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Lacan's "New Relay": Salvador Dalí and René Crevel

Sinan Richards

In 1932, Jacques Lacan met Salvador Dalí for the first time. Dalí welcomed Lacan in his Parisian art studio with a piece of cigarette paper stuck to his nose.[1] In 1975, when the two met again for the second time in New York City, forty-three years later, Dalí asked Lacan: "why didn't you say anything that time we met and I had a bandage on my nose?" "Because I knew there wasn't anything wrong with you," Lacan replied. "Fantastic!" Dalí says, "you're the only one who didn't say anything!"[2] To understand why the young Lacan thought "there wasn't anything wrong" with Dalí, even though Dalí was ostensibly provoking the young psychiatrist, we need to turn to the young Lacan and his fascination with Surrealism.

Over a decade after his first meeting with Dalí, in September 1946, Lacan was at a conference in Bonneval in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region of France, at the invitation of his friend the psychiatrist Henri Ey. It was on the first day of this conference that Lacan would deliver his well-known paper titled: "Presentation on Psychical Causality," republished in 1966 in *Écrits*. In response to Lacan's paper, Ey declared: "if we were to follow Lacan in his conception of psychogenesis there would be no more psychiatry."[3] And, while Lacan's early work elicited such an ambivalent response from the more orthodox psychiatrists, artists and in particular the surrealists were not alarmed but rather inspired by Lacan's early work.

As well as Dalí, Lacan had also met René Crevel in 1930,[4] and both Dalí and Crevel invited Lacan to write in their surrealist journal, *Minotaure,* in 1933.[5] As David Macey notes, "*Minotaure* [… was] a somewhat unlikely place, one would think, for a

[1] Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925–1985*, trans. Jeffery Mehlman (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 110.

[2] Sarane Alexandrian, *Le Surréalisme et le rêve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 67. See also Margaret Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 53.

[3] Henri Ey, "Discussion du Rapport de Lacan," in *Le Problème de la Psychogenèse des Nêvroses et des Psychoses*, eds. Lucien Bonnafé, Henri Ey, et al. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer & Cie, 1950), 60. Translation my own.

[4] David Macey, "Fragments of an Analysis: Lacan in Context," *Radical Philosophy* 35 (Autumn 1983): 5. See also Bertrand Ogilvie, *Lacan*, *la formation du concept de sujet* (Paris: PUF, 1993), 5.

[5] See Joël Dor, *Bibliographie des travaux de Jacques Lacan* (Paris: Interéditions, 1983), 36–47.

young psychiatrist to publish material which draws heavily on his clinical research."[6] Yet, as Lacan explains in "On My Antecedents;" rather than publish his early work in *Évolution Psychiatrique,* a scholarly psychiatric journal to which Lacan did contribute articles and who were willing to accommodate his early work, he preferred to have his work published in *Minotaure*, to start what he called a "new relay" alongside "Salvador Dalí's 'critical paranoia' and René Crevel's *Le Clavecin de Diderot*."[7] Clearly, Lacan did not attempt to mask his relationship and admiration for the surrealists, which was reciprocal—for precisely the same reasons, I argue, as those that brought orthodox psychiatry to feel threatened by this surrealist psychopathologist. Instead, Lacan by 1966 saw his earlier work as directly in the same movement as Dalí and Crevel. Through Lacan's doctoral thesis*, De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* [*On paranoid psychosis in its relationship with personality*] (1932) and other early texts, I explain how Lacan drew influence from and in turn inspired both Dalí and Crevel, two major figures of the surrealist movement. However, my central focus will be on the connection between Crevel and Lacan, which is, in my view, much more propitious to understanding the impact Surrealism had on Lacan. Through my analysis of this reciprocal influence, I attempt to unearth the many clues to Lacan's early surrealist and modernist practice.

Lacan's New Relay I: Salvador Dalí's Critical Paranoia

Lacan's doctoral thesis might not have precipitated the revolution in psychiatry among the medical establishment that Lacan had originally intended; however, his doctoral dissertation did become something of a revolutionary *cause célèbre* among surrealist circles.[8] As Sarane Alexandrian explains in *Le surréalisme et le rêve,* it was Lacan who first reached out to meet Dalí,[9] and Dalí who first "indoctrinated" Lacan to analyses of paranoid psychosis.[10] It is undeniable that Dalí's work is one consideration to appreciate the impact and development of the core contribution of Lacan's doctoral thesis. As Alexandrian puts it, "the early Lacan was a keen reader of the surrealist journal *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, where the links between paranoia and poetic creation had been studied since 1930."[11] Both Alexandrian and Elisabeth Roudinesco point out that Lacan was attentive to Dalí's work, as do Macey and Jean-Michel Rabaté. As Rabaté argues: "one sees the lasting influence of a paranoic drift in Surrealism that no doubt played a great part for Lacan."[12] For Macey, "of all the surrealists it is Dalí who is closest to Lacan. Or is it Lacan who is closest to Dalí?"[13]

[6] Macey, "Fragments," 5.
[7] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton, 2006), 51.
[8] Macey, "Fragments," 5.
[9] Alexandrian, *Le Surréalisme,* 67.
[10] Macey, "Fragments," 5.
[11] Alexandrian, *Le Surréalisme*, 67. Translation my own.
[12] Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Jacques Lacan and Literature* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 184.
[13] Macey, "Fragments," 5.

