence. In his first psychiatric work, L’Automatisme mental, written in 1909, Clérambault suggested that the mechanism of ‘mental automatism’ – when the mind appears to work independently of conscious control – might be responsible for ‘experiences of hallucination’. He divided mental automatism into three types: associative, sensory, and motor. Associative automatism includes disturbances in the form of thought (such as hallucinatory thoughts that occur as if you have no control over them); sensory automatism manifests itself as unpleasant feelings in internal organs thought to be caused by somebody else; and motor automatism involves the delusional belief that somebody else performs one’s movement and actions.

Clérambault also left his name to a form of paranoid disorder – the delusion of being loved-now known among English
speakers as Clérambault’s syndrome, ‘Erotomanic Delusion’ or ‘ Erotomania’. He described this condition in 1927 as *psychose passionelle*, a sort of passionate psychosis, which takes the form of a paranoid delusion with an amorous quality. He noted that the patient was usually a woman who had developed a delusional belief that a man, with whom she may have had little or virtually no contact, was in love with her. The person selected was usually of a much higher social status and thus was likely to be unattainable as a love object.

The brilliance of Clérambault’s clinical work left a deep impression on the mind of a young trainee in his unit: Jacques Lacan, who was to adapt his style of meticulous clinical observation to psychoanalysis.

The formative years

At the outset, Lacan’s intellectual journey was that of many of the founder members of the French psychoanalytic movement: he began his studies at the faculty of medicine in Paris and completed his psychiatric training (between 1927 and 1931) at St. Anne’s, under Clérambault and Claude, with whom he had good relationships. But he was a few years younger than these founding members – twenty-five when the SPP was founded – and he had to wait several years before he could attain membership of the group; his place in this inner circle of the SPP elite was, from the start, semi-detached.

French psychoanalysis was closely linked with medical psychiatry, and its proponents were dealing with extreme cases: the people treated by Clérambault, Claude, and by Lacan and his contemporaries would have been suffering from acute and chronic psychosis and manic depression. In addition, in 1930, Lacan spent two months at the Burghölzli – a mental asylum in Zurich which had been established in the 1860s as a model of
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the new, ‘humane’ way of treating severe mental cases. Here, he worked under Hans Wolfgang Maier, successor to its most illustrious director, Eugen Bleuler.

Bleuler (whose assistant was Carl Jung) belonged to the generation that presided over the birth of psychoanalysis; he took Freud’s ideas from the domain of neurosis into psychosis, challenging the prevailing belief that psychosis was the result of organic brain damage, insisting that it could have psychological causes, and trying to use the mechanisms described by Freud to understand it. In 1911, he wrote in *Dementia praecox oder Gruppen der Schizophrenien* (Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenia): ‘I call dementia praecox “schizophrenia” because (as I hope to demonstrate) the “splitting” of the different psychic functions is one of its most important characteristics. For the sake of convenience, I use the word in the singular although it is apparent that the group includes several diseases.’ Bleuler believed that delusion could be meaningful, even in psychosis: for example, an auditory delusion – the hearing of voices – could be seen as an internal discourse which has a relation to the subject. This view, novel then, has become widely accepted; it was also to remain lodged as the germ of an idea in the mind of Jacques Lacan. Bleuler also coined the term ‘Autism’ by the contraction of Auto-Erotism.

Upon his return to Paris, Lacan completed his medical thesis – a work which bears deeply the marks of the men who trained him. *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (Of Paranoid Psychosis and its Relationship with the Personality), presented in 1932, contains a case study of a woman suffering from Clérambault’s ‘passionate psychosis’ of erotomania, and incorporates Bleuler’s ideas of the meaningfulness of delusion. However, ‘Le Cas Aimée’ (The Case of Aimée), as it is commonly referred to, does more than merely reproduce the ideas of his teachers: one can see in it already that Lacan was drawing inspiration from unusual sources (see below – Surrealism).
Shortly after presenting this thesis, Lacan began his own analysis with Rudolph Loewenstein, a Polish-born analyst who was one of the founding members of the SPP; Loewenstein’s analyst was Hans Sachs, an important Viennese member of the IPA, and one of Freud’s disciples. Loewenstein was a very ‘orthodox’ analyst and the relationship between Loewenstein and Lacan was somewhat conflictual: it seems that, privately, Loewenstein questioned Lacan’s analysability and Lacan, Loewenstein’s talent. Lacan had, perhaps, already too many ideas of his own.

