

*Lacan, Kris and the Psychoanalytic Legacy: The Brain Eater* by Sergio Benvenuto. London: Routledge, 2023. ISBN 9781032482330

Some clinical cases in psychoanalysis are authentic thrillers. They involve puzzles that the psychoanalyst-detective undertakes to solve, though success, as we know, is not always guaranteed. We need only think of the famous case of the Wolfman: Freud tried desperately to trace the primary episode of seduction, but what he arrived to was merely the *Konstruktion* (construction-reconstruction) of a supposed scene based on a dream. Or the case of the so-called ‘brain eater’ to which Sergio Benvenuto has dedicated his most recent work.

The story of ‘Professor Brain’ (as Benvenuto calls him, given that his real name is not available to us), who underwent analyses first with Melitta Schmideberg in 1934 and then with Ernst Kris in 1938, is an intricate affair. Brain, a young academic scholar, goes to see Kris complaining that he is unable to publish his research and, as a consequence, to advance his career. When he writes, he claims, he plagiarises others and, since he does not want to steal their ideas, he refrains from making his own public. His analysis, and Lacan’s analysis of the issue, draws a labyrinth, to the point of suggesting, in this regard, a comparison with a *kōan*: the riddles Zen masters use to aid their disciples’ meditation. To anyone who undertakes to study one, says Hakuin Ekaku, ‘a bottomless abyss opens up and no handhold is available’, because the architecture of the *kōan*, like that of Brain’s case built by Benvenuto, is a labyrinth with no solution. Benvenuto intelligently traverses its twists and turns, and ‘intelligently’, from the Zen point of view, means ‘without sacrificing complexity’.

A labyrinthine man, according to the happy scientist Nietzsche, never seeks the truth, which is always between the lines, always disguised. The labyrinthine man only seeks his Ariadne, whatever he wants us to believe. And what is the Ariadne of the Zarathustra-Benvenuto? Apparently deconstruction: that thread-method woven by Derrida to traverse the labyrinth of writing. For Lacan, commenting on a case means carrying out an analysis (Lacan 1988); but an analysis, Benvenuto adds, which is like a deconstruction, where it is not so much a matter of untying in the sense of resolving, unveiling or explaining, but rather of making appear – ‘showing’, to adopt the term Benvenuto’s other Zen master, Wittgenstein, used – what in saying betrays itself as unsaid, forgotten, missed. The fascination of the labyrinth, as the Italian writer Giorgio Manganelli also explained on one of the many occasions when he meditated on the subject, does not only originate from its posing absolute questions in an indirect, elusive, “almost playful, cunning, childish” manner (Manganelli 1991: 73). The fascination of the labyrinth also derives from the fact that ‘every path is a path, but also a hallucination, a path towards a goal, or so it seems, but since the goal, whatever it may be, is never achieved, except in the case of yet another path, it is possible that every path is a deception, a jape, an arcature, suggesting, by way of a deceitful ideogram traced in the dark, that after all it would be wise not to move at all’ (*ibid.*).

But Benvenuto moves, and he moves with dexterity. Even when faced with another tangled skein: that of the Freudian legacy. In the arena he sets up in these pages, the various interpretations of Brain’s case that Schmideberg, Kris and Lacan bring into play, along with the different methods employed to produce them, all compete for the title of ‘*bona fide* Freudian’. And indeed, just as there is no solution to Brain’s labyrinth, there is no legitimate heir to Freud’s enterprise. To believe that there is, Benvenuto suggests, is a self-deception, because the boundaries of legitimacy, like those of ownership, hopelessly fade when we are confronted with the ‘discourse of the Other’. This is Brain-Daedalus’s lesson: it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make a clear-cut distinction between the proper and the improper, the original and the copy, the other and the self. ‘There is no such thing as symbolic property’ (Lacan 1988), which is why there is ultimately no such thing as plagiarism either. Brain goes to see Kris precisely because he is convinced that he is a plagiarist, but the essential thing, for Lacan, is not so much whether he plagiarises or not, since for him plagiarism does not exist. The essential thing is ‘that his whole desire is to plagiarise. This for the simple reason that it seems

to him that it is only possible to formulate something which has a value if he has borrowed it from someone else' (Lacan 1967).

