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American Imago, Volume 58, Number 3, Fall 2001, pp. 685-706 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/aim.2001.0014](https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2001.0014)

AMERICAN  
**IMAGO**

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND  
THE HUMAN SCIENCES  
VOLUME 58 • NUMBER 3 • FALL 2001

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## **Postures and Impostures: On Lacan's Style and Use of Mathematical Science**

### **Introduction**

Lacan makes difficult reading. No doubt about it. This, at least, is common ground to sympathizers and detractors of Lacan alike. Clearly, it is an understatement to say that when mathematical science is added to the equation, things do not become any easier. Most of us already feel insecure with the simplest of mathematical statements, let alone references to esoteric-sounding subdisciplines such as general topology or knot theory.

When we inquire into the make-up of the universe, all the way from distant galaxies and supernovae to cells, synapses, and quarks, we are not surprised when confronted with a discourse that sounds foreign to us. Scientific discourse is, by and large, opaque and filled with impenetrable jargon that takes considerable time and will to master. People do not expect to understand quantum mechanics and are happy to concede ignorance. On the other hand, when we inquire into human nature, psychic processes, identities and emotions, and the workings of the mind, we expect the corresponding models and discourse to be easily understood. This is because they are supposed to be telling us something about ourselves—something, in other words, over which we each can claim some authority and knowledge. It is a natural expectation that is deeply ingrained. So much so that scientists themselves express frustration at the mind's reluctance to yield its secrets. So when Lacanian psychoanalysis—which purports to be such a discourse about ourselves—appears to make every effort to thwart straightforward understanding, when Lacan hesitates

not a jot in enlisting mathematical science to his cause, this cannot but seem to add insult to injury.

No one likes to feel stupid. A very rare person indeed is she who, having struggled to make sense of Lacan's *Écrits*, has not entertained such thoughts of vulnerability. This vulnerability is only exacerbated if a Lacanian seminar or essay has been recommended as reading material by a friend or professor whom we respect. It is a vulnerability that can very quickly turn to frustration, intimidation, and even anger.

Just imagine, then, what would happen if someone came along and declared Lacan to be an impostor. Let us assume, futher, that this "someone" is a well-respected scientist, no less. Current affairs commentaries, press releases, editorials, and radio programs suddenly become flooded with the common knowledge that "the emperor has no clothes"; that Lacan's difficult, even tortuous, discourse is nothing more than an exercise in obscurantism of Joycean proportions; that Lacan's mathematical forays bear absolutely no relation to psychoanalysis. Just imagine the relief and satisfaction! In a society governed by the "sound-bite" imperative, we can now with clear consciences set aside that weighty volume.

This story is not *just* a story. It is a story that goes some way toward explaining the popularity of a recent bestseller by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (hereafter S&B), entitled *Intellectual Impostures* (1997). It is a book in which the authors, both scientists, take issue with the way mathematical science is invoked in the works of a multitude of French intellectuals: Kristeva, Irigaray, Latour, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Virilio, and Lacan.

Alan Sokal, professor of physics at NYU, in particular, has taken upon himself the task of defending an orthodox conception of scientific discourse against an apparent assault originating in the Parisian intellectual scene—an assault that has acquired hegemonic status in certain circles of Western academia. He initiated his counterassault by writing a consciously "bogus" piece on the hermeneutics of quantum gravity and submitting it for publication. After the article was accepted and published in the journal *Social Text* (Sokal 1996a), he promptly revealed it as a hoax—the so-called "Sokal hoax"

(Sokal 1996b)—thus sparking an interesting and fruitful international debate on the intellectual standards of postmodern academia (see Aronowitz 1997; Robbins 1996). *Intellectual Impostures*, however, seeks to raise the stakes even further, thus constituting a culmination of Sokal's initial project.

In direct contrast with the work of Jacques Lacan, *Intellectual Impostures* makes easy, even entertaining, reading. The chapters, each devoted to a different French intellectual, comprise a string of excerpts joined together with short commentaries, often in the form of ironic interjections.

In this essay we focus mainly on their chapter on Lacan. We shall put into question the main thrust of S&B's critical remarks aimed at undermining the legitimacy of Lacan's style and his use of mathematical science. But our aim is carefully delimited. We do *not* argue that Lacan is easy or fun to read. We do *not* offer detailed explanations of Lacanian concepts. We do *not* show what new insights and ways of thinking he brings to bear on questions of mental processes (except indirectly). *Nor* do we offer reasons why Lacan is worth trying hard to understand. Our argument is largely restricted to showing why S&B fail to make a case against Lacan not only on the basis of generally accepted standards of intellectual integrity but also on the basis of standards of their own choosing.