In 1934, Lacan applied for membership of the SPP and was given ‘candidate member’ status; he was granted full membership four years later. In 1936, at the International Psychoanalytical Association meeting at Marienbad, Lacan presented his first paper, ‘The Mirror Stage’. Here, the tension between Lacan and the psychoanalytic establishment was apparent: he resented being stopped by Ernest Jones because the ten minutes given to his presentation were up. There was probably fault on both sides: in the establishment, for not recognising the importance of Lacan’s presentation sufficiently to grant him some leeway, and in Lacan for ‘not playing the game’ when he was such a newcomer. But the incident, and Lacan’s huffy reaction to it, shows his self-belief, which some call arrogance: he had a great idea of himself, and could not bear being treated like a minor player. However, hindsight also shows that he was right to believe in the extraordinary nature of his work, for out of everything presented at that conference, ‘The Mirror Stage’ remains the most important work.

From the 1920s onwards, Lacan moved in avant-garde intellectual circles, befriending the writers André Breton and Georges Bataille. André Breton was one of the leaders of French surrealism, having written the Surrealist Manifesto in 1924, while Georges Bataille’s writings were more abstractly philosophical: he developed the concept of base materialism, which
had an influence on the deconstructivist thinking of Jacques Derrida. Lacan also associated with Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso, whom he greatly admired, and several of his articles were published in the surrealist magazine, *Minotaure*.

In 1938 Lacan received his full membership of the SPP; this was also a year in which the shadow of war was heavy over Europe. Freud and others of the Viennese circle were helped to safety in England, and stopped on their way in Paris. Much is made by historians of the fact that Lacan was absent from the evening organised by Marie Bonaparte to receive the Viennese – and of Lacan’s later claim that he had decided not to go to it because he did not want ‘to please Marie Bonaparte’. In reality, it is far more likely that the young psychiatrist and new SPP member was simply not invited, and his glossing over of this is an indication that Lacan was vulnerable to narcissistic hurt.

One major impact of the war on the evolution of psychoanalysis was the transfer from Europe to the English-speaking world of the majority of its leading lights. Even before the war, there had been tension between the American Psychoanalytical Association (APA) and the IPA, with the Americans wanting to accredit only analysts with a medical training, and the Europeans wishing to keep the new discipline quite separate from medicine. The dominant psychological model of the United States was at the time (and is still today) the Behaviourism of Edward Lee Thorndike, John B. Watson, and B.F. Skinner; the APA, with their insistence upon a medical degree, clearly thought it necessary to present psychoanalysis with the same trappings of science – or at least as something that could be assessed and regulated in the same way as a science.

When the Nazis dissolved the Viennese Association, there was a general exodus of intellectuals from Europe to Britain and the United States. Sigmund Freud died in London in 1939; his daughter Anna and disciple Melanie Klein remained working there for the rest of their lives. Even more significantly, Heinz
Hartmann, Ernst Kris, and Rudolph Loewenstein (who had tried to analyse Lacan) fled to the States, where they were to become the founders of Ego Psychology – a branch of psychoanalysis that drifted rapidly towards the functionalist thinking of much modern psychology. European psychologists without a psychoanalytical background also fled to America; they included Wolfgang Köhler and Max Wertheimer, who joined their colleague Koffka to become the founders of Gestalt Psychology, which gave rise to Cognitive Psychology.

While psychoanalysis lay dormant in Europe under Nazi rule, east coast America and London became the centres of its development. London played host to most of the Viennese ‘old guard’; it also may have had some of the most gifted theorists, but the United States had more wealth and therefore, more power. In London, Ernest Jones tried to hold out against the American drive for control of the IPA, but it was a losing battle; in a meeting just after the war, he had to agree to a ‘power-sharing’ arrangement in which the presidency of the IPA would alternate between Europe and the States. This arrangement was reached between seven Americans and six members of the British Society: no other European organisation was party to it; the Americans had, in fact, achieved a ‘coup’ in the absence of all other European representation. From this point onwards, the issue of the regulation and accreditation (and therefore training) of psychoanalysts was to dominate the further development of the discipline in the manner of a straitjacket.

