



Formations of the Unconscious: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V

Jacques Lacan

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When I decided to explore the question of *Witz*, or wit, with you this year, I undertook a small enquiry. It will come as no surprise at all that I began by questioning a poet. This is a poet who introduces the dimension of an especially playful wit that runs through his work, as much in his prose as in more poetic forms, and which he brings into play even when he happens to be talking about mathematics, for he is also a mathematician. I am referring to Raymond Queneau. While we were exchanging our first remarks on the matter he told me a joke. It's a joke about exams, about the university entrance exams, if you like. We have a candidate and we have an examiner.

– “Tell me”, says the examiner, “about the battle of Marengo.”

The candidate pauses for a moment, with a dreamy air. “The battle of Marengo...? Bodies everywhere! It's terrible... Wounded everywhere! It's horrible...”

“But”, says the examiner, “Can't you tell me anything more precise about this battle?”

The candidate thinks for a moment, then replies, “A horse rears up on its hind legs and whinnies.”

The examiner, surprised, seeks to test him a little further and says, “In that case, can you tell me about the battle of Fontenoy?”

“Oh!” says the candidate, “a horse rears up on its hind legs and whinnies.” The examiner, strategically, asked the candidate to talk about the battle of Trafalgar. The candidate replies, “Dead everywhere! A blood bath.... Wounded everywhere! Hundreds of them....”

“But my good man, can't you tell me anything more precise about this battle?”

“A horse...”

“Excuse me, I would have you note that the battle of Trafalgar is a naval battle.”

“Whoah! Whoah!” says the candidate. “Back up, Neddy!” The value of this joke is, to my mind, that it enables us to decompose, I believe, what is at stake in a witticism.

(Extract from Chapter VI)

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