Brain's first analysis taught him that fear and guilt had prevented him from being productive, that he always wanted to grab, to steal, as he had done in puberty with cakes. But even now, in his early thirties, he finds himself 'under constant pressure of an impulse to use someone else's ideas' (Kris 1951: 22). Hence Kris's suspicion: was Schmeideberg right? Kleptomania as a child, kleptomania as an adult? For Melitta, the daughter of Melanie Klein, the current inhibition is a curb on an oral-cannibalistic urge that had found satisfaction in the past. Brain fed on other people's belongings and could carry on doing so even now if a defence didn't intervene to restrain the urge. For him, acting = stealing and publishing = plagiarism. Therefore, the only way to get away from these reprehensible impulses is 'a far-reaching inhibition of his activity and intellectual work'. Brain, in other words, fails to write because he would like to copy, proving, as Lacan also argues, that what he says he fears is precisely what he would like to do. Kris, however, rejects this interpretation, which aims straight at the depths of the unconscious. Consistent with the principles of the analysis of *Abwehrmechanismen des Ichs*, the 'defence mechanisms' described by Anna Freud, Kris prefers to remain on the surface by mapping the circumstances in which the distressing feeling of plagiarising others emerges and isolating the mechanisms of inhibitory activity by which this feeling is abated. As a result of this approach, the opposite of Schmeideberg's, a concrete work plan and publication schedule begins to materialise in Brain, until, one fine day, he comes to the session claiming to have just discovered in the library a treatise published years earlier in which his same basic idea is developed. It was a treatise with which Brain had been familiar because it was written by a colleague he knew well, but the paradoxical tone of satisfaction and excitement in his account prompted Kris to ask him for detailed information about the text. What emerges from this examination conducted with Brain – an examination that, in Lacan's opinion, adheres to reality while ignoring the real – is that the old publication contained 'useful support of his thesis but no hint of the thesis itself' (*ibid.*). Therefore, and this is Kris's conclusion, 'the patient had made the author say what he wanted to say himself' (*ibid.*), although it is unclear whether Brain merely attributed to the author what he himself wanted to say or, vice versa, he actually fed to the author, whom he knew well, what he later feared to eat-devour by setting out to write himself.

The conundrum seems solved: It's not Brain who's the plagiarist, but his brilliant colleague with whom he used to converse and who, for both Kris and Lacan, is Brain's ideal ego: a substitute for his *grand-father* who had crushed his real father. Identified with the latter's pettiness, Brain had, since puberty, tried to compensate for his distressing image through penile symbolisations (eating surrogates of his father's phallus instead of the phallus itself). Yet, he would always end up believing that he could formulate something of any value solely by borrowing it from others better than himself. Plagiarism, in short, was his dominant style of attachment. And yet, because he did not want to use other people's ideas, Brain never acted, just as, ultimately, his father never acted, incapable as he was of leaving a mark in his field of research. Brain, writes Kris, 'The patient was under the impression he was hearing for the first time a productive idea without which he could not hope to master his own subject, an idea which he felt he could not use because it was his colleague's property' (*ibid.*)

And it is in light of this that, perhaps, we could speculate that the belief of plagiarising others – a delusion, according to Lacan – was actually an excuse for not writing-acting. Not, however, because writing would have meant devouring (Schmeideberg's and Lacan's thesis), but because writing would have meant failing: failing like his father.

Brain, in other words, was 'merely' insecure and, like those who are insecure, he systematically glimpses something shinier (an *agalma*?) on the other side of the fence: 'Only the ideas of others were truly interesting, only ideas one could take; hence the taking had to be engineered'. (*ibid.* 23). Nonetheless, according to Kris, it was others, in this case the distinguished scholar, who took

possession, without publicly acknowledging it, of his insights, with the consequence, which Kris does not address, that possibly Brain does not eat-put into writing his colleague's ideas because he unconsciously knows that they are his own... Indeed, though Benvenuto himself does not conjecture this, we could conjecture that Brain refuses to eat his own brain, unlike Poe's William Wilson who eventually kills his alter ego. We could, were it not for the fact that in this way, instead of showing itself, the object of denial underlying his compulsion not to act (not to write/steal) is covered with an additional veil. According to this conjecture, does denial affect the fact Brain has been plagiarised (Kris's thesis) or the more fundamental fact that the other is his double (Lacan's thesis)? Does Brain, in other words, ignore the fact that he has been eaten by the other or that he himself has fed to another the ideas that he fears he will then find himself stealing?

A difficult question: on the one hand, Brain seems not to realise that the other is a mirror reflecting him; on the other, he seems not to realise that there is a difference between himself and his peer or the other *in general*. And this insofar as, at least according to Kris's account, a close examination of the nature of the treatise Brain feared he would plagiarise does not indicate that it was written by his peer, but only that it did not contain Brain's ideas...

