

# Linguistic Anxiety and the Deconstruction of the Self in the Realm of the Ridiculous by J.J Phillips

Contributed by J.J. Phillips

Ludicrous Memoirs\* Linguistic Anxiety and the Deconstruction of the Self in the Realm of the Ridiculous J.J. Phillips «Ce qui n'est pas clair, n'est pas français»  
 a person with linguistic anxiety is one in whom the deliberate, effortful production of language involves anticipation of an error, with the imminence of linguistic failure serving as the threat. ...[a]nticipation is psychologically linked to anxiety and also plays an important role in the allostatic system..."1 Dear "Doctor" who?"2 When I wrote you to inquire you had any knowledge of Josef Breuer's American descendants, you responded by asking why I was interested in them. This is why: Some years ago, because intractable depression and an acute and abiding sense of worthlessness had poisoned my life and was destroying it, I decided to seek out a psychiatrist who had a background in neuropathology and some familiarity with temporal lobe epilepsy. I thought I might have TLE and if that were the case, my debilitating depression could well be connected to this condition. I thought that TLE might also account for a number of other anomalies and quirks of my singularly ill-starred existence, including aspects of cognition and language. I found myself drawn to a particular psychiatrist because, in addition to his neuropathological expertise and other credentials, he listed cognitive enhancement as a medical interest, something I'd been exploring for a number of years. He was also a psychoanalyst, but I didn't seek him out to be analyzed. After an initial period of encouragement and progress, things seemed to stagnate, but nothing transpired that I consciously detected as irrevocably irremediable or even seriously out of whack (though to my disappointment, he deflected my questions about the possibility of a TLE connection) until, at the end of what proved to be my last session with him, while we were standing in a hallway, within earshot of his office staff, seemingly out of the blue he launched into a malicious personal attack on me "essentially telling me that I was an imbecile and an exceedingly unconvincing bullshitter. Taking some of my own words but yanking them out of context, he threw them back at me to savage me. He dismissed my description of an extremely protracted and involved musical hallucination, which I thought could be an expression of TLE, as a preposterous shaggy dog story: nothing in the literature anywhere near that protracted or involved. (Preposterous to him, but it actually happened and it was sublime.) He declared my accomplishments flukes, my writing nothing more than "throwing a bunch of words around on paper." (Should I believe him "or Henry Miller, Carolyn Kizer, other well-respected writers, the professors who have used my writing in their classes and written critical papers on it?)" He said that I wasn't nearly as depressed as I claimed and that I needed to forget about returning to college, which I wanted very much to do, once I gained control over my depression. What I needed to do, he informed me, was go out and get a regular job (also insinuating that I was malingering, though I wasn't in need of a job and was paying him out of pocket). When I asked why shouldn't I try to return to school (two distinguished professors at UC had invited me to publish term papers I'd written), he produced a letter I'd sent him in which I made the comment that it seemed to me our sessions had become somewhat "laconique," by way of making a pun on Jacques Lacan's surname and the French word "laconique." This pun had to do both with Lacan's "short sessions" and what my sessions with this shrink had more or less devolved into: they'd become increasingly brief and infrequent, and he'd become increasingly terse (laconic) and distracted; which wasn't necessarily to make a value judgment but to express, I thought discreetly, the state of affairs as I was experiencing them, especially since I wasn't seeing him to be analyzed, à la Lacan or traditionally. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was just then experiencing another aspect of the laconique, the imperious and the vituperative. He pounced on this coinage to accuse me of not knowing how to spell or use English correctly and coherently; and anyway, whatever I was trying to say, I was speaking in pretentious and affected, fake Frenchified-sounding language "thus compounding my solecism." In this instance, correct or incorrect, moronic or not, mine was a conscious and deliberate coinage. This doctor was the one who accused me of committing a vulgar error in two languages, thus it was incumbent on him to demonstrate how I'd erred so that I could learn from my mistake "not simply declare my words meaningless by fiat; but he couldn't be bothered with such niceties." Again, when I tried to explain, he insisted that I made no