### Setting the Stage

In the preface to the English edition of their *Intellectual Impostures*, S&B set aim at two distinct targets: (1) Intellectuals who, they allege, abuse scientific and mathematical concepts. Their recourse to the term "abuse," no doubt, signals the seriousness of the charge they are making; and they claim that this abuse takes at least two—not necessarily unrelated—forms. Either such concepts are invoked "without the slightest justification" (ix) as to the matter under discussion or else they are thrown about in order to lend authority to their statements (vis-à-vis their predominantly nonscientific audience) without "any regard for its relevance or even its meaning" (ix-x); and (2) the epistemic relativism of "postmodern science," the idea

that “modern science is nothing more than a ‘myth’, a ‘narration’ or a ‘social construction’ among many others” (x).

Of course, both targets are not always to be found in the work of each author they canvass. The second target, for instance, is not to be found in the work of Lacan. We can thus begin by establishing a point of convergence between S&B’s view and Lacan’s on the status of science. Slavoj Žižek addresses exactly this point in the following passage:

What . . . is the nature of the difference between the narrativist postmodernism and Lacan? Perhaps the best way to approach it is via the gap which separates the modern universe of science from traditional knowledge: for Lacan, modern science is *not* just another local narrative grounded in its specific pragmatic conditions, since it does relate to the (mathematical) Real beneath the symbolic universe. (1997, 159)

While Lacan might thus be construed as sympathetic to S&B’s attack on epistemic relativism,<sup>1</sup> we already have, in this very same passage, the thin edge of a more explicit divergence of opinion, namely, the appeal to a mathematical Real. After all, Lacan is quite explicit in claiming, on behalf of psychoanalysis, that “[m]athematical formalization is our goal, our ideal” (1975, 119)—which, it is perhaps worth pointing out, is not at all the same thing as saying that it is the only, or even primary, ideal of psychoanalysis. In any case, this is evidence of the centrality Lacan gives to mathematical formalization in his attempt to establish the way in which psychoanalysis may be considered scientific.<sup>2</sup> As S&B also note, “Lacan’s predilection for mathematics is by no means marginal in his work” (23).

But no sooner have we exempted Lacan from S&B’s second class of targets than we have already hinted at why he figures as their ultimate *bête noire*. For it is this very appeal to mathematics, or rather the manner of his appeal, that, according to *Intellectual Impostures*, brings Lacan squarely into the first class of targets they take aim at: Lacan’s abuse of scientific and mathematical concepts.

But in what way, exactly, does Lacan abuse mathematical ideas? In order to determine of what kind of abuse Lacan is

apparently most to blame, S&B very helpfully list four senses of the term “abuse” in the introduction to *Intellectual Impostures*:

- (1) Holding forth at length on scientific theories about which one has, at best, an exceedingly hazy idea. The most common tactic is to use scientific (or pseudo-scientific) terminology without bothering much about what the words actually *mean*.
- (2) Importing concepts from the natural sciences into the humanities or social sciences without giving the slightest conceptual or empirical justification. If a biologist wanted to apply, in her research, elementary notions of mathematical topology, set theory, or differential geometry, she would be asked to give some explanation. A vague analogy would not be taken very seriously by her colleagues. Here, by contrast, we learn from Lacan that the structure of the neurotic subject is exactly the torus (it is no less than reality itself . . . ) . . . .
- (3) Displaying a superficial erudition by shamelessly throwing around technical terms in a context where they are completely irrelevant. The goal is, no doubt, to impress and, above all, to intimidate the nonscientist reader . . . .
- (4) Manipulating phrases and sentences that are, in fact, meaningless. Some of these authors exhibit a veritable intoxication with words, combined with a superb indifference to their meaning. (S&B 1997, 4)

Finally, at the beginning of the chapter devoted to Lacan, S&B claim that he “illustrates perfectly, in different parts of his oeuvre, the abuses listed” (17). And at the conclusion of the same chapter, S&B state that Lacan “excels . . . at the second type of abuse listed [above]” (34).

The aim of our short commentary will be to raise doubts concerning S&B’s critique of Lacan, demonstrating the way it misses its target; and this largely on account of S&B’s (acknowledged) ignorance of psychoanalytic knowledge. We organize our comments around questions of style and questions of substance.

