

CHAPTER 2

Psychoanalysis as gai saber Towards a new episteme of laughter

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Encounter with a fantasist

Sometime during the mid-1950s, Madeleine Chapsal, a thirty-something journalist writing for *L'express* – the recently launched weekly supplement to the French financial daily *Les Échos* – attended a fancy dress party organized by the editorial board of Jean-Paul Sartre's journal *Les Temps Modernes*, where she was introduced to a certain Dr. Lacan. Many years later, Chapsal recalled the event as follows: "The first time I saw Jacques Lacan he was wearing a bushy ginger-coloured wig, and he invited me to dance . . . That night the famous psychoanalyst's head presented me with an image of him that I never forgot: he was a fantasist!"¹ In her seminal historical study of Lacan, Élisabeth Roudinesco drew on a personal conversation with Chapsal to elaborate on the story. According to Roudinesco, the young female journalist had adored Lacan's "penchant for disguise [*le côté travesti du personnage*], his auburn wigs, his love of social life and gossip, [and] the way he enjoyed theatrical situations."² After their first encounter, Lacan and Chapsal immediately struck up an intimate friendship, leading to Chapsal being regularly invited to Lacan's country house at Guitrancourt, and her receiving a long series of amorous letters and notes, in which the psychoanalyst would sometimes ask his confidante for specific sartorial advice when he was preparing for another *bal masqué*.³ Whether Dr. Lacan was in the habit of wearing ostentatious wigs at fancy dress parties, I do not know. Whether he would also wear them in other situations, I do not know either. Maybe Chapsal was chuffed and charmed when she saw on the psychoanalyst's cranium a

¹ Madeleine Chapsal, "Jacques Lacan," in *Envoyez la petite musique . . .* (Paris: Grasset, 1984), 31. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of foreign-language sources are my own.

² Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1997), 261.

³ Chapsal, "Jacques Lacan," 38.

grotesque reflection of her own notorious ginger mop. Maybe she was just puzzled, bemused, and surprised. Fact of the matter is that on that particular evening, Lacan's exuberant hirsute display of color made such an important impression on Chapsal that she was left with an inerascable "flash-bulb" memory, gladly accepted all his invitations – to dance, to dine, to play and to wine – and eventually conducted a long interview with him for *L'express*, in which he paid tribute to the revolutionary discoveries of his master Sigmund Freud, defended his own linguistic approach to Freud's legacy, and denounced how contemporary psychoanalysis was descending ever more into a "confused mythology".⁴

To the best of my knowledge, no one apart from Chapsal ever reported similar occurrences of Lacan dressing up, disguising himself, or regaling an audience with odd accessories and idiosyncratic accoutrements. No one, that is, apart from Lacan himself. The day is Friday November 1, 1974. In New York City, at the United Nations Headquarters, the UN General Assembly adopts Resolution 3212, which calls upon all states to respect the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and non-alignment of the Republic of Cyprus. In Rome, in the splendid concert hall of the *Accademia Musicale di Santa Cecilia*, Lacan speaks at the 7th Conference of the *École freudienne de Paris*, the school he himself had founded ten years earlier. In front of a packed auditorium, Lacan declares:

There isn't a single discourse in which make-belief [*le semblant*] does not rule [*mène le jeu*] ... And so you should be more relaxed and more spontaneous [*naturels*] when you meet someone who is asking you for analysis. Don't feel so obliged to act as if you're really important. Even as jesters [*bouffons*], your being is justified. You only have to watch my *Television*. I am a clown. Take that as an example, and don't imitate me! The seriousness that animates me is the series that you constitute. You can't at the same time be part of it [*en être*] and be it [*l'être*].⁵

⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Cleps pour la psychanalyse" (1957) rpt. in Chapsal's *Envoyez la petite musique . . .*, 42–54. In 1991, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Lacan's death, the text and the cartoons were also reprinted in the psychoanalytic magazine *l'Âne*, yet without reference to Chapsal, without the introduction, and with the original sub-headings replaced with a new and unattributed set of paragraph titles. A facsimile of the text was subsequently reprinted in 2000 in the psychoanalytic journal *la célibataire*, again without reference to Chapsal, yet with the acknowledgement of Françoise Giroud – the co-founder and editor of *L'express* – as the one who had made the interview possible. See Jacques Lacan, "Entretien avec Jacques Lacan," *l'Âne* 48 (1991): 28–33; Jacques Lacan, "Les clefs de la psychanalyse," *la célibataire* 4 (2000): 99–104. An anonymous English translation of the interview as published in *l'Âne* can be accessed via the following website: <http://braungardt.trialectics.com/sciences/psychoanalysis/jacques-lacan/interview-jacques-lacan/>.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, "La troisième," *La cause freudienne* 79 (September 2011): 15.

Anyone who has ever read the text called *Television*, which was published following Lacan's appearance on French television in January 1974, will probably seriously doubt the seriousness of Lacan's self-assessment, here, because alongside *Radiophonie* and *L'étourdit*, both from the same period, it counts amongst the most conceptually abstruse and intellectually demanding of the psychoanalyst's later works.⁶ I have never come across anyone who admitted to having experienced uncontrollable fits of laughter at the reading of *Television*, or who thought that reading *Television* was great fun, or that the text was an inexhaustible source of amusement – intellectually or otherwise. But here is the twist: Lacan did not exhort his audience to *read* the text of *Television*, but to watch him *on* television, literally performing notes that would later be published with the eponymous title.⁷ In telling his listeners in Rome, and particularly the psychoanalysts among them, that he was a clown when playing the text that was subsequently entitled *Television*, Lacan insisted on the sensory qualities of the spoken word – delivered with a highly distinctive tone of voice, and accompanied by a number of visually arresting mannerisms – and not on a particular feature of its written inscription. Something of the intentionally comical disappears, then, when the words become detached from the person speaking them, from the way in which they are articulated, with their particular punctuation and their carefully crafted timing. And yet, when the words are being re-connected to the image of the living body of the psychoanalyst who is declaiming them, in this case Jacques Lacan, they do not by definition generate laughter either, strange as the performance may be. Vocalizing a version of his own text *Television* on television, Lacan did not tell jokes, was not wearing a wig, did not dance, and could never even be seen smiling or laughing. But he did not want to be taken entirely seriously. Those who did take him seriously, so seriously that they were prepared to follow him, demonstrated both their captivation by what they perceived to be the image of the unassailable master, and their

⁶ See Jacques Lacan, "Television," in *Television/A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec and trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss & Annette Michelson (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990), 3–46; Jacques Lacan, "Radiophonie," in *Autres Écrits* (Paris: du Seuil, 2001), 403–447; Jacques Lacan, "L'étourdit," in *Autres Écrits* (Paris: du Seuil, 2001), 449–495.

