Jacques Lacan

Science and Truth

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Typescript of the opening lesson of the seminar I gave during the school year 1965-66 at the École Normale Supérieure on The Object of Psychoanalysis, as a lecturer for the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Section 6).


Might I say that I established the status of the subject in psychoanalysis last year? I went so far as to develop a structure which accounts for the state of splitting or Spaltung at the point at which the psychoanalyst detects it in his praxis.

He detects it on a more or less daily basis. He accepts it as a given, since the mere recognition of the unconscious suffices to ground it, and since it also submerges him, so to speak, by its constant manifestation.

But for him to know the state of his praxis, or to simply direct it in keeping with what is accessible to him, it is not enough for him to take this division as an empirical fact, or even for the empirical fact to become a paradox. A certain reduction is necessary which is sometimes long in completion, but always decisive in the birth of a science; such a reduction truly constitutes its object. Epistemology takes upon itself the job of defining this in each and every case, without having proven, at least to my mind, equal to the task.

For I don’t believe that epistemology has fully accounted in this way for the decisive change which, with physics paving the way, founded Science in the modern sense, a sense which posits itself as absolute. Science’s position is justified by a radical change in the tempo of its progress, by the galloping form of its inmixing in our world, and by the chain reactions that characterize what one might
call the expansions of its energetics. In this situation what seems radical to me is the modification in our subject position (position de sujet), in both senses of the term, for that position is inaugural therein, and science continues to strengthen it ever further.

Koyré is my guide here, and it is rather widely recognized that he is still unrecognized (mconnu). I didn’t thus just make an immediate pronouncement concerning psychoanalysis’ vocation as a science. But it might have been noticed that I took as my guiding light last year a certain moment of the subject that I consider to be an essential correlate of science, an historically defined moment, the strict repeatability in experience of which perhaps remains to be determined; the moment Descartes inaugurates that goes by the name of cogito.

This correlate, as a moment, is the aftermath (défile) of a rejection (rejet) of all knowledge, but is nevertheless claimed to establish for the subject a certain anchoring in being; I sustain that this rejection of all knowledge constitutes the subject of science in its definition, this latter term to be understood in the sense of a “narrow doorway.”

This light did not guide me in vain, for it led me at year end to formulate the experienced division of the subject as a division between knowledge and truth, and to accompany it with a toposological model, the Möbius strip; this strip leads one to realize that the division where these two terms join together is not to be derived from a difference in origin.

Whoever lends credence to the technique for reading Freud I had to impose when the task at hand was simply one of restituting each of his terms in their synchronic relations, will be able to back up from the Ichspaltung (to which death put an end), to the articles on fetishism (1927) and the loss of reality (1924), to observe that the doctrinal revamping known as the second toposophy introduced the terms ich, Über-ich and even Es without certifying them as apparatuses, introducing instead a reworking of experience in accordance with a dialectic best defined by what structuralism has since allowed us to elaborate logically: namely the subject — the subject caught up in a constituting division.

The reality principle accordingly loses the discordance that supposedly characterizes it in Freud’s work when, due to a juxtaposition of texts, it is split between a notion of reality that includes psychic reality and another that makes psychic reality the correlate of the perception-consciousness system.
with depths (with an “s”), i.e. a subject constituted by a relationship — said to be archetypal — to knowledge; the said relationship was not reduced to that exclusively allowed by modern science, being no other than the one I defined last year as punctual and vanishing; that relationship to knowledge which, since its historically inaugural moment, has retained the name “cogito.”

It is due to this indubitable origin, blatant in all of Freud’s work, and to the lesson he left us as head of a school, that Marxism is unable — and I don’t believe any Marxist has seriously contested this point — to attack his ideas on the basis of their historical extraction [ses appartenance historiques].

I have in mind here his affiliation with the society of the double monarchy, Freud remaining bounded within Judaizing limits in his spiritual aversions; and with the capitalist order which conditioned his political agnosticism (who among you will write an essay worthy of Lamennais5 on indifference in political matters?); and I would add: his espousal of bourgeois ethics, for which the dignity of his life inspires us a respect that prevents us from realizing that his work has attained a stature — otherwise than in its misconceptions and confusions — comparable to that of the only men of truth we still have: revolutionary agitators and writers whose style leaves its mark on language (I’m thinking of someone in particular) and the thought that renews being of which we have the precursor.

You no doubt sense my haste here to dispense with the many precautions taken to remind psychoanalysts of their least debatable certainties.

I will nevertheless have to rehash them, even if it entails a certain heavy-handedness.

To say that the subject upon which6 we operate in psychoanalysis can only be the subject of science may seem paradoxical. It is nevertheless here that a demarcation must be made, failing which everything gets mixed up and a type of dishonesty sets in that is elsewhere called objective; but it is people’s lack of audacity and failure to locate the object that backfires. One is always responsible for one’s position as subject. Those who would like to may call that terrorism. I have the right to be amused, for it is not in a setting where doctrine is fair game for bargaining7 that I should fear obfuscating anyone by formulating that guiltless errors are the most unforgivable of all.

The psychoanalyst’s position leaves no escape, excluding as it does the tenderness of the beautiful soul. If it is still a paradox to even say so, it is perhaps once again the same paradox.

Whatever the case may be, I posit that every attempt, or even temptation, in which current theory persists in being a relapse, further incarnating the subject, amounts to errancy — ever fruitful in error, but as such faulty [fauteuil].8 The same is true when the subject is incarnated in man, himself nothing in such theories but a child.

For man is then taken to be a primitive, which falsifies the whole primary process, just as children are taken to be underdeveloped men, which masks the truth about what happens during childhood that is original. In short, what Claude Lévi-Strauss has denounced as the archaic illusion9 is inevitable in psychoanalysis if one is not steadfast in one’s theory regarding the principle I just mentioned: but one subject is accepted as such in psychoanalysis, the one that can make it scientific.

Which suffices to indicate that I do not believe that, in this respect, psychoanalysis lays claim to any special privileges.

There is no such thing as a science of man, and this should be understood along the lines of “there’s no such thing as an insignificant savings”.10 There is no such thing as a science of man because science’s man does not exist, only its subject does.

My lifelong repugnance for the appellation “human sciences” is well known; it strikes me as the very call of servitude.

But it is also fact that the term is incorrect [faux], except in the case of psychology which has discovered a way to outlive itself by providing services to the technocracy — sliding, as it were (as a sensational article by Canguilhem concludes, with truly Swiftian humor), like a toboggan from the Pantheon to the Prefecture of Police11. Psychology thus meets with failure at the level of the selection of creators in science, and of the encouragement and backing of research.

It is easy to see that none of the other sciences in this class constitutes an anthropology. Consider Lévy-Bruhl and Piaget. Their concepts — so-called ”prelogical” mentality and supposedly “egocentric” thought or discourse — refer only to the assumed mentality, presupposed thought, and actual discourse of science’s subject (not science’s man). The upshot being that too many people now think that limits (mental, certainly), weakness of thought (presumable), and actual discourse (a bit tricky in the case of the man of science: someone rather different) lend weight to these constructions,
whereas the latter, while not entirely devoid of objectivity, no doubt, are relevant to science only insofar as they contribute nothing about the magician, for example, and little about magic; and though they contribute something about the traces of these latter, the traces are of but the magician or magic, as it was not Lévy-Bruhl who traced them. The reckoning in Piaget’s case is still more unfavorable: he contributes nothing about children and little about their development, missing as he does what is essential therein, and, as concerns the logic he displays (Piaget’s child, that is) in his responses to statements whose series constitutes the test he undergoes, Piaget comes up with nothing other than the very same logic that governs the enunciation of these statements in fulfillment of the goals of the test, i.e. the logic of the man of science, in which the logician, I won’t deny it, in this case maintains his importance.

In sciences that are far more valuable, though their status stand in need of reevaluation, one finds that prescription of the archaic illusion (an illusion we can generalize with the expression ‘psychologization of the subject’) in no way fetters fecundity.

A case in point is game theory, better called strategy, which takes advantage of the thoroughly calculable character of a subject strictly reduced to the formula for a matrix of signifying combinations.

The case of linguistics is subtler as it must take into account the difference between the enunciated and enunciation, i.e. the impact [incidence] of the subject who speaks as such (and not of the subject of science). That is why linguistics revolves around something else, namely the battery of signifiers, whose prevalence over effects of signification must be ensured. Here too antinomies appear, scaled to the extremism of the position adopted regarding object selection. What can be said is that the elaboration of the effects of language is very far-reaching, as one can construct a poetics that owes no more to references to the mind of the poet, than to its incarnation.¹²

It is in the realm of logic that various indications appear of the theory’s refraction concerning the subject of science, differing as they appear in the lexicon, syntactic morphemes and sentential syntax.

Hence the theoretical differences between linguists such as Jakobson, Hjelsmlev and Chomsky.

It is logic which here serves as the subject’s navel, logic insofar as it is in no way linked to the contingencies of a grammar.

The formalization of grammar must literally circumvent this logic if it is to be successfully carried out, but the circumventing movement is inscribed in this very operation.

I will indicate further along how modern logic is situated (cf. the third example below). It is indisputably the strictly determined consequence of an attempt to suture the subject of science, and Gödel’s last theorem shows that this attempt fails, meaning that the subject in question remains the correlate of science, but an antinomical correlate since science turns out to be defined by the deadlocked endeavor to suture the subject.

One should descry therein the crucially important mark of structuralism. It ushers into every ‘human science’ it conquers a very particular mode of the subject for which the only index I have found is topological, i.e., the generating sign of the Möbius strip that I call the “internal eight.”¹³

The subject is, as it were, internally excluded from its object [en exclusion interne à son objet].¹⁴

The allegiance to such a structuralism manifested in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ work can be accredited to my thesis, assuming I confine myself for the moment to its periphery. It is clear, notwithstanding, that he highly valorizes the scope of the natural classifications savages invent — especially their knowledge of fauna and flora, Lévi-Strauss highlighting the fact that it surpasses our own — precisely because he can argue for a certain recuperation occurring in chemistry, owing to a physics of sapid and odorous qualities, otherwise stated, to a correlation between perceptual values and molecular architecture arrived at by means of combinatorial analysis, i.e. by the mathematics of the signer, as has been the case in every science to date.

Knowledge is thus clearly separated here from the subject along the correct lines, entailing no postulation of insufficient development, which, incidentally, would not be easy to substantiate.

What’s more, when Lévi-Strauss, after having extracted the combinatorial latent in the elementary structures of kinship, reports that a certain informer, to use the ethnologist’s term, is himself fully capable of drawing the Lévi-Straussian graph, what is he telling us if not that, here again, he extracts the subject from the combinatorial in question — the subject who on the graph has no other existence than the denotation ego?¹⁵

In demonstrating the power of the apparatus constituted by the mytheme in analyzing mythogenic transformations, which at this stage seem to become established [s’instituer] in a synchrony
simplified by their reversibility, Lévi-Strauss does not presume to deliver up to us the nature of the myth-maker [le mythant]. He simply knows here that his informer, while able to write the raw and the cooked — though lacking the genius whose mark has been left there — cannot do it, however, without checking at the cloakroom, i.e. at the Museum of Man, a certain number of operative instruments, otherwise known as rituals, which consecrate his subject existence as myth making; in checking them, what in another grammar would be called his assent is rejected from the field of structure. (Cf. Newman’s Grammar of Assent, somewhat powerful, albeit written for execrable purposes — I will perhaps be led to mention it again).16

The object of mythodogy thus is not linked to a development or stasis of the responsible subject. It is not concerned with this latter subject but rather with the subject of science. And the closer the informer himself is to reducing his presence to that of the subject of science, the more correctly is the collecting [of myth versions] carried out.

I believe, however, that Lévi-Strauss would have reservations about the introduction, during the collection of documents, of a psychoanalytically inspired approach, a sustained collection of dreams for example, with all that would entail by way of transference relationships. But why would he, when I maintain to him that our praxis, far from altering the subject of science (the only one about which he can or wants to know anything), is entitled to intervene only when it tends towards this subject’s satisfactory realization in the very field that interests Lévi-Strauss?

Is that to say that a non-saturated but calculable subject would be the object that, in accordance with the forms of classical epistemology, subsumes the body of sciences one might call “conjectural” — which I myself have opposed to the term “human sciences”?17

I believe it to be all the less indicated as this subject is part of the conjuncture constituting science as a whole.

The opposition between exact sciences and conjectural sciences is no longer sustainable once conjecture is subject to exact calculation (using probability) and exactness is merely grounded in a formalism separating axioms from laws for grouping symbols.

We cannot, however, be satisfied with the simple observation that a particular formalism is more or less successful, for in the last analysis we must motivate its trappings — trappings that have not arisen miraculously, but that have instead undergone renewal after crises which, since a certain unswerving direction seems to have been taken in science, have been terribly effective.

Let me reiterate that there is something in the status of science’s object which seems to me to have remained unelucidated since the birth of science.

And let me remind you that while, certainly, to now pose the question of psychoanalysis’ object is to reraise a question I broached upon first mounting this rostrum18 — that of psychoanalysis’ position inside or outside of science — I have also indicated that the question probably cannot be answered without the object’s status in science as such being thereby modified.

The object of psychoanalysis (I’m laying down my cards now — you may have already guessed my hand, given this talk of the object) is no other than what I have already advanced about the function played therein by object a. Is knowledge of object a thus the science of psychoanalysis?

That is precisely the equation which must be avoided, as object a must be inserted, as we already know, into the division of the subject by which the psychoanalytic field is quite specifically structured — that is the point with which I resumed my seminar today.

That was why it was important to promote firstly, and as a fact to be distinguished from the question of knowing whether psychoanalysis is a science (i.e. whether its field is scientific), the fact that its praxis implies no other subject than that of science.

What you’ll be so kind as to permit me to conjure up, with an image like that of the opening up of the subject in psychoanalysis, must be reduced to this great an extent if we are to grasp what the subject receives therein by way of truth.

One senses that this is a tortuously circuitous process akin to taming. Object a is not peaceful, or rather one should say, could it be that it doesn’t leave you in peace?19 Least of all those of you who have the most to do with it: psychoanalysts, who are thus those I electively try to target with my discourse. It’s true. The scheduled starting point of our meeting today, being the one at which I left you last year — that of the subject’s division between truth and knowledge — is a familiar point to them. It’s the one to which Freud urges them with his call “Wo es war, soll es werden”, which I retranslate, once again, to accentuate it here, as: “where it was, there must I, as subject, come to be”.20

Now I demonstrate to analysts the strangeness of this point in taking it from behind, which consists here rather in bringing them
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back to its front. How could what was, forever awaiting me in the guise of an obscure being, come to be totalized by a line which can only be drawn by dividing that being still more clearly from what I can know of it?

It is not only in theory that the question of double inscription arises, having given rise to a perplexity whereupon my students Laplanche and Leclaire could have read its solution in their own split over how to approach the problem.11 The solution is not, in any case, of the Gestaltist type; nor is it to be sought on a plate where one finds Napoleon’s head inscribed in a tree. It is quite simply to be found in the fact that an inscription does not etch into the same side of the parchment when it comes from the printing-plate of truth and when it comes from that of knowledge.

The fact that these inscriptions commingle [se mèlent] could have been simply accounted for by topology, there being at hand’s reach a surface in which front and back are situated so as to join up at all points.

This goes much further than an intuitive schema, for it is in so to speak wrapping around the analyst in his being that this topology can grasp him.

That is why, though the analyst shifts topology to another plane, it can only be in a breaking up of a puzzle which must, in any case, be reduced to this basis.

Which is why it is not vain to restate that in the test of writing I am thinking: “therefore I am”,22 with quotes around the second clause, the notion is legible that thought only grounds being by knotting itself in speech where every operation goes right to the essence of language.

While Heidegger gives us the expression “cogito sum” somewhere23, serving his own purposes, it must be remarked that he algebrizes the phrase, and we can justifiably highlight its remainder: “cogito ergo”; it is evident therein that nothing gets said [rien ne se parle] without leaning on the cause.

Now this cause is what is covered by the “soll ich”, the “must I” of Freud’s expression, which, in reversing [rewersen] its meaning, brings forth the paradox of an imperative that presses me to assume my own causality.

Yet I am not the cause of myself, though not for being the creature. The case is precisely the same for the Creator. I refer you on this point to Augustine and the prologue of his De Trinitate.

The Spinozian self-cause can take on the name of God. Still it is some-Thing Else [Autre Chose]. But let’s leave that to the two words

—['Autre' and ‘Chose’] I will only play on by stipulating that the Spinozian self-cause is also some-Thing other [Chose autre] than the Whole, and that this God, being other in this way, is nevertheless not the God of pantheism.

In the ego Descartes accentuates through the superfluousness of its function in certain of his Latin texts (a subject of exegesis I leave here to the specialists), one must grasp the point at which it continues to be what it presents itself as: dependent on the god of religion. A curious scrap24 of ergo, the ego is bound up with 25 this God. Descartes’ approach is, singularly, one of safeguarding the ego from the deceitful God, and thereby safeguarding the ego’s partner — going so far as to endow the latter with the exorbitant privilege of guaranteeing the eternal truths only insofar as he is their creator.

The lot shared by the ego and God emphasized here is the same as that rendingly proffered by Descartes’ contemporary, Angelus Silesius, in his mystical adjurations, upon which he imposes the form of distichs.26

Those who follow my work would do well to recall here the use I made of the cherubinic wanderer’s aculatory prayers27, taking them up within the trajectory of the introduction to narcissism I was working on, following my own bent, the year of my commentary on President Schreber.28

Now one can be a bit shaky29 at this junction30, that’s the beauty of it, but one has to shake it just right [il faut y boire juste].

And first of all by realizing that the two aspects don’t fit together at this junction [ne s’y embourbon pas].

That’s why I’ll take the liberty of letting it go a moment, so as to begin anew with the audacity I adopted at one time, but which I will only repeat insofar as I recall it to mind. For otherwise I would be repeating it twice, whereupon one could call it his repetita in the true sense of this expression which does not mean simple repetition.

I’m referring to “The Freudian Thing,” a talk the text of which is that of a second talk, deriving as it does from the occasion upon which I repeated it. It was pronounced the first time (may this insistence, in its triviality, make you aware of the temporal imbalance [contrepied] repetition engenders) in a Vienna where my biographer will situate my first encounter with what must be called the lowest depths of the psychoanalytic world, and above all with a bigwig whose level of culture and responsibility corresponded to that required of a body guard31 — but it didn’t much matter to me.
it was idle chatter. I had simply wanted it to be in Vienna that my voice be heard in homage for the centennial of Freud's birth, not so as to mark the site of a deserted locus, but to mark that other site my discourse is now closing in on [cerne].

It is well known that I already took for granted at that time, as others do now, that the way opened up by Freud has no other meaning than the one I have made my own, namely that the unconscious is language. Thus did the inspiration strike me, seeing in Freud's way an allegorical figure strangely come alive, and the nudity donned by she32 who arises from the well quivering with a new skin, to lend her a voice — this gesture in a sense playfully echoing Saint-Just's challenge whereby he sent forth to heaven an avowal, enshrined by the assembled audience, of being nothing more than that which turns to dust, "and which speaks to you," he added.

"I, the truth, am speaking..."33 and the prosopopea continues. Think about the unnameable thing which, by virtue of its ability to pronounce these words, would go right to the being of language — if we are to hear them as they must be pronounced: in horror.

But everyone reads into the unveiling what he can. To its credit let us chalk up the muffled — though no less derisory — dramatism of the tempo at the end of this text, which you'll find in Evolution psychiatrique, 1956, v. 1, by the title "La Cieuee freudienne."

I don't believe I owed the rather cool reception my audience gave me, upon the repeated delivery of the talk this text reproduces, to that same horror people might have felt. While willing to acknowledge what they considered to be its obligatory value, their deafness proved to be quite peculiar.

It is not that the thing (the "Thing" in the title) shocked them — at any rate not as much as it shocked some of my fellow helmsmen back then, piloting the raft upon which, through their doing, I patiently bed-fellowed ten long years (for the narcissistic sustenance of our shipwrecked companions) with Jaspers understanding and vacuous personalism, while we worked like mad to keep ourselves from all being tainted by the liberal heart-to-heart. "Thing is not a pretty word," someone told me verbatim; "doesn't it simply ruin our quest for the ultimate in the unity of psychology where one obviously wouldn't dream of 'thingifying,' fit who can you trust?35 We thought you were in the avant-garde of progress, comrade."

One doesn't see oneself as one is, and even less so when one approaches oneself wearing philosophical masks.

But let's leave that aside. To realize the full extent of the misunderstanding, as it arose in my audience at that time, over an issue of some consequence, I will take up a point which came to light at more or less the same moment, and which one might find touching because of the enthusiasm it supposes: "Why," someone set the question rolling, and the concern is still in the air, "doesn't he say the truth about the truth?" [le vrai sur le vrai].

This proves just how vain my apology and prosopopea were.

To lend my voice to support those intolerable words, "I, the truth, am speaking..." goes beyond allegory. Which simply means everything that can be said of the truth, of the only truth: namely that there is no such thing as a meta-language (an assertion made so as to situate all of logical positivism), no language being able to say the truth about the truth, since the truth is grounded in the fact that it speaks, and that it has no other means with which to do so.