### Questions of Style

One of the most common criticisms directed at Lacan, long before S&B's emergence on the "science wars" scene, has centered on his style (Roustang 1982, 1990). S&B take up this line of criticism and present a particular version of it. At one point, for example, S&B claim that Lacan's account is not "pedagogical from a mathematical point of view" (29). Though this comment was made with reference to "Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever" (Lacan 1970), S&B suggest that it is applicable to his style of delivery generally. This becomes clear when S&B ask, for instance, how the nonscientist (or nonmathematician) is to judge whether Lacan's account and use of mathematics is clear or even correct (11); or when S&B suggest that intellectuals in general "should explain the requisite technical notions, as clearly as possible, in terms that will be understandable to the intended reader (who is presumably a nonscientist)" (8); or when S&B say that "[i]t is not from him that a student will learn what a natural number or a compact set is" (34); or even when S&B wonder whether Lacan is "trying to impress his audience with a superficial erudition" (29).

As we have already stated, many people, indeed many Lacanians, would agree that much of what Lacan said and wrote is very difficult to follow. This is true not only of his views on and use of scientific and mathematical ideas, but also of his analyses of literature in other fields (psychoanalysis, the humanities, social science, etc.). One might conclude, then, that S&B have scored an easy point here: Lacan was a bad pedagogue!

But is this really the case? Would it make any difference to S&B's accusation if Lacan never claimed to possess pedagogical aims? Probably not. Although he sometimes obliges in this regard,<sup>3</sup> he for the most part clearly implies that his audience (drawn from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds) ought to take the initiative and investigate his recommended directions of research if they feel so inclined.

Would it make any difference if Lacan took a principled position against pedagogically styled discourse? Would it then

be legitimate to accuse Lacan of not being pedagogical enough? If it appears that Lacan is taking a deliberate stand on this issue, then S&B would at the very least be expected to provide reasons why pedagogy should be an ideal worth aspiring to in a given case rather than taking these reasons for granted.

In fact, it turns out that Lacan (1969–70) took an extremely critical view of pedagogically styled discourse, always cautioning his audience to resist understanding too quickly. This does not mean that Lacan believed the obviously absurd view that pedagogy has no place in our society; only that he deliberately declined to adopt it himself in the delivery of his seminars and writings. Consider, for example, the following quotation: “I am not surprised that my discourse can cause a certain margin of misunderstanding,” but this is done “with an express intention, absolutely deliberate, that I pursue this discourse in a way that offers you the occasion of not completely understanding it” (quoted in Samuels 1993, 16). Or elsewhere: “you are not obliged to understand my writings. If you don’t understand them, so much the better—that will give you the opportunity to explain them” (Lacan 1975, 34).

The strategy deployed by S&B relies on the audience’s gut-reaction to quotations such as these, often taken out of context. These statements come across as obviously absurd only if one forgets how Lacan’s style is very much linked to his theoretical and clinical concerns. This is always worth keeping in mind. In a society structured by tight time constraints and imperatives of efficiency, it is natural to demand explanations that are quickly and easily digestible. It has become second nature to expect clear instructions or guidelines on how to accomplish tasks or live a happier life. But Lacan is concerned first and foremost with what happens in the clinic, and his seminars and writings are addressed primarily to analysts. It is from these concerns that his statements on misunderstanding directly spring.

Why should he go out of his way to caution his audience to resist understanding too quickly? Precisely because he is concerned that analysts are tempted to understand their patients too quickly. And what does “understand” mean? To understand something means to translate a term into other terms



that we are already familiar with. This means, for Lacan, that in understanding the patient's discourse analysts understand only what they are already familiar with. Instead of accessing the patient in his or her uniqueness, instead of being open to something new and different, analysts effectively reinforce their own *self*-understanding.

No doubt it is unsettling when we are confronted with something we cannot immediately understand. No doubt it is comforting to believe that we understand each other and that we all share certain aspirations and standards of morality. But, Lacan wants to claim, this comes at a price. The price we pay for an undue reliance on immediate understanding is an unthinking acceptance of premises we have come to rely on and that cease to elicit the need for justification. Think, for instance, of the ideal of pedagogy. This is often taken as an unquestioned ideal that requires no justification.

Ultimately, Lacan's point is an ethical one, finding application not just in the clinic, but in theoretical work and quotidian life as well. It has to do with taking responsibility for one's understanding, rather than relying on a consensus of understanding. And the strategy *he* chose to adopt in this regard involved systematically creating a margin of nonunderstanding. He recognized in this strategy its potential productiveness—productive in terms of generating a desire for *responsible* understanding and in terms of generating research. In short, Lacan is not celebrating misunderstanding. Rather, he is making an argument in favour of *responsible* understanding. As Fink notes, Lacan

is seeking to have certain effects on the reader other than meaning effects: he is seeking to evoke, to provoke, to unsettle us—not to lull us but to jolt us out of our conceptual ruts. Related to this is his aim to put us to work, to remind us that in fact we do not understand what we think we understand (whether it is Freud's writings that are deceptively easy to follow, or our analysts' discourses), and that we may have to make numerous attempts to express or conceptualize something, and then our interpretation will still only be approximate: it will still miss the mark. (1997, 220)

But even if we ignore the absence of any attempt whatever to counter Lacan's principled opposition to pedagogically styled discourse, S&B's case against him is not made any easier. Let us assume for argument's sake that S&B make a case against Lacan on the grounds of his difficult, nonpedagogical style. To accuse Lacan of this, implying thereby that he has nothing of value to say about mathematics in relation to psychoanalysis, would then be to make a category mistake. It would be like ridiculing the work of an eminent physicist at the cutting edge of his or her discipline because he or she was either not willing or not capable of pedagogical delivery. S&B would effectively be collapsing an issue of style onto an issue of substance.