sense. When in frustration I said "Lacan you know, Jacques Lacan," he impatiently claimed that he couldn't understand me and had no idea what or whom I was referring to. Since I'd studied French (though long ago), had read Lacan's and some of Lacan's other writings, and had engaged in a number of conversations about Lacan with various people over the years, among them an acquaintance, a Francophone MFCC, who'd never drawn a blank when I spoke the name, it couldn't have been my pronunciation unless I'd suddenly lost control of my faculty of speech and didn't know it. When in desperation I took a pen and paper and wrote down the name "Jacques Lacan," the doctor grew even more annoyed and again professed ignorance. No matter what efforts I made, he resolutely refused to acknowledge this name and kept dismissively insisting that I wasn't making any sense and was revealing my pathetic ignorance, not only of French but of English. My continued impertinence was more than he could bear. He had no more time to waste on the likes of me. As he turned on his heel, the corners of his white coat flapped. He left me standing there stunned and mute "to pay my bill for being professionally vilified and go home." Even if I didn't know how to spell or use the English word "laconic," staging this elaborate fit of pique to ridicule me in this manner, and within earshot of his staff, wasn't "just" a gratuitously cruel and outrageous way to treat anyone, especially someone in a vulnerable psychological state, who'd come to him seeking help. His petulant refusal even to attempt to understand what I was getting at (not to mention refusing to understand me when I was making sense) and casually degrading me as he did, was completely discombobulating and deeply destructive psychologically and neurobiologically. And he got off on it. I wasn't in training to be an analyst "where I get the impression that such practices are frequently de rigueur, part of the rites of passage; though I also learn that for some, sadistic degradation

and mind-fucking patients is a clinical style, which could perhaps be termed Zilboorgian, after Gregory Zilboorg, George Gershwin's analyst. The lodestone of my internal compass instantaneously demagnetized. The fear that I'm not making sense, and that even if I was, my words could summarily be declared gibberish at any time without examination, at the whim of any jerk with an engorged but brittle ego and a sadistic streak, stoked my already considerable anxiety regarding my basic linguistic and cognitive competency, and profoundly destabilized my sense of self to the degree that I was stupefied. When I left his office, I hardly knew which direction to take and my otoliths were so rattled that I couldn't make my way down the street in a straight line or walk without stumbling. It's a wonder I found my way home without being hit by a car. This was much more than an attack on my psyche and a semi-public humiliation: he was fucking with some critical areas of my brain, and it was a calculated attack. I couldn't have been made to feel more stupid and worthless, and he knew it. He set me up and sucker-punched me, and I walked out of his office disoriented and reeling just as sure as if he'd actually slammed me in the solar plexus with his fist. The fact is that I sometimes have experienced what to me are alarming cognitive and linguistic fluctuations, even disintegration and destruction, to a greater or lesser degree, with consequent destabilization and destruction of my identity; most frequently triggered or exacerbated by external factors on the order of what I describe here. Though my powers of thought and expression are always in need of correction, development and strengthening, and circumscribed by my inherent cognitive and linguistic deficits if I actually don't make sense, that's one thing; but whether by force or by subtler forms of coercion, it's quite another for someone in the throes of his or her own cognitive-linguistic anxiety and lust to dominate, to act as high priest or priestess of a jealous language g-d of the gap and turn me into my own g\*d ambulatory Tower of Babel,<sup>4</sup> or strike me mute. I'm the first to admit that I'm no Einstein, and that my general understanding of language/s, including my native language, leaves much to be desired, as these words attest. I grew up in a multi-ethnic, multilingual neighborhood, also diverse as to class. My mother was a first grade teacher and a reading specialist. My paternal grandfather had been a college professor, later an attorney, and knew several languages, including classical Latin, Greek, and Japanese. I read omnivorously as a child, pored over all kinds of dictionaries, and studied Japanese at an afternoon gakuen for three years beginning when I was nine. Even before that, I used to pilfer my Catholic altar-boy friends' Mass response cards so that I, too, a little atheist girl with a jones for the Tridentine Rite, could learn