According to Macey, "a tenacious legend persists that Lacan's doctoral thesis is the primary 'source' for Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, but whilst Lacan may provide him with a certain *a posteriori* theorization, Dalí appears to have first used the term 'critical paranoia' in 1929."[14] It is clear that, in the logic of the "tenacious legend," both Dalí and Lacan influenced each other to a certain extent.

In a subchapter entitled "My Pictorial Struggle" from the *Conquest of the Irrational* (1935), Salvador Dalí claims that he can appreciate how his public might struggle to understand his paintings given "the fact that I myself," Dalí says, "at the moment of painting, do not understand my own pictures."[15] This impulse that Dalí proposes is remarkably close to the way that Lacan conceptualized the subject in psychoanalysis, and the way that Crevel understood the bourgeois French intellectual. Indeed, as Lacan says in 1966 in a talk entitled "*Petit discours aux psychiatres de Sainte Anne*," "if only for this reason that precisely psychoanalysis consists in discovering that we are not transparent to ourselves! Then, why would the **o**thers [*sic*] become transparent to us?"[16] For Dalí, the purpose of Surrealism, of artists like Paul Éluard, André Breton, René Magritte, and Pablo Picasso, as well as Dalí himself, was to "prove [the] need [for] concrete materialization in current reality," which is to say "giving objective value on the real plane to the delirious unknown world of our irrational experiences."[17] Dalí's paranoiac method was born out of this goal of giving value to irrational experiences, we could say a Lacanian goal *par excellence*, and referring to himself in the third person, Dalí says:

> It was in 1929 that Salvador Dalí brought his attention to hear upon the internal mechanism of paranoiac phenomena and envisaged the possibility of an experimental method based on the sudden power of the systematic associations proper to paranoia; this method afterwards became the delirio-critical synthesis which bears the name of "paranoiac-critical activity." Paranoia: delirium of interpretive association bearing a systematic structure. *Paranoiac-critical activity: spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based upon the interpretive-critical association of delirious phenomena*.[18]

In certain aspects, Dalí's paranoiac-critical activity is reminiscent of Lacan's concept of paranoia in his doctoral thesis. It is easy to see why Macey suggests that Lacan's doctoral thesis became known as a kind of mythical origins of Dalí's paranoiac-critical method.[19] In his doctoral thesis, Lacan developed his belief that the ego is structured, or constituted by, paranoia, which is to say the subject is structured psychotically. Moreover, Lacan argues in "Structure des Psychoses Paranoïaques" (1931) that unlike

[14] Macey, "Fragments," 5.
[15] Salvador Dalí, *Conquest of the Irrational* (New York: Julien Levy Publisher, 1935), 11.
[16] Lacan, "Petit discours aux psychiatres de Sainte Anne," available online, unpublished. http://www.psychasoc.com/Textes/Petit-discours-aux-psychiatres-de-Sainte-Anne (Last accessed February 4, 2023) Translation my own.
[17] Dalí, *Conquest,* 15.
[18] Dalí, *Conquest,* 15 (emphasis in original).
[19] Macey, "Fragments," 5.

doctrinal psychiatry, which understood paranoia as a character flaw, he instead saw it as something that structured the ego.[20] Dalí clearly states in the *Conquest of the Irrational,* "all delirious phenomena of paranoiac character, even when sudden and instantaneous, bear already [*sic*] 'in entirety' the systemic structure."[21] Therefore, for Dalí, paranoia always already exists, even if its manifestation is "sudden and instantaneous" as part of the structure within which the subject lives. That is, to put it in the language of the later Lacan, the symbolic frame within which we dwell, as subjects, is always already predisposed to a form of psychosis, which is, paradigmatically, an argument that Lacan will make a central pillar of his philosophy.[22] Indeed, I agree with Rabaté that in the 1930s "Lacan does not have at his disposal the critical vocabulary needed" to make this argument as clearly as he will later.[23]

In 1966, Lacan considered his early influences and states in "On My Antecedents":

> The function of ideals presented itself to me here in a series of reduplications that led me to the notion of a structure, which was more instructive than the account [Édouard] Toulouse's clinicians [*les cliniciens de Toulouse*] would have provided, for they would have lowered its price by situating it in the register of passion.[24]

For Lacan, the structural psychotic frame is to be accounted for when thinking of mental alienation and not simply the "lower price" of passionate outbursts of insanity, as Édouard Toulouse's clinicians would have it. Which is to say that, for Lacan, the general social symbolism bears heavily on subjects. And similarly, for Dalí, only the paranoia-critical method can "*a posteriori*" reveal the "systematic coherences and *finesses* already existing at the moment when delirious instantaneousness is produced" and is "given an objective light by paranoiac-critical activity."[25] Since the paranoiac-critical method focuses its analyses on the entire symbolic frame, it "no longer considers surrealist phenomena and images by themselves but, on the contrary, as a coherent whole of systemic and significant relations."[26] And, I claim, this is precisely how Lacan considered the status of the mentally alienated. As Macey puts it, "[for Dalí] the reduplication and repetition of images and identifications […] provide Lacan with the first notion of structure (Dalí's 'systemic structure')."[27] Rather than study and contain the insane from within the limited frame of "normalcy" which seeks to eliminate difference and irrationality, Lacan sought to analyze the insane against "a coherent whole of systemic and significant relations."[28] As Dalí puts it, the paranoiac-

