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The Symbolism of Clothing: The Naked Truth About Jacques Lacan

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Peter D. Mathews,
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Abstract: In the work of Jacques Lacan there exists an extended metaphor of clothing, whereby the 'naked' truth is always 'clothed' in deception. For Lacan, clothing functions at the intersection of the symbolic and the imaginary, with outward appearance shaping what we imagine to be underneath in order to determine the landscape of symbolic desire. Joan Copjec considers the political implications of this metaphor, arguing that utilitarianism, in particular, divides desire into a false dichotomy of rational, naked desire, and the ornamental clothing of irrationality, a mindset woven into both capitalism and French colonialism. The article then examines two examples from Lacan's commentary on ethics: the story of Saint Martin and the beggar, and the myth of Actaeon and Diana, further demonstrating how clothing metaphors are entwined with notions of truth and deception. The article concludes by considering whether Lacan's words are similarly clothed in deception, and ponders whether he should be telling us the naked truth. Lacan weighs both options and concludes that the most effective form of communication constitutes a double bluff in which he strategically pretends to lie, not for the sake of deception, but in order to 'clothe' (and thus protect) the naked truth concealed underneath.

Peter D. MATHEWS

The Symbolism of Clothing: The Naked Truth About Jacques Lacan

While the symbolic importance of clothing usually appears in Lacan's work as a meditation on the relationship between style and substance or, to put it another way, the connection between a thing and its properties, it has also functioned as a prominent metaphor for those detractors who accuse him of being a charlatan. In *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (1998), for instance, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont argue that in difficult but coherent fields of study, such as biology, there is "a clear path […] that will lead to a deeper knowledge of the subject" (Sokal and Bricmont 186). Such clarity is in direct contrast to "obscure discourses" like Lacan's, which "give the impression that the reader is being asked to make a qualitative jump, or to undergo an experience similar to a revelation, in order to understand them. Again, one cannot help being reminded of the emperor's new clothes" (Sokal and Bricmont 186). This last image is used three times in *Fashionable Nonsense* and has been repeated by other critics to the point where, writes Michael Bérubé, it "is now so common among theory bashers that it should be subject to a user fee" (55).

The symbolism of clothing is, in fact, a complex and recurrent metaphor that appears throughout Lacan's work. At the most basic level, Lacan is responding to a conventional opposition between clothing, which, in the act of concealing the body, represents disguise and deception, and nakedness, which in the candidness of its revelation symbolizes honesty and truth. Lacan repeatedly subverts this configuration by showing how, without the metaphorical clothing of the symbolic register, humanity is stripped of its ability to confront the truth or enjoy life. As this essay will explore, this symbolic interplay between clothing and nakedness has consequences that extend beyond a simple concern discerning truth and pleasure, extending into political and ethical questions about rationality and utility, function and social control. Such considerations require us, in particular, to consider some difficult questions about how Lacan (and psychoanalysis in general) 'clothes' its discourse, to ponder the vexed role of deception in this process, and to see whether, finally, it is possible to unveil the naked truth about ourselves.

The Style is the Man Himself

Lacan uses the metaphor of clothing, at the simplest level, as a way of illustrating the interwoven functions of the symbolic and the imaginary. In the overture to *Écrits*, for instance, he refers to Buffon's famous epigram "The style is the man himself" (3) while clothing and style are also referenced in several key moments in the seminars. In *Seminar III*, for instance, Lacan, building on the comments of an earlier speaker on the topic of African mythology, reflects on the function of myth in ancient cultures. Myths and rituals, he contends, explain "the manner in which clothing is worn, what it is that clothing, weaving, such and such an art, etc., signify" (200). Ancient cultures figuratively 'clothed' the world in mythologies that "are aimed at installing man, at placing him upright, in the world – and that tell him what the primordial signifiers are, how to conceive their relationships and their genealogy," saturating the world with a rich projection of imaginary meaning that leaves modern, secular humanity "perhaps less well off" (200).

Clothing appears more commonly in Lacan's work, however, as a way of describing the ego. In *Seminar I*, for instance, Lacan has one of his colleagues, Mme Lefort, relate the touching case history of Robert, a little boy who, suffering from the effects of severe abuse and neglect, had shown repeated difficulties in establishing the boundaries between himself and others. He expresses this fluidity by projecting death and annihilation onto other objects, using the word "*Wolf!*" as a ritual invocation for warding off self-destruction. Because any kind of leaking or expulsion was associated by Robert with his own erasure, after urinating into a pot in the presence of the therapist he became so convinced that he had removed an essential part of his self that emptying the waste into the toilet triggered anxiety attacks. Mme Lefort relates how she had to work to make Robert understand that physical expulsion did not equate to existential annihilation: the pot of urine remained in existence even after it was emptied, the tap did not disappear even when water flowed from it, and Robert's existence continued even after he urinated. Despite this progress, Robert's anxiety transferred itself from urination to clothing:

> *Robert progressively introduced a delay between emptying and filling, until the day when he was able to return, triumphantly carrying an empty pot in his arms. He had quite clearly acquired the idea of the permanence of his body. His clothes were for him his container, and when he was stripped of them, it was certain death. The business of undressing was for him the occasion of genuine crises, the most recent one*

> *having lasted three hours, during which the staff described him as possessed. He howled –* Wolf! *running from one bedroom to the next, smearing the other children with faeces that he found in the pots. It was only once he was tied up that he calmed down.* (96, original emphasis)

Robert's problems stem from the fact that he had not learned to 'clothe' himself in the register of the imaginary. As such, everyday actions in the real appear to him as analogies of his own annihilation, 'naked' threats in which even the most banal reminders of symbolic erasure seemed like a real existential threat.

