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Vital Signs: Nature, Culture, Psychoanalysis (review)

Janet L. Lucas

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terior or external to the Symbolic. On the other hand, due to worries that such a description risks reducing Lacan to a kind of developmental vitalist, Verhaeghe occasionally insists that the Real is strictly internal to the Symbolic. The Real doesn't pre-exist the Symbolic, but is produced immanently out of the internal impasses of the symbolic order (this should lead to some skepticism about the notion of the Real being utterly unrepresentable). Given just how heavily Verhaeghe relies upon this particular Lacanian register for explanatory purposes, sorting out its nuances is crucial for this text.

The fifth and sixth essays, "Subject and Body" and "Mind your Body," seek to shed light on a Lacanian theory of embodiment. What is the position of the body in Lacan's thought? "Subject and Body" does a nice job of charting the course of Lacan's engagement with the notion of embodiment as it evolves over the course of his teaching. Verhaeghe unveils some surprising consistencies connecting the early period of the "mirror stage" and the later seminars of the 1970s. In "Mind your Body," Verhaeghe argues that the late Lacan aims at overcoming Descartes, at superseding the dualisms associated with the modern subject. Verhaeghe claims that Lacan dispenses with dualism. This sixth essay is a bit disappointing in two ways. First, it pays absolutely no attention to the myriad references in Lacan's work to Descartes. Verhaeghe is silent as regards Lacan's meticulous examinations of the (often positive) relation between

the *Cogito* and his own theory of subjectivity. Second, isn't the fundamental opposition between the Real and the Symbolic a dichotomy of sorts? Verhaeghe, while maintaining that a Lacanian stance rejects dualistic models, doesn't explain why his own arguments are not themselves reliant upon just such models.

In terms of style and presentation, Verhaeghe's English is awkward at times, and the text is rife with grammatical errors and misspellings. Also, parts of the book are repetitive. For example, the second essay ("From Impossibility to Inability") duplicates a discussion contained in *Does the Woman Exist?*. Another symptom of repetitiveness is that Verhaeghe cites the same few passages from Lacan's work again and again.

Nonetheless, Verhaeghe displays an impressive mastery of Lacan's corpus. Furthermore, he deserves to be praised for the boldness and cogency of his departure from the hackneyed and questionable appeal to sexuality as the inexplicable substratum of the unconscious. *Beyond Gender* is definitely representative of the current state of the art in Lacanian theory.

—Adrian Johnston

Shepherdson, Charles.
Vital Signs: Nature,
Culture, Psychoanalysis.
New York: Routledge,
2000.

A glance at the endorsements of Shepherdson's *Vital Signs* immediately affirms the significance of

this book. Judith Butler states categorically that "Shepherdson tackles some of the most difficult and pressing problems in psychoanalysis and feminism"; Joan Copjec proclaims "[t]his book is a revolutionary examination of French feminism"; and Leo Goldberger, editor of *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* asserts that "Charles Shepherdson brilliantly illuminates the theoretical specificity of psychoanalysis as a unique knowledge base, focusing on topics of particular interest within feminist theory and clinical practice." After reading Shepherdson's book, it became clear that such striking endorsements were no exaggeration; *Vital Signs* provides an extraordinarily lucid account of Irigaray and Kristeva. And the final chapter on Foucault demonstrates that while Lacan and Foucault are not in *every sense* compatible, they are not incompatible (as is so often argued).

Shepherdson maintains that the "distorted reception" these influential theorists receive results from their interpretation "through an inappropriate paradigm." This paradigm, as Shepherdson argues, is the all too familiar distinction between "the social construction of gender" and a "biological reductionist" approach. More succinctly, he contends that within this paradigm both the scholarly and clinical contribution of psychoanalytic theory as it relates to feminist theory—particularly French feminism—is virtually lost. Rather, he argues that psychoanalysis must be understood on its *own terms*—that it is only by

letting go of the familiar terms of reference (social construction and biological reductionism) that one can appreciate the genuine contribution (and potential) of psychoanalysis to French feminism. Shepherdson makes this clear in the introductory chapter, stating, "My principal claim is that the contemporary French revision of Freud has been interpreted through an inappropriate paradigm, which has not only obscured the theoretical specificity of psychoanalysis, but also distorted the reception of a number of influential European writers who are grounded in this emerging tradition" (2).