and intone that sonorous magic word jazz. All this notwithstanding (and perhaps in some way because of it), cognitive and linguistic anxiety and instability has been with me for about as long as I can remember, and I didn't even begin to get an abstract grasp of English grammar or of any other language until, as an adult, I studied Arabic at UC Berkeley and on fellowships in Tunisia; though prior to taking up Arabic, in addition to Japanese, I'd studied French, and Hausa. Later on I took classes in Hebrew, Canaanite dialects and Northwest Semitic paleography, did a bit of Akkadian and Latin, and learned some Greek paleography working on the Tebtunis papyri. However, unlike some, if I can't use it, I lose it. Now all that is for naught and even my ability to express myself in English is under siege; it's all I can do simply to try to hang on to what language and capacity for thought that I still have but to no purpose, instead of being able to use and develop those faculties. This fragility of identity and sense of impending linguistic/cognitive collapse was nothing new; nor was the trashing of my language and cognitive capabilities. I can't speak for others, but I've come to understand that my sense of identity is so bound up with my ability to use language that when my ability to make (produce and understand) syntactical sense through language in the ways that I need to is withdrawn, assailed, or otherwise compromised for capricious reasons when I'm forced to think and express myself in ways that are inimical to me in order to control and dominate; my sense of self disintegrates along with my language and my thought processes. By the same token, when I'm able, using my own thought processes and words, at least to try to make logically and materially cogent syntactical connections, which, even in my flights of fancy (including my dreams and hallucinations),<sup>5</sup> are or can be developed into concepts that are objectively as well as subjectively meaningful, my sense of self coheres. Syntax is the vehicle which orders, binds, constructs, and is the bearer of sense. More than once when, because of this sort of imposition, all language becomes foreign to me, I've been compelled to spend/waste much time busting my brain engaging in remedial work, which ultimately proves to be of a ridiculously Sisyphean nature, simply trying to reconstruct my basic sense of syntax (something beyond grammar) and ability to recognize words as something more than pure and opaque lexical artifacts, and associate them in meaningful ways: thereby recursively reconstituting the syntax of my/self and the semantics of my existence through language and ratiocination. And for me, whatever else is contributory, psychological, cultural, environmental, what have you, the neurobiological processes that produce this mentation are fundamental, and thus fundamentally inextricable from my/self. Of course this doesn't constitute the totality of my thought processes or my identity, but it is a prime factor; necessary, but not sufficient. Along with certain other requisites, my ability not simply to feel but to be fully human, fully alive to the world and to myself, necessarily depends on my ability to think as freely, and also as logically and as rationally as I can again, even when I take flights of mind and to use language, from hieratic to demotic, orally and in writing, as best I can in the ways that I need to, in order to express myself as accurately and meaningfully as possible, objectively as well as subjectively. Whether or not one gives any degree of credence to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which I cite here in a purely subjective, idiosyncratic sense, speaking only of my idiolect and mind, I know ineluctably that my thought processes are dependent on my language and my language is dependent on my thought processes; and further, this reciprocal dynamic nexus is a biological process intrinsic to my quiddity. Without it "there's no there there," just a husk. It's as simple as that. This is why it is essential for me to be immersed in a rich and challenging linguistic, intellectual, and experiential environment, not mired in the dead zone that constitutes my present existence, where at best, with rare exception, Simple English for native speakers, 99 Cents Only Store English and Newspeak, is the stultifying, purely utilitarian coin of the realm; conveying simple ideas devoid of complexity and nuance, not to mention verve and elegance; deviation from which in one way or another is met with disapprobation, bovine incomprehension, derision, seen as anti-social behavior even regarded as symptomatic of psychopathology, as is the impulse to compose more than a grocery list (as in "Patient engaged in writing behavior";<sup>6</sup> patient engaged in