In *Seminar II*, Lacan thus compares the ego to a series of costumes or disguises that have been put on and discarded over time. The ego "is the sum of the identifications of the subject, with all that implies as to its radical contingency," he writes. "If you allow me to give an image of it, the ego is like the superimposition of various coats borrowed from what I would call the bric-à-brac of its props department" (155). Shortly afterwards, Lacan uses this metaphor to theorize the concept of regression. Taking the famous dream of Irma's injection from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) as his example, Lacan argues that the multiplication of Freud's ego in the dream reveals the various 'costumes' or roles that the latter's ego had assumed:

> We're not dealing with an antecedent state of the ego, but, literally, with a spectral decomposition of the function of the ego. We can see the series of egos appear. Because the ego is made up of the series of identifications which represented an essential landmark for the subject, at each historical moment in his life, in a manner dependent on circumstances[.] […] This spectral decomposition is evidently an imaginary decomposition. (165)

The dream of Irma's injection, demonstrates Lacan, does not show the ego returning to an earlier state, but instead reveals how Freud's various imaginary identifications had come into a state of conflict with each other, evidently causing a crisis of identity at the level of the unconscious.

This situation is further complicated by the imaginary dialectic between the ego and the Other. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan emphasizes the extent to which the love relation, for instance, is founded on the illusory projections of the lover onto the beloved. The object of desire is never seen for what it is, but instead is so wrapped up in the idealizing imagination that the lover's discourse is only ever addressed to a fantasy:

> Yet another thing restrains (*ligote*) us regarding the status of truth: the fact that jouissance is a limit. […] [J]ouissance is questioned (*s'interpelle*) evoked, tracked, and elaborated only on the basis of a semblance. Love itself […] is addressed to the semblance. […] It is only on the basis of the clothing of the self-image that envelops the object cause of desire that the object relationship is most often sustained[.] (Lacan 92)

Lacan is able to claim that no sexual or romantic relationship exists, not because there is a lack of sex or romance, but because the human drive to 'clothe' the beloved in fantasies means that there is no genuine reciprocity – and hence no relationship. What the lover experiences in the beloved is a reduction of the beloved to a partial object, in which some aspect of their person is imbued with a special, fetishized attachment. "There is no sexual relation because phallic jouissance or the sexual act is with an object of fantasy which benefits only one or both in different ways," explains Raul Moncayo. "The object of fantasy is triggered by imaginary partial signifiers of the other such as clothes, cars, body parts, knowledge, money, voice, smell, etc" (Moncayo 91). At the beginning of *Seminar XX*, Lacan gives the example of a parakeet once owned by Pablo Picasso:

> I can tell you a little tale, that of a parakeet that was in love with Picasso. How could one tell? From the way the parakeet nibbled the collar of his shirt and the flaps of his jacket. Indeed, the parakeet was in love with what is essential to man, namely, his attire (*accoutrement*). That parrot was like Descartes, to whom men were merely clothes (*habits*)… walking about (*en… pro-ménade*). Clothes promise debauchery (*ça promet la ménade*) when one takes them off. But this is only a myth […] To enjoy a body (*jouir d'un corps*) when there are no more clothes leaves intact the question of what makes the One, that is, the question of identification. The parrot identified with Picasso clothed (*habillé*). (Lacan 6)

Lacan's point is that the partial nature of the object, despite its name, is not perceived as a lack by the lover (indeed, this aspect of the *objet petit a* is what leads Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to praise this concept in *Anti-Oedipus* [1972]). Instead, the story of Picasso and the parakeet shows how the object of fantasy is integrated, by the power of the imagination, into the subject's experience of the Other. Rather than observing the logical distinction between what is essential (the human person) and what is ornamental (clothing), Lacan shows how fantasy collapses this division: for the parrot, the

clothing *is* Picasso, for all intents and purposes, so that love for one is inseparable from the other.

The reference to René Descartes in the parakeet story points to the philosophical genealogy of this idea. The passage to which Lacan is alluding appears in the second of Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and concerns the philosopher's contemplations of the malleability of a piece of wax. Descartes famously uses the wax to warn against trusting the evidence of the senses. Whereas a philosopher can rely on the mind's logic to provide a consistent answer, he argues, physical phenomena are subject to flux and change in ways that made them unreliable. In the course of this meditation, Descartes considers the following line of thought:

> For we say that we see the wax itself if it is present, not that we judge that it is there from its colour and shape. From this way of talking I might conclude immediately that the wax is therefore known by how the eye sees and not by an inspection of the mind alone, had I not looked out of the window at people passing on the street below and said, in the same customary way as in the case of the wax, that I saw the people themselves. But what do I see apart from hats and coats, under which it may be the case that there are automata hidden? Nonetheless, I judge that they are people. In this case, however, what I thought I saw with my eyes I understand only by the faculty of judging, which is in my mind. (Descartes 28-29)

Descartes makes the point that, when looking out the window, his senses perceive only pieces of clothing passing by. This incomplete picture is supplemented by the logical apparatus of the mind, which deduces that there are actual people beneath those garments. Commenting on this passage in *Descartes, Malebranche, and the Crisis of Perception* (2017), Walter Ott explains that Descartes believes that the logical mind possesses the metaphorical power to strip reality naked to discover its true state.

> What the intellect allows the meditator to do is to 'take its clothes off' and consider it 'naked.' When stripped of its determinate properties, the wax is revealed as a determinable, that is, something that will always have some determinate set of properties or other, none of which is essential to it. […] To extend Descartes's metaphor, the senses alone show us at least the clothes, though not the body underneath. (92)

This separation between a thing and its perceptible qualities – its 'outer clothing', as it were – is the nucleus of the "crisis of perception" mentioned in the title of Ott's book, a philosophical debate that reached a culmination in Immanuel Kant's idea that we only experience phenomena, never the thing-in-itself. Psychoanalysis applies this logic to the realm of subjectivity: the ego is a mask, a disguise, a piece of clothing from the form of which we may deduce the shape of the unconscious.