⁷ The small volume entitled *Television* is effectively the edited text of two one-hour long "Lacan-shows" directed by Benoît Jacquot, which were aired during prime-time on two consecutive Saturday evenings by France's main television channel ORTF, at the end of January 1974, under the title *Psychanalyse I* and *Psychanalyse II*. In each of these, Lacan can be seen "acting out" a scenario he himself had written, in response to some questions by Jacques-Alain Miller, his son-in-law and intellectual heir. See Benoît Jacquot, "Television," trans. Barbara P. Fulks and Jorge Jauregui, *Lacanian Ink* 21 (2003): 86–89; Benoît Jacquot, "How Lacan," trans. Asunción Alvarez, *Lacanian Ink* 39 (2012): 66–77.

unwillingness to allow this image to fall from the superior position it was held to occupy. They may have gone so far as to laugh *with* him, but they would never have dared to laugh *at* him. In Rome in 1974, Lacan in a sense complained about the fact that too many psychoanalysts were lacking in humor, despite his best intentions to make them laugh or, better still, despite his consistent attempts at presenting himself as a risible figure.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the thespian side of Lacan's character, his keen eye for comedy, and his utter contempt for self-indulgent gravitas were not just *ad hoc* phenomena – ‘accidental’ features of his private and public persona, frivolous flights of fancy elicited by particular social circumstances – but rather essential components of a consciously considered outlook on life, which also and most crucially informed his conception of psychoanalytic theory and practice. More specifically, I will argue that, when Lacan at one point went so far as to assert that he was gay, this “confession” was inspired by the same reasons that prompted homosexual people in the Anglophone world to adopt the word “gay” as the most apposite designation for their sexual orientation. Lacan aimed for a subtle, humorous resistance to normative practices and established conventions, and for him this principle of “gayness” was to be situated at the heart of psychoanalytic knowledge, both in its purely theoretical and in its clinical applications. At the end of this chapter I will propose, therefore, that my portrait of Lacan-the-psychoanalyst as a gay man, which is not at all antagonistic to how his master Sigmund Freud would come across in “non-official” representations, may offer us a useful paradigm for the way in which psychoanalytic knowledge should be advanced, as well as a valuable metaphor for how knowledge should be maintained in psychoanalytic institutions that want to remain truthful to the epistemic foundations of their discipline. As such, I will suggest that against the formalistic rigidity of institutionalized psychoanalytic knowledge, it is crucial for psychoanalysts to re-engage with the “dancing” thought of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, which encapsulates the prophet's most radical answer to the sterile status of ponderous, petrified reasoning, and to embrace an episteme of laughter.

Jacques Lacan is gay

On two separate occasions, in public and without ostensible shame or irony, Lacan conceded that he was gay. The day is Sunday October 22, 1967. In Washington DC, thousands of young demonstrators storm the Pentagon out of protest against the Vietnam War. At the *Maison de la*

Chimie on the *rue Saint-Dominique* in Paris, the Belgian-French psychoanalyst Maud Mannoni is presiding over a study weekend on psychosis, featuring presentations both by members of Lacan's *École freudienne de Paris* and by a number of high-profile external speakers, such as Donald Woods Winnicott, David Cooper, and Ronald David Laing. As would have been common, Lacan delivered the closing speech of the conference, during which he divulged:

Everyone knows that I am gay [*je suis gai*], some would even say that I'm a bit childish [*gamin*]. I'm having a good time [*je m'amuse*]. It constantly happens to me that, in my texts, I am giving myself over to all kinds of jokes [*plaisanteries*], which is not to the taste of academics. But look, it's true, I'm not sad. Or more precisely, I only have one real sadness, in what has been traced out for me by way of a career, and that is that there are fewer and fewer people to whom I can explain the reasons for me being gay, when I do have them.⁸

One could easily dismiss this brief public "confession" as a facetious *fait divers*, not signaling much of a commitment, were it not for the fact that three-and-a-half years later, Lacan again disclosed his "subjective affectation," this time in front of a massive audience at his weekly seminar. The day is Wednesday May 12, 1971. At the local town hall in St Tropez, Rolling Stones front man Mick Jagger is getting married to Bianca Pérez-Mora de Macias. At the great lecture theatre of the Law Faculty on the *Place du Panthéon* in Paris, Lacan is treating his audience to a performance of "Lituraterre", a text he has written for a special journal issue on psychoanalysis and literature.⁹ Telling the hundreds of devoted listeners how he has learnt to read some Chinese characters, Lacan goes on to describe his limitations when it comes to deciphering the handwriting:

In the handwritten form, I can't recognize the character anymore, because I am a novice. But that's not really what is important, because what I call the singular can actually support a firmer form. What is important is what is added. It is a dimension or – in the way I've taught you to play with these things – a *demansion*, where something resides that I introduced to you in the previous seminar or in the one before with the word that I wrote, simply

⁸ Jacques Lacan, "Discours de clôture des journées sur les psychoses," *Recherches* 8 (1968): 145.

⁹ See Jacques Lacan, "Lituraterre," in *Autres Écrits* (Paris: du Seuil, 2001), 11–19. For two authorised English translations of this essay, see Jacques Lacan, "Lituraterre," trans. Beatrice Khiara-Foxton & Adrian Price, *Hurly-Burly: The International Lacanian Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9 (2013): 29–38; Jacques Lacan, "Lituraterre," trans. Dany Nobus, *Continental Philosophy Review* 46.1 (2013): 327–334.

to amuse myself, as *papeludun* [a word play on *pas-plus-d'un*, no more than one]. It's the *demansion* of which you know that it allows me . . . to install the subject into what I will call today, simply because I'm producing literature and I'm gay [*je suis gai*] – you will recognize it, because I've already written it under a different form – the *Hun-En-Peluce* [a word play on *Un-en-plus*, One more].¹⁰

It is worth noting, here, that the phrase “I’m gay” is not actually part of the text that Lacan was reading, insofar as it does not appear in any of the published versions of “Lituraterre”. Much like something is “added” to the standard Chinese character when it is reproduced by a “subjective hand,” which may effectively prevent non-experts from finding their way around the handwritten text, “I’m gay” represents the singular subjective “*demansion*,” which Lacan himself added to the text, when he was speaking and performing the written words in front of a live audience. As such, this particular phrase already constitutes Lacan’s own meta-textual interpretation of “Lituraterre”, something he decided to add to it in the spur of the moment, as an explanatory reflection upon his persistent punning on words. What could have prompted Lacan to tell his listeners that he was gay, and what reasons could he have had for being gay in the first place? For, as he pointed out in his lecture on October 22, 1967, he definitely had his reasons, despite the fact that there were progressively fewer and fewer people around to whom he could explain himself.

Of course, one should not be deceived, here, by the fact that in the English-speaking world the word “gay” has acquired strong connotations of (male) homosexuality, which have now almost completely taken over its entire semantic field. At the end of the 1960s, such connotations were still uncommon, especially in France. No one should be misled, therefore, in thinking that whilst the Pentagon was being stormed and Mick Jagger was getting married Lacan was coming out of the closet as a homosexual cruiser. I could have chosen to render Lacan’s “*je suis gai*” as “I am cheerful,” “I am joyous,” “I am joyful,” or “I am happy,” yet these terms would no doubt be better suited as translations of the French words

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: du Seuil, 2006), 120. This is my own translation of the official French version of Lacan’s seminar session, verified against other, more literal transcriptions, such as the one that can be found on the website, “Espaces Lacan”: <http://espace.freud.pagesperso-orange.fr/topos/psychal/psyssem/semblan/semblan7.htm> and a number of tape-recordings made by members of the audience, one of which can be found at www.valas.fr/IMG/mp3/7_semlant_12_5_71.mp3. For an excellent general introduction to Lacan’s seminar, see Bruce Fink, “An Introduction to Lacan’s Seminar XVIII,” in *Against Understanding. Vol. 2: Cases and Commentary in a Lacanian Key* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 71–91.