The enquiry reveals only one difference between Brain and the author of the treatise unknown to us: a difference that Brain annihilates into an identity because the only condition for not opposing his own thought was to attribute it to another. Brain needs to perceive his own ideas as the ideas of others in order to appreciate them. Or rather, the ideas of his that he does appreciate he needs to perceive as those of others. Far from unravelling, the maze, if anything, thickens: on the one hand, there is a game of mirrors in which Brain accuses himself of imitating a colleague who has imitated him. But this game of mirrors, Benvenuto writes, becomes a labyrinth, the relationship between the two being not merely dyadic nor even merely an inversion (Kris's thesis). Brain would like to publish his ideas but refrains from doing so because he feels they are too similar to those of others. And, as we have seen, both Schimberg and Lacan agree that avoiding to publish them is precisely a defence against the desire to take possession of them. Does Kris think the same? And does Brain, for his part, fail to conceive of his ideas *as his own*, or does he fail to conceive of them *as valuable* as long as he perceives them as his own? Is it a question of value or ownership? There is no way to tell.

What emerges from the account is that there is a discrepancy between the ideas of the peer Brain would like to copy from and those he would like to divulge himself, a discrepancy that legitimizes the question: who is plagiarising who? A pointless question, Lacan explains, given that '*le plagiat n'existe pas*' (Lacan 1993). Lacan only says that what makes him think he is stealing is that he may come up with an idea of his own: the idea that 'never occurs to him or just barely crosses his mind' (Lacan 2007). Not therefore, as Kris claims according to Lacan, his defence against the idea of stealing. Brain is lacking in ideas of his own, Benvenuto notes, just like the castaways on the Raft of the Medusa (as in Géricault's famous painting featured on the cover of the book) were lacking in vitamins or like anorexics lacks desire. Brain too eats nothing. But eating nothing, for Lacan, is different from not eating...

By thinning down their flesh, anorexics gain the weight of signifiers, because by not eating, it is this nothingness that they actually eat. But what is the nothingness that Brain eats? And is the association with mental anorexia Lacan advances valid by virtue of the brain-books-ideas-signifiers metonymic shift? These questions too are difficult to answer, and not only because Lacan doesn't develop the connection with anorexia by limiting himself to embarking Brain on 'the raft of skinny virgins' (*ibid.*). From Kris's account we also deduce that Brain is actually plagiarised in the form of someone who has been foreclosed, insofar as he is prevented from using something that belongs to him. Yet, for Lacan, it is something else that has been foreclosed: oral dependence. And it is for this reason that, from such an impossibility, synonymous with the paralysis provoked by the imaginary reversibility

of the object relation, both of Brain with the ideal ego and of Kris with Brain, the latter jumps out with ‘the impulsive leap into reality through the hoop of fantasy’ (Lacan 2007b). In a word: with an *acting out*. And he jumps out, Lacan stresses, at a very specific moment: as soon as Kris absolves Brain by conveying to him the sense of his symptom. According to the Lacan of Seminar III (*The Psychoses*), it is after the interpretation that Kris uses to solve the puzzle, and in response to it, that Brain goes on to recount that ‘on leaving the session he had gone into a restaurant and treated himself to his favourite dish, fresh brains’ (Lacan 1993). Expelled from the symbolic, oral addiction returns in the real, and returns as an insurrection of the lower-case *a*.

Kris, however, does not mention this. Kris writes that the patient recounted that

‘Every noon, when I leave here, before luncheon, and before returning to my office, I walk through X Street ... and I look at the menus in the windows. In one of the restaurants I usually find my preferred dish—fresh brains’. (Kris 1951, p. 23).

But did Brain then eat fresh brains or did he not? Lacan himself multiplies the ambiguities when, after stating in black and white that Brain’s was an acting out, he returns to the case in other passages and states that Brain did not consume the dish but only ‘he looked for a place where he could find the dish he is particularly fond of, fresh brains’ (Lacan 1988) or, as we find both in the *Introduction to Jean Hyppolite’s Commentary on Freud’s ‘Die Verneinung’* and in *The Direction of the Cure*, he ‘wandered along a street full of attractive little restaurants, scrutinizing their menus in search of his favourite dish: fresh brains’ (Lacan 2007a, Lacan 2007c). Now, there is no doubt that peeking at a menu and finding a particular dish on it is not the same thing as sitting down to eat it. In the same way as sitting down to eat this dish as a result of the analyst’s revelation, therefore at a crucial moment of the treatment, is not the same thing as going out to look for it on restaurant menus at the end of every session. An acting out is not a habit, Benvenuto stresses, and this in spite of the fact that it is precisely as a result of Kris’s decisive communication that Brain relates the story... What should we then think? What did Lacan really say? And what did Brain really say to Kris? Did he eat or only long for fresh brains? Which, given the metonymy between brains and ideas, amounts to asking: did Brain plagiarise or did he not?