[20] Lacan, "Structure des Psychoses Paranoïaques," *Semaine des Hôpitaux de Paris* (1931): 437–45.
[21] Dalí, *Conquest,* 15.
[22] I discuss this at some length in my book Sinan Richards, *Dialectics of Love in Sartre and Lacan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 244–5.
[23] Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Loving Freud Madly: Surrealism between Hysterical and Paranoid Modernism," *Journal of Modern Literature* 25.3/4 (2002): 68.
[24] Lacan, *Écrits*, 52. Translation modified. I am grateful to Derek Hook and Dany Nobus for bringing this to my attention.
[25] Dalí, *Conquest,* 16.
[26] Dalí, *Conquest,* 16.
[27] Macey, "Fragments," 5.
[28] Macey, "Fragments," 5.

critical method seeks to interpret against the frame of "normalcy": "against the passive, disinterested, contemplative and aesthetic attitude of irrational phenomena there is the active, systematic, organising and cognoscitive attitude of irrational phenomena considered as associative, partial and significant events in the authentic domain of our immediate and practical experience of life."[29] Indeed, could there be a better description of Lacan's practice than this statement Dalí makes about his paranoiac-critical method: "by this method paranoiac-critical activity discovers new, and objective 'significances' in the irrational; it makes the world of delirium pass tangibly onto the plane of reality."[30] Crucially, as Macey explains: "for Dalí, the images produced by critical paranoia are characterized by their immediacy; for Lacan the 'fertile moments' of paranoia are exceptionally rich and acute delusional experiences relating less to a loss of reality than to a sudden breakthrough to an original syntax."[31]

It is not just the notion of structure that shows Lacan's connection to surrealist writings. Lacan is also well known for his homophonies, hermeneutic style, double meanings, and sliding meanings, which in many ways is also the point of the paranoiac-critical method. As Dalí puts it:

> Common images having a double figuration—the figuration can theoretically and practically be multiplied;—everything depends upon the paranoiac capacity of the author. The basis of associative mechanisms and the renewing of obsessing ideas allows, as is the case in a recent picture by Salvador Dalí now being elaborated, six simultaneous images to be represented without any of them undergoing the least figurative deformation.[32]

If we consider the homophony *le nom-du-père/ le-non-du-père/ les-non-dupes-errent* [the-name-of-the-father/the-no-of-the-father/the-non-dupes-err] or any of Lacan's many neologisms, we can see how what Lacan attempted to create was the psychoanalytic equivalent of a Surrealist painting, one that had double meanings (or more), a practice that, rather than correct paranoia or psychosis, chose to see it everywhere, to vibrate alongside it. As Lacan put it: "the psychoanalyst is the only one to authorize himself."[33] Indeed, as Rabaté argues "one can identify more precisely a 'paranoid style' in Lacan—and the encounter with Dalí was crucial—that never excluded an important element of infectious *fun* (he often used the English word in his seminars)."[34]

However, we should appreciate that while there are evidently aesthetic and formal crossovers between Dalí and Lacan, as one delves deeper into Lacan's work one comes to understand that, as Rabaté correctly argues, "Lacan's theory of paranoia has very little to do with Dalí's concept of a beautiful and stunning hallucination."[35] And, while it

[29] Dalí, *Conquest,* 16.
[30] Dalí, *Conquest,* 16.
[31] Macey, "Fragments," 5.
[32] Dalí, *Conquest,* 17–18.
[33] Jacques Lacan, *Scilicet,* no. 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 14, translation my own.
[34] Rabaté, *Lacan and Literature,* 184.
[35] Rabaté, "Freud Madly," 68.

is Dalí who traditionally comes to mind when evoking Lacan, Surrealism, and his early work on paranoïa, there was another surrealist for whom Lacan's doctoral thesis was a watershed moment, and who arguably had a much more profound and significant impact on Lacan himself: René Crevel.

Lacan's New Relay II: René Crevel

Arguably, the most important contribution of twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory was the notion of the unconscious, and Lacan perhaps its most important theorist and translator. By focusing on the unconscious speech and writings of the insane, formalizing language as the fundamental element, and situating the subject inside a system of signification, Lacan wanted to impress the ironic dependence of the "typical" subject on the unspoken rules of social life. And, if we are to believe Lacan himself in "On My Antecedents," it was René Crevel who first foresaw the importance of Lacan's work on the unconscious as early as 1933.