The dictum that the style is the man himself gives rise to an understandable curiosity as to what guise Lacan himself uses to present himself to the world. In his clothing as well as his rhetorical style, after all, Lacan was a constant performer. Jean-Michel Rabaté, for instance, recalls his initial impressions of Lacan's physical appearance:

> Here I was, facing an aging performance artist (Lacan was sixty-seven then) whose very garb had something of the cabaret comedian's outfit, with a dandiacal Mao costume, a strange shirt, and the most tortured elocution one could imagine, broken by sighs, wheezes, and sniggers, at times slowing down to a meditative halt, at times speeding up to culminate in a punning one-liner. Curiously, he was being listened to in utmost silence by an audience intent on not missing one word. (Rabaté 2)

The bizarre clothing and elocution described here by Rabaté were clearly meant to tantalize the imagination of Lacan's audience. Élisabeth Roudinesco admits in *Lacan: In Spite of Everything* (2011) that while such theatricality could foster a critical mindset, it also helped to conceal some of the more extravagant and unsavoury aspects of Lacan's personality, such as his sometimes-grotesque taste for luxury:

> A fetishistic collector, passionate about rare or original editions, over his lifetime Lacan had collected all sorts of objects – paintings by masters, water colours, designs, sculptures, archaeological figurines, valuable furniture, extravagant clothing made in accordance with his instructions: instructions: furs, suits in unusual materials, hard collars without flaps or collars twisted and turned up, lavallières of various sizes, made-to-measure shoes in rare skins, gold pieces, ingots. (Roudinesco 111-112)

Far from having no clothes, this 'Emperor' of French psychoanalysis had an abundance, a veritable playhouse of props and disguises from which he drew endlessly. "It's not without reason that people say that my discourse has something baroque about it," he muses in *Seminar XX*. "In everything that followed from the effects of Christianity, particularly in art—and it's in this respect that I coincide with the 'baroquism' with which I accept to be clothed—everything is exhibition of the body evoking jouissance" (113). Like Picasso's parrot, it is impossible to separate Lacan from this rhetorical wardrobe:

the style is the man himself.

Clothing and Utilitarianism

While Lacan's extravagant taste in luxuries reflects his expansive ego, there is a still more innovative way to understand this connection between Lacan and clothing, one that stems from the inherent opposition between 'baroque' decorativeness and utilitarian functionality. It is possible that Lacan's interest in clothing derived in part from the influence of his former teacher, Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault. In an often-cited line from *Écrits*, Lacan states that "Clérambault was my only master in the observation of patients" (Lacan 137). Catherine Clément, in *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan* (1981), briefly describes Clérambault as a strange character who had a fetish for certain kinds of clothing: "Lacan […] had been a student of Clérambault, a rather unusual psychiatrist who was mad about fabrics and woollens, which he collected, and who committed suicide – in front of a mirror – in 1934" (55). The full significance of this connection only becomes clear, however, in Chapter 4 of Joan Copjec's book *Read My Desire* (1994), in which she provides a masterful analysis of the associations between clothing, Clérambault, and Lacanian ethics.

In that chapter, Copjec draws attention to the enormous collection of photographs that Clérambault took in Morocco during the First World War while recovering from a war wound. The photographs depict figures wearing the traditional Arab dress worn by the local population, which consisted of robes and other flowing garments that are strikingly different from modern European clothing. That these photographs were taken at the height of France's colonial power in this part of the world makes them of particular interest, but so too the ambiguity of how these subjects are presented. For while Clérambault's "idiosyncratic passion for cloth" (Copjec 71) is testified by the sheer number of photographs in the collection, his pictures lack the air of sexual exploitation that is usually evident in these kinds of photographs, "the stripping [that] is performed by the colonialist gaze acting out a will to knowledge and power that had been temporarily obstructed by the women's veils" (69). Clérambault, in other words, indulges his fascination with Moroccan clothing without appearing to succumb to the colonial fetish for power that usually accompanies it.

The significance of these photographs also has to be considered in connection with a series of lectures on drapery that Clérambault delivered, beginning in 1923, at the École des Beaux-Arts. Using a mixture of wax dolls and live models to demonstrate his ideas, Clérambault addressed his audience on the topic of North African clothing, and while most of these lectures were never published, two talks connecting certain features of Arab dress to the clothing of the Greeks and the Romans survived because they were also presented elsewhere. In making this classical link, points out Copjec, Clérambault's lectures on drapery aligned with the discourse of French colonialism:

> There is no doubt that the Beaux-Arts obsession with classical architecture and sculpture sprang, in part, from its conviction that Greece and Rome represented the imperial origins of France's high degree of civilization, or that this myth of origins helped propel France's imperialist, civilizing mission. No doubt that the transposition of neoclassical architecture to the sites that had become the *goals* of this mission euphemized the brutal process of the erasure of the colonies' own beginnings. Nor is there any doubt that Clérambault's lectures and photographs assisted this process. Moroccan drapery was not merely being used to reinterpret classical sculpture, classical sculpture was also being used to reinterpret Moroccan drapery – to reinvent it for the West. (72, original emphasis)

Yet to read Clérambault's lectures on drapery only in these terms, insists Copjec, is to overlook other important considerations that extend beyond the immediate concerns of a colonial critique. There is also a larger philosophical shift going on in this period that, if better understood, helps to shed light on what created the ethical logic of colonialism in the first place.