How did the war affect Lacan? For him, the war years were a silent period: he published nothing in this time, and remained working as a psychiatrist at the military hospital of Val de Grace in Paris. What he did in the immediate aftermath suggests that silence for Lacan did not mean intellectual dormancy; the proliferation and maturity of his immediate post-war presentations suggest that the war years had been a time of intense reflection. But what he was able to observe of the evolution of the rest of
the psychoanalytic community during this period may have been less than congenial to him.

One does not know how much information he received from the United Kingdom and America during the war, but in its aftermath, Lacan would have seen that the psychoanalytical writings emanating from the other side of the Atlantic were developing into Ego Psychology and Gestalt Psychology, which were irrelevant to his thinking. Immediately after the end of the war (autumn 1945), he spent five months in England, ostensibly studying the English practice of psychiatry in war-time; but one wonders how much this visit was motivated by a curiosity about developments in psychoanalysis in the city in which Sigmund Freud had died, and which was now home to his most direct heirs.

The very next year, Lacan began again to present psychoanalytical papers: that he had continued to think, and perhaps to write in private, during the occupation, is evidenced by his presentation of six papers in the space of a year. Lacan’s production continued to be prodigious in the coming years – mostly in the form of presentations. The return to France of Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1948, after years in the Americas, provided a fresh stimulus to his thinking: Lévi-Strauss’s development of structural anthropology led Lacan to use Saussurian linguistics in the same way.

Lacan was now attracting a following: the younger analysts in particular were excited by his new ideas, which were developing in counter-current to developments in the English-speaking world. Some of Lacan’s more provocative formulations can be best understood in the context of a challenge to the increasing tendency to treat psychoanalysis – and psychology – as subject to simple scientific proofs. France was not immune to the formalising tendency – in order to be accepted by the IPA, the SPP had to produce a system of accreditation, and a training programme to go with it. By 1949, Jacques Lacan had a central role in the formulation of this programme – but as always, his relationship with other leading SPP figures was uneasy.
Institutional battles

The Lacanian innovation that caused the greatest problem for the SPP was his use of sessions of variable duration, which have come to be known as ‘short sessions’. In classical psychoanalysis, clinical sessions between the patient and analyst last just under an hour, and this was a duration fixed upon by the IPA in their phase of rule-making. Lacan’s sessions lasted, according to Elizabeth Roudinesco, between ten and forty minutes, with an average of twenty minutes. The short sessions were seen as problematic by the analytical establishment for more than one reason. Firstly, the sessions represented a transgression of the IPA rule; secondly, the IPA were afraid that this practice would put the analyst in an omnipotent position; thirdly, and maybe most importantly, it allowed Lacan to accept many more trainees than the other training analysts. The risk was that after a few years of this regime, Lacan would command the loyalty of a majority of the newly trained psychoanalysts. Lacan’s adherence to this technique was to cause him problems with the entire psychoanalytical establishment for the rest of his life, but in the early 1950s, the causes of tension between him and the other leading SPP members were more general and political.

The wider context in which the SPP power-struggles of the day must be seen was created by the seizure of power by the American movement at the end of the war, and their insistence upon regulating training and accreditation. The IPA now insisted upon a formalised system of accreditation, and the SPP, if it wished to retain IPA recognition, had to produce a set of rules in line with IPA thinking. In the early 1950s, two currents started to emerge within the SPP: on one side, the ‘conservatives’, who favoured the medical model and were keen to create an institute of psychoanalysis in order to implement IPA standards of training; and on the other, the ‘liberals’, who preferred a more psychological model and opposed the rigidity
of the planned institute. Despite being a doctor himself, Lacan sided with the ‘liberals’, and ironically, it was almost immediately after he had become president of the SPP that he resigned from it.