Crevel was a remarkable figure in early surrealist circles who sought to marry Surrealism with Marxism, fomenting a complex materialist understanding of the world that expressed itself in a deep anticolonial commitment. In the fifth volume of *Le Surréalisme au service de la revolution,* Crevel argued that while Freud discovered the unconscious, he predicted that it was Lacan's early theory of personality that could develop into a proper science to investigate and learn something much more profound about the subject's unconscious. Crevel argues that "answers will be given to us by the still nascent science of personality, to the progress of which Dr Lacan's very recent thesis: *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* [*On paranoid psychosis in its relationship with personality*] has amply contributed."[36] It is important to note that Crevel's pronouncements were made long before Lacan's famous statement: "the unconscious is structured like a language."[37] On the very specific concept of language and the unconscious, it is Lacan himself who hints that Crevel was prophetic and was right all along, saying in "On My Antecedents:" "I thus find myself situating these texts in a future perfect: they will have anticipated my insertion of the unconscious into language."[38] Which is to say that Lacan clearly credits Crevel with anticipating his infamous statement that the unconscious is "structured like a language." This hitherto underappreciated fact is striking, since this relatively unknown Surrealist author, René Crevel, is therefore central to Lacan's early brand of psychoanalysis.

In his summary of Lacan's doctoral thesis, Crevel correctly argued that Lacan was taking aim at the so-called objectivist empiricist positions in the psychiatric sciences, a dominant school of psychiatry that Crevel felt forced an erroneous understanding of the subject as deterministically oriented.[39] As I showed in the introduction, Henri Ey's

[36] René Crevel, "Notes en vue d'une psycho-dialectique," *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* 5 (1933): 50. Translation my own.

[37] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, (1955–1956)*, trans. Russell Grigg (London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 167.

[38] Lacan, *Écrits,* 56.

[39] Crevel, "Notes," 50.

response to Lacan in 1946 illustrates this quite well: Ey had argued that "if we were to follow Lacan in his conception of psychogenesis there would be no more psychiatry," which is to say that more orthodox psychiatrists saw Lacan as a threat to the entire discipline.[40] Therefore, Crevel was, in a sense, ahead of the curve as early as 1933, and there is no doubt that Crevel's analysis and praise for Lacan guided him in that direction. Indeed, in discussing Lacan's work, Crevel argues that "scientific psychology reduced the subject to the state of a string, condemned him to be nothing more than the link of a succession of sensations, desires and images."[41] Whereas, in contrast, Lacan's contribution to psychiatry was to try and understand a "personality" of the subject, by trying to "illuminate both the inside and the outside."[42] "Strictly speaking," Crevel says, Lacan's work:

> [a]gitates in all their moving details the data on the topic of paranoid psychosis which affects the whole personality, prolongs it, develops it, serves as a magnifying and specifying mirror for it. Thanks to this very sensitive microscope we will notice the interdependence of the internal and external phenomena.[43]

Crevel's notion of Lacan's "very sensitive microscope" is, in many ways, a fruitful way to understand what Lacan was trying to do in the 1930s, and we will see how Lacan's microscope was to zoom in on elements of the subject's speech and syntax.

In "On My Antecedents," Lacan singles out the importance of Crevel's book *Le Clavecin de Diderot* [*Diderot's harpsichord*] (1932) for his early thinking; as we have previously seen, he includes this work of Crevel's as part of the "new relay" in which he wishes to place his work.[44] Lacan's endorsement might seem odd at first glance, since in *Le Clavecin,* Crevel rails quite starkly against psychoanalysis, and anticipating even Foucault, he sees in this budding new practice an accomplice to state power and colonialism. Through creating a patriotic unconscious, Crevel says, "psychoanalysis becomes […] a new pretext, in the sophisticated world, [… for the French medical establishment …] to pamper themselves and their convenient prejudices." Fanning the flames, Crevel further charges that "at the hands of some, the rare opportunities for revolutionary steps [from psychoanalysis] fizzle out."[45] Elsewhere, Crevel again seeks to outline some of his dissatisfaction with Freud's psychoanalysis, but also colonialism and scientism, and set the groundwork for his praise of Lacan's radicalization of psychoanalysis in his later articles in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. Crevel again sees in Freud a kind of vulgar materialism and naïve attempt at an unjustified

[40] Ey, "Discussion du Rapport de Lacan," 60. Translation my own.
[41] Crevel, "Notes," 50.
[42] Crevel, "Notes," 50.
[43] Crevel, "Notes," 50.
[44] Lacan, *Écrits,* 51. For more on this, see also my co-authored chapter: "On My Antecedents," Sinan Richards, Derek Hook, John Dall'Aglio, Stijn Vanheule, and Benjamin Strosberg, *Reading Lacan's Écrits, Volume 4, From "Overture to This Collection" to "Presentation on Psychical Causality,"* eds. Derek Hook, Stijn Vanheule, and Calum Neill (New York: Routledge, 2024).
[45] René Crevel, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: éditions, 2014), 764. Translation my own.

scientism. Crevel, a melancholic bisexual, committed suicide in 1935, and, as Simon Harel explains, René Crevel's *Le clavecin de Diderot* (1932) sees Crevel "radicalis[ing] surrealist thought by imposing the necessity of militant action. [Crevel] criticizes with virulence the sexually repressed in colonial thought and rejects the phallocentrism which animates surrealist thought in its sublimated form, that defended by André Breton."[46] Indeed, Crevel questions the power of the psychoanalyst, saying that psychoanalysts ought not to be claiming simple repression when patients exhibit anger at their interpretations. As Crevel puts it:

> The psychoanalysed person, free to psychoanalyse his psychoanalyst, has, from the first question, noted that the psychiatry given as medicine of the soul is turning into the medicine of love. Let the succession of idealistic swindles continue in this way. Freud's discoveries are certainly no less admirable. But, under the oratorical precautions of his followers, one finds the very realistic coarseness of the classical carabinieri whose vulgar jokes [*turlupinade*], with age, never fails to turn into a strong spirit.[47]

Crevel laments that Freud's theories amount to a series of vulgar jokes that have been inculcated and defended by his followers; followers who Crevel describes as "idealistic swindlers" and "carabinieri" [Italian military police]. These are the powerful remarks of a surrealist who is disillusioned with "traditional" psychoanalysis and whose work, in turn, heavily influenced Lacan's radicalization of Freudianism throughout his life. Clearly, this adds to the view that Lacan was no simple adopter of Freudian psychoanalysis. In *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, 1933, Crevel again criticizes contemporary theory and psychoanalysis, saying that "the French intellectual, product and spokesman of a stingy bourgeoisie, doubts his doubt, therefore believes in himself."[48] Then, pitting Freud directly against Lacan, Crevel contests Freud's "relapse into a mechanical materialism" to express his preference for Lacan. Crevel says, for example, that "when speaking of a homosexual suffering from tuberculosis of the testicles, [Freud] notes, without issuing the slightest psychoanalytical view, that after the graft of a cryptic [*sic*] testicle, the homosexual in question behaved like a male and directed his libido towards the woman," whereas Lacan offers a materialist science with its "psycho-dialectic" providing "detailed, precise, complete monographs."[49] To highlight his difference from Freud, Crevel points to Lacan's case study of Aimée from his doctoral thesis, where Lacan undertook a detailed case study of not only the patient's disease but also her family, her social life, as well as crucially her creative writings. For Lacan, in 1933, it was not a question of getting the patient to provide an autobiography approvable in the language of the disciplinary power of psychiatry to entrap them within a punitive cure, as Foucault explains in *Le Pouvoir Psychiatrique* [Psychiatric

[46] Simon Harel, "René Crevel," *Nuit blanche* 79 (2000): 21–4.
[47] René Crevel, *Le clavecin de Diderot* (Paris: Éditions Surréalistes, 1932), 149–50.
[48] Crevel, "Notes," 49.
[49] Crevel, "Notes," 51.

Power].[50] Instead, for Lacan, it was to take seriously the delusions of the insane, to enter these delusions in a sense, and explore their potential from within the logic of the patient. For Crevel, therefore, Lacan's method as developed in his medical thesis was to seek as fastidious as possible a "clinical examination of certain typical cases, as Lacan did of Aimée's."[51] For Crevel, this should always include an attempt to "socially situate their patients or, rather, such and such family of such and such a patient." The method needs to "[study] the relations of such and such a particular family with society in general." This is why, for Crevel, "the materialist science, for its psycho-dialectic, needs detailed, precise, complete monographs."[52] From Lacan's earliest writings on paranoid auto-punishment and the case study of Aimée, Crevel was able to glean from Lacan's thesis the originality of his thought. Lacan's thesis marked a break with the empirical school of positivist psychiatry, instead opting to privilege the patient's own words and their speech, the patient's fictional works, as well as both their personal biography and the material circumstances that relate them to the society that formed them, and not necessarily the organic cause of mental alienation. This, then, is Lacan's "very sensitive microscope." For Crevel, psychoanalysis as a disciplinary practice allowed itself to be co-opted by generalized psychopathology, which simply dispersed its revolutionary potential, whereas Crevel saw in Lacan the potential to reactivate psychoanalysis's more revolutionary dimensions. Lacan was not prepared to become a simple adopter of psychoanalysis as it stood in the 1930s, which is why he singles out Crevel as providing a "new relay," a shift in his psychiatric project. This counter-narrative really does challenge the view that Lacan's psychoanalysis is somehow simply a re-articulation of Freudian psychoanalysis; instead, from its inception, Lacan was doing something quite substantially different.[53]

Before investigating the elements of Crevel's surrealist practice that inspired Lacan's psychoanalysis, I should like to first comment on Crevel's style. Strikingly, reading Crevel's non-fiction reveals just how much inspiration Lacan drew from Crevel. Crevel's writings are both enigmatic and confusing. In fact, they contain an idiosyncratic hermeticism comparable to that which Lacan develops in his own writing. To give a sense of what I mean, consider this scathing critique of contemporary academic discourse in linguistics that Crevel makes in *Le Clavecin de Diderot*. Crevel states:

> What's more, those who pore over the skeletons of language, for the most part impotent paupers who seek in their palaeontologies the erasure of their shortcomings, become enamoured with their grimoires like archaeologists with their mummies, when faced with the present and its creatures. And these

[50] Michel Foucault, *Le Pouvoir Psychiatrique. Cours au Collège de France. 1973–1974* (Paris: EHESS, Gallimard, Seuil, 2003), 158.
[51] Crevel, "Notes," 51.
[52] Crevel, "Notes," 51.
[53] In "The Logician of Madness: Fanon's Lacan," I claimed that Lacan's early practice inaugurated something quite different from "old psychoanalysis," in many ways, Crevel is responsible for opening that difference. For more, see "The Logician of Madness: Fanon's Lacan," *Paragraph* 44.2 (2021): 214–37.