That is precisely why the unconscious which speaks the truth about the truth is structured like a language, and why I, in so teaching, speak the truth about Freud who knew how to let the truth — going by the name of the "unconscious" — speak.

This lack of truth about the truth, necessitating as it does all the traps meta-language — as sham and logic — falls into36, is the true place of Unverdrängung, i.e. of primal repression which draws towards it every other repression — not to mention the other rhetorical effects it necessitates that we can recognize but by means of the subject of science.

And that is why we use other means to come to terms with it.37 But it is of the utmost importance that these means be unable to let out [flargir] this subject. Their advantage lies in no doubt going right to what is hidden from him. But there is no other truth about the truth that can cover over this sore spot than proper names, Freud's or my own — unless one stoops to old wives' tales with which to grate away at [rasuler] henceforth infaceable testimony: a truth whose horrible face everyone is fated to refuse, or even crush when it is unrefusable, i.e. when one is a psychoanalyst, under that millstone I've occasionally used as a metaphor to remind people, via another mouthpiece, that stones too know how to scream when need be.

People will thus perhaps consider me justified in not having found the question, "Why doesn't he say...?" terribly touching, coming as it did from someone whose workaday role in a truth agency's offices made his naiveté doubtful, and in having hence-
being; otherwise stated, it forgets the dimension of truth that psychoanalysis seriously puts to work.

I must, however, be more precise. It is widely known that physical and mathematical theory — after every crisis that is resolved in a form for which the term “generalized theory” can in no way be taken to mean “a shift to generality” — often maintain what they generalize in its position in the preceding structure. That is not my point here. My concern is the toll [drame], the subjective toll that each of these crises takes on the learned [savant]. It takes its victims, and nothing allows us to say that their destiny can be inscribed in the Oedipal myth. Let us say that the subject is not often studied. J.R. Mayer, Cantor — well I’m not going to furnish a list of first-rate tragedies [drames], leading at times to the point of madness; the names of certain of our contemporaries, in whose cases I consider exemplary the tragedy of what is happening in psychoanalysis, would soon have to be added to the list. I posit, moreover, that this tragedy cannot itself be brought within Oedipus without throwing this latter into question.

You see the program that is being sketched out here. It is not about to be realized. I even consider it to be rather blocked.

I am broaching it carefully, and for today I ask you to see yourselves in the reflected light of such an approach.

Which is to say that we are going to bring that light to bear on other fields than psychoanalysis that lay claim to truth.

It must be said that to the subject of science, magic and religion — the two positions of this order that are distinct from science, so much so that they have been situated in relation to science, as a false or lesser science in the case of magic, and as going beyond its limits, or even in a truth-conflict with science in the case of religion — are mere will-o’-the-wisps, but not to the suffering subject with whom we deal.

Will it be said: “He’s coming to it now. What is the suffering subject if not the one from whom our status derives? and what right do your intellectualizations give you to him?”

In response, I will start off with something I came across in the work of a philosopher recently awarded full academic honors. According to him, “The truth of pain is pain itself”. Leaving this matter for today to the realm he explores, I will come back to it to explain how phenomenology serves as a pretext for the counter-truth and to explain the latter’s status.
As for religion, I will simply indicate the same structural approach and, just as summarily, that this outline is founded in an opposition between structural traits.

Is it possible to hope that religion will take on a more clear-cut status in science? I ask this because for some time now strange philosophers have been giving the flimsiest definition of the relations between science and religion, primarily taking them to be deployed in the same world, religion thus having an all-encompassing position therein.

On this delicate point, about which certain people would want me to adopt analytic neutrality, I promote the principle that befriending everyone is an inadequate policy for maintaining intact the position from which one must operate.

In religion, the putting into play of the truth as cause by the subject — the religious subject, that is — described earlier is taken up in a completely different operation. An analysis on the basis of the subject of science necessarily leads one to bring out in religion mechanisms that are familiar to us from obsessional neurosis. Freud perceived them in a flash that gives them an import surpassing all traditional criticism. The intent to measure religion against obsessional neurosis is in no way incommensurate.

If one cannot begin with remarks such as this — that the function fulfilled by revelation in religion translates as a negation [dénégation] of the truth as cause, i.e. revelation negates [dénier] what grounds the subject who maintains himself therein as a concerned party — then there is little chance of giving the so-called history of religions any limits, in other words any rigor.

Let us say that a religious person leaves responsibility for the cause to God, but thereby bars his own access to truth. Thus he is led to place the cause of his desire in God's hands, and that is the true object of the sacrifice. His demand is submitted to the supposed desire of a God who must henceforth be seduced. The game of love starts in that way.

Religious people thus confer upon truth the status of guilt. The upshot being a distrust of knowledge, most evident in the cases of those Church Fathers who proved to be the best reasoners.

Truth in religion is related to [renvoyée à so-called “eschatological” ends], which is to say that truth appears only as final cause, in the sense that it is deferred [reportée à] to an end-of-the-world judgement.

Hence the obscurantist stench which permeates all scientific uses of finality.
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I’ve noted in passing how much we have yet to learn about the structure of the subject’s relationship to truth as cause from the writings of the Fathers, and even from the first conciliar decisions. The rationalism organizing theological thought is in no way a question of fancy, as the platitude would have it.

If there is fantasy therein, it is in the most rigorous sense of the institution of a real which covers over the truth.

The fact that Christian truth had to formulate the untenable notion of a Three and One God does not strike me as inaccessible to scientific investigation. On this point, ecclesiastical power adapts remarkably well to a certain discouragement of thought.

Before accentuating the impasses of such a mystery, it is worthwhile reflecting upon the necessity of this mystery’s articulation; thought must be measured against this necessity.

The question must be broached at the level at which dogma lapses into heresy — and the question of the Filioque seem to me to allow of explanation in topological terms.

Structural apprehension must be primary therein; it alone permits an accurate assessment of the function of images. De Trinitate here has all the characteristics of a theoretical work and we can take it as a model.

Were this not the case, I would advise my students to expose themselves to a sixteenth-century tapestry awaiting them in the foyer of the Mobilier National, on display for another month or two, that forces itself upon one’s gaze.

The Three People, represented in an absolute identity of form, perfectly at ease talking amongst themselves on the fresh banks of Creation, are quite simply anxiety-provoking.

And what is hidden by such a well-made machine, when it confronts the couple, Adam and Eve, in the flower of their sin, is certainly of the sort to be proposed as a mental exercise on human relationships, ordinarily imagined to never exceed duality.

But my audience should first become versed in Augustine...

I seem to have thus only defined characteristics of religions from the Jewish tradition. They are no doubt helpful in showing us the interest thereof — and I am insensible at having had to drop my project of relating the function of the Name-of-the-Father to the study of the Bible.

The fact remains that the key lies in a definition of the relation of the subject to truth.

I believe I can say that insofar as Claude Lévi-Strauss conceives of Buddhism as a religion of the generalized subject, i.e. involving an

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Newsletter of the Freudian Field

indefinitely variable stopping down of the truth as cause, he flatters this utopia in believing that it concords with the universal reign of Marxism in society.

Which is perhaps to make too little of the exigencies of the subject of science, and to lend too much credence to the emergence in theory of a doctrine of the transcendence of matter.

Oecumenicalism only seems to have a chance if it is grounded in an appeal to the feeble-minded.

As concerns science, I cannot say what seems to me to be the structure of its relations to the truth as cause, for our progress this year shall contribute to an understanding of this point.

I will broach the topic with the strange remark that our science’s prodigious fecundity is to be examined in relation to the fact, sustaining science, that science doesn’t want-to-know-anything about the truth as cause.

You may recognize therein my formula for Verwerfung or foreclosure, which forms here a closed series with Verdrängung, repression, and Verneinung, negation, whose function in magic and religion I have indicated in passing.

What I have said of the relations of Verwerfung to psychosis, especially as Verwerfung of the Name-of-the-Father, is apparently at odds here with this attempt at structural situation [repérage].

If one remarks, however, that a successful paranoia might just as well seem to constitute the closure of science — assuming psycho-analysis were called upon to represent science — and if, moreover, one acknowledges that psychoanalysis is essentially what brings the Name-of-the-Father back into scientific examination, one comes upon the same apparent deadlock; but one has the feeling that this very deadlock spurs on progress, and that one can see the chasm that seemed to create an obstacle therein coming undone.

The current state of the drama of psychoanalysis’ birth, and the ruse that hides therein by beguiling [à se jouer de] writers’ conscious ruses, should perhaps be taken into account here, for I was not the one who came up with the expression “successful paranoia”.

I shall certainly have to indicate that the effect [incidence] of the truth as cause in science must needs be recognized in its guise as formal cause.

But that will be as to shed light on the fact that psychoanalysis instead emphasizes the guise of material cause, a fact that qualifies its originality in science.

This material cause is truly the form of impact [incidence] of the signifier that I define therein.
Jacques Lacan

The signifier is defined by psychoanalysis as acting first of all as if it were separate from its signification. Here we see the literal character trait specific to the copulatory signifier, the phallus, when — arising outside of the limits of the subject's biological maturation — it is effectively (im)printed; it is unable, however, to be the sign representing the partner's sexed being [sexé étant], i.e. his or her biological sign; recall, in this connection, my formulas differentiating the signifier from the sign.

It suffices to say in passing that in psychoanalysis, history constitutes a different dimension than development — and it is an aberration to try to reduce it to the latter. History unfolds only in going against the rhythm of development — a point from which history as science should perhaps learn a lesson, if it expects to escape the ever-present clutches of a providential conception of its course.

In short, we once again come upon the subject of the signifier as I discussed it last year. Conveyed [véhicule] by a signifier in its relation to another signifier, the subject is to be as rigorously distinguished from the biological individual as from any psychological evolution subsumable under the subject of understanding.

In minimal terms, that is the function I grant language in theory. It seems to me compatible with historical materialism, the latter having left this point unaddressed. Perhaps the theory of object a will also find its place therein.

As we shall see, this theory is necessary to a correct integration of the function — from the standpoint of knowledge and the subject — of truth as cause.

You might have glimpsed in passing in the four modes of the cause's refraction just surveyed here, an analogous nominal schema and the same number of modes as in Aristotle's physics.

It's no accident, as his physics bears marks of a logicism that still retains the savor and sapience of an original grammaticism:

Τόσα τῶν ἀριθμῶν τὸ διὰ τὴν περιέλησιν.

Will it seem valid to us that the cause may remain exactly as many-sided in polymerizing?

It is not the sole goal of this exploration to afford you an elegant hold on frameworks which in and of themselves escape our jurisdiction: magic, religion, and even science itself.

My concern is also to remind you that as subjects of psychoanalytic science, you must resist the temptation of each of these relations to truth as cause.

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But not in the way in which you are at first likely to understand this.

Magic tempts you only insofar as you project its characteristics onto the subject with which you are dealing — in order to psychologize, i.e. misrecognize, it.

So-called magical thought — always attributed to someone else — is not a stigma with which you can label the other. It is just as valid for your fellow man as for yourself within the most common limits, being at the root of even the slightest of commandment's effects.

To be more explicit, recourse to magical thought explains nothing. What must be explained is its efficiency.

As for religion, it should rather serve us as a model not to be followed, instituting as it does a social hierarchy wherein the tradition of a certain relation to truth as cause is preserved.

Simulation of the Catholic Church, reproduced whenever its relation to truth as cause spills over into the social realm, is particularly grotesque in a certain International Psycho-analytical, owing to the condition it imposes upon communication.

Need it be said that in science, as opposed to magic and religion, knowledge is communicated?

It must be stressed that this is not merely because it is usually done, but because the logical form given this knowledge includes a mode of communication which sutures the subject knowledge implies.

That is the main problem raised by communication in psychoanalysis. The first obstacle to its scientific value is that the relation to truth as cause, in its material guises, has remained neglected by the circle of its elaborators.

Shall I conclude in returning to the point with which I began today: the division of the subject? This point constitutes a knot.

Let us recall that Freud unites the knot in his discussion of the lack of the mother's penis, where the nature of the phallus is revealed. He tells us that the subject divides here regarding reality, seeing an abyss opening up therein against which he protects himself with a phobia, and which he at the same time covers over with a surface upon which he erects a fetish, i.e. the existence of the penis maintained albeit displaced.

Let us, on the one hand, extract the (no) [par-de] from the (no-penis) [par-de-penis], to be bracketed out [à mettre entre parenthèses], and transfer it to the no-knowledge [par-de-savoir] that is the hesitation step [par-hésitation] of neurosis.
Let us, on the other hand, recognize the subject's efficacy in the gnomon he erects, a gnomon that constantly indicates truth's site to him.

Revealing that the phallus itself is nothing but the site of lack it indicates in the subject.

This is the same index that directs me to the path along which I want to proceed this year, i.e., the path away from which you yourselves shy, as you are called forth as analysts in that lack.

December 1, 1965
Jacques Lacan

22. The unfamiliar ring to this phrase is due to the most recent English translation of Descartes' *Philosophical Writings* by J. Cottingham (Cambridge, 1986).

23. In *Being and Time*, for example, paragraphs 24, 46 and 211.

24. "chute" translated here by "scrap" has a religious connotation as well, la chute being the fall (from grace).

25. or "(at) one with" (solidaire de).

26. Angelus Silesius (otherwise known as Johannes Scheffler) was a German theologian and poet, known especially for *Der cherubinische Wanderer*, 1674, written in the form of distichs, i.e. rhymed couplets (cf. the partial English translation: *Selections from The Cherubinische Wanderer*, translated and introduced by J.N. Page, London, 1932).

27. "jactation" in French could also be translated in this context as "ejaculatory prayers" or simply "ejaculations"; "short prayers 'darted up' to God" (OEJ).


29. boiter means both to limp (or wobble) and to be unsound, as in the case of a theory.

30. The "joint" or junction here seems to be that of God and the ego (referred to two paragraphs above), which are also the most likely referents of the "two aspects" mentioned in the next paragraph.

31. [Lacan's note:] Later an executant in the operation of destroying my teaching; the outcome, of which the present audience was aware, is of interest to the reader only as concerns the disappearance of the journal la Psychanalyse and my promotion to the rostrum at which I gave the present lecture. [Lacan seems to be referring here to Dr. Hoff who invited him to Vienna in 1956 to speak of "The meaning of a return to Freud in psychoanalysis"]

32. celle: the truth here.


35. In order to keep up the play here on "fi" with which Lacan ends this sentence: "à qui se fier?". English would have to resort to the somewhat more awkward "in whom can you have confidence?"

36. "toutes les chutes que constitue le métalangage en ce qu'il a de fais semblant, et de logique"

37. Lacan's "pour en venir à bout", which I have translated as "to come to terms with it", is very vague, as the word "en" could refer to any of a number of things in the preceding sentence: the lack of truth about the truth, every other repression, or the other rhetorical effects. "en venir à bout" could also mean to get to the bottom of it [e.g. repression], to exhaust them [e.g. the rhetorical effects], succeed, get it over with, etc.

38. In French one commonly speaks of "un savoir" (literally: "a knowledge") and "des savoirs" (literally: "knowledge"), the sense ranging from some knowledge to a whole field or fields of knowledge; both senses should be kept in mind here.

39. la forme also means closes itself, and thus one could read it as closing or shutting in/off truth.

40. causer also means to chat, talk, gab, etc.

41. The reference here seems to be to Merleau-Ponty.

42. Lacan's intended reference here could be either "in religion" or "revelation".

43. A doctrine according to which the Holy Ghost proceeds both from the Father and from the Son (in Latin "filioque" means "and from the son").

44. [Lacan's note:] I put on hold the Seminar which I had announced for 1963-64 on the Name-of-the-Father, after having closed the opening lecture (in November of 1963) with my resignation from the public forum [place] of Sainte-Anne at which my seminars were held for ten years.

45. Lacan's term here is "diasfragmatisation" which indicates the closing of an aperture, like that of a camera.

46. The reference here is to 1984, lines 15-16 of Aristotle's *Physics*, translated in rather different ways by the various French and English translators, many of whom combine it with the sentence that immediately precedes it in the original; Wicksteed and Cornford, for example, give: "It is clear, then, that there are such things as causes, and that they can be classified under the four heads that have been enumerated" (in part in italics corresponding roughly to the Greek text cited). Cf. Aristotle, *The Physics*, translated by P.H. Wicksteed and F.M. Cornford, Harvard University Press, London, 1929. A word seems to be missing from Lacan's quote, as in all of the versions of the Greek I consulted, the first word *Tyrano* is followed by οἷος

47. "se polymériser". A polymer is a large aggregate molecule, i.e. it is made up of several smaller molecules; "polymerizing" can thus be understood here in the sense of aggregating, or becoming an aggregate: the cause becomes a composite.

48. "pas" in French can mean both "no" (or "not") and "step".

49. "le point de vérité:" the point, place or position of truth; "site of lack" in the next sentence corresponds to "ce point de manque". I have translated "à toute heure" by "constantly", but the combination in French of something being erected that at every moment or hour designates the place of something else could be taken to have sundial overtones. Lacan is here
The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience

Delivered at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zurich, July 17, 1949

The conception of the mirror stage that I introduced at our last Congress, thirteen years ago, has since become more or less established in the practice of the French group. However, I think it worthwhile to bring it again to your attention, especially today, for the light it sheds on the formation of the I as we experience it in psychoanalysis. It is an experience that leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the Cogito.

Some of you may recall that this conception originated in a feature of human behaviour illuminated by a fact of comparative psychology. The child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in a mirror. This recognition is indicated in the illuminative mimicry of the Aha-Erlebnis, which Köhler sees as the expression of situational apperception, an essential stage of the act of intelligence.

This act, far from exhausting itself, as in the case of the monkey, once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates - the child's own body, and the persons and things, around him.

This event can take place, as we have known since Baldwin, from the age of six months, and its repetition has often made me reflect upon the startling spectacle of the infant in front of the mirror. Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a ‘trotte-bébé’), he nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.

For me, this activity retains the meaning I have given it up to the age of eighteen months. This meaning discloses a libidinal dynamism, which has hitherto remained problematic, as well as an ontological structure of the human world that accords with my reflections on paranoiac knowledge.

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image - whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term imago.

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form., before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.

This form would have to be called the Ideal-I, if we wished to incorporate it into our usual register, in the sense that it will also be the source of secondary identifications, under which term I would place the functions of libidinal normalization. But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (le devenir) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality.

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as Gestalt, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size (un relief de stature) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. Thus, this Gestalt -whose pregnancy should be regarded as bound up with the species, though its motor style remains scarcely recognizable - by these two aspects of its appearance, symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination; it is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the I with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that
dominate him, or with the automaton in -which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his own making tends to find completion.

Indeed, for the imagos - whose veiled faces it is our privilege to see in outline in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic efficacy² - the mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world, if we go by the mirror disposition that the imago of one's own body presents in hallucinations or dreams, whether it concerns its individual features, or even its infirmities, or its object-projections; or if we observe the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearances of the double, in which psychical realities, however heterogeneous, are manifested.

That a Gestalt should be capable of formative effects in the organism is attested by a piece of biological experimentation that is itself so alien to the idea of psychical causality that it cannot bring itself to formulate its results in these terms. It nevertheless recognizes that it is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon that it should see another member of its species, of either sex; so sufficient in itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual -within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror. Similarly, in the case of the migratory locust, the transition -within a generation from the solitary to the gregarious form can be obtained by exposing the individual, at a certain stage, to the exclusively visual action of a similar image, provided it is animated by movements of a style sufficiently close to that characteristic of the species. Such facts are inscribed in an order of homeomorphic identification that would itself fall within the larger question of the meaning of beauty as both formative and erogenic.

But the facts of mimicry are no less instructive when conceived as cases of heteromorphic identification, in as much as they raise the problem of the signification of space for the living organism - psychological concepts hardly seem less appropriate for shedding light on these matters than ridiculous attempts to reduce them to the supposedly supreme law of adaptation. We have only to recall how Roger Caillois (who was then very young, and still fresh from his breach with the sociological school in which he -was trained) illuminated the subject by using the term 'legendary psychasthenia' to classify morphological mimicry as an obsession with space in its derealizing effect.

I have myself shown in the social dialectic that structures human knowledge as paranoiac - why human knowledge has greater autonomy than animal knowledge in relation to the field of force of desire, but also why human knowledge is determined in that 'little reality' (ce peu de réalité),

which the Surrealists, in their restless way, saw as its limitation. These reflections lead me to recognize in the spatial captation manifested in the mirror-stage, even before the social dialectic, the effect in man of an organic insufficiency in his natural reality - in so far as any meaning can be given to the word 'nature'.

I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the imago, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality - or, as they say, between the Innenwelt and the Umwelt.

In man, however, this relation to nature is altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor un-co-ordination of the neo-natal months. The objective notion of the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal system and likewise the presence of certain humoral residues of the maternal organism confirm the view I have formulated as the fact of a real specific prematurity of birth in man.

It is worth noting, incidentally, that this is a fact recognized as such by embryologists, by the term foetalization, which determines the prevalence of the so-called superior apparatus of the neurax, and especially of the cortex, which psycho-surgical operations lead us to regard as the intraorganic mirror.