Copjec reminds the reader that 1923, the year in which Clérambault began his lecture series, was also the year that Le Corbusier published *Towards a New Architecture*, a ground-breaking work that opposed the new modernist aesthetic to the classical academicism of the École des Beaux-Arts. Several decades before Le Corbusier, however, a revolution in architecture had, almost unnoticed, already begun, a "rupture introduced at the beginning of the nineteenth century by a completely new notion of building type, one that would operate continuously not only through the century but also throughout modernism" (75). The central feature of this revolution is that buildings are now defined first and foremost by how they are used, in a way that relegates all other aesthetic or symbolic values in a work of architecture to a secondary position. The pervasive introduction of this utilitarian mindset allows the architect to view the building in its essential function resembling a naked body that may then be 'clothed' by non-essential, ornamental features:

> It is at this point that style and ornament began to be considered precisely as *clothing*; their connection to the building, in other words, was taken as arbitrary rather than necessary, and they were thus viewed, for the first time, as the wrapping or covering of an otherwise nude building. It was, of course, their altogether inessential status that made them vulnerable to the obsessive economy that ruled functionalism – ornament was eventually banished as crime, and stylistic eclecticism (the borrowing of styles from different historical periods) was outlawed by architecture's cultivation of a new indifference to all history except that of the building's own process of construction; style, in short, disappeared as an independent entity as it merged with construction. Functionalism, in the form of architectural purism, peaked, then, in a rending of clothing. (75-77, original emphasis)

Clérambault takes the same approach to Moroccan clothing, which in the surviving lectures he analyses in terms of construction and function. Despite this adherence to analytical distance, Copjec argues that the sheer volume of photographs taken, amounting to more than forty-thousand images, hints at a hidden obsession simmering just below the surface.

The utilitarian revolution extends not only to architecture, contends Copjec, but also to a wider redefinition of humanity in functional terms "that resulted in utility's becoming a *psychological* as well as an architectural principle" (80). In this mindset, humans are no longer defined by the goal of thought or contemplation, or seen as involved in a quest of self-knowledge, but instead seek meaning through the use-oriented occupation of labour. Clothing would play an important symbolic part in this utilitarian revolution:

> Before the debut of industrialization, clothing had been an important indicator of social status; it had served to mark the division of classes into distinct groups. But once 'man' became vested with a functional definition, the old vestiary regime collapsed and man was submitted to a new one. Sartorial distinctions among men were abolished, and all classes accepted a uniformity and simplification of style. The egalitarianism that defined the political agenda of the day and permitted man to define himself through his work rather than his birth was thus evidenced in the levelling and unmarking of his clothing. (80)

This cultural shift was particularly marked by the way clothing in this period differentiated women from men, who "surrendered the field of fashion to women and came to occupy, instead, that of function" (81). Copjec explores how this functionality quickly translated into an ethics of duty, "the equation of man's plain and uniform costume (his functional attire) with his stern and rigid conscience" (81). The pre-eminence of the utilitarian male is affirmed by this relegation of feminine dress to a largely decorative role.

The intersection of the utilitarian revolution and Lacanian thought occurs in *Seminar VII*, in which Lacan engages in a brief but crucial discussion of the English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham defines utilitarianism in terms of pleasure – that is to say, the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain – and Copjec is quick to specify that this "pleasure was from the beginning taken as fundamental – *as long as it could be used*" (82, original emphasis). Indeed, the utilitarian pursuit of pleasure is conceived as the duty of each human being, with activities that violate this rule dismissed as 'irrational' and 'capricious':

> The maximization of pleasure becomes a duty. Society can be held together only if men can be made to sacrifice their immediate, local gratifications for longer-term and greater ones. Now, it is precisely this manoeuvre that occasions the attack by Lacan, who sees it as the source of utilitarianism's unethical 'penchant for expansion;' and, in [a] similar vein, Jacques-Alain Miller will later describe this manoeuvre as part of the 'despotism' of utility. (84-85)

The meaning of these two terms refers to the perceived capacity for rational autonomy that utilitarianism takes upon itself to measure not only in one's own self, but also in others. As such, if someone is judged to be incapable of maximizing their pleasure, it becomes an implicit duty to help them realize this ethical goal. Copjec notes how this implicit justification for paternalism in utilitarianism translates directly into the logic of colonialism. "We understand to what Lacan and Miller refer when we recall that colonialism was the historical partner of functionalism's rise," she writes. "We think of the 'extensive benevolence' of industrialized nations, the 'civilizing mission,' the desire to dispense 'charity and humanity' that carried imperialism forward" (85). The despotism of utilitarian thought lies in its erroneous belief that the maximization of pleasure is the only rational goal of existence, so that any deviation from this aim ought to be regarded as a self-destructive mode of irrationality that it is one's duty to correct.

For Copjec, this concept of utilitarian duty is the target of both Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytic critique. Functionalism forges a chain of concepts that, in the name of ethics, effectively justifies its despotism. Starting from the maximization of pleasure as the basis of the law, it simultaneously

redefines not only rationality as the pursuit of pleasure, but also freedom as the subject's duty to achieve such a goal at both a personal and a collective level. This utilitarian deduction does not take into account the subject's *actual* desire, nor does it allow any genuine freedom to choose something different, since it is utterly blinkered by what functionalist logic tells it that the subject *ought* to want:

> Bentham's derivation of ethics from a descriptive psychology is often described as the derivation of *ought* from *is*. It now seems more fitting to say that, in utilitarianism, *ought* is derived from *ought*. The imperative to extend benevolence infinitely stems from the notion that man can be counted as zero. Defined as essentially pleasure seeking, he becomes total compliance. For, once his motive is established, his manipulability is assured. The ambitious imperialism of functionalism does not expect to encounter resistance. Since it arrives bearing what man wants – happiness – it expects its subjects to submit to its embrace. For this reason, French colonialism adopted a policy of 'assimilation.' (85-87, original emphasis)

The functionalist maximization of pleasure, in short, produces a new variant on what Lacan calls in *Seminar VII* the eighteenth-century 'man of pleasure,' in which utilitarian logic has discarded radical freedom on the grounds that it is an inefficient path toward achieving maximum pleasure. Such a move does not make functionalism any less susceptible to the paradoxes of the beyond of the pleasure principle. "The psychoanalytic subject, in short, being subject to a principle *beyond* pleasure, *is not driven to seek his own good*," writes Copjec (87, original emphasis). Utilitarian logic, in other words, does make sense, but only up to a certain point—namely, the point at which our pleasure is 'maximized,' beyond which the impetus to be 'good' collapses.