In June 1953, a small group of ‘liberals’, led by Daniel Lagache, walked out of the SPP to set up an alternative society, the Société Française de Psychanalyse (SFP); Lacan quickly joined them. The new SFP now had to negotiate its recognition from the IPA, and in doing so, fell into the same trap its members had experienced while still in the SPP: the need to demonstrate to the IPA that its standards of training followed IPA rules. Predictably, it was Lacan’s use of ‘short sessions’ that provoked the crisis. At its annual meeting in London in 1953, the IPA refused the affiliation of the SFP and asked a committee to examine their application. This fact-finding commission was directed by Winnicott and its members were the American psychoanalyst, Phyllis Greenacre, a friend of Anna Freud’s, Willi Hoffer, and Jeanne Lampl De Groot, a Dutch analyst trained by Freud.

None of this appeared to dampen Lacan’s morale; if anything, during the period in which the SFP was under the surveillance of the IPA committee, the energy with which he continued to develop and disseminate his theories increased. Immediately after the schism with the SPP, he presented his paper ‘The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real’ at St. Anne Hospital; two months later, in Rome, he delivered ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’. In November, he gave a public seminar – the first of a series that was to continue for twenty-seven years.

For the duration of this first IPA investigation, the problem of the variable duration sessions just would not go away: Lacan would not renounce them, and the IPA would never accept them. He continued to practise in this way while publicly denying it: he told representatives of the IPA that he was following their
rules, but regulatory bodies hate transgressors, and hate transgres-
sors who show contempt even more. What happened next was
quite shocking to the French psychoanalytical movement –
particularly to members who had grown up with the easy freedom
of the developing discipline in its formative years.

The committee’s views on Lacan were negative in many
more ways than expected: not only did they find him to be using
‘short sessions’, they also felt that he was very ‘seductive’ towards
his pupils: he had an influence on trainees that was judged to be
too great and probably unhealthy. The committee also criticised
the child psychoanalyst, Françoise Dolto – not as an analyst, but
as a training analyst. They felt that she lacked method and that
she was often the object of a ‘wild transference’ by her pupils;
the committee was afraid that she would ‘influence the young
generation’. The findings of this committee, therefore, meant
that two of France’s most respected and influential psychoana-
ysts would not have professional recognition as training analysts.

The discrepancy between the hostility Lacan attracted from
critics and the status he held in the eyes of his admirers posed a
great problem for the international regulators. The negotiation
between the SFP and the IPA went on, and in July 1959, the
executive committee of the IPA decided to create a new
committee to re-examine the application of the French associa-
tion. In May 1961, Pierre Turquet, Paula Heimann, Ilse
Hellman, and Pieter Jan van der Leeuw arrived in Paris to inter-
rogate members of the SFP, whom they divided into a senior
and a junior group. The negotiation took place between May
1961 and December 1963. But already, at the start of the
process, following the commission’s first series of interviews in
May–June 1961, the IPA executive committee had recom-
pended that Lacan should not be allowed to take on any new
training cases.

None of this made any difference to Lacan, to his develop-
ing ideas, or to his students, who continued to flock to his
seminars. These were the arena in which he expounded his theories, and became the basis of the Lacanian canon. It is essential to bear in mind that much of the apparent obscurity of Lacanian theory, as well as much of the provocative quality of his statements, comes from the simple fact that his theory was not recorded in the cool consideration of the act of writing, but from the interactive and audience-dependent form of oral teachings. This gives the learning of Lacanian theory its special flavour – his ideas were developed in the ancient discursive style, by speaking out loud to an audience, and receiving their reactions – the modus operandi of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, or of scholars at the medieval universities. Lacan’s theory has been transcribed from seminars in which his articulations push the audience towards the understanding of a concept, towards a moment where there is something of a feeling of epiphany, in which the listener comes to a realisation, and this in turn has earned him the negative epithet of ‘guru’. ‘Guru-ism’ is intellectually suspect because it suggests that the ‘disciples’ have been duped or seduced into an irrational belief; however, all theoreticians are as guilty of such seduction – and it is even more often carried out by apparently rationalist and speciously scientific means.