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation - and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic - and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. Thus, to break out of the circle of the Innenwelt into the Umwelt generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego's verifications.

This fragmented body - which term I have also introduced into our system of theoretical references - usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions - the very same that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch has fixed, for all time, in painting, in their ascent
from the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man. But this form is even tangibly revealed at the organic level, in the lines of 'fragilization' that define the anatomy of phantasy, as exhibited in the schizoid and spasmodic symptoms of hysteria.

Correlatively, the formation of the I is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium - its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) symbolizes the id in a quite startling way. Similarly, on the mental plane, we find realized the structures of fortified works, the metaphor of which arises spontaneously, as if issuing from the symptoms themselves, to designate the mechanisms of obsessional neurosis - inversion, isolation, reduplication, cancellation and displacement.

But if we were to build on these subjective givens alone - however little we free them from the condition of experience that makes us see them as partaking of the nature of a linguistic technique - our theoretical attempts would remain exposed to the charge of projecting themselves into the unthinkable of an absolute subject. This is why I have sought in the present hypothesis, grounded in a conjunction of objective data, the guiding grid for a method of symbolic reduction.

It establishes in the defences of the ego a genetic order, in accordance with the wish formulated by Miss Anna Freud, in the first part of her great work, and situates (as against a frequently expressed prejudice) hysterical repression and its returns at a more archaic stage than obsessional inversion and its isolating processes, and the latter in turn as preliminary to paranoid alienation, which dates from the deflection of the specular I into the social I.

This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the imago of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy (so well brought out by the school of Charlotte Bühler in the phenomenon of infantile transitiivism), the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations.

It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation - the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in

man, on a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus complex.

In the light of this conception, the term primary narcissism, by which analytic doctrine designates the libidinal investment characteristic of that moment, reveals in those who invented it the most profound awareness of semantic latencies. But it also throws light on the dynamic opposition between this libido and the sexual libido, which the first analysts tried to define when they invoked destructive and, indeed, death instincts, in order to explain the evident connection between the narcissistic libido and the alienating function of the I, the aggressivity it releases in any relation to the other, even in a relation involving the most Samaritan of aid.

In fact, they were encountering that existential negativity whose reality is so vigorously proclaimed by the contemporary philosophy of being and nothingness.

But unfortunately that philosophy grasps negativity only within the limits of a self-sufficiency of consciousness, which, as one of its premises, links to the méconnaissances that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself. This flight of fancy, for all that it draws, to an unusual extent, on borrowings from psychoanalytic experience, culminates in the pretention of providing an existential psychoanalysis.

At the culmination of the historical effort of a society to refuse to recognize that it has any function other than the utilitarian one, and in the anxiety of the individual confronting the "concentrational" form of the social bond that seems to arise to crown this effort, existentialism must be judged by the explanations it gives of the subjective impasses that have indeed resulted from it; a freedom that is never more authentic than when it is within the walls of a prison; a demand for commitment, expressing the impotence of a pure consciousness to master any situation; a voyeuristic-sadistic idealization of the sexual relation; a personality that realizes itself only in suicide; a consciousness of the other than can be satisfied only by Hegelian murder.

These propositions are opposed by all our experience, in so far as it teaches us not to regard the ego as centered on the perception-consciousness system, or as organized by the 'reality principle' - a principle that is the expression of a scientific prejudice most hostile to the dialectic of knowledge. Our experience shows that we should start instead from the function of méconnaissance that characterizes the ego in all its structures, so markedly articulated by Miss Anna Freud. For, if the Verneinung...
represents the patent form of that function, its effects will, for the most part, remain latent, so long as they are not illuminated by some light reflected on to the level of fatality, which is where the id manifests itself.

We can thus understand the inertia characteristic of the formations of the I, and find there the most extensive definition of neurosis - just as the captation of the subject by the situation gives us the most general formula for madness) not only the madness that lies behind the walls of asylums, but also the madness that deafens the world with its sound and fury.

The sufferings of neurosis and psychosis are for us a schooling in the passions of the soul, just as the beam of the psychoanalytic scales, when we calculate the tilt of its threat to entire communities, provides us with an indication of the deadening of the passions in society.

At this junction of nature and culture, so persistently examined by modern anthropology, psychoanalysis alone recognizes this knot of imaginary servitude that love must always undo again, or sever.

For such a task, we place no trust in altruistic feeling, we who lay bare the aggressivity that underlies the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer.

In the recourse of subject to subject that we preserve, psychoanalysis may accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the 'Thou art that', in which is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins.

Notes

1 Throughout this article I leave in its peculiarity the translation I have adopted for Freud's Ideal-Ich [i.e., 'je-idéal'], without further comment, other than to say that I have not maintained it since

2 Cf Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Chapter X.


4 'Concentrationnaire', an adjective coined after World War II (this article was written in 1949) to describe the life of the concentration-camp. In the hands of certain writers it became, by extension, applicable to many aspects of modern life [Tr]
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Since we are talking about Lacan, therefore about psychoanalysis, I will begin with a personal reminiscence, almost a confession. It could borrow its title from Milan Kundera’s novel The Joke, for it all started with a silly practical joke. In the fall of 1968, when I was a new student at the Ecole normale supérieure, I overheard friends preparing one of the idiosyncratic pranks that used to be one of the privileges of that French cathedral of learning. They had espied with some nervous envy how the famous psychoanalyst would be driven to the school’s entrance to emerge with a beautiful woman on his arm and make his way to the office of Louis Althusser, who was then the Ecole’s administrative secretary. By contrast with the nondescript student style of the school, Lacan was known to draw crowds from the city’s select quarters, a medley of colorful intellectuals, writers, artists, feminists, radicals, and psychoanalysts. It was easy to rig the speakers connected with his microphone. A tape consisting of animal squeals and pornographic grunts had been rapidly put together. Now was the moment to see how the master and his audience would react to this insolence; not having had time to finish lunch, still clutching an unfinished yogurt pot, I followed the conspirators. We arrived late (our X-rated tape was to be aired close to the end of the seminar) into a crowded room, in which dozens of tape recorders had been set on the first row of tables in front of a little stage. There Lacan was striding and talking to the forest of microphones; behind him was a blackboard on which was written: “The essence of psychoanalytic theory is a discourse without words.” Clearly, he was begging for our rude interruption! Precisely as I entered the room, Lacan launched into a disquisition about mustard pots, or to be precise, the mustard pot, l’pot d’moutard. His delivery was irregular, forceful, oracular. The first sentences that I managed to jot down despite my postprandial stupor are the following:

This pot, I called it a mustard pot in order to remark that far from necessarily containing any, it is precisely because it is empty that it takes on its value as a mustard pot. Namely that it is because the word “mustard” is written on it, while “mustard” means here “must tardy be” [moult me tarde], for indeed this pot will have to tarry before it reaches its eternal life as pot, a life that begins only when this pot has a hole. Because it is in this form that throughout the ages we find it in excavation sites when we search tombs for something that will bear witness to us about the state of a civilization.

This sounded deep, Dadaist, and hilarious, and yet no one laughed or even smiled. Here I was, facing an aging performance artist (Lacan was sixty-seven then) whose very garb had something of the cabaret comedian’s outfit, with a dandical Mao costume, a strange shirt, and the most tortured elocution one could imagine, broken by sighs, wheezes, and sniggers, at times slowing down to a meditative halt, at times speeding up to culminate in a punning one-liner. Curiously, he was being listened to in utmost silence by an audience intent on not missing one word. I had forgotten my own yogurt pot, embarrassingly half-full or half-empty in my hand: it had turned into an urn. I vaguely knew the popular etymology of the word moutarde, which was supposed to derive from que moult me tarde (attributed to one of the Dukes of Burgundy, as I would verify a few years later when I started teaching in Dijon, a first academic post no doubt programmed by these ominous sentences), but did not know that Lacan came from a dynasty of vinegar makers and that one of their specialties was fine mustard. In the seminar, I had just witnessed a typical series of virtuoso associations taking off from mustard pots to engage with funerary vessels as they characterize entire civilizations. Lacan obliquely quoted Heidegger’s meditation on jugs allegorizing the work of art, then climaxed with the Danais and compared Pan’s musical flutes to empty barrels, all this in a few breath-taking sentences. His words circled around in freewheeling thematic glides rendered more startling by a very particular enunciation: it systematically elided mute e’s (e muets) and thus, in an accent that sounded old-fashioned but full of stage-Parisian gouaille, endowed with new echoes homely phrases such as l’pot d’moutard. Much later, I found out that Lacan had punned not only on mustard and vinegar but also on the broader conceptual category of “condiment,” a word he would always use with the demonstrative ce, thus uttering “ce condiment,” a phrase which could be heard as ce qu’on dit ment: what one says is lying, we only say lies. Lies and truth passed through the hole in the mustard pot, thanks no doubt to the obscene echo of con (“cunt”). By way of the mustard pot, I had been introduced to the devious logic of the signifier.

By the time our little prank came up, I had been captured by the master’s voice and was really paying attention to what he was saying: that he still considered himself a Structuralist even if the tide of fashion had started to turn (this was 13 November 1968), that he was busy constructing a model...
in which Freudian concepts like Lust were combined with Marxist concepts like Mehrwert (surplus value), so as to produce the new concept of Mehrlust or “surplus enjoyment.” He hoped that such a concept would account for the social function of symptoms while, of course, indulging in rhyming slang and knotting the mère verte (or “green mother,” whoever she was) to Mehrwert. Thus, when the grunts and groans finally came, no one seemed to be particularly disturbed, Lacan even smiled approvingly as if he had expected such banter as a greeting, if not feared something more offensive. The squawks were quickly switched off and he resumed his talk. Needless to say, the following week, I came on time to the salle Dussane and added my microphone to the others. Little did I know then that I was following a general trend that in a matter of months would bring most of the May 68 generation, all those political baby boomers who had fought their war on the barricades, to Lacanian seminars, reading groups, and couches. Lacan’s voice, his exaggerated posturing, his outrageous rhetoric that was not above obscenities or risqué jokes, all this connects him in my mind with the old leader who had been rejected by the young, who after a period of intense doubt had survived the political tempest before deciding it was time to retire. Particularly when seen with the benefit of hindsight, Lacan’s life shows many parallels with that of de Gaulle, although his reliance on the “young guard” in the movement he had created means that he may be seen as the anti-de Gaulle of psychoanalysis.

Founders of discursivity

At the second meeting of the seminar, Lacan commented on the political upheaval of the previous spring. Assessing the May “events,” he said that what had taken place was a prise de parole (speaking out) – even though no Bastille had been “taken.” What was at stake when the students “took” the streets was Truth, a truth that might be uttered collectively. But, he insisted, Truth only speaks through the staged prosopopeia of fiction. Lacan would mime this trope by saying “The Truth has said: ‘I speak’” (on a number of occasions). Because the truth can never be completely accessible, the students of May 68 had wanted to stage a “strike of truth” and expose the way social truth is produced. Lacan remained skeptical and cynical, telling the young audience (he noted that those who were twenty-four understood him better than their elders) that they, too, would soon participate in the reproduction of academic knowledge, knowledge that was fast turning into a commodity. A few meetings later, Lacan saluted the new year with some flourish – as he said, “69” was a much better number than “68” – by calling attention to an article penned by a professor of linguistics, Georges Mounin, who had published in the Nouvelle revue française a critical examination of Lacan’s own style.

This short essay is worth examining because, despite barbs and snide put-downs from an expert in linguistic theory (on the whole, Lacan is accused of not having understood Saussure’s theories), it hit home in some cases. The article, entitled “Some features of Jacques Lacan’s style,” justifies its decision to approach Lacan via linguistic and rhetorical analysis by quoting Lacan’s equation of “style” with “personality.” It seemed therefore legitimate to analyze Lacan’s deviations from standard usage and to infer from these a whole method. To describe what had already often been called Lacan’s “mannerism,” a labyrinthine syntax that its author had preemptively defended as “Gongorism,” a poetic manner that would force his readers to be attentive while immersing them in the fluid equivocations of unconscious discourse, Mounin listed a number of oddities in the psychoanalyst’s use of vocabulary and syntax. He began with French prepositions like à, de, and pour that were used quite idiosyncratically: Lacan would systematically replace the usual “because,” parce que by the ambiguous de ce que or, as often, pour ce que. For a long time, even after his death, one could immediately spot a Lacanian by a peculiar use of sauf à followed by the infinitive instead of sauf si followed by a conjugated verb to mean “except if . . . ,” and also by the use of the verb pointer instead of désigner to mean “to point,” “to point out,” and “to refer to.” In his wish to modalize at any cost, Lacan relished syntactic periphrases like pour autant que (meaning “in so far as,” “in as much as”) often reduced to ambiguous phrases like à ce que or de ce que.

On the whole, Lacan, so Mounin continued, loved nothing more than obscure archaisms, poetic inversions, or unusual turns of phrase borrowed either from German or Latin. Guessing wrongly that these deviations were due to early bilingualism, and naming Mallarmé as an obvious literary model (like Lacan’s, Mallarmé’s idiosyncratic style owed nothing to a family’s bilingualism but a great deal to a lifetime of reading the works of German and English writers), Mounin observed a dramatic increase in the frequency of these circumlocutions; for him, the 1966 preface to Ecrits verged on self-parody. Mounin wished to take seriously not only the meaning but the baroque language of one of Lacan’s most important and programmatic essays, “The Freudian Thing,” subtitled “or the meaning of the return to Freud in psychoanalysis,” a highly rhetorical text delivered in Vienna in 1955 and published in 1956. In this lecture, we discover not only a three-page-long speech in which Truth speaks in person but also a highly wrought conclusion finishing on a paragraph that conceals in dense prose a submerged quatrain in classical rhyming alexandrines:
Mounin’s worry seemed justified, even inevitable: was Lacan a frustrated poet, a post-Heideggerian thinker progressing by opaque epigrams, a psychoanalyst wishing to revolutionize a whole field of knowledge, or just a charlatan?

To be honest, Mounin was contrasting what he saw as the excessive theatricality of a fustian style suggesting the image of a hamming buffoon with what he knew of Lacan’s personal openness, professional rigor, and availability. Such a style was above all meant to provoke and thus forced commentators to be as excessive as the persona they saw looming behind. In Mounin’s outline, the flaunting of style as style underpinned a program summed up by three main claims: a claim to science, since Lacan was transforming Freud’s thinking into an algebraic system (Mounin wondered whether mathematical or logical models were only metaphors); a claim to philosophy, whether post-Hegelian or neo-Marxist – Mounin pointed to the recurrent but inconsistent use of the term “dialectic”; and a claim to a new systemic rigor in the discourse of psychoanalysis thanks to the importation of the main concepts of linguistics – and this was what Mounin, anxious about his own field, lambasted. Not only had Lacan misunderstood Saussure’s concept of the sign, but he unduly privileged the signifier and collapsed it with the symptom through which Mounin thought was a submerged pun on “significant” (any symptom was thought to be signifiant, hence significatif). Mounin showed how late Lacan had come to structuralist linguistics, only to embrace it with the blind fervor of a neophyte who distorts what he has assimilated fully. The Parthian shaft came at the end when Mounin deplored that Lacan’s influence on young philosophers of the École normale supérieure had been condoned or encouraged by their institution. According to him, because of Lacan’s undue prestige, ten or fifteen years of solid foundational research in linguistics had been wasted. The last remark was to have repercussions, for indeed, at the end of the spring of 1969, Lacan’s seminar was canceled. Flacelière, the new director of the École normale supérieure, had declared him persona non grata. The last session of the seminar was devoted to scathing political remarks denouncing the director’s double game, which led to a chaotic sit-in in his office, a fitting emblem of Lacan’s conflicted relations with almost all official institutions. Lacan, following more in the steps of Chairman Mao, who repeatedly used the younger generations as a weapon against the old guard, than in those of de Gaulle, who had haughtily dismissed France as ungovernable, was no doubt starting his own cultural revolution.

Lacan’s revolution was waged more in the name of Freud than of Marx, however, although Lacan strove for a while to reach a synthesis of Marx and Freud after he trumpeted his “return to Freud” at the beginning of the 1950s. Typically, when he mentioned Mounin’s essay in public, Lacan did not try to defend or explain himself. He jokingly reminisced that he had started his career by writing about the problem of style and should re-read his own text to be enlightened. He dismissed the whole article and kept his equanimity; however, there was one remark that hit a raw nerve. Mounin wrote: “Let us savor the tranquil Bretonian majesty [la majesté tranquillement bretonniennse, referring to André Breton] with which Lacan says: Freud and I” (SJL, p. 87). There he was not quoting Lacan but summing up the gist of a page of “Science and Truth” in Écrits, a theoretical tract read to the same students – no doubt the source of Mounin’s critical remark about Lacan’s negative influence on the normaliens, the students of the École normale supérieure. In his text, Lacan sounds even more pretentious: he not only claims that he alone “tells the truth about Freud, who lets truth speak under the name of the unconscious,” but adds his name just after that of Freud as those of the true founders of psychoanalysis: “But there is no other truth about the truth on this most vivid point than proper names, the name of Freud or mine . . .” (E, p. 868). Mounin had been rather sarcastic when he was inciting his readers to open Écrits and see in a passage taken out of its context another symptom of Lacan’s indurate grandiosity.

Lacan debunked Mounin’s reproach as coming from an envious rival, someone who would object: “Well, that guy doesn’t take himself for nobody!” Then he wondered why Mounin, who had confessed in the article that he did not understand Freud or care for him in the least, should show such an exaggerated respect for the founder of psychoanalysis. To convey his point more strongly, Lacan quoted a story he had narrated earlier, during the first seminar he had given at the École normale supérieure in March 1964, the famous anecdote of the tin can floating on water. In 1964, Lacan had engaged in a digression about the difference between the eye and the gaze, a new conceptual couple that had been suggested to him by the publication of Merleau-Ponty’s posthumous book, The Visible and the Invisible. To provide a personal illustration, he evoked a vignette, the story of an outing in a boat when, as a young man, he had accompanied a group of fishermen. One of them pointed to an empty sardine can floating in the water, glittering in the sun. Then he said to Lacan, “You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!” and burst out laughing (SX I, p. 95). Lacan, quite aware that the
fisherman’s jibe implied that he, the bourgeois tourist, was the odd man out among a group of active workers, added that, to be more precise, even if the can did not see him (voir), it was in fact gazing at him (regarder) all the time. The sardine can condensed the light without which we cannot see anything, while allegorizing the idea of an Other gaze looking at us when, because we just see objects in our field of perception, we do not pay attention to the gaze that frames them and us from outside.

In January 1969, by a bold reworking of the allegory, the sardine can encapsulated Freud’s gaze, for Lacan offered the following as a retort to Mounin: “The relation between this anecdote and ‘Freud and I’ leaves the question open of where I place myself in this couple. Well then be reassured, I place myself always in the same place, in the place where I was, and where I still remain, alive. Freud does not need to see me (me voir) in order to gaze at me (me regarder).”4 Lacan was not simply asserting that Freud was dead while he was alive, which would have been an inelegant triviality. “Alive” in this context implies keeping something alive within a tradition that is in danger of becoming mummified. It is against this risk that Lacan constantly evoked the living “experience” of psychoanalysis. And what is it that is being kept alive? Speech, language, the medium without which psychoanalysis does not exist, a medium that has to be understood by splicing together Freud’s insights and those of linguistics. Being alive in a world whose epistemologies have changed, Lacan “sees” new things by elaborating new concepts like objet a (this is the object as defined by psychoanalysis, as in “object of fantasy” or “object of desire”). However, this could only succeed if one acknowledged that the field had been opened by another whose gaze and signature should not be elided. The name of an Other who had, above all, written texts is the name of an Author to whom Lacan vowed to return constantly but not slavishly. He could see and speak truly because Freud was still “regarding” him.