“*enjoué*,” “*joyeux*,” or “*heureux*,” and one would only really want to avoid the word “gay” on account of its current association with a certain sexual orientation, which at the time it just did not have.¹¹

In fact, there are very good reasons for insisting on the significance of Lacan’s being gay – as opposed to him being merely cheerful or joyous – and they are essentially the same as those that encouraged Walter Kaufmann to continue to render the title of Nietzsche’s *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* as *The Gay Science*, from his first discussion of the book in his seminal 1950 revisionist account of the German philosopher, up to his landmark 1974 translation of the work, which was released at a time when the word “gay” had already been adumbrated by the homosexual community in the English-speaking world.¹² Without going so far as to suggest that Nietzsche was homosexual, which he very well may have been, Kaufmann clarifies: “[I]t is no accident that the homosexuals as well as Nietzsche opted for ‘gay’ rather than ‘cheerful’. ‘Gay science’, unlike ‘cheerful science’, has overtones of a light-hearted defiance of convention; it suggests Nietzsche’s ‘immoralism’ and his ‘revaluation of values’ . . . What Nietzsche himself wanted the title to convey was that serious thinking does not have to be stodgy, heavy, dusty, or, in one word Teutonic.”¹³ In his introduction to a more recent translation of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Bernard Williams makes a similar point: “No one, presumably, is going to be misled by the more recent associations of the word ‘gay’—it simply means joyful, light-hearted, and above all, lacking in solemnity.”¹⁴ Likewise, in me saying that Lacan admitted to being gay, no one will presumably be led to believe that I want to insinuate that he actually confessed to being a

¹¹ Indeed, in his unofficial English translation of Lacan’s seminar session of 12 May 1971, Cormac Gallagher has rendered Lacan’s “*je suis gai*” as “I am happy.” See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XVIII, On a Discourse That Might Not Be a Semblance*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, privately printed.

¹² See Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton & London: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹³ Walter Kaufmann, translator’s introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 4–5. For a fascinating reconstruction of Nietzsche’s alleged (suppressed) homosexuality, and its potential influence on the shaping of his ideas, see Joachim Köhler, *Zarathustra’s Secret: The Interior Life of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Ronald Taylor (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Bernard Williams, introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, poems translated by Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), x. Interestingly, in the new English edition of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, which was launched by Stanford University Press in 1995 and which is based on the authoritative *Kritische Studienausgabe* by Colli-Montinari, the title of volume 6, whose publication date has not been announced yet, was originally mentioned as *The Gay Science*, whereas the publisher’s website currently has it listed as *The Joyful Science* . . . See the listing of Volume 6 on Stanford University Press’s website.

homosexual, although the notion's connotations of spontaneous, undirected playfulness and its implicit purpose of demonstrating carefree civil disobedience served the homosexual community extremely well.

But there are other than purely linguistic reasons for emphasizing Lacan's and Nietzsche's gaiety. When Nietzsche 'composed' *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* – not once, but twice between 1881 and 1886 – he gave the second edition of his book the parenthetical subtitle “*la gaya scienza*,” thus suggesting that his own German title was effectively already a translation, and that *fröhlich* was intended to render the adjective *gaya*. In addition, as Nietzsche pointed out in a passage of *Ecce Homo* published in 1888, one year after the second edition of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, the so-called “Songs of Prince Vogelfrei”, which were added to this second edition, “are very clearly reminiscent of the Provençal concept of *gaya scienza*, that unity of *singer, knight, and free spirit* that is distinctive of the wonderful early culture of Provence.”¹⁵ It is unclear how Nietzsche had come across the concept of *gaya scienza*. He may have discovered it via Ralph Waldo Emerson, with whose works he had become infatuated as a schoolboy and whose essays he ardently re-read whilst writing *The Gay Science*.¹⁶ Alternatively, his knowledge of it may have stemmed from his own deep personal interest in Mediterranean culture, as represented in this case by the medieval troubadours of Southern France.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo: How To Become What You Are,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 123.

¹⁶ We know that Nietzsche re-read Emerson whilst he was working on *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* from a note he made during the Autumn of 1881: “In no other book [than Emerson's selected essays] have I ever felt so much at home and in my home – I can't praise it, it is just too close to me.” See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Nachgelassene Fragmente 1880–1882,” in *Kritische Studienausgabe* (Berlin: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 588. Emerson designated himself as a “Professor of the Joyous Science” in an early lecture entitled “Prospects”, which was originally delivered at the Masonic Temple in Boston on January 20, 1842. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Prospects,” in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, MA & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972), 368. He repeated the phrase thirty-four years later, in a lecture on “The Scholar” presented at the University of Virginia on 28 June 1876. In the latter “oration,” he stated: “I think the peculiar office of scholars in a careful and gloomy generation is to be (as the poets were called in the Middle Ages) Professors of the Joyous Science.” See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Scholar,” in *Complete Works, Vol. X: Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co. 1888), 250. Emerson specifically referred to “gai science” (sic) in the 1876 essay “Poetry and Imagination”, which had started life as a lecture on “Poetry and English Poetry” from 1854. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” in *Letters and Social Aims* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1898), 28. The literature on Nietzsche's intellectual indebtedness to Emerson is vast. For recent discussions, with a particular focus on *The Gay Science*, see Robert B. Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press 2011), 32–34 and Paul Grimstad, *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 33–36.

In 1323, seven distinguished citizens of Toulouse founded the *Sobregaya Companhia del Gay Saber* (literally, “The super gay company of the gay knowledge”), with the aims of fighting sadness and boredom, celebrating joyful educational practices through song and dance, and establishing an annual poetry contest open to all “*dictador et trobador*.”¹⁷ In order to evaluate the quality of the poems more rigorously, and with a view to promoting Occitan grammar, the seven members of the “gay company” then asked a lawyer by the name of Guilhem Molinier to compile a comprehensive handbook setting out the fundamental rules of lyrical poetry. The book was eventually published under the title *Las Leys d’Amors* (*The Laws of Love Poetry*), and became hugely influential in various parts of Southern Europe as the standard treatise on the art of poetry.¹⁸ Over time, the Toulousians became known in Occitan as the *Consistori de la Gaya Sciensa*, in Spanish as the *Consistorio del Gay Saber*, and in French as *La Compagnie des mainteneurs du Gai Savoir*, although the polyphony of languages and the amalgamation of cultures in the Mediterranean during the late Middle Ages often resulted in various hybrid designations such as *Consistori del Gai Saber*, *Consistoire de la Gaie Science* and *Consistori de la Gaya Ciència*. The shift from “*sciensa*” to “*saber*,” and “*savoir*” makes sufficiently clear, here, that the consistory did not so much intend to redefine the rules of scientific practice, or the practical (empirical) principles of science, but rather the language of knowledge, or the rhetorical and especially the poetic structures governing a certain type of knowledge production. *Gaya scienza* is in essence “gay knowledge,” “gay learning,” or “gay intelligence,” rather than “gay science,” although any kind of science (in the commonly accepted meaning of the word) will inevitably draw upon and generate bodies of knowledge.¹⁹

¹⁷ See Georges Passerat, “L’Église et la poésie: les débuts du *Consistori del Gay Saber*,” in *Église et culture en France méridionale (XII–XIV siècle)*, ed. Jean-Louis Biget (Toulouse: Privat, 2000), 443–473.