Vital Signs is comprised of five chapters: "Hysteria and the Question of Woman"; "Maternity and Femininity"; "The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex"; "From *Oedipus Rex* to *Totem and Taboo*: Lacan's Revision of the Paternal Metaphor"; and "History and the Real: Foucault with Lacan." In the first chapter Shepherdson engages the theoretical work of Irigaray and points out that what binds the generations is the *transmission of the signifier*. Put another way, the project of psychoanalysis as it relates to feminism (and in particular French feminism) is the "*relation between the symbol and the organism*" (18, emphasis in original). As such, psychoanalysis addresses the question of sex from a *qualitatively* different perspective.

Shepherdson also addresses the somewhat "thorny" issue of the "feminine imaginary"—i.e., the notion of a prehistoric essence of "woman—an essence that has

been repressed, and through its return is somehow capable of challenging and undermining the patriarchy. Shepherdson argues, on the contrary, that "woman" and/or gender become identifiable only to the extent that it *undergoes symbolization*. Thus women "cannot take refuge ... in the romanticism of origins that would seek an unrepressed zone of prehistoric femininity" (51). It is in repression itself, i.e., the engagement of the symbol with the flesh, that women come into being—albeit fragmentarily. As Shepherdson stresses,

the kinds of reservations expressed by some readers are due to a drastic misconception, according to which the biological body, or the so-called feminine imaginary, are abstracted from this set of historical and discursive problems, and then substantialized as autonomous entities ("the body" or "the imaginary"), with no sense of the cognitive models in which these terms are produced, discursive and historically precise models that Irigaray is *analyzing*. This premature isolation and substantializing of her terms produces a situation in which Irigaray's readers almost absurdly characterize her as endorsing precisely the kinds of notions Irigaray herself regards as symptomatic and in need of criticism. (54)

In Chapter 2, "Maternity and Femininity," Shepherdson engages the common misconceptions of Kristeva's writing—specifically,

the association of the mother with the imaginary realm. He approaches this (in part) by closely analyzing the crucial distinction between the terms "mother" and "woman." He further argues that what others have viewed as chaotic and incoherent theoretical conceptions are, on the contrary, "the clearest evidence of an impasse" (56). In other words, Shepherdson contends that it is *not* that Kristeva's work is incoherent, but that this (superficial) *appearance* "show[s] us the precise point at which her terminology has been neglected, thereby giving rise not to mere confusion, but to the production of opposite readings—what psychoanalysis might call "conflicting" readings" (56).

Again, Shepherdson demonstrates that it is not a matter of biology or social construction, but rather, the relation to the signifier, i.e., to symbolic *representation*. As such (and again), without representation, there would be no possibility to return to an idyllic prehistoric "feminine" past. Specifically, he argues that "the semiotic only appears from *within* the symbolic order, as a disturbance from within, a moment of rupture that has no autonomy" and that "the semiotic is not automatically a domain of maternal or feminine identity, but a domain in which sexual difference is not yet established, and consequently it cannot be gendered without *returning* to a pregiven sexual difference (based on common sense and anatomy) that avoids the very question Kristeva's categories seek to address" (60–61). Simply put, *sexual difference does not ap-*

pear in the semiotic; rather, it is only distinguished through the symbolic order. It is important, however, not to conflate the semiotic with the imaginary; it is a distinct category, though one “concerned with speech.”

Shepherdson argues that the pre-Oedipal mother “is not only distinct from the woman, but also not sexually marked, whenever she is viewed as belonging to the semiotic domain” (61). As such, it is

necessary to make a distinction between two forms of maternity, i.e., the archaic maternal image which *cannot* be understood in terms of sexual difference—the mother of the semiotic—and the mother as *sexually marked*, i.e., the mother of the symbolic order. Thus, it is not only the famous “mirror stage,” then, that gives the child its body, establishing the cut that distinguishes the body from the world, but also this discourse of love, through which the body (as distinct from the “organism”) is born. (67)

The mother thus becomes critically important in the child’s move from the imaginary to the symbolic, i.e., “by giving voice to her desire”—a desire that is beyond the child, a desire that the child cannot determine or satisfy—the mother “redirects” her desire elsewhere. The child is thus freed from “remaining dedicated to being the only object of maternal desire” (69–70). Specifically, the mother’s desire is directed toward the father—however not as a

“real” father, but rather as a symbolic *substitution*, or in Shepherdson’s terms, “a metaphor, a purely symbolic operation, a substitution by which the ‘void’ or ‘enigma’ of maternal desire is given a ‘sense,’ a symbolic orientation beyond the child, thereby allowing the child itself to find a place beyond what would otherwise be the overwhelming abyss of maternal desire” (70).