A month and half later, a different event in Paris allowed Lacan to probe deeper his link to Freud. On 22 February 1969, Michel Foucault gave his influential lecture “What is an Author?” at the Collège de France. Lacan heard it with interest and took part in the general debate that followed. He then referred to it at some length in his seminar four days later. In a typical burst of que and de, Lacan evoked his Seminar on Ethics, a seminar whose publication he had considered although it was postponed until after his death. In his talk, Lacan quoted phrases used by Foucault, such as “the Freud event” and “the Author function,”5 as he summed up his discussion with the philosopher. Such terms derive from Foucault’s masterful mapping of authority. Foucault was trying to distinguish his position, a position rather close to new historicism, from that of critics like Roland Barthes, who had argued in 1968 that authors were “dead” since they only played the part of bourgeois owners of meaning. Without acknowledging any individual author’s right to the ownership of meaning, Foucault explains that it is necessary for certain names to serve as points of reference, thus defining the Author function, particularly when dealing with “inventors of discursivity” or “initiators of discursive practices,” among whom Freud and Marx figure preeminently.6 Foucault, who as early as 1962 evinced some familiarity with Lacan’s theses,7 is clearly alluding to Lacan when he states that it is “inevitable that practitioners of such discourses must ‘return to the origin’ ” (LCP, p. 134). Foucault explains that recourse to foundational texts does not simply indicate inadequacies or gaps but transforms the discursive practice governing a whole field: “A study of Galileo’s works could alter our knowledge of the history, but not the science, of mechanics; whereas a re-examination of the books of Freud or Marx can transform our understanding of psychoanalysis or Marxism” (LCP, pp. 137–8). In his seminar, Lacan states with some pride that “no individual alive today has contributed more than I to the idea of the ‘return to,’ particularly in the context of Freud.”8 However, he does not engage with an argument made more trenchant by Foucault’s keen epistemological assessment: if Marxism and psychoanalysis do not have the status of hard sciences, it is because they are still in debt to the texts of a founder, a founder who left a legacy of future strategies that are both marked by future resemblances and future differences:

They [Marx and Freud] cleared a space for the introduction of elements other than their own, which, nevertheless, remain within the field of discourse they initiated. In saying that Freud founded psychoanalysis, we do not simply mean that the concept of libido or the technique of dream analysis reappear in the writings of Karl Abrahams or Melanie Klein, but that he made possible a certain number of differences with respect to his books, concepts, and hypotheses, which all arise out of psychoanalytic discourse. (LCP, p. 132)

Unlike scientific inventors, the “founders of discursivity” cannot be accused of error—Foucault even writes that “there are no ‘false’ statements in the work of these initiators” (LCP, p. 134)—but precisely for this reason their theories demand a constant reactivation; they are productive because of the many “constructive omissions” that demand endless returns to the origin. Such an origin is not defined by truth procedures or verification; on the contrary it is porous, full of gaps and holes: the return “is always a return to a text in itself; specifically, to a primary and undecorated text with particular attention to those things registered in the interstices of the text, its gaps and absences. We return to those empty spaces that have been masked by omission or concealed in a false and misleading plenitude” (LCP, p. 135).
Lacan’s turn to Freud

Foucault makes it clear that the “return to” does not entail respectful imitation but a type of reading that is also a rewriting. Much as Althusser was wondering how one could read Marx “symptomatically,” that is, by separating what is really “Marxist” and what is merely “Hegelian” in his writings, Lacan wonders where and how Freud may be said to be properly “Freudian.” The issue is thus not that of a greater or lesser fidelity to Freud. It is the critical diagnosis of a loss of vitality, a weakening of the original “cutting edge” of a discourse and practice. Thus it is no surprise to see Lacan comment on his own return to Freud in the recapitulative introduction he wrote for a number of early texts on psychoanalysis in the 1966 edition of *Ecrits* by saying that this meant his taking Freud “against the grain” or “in reverse”: “an inverted reawakening [reprise par l’envers] of the Freudian project characterized our own” (*E*, p. 68). This is to be found in “Of our antecedents,” a preface to canonical Lacanian texts such as “The mirror stage.” Some ten years earlier, when presenting Freud’s work to a Viennese audience in the essay on “The Freudian Thing” quoted above, Lacan complains about the failure of Austria to honor the revolutionary discoverer of psychoanalysis. Given the betrayal of the founder by his own disciples, any “return to” will have to function as a “reversal”: he denounces a “psychoanalytical movement in which things have reached such a state that the *mot d’ordre* of a return to Freud means a reversal.” This is what the back cover of *Ecrits* dramatizes as a drawn-out struggle between “obscurantism” or “prejudice” and a new “dawn” or “enlightenment”: “No surprise, then, that one should resist, still now, Freud’s discovery – a phrase that can be extended by ambiphology: the discovery of Freud by Jacques Lacan.” What this suggests is that the exploitation of the ambiguity between a subjective and an objective genotype leads to the redoubling of Foucault’s paradox: if there has been a Freudian discovery, it has been forgotten, and one needs the rediscovery of the discovery; thus Lacan is not simply pointing to Freud as too soon forgotten by the International Association of Psychoanalysts (whose faulty memory is an equivalent of the murder of the father). If we want to understand Freud’s discovery we must grasp how the discovery of the unconscious, of the signifier, of an Other place for desire could have been rediscovered by Jacques Lacan.

**Freud’s discovery by Lacan**

Unlike Freud, Lacan was never a self-conscious “author,” although like Freud he knew the difference between “a book by . . .” and “a book from . . .” an author. In a passage of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud mentions a fragment of a dream he had forgotten. In that fragment, Freud spoke in English, saying of one of Schiller’s works, “It is from . . .” then noticing the mistake and correcting it to: “It is by . . .” (*SE* 5, p. 456 and p. 519). This dream of books, travels, and defecation (Freud links texts with titles such as Clerk-Maxwell’s *Matter and Motion* with literary glory but also anal excretion) called the “Hollthurn dream” is analyzed in two passages of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and shows how crucial the publication of books and their related claims to authority were for Freud. In another dream, Freud mentions lending a novel by Rider Haggard to a female friend who wants to read some of Freud’s books instead. He replies simply: “. . . my own immortal works have not yet been written” (*SE*, 5, p. 453). That same dream had presented the rather horrific picture of his lower body open by dissection and showing tangled viscera but also silver paper, containing, as he explains, an allusion to a book on the nervous system of fishes (a topic that had interested Freud before his psychoanalytic discoveries). Freud’s imaginary body was partly made up of books, and his discovery of psychoanalysis via dreams and hysteria was based upon a process of self-analysis that required writing as a technique and medium. Besides, we know that he would often tell his patients about his latest findings and urge them to read his papers as they appeared. Whereas we see Freud engaged quite early in the rigorous writing schedule he observed throughout his life even when his fame brought more patients, Lacan always boasted of his teaching and the interactive space of his seminar while dismissing his “writings” as being just that: matter, anal writing – what he repeatedly called *poubellification* (garbage-publishing) for “publication.” Later, he would often quote Joyce’s pun in *Finnegans Wake* on *letter* and *litter*, even using it as a starting point for a meditation on writing. If Lacan’s writings are now available in two dense collections, *Ecrits* and *Autres écrits*, totaling some fifteen hundred pages, the seminars make up a larger but more problematic sequence of oral texts partly edited or rewritten. Besides, the kind of interactive performance I have described makes it impossible to produce a definitive version of these seminars. What stands out is that in both his writings and his seminars, Lacan’s style, even when it does not consciously mimic an oral delivery, keeps a strong flavor of oratory. In his Viennese talk, “The Freudian Thing,” Lacan suggests that his writings condense the gist of his doctrine while the seminars present a continuous commentary on Freud. This view turned out to be misleading for, after 1964 and the move to the Ecole normale supérieure, the seminars moved on from Freud and began to probe and develop Lacan’s own concepts. Thus “The Freudian Thing” lauds Freud:

Will I surprise you if I tell you that these texts, to which for the past four years I have devoted a two-hour seminar every Wednesday from November to July, without having covered more than a quarter of the total, if indeed
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my commentary presupposes their totality, have given me and those who have attended the seminars the surprise afforded only by genuine discoveries? Discoveries ranging from concepts that have remained unused to clinical details uncovered by our exploration that prove how far the field investigated by Freud extended beyond the avenues that he left us to tend, and how his observations, which at times suggest exhaustiveness, were never enslaved to what he wanted to demonstrate.

(ES, pp. 116–17)

But in what precisely does Freud’s discovery consist? If we go back to two texts already quoted, it is clear that Lacan is never reluctant to give his version of the discovery, although his definition varies hugely. On the back cover of the 1966 Écrits, we read that Freud’s discovery was that “the unconscious is determined by pure logic, in other words by the signifier.” Eleven years earlier, in “The Freudian Thing,” a no less memorable statement is provided: “One took to repeating after Freud the word of his discovery: it speaks and, no doubt, where it was least expected, namely, where there is pain [la où ça souffre]” (ES, p. 125).

An important decade has elapsed, a decade that produced a shift in Lacan, who moved from the pathos of the suffering subject of the unconscious (albeit in ... may wonder whether it is “it speaks” or “the id speaks”) to a logical or linguistic mode of apprehension via the signifier.

Thus it would be wrong to believe that Lacan’s discourse in his seminars restricts itself to close readings of Freud’s texts, even if most of them, at least in the first decade, do just that, and very well, before boldly exploring the new avenues he mentions – but the gesture is less that of modesty than a wish to be a founder above all, that is, a founder re-discovering the Freudian truth, and much less an author. This is why Lacan constantly foregrounds a practical dimension in his doctrine and always refers to an “analytic experience” that must be taken as the sole foundation for this type of discourse. Such an experience of language, of possible healing by words and silence, locking in a curious duo two persons, each of whom projects ghosts of many others and of the Other, often leaves a simple alternative: either to stress purely clinical issues, or to focus on the politics of new institutions. This does not mean that theory is left lagging behind: all of this is done in the name of theory.

Once more, it was Althusser who perceived keenly the underlying unity of what Lacan had been doing for some time. His position on Lacan had been a mixture of personal resistance to a man he saw captivated by effects of power and seduction, and fascination for a theoretical effort that was never produced in the voids of pure ideas but on the contrary was buttressed by concrete political gestures like foundations, exclusions, dissolutions. In an
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actor was wounded in the hand but did not press charges, as her attacker was clearly insane. Two months later she was brought to Lacan's care at Sainte-Anne and he confirmed the previous diagnosis of paranoid psychosis. After having worked intensively with her for about a year, he refined the diagnosis, downplayed the elements of erotomania and persecution and stressed the “auto-punitive” structure (and to do so, he needed Freud's concepts).

Before the crisis, Aimée's erotomaniac delusions had focused on two male figures, the Prince of Wales and Pierre Benoit, a popular novelist, but the latter infatuation was soon directed at the novelist's mistress, the very visible actress Huguette Duflos, who had become a dangerous after ego for Aimée. Aimée was also a frustrated self-taught writer, whose beautiful texts were confiscated and then amply quoted by Lacan. The two novels Aimée had written in a frenzy of inspiration in the months preceding her assault are summed up and partly transcribed. Lacan provides a diagnosis of a particular type of delirium based partly upon a written archive and his insight into the structure of a personality. What is then a “personality”?

Lacan uses the term “personality” rigorously and criticizes approaches to what he calls a “psychological personality” (PP, p. 31). For him, personality must be approached on three levels: as a biographical development (he needed to reconstruct Aimée’s story); as the conception one has of oneself, a reflexive measure that is “dialectical” and can be gauged in dialogue, eventually modified and acted on; and finally as a “tension” between social values implying an ethical participation (PP, p. 42). Personality implies a dynamic dialogue between social determinations, personal fate, and reflexive revisions. Before giving his definition, Lacan reviews the theories of personality from traditional metaphysics to scientific psychology and then clearly opts for a phenomenological approach: the philosophical references in the thesis (beyond the debt to Spinoza) are mostly to Scheler, Husserl, and Jaspers. He uses “intentionality” not as an intuitive capture of subjective intentions but as a focus on a subject defined as a speaking being: “But one still has to explain the phenomenological existence of these intentional functions, like the fact that the subject says ‘I,’ believes he acts, promises, asserts” (PP, p. 39). A footnote mentions the derivation from the Latin persona, the mask with a hole to let the voice of the actor resound: even if philologists are divided on this point, Lacan approves “the significant intention” of the etymology (PP, p. 34, n. 6). This insight will not be lost, even after the turn to Structuralism. In a long theoretical essay criticizing Daniel Lagache (he read Lagache’s work in 1958, wrote the essay in 1960, and published it in 1961), Lacan attacks the latter’s “personism” and fusion of psychology and psychoanalysis. He writes: “We can say that with the per-sona the person begins, but what of the personality? Here an ethics announces itself, hushed into silence not by fear but by desire: the whole question is to know whether the way through babble of psychoanalytic experience will lead us there.” (E, p. 684).

Because it forces us to consider issues of social relations and ethics, “personality” cannot be reduced to a vague equivalent of the “self” or the “ego.” Precisely because of this dangerous proximity, Lacan has to distinguish personality from the “ideal image of the ego” — and this is where Freud comes into play for the first time when a footnote refers to “Freudian theories” that have pointed out the partly unconscious mechanisms presiding over the constitution of this image and its links with affective identification (PP, p. 39, n. 18). A second footnote sends us to Freud's Das Ich und das Es (1923) when invoking the clash between the Ich and Über-Ich (both left in German). What is remarkable here is Lacan's prudence in refusing to translate hastily Ich as “ego” (“id” was then translated into French as soi, a usage adhered to in the thesis). In addition, Lacan refuses to moralize personality, just wonders what we mean when we say that so-and-so has “personality” (PP, p. 41): the term suggests moral autonomy or a sense that a person can make promises that will be held. Often though, under the promises and suggestions of moral autonomy, we discover resistances that arise to oppose a limit to the encroachments of reality (PP, p. 41). What is presented as a “phenomenological” analysis of personality in the first part appears in the synthetic third part of the thesis as a thoroughly Freudian theory of the subject, even if the subject or je is not yet opposed to the ego. In the last part, Lacan explains that he had been using Freudian categories all along, especially when he was talking of resistance, even if he notes that most moralists, from La Rochefoucauld to Nietzsche, had described this mechanism before (PP, p. 320). In fact, what he needs above all is Freud's notion of the super-ego.

The last and synthetic part of the thesis makes it clear that Lacan's intention is not to complement Freudian psychoanalysis, which has stayed cautiously within the confines of treatment of neurotics, with a bolder approach to psychosis: his aim is to use what he has learned from the treatment of psychosis to redefine Freud's topological model of the subject, a model articulating the id, the ego, and the super-ego. Lacan limits his direct borrowings from psychoanalytic doctrine to two “dogmatic postulates”: first, that there is a strict overlapping between genesis and structure in personality; second, that there is a common yardstick by which we can measure the various features composing personality, and which is found in psychic energy, or libido (PP, p. 320). These postulates are instrumental in criticizing theories of psychosis based upon a doctrine of innate “constitutions” — as Lacan adds, the only issue that remains in such doctrines is to know when to lock up the patient! (PP, p. 308). This is why he can state his reliance on “historical materialism”
Lacan’s turn to Freud

(PP, p. 309 n. 2), for it is at the social level that the approach to a structure like the difference between neurosis and psychosis and the denuded “idealism” of each person’s self-reflection can cohere (PP, p. 314). The “science of personality” combines the intentionality of phenomenology and an account of social forces as they are replayed in the psyche. Aimée is a good example of this social determination: she chose an actress for her crazy attack because she had been caught up in the phenomenon of the “star” (la vedette) which provides, as Lacan glosses, a modern form of social participation (PP, pp. 317–18). Aimée was an uprooted woman of peasant extraction who had polarized on this fascinating image all her ideals and all her hatred. The actress embodied her Ich-Ideal, Freud’s expression with which Lacan will grapple for decades. In the thesis he expresses his dissatisfaction with the Freudian notion of a “narcissistic fixation” often adduced to account for psychosis; he asks: “Is narcissistic libido produced by the Ego or the Id?” (PP, p. 321). He queries Freud’s hesitations about the exact status of the Ich: is the ego purely identified with the function of perceptive consciousness, the Wahrnehmungsbewusstsein, or is it “partly unconscious” (PP, p. 322)? After having quoted Fenichel, Abraham, and Freud, he concludes this survey on a skeptical note: “In fact, narcissism appears in the economy of psychoanalytic doctrine as a terra incognita whose borders have been delimited by investigations born from the study of neuroses but whose interior remains mythical and unknown” (PP, p. 322). This maps out the terrain that Lacan would keep on exploring over the next decade via the mirror stage.

Was Freud more timid in accounting for the social factors of his patients’ neuroses? Lacan hints that this is the case, and his diagnosis of a psychosis of self-punishment for Aimée culminates with the global category of the “psychoses of the super-ego.” Thus Aimée’s case ties together three levels, the intentional level rife with the subject’s personal tensions, the structural level determined by the function of the ideal of the ego and the super-ego, and the social level with a dialectic of social alienation and desired ethical participation. And finally it is desire that provides a key to the totality of Aimée’s personality (PP, p. 311). Because of the determining factor of desire, personality cannot be reduced to the “ego,” whether as a philosophical or a psychoanalytical concept. But Lacan too seems to hesitate, for in the conclusion to the discussion of Aimée (perhaps in view of all the personal details amassed) he writes that the best approach to the case is via the patient’s resistances and that a “psychoanalysis of the ego” is sounder than a “psychoanalysis of the unconscious” (PP, p. 280). This sounds like the dominant Freudian orthodoxy that Lacan would attack in the fifties. However, this was not just a distortion introduced by Freud’s followers; in a late essay like “An outline of psychoanalysis” (1938), Freud had written typically: “The analytical physician and the weakened ego of the patient, basing themselves upon the real external world, are to combine against the enemies, the instinctual demands of the id and the moral demands of the consciousness of the super-ego” (SE 23, p. 175). In the synthetic part of the thesis, however, Lacan stressed both the sadistic function of the super-ego and the fact that the term “personality” allowed him to overcome the individual ego. The “new science” of personality was condensed as “the development of man’s intentional functions linked to tensions that are proper to social relations” (PP, p. 328). In fact, all these tensions, intentions, and relations pave the way for the realm of what Lacan would start calling the “symbolic system” of culture in the fifties.

In spite of the classical transparency of its language, Lacan’s thesis offers some difficulties. It is packed with questions, questions that aim at expanding the Freudian field concerning paranoia and leading to a more precise description of the structure of subjectivity. After the thesis, Lacan continued the discussion of Freudian concepts. As early as 1936, we find an article entitled with some bravura “Beyond the ‘reality principle.’” Its sub-title is revealing: “Around this fundamental principle of Freud’s doctrine, the second generation of his school can define its debt and its task” (E, p. 73). There Lacan opposes the concern for truth (evidenced by philosophy) and the concern for reality. A phenomenological stance still dominates, but this time phenomenology yields a different insight: Freud’s reverence for reality as a principle leads to the awareness that psychoanalysis only works with language. “The given of this experience is first of all language, a language, that is to say a sign” (E, 82). Much later, Mounin will quote this equation ironically, hinting that Lacan did not know much about linguistics. But we are in 1936, and what matters is how he stresses two important notions, all the more important as they are linked: the impact of unconscious knowledge and a concern for language as such.

As Lacan reminisced in “Of our antecedents,” the lesson of this conceptual knot was conveyed to him once and for all by Aimée. By “clinical exhaustion,” systematically and exhaustively examining one single case, he had reached a “paranoid knowledge” that finally forced him to take creativity into account: “For fidelity to the formal envelope of the symptom – the only true clinical trace we may acknowledge – led us to this limit which turns into pure creativity. In the case of our thesis (the Aimée case), these were literary effects, and with enough merit to have been quoted by Eluard under the (reverential) heading of involuntary poetry.” Thus one might say that “Aimée” played for Lacan the role Nadja had played for Breton or Anna O. for Freud and Breuer: a figure of inspiration, a brilliant failure despite extraordinary artistic and linguistic gifts, and finally an allegory of femininity
granting access, without any need of “theory,” to a different truth concerning the unconscious. This is why we need to explore once more Lacan’s not so tranquil “Bretonian majesty” when he speaks of “Freud and I.”

Lacan’s paranoid modernity

Mounin’s remark about Lacan’s “Bretonian” majesty contains an element of truth, less because it denounces Lacan’s arrogance or delusion of grandeur than because Breton’s notoriously ambivalent attitude to Freud was repeated by the French psychoanalyst some ten years later. Breton had launched Surrealism as a quasi-Freudian movement that trusted the spontaneous dictation of the unconscious, but when, in October 1921, he paid a visit to Freud that should have been a reverent pilgrimage, he was severely disappointed by the meeting. “Interview with Professor Freud” (1922) describes Freud pitilessly as “an old man without elegance” whose shabby consulting room is worthy of an impoverished local generalist. The Viennese MD stubbornly refuses to engage in meaningful dialogue and hides behind polite generalities. He concludes tongue-in-cheek by quoting Freud’s tepid endorsement: “Happily, we do count a lot upon the young.” This painful sense of a discrepancy between Freud the man and Freudian ideas, or between the inventor of psychoanalysis caught in all his human and social limitations and the empowering invention of psychoanalysis itself was to mark the attitude of the French intelligentsia in the following years.