> scatophages of antiquity, not bookworms but book vampires, award themselves their own patents as good old harmless scholars.[54]

Criticizing the smug, self-referential grammarians of the Sorbonne, Crevel claims that these myopic academics who "pore over the skeletons of language" seek therein "the erasure of their shortcomings." For Lacan, who would spend his psychoanalytical career focused on the ramifications of language, and its symbolic weight, this is a crucial rebuttal of the methods of standard academic practice. In many ways for the early Lacan, *Le clavecin de Diderot* acts as a blueprint for the goals and pitfalls to avoid when developing his systematic psycho-philosophy, but also provides Lacan with the key areas of investigation, notably, the relationship between the unconscious and language. Crevel states:

> What help could linguistics be to the psychoanalysis of the universe, if this science, when dealing with dead languages, knew, in order to remain or rather become alive, how to bring back to the point of time that was theirs, these families of words, of which, in truth, it is content to open the sepulchres, for the sole purpose of giving us something to rave about—corpses, nothing but corpses.[55]

Like Crevel's earlier indictment of psychoanalysis as a practice co-opted by the French medical establishment, his criticism of linguistics, and the systematized failure of traditional scholars, does not see him reject the discipline altogether. Instead, Crevel seeks in both linguistics and psychoanalysis a fundamental re-orientation of their practices in new directions that could marry a new materialism with Marxist revolutionary thought: this is, precisely, the "new relay" that Lacan says he picked up in the early 1930s.

From his earliest work, Crevel resisted the psychiatric idea that subjects could be wholly consumed by a certain pathology, and this would become a hallmark of his writings; one which also profoundly impacted Lacan. At the same time, for Crevel, we must also resist the purely aesthetic desire to remain within the image of symptoms, and instead not be afraid to confront our desires in their materiality. For example, Crevel's insistence on the materiality of psychosomatic illnesses was rooted in his experience with clairvoyants from his early 1920s. As Louis Aragon explains in *Une vague de rêves* (1924) [A Wave of Dreams], in 1922, at the age of twenty-two, Crevel visited a clairvoyant by the seaside who enchanted him, not for her divine powers but for the meditative trance her voice placed him in.[56] As Breton puts it in *Les Pas perdus* (1924), "[a woman named D] had taught [Crevel] how to develop [his medium's gifts] and that is how, in the conditions required for the production of such phenomena (silent, dark room, hands joined together in a 'chain' around the table), he told us

[54] Crevel, *Œuvres*, 732. Translation my own.
[55] Crevel, *Œuvres*, 732–3. Translation my own.
[56] See Marc Verlynde, "Je ne m'arrête plus quand je vois la folie," *Approche surréaliste de la folie dans l'œuvre de René Crevel In: La folie: Création ou destruction?* http://books.openedition.org/pur/40732, last consulted January 12, 2024.

that he could easily fall asleep and utter words which organised themselves into more or less coherent speech."[57] It was from this experience that Crevel sought to borrow the methods of the *séance* to the application of surrealist philosophy, politics, and art. Crevel's experience is the generally accepted beginning of the "wave of dreams" movement: as Jonathan P. Eburne puts it in *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, "it was Crevel who initiated the '*période des sommeils*' memorialised by Breton in 'The Mediums Enter' and by Aragon in 'A Wave of Dreams,' adapting spiritualist methods of *séance* induction to the group's experiments with automatic writing and its budding interest in psychoanalysis."[58] Crevel describes these moments of automatic speech in a state of slumber thus:

> In 1919 my attention was fixed upon the more or less partial phrases which in complete solitude, at the approach of slumber, become perceptible to the mind without it being possible to discover in them a previous determination. These phrases remarkably pictured and with a syntax perfectly correct have appeared to me to be poetic elements of the first order.[59]'

Crevel elegiacally claimed that this method of attention and solicitation to one's unconscious could swing open the doors of the unknowable region of consciousness. Crevel credits this "superrealist" method as being *more fruitful* in this pursuit than Freud's psychoanalysis. Crevel states:

> With the psychoanalytic method, Professor Freud tries to uncover that which we force back into our unconscious. Superrealism claims to open wide the doors; and because it really does open them, there is no constraint; these mysterious words arise without affected romanticism, without calculated pose. They have multiple reflections, and it is difficult not to be carried away by their spontaneous and free current. I mean that superrealism, the product of an absolute intellectual emancipation, distinguishes whomsoever has the courage of wishing to profit by it.[60]

The early surrealists's attempt to conduct the spiritualism of the *séances* into speech and writing, in the so-called automatic writings, is also a remarkable precursor to Lacan's early work. Automatic writing also has its roots in Hippolyte Taine's approach to writing and images in *De L'intelligence* (1870). Taine argues: "each image is equipped with an automatic force and spontaneously tends towards a certain state which is hallucination, false memory, and the rest of the illusions of madness."[61] For Taine, therefore, contained within each image is the obverse, the underlying madness, the false

[57] Andre Breton in René Crevel, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Editions du Sandre, 2014), 565. Translation my own.

[58] Jonathan P. Eburne puts it in *Surrealism and the Art of Crime,* 61–2.

