



Talking to Brick Walls: A Series of Presentations in the Chapel at the Sainte-Anne Hospital

by Jacques Lacan (Translated by A.R. Price)

Chris Vanderwees, PhD¹

Concurrent with his delivery of Seminar XIX, *...or Worse*, from 8 December 1971 to 14 June 1972 at the Paris Law Faculty, Jacques Lacan also gave a series of seven talks under the title, *The Psychoanalyst's Knowledge*, for an audience of junior psychiatrists in the Chapel at the Sainte-Anne Hospital.² *Talking to Brick Walls* features the first three of these seven talks where Lacan provides a fleeting and whimsical tour through some of his major theoretical contributions, but while especially circling the relationship between psychoanalytic knowledge, truth, and *jouissance*.³ Since the last four sessions at the Sainte-Anne engage the themes of Lacan's main seminar at the Law Faculty, Jacques-Alain Miller, editor of Lacan's *oeuvre*, has decided to include these sessions chronologically within the publication of Seminar XIX. *Talking to Brick Walls (Je Parle Aux Murs)* and Seminar XIX, *...Or Worse (...Ou Pire)* were published in the original French by Éditions du Seuil (Paris) in 2011, respectively, but there have been few efforts at translating *The Psychoanalyst's Knowledge* to English until this new rendition from A. R. Price.⁴ Thus, Price's lucid and highly readable rendition of *Talking to Brick Walls* (including his

¹ Psychotherapist, Private Practice, Toronto, ON, Canada. SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow, Western University.

² Lacan not only served as an intern at the Sainte-Anne from 1927-1931, but also held his seminars at the hospital from 1953-1963. Throughout *Talking to Brick Walls*, Lacan playfully reminisces of his younger years as an intern within the walls of the Sainte-Anne Hospital.

³ Lacan held these three sessions in the Chapel at the Sainte-Anne Hospital on 4 November 1971, 2 December 1971, and 6 January 1972.

⁴ In 1981, Denise Green translated the 3 March 1972 talk under the title "Ste Anne," which appeared in the *Semiotext(e)* special issue, *Polysexuality*. Apart from this, Cormac Gallagher's adequate, but rough translation of all seven Sainte-Anne presentations (as Seminar XIXa, *The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*) has been the only version of this work available to those who study Lacan in English until A. R. Price's fresh rendition of *Talking to Brick Walls*.

forthcoming translation of Seminar XIX from Polity Press) marks the first time that *The Psychoanalyst's Knowledge* has been available in English under the official editorship of Miller.

In these seminars, Lacan addresses some of the misconceptions about his work. “[M]y discourse,” he says, “is still not being understood” (p. 40). Consequently, Lacan begins his discussion with distinctions surrounding knowledge and truth directed at some of his early followers who had particularly venerated the notion of the lack. Partly influenced by Georges Bataille’s emphasis on non-knowledge or not-knowing, these followers gave privilege to castration, disbeing, not forgetting, and destitution, elevating these concepts to the extent of idealization (Soler, 2014, p. 96). Lacan reiterates that truth is a form of not-knowing: “If truth is not knowledge then it’s non-knowledge. That’s Aristotelian logic, all that is not black is non-black” (p. 10). He does not idealize non-knowledge, but restates the significance of *savoir*, that knowledge which the subject does not know he knows. This is the knowledge of which psychoanalysis seeks to progressively uncover as the subject speaks, as much as possible, everything that comes to mind.

For Lacan, the “symptom is a truth-value” (p. 45) and “[s]peech defines the place of what is called truth” (p. 19). Therefore, psychoanalytic treatment aims at translating the truth-value of the symptom into speech. Lacan does not refer to any sort of universalization or institutionalization of truth, but rather to the singular truth of each subject, a form of knowledge that emerges in the subject’s relation to the symbolic that emerges at the point of its lack. The psychoanalyst must situate his or her discourse in the space between truth and knowledge (occupying the place of the *objet petit a* or the subject supposed to know) in order to allow the speaking being’s *savoir* to surface. The subject, however, remains divided, as there can be no totalization or pure form of knowledge since access to the unconscious is always indirect. This symbolic knowledge becomes a form of *jouissance* expressed from the body in conjunction with the Other, which also lowers or contains the degree tension held within the subject’s body.⁵ For Lacan, it is through speech that the subject engages with *savoir*, symbolic knowledge, and takes up a relation to his or her own unconscious desire.