Thus Breton’s second Manifesto of Surrealism (December 1929) quotes Freud rather distantly and with critical asides about the term of “sublimation,” while reasserting that a dose of dialectical materialism would do wonders for Freud. As we have noted, in his thesis Lacan had saluted dialectical materialism as a way of avoiding both spiritualism and “mechanistic materialism” or any behaviorism (PP, p. 309, n. 2). Moreover, for Breton, Freud was suspected of lending arguments to what he saw as Georges Bataille’s “non-dialectical” materialism. In this ideological conflict, Dalí’s theory of paranoia emerged as a new watershed in Surrealist groups. Dalí had been the object of a tug of war between Bataille and Breton; Bataille initially took to Dalí and wrote a passionate article on the 1929 painting called “The Lugubrious Game.” In his commentary, Bataille interpreted the painting as representing castration and emasculation; he saw a sign of this in the way one male figure is portrayed in breeches stained with excrement. Immediately Dalí refused permission to reproduce the painting, and then attacked Bataille in “The rotting donkey” (July 1930) for his “senile” ideas. As Dalí wrote, Bataille’s mistake derived from an incorrect interpretation of Freud, a “gratuitous use of modern psychology.” All this brought grist to the mill of what appeared as Dalí’s object, the definition of his paranoid-critical method. Aligning himself with Breton’s Second Manifesto, Dali explained that next to going into the street with a revolver and shooting people at random (as Breton said, this was the purest Surrealist act), his proselytizing activity aimed at propagating the “violently paranoid will to systematize confusion” (OU, p. 110). Anticipating Lacan, Dali adds that since Freudian ideas have been watered down he means to use paranoia to give them back their “rabid and dazzling clarity.” He then launches into a description of the method he has devised to see reality differently, a method that took its bearings in paranoia:

The particular perspicacity of attention in the para-noiac state must be insisted upon; paranoia being recognized, moreover, by all psychologists as a form of mental illness which consists in organizing reality in such a way as to utilize it to control an imaginative construction... Recently, through a decidedly para-noiac process, I obtained an image of a woman whose position, shadow and morphology, without altering or deforming anything of her real appearance, are also, at the same time, those of a horse. (OU, p. 112)

This passage leads to a new method for the avant-garde and provides a new foundation for Rimbaud’s program of a “systematic deregulating of all senses” leading to the automatic production of spontaneous hallucination and the multiplication of delirious sign-systems. In “The rotting donkey,” Dali pushes his thesis further by collapsing conventional systems of representation and paranoid delirium. The woman who is at the same time a horse and a lion forces us to conclude that “our images of reality themselves depend upon the degree of our paranoid faculty” (OU, pp. 116–17). If paranoia opens a door into other kinds of visual perception, it also turns into a principle that replaces any idea of the material world by simple hallucination—a view leading to Lacan’s later distinction between reality and the real. Here reality is just a type of simulacrum. This might be why Dalí had chosen Breton’s rather than Bataille’s camp. Both criticize Freud’s dualism while rewriting his insights in a monist discourse stressing either the materiality of the body leading to excess, waste, and excrcement (Bataille), or a series of simulacra underpinned by a universal and productive desire (Breton). Bataille appears stuck in “vulgar materialism” while Breton tends to stress the creative imagination. In this context, Lacan’s relationships with Bataille and Breton appear loaded with transference and counter-transference, from his marriage to Bataille’s estranged wife, Sylvia, up to a much later stress on jouissance, a notion that translates Bataille’s concepts of waste, expenditure, erotic excess, and transgression.
Lacan’s turn to Freud

Dali’s ideas gave a jolt to Lacan, who chanced upon them just as he was working on his doctoral dissertation. Elisabeth Roudinesco thinks that it was the impact of Dali’s “The rotting donkey” that allowed Lacan to break with classical psychiatric theories and revisit Freudian meta-psychology with a new agenda. Indeed, at the time of his thesis, Lacan was translating Freud’s article on “Certain neurotic mechanisms in jealousy; paranoia and homosexuality,” a text in which Freud restates the theory underlying his main analysis of paranoia, that is, the Schreber case: for him, the creation of a paranoid system of delusions aims at allowing the return of a repressed homosexuality. Freud mentions a case of jealous delirium in a heterosexual patient, noting how delusional attacks would follow successful sexual relations in the couple; by inventing imaginary male lovers and creating delirious recriminations, the husband projected his own desire for men. This theory is clearly not the route followed by either Dali or Lacan in the early thirties. Lacan already relied on an analysis of the signifier. It was also at that time that he co-authored “Inspired writings” (1931), an essay analyzing the psychotic ramblings of a young teacher who had been hospitalized at Sainte-Anne. The stylistic analysis of the grammar of mad utterances acknowledges Surrealism. The authors quote Breton’s first Manifesto of Surrealism and look for a model of interpretation in Breton’s and Eluard’s imitations of different types of delirium in The Immaculate Conception (1930).

Thus, quite logically, the Surrealists were the first to greet the thesis with exuberant praise: Crevel’s 1933 “Notes toward a psycho-dialectic” expressed the hope that Lacan’s work would provide a new foundation for psychoanalysis at a time when Freud appeared reactionary, idealistic, or pusillanimous. It was not only that Lacan dared to treat psychosis but also that his work was firmly grounded in the social world. In spite of himself, Lacan was thus enlisted in the cause of a Surrealist Freudo-Marxism. But as Dali later insisted, Crevel’s suicide in 1935, partly brought about by his inability to reconcile Surrealism, psychoanalysis, and communism, was one of the bad omens that announced the demise of the movement. It may not have helped that Dali was investing more and more paranoiac activity into fantasies about Hitler on the one hand and high fashion on the other. Conversely, Lacan had already taken some distance from Surrealism and from left-wing politics; he only elaborated his own version of Freudo-Marxism in the late sixties.

If Lacan’s theory of paranoia has little to do with Dali’s concept of a beautifully multiple hallucination, it does leave room for artistic creation, since, as we saw, Aimée was a gifted writer looking for recognition from the press and novelists. The Aimée case forced him to make inroads into mirrored doubles and the release of aggression they elicit in paranoids. This would soon provide a bridge to the construction of the alter-ego as a dangerous rival and the need for fabricating delirious paternity systems that resemble the symbolic. Above all, thanks to the convergence of interests between Bataille, Dali, Breton, Eluard, Crevel, and Lacan, the second decade of Surrealism was dominated by the concept of paranoia exactly as the first had been by automatism and hysteria. Breton’s comprehensive memoir Mad Love (1937) affirms his belief in desire as the main spring of all our dreams and actions but also leaves room for paranoia. Desire is not just unleashed by hysteria in a distorted pastiche of artistic creation but it is structured like paranoia—that is, it produces knowledge. Close to the end, Breton uses Freud’s A Childhood Memory of Leonardo da Vinci to expound the principle of paranoiac criticism. Even if the vision of a vulture hidden in the Virgin’s dress was only Pfister’s hallucination and not the direct product of Freud’s meditations, once an interpretation has produced a new image in a previous one, it remains there, hovering between objectivity and subjectivity. What Leonardo had stumbled upon was the “objective chance” in which any artist or person will learn to read the half-erased letters of a text written by desire. Breton continues his musings:

The purely visual exercise of this faculty which has at times been called “paranoid” allows us to conclude that if a single spot on a wall or elsewhere will almost always be interpreted differently by different individuals acted upon by distinct desires, this does not imply that one will not manage to make the other see what he has perceived.

Even when Polonius humors Hamlet’s feigned madness by agreeing to see a whale in the clouds, his calculated acceptance suggests the possibility of a verbal communication. Breton’s view of paranoia is weaker than Lacan’s because, unlike Lacan, he does not try to think systematically but magically; he avoids Spinozist “essences” that provide Lacan with a firmer conceptual grid, since these essences are not substances but the relations provided by language. Paranoia creates a system of signs that function as “images” or pure signifiers before being held accountable to so-called objective truth. Thus they betray the creative function of desire that underpins their production. Such a desire can lead to murderous attacks, at times with the objective of putting oneself under the domination of the sadistic super-ego through an expected punishment but also with a view of getting rid of an idealized image of oneself projected in another person.

Lacan’s first deliberate critique of Freudian logic came much later with the Seminar on Hamlet, but it is based on insights provided by Aimée. Freud’s main argument about the Oedipal structure of Hamlet’s desire (Hamlet
cannot strike his uncle because the uncle has enacted his own incestuous and murderous wish) is not based on a secure foundation, since, after all, Hamlet might want all the more to get rid of such a successful Oedipal rival! What for Lacan accounts for the riddle of the play lies on the side of the impenetrable desire of the mother, or the hidden source of Gertrude's jouissance. However, desire remains a mythical notion that will contain all tensions and contradictions; like Breton and like Freud, Lacan dreamed of an essential and foundational libido that would be identical with the substance of nature. One can verify this by perusing one of Lacan's earliest texts, a sonnet based upon his reading of Alexandre Koyré's book on Boehme, La Philosophie de Jacob Boehme (1929). Lacan's sonnet was written in 1929 under the title “Panta Rhei” and was slightly rewritten for publication in Le Phare de Neuilly (1933) as “Hiatus Irrationalis.” A paraphrase of Lacan's opening and concluding lines of the final version could be the following: “Things, whether sweat or sap flows in you, Forms, whether begotten from forge or flood, Your stream is not denser than my dream, And if I do not strike you with unceasing desire, I cross your water and fall to the shore Brought down by the weight of my thinking genie.../ /But, as soon as all words have died in my throat, Things, whether begotten from blood or forge, Nature,— I lose myself in elementary flux: He who smolders in me, the same lifts you up, Forms, whether sweat or sap flows in you, It is the fire that makes me your eternal lover...” Beyond echoes of Rimbaud’s famous “It is the fire that rises again with its damned soul” (from Season in Hell), Lacan posits desire as a universal principle running through nature like a Heraclitean stream and Boehme's fire. However, to reach the mysterium magnum, the subject has to be mute: the central lines point to a moment of speechlessness: “But, as soon as all words have died in my throat, Things, whether begotten from blood or forge, Nature,— I lose myself in elementary flux...” Boehme's mystical discourse foreshadows the function of an absolute Other whose silence lets nature disclose its most hidden secrets.

Lacan's sonnet is contemporary with his first attempts at letting the “insane” or the “psychotic” speak. If he has discovered that everyday language is structured as poetry through the “inspired speech” of raving patients, it is not to say like Freud that he has “succeeded where the paranoiac fails.” Freud was referring to the Schreber case, hinting that Freud himself had managed to sublimate his homosexual inclinations (all needed for the elaboration of his system when he was in correspondence and transference with his friend Fliess). Does this apply to Lacan? Did he use Aimée to sublimate his own erotomania and erect in its stead what could be called a theoretical monument of paranoid modernism? In fact, Lacan would probably not say that the paranoiac failed! When Aimée replaces Schreber, she is always right, even when she sees the kingdom of peace as the future realm of the just... Lacan's displacement entails a much needed feminization of those who try to write down the discourse of the Other — which is also why Freud's castrating father will yield some ground to Lacan's big Other, mostly embodied by the Mother. Paranoia is always right, especially when it forces us to elaborate a parallel system of thoughts underpinned by desire. Hence, Lacan's Freudo-Lacanism reaches its limit. Lacan, one of the first to warn against the duplicity of religious piety for the creed's founder, is ready to rewrite and to contest Freud, in short to fail where the paranoiac succeeds. Hence the added difficulties and the heavier burden of a theoretical legacy: an endless task of re-reading.

NOTES
2. I have reproduced the text as poetry, but it is laid out as prose in the original. Sheridan's translation cannot render the mock heroic tone and its deliberate pre-ciosity, which is not above a low pun on “reconnaˆıtra les siens / les chiens”: “Actaeon, too guilty to hunt the goddess, the prey in which is caught, O huntsman, the shadow that you become, let the pack pass by without hastening your step, Diana will recognize the hounds for what they are...” (ES, p. 145).
4. Personal notes, session of 1 January 1969.
Lacan's turn to Freud

11. Translation modified. For the original, see Lacan, E, p. 404.
The mirror stage: an obliterated archive

Why speak of the “mirror stage” as an archive that has been obliterated? The reason is both simple and complex. First, there is no existing original of the lecture on this subject delivered by Jacques Lacan at the 16th congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA), which took place in Marienbad between the second and eighth of August 1936. After he had been speaking for minutes, Lacan was interrupted by Ernest Jones, the chairman, who considered that this French participant, of whom he had never heard, was exceeding the time allotted to each speaker. At this time, the rule regulating the duration of each spoken contribution was already being applied at international conferences. Lacan, who regarded the interruption as a humiliation, quit the conference and went on to the Olympic Games in Berlin to see at close quarters what a sporting event manipulated by the Nazis was like. One might well see some connection between the forceful manner in which Jones interrupted Lacan’s talk and Lacan’s notorious invention of “variable sessions” marked by radical brevity and a sense of deliberate suspension. All his life, Lacan would struggle with an impossible control over time, as evinced by the masterful analysis presented in his 1945 essay on “logical time.”

The Marienbad incident arose out of a serious misunderstanding. In the eyes of the then leaders of the IPA, Lacan was not yet the Lacan known to history, but merely a modest, anonymous clinician belonging to the Société psychanalytique de Paris (SPP), with no claim to any special privileges. In France, on the other hand, Lacan was already recognized in literary circles as an important thinker. He often was put on a par with Henri Ey, whom many saw as the leader of a new school of psychiatry, even though his reputation was not high among psychoanalysts. As for Lacan himself, he already considered himself as important enough to find it intolerable to be treated so dismissively at an IPA congress. As a result, he did not hand in his text for publication in the conference proceedings.

We have nevertheless two records of the August 1936 text. The first is to be found in the notes Françoise Dolto took at a preliminary lecture that Lacan delivered to the SPP on 16 June 1936, notes that are undoubtedly a faithful reflection of the missing August text. The second trace is to be found in the draft of an article by Alexandre Kojève, with whom Lacan was to have collaborated in the summer of 1936. The article did not see the light of day in final form and was never mentioned by Lacan himself, who probably forgot about it. But it is a pointer to the genesis of his later ideas about Descartes’ cogito, the subject of desire, and the origin of madness.

These notes should be compared with another text by Lacan that was included in a famous article on the family commissioned by Henri Wallon and published in 1938 in the *Encyclopédie française*. According to Lacan himself, this long article, reprinted in 1985 under the title of “Family complexes,” reproduces the content of the 1936 Marienbad lecture. The passage in question occurs in the second part of the article, entitled “The intrusion complex.” It is followed by a paragraph on “Jealousy, archetype of social feelings,” which has sub-paragraphs bearing on “Mental identification,” “The image of fellow beings,” and “The meaning of primal aggression.” The paragraph on the mirror stage is divided into two parts: (1) The secondary power of the mirror image; (2) The narcissistic structure of the ego.

As Françoise Dolto’s notes show, on that day at Marienbad Lacan expounded not only the “stade du miroir” paragraph that was taken up again later in the *Encyclopédie* but also a large number of the themes developed in the 1938 article. Her notes show that the lecture was divided into nine parts: (1) The subject and the I (*je*); (2) The subject, the I (*je*) and the body; (3) The expressivity of the human form; (4) The libido of the human form; (5) The image of the double and the mirror image; (6) Libido or weaning and the death instinct, Destruction of the vital object, Narcissism; (7) Its link with the fundamental symbolism in human knowledge; (8) The rediscovered object in the Oedipus complex; (9) The values of narcissistic symptoms: twins. All this probably reflects, with a few variants, the paper written by Lacan for the Marienbad congress: a text too long for the IPA authorities, and one neither in the style of Freud nor of Melanie Klein, but influenced by Alexandre Kojève’s seminar on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Lacan’s lecture, transcribed by Dolto, is followed by a discussion in which Marie Bonaparte, Daniel Lagache, Georges Parchemin, Rudolph Loewenstein, René Laforgue, Paul Schiff, and Charles Odier take part. The lecturer then answers them all. The lecture is so obscure that the SPP audience finds it hard to understand what Lacan means. They ask him to define his attitudes more clearly, in particular his view of the relation between weaning and the
death impulse, and his conception of the link between the I (je), the body and fantasy. Is the I (je) one's body? Is fantasy the specular image? Another question asked is: what is the relationship between the I (je) and the ego (moi), and between the I and the personality?

This raises a major theoretical issue. As is well known, in Freud's works the notion of the subject is not fully conceptualized, even though he does use the term. At this point in time, Lacan is trying to introduce the concept as it has been used in classical philosophy rather than in psychology: the subject is man himself, inasmuch as he is the foundation of his own thoughts and actions. Man is the subject of knowledge and law. Lacan is trying to link not Freud's second topography of the id, the ego, and the super-ego with a theory of the I, but to connect together a philosophical theory of the subject and a theory of the subject of desire derived from Freud and from Hegel via Kojève. From this he will pass to the notion of the subject of the unconscious.

It is from an article published by Henri Wallon in 1931 that Lacan borrows the term of the “mirror stage” (stade du miroir).4 However, Lacan neglects to cite his main source. Wallon's name is not mentioned either in Lacan's lecture or in the bibliography of the Encyclopédie française. As I have had occasion to show, Lacan always tried to obliterate Wallon's name so as to present himself as the inventor of the expression. For instance, Françoise Bérounné has found some sixty examples of the use of the term “mirror stage” in Lacan's work. Lacan always insists on the fact that it was he who introduced the term. In his seminar on L'Acte psychologique (session of 10 January 1968), he says: “Everyone knows that I entered psychoanalysis with the little brush that was called the ‘mirror stage’ . . . I turned the ‘mirror stage’ into a coat rack.”5

In order to understand what happened in 1936, we need to know that Lacan was then still unacquainted with the work of Melanie Klein, whose theories were far less well known in France. In the discussion that followed the SPP lecture, no one mentioned her work, concerned though it was with ideas on object relations, weaning, and character formation in infants. In fact, Lacan, in his own way – a “French” way, that is – was providing an interpretation of Freud that ran parallel to Klein's own interpretation of the master at the same period. Lacan's specific reading of Freud arose out of his attendance at Kojève's seminar on The Phenomenology of Spirit and follows directly from questions asked in the review Recherches philosophiques, of which Kojève was one of the leading lights. Kojève's generation had been marked by the “three H’s” of phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel. This generation was seeking in philosophy a way of apprehending a world that saw the rise of dictatorships, that was haunted by the problems of anxiety, fragmented consciousness, doubts hanging over human progress, and all the forms of nihilism deriving from the fear that history might be coming to an end. Lacan belonged to this group.

Documents from this period show that in July 1936 Lacan intended to collaborate with Kojève in writing a study dealing with the same philosophical principles as those found in the Marienbad lecture and later in the article in the Encyclopédie. The study was to be entitled “Hegel and Freud. An attempt at a comparative interpretation.” The first part was called “The genesis of self-consciousness,” the second, “The origin of madness,” the third, “The essence of the family.” In the end, the study was never written. But in the fifteen pages that survive in Kojève's handwriting we find three of the major concepts used by Lacan in 1936: the I as subject of desire; desire as a relation of the truth of being; and the ego as site of illusion and source of error. These concepts would also be present, mixed in with the two theories on the origin of madness and the essence of the family, in all the texts Lacan published between 1936 and 1949. They are to be found in “Beyond the reality principle” and “Family complexes,” as well as in “Observations on psychic causality” and in the second version of the “mirror stage,” a lecture delivered at the 16th IPA congress in Zürich.6

There can be no doubt that Lacan drew inspiration from Kojève's handwritten pages, in which their author suggested that to be up-to-date the thirties would need to progress from Descartes' philosophy based on “I think” to Freud and Hegel's philosophy based on “I desire,” on the understanding that desire is the Hegelian Begierde rather than the Freudian Wunsch. Begierde is the desire through which the relation of consciousness to the self is expressed: the issue is to acknowledge the other or otherness insofar as consciousness finds itself in this very movement. The other is the object of desire that the consciousness desires in a negative mirror-relationship that allows it to recognise itself in it. Wunsch, or desire in the Freudian sense, is more simply an inclination, an aspiration, the fulfilment of an unconscious wish. Thus in the transition from a philosophy of “I think” to a philosophy of “I desire” there is, according to Kojève, a split between the true I of thought or desire and the ego (moi), seen as the source of error and the site of mere representations.

This shows us the evolution of Lacan's interpretation of Freud between 1932, when the thesis on Aimée and the paranoia of self-punishment was published,7 and 1936, when the lost first version of the “mirror stage” was written. The analogy between Lacan and Klein consists above all in the way they both contributed at almost the same time to an internal overhaul of psychoanalytical thinking. Like Melanie Klein, Lacan approaches Freud's
second topography with an opposition to any form of ego-psychology. Two choices were possible after the overhaul aimed at by Freud himself in 1920–3. One was to make the ego the product of a gradual differentiation of the id, acting as representative of reality and charged with containing drives (this was ego-psychology); the other turned its back on any idea of an autonomous ego and studied its genesis in terms of identification.

In other words, if one chose the first option, which was to some extent the path followed by psychoanalysis in the United States, one would try to remove the ego from the id and make it the instrument of the individual’s adaptation to external reality. If one chose the second option, which was that of Klein and Lacan and their respective followers, and later of Self Psychology (that of Heinz Kohut, for example), one brought the ego back toward the id to show that it was structured in stages, by means of imagos borrowed from the other through projective identifications.

To understand this development, we must define the idea of narcissism in the Freudian sense of the term. Although Freud’s position changed several times after the publication in 1914 of his famous article “On introducing narcissism,” we can give a more or less firm definition of the distinction he drew between primary and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism is a first state, prior to the constitution of the ego and therefore auto-erotic, through which the infant sees his own person as the object of exclusive love – a state that precedes his ability to turn towards external objects. From this ensues the constitution of the ideal ego. Secondary narcissism results from the transfer to the ego of investments in objects in the external world. Both primary and secondary narcissism seem to be a defence against aggressive drives.