We all agree that one can better follow an advanced physics seminar by becoming familiar with relevant prerequisite courses. Would it be so astonishing to learn that one can better come to terms with Lacan's writings and seminars of the 1970s by becoming familiar with his seminars of the 1950s and 1960s? From this perspective, each of his twenty-five seminars can be viewed as building upon (even if sometimes in the sense of reacting against) material produced in earlier seminars, not to mention the literature (whether contemporaneous or not) Lacan constantly engaged with. Indeed, as is well known, his early papers on family complexes and criminology, or his early seminars, are very accessible, almost Anglo-Saxon in style (see, for example, Lacan 1950).

In this view, it is perfectly understandable—though not inevitable—that, as the years progressed, Lacan's style, by virtue of the preceding body of knowledge he more or less took for granted, would appear to become progressively more obscure. Just as an advanced quantum mechanics or economics seminar or textbook may appear to be either intimidatingly impressive or superficial gibberish to the person first encountering the subject, so too will many of Lacan's later seminars and texts on psychoanalysis. Though Lacan was often explicit in his references to past seminars, these references were also often implicit, obvious only to those who were familiar with his previous teachings. It is no surprise, then, to find Lacanian schools of psychoanalysis devoting, as a matter of course, an

entire year's seminar to the paragraph-by-paragraph discussion of even a short twenty-page text by Lacan. In this connection, it might be relevant to quote Anthony Wilden's intervention in the exchange following Lacan's 1966 "Of Structure as an Inmixing." Referring to the difficulty in grasping Lacan's presentation, he addresses Lacan by claiming that "you have started at the top (at the most difficult point of your work), and it is very difficult for us to recognize the beginnings of this thought. . . . In my opinion . . . it is absolutely necessary for us to read your works before talking a lot of nonsense" (Lacan 1970, 196).

This process of reading Lacan is conducted with the utmost attention to detail, both because his seminars are a product of an editing exercise (established from a collection of transcripts) and (from a non-French perspective) because of the many problems that arise on account of the translation process. The scholar or trainee, in other words, develops a critical understanding and opinion of the text after a difficult and protracted period of study. It by no means guarantees an understanding that will satisfy or convince—indeed, one may "drop" psychoanalysis altogether after several years of an apparently fruitless struggle. But then again, many may also drop mathematical physics after an equally arduous several-year struggle with that subject.

We conclude that Lacan's style is absolutely consistent with his stated aims and concerns. There is no doubt that one can dispute Lacan's reasons for adopting this particular style, but as these emerge directly out of theoretical, clinical, and ethical concerns, S&B would first have to do a little work. They erect as the sole and unquestioned criterion of assessment a traditionally conceived pedagogical style, often using its absence as evidence that Lacan abused well-established substantive knowledge. The price they pay is heavy. For they do not know who Lacan is beyond the straw man they very entertainingly project. They illustrate perfectly the Lacanian idea that "to understand someone too quickly is to misunderstand her." What they leave unexplained is how Lacan has managed, without lowering the standard of his delivery, not only to be, as S&B put it, extraordinarily influential (1997, 194), at least in

the Franco-Hispanic world, but also, and more importantly, to initiate an array of productive research programs, whether in the realm of child analysis, in Lacanian topology, on the end of analysis, and so on—something that even the IPA, which “excommunicated” Lacan in 1963, is forced to admit more openly today.<sup>4</sup>

### Questions of Substance

Though severely underresearched and deeply unself-reflexive, S&B’s objections to Lacan’s style do give voice to an apparently legitimate fear. Lacan is explicit in giving us the opportunity not to understand him completely so that we may then take on full responsibility in trying to explain him. What is there then to stop him from deploying obscure references to the mathematical sciences in order to prop himself up as Master? What’s stopping Lacan from using his style as a convenient alibi for the spurious use of mathematics, thus feeling not the slightest obligation to justify its connection to psychoanalysis? Should we not, as mathematical scientists, disabuse those poor souls who insist on taking Lacan seriously? So S&B implicitly reason. We thereby move from questions of style to objections more firmly grounded on issues of substance, by which is meant Lacan’s knowledge and use of mathematical science on the one hand, and the alleged irrelevance of Lacan’s mathematics to psychoanalysis on the other.