"throwing a bunch of words around on paper").<sup>7</sup> This debased, impoverished, deracinated language infests and pollutes my brain. It is pernicious. This verbal plaque clogs my neural pathways and other cerebral structures crucial for deliberative and critical thought and expression at every level, as well as suppressing even more basic mental considerations such as the capacity for curiosity and for imagination, both of which underlie any sort of creative intentionality (not restricted to artistic expression), verbal or not, abstract or not. It doesn't take a brain scientist to understand that. At the level of actual expression, I'm reminded of *Cymothoa exigua*,<sup>7</sup> the transsexual tongue-eating fish louse, which parasitizes the tongues of fish. The isopod finds a likely host, attaches itself to that organ, destroys it and supplants the functions of the former tongue; while the fish, apparently not otherwise incommoded, swims on its fishy way, now with the tongue of a louse. Since the good doctor was a psychoanalyst, had specialty certificates up the wazoo, had been on the faculty of a major university hospital, and was someone who presented himself professionally at the cutting-edge of all things neuropsychiatric, there's no way in the world I'd believe that he didn't recognize the name Jacques Lacan, this particular "Name-of-the-Father," this particular deity in the psychoanalytic pantheon. Pardon my French, but to me, this was, par excellence, a Lacanian moment; and whether he got the pun and didn't like it, or genuinely thought that I didn't know how to spell or use the English "laconic," he was so fixated on abasing me and portraying me as a fool and a cretin that he had to turn himself into an even bigger fool by exhibiting this selective situational receptive anomia and alexia regarding a seminal figure in psychoanalysis. This exposed the fundamental "con," in both the English and French slang senses of the word, of his tendentious, anti-semantic de(con)struction of my internal sense of self, for he was indeed a *pauvre con* perpetrating a con, here a kind of Gaslighting. His Freudian slip was showing. Ooh IÃ IÃ IÃ IÃ IÃ IÃ IÃ IÃ I don't pretend to understand Lacan (or Derrida<sup>8</sup>). I find my own tentative, shifting, often oppositional, frequently evanescent meanings; and I can read them only in translation and when I'm stoned. Don't ask me why, but I derive a certain perverse pleasure from reading their perverse, impenetrable texts; and because of this, the ridiculous Lacanian/Derridean/Freudian irony of the situation became inescapable. This could/should have been a droll scene from a postmodern farce about psychoanalysis, but it was happening to me in real life and I was utterly (pun intended) abased, and profoundly destabilized existentially and linguistically "and both are integrally connected neurobiologically, I think, in this instance." Time passed. Things went from bad to worse, until sometime later, my life having deconstructed yet again, having fallen into complete ruin, never having regained any positive sense of self and self-worth, never having returned to college, now destitute, seething with self-loathing, unfit to work even at a "regular job" and well on my way to becoming a homeless derelict "no redemptive narrative here" my devolution markedly accelerated by this shrink's "diagnosis"; in an attempt to gain belated insight into and control over these linguistic and cognitive decompositions, still trying to determine whether they could have a neurological basis as opposed to being "purely" and hopelessly psychiatric or attributed to some other equally invidious postulation, I came to read Freud's monograph on aphasia (admittedly without much comprehension, but I found it intriguing nonetheless). Freud dedicated the monograph to Josef Breuer, and all at once it dawned on me that the patronymic of this infernal shrink I'd seen was identical to that of the dedicatee but for one altered vowel. (Another psychoanalytic surname, another accursed vowel.) Again I saw a wickedly demented Derridean/Lacanian/Freudian pun in this onomastic similarity, charged and elaborated in my mind by this shrink's factitious aphasia and my own aphasia-like lapses, which are a feature of my cognitive-linguistic meltdowns. I couldn't but wonder, unlikely though it was, there could be a consanguineous connection between the two men, obscured by the variant vowel, so I began to investigate the possibility, and I've been investigating in fits and starts ever since. I've come to realize that the answer to my question about consanguinity is probably negative and that I probably won't even be able to establish the negative, which would at least put the question to rest, though it wouldn't be the neat genealogical connection my ideal wacko cosmic joke narrative demands. However, I do consider this shrink to be a direct descendant through the occult line of Breuer and Anna O.'s phantom child. In the meantime, the search itself has taken on a life of its own: one thing led to another and another. It has ranged well beyond its original aim and led me to discover a number of other surprising things, which, just like this particular farce, and the farce that my life has become, come into being by way of goofy chains of circumstance: loopy and bizarre coincidences that are wacko cosmic jokes "and usually the jokes are on me." ("And the god laughed seven times CHA CHA CHA CHA CHA CHA CHA").