In 1931 Henri Wallon gave the name épreuve du miroir (mirror test) to an experiment in which a child, put in front of a mirror, gradually comes to distinguish his own body from its reflected image. According to Wallon, this dialectical operation takes place because of the subject’s symbolic comprehension of the imaginary space in which his unity is created. In Wallon’s view, the mirror test demonstrates a transition from the specular to the imaginary, then from the imaginary to the symbolic. On 16 June 1936, Lacan revised Wallon’s terminology and changed the épreuve du miroir into the stade du miroir (“mirror stage”) – that is, mixing two concepts, “position” in the Kleinian sense and “phase” in the Freudian sense. He thus eliminated Wallon’s reference to a natural dialectic. In the context of Lacan’s thinking, the idea of a mirror stage no longer has anything to do with a real stage or phase in the Freudian sense, nor with a real mirror. The stage becomes a psychic or ontological operation through which a human being is made by means of identification with his fellow-being.

According to Lacan, who borrowed the idea from the Dutch embryologist Louis Bolk, the importance of the mirror stage must be linked to human prematurity at birth, which is demonstrated objectively by the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal system in infants and their imperfect powers of physical coordination during the early months of life. From this date, and increasingly as time goes by, Lacan distances himself from Wallon’s psychological design by describing the process in terms of unconscious rather than of consciousness. Basing himself on one of Kojève’s theories, he declares that the specular world, in which the primordial identity of the ego is expressed, contains no alterity or otherness. Hence the canon definition: the stade du miroir is a “phase” – that is, a state structurally succeeding another state, and not a “stage” in the evolutionary sense. The distinction is not negligible, even if Lacan retains the Freudian terminology and the idea of historicity. The mirror phase, occurring between the sixth and eighteenth month of life, is thus the time when the infant anticipates mastery of his bodily unity through identification with the image of a fellow being and through perceiving his own image in a mirror. Henceforth, Lacan bases his idea of the mirror phase on the Freudian concept of primary narcissism. Thus the narcissistic structure of the ego is built up with the imagos of the double as its central element. When the subject recognizes the other in the form of a conflictual link, he arrives at socialization. When on the contrary he regresses to primary narcissism, he is lost in a maternal and deathly imago.

In abandoning himself to death he seeks to rediscover the maternal object and clings to a mode of destroying the other that tends toward paranoia. Like Melanie Klein, Lacan favours the archaic link to the mother in the construction of identity, but unlike her he retains the Freudian idea of a stage with a beginning, an end, and a precise state within a duration. As we know, Melanie Klein abandoned the idea of “stage” or “phase” for that of “position” (Einstellung in German, position in French). According to her view, “position” (depressive or paranoid/schizoid) occurs at a certain point in the subject’s existence, a point in his development, but this moment, internal to his fantasy life, may be repeated structurally at other stages in his life. Another difference between Lacan and Melanie Klein is that she rejects the idea of primary narcissism and postulates the early existence of object relations as a constituent factor in the appearance of the ego. We can see how Lacan, through the notion of the mirror phase, works out his first conception of the Imaginary and constructs a concept of the subject, distinct from the ego, which has nothing to do with that of Freud.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was the first to comment on Lacan’s idea, in his 1949–51 lectures on child psychology. While paying tribute to Wallon, he showed that Lacan had a much firmer grasp of the essential Narcissus myth,
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beyond what Freud said of it, thus opening the way to a more phenomenological approach to the problem: “Lacan revises and enriches the myth of Narcissus, so passionately in love with his image that he plunges into the water and is drowned. Freud saw the sexual element of the myth first and foremost, the libido directed towards the subject’s own body. Lacan makes full use of the legend and incorporates its other components.”

The question of the subject becomes central in the second version of the lecture on the mirror stage, delivered in Zürich at the 16th IPA congress in 1949. Ernest Jones was again the president, but this time he let Lacan read his paper through to the end. The positions Lacan adopted now were different from those of 1936. What he was concerned with in 1949 was a plan for constructing the notion of the subject in psychoanalysis and in the history of science – a topic already touched on under the influence of Kojève. The title of Lacan’s lecture reflects his new preoccupation: “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience.”

Before arriving at this new formulation, Lacan had been careful to enter the psychoanalytical movement through the front door. After the humiliation at Marienbad he published an article in L’Évolution psychiatrique entitled “Beyond the reality principle,” in which he called for the creation of a second psychoanalytical generation able to bring about the theoretical “revolution” necessary for arriving at a new interpretation of Freud. As is well known, Lacan belonged to the third world-wide generation, but he saw himself as the spokesman of a second generation vis-à-vis the pioneers of the first French generation, whom he accused of not having understood the master’s discoveries. He made a point of dating his text as precisely as possible: “Marienbad-Noirmoutier, August–October 1939.” The dating is not without significance. It was at Noirmoutier that Lacan spent the summer of 1936 with his first wife, Marie-Louise Blondin, then five months pregnant. At the age of thirty-five, about to become a father for the first time, he hailed the triumphant advent of a generation of psychoanalytic leaders, and which he charges with the task of “reading Freud” against and independently of all ego-psychology.

On the theoretical plane, this call to rebellion is a continuation of Lacan’s formulation of the first version of the mirror stage and of the article in which he was to have collaborated with Kojève. Lacan distances himself from the idea that an individual might adapt to reality. Thus he makes mental identification a constituent factor in human knowledge. Hence the proposal to identify “imaginary posts (postes) of personality,” the three elements in Freud’s second topography (ego, id, and super-ego), and then to make out a fourth, the I, which he describes as the function by means of which the subject can recognize himself. This, Lacan’s first formulation of

the concept of the Imaginary, by which the genesis of the ego is assimilated, as with Melanie Klein, to a series of operations based on identification with imagos, is accompanied by an even vaguer mention of the notion of symbolic identification. Needless to say, this idea was to be expanded later.

When Lacan was preparing his new lecture on the mirror stage for the Zürich congress, he was no longer advocating the same positions as those he had put forward before the war. He had now read the work of Melanie Klein and discovered that of Claude Lévi-Strauss. He was also adapting the principles of Saussurean linguistics for his own purposes, though he had not yet made use of them. He was interested in the logics of the Cartesian cogito, and still fascinated by the psychogenesis of madness. The theme of the cogito, which was absent from the 1936 text, became central in that of 1949, when Lacan set forth a theory of the subject. To understand its significance we must examine the lecture he gave at Bonneval in 1946, “Observations on psychic causality.”

In answer to Henri Ey, who suggested combining neurology and psychiatry so as to provide the latter with a theory that could incorporate psychoanalytical concepts, Lacan advocated a revision of psychiatric knowledge based on the model of the Freudian unconscious. However, as against the scientists who reduced man to a machine, both men shared the belief – as did most psychiatrists at that time – that psychoanalysis restored a humanist meaning to psychiatry, in that it rejected the idea of a classification of diseases isolated from the everyday experience of madness.

It was in this context that Lacan advocated the need for a return to Descartes – not to the philosophy of the cogito but to a philosophy capable of apprehending the causality of madness. In a few lines he commented on the famous sentence in the first part of the Meditations that later became the subject of a polemic between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Descartes wrote: “And how could I deny that these hands and this body are mine, were it not perhaps that I compare myself to certain persons, devoid of sense, whose cerebella are so troubled and clowned by the violent vapors of black bile, that they constantly assure us that they think they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really without covering, or who imagine that they have an earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or made of glass. But they are mad, and I should not be any more the less insane were I to follow examples so extravagant.”

Thus in 1946 Lacan suggested, as Derrida did later, that Descartes’ founding of modern thought did not exclude the phenomenon of madness.

If we compare this attitude with that of 1949 concerning the mirror stage, we see that Lacan has changed his point of view. Having appealed to Descartes in 1946, he now rejects Cartesianism and points out that the
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experience of psychoanalysis “is fundamentally opposed to any philosophy deriving from the cogito.” In the 1966 version, the one included in *Ecrits*, he corrects the lecture by reinforcing his criticism of the cogito: he says that the mirror stage is “an experience that leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the cogito” (E, p. 1). We can therefore see how Lacan evolves between 1936 and 1949. At first he constructs a phenomenological theory of the imaginary while distanc ing himself from the biological notion of “stages.” Then he appeals to Cartesian rationality to show that madness has its own logic and cannot be apprehended independently of the cogito. And lastly he invents a theory of the subject that rejects not only the Cartesian cognito but also the tradition of ego-psychology that derives from the cogito. His criticism was directed as much at Daniel Lagache, who was anxious to set up in France a psychological unit that would include psychoanalysis, as at the American advocates of ego-psychology, who, it may be said in passing, were no Cartesian.

As for the 1949 lecture, it is quite simply splendid in its style and tone. We are a long way now from the 1936 version of the mirror stage. Thirteen years after his humiliating failure to enter the arena of the psychoanalytical movement, Lacan invites us to partake in a genuinely tragic vision of man—a vision derived from a baroque aesthetic, from Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s views on Auschwitz, and a conception of time influenced by Heidegger. He turns psychoanalysis into a school for listening to the passions of the soul and to the malaise of civilization, the only school capable of countering the philanthropic but deceptive ideals of happiness therapies that claim to treat the ego and cultivate narcissism, while really concealing the disintegration of inner identity.

Translated by Barbara Bray

NOTES


10. In English the terms “phase” and “stage” are often used interchangeably. In German, *Stufe* is used to mean “stage” in the Freudian sense, while *Stadium* translates the Lacanian concept.
Freud’s work has been both praised and maligned for its frequent introduction of myths and narratives which attempt to map out the archaeology of the human psyche. These range from classical myth to the invention of new myths, from the use of the Sophoclean Oedipus to the strange story about the origin of society set out in Totem and Taboo. Critics of Freud have pointed out the limitations of these models, their historical contingency, and the implausibility of their claims in terms of evidence taken from other fields in the human sciences. As historical narratives, their weaknesses are taken as impeachments of Freudian theory as a whole. Hence the psychological theories of the Oedipus complex or the castration complex become, in their turn, mere myths, fictions that collapse once their historical underpinnings undergo scrutiny.

Even to those sympathetic to psychoanalysis, many of Freud’s narratives seem quaint and far-fetched, and yet, as the recently published text on the importance of the ice age for human development makes clear, such apparent flights of fancy formed an integral part of Freud’s procedure. A search for origins was characteristic of much early twentieth century thought, as it had been in the Enlightenment, and Freud’s commitment to a form of phylogeny was shared by many other Continental thinkers. While this is not the place to go into the details of Freud’s use of classical myth and mythic constructions, we can ask whether Lacan’s methods of exposition have anything in common with Freud’s. Can we, indeed, speak of “Lacan’s myths” in the same way that we can speak of Freud’s?

Lacan’s use of narratives is certainly very different from Freud’s. After the late 1950s, he tended to avoid developmental schemas and was also quite sparing in the use of the sort of analogies that were dear to Freud. The difficulty of his style is consonant with this. The theory of the mirror stage is probably one of the most accessible of Lacan’s concepts, and its developmental flavor is perhaps why it is often misconstrued. Its “easiness” generates a range of problems, and Lacan’s reformulations of it after its introduction in the 1950s testify to his effort to undermine quick assimilations of his concepts. It might also be argued that developmental schemas share something in common with myths, and that Lacan’s avoidance of the one is what entails his avoidance of the other. If we understand myths less as fictions with a low truth value than as attempts to make sense of contingent and perhaps traumatic sets of events by means of a narrative, then all developmental schemas have a mythic character.

Freud, after all, introduces myths like the Totem and Taboo story or the struggles of Eros and Thanatos at the moments when he is trying to articulate clinical problems linked to the psyche’s difficulties in accommodating excessive pain or pleasure. In Lacanian terms, myth is inserted as a way of approaching the real, which resists symbolization. If a basic tenet of psychoanalytic theory is that there exists a nonsymbolizable and nonrepresentable aspect of human reality, it follows that attempts to access it theoretically will involve possibly discontinuous modes of presentation. One could think here not only of Freud’s use of myth but also of Lacan’s use of mathematical and logical formalizations. As we will see, this is a thread that runs throughout Lacan’s work and it will allow us to situate the sense of myth particular to him. Although his gravitation towards logical problems and modes of exposition may be interpreted as the effort to contest the imaginary pull to assimilate new ideas to recognizable and familiar sets of meanings, it is part of a larger project to find mathematical structures for the psyche. In this sense, the avoidance of Freud’s appeal to narrative and his search for origins is understandable. In their place we find a wide range of logical and mathematical apparatus, from the early paper on the problem of logical time to the later concern with knots that would characterize his final works. And with this, we find a particular theory – and use – of myth.

To approach this thread of Lacan’s work, we need to focus on two motifs that are central to psychoanalysis: impossibility and contradiction. In Freud’s early work on systems of defense in the psyche, he argues that certain representations will be deemed incompatible with others, and barriers established to separate them. These separations arise out of the experience of pain, and generate oppositions and contradictions: for example, the representation of the mother as a sexual being might be deemed incompatible with that of the mother as an object of love, to produce the famous splitting in love life whereby a woman who is loved cannot be desired sexually and a woman who is desired sexually cannot be loved. The current in love life derives from the experience of pain – that of considering the mother to be both a love and a sexual object – and it results in the manufacture of an impossibility: once
the separation is made, a woman cannot be both loved and desired at the same time.

Freud also claimed that in the archaic link of infant to caregiver, there is a dimension of the relation between them that is separated from the field of linguistic predication, in which representations involving qualities and attributes is constructed. These linguistic chains will circle around the primary object without ever accessing it. Freud’s early theories thus suggest that there are at least two different forms of impossibility encountered by the subject: the impossibility of symbolizing a primordial real, and the impossibilities generated by the network of representations themselves.

These encounters are also at the heart of Freud’s exploration of infantile sexual theories. The child is unprepared for and unable to make sense of such troubling and enigmatic phenomena as physical pain. The appeal to the symbolic system of myth can serve to situate...
This crucial step of prioritizing relational structures informed Lévi-Strauss’s work on both kinship systems and myth. Moreover, seeing myth as made up of sets of relations was well-suited to the mathematics of group theory, which allows an equation to be identified with a group of permutations. All the known variants of a myth could be placed into a set which formed the permutation group. The elements would consist of relations between terms or sets of terms. Now, we might well ask what all this has to do with psychoanalysis, and especially with clinical practice. The answer to this question shows us why myth mattered so much to Lacan.

We saw earlier how Freud had interpreted the sexual theories of children as responses using signifying material to the painful problems of sexuality and family dynamics. What seemed like a contradiction or an impossibility could be made sense of using the sexual theories. A myth could be seen in the same way. Long before Lévi-Strauss, myths were often understood as the way that a society might give meaning to the question of its origins or the mysteries of birth and death. Like a sexual theory, a myth is a way of treating an impossibility. But Lévi-Strauss went much further than this. He argued that myth responds to the initial situation of impossibility or contradiction not with a solution but by finding new ways of formulating it logically. One contradiction replies, as it were, to another.

In his analysis of the Oedipus myth, for example, the initial contradiction is between the theory of the autochthonous origin of man (born from one) and the knowledge that man is in fact born from two. Although this problem cannot be solved, Lévi-Strauss argues, the Oedipus myth provides a “logical tool” which relates this initial problem to a secondary problem, “to be born from different or born from same.” The key here is the link between the two sets of relations, to give a basic functional formula: the overrating of blood relations (e.g. incest) is to the underrating of blood relations (e.g. paricide) as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. We have thus moved from a theory of the Oedipus myth as the disguised representation of repressed wishes to a structural model which sees it as the response to a logical problem.

In one of his first formulations of myth, Lévi-Strauss defined it in the following way: “The inability to connect two (contradictory) relationships is overcome (or rather replaced) by the positive statement that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way.” A myth takes an initial contradiction between A and B and shows that a further contradiction between C and D is contradictory in a similar way. Lacan adopted this definition of myth as a working model, using it in the early seminar held at his home on Freud’s case histories, and then during the later 1950s. Myth, in Lacan’s very Lévi-Straussian terms, was “a way of confronting an impossible situation by the successive articulation of all the forms of impossibility of the solution.”

These developments in structural anthropology had brought together two projects fundamental to Lacan: the study of mental structure as a response to an encounter with contradictions and impossibilities, and the study of mathematical structure as the underlying structure of the psyche and the symbolic order. Although his use of the Lévi-Strauss model is usually assumed to start with his 1956 commentary on the case of Little Hans, the earlier paper on “The neurotic’s individual myth” conceals quite a strict use of Lévi-Strauss’s schema applied to the case of the Rat Man. Lacan does not reproduce the mathematical formula that Lévi-Strauss gives in his paper on myth, but refers to it implicitly throughout the article.

Lacan focuses on the situation that seems to precipitate the Rat Man’s neurosis. He loses some glasses while on military maneuvers and wires for another pair from Vienna, which he receives soon after. But whereas he knows perfectly well to whom he owes the money for their receipt, he concocts an obsessional scenario involving a certain Lieutenant A paying the money to a lady at the post office, this lady then passing on the money to a Lieutenant B, and then himself giving the sum to Lieutenant A. In his discussion on the case, Lacan puts an emphasis on this absurd scenario, rather than on the more sensational account of the rat torture so often evoked by commentators. What interests him, following Lévi-Strauss, is the system of relations involved, and, as with myth, the constellation that preceded the patient’s birth.

This constellation, Lacan suggests, has a “transformational formula,” which becomes crystallized in the scenario involving the glasses. The two key relations concern (1) the Rat Man’s father’s marriage to a wealthier woman of higher station, superseding his attachment to a poor but pretty girl, and (2) a gambling debt from which the father was saved by a friend, whom he subsequently fails to repay. He had in fact gambled away the regimental funds and was only saved from disgrace by the intervention of his friend. These two debts form a first contradiction and Lacan claims that there is “a strict correspondence between these initial elements of the subjective constellation and the ultimate development” of the obsessional scenario.

The Rat Man is trying to reformulate the impossibility of bringing together (1) and (2), the two debts which function at different levels in his family history, and the convoluted set of exchanges that make up the repayment scenario are a functional variant of the initial contradiction. They are a new version of the inaugural relation between the father, the mother, and the
friend. “This phantasmic scenario,” writes Lacan, “resembles a little play, a chronicle which is precisely the manifestation of what I call the neurotic’s individual myth.”

Lacan’s reading of the Rat-Man case goes on to elaborate a differentiation of the symbolic and imaginary functions of the father, and it was the use of these registers that he added soon afterwards to the Lévi-Strauss model. A myth was still understood as the reformulating of contradiction or impossibility, but now it was the symbolic work of reformulating or “reshuffling” that responded to some emergence of the real via the permutation of imaginary elements. Since this sort of reorganization would in fact characterize the early life of the child, Lacan’s argument suggests that the construction of myths is a central feature of entry into the symbolic order. This would be illustrated clearly in Lacan’s reading of the case of Little Hans.

Confronted with the initial question of his position in relation to his mother, Hans has to deal with two further problems: the experience of his first erections and the birth of a sister. These constitute real elements, and to situate them in a new symbolic configuration, the imaginary elements of Hans’s world have to be reshuffled. This results in the proliferation of stories, ideas, dreams, and scenarios that Hans comes up with, which use a limited number of elements in different configurations (the horse, other children, trams, etc.). Lacan sees this sustained production of material as a “mythic activity,” the effort to pass from a world dominated by imaginary relations to one organized around symbolic principles and places.

This reshuffling is equivalent to the transformational formula of myth provided by Lévi-Strauss. Myth is now defined as the use of “imaginary elements in the exhaustion of a certain exercise of symbolic exchange” and as “the response to an impossible situation by the successive articulation of all the forms of the impossibility of the solution.” The passage from the imaginary to the symbolic consis ts, for Hans, in an “organization of the imaginary in myth,” an idea that allows Lacan to link the theory of myth to the theory of neurosis that he was elaborating in the early 1950s.

Lacan had taken Heidegger’s notion that human existence consists fundamentally in a question, and used it to define neurosis as a question posed by the subject concerning not only its existence but its sex. As he discusses Hans’s mythic constructions, he argues that they respond to the question of his place between his mother and his father, experienced by him as an impasse. By running through the different forms of possible and impossible modes of reshuffling the components of his world, he reaches the point where “the subject has placed itself at the level of its question.” Hence Hans is positioned within the field of neurosis, and his use of myths is formally equivalent to the process of responding to and elaborating a question. The phobia, construed as a mythic activity, has functioned, to use Lévi-Strauss’s phrase, as a “logical tool.”

One of the striking features of the case of Little Hans is the fact that Freud’s own myth of Oedipus functions as an element that Hans uses in his constructions. When Hans and his father go to visit Freud, he tells Hans that “Long before he was in the world . . . I had known that a little Hans would come who would be so fond of his mother that he would be bound to feel afraid of his father because of it . . .” (SE 10, p. 42). The Oedipus complex is presented here as an a priori schema, and hence as a purely symbolic narrative rather than the consequence of a set of empirical relations. When critics of Freud argued that they failed to find any evidence of an Oedipus complex in their own fields of experience, they missed this crucial point: that as a myth, the Oedipus was a formal structure that a child could aspire to, and hence, in a certain sense, a fiction as such.

