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Paul Kingsbury
University of Kentucky

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Paul Kingsbury

Book Review

Mathelin, Catherine

*Lacanian Psychotherapy with Children:
The Broken Piano.*

Trans. Susan Fairfield

New York: The Other Press, 1999.

Catherine Mathelin's book, *Lacanian Psychotherapy with Children: The Broken Piano* is published in a series called the "Lacanian Clinical Field" edited by Judith Feher Guerwich. In the preface to Mathelin's book, Guerwich mourns the loss of a vibrant scholarly dialogue between academic and psychoanalytic communities since the inventive works of Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. For Guerwich, the emergence of structural linguistics and, more recently, the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have meant that founding psychoanalytical texts are often read more scrupulously by literary critics and social scientists than by psychoanalysts. Guerwich believes this fervent "intellectual revolution" with the attendant requirements of disciplinary discourses has derailed the project of Jacques Lacan, failing to adequately situate his teachings as a *praxis* devoted to reworking the meaning and function of psychoanalysis as a cure for psychic distress. Furthermore, these analyses are why Lacan's work is often perceived as being too removed from clinical reality by the psychoanalytical community.

Mathelin is one of Paris's leading child analysts and her book is also one of the first English translations of Lacanian child analysis. It pre-

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Theory, University of
Kentucky, Lexington, KY

sents Lacan's teachings in the clinical context for which they were originally intended, as the dynamic between the analyst and analysand. This approach sheds new light on the creative and interpretative powers of Lacan's brand of psychoanalysis that many academics have usually found either so appealing or contentious. Echoing Lacan's teachings, Mathelin argues that the analyst "must be alert to remaining alive and creative, ready to let themselves be surprised, educated, unsettled" (17) in order to recognize that "each child has his own theory, and it is from him that we get it" (18). Mathelin's book consists of fourteen cases that illustrate how the crippling distress of children can be understood as symptomatic of a "living lie" configured in the imposing silences of unresolved parental conflict. Working with physicians and pediatricians, Mathelin aims to provide a space for children and parents to examine illness, confront desire, and "risk" expressing horror, in order to envision a different life. Realizing these goals can be extremely challenging. Desperate parents often use psychoanalysis as a last resort imploring Mathelin to "'ask any price you want. My son doesn't talk. So do whatever you want as long as you can make him talk, and then let's not talk about it any more'" (11).

Part one, "The First Meeting with the Analyst," includes cases such as "Arthur and the Secret of the Sea Elephants," and "Margot and the Magic Skin Eruptions." These cases are riveting and beautifully written. They combine the moving life histories of children and parents, arresting session transcripts, and Mathelin's deft handling of a Lacanian theoretical framework. Part two, "From the First Session to the Analytic Treatment," features children's drawings, a crucial non-verbal device that allows handicapped children to explore their anguish and desires. In "Xénophon, or the Name-Crosses," we encounter drawings that illustrate the six year long journey of a mute four year old boy diagnosed with autism, burdened with the trauma of a mother unable to come to terms with a handicapped brother and death of her sister. After six years in Mathelin's care, Xénophon overcomes chronic phobias and learns to speak, read, and write despite his mother's attempt of suicide during a time "when her son was beginning to live his own life in a boy's body, and to risk speech" (99). In the final part of the book, "The Clever Baby," Mathelin provides fascinating insights of her role as an analyst at work on a neonatal unit, an increasingly common practice in a hospital's pediatric service. Amidst the challenges of postpartum depression, test-tube babies, anonymous donors, and frozen sperm, Mathelin argues that the analyst can provide additional patient care remaining outside traditional

medical discourse but as part of the team. In this way, the analyst can offer a "heart that is a heart that wishes to live, while the doctors are forcing the heart that is a piece of meat to continue to beat" (169). Mathelin's vigilance about the ethics of combining theory and practice as the psychoanalytical treatment of children and parents is part of the book's poignancy and potential to forge new dialogues between academic and psychoanalytical communities.

In reading Mathelin's depiction of Lacanian psychotherapy's interventions into the lives of debilitated parents and disabled children, perhaps the pervasive academic fantasy of a notorious symptom called "Lacan" that cries out an impossible theoretical obscurantism marked by patriarchal and phallogocentric excesses could be traversed and re-evaluated.