⁵ In Seminar XXIII, Lacan returns to the importance of *savoir* through the subject’s identification with the symptom, reformulated as the *sinthome*.

Lacan also continues a line of thought that he had begun in Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, addressing the connections between sexual difference and *jouissance*. Here, he proposes that, if all sexuality is defined through processes of signification, there can be no direct or unmediated relationship between masculine and feminine positions, which leads him to a thesis: “there is no sexual relation for beings who speak” (p. 55). The Other of language always mediates and divides this relation. Here, Lacan proposes that there is no signifier that could properly designate “woman” in the same way that the masculine position is brought to signification.⁶ Since there is no proper way to give representation to a symmetrical sexual relationship, Lacan points out that “it is impossible to write down what would be involved” (p. 27). There is no possibility of completely unifying the significations between male and female bodies in language. In other words, the two signified bodies cannot become one. The subject’s *jouissance* significantly stems from this non-relation. Throughout *Talking to Brick Walls*, Lacan provides a glimpse of the divergence of *jouissance* between masculine and feminine positions, which he elaborates more fully in Seminar XX, *Encore* in his theories on sexuation.

Given the misconceptions that his early students produced and the experience of incomprehension that some listeners or readers find in encountering his discourse, Lacan wonders if he has not been speaking to anyone in particular all this time, but perhaps only to the brick walls (*murs*) within the Chapel of the Sainte-Anne: “How is one to know to whom I am speaking?” (p. 80). Lacan’s speech not only reverberates back to him from these walls, but also apparently resonates as something else for those in the audience as well. By extension, Lacan posits that no member of the audience hears him in the same sense as any other and that his “endeavor [is] to make it so that access to this meaning is not easy, which entails [his listeners with] having to put something of [their] own into it, which is a salubrious secretion, and even a therapeutic one” (pp. 86-87).⁷ Perhaps Lacan demonstrates something of his own *savoir* in speaking to these walls when he states, “I’ve

⁶ The sexes can only logically be defined through a mutually constitutive negation: if all that is man is not woman, then man is non-woman. All that is woman becomes not man, non-man.

⁷ Bruce Fink (2004) has also translated this passage nicely: “I strive to ensure that access to the meaning [of what I say] not be too easy, such that you must contribute some elbow grease of your own (or work hard at it)” (p. 178). Lacan concludes his introduction to *Écrits*, “Overture to this Collection,” with a very similar statement.

been speaking with the *murs* here, indeed with *(a)murs*, and with *a-murs-ement*” (p. 98). Despite this playful and polyvalent wordplay, he insists that there is a logic to Lacanian discourse, which can be found on the walls in the relationship between the four discourses and the barred S, the S1, the S2, and the *objet petit a*. Lacan suggests that those who listen to the reflection of his voice from these walls should do well to remember that the clinician “is bound to the walls by a definition of discourse” (p. 100). He reminds the audience of junior psychiatrists that the *mur* can also function as a *murior*, conveying the possibility of what may be foreclosed in the ego’s misrecognition of its self in the mirror. Ultimately, Lacan hopes that his audience does not take these reflections at the Sainte-Anne as merely personal ones despite the difficulties that may be encountered in attempts at comprehension. After all, it is precisely the element of not-knowing that sustains any psychoanalytic journey.

I should note that Lacan intentionally delves into psychoanalytic concepts in a more introductory or “elementary” fashion, here, since his audience is composed of junior doctors (p. 39). Price’s translation is an achievement that maintains this accessibility as much as possible in working with Lacan’s discourse. As a result, *Talking to Brick Walls* serves as a pleasant introduction to Lacan’s system of thought, but these talks also expand and clarify certain theoretical notions in a new context for English readers more familiar with his work.

References

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