In Hans’s case, where the father is failing to function in a way appropriate to introduce the Oedipal myth, the son introduces the logical tool of his phobia to get things moving. When Malinowski and others criticized Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex in the light of anthropological data in which the father’s role in the family was clearly weak and devalorized, they missed this basic point: that the starting point for Hans’s Oedipus was precisely such a failing at the level of his father, to which the Oedipal myth provided a form of response, albeit in a rather particular way with Hans. If there were a necessary discrepancy between real fathers and the symbolic function of the father, the Oedipus complex could be elaborated as a myth to allow the child a positioning in the symbolic. The Freudian father, in this sense, is less the authoritarian figure caricatured by Malinowski than a benign one.

Lacan’s focus on myth shows how a fiction should not be understood simply as something “false” but as something that can be used to organize disparate and traumatic material. This is not to say that it is entirely arbitrary, as Lévi-Strauss had indicated when he drew attention to the limited number of complexes described by Freud. Indeed, Freud makes the same claim in his analysis of the Wolf Man, when he equates the Oedipus complex with an inherited schema: “inherited schemata, he says, are like the categories of philosophy, placing impressions derived from experience into a pre-existing framework (SE 17, p. 119). When experiences fail to fit into such schemata, they become remodeled, and “it is precisely such cases that are calculated to convince us of the independent existence of the schema.”

Thus, in the case of the Wolf Man, the threat of castration was attributed to the father when it had actually arisen elsewhere. Subjective experience was being reinvented to incarnate the symbolic schema. The schema functions to structure the experience, and, Freud writes, the Oedipus complex is a
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prime example of such a process. Where Freud sees the disparity between the schema as a phylogenetic inheritance and lived experience, Lacan sees it as concerning symbolic structures and the imaginary and real elements that make up our world: but for both, a disparity exists between formal schema and the rest of experience, and both Freud and Lacan evoke Kant during the course of their explanations. The Oedipus is thus not the result of experience, and its structure must be sought elsewhere.

Seen in this light, Hans is making a sustained effort to constitute a fictional Oedipus complex, even if, in the end, he is not entirely successful. It is thus less a question of finding a “real” Oedipus complex in the material than of seeing how a child might try to manufacture one, and how the elements of his or her environment may either encourage or hinder such a construction. Lacan is claiming that the Oedipus is certainly a myth, but that the basic question is to understand what myths are and how they are put to use.

Lacan did not go on to elaborate his ideas about myth as a set of permutations in any systematic way after his seminar on object relations and it is a pity that this aspect of his research program remained undeveloped. The use of the Lévi-Strauss model in the cases of Little Hans and the Rat Man is extremely fruitful, yet today the notion of equating a neurosis with an individual myth is often taken to have merely historical interest. As far as I know, there is no published clinical case in the Lacanian literature which uses the model proposed by Lacan to make sense of the material in anything more than a perfunctory way.

Despite this waning of the more programmatic approach that characterized Lacan’s work in the 1950s, the two central threads of mathematical structure and the encounter with impossibilities run throughout his subsequent seminars. In his seminar of 1969–70, L’Envers de la psychanalyse, Lacan returns to Lévi-Strauss’s theory of myth in the context of a discussion of truth. It shows, he argues, how truth can only be half-said, and that “half-saying is the internal law of any kind of enunciation of the truth.”

Truth here is linked to desire, and will emerge “in the alternance of strictly opposed things.” We find here a clear statement of the Structuralist principle that what cannot be given form as a meaningful proposition will take on the form of a relation, exactly the principle that Lévi-Strauss emphasized in his study of myth.

A literary example can clarify this idea. The play-within-a-play in Hamlet has always constituted something of a puzzle. The main plot concerns a son commanded to avenge his murdered father and in the midst of his indecision and hesitancy, he hits on the idea of staging a play before his guilty uncle Claudius in which the murder scene is played out. The mini-play, however, makes of the nephew the king’s murderer, not the brother, as in the main narrative. Countless interpretations of this episode have been put forward in the literature on Hamlet, but the first question that we can ask is why it was necessary to add the extra play at all: what, structurally, is its function?

To be suitably dogmatic, suppose for a moment the presence of some Oedipal material, the kind of thing that the best and the worst psychoanalytic commentators on the play have always emphasized. Little boys want to murder their daddies, so when someone else actually does, all the unconscious currents become especially reanimated: the uncle, in this sense, is in the place of the unconscious desire of Hamlet himself. We don’t find such an Oedipal desire expressed as such in the play. What we have instead are two contradictory plots, and it is this very contradiction which can suggest that when an unconscious wish is impossible to assume, it will take the form of pieces of material that cannot be fully superimposed the one on the other. Desire, in this sense, is not to be identified with one or the other piece of material, but with the relation between them. Two stories thus cipher an initial point of impossibility, something that cannot be thought because it is so unbearable: that the son is himself in the place of the father’s murderer. In other words, what the play-within-a-play shows us is that when a wish cannot be expressed as a proposition (“I want to kill daddy”), it will take the form of a relation, a relation in which the “I” is missing.

We can find the same principle at work in the formation of “dream pairs,” the occurrence of two related but separate dreams on the same night. Referring to a paper by Alexander, Freud writes that “If a dream-wish has as its content some piece of forbidden behavior towards a certain individual, then that person may appear in the first dream undisguised, while the behavior is only faintly indicated. In the second dream it will be the other way round. The behavior will be openly shown, but the person will be made unrecognizable, or else some indifferent person will be substituted for him . . .” (SE 22, p. 27). The forbidden point thus emerges not in one or the other dream but in the relation between the two.

Lacan’s argument, following Lévi-Strauss, is much stronger. It is not that the forbidden thought is simply disguised, hidden behind the dream material, but rather that it only exists, in a sense, as the slippage between the one and the other. Another example can illustrate this principle. A man has two dreams on the same night. In one, he loses a blood-soaked tooth and stares at it in absolute horror. In the other, his penis is being examined in a medical test and no problems are found. Neither of the dreams represents castration as such, but it is in the relation between the two that the reference to castration is situated. In Lacanian terms, it is being half-said.

Does Lacan’s use of the myth-as-impossibility model give us a clue to his own use of myth in his seminars? Let’s look at two examples, one from the
Seminar on Transference, one from the Four Fundamental Concepts. In the first example, Lacan is elaborating his commentary on Plato’s Symposium, and discussing the schema in which, through an exchange of places, the beloved becomes a lover. “To materialize this in front of you,” he tells his audience, “I have the right to complete any image, and to turn it into a myth.” Love for the object can be compared to “the hand stretching out to reach a ripe fruit or an open flower, or to stroke the log that has suddenly caught alight. But if at the moment that the hand gets close to the fruit or the flower or the log another hand emerges to meet your own, and at this moment your own hand freezes in the closed plentitude of the fruit or the open plentitude of the flower – what’s produced then is love.” 13

Although Lacan does not cite the reference, this odd metaphor is in fact adapted from the work of the thirteenth-century mystic Ramon Lull. The emergence of the other hand may seem miraculous, but what Lacan stresses here is the lack of symmetry in the scene depicted: the hand, after all, is not initially reaching out for another hand but for an object (the flower, the fruit). There is thus a basic lack of symmetry behind what seems to be a perfectly symmetrical relationship – exactly what Lacan will elaborate in the rest of his seminar, where he is trying to emphasize the disparity between the object of desire and the demand for love. In the Symposium, Alcibiades may seem to love Socrates, but the latter’s intervention in the final scenes shows that Alcibiades’ desire is in fact directed to the poet Agathon. Likewise, although love may seem to involve the symmetrical relation between two partners, Lacan gives a crucial role to the partial object or agalma as the principle of the dynamics of love.

If this object is a real one, the use of the myth of the two hands shows how, as Lacan puts it, “a myth here is understood as responding to the inexplicable nature of the real.” 14 The image in question, however, seems to lack the qualities of myth that Lacan made so much of in his earlier work: it shows perhaps how it is not so much the content of the image that matters than its place within the context of a theoretical elaboration. It is introduced at a point where Lacan is trying to show the relations of the imaginary to the real in the field of love – and hence of something ungraspable simply in terms of the imaginary and its field of symmetry.

The story of the lamella, introduced a few years later, has enjoyed a far greater popularity than that of the two hands. Like the latter story, it is situated in the context of a series of references to the Symposium, in particular, to the Aristophanic myth of the egg-like being split in two by the gods which then searches to reconstitute itself. Imagine, says Lacan, that this separation has a surplus, like the afterbirth lost at human birth. This large, flat being would move around like an amoeba, sliding under doors, led by a pure life instinct. What would it be like, Lacan muses, to find that this hideous being had draped itself over one’s face while one slept (S XI, p. 197).

This organ is the libido, and the “new myth” has been introduced because, like all other myths, its function is to provide a “symbolic articulation,” rather than an image, of something that has a direct relation with the real. The libido is understood here as pure life instinct, what the living being loses in becoming subject to the cycle of sexual reproduction. The objets a are the representatives of this lamella, standing in for that part of him or herself that the subject has lost. The relation of the subject to these objects is the drive. Just as Freud had described the drives as situated on the frontier of the somatic and the psychic, here Lacan tackles this limit phenomenon in a Freudian way: he inserts a myth. In other words, a response to a point of contradiction or impossibility, here between the symbolic and the real, the life instinct, and the mortal side of reproduction.

Although Lacan does not explain his choice of term, the reference follows many of his other comments on ancient burial practice. Lamellae were thin gold plates or foils buried with a cadaver and containing instructions and passwords for use in the next world. These have been linked to both Orphic and Pythagorean cultures by historians of classical culture, but what matters here is the opposition between the mortal body and an enduring, separate life substance that is linked to it. Lacan often refers to this duality, and will later identify the objects buried with the dead with the objects of jouissance, in other words, with a form of libido. 15 Note once again how the reference to myth comes at a point where Lacan is dealing with a disparity of registers: the mortal body, reduced to a signifier, and the real, the objects of enjoyment around it.

Beyond this internal consistency in Lacan’s thinking about the libido, the first thing to be said about this story of the lamella is that it is not a myth in the strict sense: it has no set of variants, and it does not seem to be linked to a series of successive mythic constructions. In fact, it is similar to some of Freud’s similes, and functions to present a quite complicated theoretical development with the aid of a nightmareish image. One might see this passage as in fact symptomatic of exactly the kind of expository technique that Lacan usually did his best to avoid. It is continually rehashed in commentaries on Lacan’s theory of the libido and tends to act as a block to any serious consideration of the theory itself.

Curiously enough, the story of the lamella carries a mathematical shadow. In a footnote to the Ecrits that once attracted some interest, Lacan proposes a mathematical model for the relation of the libido to the surface of the body, taken from physics. 16 The reference to Stokes’ theorem occurs just after a
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discussion of the lamella, yet unfortunately its value as a model is limited: the mathematics evoked adds little to Lacan’s argument and it presupposes a particular, metaphorical interpretation of what a vector space is. If we interpret the footnote, however, as more than a rhetorical device to generate transference to some supposed mathematical knowledge, it testifies first of all to Lacan’s effort to give a mathematical backbone to his theorizing, following the belief that the structures at play in the analytic field are mathematical structures, and secondly that what he is aiming to access theoretically cannot be simply formulated as a proposition.

We see the same principle at work in the equally famous commentary on Poe’s story “The purloined letter.” Lacan uses a fiction to develop his theory of the signifier and the function of the symbolic order, but then adds a difficult appendix introducing mathematical models, which usually passes without too much commentary. Why did Lacan choose to add this section to his work? Perhaps for the same reasons as the Stokes reference follows his use of the lamella story. He is aiming to access the structure of the relation of the subject to the signifier, and believes that this will be most clearly mapped out in mathematics.

We might find here the very principle that organizes Lévi-Strauss’s work on myth that Lacan took up in the 1950s: when something cannot be expressed as a meaningful proposition, it will take the form of a relation between two sets of elements. In this case, the lamella story and the Stokes theorem, the commentary on Poe and the mathematical appendix. Rather than interpreting these textual juxtapositions as indicating that the “truth” of the “Purloined letter” commentary or the lamella story lies in the mathematics, it suggests that, for Lacan, there is a real involved which can only emerge in between these two modes of presentation. As Lévi-Strauss’s work on myth showed, the real is only present as the result of a signifying combinatorial of oppositions.

This tension between the use of fictional models and logical or mathematical ones is also present in Lacan’s various perspectives on the Oedipus myth. In L’Envers de la psychanalyse, he claims that he only ever spoke about the Oedipus complex in terms of the paternal metaphor, that is, a formalized structure which concerns a normative set of relations.17 His various accounts of the Oedipus complex as a narrative are likewise shadowed by attempts to establish formal structures. This would eventually involve an application of the old Lévi-Strauss method: the Oedipus myth is treated as one bundle of relations, set in a relation of opposition to the other bundle of relations that constitutes the myth of Totem and Taboo.

In the story of Oedipus, access to the enjoyment of the mother has to pass via the murder of the father. In Totem and Taboo, it is after the brothers murder the father that they decide to forbid themselves the women that the murder was supposedly intended to allow them to access. The contradiction between these two sets of relations leads Lacan to equate the dead father and enjoyment: in other words, an impossibility emerges out of the opposition between the two stories. This impossibility will frame Lacan’s famous “formulas of sexuation,” discussed elsewhere in this volume, in which male and female sexuation is given a logical formalization involving two sets of contradictions. On a more general level, we see here the passage of the Oedipus myth as a narrative transformed into a set of abstract logical relations embodying different forms of impossibility.

We could conclude our discussion by asking whether Lacan created any new myths. Given the popular sense of the term as designating merely a fictional narrative dealing with a question of origins, our answer must be negative. But in the particular sense to which Lacan subscribed, there is no dearth of mythic activity: his continuous effort to grapple with psychoanalytic problems involving a real or point of impossibility led him to the construction of relational modes of exposition involving stories, images and fictions caught up with logical and mathematical models. If classical myth aimed “to give an epic form to structure,” Lacan was also after the structure, yet he chose logic rather than epic to do so.

Lacan’s emphasis on relational models was a central direction of research, and can be linked to the basic Structuralist notion that what cannot be formulated as a proposition can take on the form of a relation. As we have seen, this is why Lacan could refer to “the kinship of logic and myth.”18 And this is perhaps the key difference between Lacan’s and Freud’s myths: where Freud uses a mythic narrative to account for some contradictory or impossible real, Lacan looks to the relation between mythic narratives to access this same point. Hence his reading not of the Oedipus story or of the Totem and Taboo story as separate narratives, but as two oppositional poles of a formula.

Although it has been fashionable for many years to try to dispel the idea of a Structuralist Lacan, this aspect of his orientation is fundamental and extends into even his final seminars. What we need is less the well-worn critique of the aspects of Structuralism that are clearly antithetical to Lacan’s work than a reappraisal of the Structuralism that focuses on impass and impossibility, and the introduction of logical structures as a response to this. Despite their many differences, there is thus a current in the work of both Lacan and Lévi-Strauss that constitutes a part of the same, relentless mythic activity. And if this activity involves what can only be half-said, how could reading Lacan ever be easy?
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NOTES


3. Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, p. 204.


5. Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, p. 216.


10. Ibid., pp. 266–7.


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DANY NOBUS

Lacan’s science of the subject: between linguistics and topology

Many students of the arts and humanities probably first encounter the name of Jacques Lacan in one of the numerous studies of the French Structuralist movement, an intellectual paradigm which attained the zenith of its public success during the 1960s, and which has since occupied many an Anglo-American scholar’s critical spotlight, either as a fashionable esoteric creed or as an original explanatory doctrine. Invariably associated with the contributions of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Louis Althusser – the central quadrivium of Structuralism – Lacan’s oeuvre has indeed frequently appeared as another influential instance of how Structuralist ideas managed to change the face of many research areas in the human and social sciences, in his case the field of Freudian psychoanalytic practice. Whereas his companions have been hailed or vilified for their Structuralist approaches to anthropology, literary criticism, philosophy, and politics, Lacan has entered history as the quintessential defender of the Structuralist cause in psychoanalysis, an acolyte so militant that he did not shrink from making the claim that Freud himself had always been an inveterate structuralist avant la lettre.¹

The main reason for Lacan’s recognition, and his intermittent self-identification as a Structuralist is situated in his allegiance to the basic principles of Structuralist linguistics, as inaugurated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his famous Course in General Linguistics, published posthumously in 1916, and as elaborated from the late 1920s by Roman Jakobson, founding member and chief representative of the Prague Linguistic Circle.² As Jakobson explained in his Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning, a series of epoch-making presentations at the École libre des hautes études in New York during the autumn of 1942, Saussure cleared the path for an innovative conception of language, focusing more on the meaningful function of sounds than on their anatomophysiologibasis, investigating language as a socially regulated, universal human faculty rather than a culturally diverse and historically evolving collection of words, and viewing language as a complex

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system of relationships between a basic repertory of sounds instead of the sum total of all the elements employed for conveying a message. To substantiate his revolutionary outlook on language, Saussure brought an impressive array of new concepts to his object of study, many of which were couched in dual oppositions. In this way he distinguished between the language system (langue) and individual speech acts (parole) (CGL, pp. 17–20), between synchronic (static) and diachronic (evolutionary) linguistics (p. 81), and between syntagmatic (linear) and associative (substitutive) relationships within a given language state (pp. 122–7). Yet Saussure’s greatest claim to fame no doubt stems from his definition of the linguistic sign as a dual unit composed of a signifier (signifiant) and a signified (signifié) (pp. 65–70).

Against the realist perspective on language, according to which all words are but names corresponding to prefabricated things in the outside world, Saussure argued that within any language system the linguistic signs connect sound-images to concepts, instead of names to things. The sound-image, or signifier, coincides with the vocal production and sensory perception associated with a verbal utterance. It therefore possesses acoustic and material (physical) qualities, the phonic aspects of which could, in principle, be registered and measured. The concept, or signified, coincides with the idea in the individual’s mind, a thought-process occurring as a result of a particular sensory impression, or seeking to express itself through a verbal utterance. Unlike the signifier, the signified possesses mental and semantic (meaningful) qualities, the psychological and social aspects of which could, in principle, be referred to the individual’s family background, education, social identity and nationality.

In Saussure’s linguistics the relationship between the signifier and the signified is completely arbitrary, whilst the two constitutive elements of the linguistic sign remain fully interdependent. An example may clarify this proposition. The concept (signified) of “the male individual who was born as my parents’ child before or after me” is linked in the English language to the sound-image (signifier) of “brother.” Yet nothing whatsoever within this concept predisposes it to being conveyed by this specific signifier. Proof is that the same concept is linked to very different signifiers in other languages: “frère” in French, “broer” in Dutch, “hermano” in Spanish, “bhai” in Hindi, and so on. Conversely, nothing within the signifiers “brother,” “frère,” “broer,” “hermano,” and “bhai” makes them intrinsically well-suited for conjuring up the concept of “the male individual who was born as my parents’ child before or after me.” The fact that they do is purely accidental and a matter of convention. Any other signifier could have been connected as effectively with the same signified within a certain language. In one and the same language a single signifier may even be linked with various non-overlapping

![Figure 4.1](image-url)
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(E/S, p. 149). In response to some erroneous interpretations of the latter definition, especially that which had been advanced by Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire in their 1960 text on the unconscious, Lacan later pointed out that the bar between the signifier and the signified ought not be understood as the barrier between the unconscious and the preconscious, thus representing the psychic mechanism of repression, nor as a proportion or fraction indicating a ratio between two variables. Instead, he pointed out that the bar should be read as a “real border, that is to say for leaping, between the floating signifier and the flowing signified.”

Much has been written about Lacan’s distortion of Saussure’s basic schema of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. One of the earliest and most trenchant critical assessments of Lacan’s operation is included in The Title of the Letter, a meticulous deconstruction of his 1957 paper by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, which he himself praised in his 1972-73 seminar as “a model of good reading.” Encouraged by the vigor of Jacques Derrida’s attack on Western logocentrism in Of Grammatology and Writing and Difference, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe set out to demonstrate that Lacan’s linguistic turn in psychoanalysis, however far it reportedly removed itself from traditional philosophical notions, epitomized an implicit return to the age-old metaphysical concepts of subjectivity, being, and truth. Comparing Lacan’s algorithm of the signifier and the signified to Saussure’s original notation, the authors discerned a number of crucial differences, which prompted them to conclude that taking his bearings from Saussurean linguistics, Lacan had spitefully destroyed one of the cornerstones of his alleged theoretical foundation in view of its potential appropriation for his own psychoanalytic purposes.

The most conspicuous difference between Saussure’s and Lacan’s diagrams concerns the positions of the signifier and the signified relative to the bar that separates them. Whereas in Saussure’s schema, the signified and the signifier are located above and beneath the bar respectively, in Lacan’s version their position has been interchanged. Secondly, whereas Saussure’s diagram suggests if not an equivalence, at least a parallelism between the signified and the signifier, owing to the similarity with which they are graphically inscribed above and beneath the bar, Lacan’s algorithm underscores visually the incompatibility of the two terms. For in Lacan’s formula the signifier is written with an upper-case letter (S) and the signified appears in lower-case type (s), and is italicized (s). Additionally, the ubiquitous ellipse encapsulating the signifier and the signified in Saussure’s diagrams is absent from Lacan’s rendering, and so are the two arrows that link the terms. For Saussure, both the ellipse and the arrows symbolize the unbreakable unity of the sign; the signifier does not exist without the signified, and vice versa.