Furthering the discourse of sexual difference and gender, in “The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex,” Shepherdson draws the reader’s attention to the distinction between the transvestite and the transsexual. He indicates that the argument in general circulation is that

if the *transvestite* is able to play with gender identity through the masquerade of clothing, demonstrating the “symbolic” character of identity through the mimetic adoption of behavior, the *transsexual* would assume the even more radical position of altering the body itself, changing the very material of the flesh, as if the body itself were another “constructed” phenomenon, subject to manipulation (displacement and substitution) in the same way that clothing is, as if it too were “fashionable.” There would be a sort of continuum linking the transvestite and the transsexual, as two examples of the “construction of gender,” one at the level of clothing, the other at the level of anatomy. (85)

Shepherdson, however, points out that the two terms—the transvestite and the transsexual—reflect radically *different* positions. He introduces this distinction by reiterating the crucial point that “sexuality is not governed by *the laws of nature*, or reducible to an instinctual force; on the contrary, the sexual drive departs from the natural pathway of instinct precisely insofar as the drive is *subject to representation*.” The body is thus constructed *not on the image*, but rather “with the *first substitution*, the inscription of the void” (98). It is the *uncertainty* this void introduces, the *presence of an absence* that inaugurates the subject into the symbolic order. Without this uncertainty, this lack, the subject is structurally similar to the psychotic. Drawing on Millot, Shepherdson argues that there are

two forms of identification, one oriented in relation to sexual difference (identification as “a man” or “a woman,” with all the ambiguity, uncertainty, and symbolic mobility this entails), and another oriented by a *simulacrum* of sexual difference, a fantasy of “otherness” that in fact amounts to the elimination of sexual difference, its replacement by the fantasy of a sex that would not be lacking. (106)

While the transvestite already has a body subject to performance (and by extension, uncertainty, lack, and thus the possibility of play), the transsexual is, in a sense, *without* a body. In other words,

the transsexual “lives a time of suspension in which the body has not yet been constituted” (111). Shepherdson further argues that in treating the body as a purely biological organism (ignoring that the body is established in relation to the signifier), medical science not only participates in the transsexual *demand* (versus *desire*), but establishes through various means (e.g., questionnaires) what a “man” and a “woman” *are*. Hence they *collaborate* in the *certainty* of the transsexual demand. Indeed, again drawing on Millot, Shepherdson contends that

the subjects who maintain this relation of fantasy to the “other sex” as not lacking, have their subjective consistency precisely on the basis of this relation, this quasi-symbolic link, which is also a relation to alterity, difference, and lack. The consequence is decisive: for these particular subjects, an operation would deprive them of the one *point of reference* in relation to which they have established a subjective consistency. For them, an operation eliminates this point of reference, replacing a *relation to the other* (a symbolic link), however precarious, with a *condition of being* that is outside the

symbolic, so that surgery, far from liberating them for a future, will on the contrary imprison them once and for all in a position of foreclosure that has been kept at bay only by this fantasy of the other sex. For these subjects, surgery will precipitate a psychotic break. (109–110)

In the following chapter, “From *Oedipus Rex* to *Totem and Taboo*,” Shepherdson further elaborates the means of establishing a symbolic point of reference *beyond the child*, i.e., via the paternal metaphor. Here Shepherdson makes an essential distinction between the “*imaginary father*”—i.e., “the figure who threatens, prohibits, castrates, or frustrates the child” (135, emphasis mine)—and the *symbolic father*. The symbolic father is consistent with the paternal metaphor. Crucial to this argument is that the symbolic father is the *dead* father, the father that is negated and replaced—*sublated*—via the symbol. This is the essential distinction between the father as prohibitive, i.e., a “real” father (the father of the imaginary), and the *paternal function*, which is *entirely* symbolic. Shepherdson asserts that “in formulating the paternal metaphor, Lacan distinguishes between the imaginary and symbolic father, insisting

that the crucial aspect of paternity is symbolic, and that certain clinical issues can be described as a collapse of the symbolic and imaginary, or in terms of a deficient distinction between them” (136).

The final chapter, “History and the Real: Foucault with Lacan,” draws a parallel between these (seemingly) disparate theorists. This parallel consists in both the *formative* function of the law (versus prohibitive), and the “excess” this law produces. Shepherdson contends that the law as such “no longer serves as a juridical or prohibitive limit, but as a force, an imperious agency that does not simply limit, but *produces an excess*” (179). In making this parallel, however, Shepherdson is careful to point out that Foucault and Lacan do not coincide in every respect; in fact, he argues that there are many significant differences between these theorists. Shepherdson *does*, however, credit the discourse of Foucault to the extent that the genealogical point of view he espouses is potentially useful in revealing that the debate between nature and culture—the very discourses that as Shepherdson stressed from the start—obscure the specificity of psychoanalysis, and in particular as it is applied by the French feminist tradition.

—Janet L. Lucas