Translating this discussion of functionalism back into the metaphor of clothing, what utilitarian logic seeks to do is strip humanity to its naked state, to discover what its essential function or purpose is. Having reasoned that the goal of humanity is the maximization of pleasure, functionalists argue that it is our duty to 'clothe' ourselves in the various 'garments' associated with that pursuit. But if this pleasure, upon reaching the point of maximization, should turn out to be less than satisfying, what then are we to make of this philosophy? Does utilitarianism not leave the subject out in the cold, naked and trembling? Such a twist is a key insight of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which realizes that, in this utilitarian version of the story, it is not the emperor who has no imaginary clothes, but each and every subject.

The Naked Truth

This history should make us wary of any philosophy, then, that claims to reveal the naked truth. In Lacan's thought there is an essential interplay between clothing and nakedness, deception, and truth, that arises from its intersection with the imaginary dialectic of desire. Roland Barthes's famous chapter on striptease in *Mythologies* is a perfect example of this dynamic. "Woman," he writes, "is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked" (Barthes 84). Without the dialectic between clothing and nakedness, desire collapses in on itself, along with the potential for further pleasure. That is also why, in 'The Freudian Thing,' Lacan has an allegorical figure named 'truth' speak the following words:

> To you I am thus the enigma of she who slips away as soon as she appears, you men who try so hard to hide me under the tawdry finery of your proprieties. Still, I admit your embarrassment is sincere, for even when you take it upon yourselves to become my heralds, you acquire no greater worth by wearing my colours than your own clothes […] Men, listen, I am telling you the secret. I, truth, speak. (340)

The 'truth' that speaks here is not naked, however, for Lacan strategically distances this passage from his own voice. Instead of presenting these words as his own, he 'wraps' them in quotation marks and puts them in the mouth of an imaginary Freud. The discourse continues thus: "I, truth, will against you be the great Trickster, since I slip in not only via falsehood, but through a crack too narrow to be found at feigning's weakest point and through the dream's inaccessible cloud" (342). Here is one of Lacan's most important reflections on how there is inherent fraudulence in claiming to reveal the naked truth, that truth can only be revealed when it is clothed in the robes of deception and untruth. "At the level of the unconscious, the subject lies," says Lacan in *Seminar VII*. "And this lying is his way of telling the truth of the matter" (73). The only real path toward telling the truth, then, is to be a deceiver, a trickster, a charlatan, not for deception's own sake, but in order to betray falsehood itself and thus reveal the truth.

As a result, Lacan is repeatedly critical of ideas and philosophies that attempt to strip the truth naked, abolishing the interplay between clothing and what we imagine to be hidden underneath its folds. In this section, therefore, I want to examine two key stories about nakedness that appear in

Lacan's work. The first is Lacan's evocation, in *Seminar VII*, of the story of Saint Martin. In his *Life of Martin of Tours*, a biographical text from the early period of Christianity, Sulpicius Severus recounts the defining moment in the saint's life: an act of Christian generosity in which Saint Martin uses his sword to cut his cloak in half to share it with a needy beggar. Lacan's references to this story occur at two key points in *Seminar VII*. In the first, he is discussing Freud's critique of the commandment to 'love thy neighbour' in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Lacan's analysis centres on a crucial distinction between altruism, the principle of being good toward others, and the imperative to love them. Lacan uses the story of Saint Martin to illustrate the dangers of this second commandment:

> As long as it's a question of the good, there's no problem; our own and our neighbor's are of the same material. Saint Martin shares his cloak, and a great deal is made of it. Yet it is after all a simple question of training; material is by its very nature made to be disposed of – it belongs to the other as much as it belongs to me. We are no doubt touching a primitive requirement to be satisfied there, for the beggar is naked. But perhaps over and above that need to be clothed, he was begging for something else, namely that Saint Martin either kill him or fuck him. In any encounter there's a big difference in meaning between the response of philanthropy and that of love. (186)

Altruism is a social relation that tolerates a certain 'nakedness' of motivation, so that the material need for food or clothing is easily understood as the source of a virtuous action. That is what Lacan means when he says that such "material is by nature made to be disposed of—it belongs to the other as much as it belongs to me" (186). Love, by contrast, does not have this transferable quality—when we love our romantic partner, our family members, our friends, we do not see them as interchangeable in the same way as the random stranger to whom we lend a hand. Love imbues the surface meaning of an altruistic gesture with a hidden meaning, transforming a helpful act for one's neighbour from an act of philanthropy into a hidden gesture of *jouissance*. Lacan thus gives the story of Saint Martin and the beggar two possible alternative interpretations: does Saint Martin give the beggar his cloak out of 'naked' altruism, or is it a gesture of love, 'wrapped' (or 'clothed') in sublimated and hidden meanings?