In their introduction, S&B make the general claim that “in cases of legitimate use, the author needs to have a good understanding of the mathematics he/she is purporting to apply—in particular, there should be no gross mistakes” (1997, 8). Of course, S&B imply that Lacan does not suffer so much from this type of abuse. This becomes clear when their analysis of Lacan is contrasted with their analysis of, say, Kristeva.<sup>5</sup> In their analysis of the former, unlike the latter (39), there is a very clear reluctance to accuse Lacan of outright or persistent mistakes or errors. It is more the case, as S&B put it, that Lacan’s mathematics appear “bizarre” (34), no doubt due

to his admittedly difficult accompanying exegesis. In this regard, “his statements, when they are understandable, are not always false” (34)—indeed, Lacan’s statements are sometimes grudgingly declared “not too bad” (26). Problems arise when the link between his mathematical statements and psychoanalytic theory is unclear.

Even so, there is no doubt that Lacan sometimes confused terms in his discourse, thereby incorrectly relaying the details of mathematical definitions and/or theorems.<sup>6</sup> In the context of a seminar-style delivery perhaps this is to be expected. Given that his recourse to mathematics over twenty-five years was in no way marginal, it is quite remarkable that, given a supposedly “hazy” (4) or “vague” (13, 34) idea of mathematics and science, it could have led to so few readily identifiable mistakes. Either way, however, we do not claim that Lacan’s knowledge of mathematics was faultless. In any case, S&B’s main charge is that Lacan’s *use* of mathematics was misguided and irrelevant to psychoanalysis.

In this regard, it is interesting to note how in the introduction S&B preemptively address themselves to the accusation that they might be examining Lacan’s mathematical statements out of context. One reason S&B provide for exonerating themselves from this accusation is that mathematical concepts have very precise meanings. We have already seen that Lacan suffers from the supposed drawback of not being pedagogical enough. He does not, in other words, explain clearly and separately mathematical concepts on their own terms, at least not at any great length in the texts that S&B refer to in *Intellectual Impostures*. Instead, Lacan jumps straight into the *interpretation* of mathematical symbols *from a psychoanalytic point of view*. This makes it very hard to judge Lacan’s knowledge of mathematics or what he is aiming to do with this knowledge. It then becomes very easy, if one is not familiar with the psychoanalytic context in which Lacan’s mathematical statements appear, to leap to the conclusion that “Lacan does violence to mathematics” (25), or that he tries to impress his audience by throwing at them sophisticated terminology such as “union (in mathematical logic)” (33), or that his appeal to dynamics in mathematical science (Stoke’s theorem) is “particularly shameless” (33), or to confront the statement that gravitation is the

“unconscious of the particle” with wordless astonishment (by way of an exclamation mark) (33).<sup>7</sup>

No doubt S&B’s hostility to Lacan’s use of mathematics is also compounded by their particular understanding of the nature of mathematics. S&B take for granted, for example, that mathematical statements have unique meanings. But this view stems from only one possible perspective on the nature of mathematics. Admittedly, it is intuitively appealing and taps into commonsense ways about how we think of mathematics. But it is based on an underdeveloped analogy with an equally underdeveloped idea of linguistic meaning. It is worth noting, in this respect, that Lacan spent considerable time and effort articulating concepts such as analogy and meaning in relation to much literature on the philosophy of science and mathematics. According to Lacan, mathematics finds itself occupying a privileged locus at the limits of language. In this view, mathematics is essentially meaningless: “The mathematical formalization of signifiers runs counter to meaning. . . . In our times, philosophers of mathematics say ‘it means nothing’ concerning mathematics, even when they are mathematicians themselves, like Russell” (1975, 93). This, after all, is why identical squiggles on a piece of paper may acquire vastly different meanings depending on the domain of their application (and therefore interpretation). The fact that the physicist Richard Feynman (1963) emphasized that quantum mechanics cannot be understood is also relevant in this regard—it simply “works” (117).

An appeal to mathematics and physics might indeed have the effect of fostering uncritical acceptance among those not versed in mathematical science (by, for example, attributing to Lacan’s statements the authority of science in the manner of “name-dropping” [S&B 1997, 13]). This, however, will undoubtedly be the case among those who are unwilling or unable to follow relevant introductory texts. It is not worth denying that a lot of this is going on in academic seminars on Lacan where the study of linguistics and mathematics is not necessarily encouraged or even suggested.