[59] René Crevel, "Which Way?" *The Little Review*, 30–1. Translation my own. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015016894522&seq=927&q1=crevel.

[60] Crevel, "Which Way?" 31.

[61] Hippolyte Taine, *De L'intelligence* (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1870), 139.

memory or hallucinations, and the early goal for Crevel and Lacan, was to appreciate this obverse, underside of madness in all our speech and visual representations. It is not difficult to see how Crevel's reinterpretation of Taine leads to something like the concept of the unconscious. Importantly, however, Crevel would come to reject the elements of the *séances* practice as it was developed by Breton and others, and it is impossible to not see Lacan's similar rejection of automatism as drawing inspiration from Crevel.[62] As Dickran Tashjian puts it, "René Crevel, adept at automatic writing, gradually became skeptical about the possibilities of plumbing the unconscious for linguistic data."[63] For Jonathan P. Eburne, "Crevel would remain critical of 'Automatism' and automatic writing."[64] Therefore, Crevel's argument of seeing in psychoanalysis a significant value and revolutionary force, while rejecting it in its current form, consists in the new relay, which Lacan believes he picks up in the 1930s, marrying his interest in psychoanalysis with Crevellian Surrealism.

It is for this reason that, in his early work, and indeed throughout his life, Lacan takes a keen interest in the fictional and nonsensical writings of his patients. For example, in his 1931 article, "*Écrits inspirés,*" Lacan undertakes what he calls a "schizographical" analysis of the writings of an insane patient named "Marcelle C." We can see more clearly how Lacan's interest was never just language but how language relates to subjectivity and human freedom. "*Écrits inspirés*" is significant because it clarifies Lacan's early aims, as well as the methods he adopted. In his analysis, Lacan is most interested in Marcelle C's letters and how the subject's writing and speech are important in any possible treatment. Lacan gives many examples of Marcelle C's writing in "*Écrits inspirés,*" but for our limited purposes here, I will draw on only one example. According to Lacan, Marcelle C writes:

> I honor you, Mister Green Belly. To you my flavours of petulance and primeur to honor you and to please you. Thank you of the Good God to sprinkle you of shame or to haunt you of solid and balanced success. High marsh of freshwater fish.
> Bedouce.[65]

As is immediately recognizable, this extract from Marcelle C's letter makes no sense. Not in French and even less so in English. But why? For Lacan, why should we automatically assume that Marcelle C's writings make no sense, or simply surmise that these are the deranged words of a madwoman? In what is a key theme of the early Lacan, with remarkable heart and respect, Lacan instead argues that there is intelligibility in these schizotic "inspired" writings. "For instance, 'the handwriting,' Lacan says, 'is regular from the beginning to the end of the letter. Extremely

[62] See Will Greenshields, "Lacan Contra the Surrealists," *Nottingham French Studies* 58.1 (2019): 64–8.

[63] Dickran Tashjian, "Williams and Automatic Writing: Against the Presence of Surrealism," *William Carlos Williams Review* 22.1 (1996): 9.

[64] Eburne, *Crime,* 63.

[65] Jacques Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité suivi de Premiers écrits sur la paranoïa* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 373. Translation my own.

legible.'"[66] In addition, on the grammatical merits of Marcelle C's writings, "we notice after examination that the syntactic construction is almost always respected. Formal logical analysis is always possible on the condition that we admit the substitution of a whole sentence for a noun."[67] Lacan then compares Marcelle C's letters in favorable terms to a surrealist mode of writing, saying:

> An activity of play is shown here, of which one should not ignore either the part of intention or the part of automatism. The experiments made by certain writers on a mode of writing that they called sur-realist [*sic*] […]. An analogous mechanism seems to play in the writings of our patient, for which reading aloud reveals the essential role of rhythm. It often has, by itself, considerable expressive power.[68]

For Lacan, considerable expressive power is displayed by the patient in their writings, and yet psychiatrists have traditionally been unconcerned with the "remarkable poetic value" of their patient's speech and writing, such as those displayed by Marcelle C. Lacan says: "in favour of such play mechanisms, it is impossible for us not to note the remarkable poetic value which, despite some flaws, some passages reach."[69] If language *makes* the subject, we can see why Lacan was keen to read these writings by Marcelle C in detail, annotate and comment on them, and why he felt we should take seriously the speech and writings of the insane. Moreover, Lacan also makes similar comments regarding his patient Aimée's literary writings in his doctoral thesis. Many years later, Lacan remarks in "On My Antecedents":

> For faithfulness to the symptom's formal envelope, which is the true clinical trace for which I acquired a taste, led me to the limit at which it swings back in creative effects. In the case included in my dissertation (the case of Aimée), there were literary effects—of high enough quality to have been collected under the (reverent) heading of unintentional poetry, by Eluard.[70]

Therefore, Lacan sees in his patients the *potential* for expression and the expression of their unconscious desires, a strategy that, as I intimated earlier, comes from Crevel. From as early as 1933, Lacan "acquired a taste" that he never abandoned for these "creative effects," which emerge from the subject's speech and writings; by adopting a materialist and surrealist method, in a Crevellian sense, Lacan would flesh out an entirely novel method of psychoanalysis. For Lacan, these writings by his patients hold a particular analytical power, since they permit the unearthing of for example "certain key traits of [their] personality, [their] character, and the affective complexes of mental

[66] Lacan, *De la psychose*, 373. Translation my own. I discuss Marcelle C's writings in more detail in: Sinan Richards, "'I Am a Clown': Lacan's Difficult Literary Dandyism," *Difficulty's Knots*, a special issue of *Paragraph*, eds. Richard Mason and Kasia Mika 47.1 (2024): 59–73.