Lacan’s mode of communication was effective for his audience because it employed the device of ‘realisation’: just as in analysis, an individual has to arrive at a realisation by him/herself, and that realisation has a force far greater than if it was received as ‘information’ from another party. Lacan led his audience, sometimes by provocation, sometimes by fuzziness, to think along a certain path until they reached of their own accord the conclusion he wished to bring them to. It is not surprising, therefore, that those who understood/understand him did/do so with such belief and conviction – they have experienced inwardly the truth of what he said: it carries the ‘force of realisation’. However, while this style of communication
worked well in his seminars, when transcribed onto the page, it has led to misunderstandings, irritation, or disgust – very often because few people bother to read the thing in its entirety, or they are presented with the few provocative statements he came out with, quite out of context.

Lacan’s academic career appeared to progress undisturbed by the lack of formal recognition: in 1964, he was appointed part-time lecturer at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, and editor of the Champ Freudien series. But the very same year, the IPA commission concluded their report, and in August told Lacan that he would be struck off the IPA’s list of training analysts that October. Lacan promptly resigned from both the IPA and the SFP.

There had been dissent within the SFP over Lacan’s intransigence for some time: some members wanted international recognition more badly than others and felt that Lacan should make some concessions – in particular drop his use of short sessions – in order to remain within the fold of the IPA. When the SFP was dissolved, those members created the Association Psychanalytique de France (APF), while those ‘loyal’ to Lacan joined him in setting up the Ecole Freudienne de Paris (EFP), on 21 June 1964. This was soon to devise its own training programme.

The inquiry and ‘trial’ of Jacques Lacan split the French psychoanalytical world. Lacan’s attitude and behaviour towards the IPA was arrogant and childish: he called the Turquet Commission the ‘turkey commission’; he lied to them about his use of short sessions, as if it really did not matter. But the commission’s manner was perhaps equally childish: the grounds upon which they recommended his expulsion were all to do with their judgements upon his personality. At no point was there ever any discussion or debate around the theoretical basis of his ideas, his teaching, or his use of short sessions; indeed, given that it was as a training analyst that Lacan was expelled, it is startling how little theory was ever mentioned. Even more
remarkable is the fact that, after Lacan’s expulsion, the leading lights of French psychoanalysis, to a man accepted by the IPA – Jean Laplanche, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, Didier Anzieu, and Daniel Widlöcher – were all trained by Lacan; Daniel Widlöcher even became its president. The IPA did not seem to see the irony of expelling someone as a bad trainer and then appointing one of his trainees as their president.

Lacan’s oppositional attitude towards the IPA was perhaps more than merely childish: he did really seem to believe that the kind of regulation they sought to impose was fundamentally wrong: that psychoanalysis, still a young and evolving field of work, should not be bound by the strictures imposed by any group of people. Freud, he liked to point out, was never dogmatic: his theory and his practice continued to change and develop until the end of his life. This, according to Lacan, was how psychoanalysis had to be. One can look at the history of almost any science or humanity or art, and see how fixed and accepted views that were paradigmatic for a generation, or even a millennium, have bitten the dust; and yet, just decades after the birth of psychoanalysis, a group of disciples of Freud had gone down the road of dogma, in a manner whose closest parallel can only be found in religion.

With the expulsion of Lacan from any internationally recognised body, the schism in French psychoanalysis seemed set in stone, with its two alternative institutions as irreconcilable as the Catholic and Protestant churches. But Lacan, the ‘antipope’, seemed only to be gaining in strength; paradoxically, he was even becoming popular in intellectual circles in the United States, where the interest showed in him by students of literature and philosophy almost matched the disdain shown by their colleagues in psychology.

In 1966, he addressed a colloquium at Johns Hopkins University. In 1968, a group of Lacanian-trained analysts set up a Department of Psychoanalysis at the University of Vincennes
Lacan became its scientific director in 1974. The following year, he was invited to lecture at Yale and MIT. In 1980, the year before his death, Lacan dissolved the EFP and set up in its place the Ecole de la Cause Freudienne. He died at the age of eighty, having lived to see that his work would survive him for a very long time, and still without ‘accreditation’ from the IPA: perhaps he wanted to prove his own dictum true – that ‘the psychoanalyst derives his authorisation only from himself’.