This acknowledgment, however, does not dent the integrity of Lacan’s invocation of mathematics. In their preface S&B

express the following wish (no doubt with tongue firmly lodged in cheek): “Wouldn’t it be nice (for us mathematicians and physicists, that is) . . . if topology had something to do with the human psyche?” (x). Irony, however, does not explain the fact that *professional* mathematicians *are* drawn to the study of Lacanian psychoanalysis; or to explain the many full-text elaborations of relevant mathematical ideas such as Lacanian topology. Indeed, S&B do make reference to “Lacan’s disciples [who] have given full accounts of his *topologie psychanalytique*” (23). What is curiously missing—curious precisely by virtue of its resounding absence—is any commentary as to whether these disciples’ exegetical remarks were at all illuminating in making more explicit Lacan’s mathematical intuitions in relation to psychoanalysis. This would constitute at least one ideal test-case scenario in determining whether Lacan’s mathematical forays can so quickly be dismissed as an unfortunate, even sad, quixotic dream.

Related to the above discussion are the following two claims. First, S&B claim that Lacan’s mathematical “account is [not] original . . . *from a mathematical point of view*” (29; emphasis added). Second, they claim that Lacan’s mathematics “cannot play a fruitful role in any serious psychological analysis” (34). *Prima facie*, of course, these claims carry the risk of dumbfounding the reader. For, she no doubt will ask, is the originality of importing mathematical ideas into psychoanalysis supposed to be judged by the practicing psychoanalytic community or by the mathematical community? The obvious answer to this question seems to render the original claims somewhat moot. But perhaps this move is too quick. Accordingly, we shall now focus in more detail on the second claim, before turning to a closer examination of the first.

In relation to the second claim, it is interesting to note how S&B again anticipate, and attempt to dismiss, an objection that they feel will immediately occur to the reader. Their attempt to deal with this objection is worth pausing to consider in greater detail because of its apparent straightforwardness. S&B admit quite openly, for instance, that “[i]t goes without saying that we are not competent to judge the non-scientific aspects of these authors’ work” (6). But it is precisely because

this admission strikes the reader as “obvious” and unproblematic that we ought to apply some pressure at this exact point. For, surely, such disarming admissions cannot justify substituting dismissal for hard work. Indeed, it is the disarming nature of the claim that should raise alarm bells. For at a purely conceptual level, this claim clearly relies upon an unargued thesis, namely, that it is possible to judge the scientific status of a discipline without reference to the kind of concrete issues thrown up by that particular discipline. In other words, S&B suggest that it is possible to judge the scientific status of psychoanalysis without being familiar with issues and knowledge generated by the psychoanalytic experience.

But would this not be like judging the scientific status of physics without being familiar with the issues and knowledge specific to the discipline of physics? How, for instance, can one judge the pertinence of mathematical ideas (such as group theory or topology) for a particular area of physics (such as elementary particle physics) or psychoanalysis (such as the process of sexualization) if one is not familiar with the issues and debates animating this area, not to mention the development and meaning of relevant physical or psychoanalytic knowledge? In order to judge whether a physicist is properly interpreting a domain of mathematics, one cannot abstain from the experience and knowledge of that field. Why should a psychoanalyst not be accorded a similar respect? How is it possible to judge the pertinence of certain mathematical ideas in an author’s work when one at the same time openly admits that one does not understand the rest of the author’s work (8)? Surely, such a clear-cut separation between Lacan’s mathematics, on one hand, and its productive impact upon psychoanalysis, on the other, is too simplistic.<sup>8</sup>

However, perhaps we can suggest a way in which to make sense of S&B’s first claim that it is possible to judge the originality of psychoanalysis’s use of mathematics “from a mathematical point of view.” And this we can do by again drawing a structural homology with the domain of physics. After all, it is well known that some of the most original mathematics have been invented and perfected as a result of developments in physics. And there is a reason for this, namely,



that physicists are driven to address specific issues that arise in their particular area of study: the physicist's use of mathematics is guided by his or her intuition, an intuition based on his or her familiarity with the particular issues and evidence at stake.

This brings into relief the old dispute between pure and applied mathematicians, allowing us thereby to cast new light on Lacan's use of mathematics. For it is common knowledge that, from the perspective of the "pure" mathematician, the physicist's use of mathematics is often considered "sloppy," to the point of risking its condemnation as outright error. It is often left to the "purists" to sort out the mathematical details. In a homologous way, it is Lacan's intuition (based on extensive psychoanalytic experience and familiarity with the relevant literature) that prompts specific uses of mathematics—something that may result in the invention of a new mathematics that will be suitable to the psychoanalytic domain. The point is that Lacan's forte should be located not so much in the minutiae of mathematical detail but in his powerful intuitive grasp of mathematics and mathematical science generally, thereby offering up fruitful directions for further research in the field of psychoanalysis. And while it is true that Lacan cannot be said to have invented a fully fledged, clearly delimited branch of mathematics, this is currently the focus of research by mathematicians in Lacanian circles.<sup>9</sup> It would be something that could very well justify the title Lacanian topology, for example, insofar as the topology the psychoanalyst relies on involves a domain-specific set of axioms.