Lacan returns to the example of Saint Martin three sessions later, this time in the context of his critique of utilitarianism. Early in that session, he talks about the false teleological belief that consciousness is the pinnacle of evolution. "[T]he finality of the evolution of matter toward consciousness is a mystical, elusive notion," insists Lacan, "and one that is properly speaking historically indeterminable" (223). Lacan does not deny that there are functional aspects to human desire, but the repeated historical error has been to see consciousness as the ultimate stage of humanity's march toward a grasp on reality. "Freud came up against this fact more than once in his investigations, and he always emphasized the fact that consciousness cannot be functionalized" (224). For Lacan "reality is not the simple dialectical correlative of the pleasure principle […] reality isn't just there so that we bump our heads up against the false paths along which the functioning of the pleasure principle leads us. In truth, we make reality out of pleasure" (225). Marc De Kesel, in his commentary on *Seminar VII*, relates these ideas back to the example of Saint Martin:

> In Lacan's interpretation of the parable of Saint Martin, a destitute man demands not so much that one respond to his needs as to the erotic call of his naked body. In this case, the beggar's request becomes a (*non*economic) demand for eroticism and enjoyment that transgresses the realm (and law) of the 'good' and 'goods.' Here the demand that one alleviate someone's needs is traversed by an erotic demand and it is this dimension, according to Lacan, that makes up the ultimate weight of ethics. *Beyond* the demand for clothing, the naked beggar always demands something else, an enjoyment that, even with the help of the most expensive clothes, will never completely be satisfied, even should Saint Martin literally give himself as a lover. (148, original emphasis)

There can be no such thing as a 'naked,' completely functionalist human being, as far as Lacan is concerned, because while human beings may behave in rational, even Machiavellian ways, their real goal is always enjoyment rather than utility.

In his comments about Saint Martin, Lacan focuses on the importance of cloth in relation to Karl Marx's theory of value. Marx outlines this idea in the first volume of *Capital* (1867), using the economic relationship between cloth and clothing as a key example. Lacan had previously elaborated this idea in *Seminar V* by delineating how capitalism takes the 'naked' object and 'clothes' it in a system of value:

> On this page Marx formulates the following proposition—no quantitative relations of value can be established without the prior establishment of a general equivalence. It's not simply a question of equating so many yards of cloth, it's the equivalence between cloth and clothes which has to be structured, that is, that clothes can

> come to represent the value of cloth. It's thus not a matter of the clothes that can be worn but of the fact that clothes can come to be the signifier of the value of cloth. In other words, the equivalence necessary from the start of the analysis, and on which what is called value is based, presupposes, on the part of both terms in play, abandoning a very important part of their meaning. (73)

In *Seminar VII* Lacan briefly parses this example, then points to several well-known fables about nudity and clothing – the story of Adam and Eve's discovery of their nakedness and the ensuing desire to clothe their shame, Christ's example of how the lilies of the field are clothed gloriously by the providence of God, and finally, a return to the example of Saint Martin:

> Saint Martin's gesture means in the beginning that man as such, man with his rights, begins to be individualized as soon as one begins to make holes in this cloth through which his head and his arms can emerge, through which, in effect, he begins to organize himself as clothed, that is to say, as having needs that have been satisfied. What can there be behind this? What in spite of that can he continue to desire? (228)

As De Kesel points out, what Lacan means here is that while the shared cloth fulfils the beggar's basic need, far from being the closure of desire, the satisfaction of 'naked' physical requirements such as food or clothing allows the subject to advance beyond survival into the realm of enjoyment, into entertaining desires that have no purpose from the perspective of the body's existence, but that are nonetheless experienced by the subject as powerful urges. It is no coincidence that Lacan's critique of Bentham immediately follows this example, with Lacan reiterating the distinction between "use value" and "*jouissance* use" (229). Nudity always exists in relation to the state of being clothed, just as truth is inseparable from its playful relationship to untruth.

That is not to say that attempting to pull back the veil to look upon the naked truth is not without its dangers. Indeed, this temptation is the main concern of the second key example of nakedness in Lacan, his references to the classical legend of Actaeon. The most famous version of this myth is recounted in Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which tells how Actaeon, while out hunting deer one day, loses his way and happens upon a "woodland cave" that "was sacred to Diana, the goddess of the hunt" (78). This violation of her sacred space is compounded by the fact that, because they were in the process of bathing, she and her nymphs were naked. Rather than allowing Actaeon to depart with his life after looking upon her unclothed body, Diana throws water into his face and uses her magical powers to transform him into a deer. When Actaeon emerges from the cave in this new form, his well-trained hounds immediately attack him, unwittingly tearing apart their master and so avenging the offended deity.

Lacan makes several references to the story of Actaeon—in *Seminar XI*, for instance, he provocatively compares the relationship between himself and his audience to that of Actaeon and his hounds. The most important allusions to this story occur in 'The Freudian Thing,' an unusual piece because Lacan occasionally departs from his usual style to indulge in poetic flights of fancy. The initial mention of Actaeon, for instance, occurs when Lacan is imagining the history of psychoanalysis as a kind of drama, a "comedy" that "I shall interrupt here at the beginning of its second act" (343):

> But if a more serious metaphor befits the protagonist, it is one that would show us in Freud an Actaeon perpetually set upon by dogs that are thrown off the scent right from the outset, dogs that he strives to get back on his tail, without being able to slow the race in which only his passion for the goddess leads him on. It leads him on so far that he cannot stop until he reaches the cave in which the chthonian Diana, in the damp shade that confounds the cave with the emblematic abode of truth, offers to his thirst, along with the smooth surface of death, the quasi-mystical limit of the most rational discourse the world has ever heard, so that we might recognize there the locus in which the symbol substitutes for death in order to take possession of the first budding of life. (343)

Charles Freeland interprets this passage as an allegory of the interplay between truth and the imaginary, in which Actaeon (the subject) and Diana (the Other) re-enact the process of aphanasis—the disappearance or "*fading*" (Lacan 208)—of the subject:

> Lacan […] compares truth to the virgin goddess Diana (Artemis) and places Freud in the role of Actaeon, the hunter pursuing truth, no doubt on the promise of seeing what no mortal should see, seeing truth unveiled, seeing her, naked in her abode, in her dark and moist grotto, seeing her, and in the moment of seeing her also reaching out to touch her, and at that moment of truth, he is both denied by the goddess and then devoured by his hounds precisely for attempting to see and to touch what is forbidden to see or to touch. Isn't this a simulacrum of truth – not just a metaphor but an image of truth – as both lure and barrier? Truth is, in this scenario, the object of a fantasy. (88-89)

Freeland's interpretation has the virtue of foregrounding the issue of the gaze in the interaction between Actaeon and Diana, but it is rather less satisfying than the more in-depth reading that Oliver Harris presents in *Lacan's Return to Antiquity* (2017).

For a start, Harris provides a much wider intellectual scope for Lacan's interaction with the Actaeon myth, foregrounding, in particular, the role of Pierre Klossowski. Klossowski's *Sade, My Neighbour* (1947) is a well-known influence on Lacan's ethical theories, most notably in 'Kant with Sade,' but in 1956 Klossowski also published a novella, *Diana at her Bath*, in which he retells the Actaeon story. Harris claims that Klossowski, as well as Sartre's discussion of an 'Actaeon complex' in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), were crucial precursors to Lacan's theory of the gaze. Harris highlights some important aspects of this story—the fascination with nakedness in the classical myth, for instance, has a rather different intention compared to that described in Genesis. "Judeo-Christianity is defined by a gaze that judges rather than lusts," writes Harris (Harris 178). The difference in gender of the two protagonists, he points out, is also significant, with the story's emphasis on the femininity of truth "and he who hunts her" (180). But the most crucial part of this interpretation is Harris's focus on how the veil (or clothing in general, as shown by Barthes's example of striptease) obscures and thus maintains the object of desire. After citing from the end of 'The Freudian Thing,' in which Lacan compares the tantalizing inaccessibility of truth to the figure of Diana, Harris writes: "This is Diana as a cold fantasy, a refusal, one that reaches for the veil and so preserves our desire. […] The true consequence of drawing back the veil is that the veil is promptly restored" (181). Here we begin to approach the real meaning of this story, which goes well beyond what Freeland claims for it. Let us not forget that Diana is a goddess, and for Lacan, the gods belong to the field of the real, to the sphere of unpleasure that is necessary to the renewal of desire. In contrast to Ovid's Actaeon, who stumbles on Diana's cave by accident, Lacan portrays Freud, the new Actaeon, as *hastening* toward the cave, replete with the insight that this encounter with the real, far from leading to tragedy, is the correct path to *jouissance*. It is precisely because Freud understands the beyond of the pleasure principle that "the Actaeon who is dismembered here is not Freud, but every analyst in proportion to the passion that inflamed him and made him […] the prey of the dogs of his own thoughts" (Lacan 343).

The Emperor's New Clothes

For Lacan, the ego is the 'clothing' of the subject, a metaphor that has its origins in a passage from Descartes's *Meditations* that, as Roudinesco explains (Roudinesco 23-28), is central to his refutation of Henry Ey's attempt to blend neurology and psychiatry in 'Remarks on Psychic Causality.' In this example from the First Meditation—famous, in more recent times, because of the acrimonious dispute between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida over its interpretation—Descartes contemplates how a disparity might arise between the reality of a person's status and how they present themselves to the world. A madman, for instance, might believe himself to be a king who is dressed in purple robes, even though he is, in fact, a naked pauper. Descartes writes:

> Indeed, how could I deny that these hands or that this body is mine, unless perhaps I think that I am like some of those mad people whose brains are so impaired by the strong vapour of black bile that they confidently claim to be kings when they are paupers, that they are dressed up in purple when they are naked, that they have an earthenware head, or that they are a totally hollowed-out shell or are made of glass. But those people are insane, and I would seem to be equally insane if I followed their example in any way. (19)

Lorenzo Chiesa takes up Lacan's interpretation of this passage in *Subjectivity and Otherness* (2007). Chiesa emphasizes the double misrecognition that takes place in the formation of the subject, since not only does the ego fail to understand that its formation occurs through the alienating process of seeing the subject from the position of the Other but, on top of this, the ego fails even to recognize that such alienation has occurred.

As a marker of subjectivity, clothing functions in a congruent way. Modern humans like to imagine that the clothing we wear expresses the nuances of our personality, yet most people today wear outfits that they did not make or design. The misrecognition of this state of affairs allows the indulgence of a further imaginative fantasy, that the clothes I am wearing are an expression of 'my' style and character. Unlike Descartes, who views the naked madman who believes himself to be dressed as a king as primarily a problem of erroneous knowledge, Lacan regards the same example as one of subjective identification and formation: clothing and self-image are two interrelated aspects of

the subject's ego. Once this logical equivalence is established, Lacan can use Descartes's argument against itself, as Chiesa explains:

> According to Lacan, it is the ego that makes me accept as true that I am myself and the other is the other. This was Descartes's conclusion in the *Meditations*, and it explains his statement that madness consists in believing oneself to be other than one is ('they think they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering'). Lacan undermines this argument on its own grounds by asserting that it is no more crazy to believe oneself to be a king when one is not than it is to believe oneself to be oneself. (16)

Just as it is a delusion to think that the clothes I wear, which were made by the Other, are an expression of 'my' style, so too it is an error (albeit an understandable one) to believe that the ego that 'clothes' me, as a subject, does not derive from the Other, that it is an expression of my 'authentic' self. Language is another example of this same phenomenon: the words I claim as my 'own,' that I use to express my most intimate ideas, in reality belong to the Other. Language is not something that each subject invents as a separate individual, but instead is acquired from the linguistic community in which we are immersed.