**Lacan’s intellectual journey**

Creative thinking draws from many different sources, in what has become commonly known as lateral thinking, which simply means being open to ideas from varied sources and having the intellectual capacity to see the relevance of one in another. The practitioners of a new science or art form are especially free to draw together ideas from different disciplines in the development of their own; some cross-fertilisations are less successful than others. One of the founder members of the SPP, René Allendy, was an adherent of homeopathy, numerology, and esotericism; Carl Jung turned to alchemy and folklore for inspiration. Time is the best test of the worth of ideas, and now, Jacques Lacan’s nose for the intellectual *Zeitgeist* appears unerring: he chose fields of study that remain within the mainstream of intellectual activity, and focused on innovations within those fields that are still respected today.

**Surrealism**

Lacan’s medical thesis, in which he presents at length the case of a deluded woman who attempted to stab a famous actress, drew on the work of the surrealists. In particular, he was struck by an
article written by Salvador Dali in which the artist described how some of his images were obtained by ‘un processus nettement paranoïaque’ – ‘a clearly paranoid process’ – in other words, Dali’s images are created by the same mental process by which paranoid delusions are produced. An example of this is the transformation of a verbal metaphor into a concrete object: the idea of someone ‘bending over backwards’ to do something may conjure an image of someone literally doubled over backwards, as if their spine was articulated the wrong way – the kind of image that could appear in a dream, a surrealist painting, or a paranoid delusion. Lacan married the Bleulerian notion that delusions have the meaning of an ‘internal discourse’ with their subject with Dali’s observations on his creative process and reflected upon the process by which the delusion/dream image is produced through an interpretation of reality by means of language.

Philosophy

From an early age, Lacan had taken an interest in philosophy; the staunch Catholicism inculcated in him by his mother (he went to a Jesuit school) was eroded by his love of Spinoza; it is perhaps the influence of Spinoza’s monism (the belief that there is no duality between mind and matter, that there is a single driving principle behind phenomena, and that everything is reducible to mathematical formulae) that gave him his lifelong conviction of the inseparability of affect and intelligence, or the wrongness of compartmentalisation as a means of understanding. In his love of philosophy, Lacan was drawn naturally towards a systematisation of thinking and the construction of paradigms; he also fell into the philosopher’s habit of procuring common words and affixing to them meanings relevant to a new paradigm – a habit that makes Lacan easily misunderstandable by readers who have not made the same intellectual journey.
To Lacan, mastery of the philosophical method was so essential that after finishing his medical studies, in the period in which his theoretical innovations were coming to a boil, he took on a private tutor to give him a crash course in philosophy, and attended the seminars of Alexandre Koyré and Alexandre Kojéve, who introduced him to the philosophy of Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl. The work of Husserl in particular led Lacan to an intense reflection about the concept of ego, alter ego (the other), consciousness, etc., and led directly to his formulations of the Subject, the Other (le grand autre), and later to the ‘Name-of-the-Father’. Likewise, his interest in Platonic forms led to his formulation of the Real and the Imaginary.

**Psychology**

Henri Wallon (1879–1962) was a psychologist who also based much of his thinking on philosophical models, and in particular Marxist and Hegelian dialecticism. Not only did Wallon share Lacan’s love of philosophy, but he was also one of the very few authors of that time who tried to cross-fertilise psychology and psychoanalysis.

Wallon used this methodology in his conceptualisation of childhood development as a dialectical relationship between affectivity and intelligence, which underpin the development of the child. This means that at any one time, both affectivity and intelligence are at play, but with one predominating over the other. This model allows for the possibility of regression, and differs greatly from that of the other great founder of developmental psychology, Jean Piaget, who compartmentalised development into cognitive, social, and emotional spheres, and whose views of development are more linear. Wallon found this kind of compartmentalisation unhelpful, and insisted instead upon a
kind of horizontal linkage between different areas of development within a developmental stage. He believed also in a discontinuity between stages, and that these discontinuities were triggered by crises. Wallon put a strong emphasis on the role of language and the social milieu in understanding the development of the child. He also defined five principal stages in the child’s development, in each of which affectivity and intelligence play greater or lesser roles: the impulsive and emotional stages (0 to 3 months), the sensorimotor and projective stage (1 to 3 years), the personalism stage (3 to 6 years), the categorial stage (6 to 11 years) and the adolescence stage which begins after 11 years.