<sup>9</sup> I hope this explains my interest in Josef Breuer's American descendants. Notes \* "Ludicrous Memoirs." A memoir by Aristodemus mentioned in the *Deipnosophists* by Athenaeus. 1 From "Language as a Stressor in Aphasia," Dalia Cahana-Amitay, PhD, Martin L. Albert, MD, PhD, Sung-Bom Pyun, MD, PhD, Andrew Westwood, MD, Theodore Jenkins, MA, Sarah Wolford, BA, and Mallory Finley, BA. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3372975/>. 2 "Doctor "who?" From "Real Love in an Imaginary Wagon" by Anne Sexton; written to her psychiatrist, Martin Orne. 3 Some years before I went to this doctor, I brought myself out of a nasty, paralyzing depression by shutting myself in my house for about a month and reading %crits obsessively. I didn't emerge happy or cured "but I emerged, dazed and with a far more profound cynicism than I already possessed." 4 The biblical story of the Tower of Babel, over which much ink has been spilled throughout the ages, irrespective of any other vexed linguistic (or theo-linguistic) issues it raises, is relevant here because it is certainly one of the oldest, if not the oldest, explicit documented expression of the use of language as an instrument of social control, specifically addressing ways in which the restriction, and destruction of language is used to divide, stratify, marginalize, condemn, deny access to knowledge and technologies, and kill the basic human capacity for free thought and expression, not to mention indiscriminately killing people in the process. To make this observation is not to advocate for a universal language. 5 I learned long division in a dream; so far, not astrophysics or Avestan. In my extended musical hallucination, for well over a week, from the instant I awoke until I dropped off to sleep, I "heard" with audiophile clarity, the most exquisite and original classical instrumental music, which proceeded stylistically in a fairly chronological progression from early music to atonal, but for one song by a Zulu choir. Years later, I learned of the music generator at UC Santa Cruz, which uses algorithms to generate unique music in the mode of various composers. When I heard some

of the music, it was as if I was re-visiting my hallucination; but, of course, I thought my compositions much more rich and grand. If I'd only been able to capture them, there would have been an entirely new and parallel canon of Western classical music and one new addition to Zulu choir music. The Rosenhan Experiment "On Being Sane in Insane Places,"

[http://web.archive.org/web/20041117175255/http://web.cocc.edu/lminorevans/on\\_being\\_sane\\_in\\_insane\\_places.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20041117175255/http://web.cocc.edu/lminorevans/on_being_sane_in_insane_places.htm).  
<http://dailyparasite.blogspot.com/2010/01/january-26-cymothoa-exigua.html>.  
 Of course, one could explicate the ridiculous but exceedingly destructive contretemps that is the subject of this essay from any number of perspectives, but for me the crux of it all lies in one of Jacques Derrida's etymological tropes (which directly relates to note 2), so I'll let Derrida do my deriding and deconstructing, and let him have the last word, the last pun and hurrah. I find this quote in Reading Derrida Reading Joyce by Alan Roughley, via Google Books: "Punning on the word paronomasia and the Greek para-nomos, Derrida suggests that puns may be para nomos, or 'against the law', and that 'the pun must be morally condemned and as such proscribed, for the pun signals some malice...a perverse tendency to transgress the laws of society'." Even if this psychiatrist/psychoanalyst considered me completely stupid and fatuous, and even if that were true, I suspect that I sure as heck had unwittingly transgressed against something deeply ingrained in his psyche, his brain, and perhaps certain other parts of his body, concerning his sense of established order, law, dynamics of power; and here it had to do with his fetishization of this domain of language/knowledge. My little pun that turned on the slip of a vowel constituted a blasphemy which could be atoned for only by attacking those very cognitive and linguistic faculties that allowed me to make the pun, the destruction of which, for me, meant the concomitant deconstruction of my/self. Whatever his motives, whether I made sense or not, he was driven to get his rocks off destroying me, even if he had to make a jackass of himself in the process.  
 The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Hans Dieter Betz, Ed. (Chicago, U. Chicago Press, 1992), p. 176, line 162.