¹⁸ See Joseph Anglade ed., *Las Leys d’Amors. Manuscrit de l’Académie des Jeux Floraux* (Toulouse: Privat, 1919–20); Joseph Anglade, “La doctrine grammaticale et poétique du Gai Savoir,” in *Todd Memorial Volumes: Philological Studies. Vol. 1*, ed. John D. Fitz-Gerald & Pauline Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), 47–58; Robert Lafont, “Les ‘Leys d’Amors’ et la mutation de la conscience occitane,” *Revue des langues romanes* 76 (1966): 13–59; John Stevens, *Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance and Drama, 1050–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Cathérine Léglu, “Language in Conflict in Toulouse: *Las Leys d’Amors*,” *The Modern Language Review* 103.2 (2008): 383–396.

¹⁹ As such, Nietzsche was definitely right in rendering *scienza* as *Wissenschaft*, but the latter term should not be retranslated into English, as some Nietzsche-scholars have done, as “wisdom.” Apart from the fact that *Wissenschaft* never refers to wisdom in German, Nietzsche intended to advance a new type of scholarly investigation, resulting in a new kind of knowledge, which was not meant to be any less serious, disciplined and rigorous than conventional scientific practices and doctrines, but which would overcome the rigid, formalistic style of academic, professorial science, as it was to be

What characterizes *gai saber*, and what the didactic style of the *Leys d'Amors* may easily obfuscate, is the ludic and jocular approach to the composition of lyrical poetry, its deliberate recourse to semantic ambiguities, its recurrent re-creation of internal inconsistencies with regard to meter and rhyme, and its untroubled usage of apparent contradictions, making any literal or realistic interpretation impossible and therefore misguided.²⁰ As the Belgian medievalist Roger Dragonetti put it: “It is entirely clear that the concept of *gai saber*, supported by the dionysiacal basis of *joy*, which the poets of courtly love celebrate with overwhelming fervor and a state of ravishing, supposes an entirely joyous, mocking and amusing side . . . In a sense, the poets of the maternal idiom aimed to conquer knowledge through poetry, because for the *gai saber* of the troubadours it was all about turning the new literary language into a place for the most subtle findings [*trouvailles*] of reason, and at the same time for the play of letters and words.”²¹ Serious as the Consistory may have been when it came to identifying the best *canço*, recognizing the “most excellent

found primarily in German (Teutonic) quarters. Although *Wissenschaft* (science) is, strictly speaking, the most accurate translation of *scienza*, we should interpret “science” in the broadest possible sense here, Nietzsche aiming his derision at all the representatives of humorless knowledge-production, at all those epistemic authorities who do not believe that serious knowledge can simultaneously be playful, light-hearted and funny. For more detailed elaborations of this point, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, “The Gay Science” in *A Companion to Friedrich Nietzsche: Life and Works*, ed. Paul Bishop (Rochester: Camden House, 2012), 167–192; Babette E. Babich, “Nietzsche’s ‘Gay’ Science,” in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Malden MA-London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 97–114; Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Comic Relief: Nietzsche’s Gay Science* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Monika M. Langer, *Nietzsche’s Gay Science: Dancing Coherence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Christopher Janaway, “The Gay Science,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes & John Richardson (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 252–271.

²⁰ In a review of the 1967 French translation of Nietzsche’s *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, by Pierre Klossowski, the French critic and translator Jean-Louis Backès intimated that it was precisely this total defiance of contradictions or, viewed from a different angle, the pervasive simultaneous presence of seemingly incompatible experiences – happiness and sorrow, jubilation and despair – which may have attracted Nietzsche to the *gay scienza* in the first place. See Jean-Louis Backès, “Le gai saber,” *Critique* 251 (1968): 347–367.

²¹ See Roger Dragonetti, *Le gai savoir dans la rhétorique courtoise. Flamenca et Joufroi de Poitiers* (Paris: du Seuil, 1982), 15–16. Dragonetti taught at the University of Ghent from 1961 until 1968, when he accepted a chair at the University of Geneva. His 1961 book *Aux frontières du langage poétique* caught Lacan’s attention, and Dragonetti and Lacan subsequently became good friends. Lacan also arranged for some of Dragonetti’s books to be published in the collection he was editing at *Editions du Seuil*, and Dragonetti’s own growing interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis, combined with his intellectual generosity towards his students, eventually resulted in the emergence of a small group of Lacanian medievalists, including Charles Méla, Henri Rey-Flaud and Alexandre Leupin. A collection of letters between Dragonetti and Lacan is preserved at the Swiss Literary Archives in Bern. It is also worth noting, here, that the word troubadour is derived from the Occitan verb *trobar*, which means “to compose poetry,” but also “to find” and “to invent.” See Roger Dragonetti, *Aux frontières du langage poétique. Études sur Dante, Mallarmé, Valéry* (Gand: Romanica Gandensia, 1961); Simon Gaunt &

poet” (*plus excellen Dictador*) and awarding the coveted *violeta d’aur* (golden violet) at their annual poetry contest, they would not necessarily have been looking for the most serious-minded troubadour, or at least not for the poet who displayed the most rigorous understanding of the rules of lyrical poetry, but rather for a *joglar* (minstrel, performer) who was capable of demonstrating the most coltish, frisky, jaunty, merry, mirthful, spirited, and sprightly interpretation of the rulebook, so that something new and surprising was being invented. A true troubadour is someone who despises the humorless gravitas of the formal form, someone who, when he gets down to do his business, cannot conform to any kind of accepted practice or standard pattern, neither within the symbolic framework of language nor within the rules of engagement that govern human interaction. As the troubadour Bertran de Born put it after spending time at a court in Normandy in 1182: “*Ja mais non er cortz complia on hom non grab ni non ria*” (Never is a court complete when no one jokes or laughs).²²

When Lacan confessed publicly to being gay, on October 22, 1967, and again on May 12, 1971, there can be no doubt that he meant it. He was not joking about his affectation, and very much wanted to be taken seriously as a “gay psychoanalyst.” By contrast with Nietzsche, there is no evidence that Lacan ever delved into Emerson, nor, for that matter, that he ever paid any serious attention to Nietzsche’s “gay science.”²³ Nonetheless, when he said he was gay, Lacan presented himself not just as being in a jolly, cheerful mood, but also and primarily as a self-identified “Professor of the Joyous Science” – one who is fully attuned to the poetic principles of the Provençal troubadours. And although he may not have known anything about Emerson, Lacan definitely knew something about the *gaya scienza*.

Sarah Kay eds., *The Troubadours: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 294.

²² Qtd in Ruth Harvey, “Courtly Culture in Medieval Occitania,” in *The Troubadours*, ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, 8. As it happens, it was not until the late nineteenth century that scholars started to appreciate the humor and playfulness in troubadour poetry, but not until the 1960s, following the translation into English of Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, that this type of appreciation in itself was taken seriously. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949); Don A. Monson, “The Troubadours at Play: Irony, Parody and Burlesque,” in *The Troubadours*, 197–211.