At this point, let us discard the critique we have presented thus far against S&B's characterisation of Lacan's knowledge and use of scientific and mathematical ideas. Let us assume for the moment, again for argument's sake, that in order to criticize the use of mathematics in a particular discipline, it is not necessary to possess an overly detailed familiarity with that discipline's problems and body of knowledge. This then brings us to what S&B claim to be their strongest objection to Lacan's use of mathematics (34). In this view, all that is required to judge the pertinence of an author's recourse to mathematics is to identify a conscious and explicit conceptual or empirical

link to that discipline (in this case psychoanalysis) without having to understand its intricate details. *Some* argument must be evident that justifies the relevance. As S&B emphasize, their objection to Lacan's use of mathematics "does not deal primarily with errors, but with the manifest irrelevance of the scientific terminology of the subject supposedly under investigation" (11). More specifically, Lacan's "analogies between psychoanalysis and mathematics are *the most arbitrary imaginable*, and he gives *absolutely no empirical or conceptual justification* for them (*neither here nor elsewhere in his work*)" (34; italics added).

One of S&B's discussions takes place in the context of Lacan's claim that "[i]f one can symbolize the subject by [a] fundamental cut, in the same way one can show that a cut on a torus corresponds to the neurotic subject, and on a cross-cut surface to another sort of mental disease" (1970, 193). S&B wonder what these topological objects have to do with the structure of mental disease (1997, 18). In view of the sweeping statements quoted in the previous paragraph, it will no doubt come as a surprise to find that Lacan spent many seminars (see especially 1961–62) on the relation between topology (including the torus) and neurosis.

But what, the reader may insist, can such things as "union" in mathematical logic or Stoke's theorem possibly have to do with psychoanalysis? What on earth can justify the link between gravitation and the unconscious of a particle or between the square root of -1 and the penis? Even if we accept that S&B have naively attempted to judge Lacan's mathematics independently of the psychoanalytic context he was speaking in, how can one not affirm as plainly obvious that these mathematical concepts are introduced in "the most arbitrary imaginable" (34) way? Why does the link between Lacan's mathematics and psychoanalysis appear so elusive, even nonexistent, to S&B? *This* is what cries out for an explanation.

Lacanian would want to insist that only something as simple as a basic ignorance of Lacan's work can serve to explain the perception of these mathematical concepts as enigmatic. Let us refer again to S&B's discussion of Lacan's topology and its associated concepts of space, boundedness,

closure, cut, etc. S&B's central objection is that "Lacan never explains the relevance of these mathematical concepts for psychoanalysis" (19). And yet, upon further investigation they are forced to admit in a footnote that "the relationship between topology and structure is easy to understand" (20). But, of course, as they also point out, the final connection to psychoanalysis depends upon what one means by "structure."

Only ignorance of the most basic ideas of Lacan's work can make such a question possible. Once one recalls how Lacan's aphorism that "the unconscious is structured like a language" summarizes a huge swath of his teaching, not only is a conceptual link to topology established, its link to psychoanalysis is also readily identifiable. In other words, the study of structure—especially in the context of linguistics—is indispensable, according to Lacan, in any attempt to grasp the workings of the unconscious, and therefore to comprehend the discipline of psychoanalysis. So, without denying the difficulty of following Lacan's commentary, without going beyond a familiarity with the most elementary of Lacan's ideas, the accusation that Lacan's mathematics are irrelevant or arbitrary with respect to psychoanalysis cannot but ring hollow. On their own terms, a conceptual link is readily identifiable, without having to go too deeply into the details of his teaching.

The problem with the question of substance is that S&B would like to oblige Lacan to address them in their own terms, terms whose universality they take for granted. From a Lacanian point of view, S&B assume the position of the big Other, the Subject-Supposed-to-Know of Science. Adopting the position of official spokespersons of Science, they—quite understandably, though inexcusably—take it upon themselves to police the boundaries of their particular (and unargued for) conception of mathematical science, declaring also that the domain-specific knowledge of the appropriating discipline cannot be of any relevance to their accusations of misguidedness.