[67] Lacan, *De la psychose*, 377. Translation my own.

[68] Lacan, *De la psychose*, 379–80. Translation my own.

[69] Lacan, *De la psychose*, 380. Translation my own.

[70] Lacan, *Écrits*, 52.

images that enthrall [them]."[71] According to Lacan, closely studying this literary output is crucial since it will shed light on the relationship between the subject's delusions and their personality—the object of study for Lacan. And it was precisely these elements of the linguistic attention that Lacan sought in his practice that led Crevel to anticipate Lacan's theory of the unconscious.

Crevel did not just see in Lacan a connection between language and the unconscious, spurring Lacan to develop this aspect of his theory; in addition, Crevel saw in Lacan a much more radical version of psychoanalysis than Freud's, a conception of "paranoid psychosis which affects the whole personality" and one which was affected not just by internal events in the mind, but also by the social context within which the subject lives. As Roudinesco explains, Crevel saw "the old school of psychoanalysis as corrupt and steeped in bourgeois idealism, saw Lacan as the spokesperson of a new spirit: his 'materialism.'"[72] For the Surrealists, Lacan represented the future, he was "hailed as the leader of a school that combined Freudianism and Marxism and as the harbinger of the coming revolution."[73] Indeed, according to Roudinesco, in response to the perceived materialism of his thesis and to Crevel's revolutionary desire, Lacan slowly adopted some revolutionary language that might live up to the prophecies of the surrealists. Indeed, Crevel had asked: "which young psychoanalyst will speak?" and Lacan was keen to respond to the appeal.[74]

Crevel's influence is remarkably wide-ranging: consider, for example, Crevel's statement: "le père, le plus vieux que soi, c'est la société tout entière" ["The father, he who is older than oneself, is the whole of society"],[75] in light of Lacan's development of the theory of the father. We can say that Crevel's statement that the father "is the whole of society" is remarkably close to the patriarchal theory of the world that Lacan will diagnose and profoundly criticize throughout his career. Crevel seemed to be searching for something more profound than the psychoanalytical hypotheses generated by Freud: he expressed disappointment with Freud, and, as I suggested, looked to Lacan to make a fundamental advance in a revolutionary direction in psychoanalysis. It is this history that we cannot forget when we think about what Lacan was doing between 1932 and 1953. Thanks to Lacan's engagement with Dalí and the Surrealists, Lacan was able to make a fundamental break with Freud, imperceptible though it may be early on. In "On My Antecedents," Lacan comes out and says it quite clearly, arguing that:

> Present generations of psychiatrists will find it hard to imagine that, at the time when I was doing my [medical] residency, there were only three of us who got involved in psychoanalysis; and without being ungrateful to the group of people involved in *Evolution Psychiatrique,* I will say that although it was to their credit

[71] Lacan, *De la psychose*, 177. Translation my own.
[72] Roudinesco, *Lacan,* 59.
[73] Roudinesco, *Lacan,* 60.
[74] Roudinesco, *Lacan,* 62; and Crevel, "Notes," 52.
[75] Crevel, *Clavecin,* 115.

> that psychoanalysis saw the light of day [in France], psychoanalysis was not radically called into question by them.[76]

Clearly, Lacan fundamentally moved away from not only psychiatry but also the way old psychoanalysis was understood at the time, since "psychoanalysis was not radically called into question by them," but profoundly by him. As a result of his engagement with the surrealists, Lacan felt able and comfortable, from as early as 1933 onwards, to pursue his science of language and the theory of the subject as fundamentally distinct from all that had previously been thought.

Lacan's method from the early 1930s is clearly laying the intellectual groundwork for his argument in his third seminar *Les Psychoses* for foreclosure and psychosis as only *one* form of symbolic articulation that is at odds with our more generalized form of symbolic structuring, which is why the allusion to Surrealism is so suggestive for this early Lacan. The method, the focusing on speech and writing of his patients, as well as the careful reading of their artistic work provides us with all the clues to the later Lacan. However, it is important to note that, as important as Crevel was for Lacan, as Rabaté argues, "Crevel's suicide in 1935, partly brought about by his inability to reconcile Surrealism and Communism, was one of the bad omens that announced the untimely demise of the movement […]." And that meant that Lacan's "new relay" was to be somewhat short-lived, at least in the sense of a materialist psychoanalysis: indeed, "Lacan had already taken some distance with the avant-garde and its political factions. He only elaborated his own version of Freudo-Marxism in the late 1960s."[77] Despite this, I claim that it remains indisputable that Crevel had a profound impact on Lacan's theory of language and the unconscious and Lacan's "surrealist" style.

[76] Lacan, *Écrits*, 57.
[77] Rabaté, "Freud Madly," 68.