²³ There are no references to Emerson in any of Lacan’s written texts and seminars. As to Nietzsche, Lacan briefly referred to *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *On the Genealogy of Morality* in some of his seminars, but to the best of my knowledge he never mentioned *The Gay Science*. On two occasions, he did invoke the theme of the “death of God,” which looms large over the third and fifth books of *The Gay Science*, but this in itself is no indication that he actually read Nietzsche’s work in this respect. See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIII: L’objet de la psychanalyse* (1965–66), unpublished, session of 25 May 1966; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 27.

The day is Saturday September 26, 1953. In Hannibal MO the CBS-affiliated KHQA TV channel 7 begins broadcasting. At the Institute of Psychology of the University of Rome, Lacan introduces the lengthy report entitled, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,' which he has written during the summer, with a largely improvised address directed at the friends who have had the courage to follow him in the wake of a split in the Paris Psychoanalytic Society. At the end of his speech, Lacan exposes the grave errors committed by his fellow psychoanalysts, in the name of a spurious allegiance to the so-called classical tradition, but he is also reassuring his audience that there is hope: "If psychoanalysis is a source of truth, it is also a source of wisdom. And this wisdom has a face, which has never deceived anyone, ever since human beings have occupied themselves with its destiny. All wisdom is a *gay savoir*. It is being opened up, it subverts, it sings, it instructs, it laughs. It is all language. Nourish yourselves on its tradition, from Rabelais to Hegel. Open your ears to popular songs, to the marvelous dialogues of the street. You will receive the style through which humanity is revealed in human beings, and the meaning of language, without which you will never liberate speech."²⁴ During the question-and-answer session that follows, Lacan drives his point home with two additional references to the importance of the *gay savoir*, not drawing on examples from the troubadours but mentioning the satirical linguistic pyrotechnics of François Rabelais.²⁵ Again, it is worth noting here that *gay savoir* is what Lacan *adds* to the written text of his "Rome Discourse", when he is presenting it to the audience. When Rabelais is mentioned in the written text, there is no evocation of *gay savoir*.²⁶

For all I have been able to establish, there are no further references to *gay savoir* in any of Lacan's written or spoken interventions until some thirteen years later. The day is Wednesday January 19, 1966. In India, Indira Gandhi is elected prime minister. In France, at Lacan's seminar at the *École normale supérieure*, which is focusing on the object in psychoanalysis, the audience is listening to a commentary by a certain Madame le Docteur Parisot on a paper by Roger Dragonetti, which deals with the function of the image in the works

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Discours de Rome," in *Autres Écrits* (Paris: du Seuil, 2001), 146.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 149, 152.

²⁶ For the full written text of Lacan's "Rome Discourse," see Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2006), 197–268. The reference to Rabelais appears on page 230.

of Dante.²⁷ Following the presentation, Lacan gives his own views on the matter and states: “It is insofar as *jouissance* – I am not saying pleasure – is withdrawn from the field of courtly love that a certain configuration is established there which allows a certain equilibrium between truth and knowledge. It is properly what has been called . . . *le gai savoir*.”²⁸ Some six years earlier, Lacan had devoted a couple of sessions of his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis to courtly love and the troubadours, insisting on the crucial significance of the female love-object’s unattainability – if not in real life, at least in the songs and love poetry of the wandering singers.²⁹ In extracting the *jouissance* from their songs, and concentrating on desire, the troubadours’ *gai savoir* became, at least to Lacan, a more playful, less heavy, more truthful and less petrified knowledge.

As we now know, in October 1967 and May 1971 Lacan said he was gay, but for all I know there was no further mention of *gai saber* during this period. Until Friday July 14, 1972. At the Crimean Astrophysical Observatory in the Ukraine, Lyudmila Vasilyevna Zhuravleva discovers asteroids #1959 Karbyshev and #2423 Ibarruri. France is celebrating its national holiday, and Lacan is making a contribution to the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Henri-Rousselle hospital, which was effectively the first open psychiatric clinic in France – admitting patients without them necessarily having been sectioned. The text is called ‘L’étourdit’ and although he does not explicitly say it – and I have no way of proving it – Lacan is rather gay in it, and so he conjures up the gay science: “Insofar as it is the language that is most propitious for the scientific discourse, mathematics is the science without conscience which has been promised to us by our dear old Rabelais; it is the science which can only remain blocked to a philosopher: the gay science [*la gaye science*] is rejoicing by presuming the ruin of the soul.”³⁰ Eighteen months later, in *Television*, we know that Lacan was gay, because he himself said he had been a clown on it, if not in it. Much like he did when he delivered the closing speech at the conference on psychosis in October 1967, Lacan opposed gay science to sadness: “In contrast with sadness [*tristesse*] there is

²⁷ See Roger Dragonetti, “Dante et Narcisse ou les faux-monnayeurs de l’image,” *Revue des Etudes Italiennes* 102 (1965): 85–146.

²⁸ See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XIII: L’objet de la psychanalyse*, unpublished, session of January 19, 1966.

²⁹ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 85–164.

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, “L’étourdit,” in *Autres Écrits* (Paris: du Seuil, 2001), 453.

the Gay science [*gay savoir*], which is a virtue. A virtue absolves no one from sin – which is, as everyone knows, original. The virtue that I designate as the Gay science [*gay savoir*] exemplifies it, by showing clearly of what it consists: not understanding, not a poking into meaning, but a flying over it as low as possible without the meaning's gumming up this virtue, thus enjoying [*jouir*] the deciphering, which implies that the Gay science [*gay savoir*] cannot but meet in it the Fall, the return into sin."³¹

Gay psychoanalysis

Only a handful of interpretations of Lacan's references to *gai saber* are available in French, and to the best of my knowledge no Lacan scholar in the English-speaking world has ever paid any serious attention to Lacan's gayness or to his reliance on the "gay science."³² Yet as Madeleine Chapsal observed when she first encountered the hirsute ginger Dr. Lacan, the psychoanalyst was definitely a fantasist, and an extremely serious one at that.³³ Returning from Rome in September 1953, Lacan moved his weekly seminar to the Sainte-Anne hospital in Paris, and for the next twenty-five years or so he had a real blast, thoroughly enjoying himself with all kinds of things, from strange physical experiments to even stranger topological objects, indulging himself in recreational mathematics and performing

³¹ Lacan, *Television/A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, 22. Translation modified.

³² For sources in French, see Anaëlle Lebovits, "Gai savoir," *La lettre mensuelle* 258 (2007): 23–25; Pascale Vallois, "Le gai savoir de Lacan," *Letterina—Bulletin de l'ACF Normandie* 35 (2003): 69–76; Serge Cottet, "Gai savoir et triste vérité," *La cause freudienne* 35 (1997): 33–36; Anne Lysy-Stevens, "Raser le sens: le gay savoir," *Quarto* 51 (1993): 80–85; Anne Lysy-Stevens, "A propos du 'gay savoir,'" *Les Feuilles du Courtil* 6 (1993): 25–47; Monique Kusnierek, "Le gay savoir, un affect lacanien," *Quarto* 25 (1986): 3. In her otherwise excellent study of how Lacan's theory of desire is crucially indebted to his reading of various medieval texts, Erin Felicia Labbie makes no mention whatsoever of the *gai saber*. A book chapter by Joan Copjec raises high expectations, but does not address Lacan's engagement with *gai saber* either. See Erin Felicia Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Joan Copjec, "Gai Savoir Sera: The Science of Love and the Insolence of Chance," in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*, ed. Gabriel Riera (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 119–135. It is also worth noting, here, that in 1969 Jean-Luc Godard released a film entitled *Le gai savoir*, which was re-titled *Joy of Learning* when it was distributed outside France. In the film, a young man and a young woman discuss language and the spoken word, which they designate as 'the enemy', in the eerie space of an abandoned television studio. In a fine review of the film, the American film critic James Monaco described *Le gai savoir* as Godard's "ultimate effort at semiocasm" and the director's first "film d'role". See James Monaco, "Le gai savoir: Picture and Act—Godard's Plexus," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 7 (1975): 15–17.