These ideas make Lacan particularly sensitive to style and presentation. The ethical importance of rhetorical 'clothing' is highlighted in *Seminar VII*, for instance, when he comments on how "a sensitive subject such as ethics is not nowadays separable from what is called ideology," so that any statement on this subject becomes prey to the suspicion that the speaker is attempting to compel the audience to believe something (Lacan 182). The contradiction, for Lacan, lies in the fact that such an imperative is fundamentally incompatible with a genuinely ethical mindset, which cannot coexist with the despotism of the superego. "That is why I spoke of master-fools," he explains (182). The comic tradition of the fool allows a taboo to be uttered aloud *only* if it is framed by a mixture of humour and apparent naïveté, which absorb the negative 'blame' that would normally fall on such words:

> The 'fool' is an innocent, a simpleton, but truths issue from his mouth that are not simply tolerated but adopted, by virtue of the fact that this 'fool' is sometimes clothed in the insignia of the jester. And in my view it is a similar happy shadow, a similar fundamental 'foolery,' that accounts for the importance of the left-wing intellectual. (182)

Lacan then contrasts the figure of the 'fool' to that of the 'knave,' the 'unmitigated scoundrel' who, under the guise of truth-telling, gives a public performance of false sincerity. "Everyone knows that way of presenting himself, which constitutes part of the ideology of the right-wing intellectual, is […] [that] he doesn't retreat from the consequences of what is called realism; that is, when required, he admits he's a crook" (183). Whereas the left-wing 'fool' uses naiveté as a rhetorical mask to reveal the truth, the right-wing 'knave' spouts a mixture of lies and ideology presented as the unvarnished truth.

While Lacan's sympathies lie with the 'fool,' he nonetheless adds this important qualification: "But what is not sufficiently noted is that by a curious chiasma, the 'foolery' which constitutes the individual style of the left-wing intellectual gives rise to a collective 'knavery'" (183). Lacan is concerned with the practical consequences of how a discourse is presented to its audience, especially because the words of a left-wing intellectual may end up having the opposite of their intended effect. A 'fool' thus may be allowed to confront the audience with the truth, but experience shows that such an unveiling, far from changing the behaviour and attitudes of the public, often plays a part in reinforcing it. Lacan then continues to what he calls his 'confession':

> What I am proposing here for you to reflect on has, I don't deny, the character of a confession. Those of you who know me are aware of my reading habits; you know which weeklies lie around on my desk. The thing I enjoy most, I must admit, is the spectacle of collective knavery exhibited in them – that innocent chicanery, not to say calm impudence, which allows them to express so many heroic truths without wanting to pay the price. It is thanks to this that what is affirmed concerning the horror of Mammon on the first page leads, on the last, to purrs of tenderness for this same Mammon. (183)

What Lacan is 'confessing' to here is a kind of double bluff, an admission that, even though his sympathies lie with the 'fool,' he sees the strategy of the 'knave' as also being a useful tactic. For the fool to speak the truth and point out the world's injustices is all very well, but if the practical outcome of such discourse is an unwitting collaboration with one's enemies (Mammon), then such a figure is clearly a fool in more than just a rhetorical sense. In his most provocative public appearances, therefore, Lacan succeeds in occupying the rhetorical position of the 'knave'—to the students he meets with at Vincennes in 1969, for instance, or to the journalists at his 'Triumph of Religion' press conference in

1974—who, in attempting to catch him out as a liar, a charlatan, an emperor with no clothes, play directly into *his* hands.

For strategic purposes, Lacan appears to be a charlatan, as I argue in my book *Lacan the Charlatan* (2020), only because, in a double bluff, he is self-consciously *playing* the role of a charlatan. "I have even heard it said that Lacan doesn't say much more than 'The king is naked,'" he jokes in *Seminar VII*. "Perhaps after all I was the one referred to" (13). Lacan clarifies this statement further by making an important distinction between his own position and that of the child in Hans Christian Andersen's classic tale:

> Of course, I do teach in a somewhat more humorous way than my critic thinks […] If I do say 'The king is naked,' it is not in the same way as the child who is supposed to have exposed the universal illusion, but more in the manner of Alphonse Allais, who gathered a crowd around him by announcing in a sonorous voice, 'How shocking! Look at that woman! Beneath her dress she's stark naked!' Yet in truth I don't even say that. If the king is, in fact, naked, it is only insofar as he is so beneath a certain number of clothes – no doubt fictitious but nevertheless essential to his nudity. (13-14)

The child in Andersen's story, in other words, occupies the position of the aforementioned 'fool,' whose innocence allows him to speak the truth aloud, but whose utterance does not change the behaviour of those who hear his words—after all, Andersen's tale ends with the Emperor and his attendants stubbornly continuing their parade. "And so he held himself up even more proudly than before," concludes Andersen, "and the Gentlemen of the Chamber walked along carrying a train that was most definitely not there" (113). This practical ineffectiveness leads Lacan to undertake a crucial double bluff: in the guise of playing the 'knave' or 'charlatan,' a rhetorical stance that, in flaunting its sincerity, alerts his audience to be on guard against what looks suspiciously like an imposture, Lacan instead tells the truth. "This is, of course, the very Lacanian definition of deception in its specifically human dimension," writes Slavoj Žižek, "where we deceive the Other by means of the truth itself: in a universe in which all are looking for the true face beneath the mask, the best way to lead them astray is to wear the mask of truth itself" (42). Lacan, therefore, lies to us, while knowing that he is not really lying—he is a charlatan who clothes his discourse with imposture, an outer falsehood that is required because, without it, we would refuse to believe the naked truth.

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