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### Conclusion

Our verdict is that S&B are guilty of gross intellectual negligence insofar as they systematically misunderstand and distort the research program of Jacques Lacan and its relation to mathematical science. No serious effort is made to give Lacan the benefit of doubt or to engage in scholarly fashion with the literature on this topic, openly admitting that they know next to nothing about psychoanalysis. Had it not been for S&B's link to the scientific establishment—an institution whose authority one tends to accept without question—*Intellectual Impostures* would not have seen the light of day.<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, this is quite a stark position—a position not without its own difficulties. For if we are convinced that S&B—however serious and well-intentioned their motivations—have so seriously misconstrued Lacan, one is left with the following quandary. Should one dignify this debate by issuing a response, a kind of “setting the record straight”? Why not react, as Jacques Derrida (1997) did, with his sardonic quip “le pauvre Sokal,” and leave it at that?

No doubt such a Derridean response will have its effects. Our opinion, however, is that a different sort of intervention here was also important. It was important not because it promised to be intellectually rewarding in a substantive sense. We do not in this essay make any contributions to the understanding of psychoanalysis or philosophy of science. Such an intervention was important because the debate taps into a widespread sentiment characteristic of the current *Zeitgeist*, entailing a kind of reactionary backlash against psychoanalysis and poststructuralism in general.

This backlash is epitomised by a kind of pathological reaction against the likes of Lacan. By pathological here we mean simply symptomatic from the perspective of a polity that imagines it is governed by principles of reasonableness and pluralism. That is to say, by pathology we mean only what you get when dismissive opinions about a person's work are taken seriously even if expressed by those *who admit to their ignorance* regarding that person's discipline, substituting sensationalized irony for intellectual rigor and relying—through mere associa-

tion—on the crutch of the scientific establishment’s institutional authority. The poor citizen who inhabits such a “polity of reasonableness” cannot but be horrified, struggling to offer what can only appear as an impotent response: “It is one thing for someone to disagree with Lacan, or to conclude that Lacan is too difficult to be worth the trouble, or to decide that Lacan is not one’s ‘cup of tea’; it is quite another to go out of one’s way to invoke institutional faith to endorse and encourage cheap entertainment at the expense of authors whose work is not examined in any detail.”

It is clear that S&B’s *Intellectual Impostures* owes its popularity not to any kind of sound scholarship, intellectual integrity, or literary erudition. How then to explain all the fuss surrounding it? Deconstructive commonsense suggests that its popularity comes not so much from the content between its covers as it does from the cultural and academic context in which it appears. We close with a Lacanian hypothesis, suggesting that its success is buoyed up by a satisfaction or enjoyment (*jouissance*) that has at least two sources: (1) the fun poked at French intellectuals who are difficult to understand; and (2) the fun poked at those who poke fun at French intellectuals. It is not so easy to steer clear of these two sources of satisfaction.

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### Notes

1. Of course, we do not want to suggest the existence of a shared set of reasons leading to this shared (op)position.
2. But as Lacan (1989) insists, the claim that psychoanalysis is (or aims to be) scientific should not be conflated with a similar, yet distinct, claim, namely that psychoanalysis is a science, at least in the way modern physics is traditionally considered to be a science.
3. On surface topology, see, for example, Lacan (1961–62). For a discussion of complex numbers, see his seminar of January 10, 1962.
4. An index of such a dialogic opening is to be found in the recent exchange between J.-A. Miller and R. H. Etchegoyen (1996).
5. We do not claim to be sufficiently familiar with Kristeva’s work to pass judgment on her invocation of mathematics. We simply report S&B’s assessment.
6. See, for example, Lacan (1975, 9), where he mistakenly states that an open set is one that excludes its own limits. Indeed, many Lacanians have gone out of their way to point to several such mistakes.

7. In this respect, S&B simply reiterate, by displacing it to the field of mathematical science, the structurally homologous accusations that “Lacan is doing violence to linguistics” (an argument that has often been made vis-à-vis the Lacanian appropriation of Jakobson’s concepts of metaphor and metonymy) or that “Lacan is doing violence to Freud.” On these latter points, see Stavrakakis (1999, 21–22, 57–59).
8. But even if we accept that S&B “do not purport to judge Lacan’s psychoanalysis . . . [limiting themselves to] statements about the mathematical and physical sciences” (11), what are we to make of their attempt to do exactly that, namely, not to judge Lacan’s mathematics *per se* but to insist that his mathematics cannot play any fruitful role in *psychoanalysis* (34)?
9. See, for example, Burgoyne (2000), Darmon (1990), Vappereau (1985), Granon-Lafont (1985, 1990), and Nasio (1979, 1987). As to debates about the status of Lacan’s mathematics *within* the Lacanian school, see Dor (1991).
10. For an example of the power of this volume to influence opinion by virtue of simple association with the scientific establishment, thereby sanctioning a quick dismissal of Lacan’s invocation of mathematical science, see Schwartz (1999, 254–55).

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