³³ In 1993, an American PhD student was accorded a rare interview with Lacan's second wife Sylvia Maklès, in which she described her husband as someone who was handsome without being droll, and someone who definitely could be funny when he ought to be. At the same time, she referred to Chapsal as a vulgar person, who was hardly a "great woman" See Jamer Hunt, *Absence to Presence: The Life History of Sylvia [Bataille] Lacan* (doctoral dissertation, Rice University, 1995), 177, 180.

more and more linguistic stunts as the years went by, whilst losing himself like a five-year-old boy in the endless twists and turns of a crazy little thing called the Borromean knot. Whether the people in his audience went through the same hilarious experience, I am not sure.³⁴ What we do know is that the representatives of the psychoanalytic establishment and the guardians of the institutions at which Lacan was “performing” did not always think that the show was funny. The day is Monday November 7, 1955. In the United States, the Supreme Court of Baltimore bans segregation in public recreational areas. In Vienna, at the Neuropsychiatric clinic, Lacan is giving a lecture entitled “La chose freudienne” (The Freudian Thing), in which he proclaims “*Moi, la vérité je parle*” (I, truth, speak).³⁵ Viennese psychiatrists and psychoanalysts really do not like it when a French colleague says something like that.

But the tone was set at the beginning of his first public seminar at Sainte-Anne. “The closer we get to psychoanalysis being funny [*la psychanalyse amusante*],” Lacan said, “the more it is real psychoanalysis [*la véritable psychanalyse*].”³⁶ Maybe his audience at the time – which was mainly made up of analysts-in-training – thought he was joking, but Lacan himself was entirely serious about the importance of having fun. The next year, he defined Hegel’s concept of “absolute knowledge” (*savoir absolu*) as an “elaborated discourse,” which is used as an instrument of power by self-identified masters, and he opposed it to the libidinal knowledge of the street-corner, produced by those who are having a good time in the local café listening to jazz music and dancing the night away. It is clear where his heart was.³⁷ Two years later, he said to his listeners that he was always trying to end a lecture on something that would amuse them.³⁸ And the

³⁴ Jacques-Alain Miller, the official editor of Lacan’s seminars, could have included textual interpositions such as [*laughs*] whenever the audience laughed at something Lacan was saying or doing, but on that point the text is silent and arid. Recordings of the seminars generally contain too much background noise for laughter in the audience to be discernable. When asked about his encounters with Lacan, the French author Philippe Sollers, who attended Lacan’s seminars throughout the late 1960s and 70s, has always insisted on Lacan’s great sense of humor. In another interview, Jacques-Alain Miller stated that Lacan was “gay” until 1975–76 and that a great many laughs were being had. See Philippe Sollers, *Lacan même* (Paris: Navarin, 2005); Philippe Sollers, “Le corps sort de la voix,” *Le diable probablement*, 9 (2011): 16–28; Jacques-Alain Miller, “Le démon de Lacan,” *Le diable probablement* 9 (2011): 29–171, 142 in particular.

³⁵ Jacques Lacan, “The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 340.

³⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. John Forrester (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), 77.

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 72.

³⁸ See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre IV: La relation d’objet*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: du Seuil, 1994), 334.

year after, when focusing on the so-called formations of the unconscious, he paid relatively little attention to dreams, bungled actions and neurotic symptoms, but spent the entire first trimester talking about the “Freudian structures” of the joke.³⁹ At another point in this seminar, Lacan claimed that he was not really having fun when playing on words (*Je ne m’amuse pas à jouer sur les mots*).⁴⁰ I think he was joking. There are numerous other examples throughout the seminars and the written texts of things that Lacan finds funny and amusing: the optical installation of the inverted bouquet taken from Bouasse, Platonic dialogues, the works of Lévi-Strauss, Sade, and Kant, topological structures, especially the cross-cap, a little story about a giant praying mantis, a book by Leopold de Saussure on Chinese astronomy, the golden section, T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’, the imagined *jouissance* of a plant. “I’m not giving any lectures here,” he said to the crowd at his Seminar on February 9, 1972. “As I have said elsewhere, very seriously, I’m amusing myself. Serious or pleasant amusements.”⁴¹

At some point during his Seminar of 1968–69, Lacan revealed to his audience that he was having a particularly good time and a great deal of fun when being all on his own. What on earth was he doing? The day is Friday June 30, 2006. In Pasadena, CA, an MTA bus hits and kills a five-year-old girl riding a tricycle. In Paris a public auction is being held at the Hôtel Marcel Dassault on the famous Champs-Élysées, during which 117 graphic designs and unpublished manuscripts by Dr. Jacques Lacan are put up for sale. The collection belongs to Jean-Michel Vappereau, a psychoanalyst and mathematician who had worked with Lacan during the 1970s on the development of his knot theory, and it is being auctioned because Vappereau wants to buy an apartment in Paris to house a new archive of psychoanalytic texts. Amongst the documents that are being sold, there are numerous sheets of paper with colourful drawings of highly intricate knots, which Lacan tended to refer to as his “*ronds de ficelle*,” as well as various undated handwritten texts. One of the most interesting ones starts with the line “*Je n’ai dit que des sottises*” (I’ve only ever said foolish things), and

³⁹ See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre V: Les formations de l’inconscient*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: du Seuil, 1998), 7–139. For all I know, this is the only seminar in which Lacan tells his audience a proper joke – a story of a student and an examiner, which he has borrowed from Raymond Queneau.

⁴⁰ Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre V: Les formations de l’inconscient*, 344.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XIX. . . ou pire*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: du Seuil, 2011), 187. The “elsewhere” refers to a series of talks (*entretiens*) Lacan was giving in the chapel of the Sainte-Anne Hospital, under the general title of “*Le savoir du psychanalyste*” (The knowledge of the psychoanalyst). See Jacques Lacan, *Je parle aux murs* (Paris: du Seuil, 2011).