Lacan met Wallon socially in 1930, and Wallonian thinking played an early role in the development of Lacan’s theory. Wallon wrote about ‘the symbol’ and ‘the image’ in connection with the development of the child’s psyche; Lacan was to build upon that to arrive at his conception of ‘the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real’. In addition, Wallon’s Les Origines du caractère chez l’enfant, published in 1934, developed themes such as the prematurity of the human baby, transitivism, and the other, and also contained twenty pages devoted to the baby and the image in the mirror – all ideas that became central to Lacanian thinking.

Lacan was asked by Wallon to write a chapter in the Encyclopédie française, and his article, ‘Les Complexes familiaux’, published in 1938, is clearly influenced by Wallon’s thinking. Among the Wallonian ideas he uses are those of functional anticipation, the role of proprioception (the perception of the position and movements of the body) in the construction of body image, and that the recognition of oneself in the mirror comes at the start of the process whereby the child develops from merely perceiving images to affixing labels and meanings to them – the ‘passage from image to symbol’. More famously, Lacan’s founding work, ‘The Mirror Stage’ (1936), borrowed and modified the Wallonian concept of the mirror test where a
child between six and eight months old manages to recognise itself in the mirror.

**Linguistics and structuralism**

Linguistics was another fast-developing field from which Lacan borrowed ideas, and his ‘borrowings’ here were inspired by the work of social anthropologists, who had done it first. Early in the twentieth century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s innovative course at Geneva overturned the orthodox views of German philology (the study of the historical development and morphology of languages) and laid the basis for a new approach, not just to linguistics, but to anthropology and sociology as well. Saussure had been a part of the movement that launched the investigation of the Asiatic origins of European languages.

Saussure rejected the positivist conception of language as one of simple correspondence to the physical world. The relationship *between words* is of greater importance than the relationship between words and objects. It is the relation of the Sign (the word) to the code of signification (the language) that accords it meaning, rather than a simple correspondence with an external object. Saussure showed, through looking at linguistic variation and innovation, that distinctions within the language had a knock-on effect upon other terms, tenses, prefixes, etc., which meant that any singular innovation necessarily impacted upon the whole code of language or its structure (hence his linguistics being called ‘structural’). For Saussure, language was studied not as a tool or medium, but an object of study in its own right. One of Saussure’s innovations in linguistics that was to become central to Lacanian conception and practice was his analysis of the relationship between signifiers (words) and the signified (meaning).

Claude Lévi–Strauss saw parallels between Saussure’s findings in linguistics and recent developments in anthropology –
another new and labile ‘science’, which was still in the process of separating fully from its parent disciplines of sociology and ethnology. At the time, anthropology was drawing heavily on the ‘functionalist’ sociology of Emile Durkheim, and using it to look at the rituals, taboos, and mores of primitive societies from the standpoint of their functionality to those societies. This approach to anthropology was pioneered by Durkheim’s nephew, Marcel Mauss, who employed it in his study of the nature and function of sacrifice, and in his famous essay on the role of symbolic gifts amongst Native Americans (Essai sur le don, 1924).

Lévi-Strauss was not satisfied with the functionalist approach in anthropology, which involved isolating particular institutions and trying to find parallels between those and modern institutions (for example, Azande witchcraft is ‘their version’ of medicine), as it implied looking at other cultures simply as versions of our own. Lévi-Strauss realised that Saussure’s approach allowed him to go further than Durkheim’s functionalism, and to look at culture in itself as a code of meaning. Just as Saussure came to his linguistic codes by studying the relationship between the elements of language, Lévi-Strauss tried to find the code that underlies and links the elements within a culture – for instance, the way that a culture’s mores and taboos interact and support each other.

