

Learning from the Master

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Joshua Cohen, LMHC

*If we only arrange our life in accordance with the principle which tells us that we must always trust in the difficult, then what now appears to us as the most alien will become our most intimate and trusted experience.—
Rilke*

On March 30, 2013, a rather extraordinary event occurred. NPS, a British Object Relations oriented training institute, invited the heretic Lacan in from the cold. Oscar Romero, MD FIPA, a training analyst at both NPS and SPSI, presented a paper on the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, entitled *Lacan Remembered...On Time*. Both Lacan, the person, and his work have a reputation for being notoriously difficult—a reputation that is well earned. He was kicked out of the IPA in 1963 for his practice of the variable length session. Lacan, like the surrealists he kept company with, prized provocation. Some have argued that Lacan's ideas are merely a lot of sound and fury...signifying nothing. It is not hard to imagine that the same criticism was also leveled against Freud in his time. Not unlike a foreign language heard for the first time, Lacanese can sound like gibberish. But like the work of Freud, Klein, and Bion, Lacan's work rewards continued effort. Given the terrible intellectual thicket and forbidding territory that is Lacanian psychoanalysis, Oscar Romero provided the kind of guidance that is inevitably needed when entering into what, for many, is the unknown continent of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Lacan often spoke of his work as a “return to Freud.” He sought to emulate the spirit of Freud and the Freudian revolution in thought. “It is up to you to be Lacanians if you wish. I am a Freudian.” He was also quite deliberate in evoking the experience of psychoanalysis and unconscious communication in his writings and in his famous Paris Seminars. These seminars were held from 1953 to 1981 and were attended by young and old, by people from various disciplines, as well as by some of the great intellectual minds of the 21st century. He was good friends with Martin Heidegger and such good friends with Georges Bataille that he stole Bataille's wife. His playful use of language and puns was a calculated attempt to imitate the unconscious. As with reading Bion, Lacan evokes the very experience he is describing. The unconscious, as anyone who has worked with dreams or the transference knows, can be utterly baffling (Freud spoke of the navel of the dream, as that part which is utterly inscrutable). Romero's presentation was in stark contrast with this sort of approach. Where Lacan can be obscure and enigmatic, Romero was clear and concise. I think I am not alone in feeling awed by the cogency and clarity of Oscar Romero's paper. Not unlike the way an analyst translates unconscious material, Romero translated Lacan for us. And what a beautiful translation it was.

From the start of Romero's presentation, I was struck by how personal and political his talk was. Oscar Romero first encountered Lacanian ideas in 1976 in Cali, Columbia, the city of his birth. Romero had been invited to attend meetings held at the Instituto Freud, a Lacanian institute. Sitting among the audience, everyone seemed to agree, was a CIA agent. He was called “the very

blonde one.” The “very blonde one” slept through the meetings, undoubtedly unable to understand a word that was spoken, incapacitated by the incomprehensible. This comical and oppressive CIA figure showed up throughout Romero’s paper. This agent, undoubtedly a source of paranoia, “was my first experiential and phenomenological lesson about the meaning of the big other, or the Other with a capital O, and of the ‘signifier.’” The CIA agent in Romero’s paper serves as both comic relief and a signifier of the painful and complex realities of Latin American history.

There is a telling story in Romero’s presentation that illustrates the Lacanian idea of the Big Other or “the one who knows.” In 1979, when Romero was in Columbia, the people of Iran overthrew the American backed Shah, ushering in the Islamic revolution. The revolutionaries turned the tables on the Big Other. Once they began interrogating people from the embassy, they realized that many of the all-knowing CIA agents didn’t have even the most cursory knowledge of Iranian history, and most of them didn’t even speak Farsi. The Big Other, in other words, is essentially a narcissistic construction that ultimately is illusory. But this imaginary other has real effects. Romero quotes Lacan, drawing a parallel between the role of the CIA in Latin America and Lacan’s critique of psychoanalysis. Lacan felt that psychoanalysis was falling into a trap in how it viewed the transference relationship, “giving in to a mirage internal to the function itself...returning to the reactionary principle that covers over the duality of the one who suffers and the one who heals, with the opposition between the one who knows (the connoisseur) and the one who does not.” It is not uncommon for the patient to believe, like the Iranian revolutionaries, that there is the Big Other who knows. The patient often believes that the psychoanalyst knows his or her unconscious. This is to be expected. The danger occurs when the analyst shares the patient’s belief, resulting in a *folie a deux*. In many ways, Lacan believed that, as a discipline, psychoanalysis was devolving, rather than evolving, that psychoanalysis was becoming a source of oppression rather than of liberation. He fought in many ways to keep the spirit of psychoanalysis alive, to protect it from becoming reified. The unconscious subverts the subject and, in some ways, this is the psychoanalyst’s role. Just as the Iranian revolutionaries were surprised by their interrogation of the Big Other, so the analysand is surprised by what he or she encounters in the psychoanalytic process. In Lacanian terminology, the analysand will discover a lack, something that does not exist, a hole, that omnipotence has covered up.

There were far too many complex concepts in Romero’s paper for me to effectively summarize. The headings may convey some idea: Language, Power, The Signifier, The Mirror Stage, The Phallus, Time and Space, etc. Like the work of Freud and Bion, Lacan’s work comprises many phases, and many of the ideas build upon themselves. It is a universe unto itself. But I do hope I have given some flavor and feel for Oscar Romero’s presentation. His ability to mix both the complex with the playful and his blending of the abstract with the concrete was masterful. Lacan, like Freud, has had an impact far beyond the psychoanalytic field. In America, Lacan has found a home in academia but not in the clinic. Hopefully, Romero will publish his paper and others will have the opportunity to know more about this towering intellectual figure in psychoanalysis. Toward the end of his paper, Romero described how the figure of the CIA agent began to fade at the Institute Freud. This has happened throughout Latin America, where a radical and unheralded political transformation has occurred in the past decade or so. In many ways, Klein brought with her an evolution and revolution in analytic theory and technique. Especially in America, Kleinian thought was once considered odd, exotic, and arcane. Perhaps one day, Lacanian analysis, like

British Object Relations theory, will find a more hospitable home away from home in North America, helping to enrich an already ongoing and evolving analytic discourse.

Joshua Cohen, LMHC, is a candidate at Northwestern Psychoanalytic Society with an interest in philosophy, politics, and French psychoanalysis. He maintains a private practice in Seattle, where he works with children and adults.