then goes on to show how Lacan is re-writing, in pseudo-Joycean fashion, the sentence and its constitutive parts in a newly invented language, which may still sound like French, but definitely no longer looks like French: “*jnédit kdessot'tise, kdesse ottise, jeûn'nez dit, jeun'nez dit quedès/quedesse.*” The same process is subsequently applied to the next section of the text, or what now looks like the second stanza of a poem: “*La pensée [thought], ai-je une appensée?, Jnes padappe ansée, listerie, lister-ie, il faut que lister rie [Lister laughs]. Isteron est du même ordre. Boufonnerie.*” At the end of the text, the rules of French grammar are restored, and a question is being formulated: “*Qu'est-ce que l'utérin a affaire dans l'hystérie. Grossesse nerveuse. Et après.*” (What does the uterine have to do with hysteria. Nervous pregnancy. And afterwards).⁴² Anyone who is taking these scribbles seriously is likely to react in one of two different ways, no doubt depending on the quality of the transference toward Lacan. The first reaction is to say that Lacan had finally lost it, that his writing, here, shows clear signs of a pathologically deteriorating mind, which, although not necessarily representative of a florid psychosis, has driven the man and his ideas deeper and deeper into the darkest realms of a full-blown delusion. Lacan's writing here would come frightfully close, then, to the samples of “inspired writing” by psychotic patients he himself had studied so carefully as a psychiatrist during the 1930s.⁴³ The second reaction would start from the assumption that Lacan was actually entirely sane when he wrote the text, and then proceed to an in-depth investigation of the meaning of it all, as if the lines constitute an esoteric, hermetically locked set of words, whose real and true meaning can only be found if we manage to locate the right key for deciphering the document. I shall resist the temptation to pass judgment on Lacan's state of mind, but if we take the text not as the production of a madman, then the second, hermeneutic, approach may in itself not be all that productive either. Regardless as to whether one finds the key to unlock the seal, the hermeneutic approach, which pokes at meaning and values the enjoyment of the deciphering that is associated with it – following Lacan's own assertions in and on *Television* – exemplifies how any type of “virtuous knowledge,” even the most playful and joyous example, can be made to fall from grace and descend into sin, especially when it is taken too seriously.

⁴² For a facsimile and transcription of the document, see Jacques Lacan, *Œuvres graphiques et manuscrites* (Paris: Artcurial Briest, 2006), 42.

⁴³ See, for example, Jacques Lévy-Valensi, Pierre Migault and Jacques Lacan, “Écrits ‘inspirés’: Schizographie,” in *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité, suivi de Premiers écrits sur la paranoïa* (Paris: du Seuil, 1975), 365–382.

Maybe it is just better to assume that as a gay psychoanalyst Lacan was having fun, enjoying himself, and extolling the virtues of *gai saber*. Fantastist or not, he is bending over backwards to ensure that the knowledge he is producing remains light-hearted. When he is ‘demolishing’ the French language – much like the surrealists were fond of doing, or like his younger literary contemporaries Philippe Sollers and Pierre Guyotat – enacting the content of the message (*je n’ai dit que des sottises*) through the style with which it is executed, he is bending the rules of grammar, turning syntax inside out, twisting words and sentences like he is working on yet another transformation of the Borromean knot. For Lacan, language and knowledge should be as flexible as a Möbius-strip, a Klein bottle, or a cross-cap. That is what he recognized and appreciated in the works of Rabelais, in the literary art of Baltasar Gracián, whose inimitable talent for generating maximum effect with minimum words was referred to as *agudeza*, or in the remarkable *Bigarrures* (variegations) of Étienne Tabourot, the Seigneur des Accords, and of course also in the books of James Joyce.⁴⁴ Yet in pursuing *gai saber*, and avoiding any kind of established, doctrinal knowledge production, Lacan was actually extremely serious about where the true value of psychoanalysis can be found, and what should become of knowledge when it enters the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. As his formula for the discourse of the analyst indicates, knowledge is held to operate on the place of truth, which does not mean that psychoanalytic knowledge, as it is employed by the analyst in his or her clinical practice, has to represent the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but paradoxically that the knowledge “in action” cannot be too serious, meaningful, and austere, so that it can *evoke* the truth – much like the medieval court jester would always speak the truth by never actually saying it.⁴⁵ And when, in *Television*, Lacan posited that the end of a psychoanalytic process is driven by the ethic of the “well-spoken” (*l’éthique du bien-dire*), what he had in mind was not that analysts at the end of their analysis would be more capable than before

⁴⁴ The reference to Tabourot appears late in Lacan’s work, in the seminar *L’insu-que-sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre*, of 1976–77, and it shows, alongside the title of the Seminar, how Lacan, *pace* Jacques-Alain Miller, was still pretty gay at the time. See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XXIV: L’insu-que-sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre*, unpublished, session of 11 January 1977. For a brief Lacanian presentation of the *Bigarrures*, see Christian Vereecken, “Le gay sçavoir du seigneur des Accords,” *Quarto* 26 (1987): 39. For Lacan’s yearlong 1975–76 seminar on Joyce, see Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII: Le sinthome*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: du Seuil, 2005).

⁴⁵ On the discourse of the analyst, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Russell Grigg (New York NY-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

to articulate their thoughts and emotions in a serious and correct fashion, but rather that analysts would acquire the capacity to play on words, to put their life into perspective, to see the humor of it all.⁴⁶ As such, *gai saber* is not just a theoretical flight of fancy for Lacan the fantasist, but also, and much more fundamentally, a clinical principle, which lies at the heart of psychoanalytic practice, psychoanalytic training, and psychoanalytic epistemology. It is related to what Nicolas of Cusa – who was not a troubadour but a cardinal – designated as the *docta ignorantia*, the wise ignorance, but it is also connected to the Freudian structure of the *Witz*, which much like any joke can be seen as a linguistic attempt at destabilizing an established set of expectations, or at steering existing mental and social structures in surprising, unanticipated directions.⁴⁷ As the anthropologist Mary Douglas put it: “A joke is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity.”⁴⁸ It should not come as a complete surprise, then, that Lacan at one point also defined psychoanalytic interpretation as a *Witz* – not exactly a joke (and there is no evidence that Lacan ever told jokes when conducting his analyses) but a quip, a wittiness, a wordplay, a little piece of gay knowledge.⁴⁹ Lacan could only hope that his audience, and especially the psychoanalysts attending his seminars, would be as gay as he was, that they would not become bogged down in the pursuit of absolute knowledge and the quest for true meaning, that they would be able to listen to his words like they were coming from the sonorous mouth of a medieval troubadour, and that they would see the not-so-funny comedy of their own existence, as dedicated followers of Jacques the Fantasist.

Episteme of laughter

Given Lacan’s lifelong commitment to *gai saber*, it would be inappropriate to employ his theory as a firmly established, doctrinal body of knowledge,

⁴⁶ Lacan, *Televisión/A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, 22. See also Jacques-Alain Miller, . . . *du nouveau. Introduction au Séminaire V de Lacan* (Paris: rue Huysmans, 1998), 12–13.

⁴⁷ See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 8, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1960).

⁴⁸ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London & New York: Routledge, 1975), 96.