The literary critic Roland Barthes extended the analysis of codes of signification developed by Levi-Strauss and Saussure to analyse popular culture. In his hands, Saussure and Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism became a full-blown ‘science of signs’ or semiology. Barthes reversed the commonsense view that authors wrote texts, to argue – cryptically – that texts ‘wrote’ authors. The slogan of semiotics became ‘The death of the author’.

By the mid 1940s, Lacan had already discovered the relevance of Saussurian linguistics in the formulations of his theories of psychoanalytical practice – one of his first presentations after
the war showed that he had been reflecting upon how meaning is encoded in the speech of the analysand in a way that escapes the consciousness of the speaker. In the 1950s and 1960s, Lacan took up Lévi-Strauss’s method, ‘structuralism’, and used it to examine how not just language and culture but individuals themselves could be seen as a code of meaning in Saussure’s sense; and as Barthes argued that texts ‘wrote’ authors, Lacan argued that ‘discourse writes the Subject’.

Also drawing on Saussure, Lacan proposed that in the Subject’s unconscious, the relationship of words one to another is of greater importance than the relationship of a word to an object. Another of his theories was that ‘the unconscious is structured like a language’ – which has sometimes been misunderstood as the unconscious being structured by language. Lacan’s insight here is that of an experienced clinician: he saw that the encoding of meanings in dream images followed the same rules as the encoding of meaning in language. This allowed him to ‘read’ dreams by their Subjects’ discourse about them.

**Mathematics**

Lacan always had a rather difficult relationship with language, in the sense that he could not express himself clearly; when asked as a young doctor to write an encyclopaedic article, ‘Les Complexes familiaux’, his original text was sent back many times for correction, because it was so unclear. When reading his works, one gets a sense of how very cautious he always was in his choice of words – too cautious: every statement is hedged around by half a dozen qualifying sub-clauses, which in turn allow for multiple digressions, and make following the main point of a sentence difficult. But the impression one receives is that this obscurity is, strangely, the product of a fear of saying something wrong; it is perhaps this worry that led him to
immerse himself in mathematical formulae, in which he hoped to find clearer expression.

Lacan was fascinated by the eighteenth-century mathematician, Desargues, and also Leibniz, who developed topological models. Lacan always seemed to find such figures easy ways of envisaging a problem, and towards the end of his career, his use of topology became more and more complex, so that by his last seminars, they had become his main mode of expression of his ideas.

Topology is the branch of mathematics that studies the properties of a space that are preserved under continuous deformations; because it involves finding properties that remain constant no matter how much the appearance of the space changes, it is an attractive model for a psychoanalyst looking for consistency of factors in the bewildering complexity of the human psyche and its interactions. Lacan felt that by expressing psychological patterns in mathematical figures, he could make the relationships between different elements easier to envisage. We all do this to some degree – an everyday example is when we use the term ‘a triangular relationship’ to describe one in which the dynamic of emotion depends upon three parties.

Lacan’s topological models were more complex, and towards the end, highly complex. One of his best known and most useful is that of the moebius strip, which he used to describe the relationship between the conscious and unconscious in the construction of the Subject. The moebius strip is a continuous loop with only one surface, but which nonetheless presents a back and a front (a visible and an invisible) aspect, showing the singularity of the Subject in an apparently dualistic system.

Lacan also used the theory of knots to express the relationship between the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. He also used algebraic notation to construct ‘mathemes’ – formulae for expressing psychoanalytical concepts. The first and most famous of these was when he overturned the Saussurian algorithm by writing:
S (signifier)
\(s\) (signified)

to express the relationship between the signifier and the signified in the functioning of the psyche.

While Lacan’s mathematical elaborations are difficult to follow to the point of impracticality, they were paradoxically born of a desire for clarity: they were aimed at reducing the dependency of psychoanalysis upon intuition, by the production of models that could work quite independently of the talents and personality of the analyst. They also had a didactic purpose: Lacan wanted his theories to be transmitted accurately and independently of the variations and nuances that may be created by the imaginations of teacher and pupil.

His mathemes and topological models were perhaps Lacan’s philosopher’s stone: the point in his quest at which his ambition surpassed good sense; or perhaps he simply did not live long enough to refine his method to a point at which these things become useful, because they remain mainly of rather esoteric academic interest.