For Benvenuto, Lacan’s word is not the Gospel but is filtered by an unconscious that still today very few dare to interpret. Benvenuto allows it to emerge by meticulously analysing every word that Lacan uses to refer to Kris’s account, deliberately twisting it in his seminars. Lacan misrepresents it, modifies it, omits certain parts. And this in order to achieve his aim: crediting himself as the legitimate child of his father Freud. Brain’s case, in fact, is a part of that whole that is Ego Psychology: a whole of which his twin/alter ego Kris – as Benvenuto presents him – is among the most eminent representatives. Against it, Lacan launched numerous attacks, hostile as he was to that ‘military vision of the ego’ (Benvenuto 2023) that the Freudians of America promoted and which a French anarchist like himself certainly could not stomach. But it is the case of Professor Brain, in the reconstruction filled with anecdotes offered by Benvenuto, that is the real battlefield on which the orthopaedics of the ego on the one hand and the gaiety of the unconscious on the other confront each other. And indeed, from a certain point of view, one could say that the acting out attributed by Lacan to Brain is revelatory of a message he himself wanted to send to Kris, because every acting out, for Lacan, who theorised it precisely from Brain’s case, is a message addressed to the analyst: a message that says ‘*vous êtes à côté*’: you’re not with it, you’re off the mark. In short, it was Lacan who was acting out.

There are excellent reasons to suppose, in the light of Benvenuto’s insightful analysis, that through Brain’s tongue or acts, that is to say through his *word produced by the thing* (acting out is the reverse of Austin’s performative utterance: a thing done by the word), Lacan wanted to tell Kris that he was off target, that he had missed the point. By solving the puzzle – it’s not clear whether with Brain or instead of Brain – and providing the patient with the solution, Kris, according to Lacan, acted ‘ego to

ego', *égal à égal*, on an equal footing. Therefore, psychotherapeutically rather than psychoanalytically. And it is ultimately for this reason that the lower-case *a* remains untouched, unscathed, rising up as soon as the time comes: 'You show him that he isn't a plagiarist anymore' – Lacan says – and he 'shows you what is at stake by making you eat fresh brains' (Lacan 1993). With fresh brains, in other words, Brain signals to Kris.

'Everything you tell me is true, only it leaves the question unscathed; there are still fresh brains. In order to show you, I am going to eat some when I leave in order to tell you about it the next time' (Lacan 2016).

Brain shows an *a* on the silver tray of a foreign but tantalizing menu to say that on the menu prepared up by Kris there is no *a*. And yet, Lacan comments,

'To wipe desire off the map [carte] when it is already covered over in the patient's landscape is not the best way of following Freud's teaching. Nor is it a way of getting rid of depth, for it is on the surface that depth is seen, as when one's face breaks out in pimples on holidays'. (Lacan 2007a: 503).

The feast is the metonymic feast of language, through which, "Lacan invites us to the escape routes of signification" (Benvenuto 2023: 72). Benvenuto does not interrupt it. Though he skirts around it deftly, he never unravels the mystery but encourages readers to unravel it themselves, possibly by raising yet more questions. That he does not seek the truth means that he consents to it being half-told without fabricating the missing part *ad hoc*, just as Kris, according to Lacan, fabricated an obsessive symptom *ad hoc* falling victim to *bilanisme*, 'summaryism' (*ibid.*). And indeed, if he can, or deems it useful, Benvenuto even deconstructs the validated half, correcting the psychoanalyst who, more than any other, is considered incorrigible: Lacan. Giving proof of a remarkably independent spirit, Benvenuto unmasking one by one the fantasies that, in the form of ideals, the pope of French psychoanalysis sees reflected in that Rorschach inkblot that Kris's text is for him. Most importantly, Lacan's analytical text, which, Benvenuto thinks, is not so different from the Ego psychology he loathed so much. After all, how can we be original and say something absolutely new if from an early age we learn language from others and always somehow plagiarise what we hear? Every language, in Lacanian terms, is a 'discourse of the Other' and is therefore unconscious: that which, in the form of a favourite dish, every analysis must show if it does not want to culminate in a '*rien à frire*', a 'nothing to fry'<sup>1</sup> (Lacan 2007a, p. 502) quite different from the well-fried butter in which, as we know, real brains can be relished, provided that the *pia mater* has first peeled them with a great deal of care<sup>2</sup> (Lacan 2007c).

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<sup>1</sup> '*Rien à frire* (nothing doing) literally means nothing to fry, and is preferred here to the more usual *rien à faire*, due to the reference to fish in the previous sentence', Note in the English translation of *Ecrits*.

<sup>2</sup> 'It might seem incidental to ask how he is going to deal with the fresh brains, the real brains, the brains that one fries in black butter, it being recommended to first peel the *pia mater*, which requires a great deal of care'.

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