⁴⁹ See Jacques Lacan, *Le phénomène lacanien* (Nice: Section Clinique de Nice, 2011). On another occasion, Lacan also suggested that the procedure of the pass – a controversial arrangement for appointing new analysts – should be considered a *Witz*, or at least he used the structure of the *Witz*, which crucially relies on what Freud called *die Dritte Person* (*la troisième*, the third), in order to justify its precise structure. See Jacques Lacan, “Discours à l’École freudienne de Paris,” in *Autres Ecrits* (Paris: du Seuil, 2001), 265.

and outright paradoxical to interpret his each and every word as a definitive statement. During the 1950s, Lacan criticized the representatives of ego-psychology not only for transforming Freud's invention into psycho-education and enlightened behaviourism, but also for systematizing and "straightening" Freud's ideas. Throughout his career, he remained profoundly skeptical of the scientific ideal of the integration of knowledge, truth and reality, and he consistently argued in favor of a knowledge economy that is based on the principles of uncertainty, undecidability, and incompleteness. Instead of returning to Freud in order to generate a new, coherent and consistent formalism, Lacan campaigned for psychoanalysis to be re-gay-ed – for it to re-establish itself as a new *gaya scienza*, for it to mellow its rigid concepts, structures, practices, and procedures into a more light-hearted, open-ended, playful, and altogether amusing set of ideas, for it to become less scientific in the Teutonic sense, and more poetic in the Provençal sense, for it to stop worrying about social conventions and public respectability, for it to be intrinsically suspicious of customary practices; in short, for it to have fun. As such, Lacan intended to contribute to the (re-)invention of psychoanalysis as a new episteme of laughter or, better still, as a laughing episteme – a sensual, passionate, "affected knowledge," which can be worn lightly, and whose playful permutations of words and ideas may generate unexpected new discoveries.⁵⁰

Unlike Lacan, Freud never disclosed in public that he was "*fröhlich*," and although he admitted in his autobiographical study that Nietzsche's "guesses and intuitions [*Abnungen und Einsichten*] often agree in the most astonishing way with the laborious findings of psycho-analysis," there is no evidence that Freud ever paid much attention to *The Gay*

⁵⁰ If there is an echo of Spinoza in all of this, then it is definitely not accidental. Whereas most teenagers would decorate the walls of their room with posters of their favorite pop-stars, at the age of sixteen Lacan preferred a self-designed diagram outlining the structure of Spinoza's *Ethics*. For his doctoral thesis, he chose proposition 57 of the third book of the *Ethics* as an epigraph. When, at the *Maison de la Chimie* and in *Television*, he opposed gaiety to sadness, he clearly alluded to Spinoza's two fundamental emotions of *laetitia* and *tristitia*. In addition, when Nietzsche started making notes for *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* in the Summer of 1881, he wrote to his friend Franz Overbeck about his indebtedness to the Dutch philosopher, and about the important task of "making knowledge the most powerful affect" (*die Erkenntniß zum mächtigsten Affekt zu machen*). By contrast with Spinoza, for whom knowledge is intrinsically joyful because it grants power over life, Nietzsche believed that knowledge is primarily painful, so that joyful knowledge is a philosophical assignment rather than an epistemic given. See Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 11 and 52–53; Jacques Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*, 11; Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1996), 177.

Science.⁵¹ Nonetheless, Freud was the first psychoanalyst, and for many years the only psychoanalyst, to give serious consideration to the structure and function of jokes, and in his works he often made use of irony and sarcasm to drive his points home. When, in 1926, the American writer Max Eastman visited Freud in Vienna, and the great man walked through the door to greet him, he was surprised that “he was smaller” than expected, and “slender-limbed, and more feminine,” and with a flatter nose than expected, and with a gentle voice. But Eastman particularly picked up on the fact that Freud smiled a lot, seemed quite amused a lot of the time, and would sometimes throw his head way back and laugh like a child.⁵² It is not an image of Freud that one would ever get from the numerous “official” photographs of him that have entered the cultural domain over the years. Indeed, there is hardly a single photograph of Freud in which he can be seen laughing. For the later pictures, this may be explained with reference to the cancerous growth in his mouth and the cheek prosthesis he was forced to wear, but for all the others it may no doubt also be attributed to the public image of gravitas that he was expected (and to some extent also wanted) to maintain. In a sense, one could argue that the official photographs were meant to capture the serious-mindedness of the “institutional Freud,” the Freud who approached the psychoanalytic study of the mind with authority, dignity, and respect, even if the results of his research were challenging, controversial, and scandalous.

It is precisely in this discrepancy between the private intellectual playfulness of one or more passionate, enthusiastic soul-searchers and the constant institutional quest for the public recognition of a firmly grounded doctrine that the problem of psychoanalytic knowledge needs to be situated. Were I to choose a psychoanalytic concept to “diagnose” the current and historical state of the knowledge operating within psychoanalytic institutions, it would have to be the good old Freudian notion of “disavowal” (*Verleugnung*), which he employed to characterize the attitude of the male fetishist toward castration, and which the French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni brilliantly captured with the phrase “I know very

⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, “An Autobiographical Study,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1959), 60. For a detailed study of Freud’s indebtedness to Nietzsche and the Nietzschean themes in his work, see Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Freud and Nietzsche*, trans. Richard L. Collier Jr. (London: Athlone, 2000).

⁵² See Max Eastman, *Heroes I Have Known: Twelve who Lived Great Lives* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 1942), 261–273.

well, but still. . .” (*Je sais bien, mais quand même*).⁵³ As a “gay psychoanalyst” Lacan too has to some extent been the unwilling victim of this type of institutional straightening, with its organizational epistemic disavowal. In a thought-provoking paper on the hugely problematic psychoanalytic concept of perversion, Tim Dean has demonstrated, for example, how Lacan’s theoretical and practical celebration of division, fracture, and dehiscence, as well as his critical opposition to any form of subjective identity, which has effectively allowed for his ideas to be recuperated within the anti-identitarian configurations of queer theory, have regularly been re-adjusted into a set of formalistic normative categories and a hetero-centric logic of sexual identity.⁵⁴ In Rome, in 1974, and elsewhere Lacan was rather exasperated when he felt the need to remind people that he had been a clown on television. It is rather exasperating that Lacan’s “I am gay” – although it could easily be dismissed as a passing remark, an insignificant punctuation, a momentary lapse of reason, or an extremely succinct para-textual digression – never seems to have been taken very seriously.

There is no evidence that Lacan ever read Nietzsche’s *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, but if he had, he would definitely have picked up on the following “aphorism”: “For most people, the intellect is an awkward, gloomy, creaking machine that is hard to start: when they want to work with this machine and think well, they call it ‘taking the matter seriously’ – oh, how taxing good thinking must be for them! The lovely human beast seems to lose its good mood when it thinks well; it becomes ‘serious’! And ‘where laughter and gaiety are found, thinking is good for nothing’ – that is the prejudice of this serious beast against all ‘gay science’. Well then, let us prove it a prejudice!”⁵⁵ The paragraph echoes something Nietzsche had already written in the introduction to his book: “[Y]ou will never find someone who could completely mock you . . . To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh *from the whole truth* – for that, not even the best have had enough sense of truth, and the most gifted have had far too little genius! Perhaps even laughter still has a future – when the

⁵³ See Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961), 147–157; Octave Mannoni, “I Know Well, But All the Same . . .,” trans. G. M. Goshgarian in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, eds. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 68–92.

⁵⁴ See Tim Dean, “The Frozen Countenance of the Perversions,” *Parallax* 14.2 (2008): 93–114 and 108, in particular.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 182–183.

proposition ‘The species is everything, an individual is always nothing’ has become part of humanity and this ultimate liberation and irresponsibility is accessible to everyone at all times. Perhaps laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom; perhaps only ‘gay science’ will remain.”⁵⁶ Not too long after writing these lines, Nietzsche collapsed physically and mentally, and never recovered his sanity. Sixty years later, Dr. Jacques Lacan put on a hairy, ginger-coloured wig and invited a young woman to dance.

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⁵⁶ Ibid., 27–28.

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