Despite the arbitrariness of their connection, Lacan’s deletion of the ellipse and arrows thus already suggests that in his account of the relationship between the signifier and the signified the unity of the linguistic sign is seriously put into question. Finally, whereas for Saussure the line distinguishing the signifier and the signified expresses at once the profound division and the strict solidarity of the two terms, for Lacan the line constitutes a genuine barrier— an obstacle preventing the smooth crossing from one realm to the other.

These four differences between Saussure’s linguistic sign and Lacan’s algorithm of the signifier and the signified raise a number of important questions concerning the motives and corollaries of Lacan’s distortion and the general affinities between his theory of psychoanalysis and structural linguistics. Did Lacan subvert Saussure’s model because he deemed it imprecise— as indeed Jakobson had already surmised in his 1942 lecture series— from a linguistic point of view, or rather because he considered it unsuitable as a workable construct for psychoanalysis? If it was his psychoanalytic experience that inspired Lacan to revise Saussure’s schema, which aspects of this experience urged him to implement the revision in this particular fashion? And what are the consequences of Lacan’s subversion for the way in which language is held to function both outside and within psychoanalytic treatment? More generally, what are its implications for Lacan’s perceived allegiance to the Structuralist paradigm? Does it invalidate Lacan’s role as one of the key players within the Structuralist movement, or does it open the door to a more radical, super-Structuralist approach?

The first thing to note when assessing Lacan’s motives for modifying Saussure’s schema of the linguistic sign is that instead of discovering the Swiss linguist’s lectures all by himself, he was exposed to them indirectly, through the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. The latter’s knowledge of Saussure and structural linguistics had in turn been mediated by somebody else’s comments, notably those of Roman Jakobson, whose New York course Lévi-Strauss attended in the autumn of 1942. As the anthropologist admitted on numerous occasions, it was Jakobson who had provided him with a solid theoretical framework for interpreting his observations and who had encouraged him to engage in the project of The Elementary Structures of Kinship, the book which announced the birth of structural anthropology. Thus, Lacan initially read Saussure through the eyes of Lévi-Strauss, whose own reading had passed through the critical filter of Roman Jakobson.

In his Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning, Jakobson was generally appreciative of Saussure’s work, commending it as one of the most significant steps for the study of language sounds in their functional aspects, yet he also believed that the Course remained deeply entrenched
When Lévi-Strauss dipped into Saussurean theory in The Elementary Structures of Kinship, and more markedly in his extraordinary Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss, his was already much more a critical re-interpretation of Saussure’s ideas than an accurate presentation of their impact. For example, Lévi-Strauss declared in the latter text that structural linguistics has “familiarised us with the idea that the fundamental phenomena of mental life... are located on the plane of unconscious thinking,” adding that the “unconscious would thus be the mediating term between self and others.” Inasmuch as Saussure and Jakobson were interested in the unconscious at all, to the best of my knowledge they had never formulated anything as specific and decisive about its importance within mental functioning. And whereas Lévi-Strauss’s first statement may still leave some doubt as to the exact nature of his viewpoint – “unconscious” could be a mere quality of certain thoughts – the second statement makes it crystal-clear that he conceived of the unconscious as a mental system, akin to how Freud had defined it in his so-called “first topography” of the unconscious, the pre-conscious, and consciousness. Further in the same section of the Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss argued that social life and language share the same autonomous reality, whereby symbols function in such a way that the symbolized object is much less important (and real) than the symbolic element that conveys it. This observation emboldened him to posit, challenging the basic principle underlying the Saussurean linguistic sign, that “the signifier precedes and determines the signified.” Needless to say, this proposed primacy of the signifier could still be conceivable alongside a Saussurean-type interdependence of the signifier and the signified. But Lévi-Strauss dismantled the unity of the linguistic sign as swiftly as the other components of Saussure’s theory. Substituting “inadequation” for equivalence and “non-fit” for adequacy, he claimed that no signifier ever “fits” a signified perfectly, human beings doing their utmost to distribute the available signifiers across the board of signifieds without ever creating a perfect match. In light of Lévi-Strauss’s singular espousal of structural linguistics, Lacan’s alleged distortion of the Saussurean sign becomes evidently more considerable and less idiosyncratic, less erratic and more deliberate. In defending the “primordial position of the signifier” and defining the line separating the signifier and the signified as a “barrier resisting signification” (E/S, p. 149), Lacan simply reiterated and formalized the ideas that Lévi-Strauss had already professed some seven years earlier. Although he did not mention his friend-anthropologist by name in his seminal 1957 article on the value of Saussure’s theory for psychoanalysis, Lacan attributed to the Swiss linguist what was in reality a Lévi-Straussian conception of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. And until the end of his intellectual career, Lacan did not budge an inch on the supremacy of the signifier and the “inadequation” of its relationship with the signified, the two hallmarks of Lévi-Strauss’s take on structural linguistics. Even when these axioms came under serious attack, towards the end of the 1960s, from Derrida’s deconstructionist critique of the Western metaphysical tradition, Lacan remained adamant that the letter (writing) cannot overthrow the signifier (speech) as the primary force of language, and that the greatest achievement of structural linguistics consists in the imposition of a barrier between the signifier and the signified. Lacan’s formalization of the constitutive linguistic algorithm, along the lines suggested by Lévi-Strauss, was not just indicative of his eagerness to rescue the ailing body of psychoanalysis through an injection of the latest scientific developments. His integration of clinical psychoanalysis and structural linguistics a la Lévi-Strauss was not merely inspired by a desire to accelerate the aggiornamento of Freud’s legacy. For Lacan was equally keen to underscore that Freud himself had anticipated the premises of Saussure’s doctrine and those of the Prague Linguistic Circle, so that instead of infusing psychoanalysis with a foreign substance he could safely argue that structural linguistics entailed the most advanced continuation of Freudian psychoanalysis. In the 1971 text “Lituraterre” Lacan even went so far as to recognize the signifier in the notion of Wahrnehmungszeichen, literally “perception sign,” which Freud had introduced in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess of 6 December 1896. Remarkably, when trying to find evidence for the presence of Saussure’s concepts in Freud’s writings, Lacan never took advantage of the terminology suffusing Freud’s 1891 book On Aphasia, in which the founder of psychoanalysis had decomposed “word-representations” into four distinct images, dubbing the most important one Klangbild, that is to say “sound image,” or precisely what Saussure would later elect to designate as the signifier. Over and above the question as to whether it makes sense to claim that Freud had foreshadowed the principal propositions of structural linguistics,
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it may seem self-evident to many a reader for Lacan to attempt a revaluation of psychoanalysis through the systematic accounting of language and its functions. After all, Anna O., one of the most famous patients in the history of psychoanalysis, could not have described the treatment regime to which she had been subjected by Josef Breuer more accurately than that of a “talking cure” (SE 2, p. 30). And when Freud decided to leave the so-called hypnotic method behind, in order to access more fully the pathogenic vicissitudes of representations and their effects in the unconscious mind of his patients, language became even more the privileged playground of psychoanalytic treatment. Trying to substantiate a clinical practice which relies exclusively on the effects of a verbal exchange through the promotion of linguistics may thus appear to be an act of common sense rather than a revolutionary undertaking.

However, Lacan’s main rationale for merging psychoanalysis with structural linguistics lies elsewhere. Throughout his career, he ventured to explain how Freud had demonstrated in The Interpretation of Dreams, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, and Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious that the modus operandi of the unconscious and its formations (dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes) cannot be understood without taking account of the role of the signifier and the structure of language. For instance, in his notorious 1953 “Rome discourse,” Lacan explicated at length how Freud’s tactics of interpretation ought to be conceived as a practice of reading, deciphering, and translation (E/S, pp. 57–61). In Lacan’s understanding, Freud had recourse to these procedures because the formations of the unconscious are themselves the outcome of an intense rhetorical labor – as opposed to, say, the simple transformation of words into images or the transmission of psychic energy to the biological substratum of the body. Freud’s extensive probing of word-connections in the analysis of his own forgetting of the name Signorelli thus proved to Lacan that psychoanalytic interpretation is tantamount to a reading process, and that this method is invaluable, owing to the linguistic nature of the unconscious (SE 3, p. 287).

Lacan’s discovery of a linguistic breeding-ground in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and practice equipped him with a powerful argument against the ego-psychological tradition in contemporary psychoanalysis, whose representatives were more concerned with rebuilding their analysands’ personalities as well-adapted, competent citizens than with the dissection of unconscious formations, and in whose clinical field language functioned more as an obstacle than a necessary means. Yet, similar to his distortion of Saussure’s concept of the linguistic sign, Lacan found additional support for his personal rendering of the Freudian unconscious in the work of Lévi-Strauss. Indeed, as early as 1949, in an influential paper on “The effectiveness of symbols” the anthropologist had already proclaimed that the unconscious is synonymous with the symbolic function, which operates in every human being according to the same laws, regardless of individual idioms and regional dialects.” Combining this insight with his own re-reading of Freud’s books on dreams, slips, and jokes, Lacan subsequently adduced the formula which would gain prominence as the single most important emblem for his entire work: “The unconscious is structured as a language.” The only reservation he ever made pertaining to the value of this statement concerns the tautological nature of its wording. As such, he indicated to an international audience of scholars gathered in Baltimore during the autumn of 1966 that the qualification “as a language” is entirely redundant because it means exactly the same as “structured.”

Armed on the one hand with the idea that the signifier prevails over the signified and on the other with the formula that the unconscious is structured (as a language), Lacan devoted all his energy during the 1950s and 60s to the careful deployment of a version of Freudian psychoanalysis which simultaneously vindicated its loyalty to the founder’s original inspiration and justified its enlightened character through the principles of structural linguistics. For many of his fellow-analysts, Lacan’s interpretation of Freud was exactly the opposite of what he himself wanted it to be: they saw it as a potentially dangerous and fundamentally flawed aberration which needed to be exposed and exterminated, rather than a strictly orthodox elaboration which ought to be regarded as the only true account of the original texts. Who is the honest defender of the Freudian cause and who is the impostor? Lacan or ego-psychology? These are the issues that have divided the international psychoanalytic landscape since Lacan’s occupation of the intellectual scene as a contested, yet hugely influential maitre-a-penser.

Looking back at these questions twenty years after Lacan’s death, and in a contemporary climate of newly erupting conflicts between Lacanians and the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), it would be ridiculous to maintain that Lacan merely sought to regurgitate the naked truth of Freud’s doctrine. As he openly declared in “The Freudian Thing” (1955), the meaning of his so-called “return to Freud” was no more and no less than “a return to the meaning of Freud,” but this admission did not preclude this meaning being refracted by the prism of Structuralism advocated in Lévi-Strauss’s new paradigm of anthropological research (E/S, p. 117). In Lacan’s amalgamation of structural linguistics and psychoanalysis, both disciplines were simultaneously preserved and modified, according to the Hegelian principle of sublation (Aufhebung). If Lacan’s espousal of Saussure’s linguistic sign encompassed a fruitful distortion of its underlying tenets, then his interpretation of Freud’s work also entailed a radicalization of its main thrust. If

SUGGESTED READINGS ON LACAN

BY HASAN SHAIFE

DANY NOBUS
Lacan's science of the subject

Lacan's psychoanalytic course supported his modification of Saussurean linguistics, however influential Lévi-Strauss's ideas may have been, his linguistic interest also inflamed his recuperation of Freudian psychoanalysis as a clinical practice based on the power of speech and the structure of language.

After his excommunication from the IPA in November 1963, Lacan engaged in an even more vehement campaign for the recognition of his approach, solidifying its foundations and exploring its significance for the epistemological differentiation between psychoanalysis, religion, and science. Concerning the latter debate, he suggested in “Science and Truth” that the structural approach constitutes a necessary and sufficient condition for guaranteeing the scientificity of psychoanalysis, thus scarring those psychoanalysts who try to redress the legitimacy of their discipline by tailoring its logic to the requirements of empirical science, and ultimately refusing to relinquish the notion that psychoanalysis is an unscientific, speculative “depth-psychology” concerning the illogical, irrational and ineffable aspects of the mind.65 Invigorated, once again, by Lévi-Strauss's take on the nature of a scientific praxis as detailed, for instance, in The Savage Mind, Lacan argued that the psychoanalytic delineation of the mental invariants governing the empirical diversity of the formations of the unconscious suffices to define psychoanalysis as a scientific enterprise – not a science in the traditional (positivistic, experimentalist) sense of the term, but a science nonetheless.66 Hence, the Structuralist project also offered Lacan the opportunity to realize Freud's ardent wish to see psychoanalysis included among the sciences.67

The aforementioned differences between Saussure's formula of the linguistic sign and Lacan's algorithm of structural linguistics indicate how Lacanian psychoanalysis no longer puts the signifier and the signified on an equal footing (considering its reliance on the primacy of the signifier), and how it repudiates the possibility of a self-contained, unitary relationship between a sound-image and a concept (considering its emphasis on the barrier between the two components). In a sense these two key characteristics of Lacanian theory sustain each other, because the imposition of a cut between the signifier and the signified increases the autonomy of the signifier, and the latter's separation from the signified is directly proportional to its symbolic autonomy.

The direct implication of these two characteristics for clinical psychoanalysis is that it ought to concentrate on the existing relationships within the network of signifiers rather than on the relationship between a signifier and a signified outside its sphere of influence. Lacan believed that analysts ought to target their interpretations at the connections between the signifiers in their analysands' associations, and not at the meaningful links between signifiers and signifieds (§ XI, p. 250). Put differently, he urged the analyst neither to ratify or condemn the meaning of an analysand's symptoms (as it has taken shape in his or her own mind), nor to try to alleviate these symptoms by suggesting a new meaning (as it appears in the mind of the analyst), but to elicit analytic effects through the intentional displacement of the analysand's discourse.68 The notion “displacement” is synonymous here with the shifting connection between signifiers and also with the rhetorical trope of “metonymy,” which Lacan extracted, alongside that of “metaphor,” from the work of Roman Jakobson (E/S, pp. 156–163–4).69 By demanding that the analyst formulate metonymical interpretations – undoing and not fortifying meaning, revealing and not concealing it – Lacan championed a purportedly more effective tactic for psychoanalytic treatment than any of the other, accepted techniques of interpretation (explanation, clarification, confrontation, reassurance, etc.). For Lacan insisted that all these techniques somehow rely on the substitution of the analyst's signifiers for those of the analysand, that is to say, they all function within the dimension of metaphor, which invalidates their power over the symptom, because the latter is a metaphor in itself (E/S, p. 175). Indeed, because the symptom is a metaphor – the exchange of one signifier for another signifier or, in Freudian terms, the replacement of one repressed unconscious representation with another representation – it cannot subsist by means of an analytic intervention that is metaphorical too.70

The clinical issues I am highlighting here are by no means marginal, much less alien to Lacan's Structuralist project of psychoanalysis. On the contrary, the peculiarities of clinical psychoanalytic practice inform every single aspect of Lacan’s trajectory, from his earliest contributions on the family and the mirror stage to his final excursions on the intertwining of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. It is precisely this relentless clinical questioning rather than, say, the impact of Lévi-Straussian Structuralism, which triggered some of Lacan’s supplementary modifications of Saussure’s linguistic model. The most significant of these adjustments no doubt concerns his critique of the superiority of the language-system (langue), to the detriment of speech (parole) in the Course.71 In his ambition to devise a new scientific theory of language as an abstract system of signs embedded within a social context of human interactions, Saussure needed to make abstraction of the utterance, in which individuals employ the language code for expressing their thoughts and in which they rely on psycho-physical mechanisms of motor production and sensory reception. For Saussure, the only possible object for linguistics proper is therefore the language system (CGL, pp. 14, 20). As a psychoanalyst, Lacan disagreed with Saussure's decision to relinquish the study of speech, because within psychoanalytic treatment the function of the analysand's speech is more important than anything else. The signifier thus
Lacan's science of the subject appeared in Lacan's version of structural linguistics not as an element of the general language system but as the key element of the analysand's speech. Lacan's emphasis on speech and his relative disregard for the language-system coincided with a sustained reflection upon the status of the subject in relation to the law of the symbolic order, or what Lacan designated as the Other. The subject should not be understood here as the unified, self-conscious being or the integrated personality so dear to many a psychologist, but as the subject of the unconscious – a subject that does not function as the center of human thought and action, but which inhabits the mind as an elusive agency, controlling yet uncontrollable. The reason for Lacan's “subversion” of the classical, psychological notion of the subject is that during psychoanalytic treatment the analyst is not supposed to be concerned with how the analysand wittingly and willingly presents him- or herself in the twists and turns of his or her verbal productions, nor in the content of the analysand's speech (what somebody is saying), but in the fact that something is being said from a place unknown to the analysand. "It speaks, and, no doubt, where it is least expected, namely, where there is pain," Lacan stated in 1955 (E/S, p. 125). In keeping with Freud's formula that patients suffer from “thoughts without knowing anything about them,” Lacan subsequently stipulated that the unconscious is a body of knowledge which expresses itself in various formations (dreams, slips, symptoms) without this knowledge being operated by a conscious regulator. Analytic treatment rests on the manipulation of the analysand's unconscious thoughts and as such it should reach beyond what is said and how it is being said, towards an investigation of where things are being said from and who, if anybody, is actually saying it. What the analysand says is but a semblance and cannot be dissociated from what the analyst hears in his or her own understanding of the words; the very process of saying is much more important than the form of the productions in which it results. Throughout his work Lacan insisted on this point, deploring the fact that many analysts just continued to devote all their attention to understanding the content of the analysand's message.

Borrowing another set of concepts from Jakobson's research, Lacan also mapped out the antagonism between self-conscious identity and unconscious subject across the two poles of the opposition between the subject of the statement (sujet de l’´enonc´e) and the subject of the enunciation (sujet de l’´enonciation). Freud's famous joke of the two Jews who meet at a station in Galicia still serves as an excellent example of what Lacan was trying to demonstrate here. When the first Jew – let us call him Moshe – asks the second, who will go by the name of Mordechai, “So where are you going?” Mordechai says, “I am going to Cracow.” This message instantly infuriates Moshe, who exclaims: “You’re a dirty liar, Mordechai, because you are only telling me you’re going to Cracow in order to make me believe that you’re going to Lemberg, but I happen to know that you are going to Cracow!” (SE 8, p. 115). Of course, the joke is that Moshe accuses Mordechai of being a liar, whereas what Mordechai says is a truthful description of his journey plan. Moshe acknowledges that the subject of the statement is telling the truth about himself – “I know you’re going to Cracow” – but he also pinpoints the deceitful intention behind Mordechai's statement, which reveals the subject of the enunciation: “Your true intention is to deceive me.” Mordechai may or may not have been aware of his intention, the fact of the matter is that Moshe acknowledges the presence of another subject behind the subject of the statement.

As a postulate, the subject of the enunciation implies that the subject of the statement (the personal pronoun or name with which the speaker identifies in his or her message) is continuously pervaded by another dimension of speech, another location of thought. However strongly somebody may identify with the subject of the statement, we have good reason to believe that the utterance is also coming from somewhere else than the place which the message has defined as the locus of emission. More concretely, if an analysand says, “I am doomed to ruin every relationship I am engaged in,” the analyst need not bother very much about the grammatical structure and semantic value of the message, but ought to concentrate on the fact that something is being said from a particular place, the exact source and intention of which remain unclear and require further exploration. When the analysand is saying, “I am doomed, etc.,” the subject of the enunciation is not necessarily herself. The statement may very well represent the discourse of her mother and she may easily produce these words for the analyst to believe that they are hers and for him to try to convince her that she is not doomed at all.

When Lacan embraced structural linguistics to advance the practice of Freudian psychoanalysis, he was hardly concerned with the type of questions Saussure and Jakobson were interested in, namely those related to the study of language as an abstract functional system linking sound and meaning. And despite his high regard for Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, it is fair to say that he was neither involved in the study of how rules of kinship, the classification of natural phenomena, and the deployment of myths reflect the organization of the human mind and vice versa. What mattered more than anything else to Lacan, considering the specific nature of psychoanalytic praxis, was the establishment of a science of the subject – not the self-contained subject of consciousness but the ephemeral subject of the unconscious.

It probably does not come as a surprise, then, that as his work progressed Lacan became more and more skeptical about the value of linguistics for...
psychoanalysis. In December 1972, during a crucial session of his seminar *Encore*, which was notably attended by Jakobson, he eventually admitted that in order to capture something of the Freudian unconscious and its subject, linguistics does not prove very helpful. Insofar as language is indeed of the utmost importance to the psychoanalyst, what is needed, Lacan quipped, is not the science of linguistics, but “linguisteria” (linguisterie), a certain (per)version of linguistics which takes account of the process of saying and its relation to the (subject of the) unconscious (§ XX, p. 15).

In “L’Étourdit,” the message was even more provocative: “For linguistics on the other hand does not open up anything for analysis, and even the support I have taken from Jakobson isn’t... of the order of retrospective effect [après-coup], but of repercussion [contrecoup] – to the benefit, and secondary-sayingly [second-dire], of linguistics.” In other words, instead of conceding that psychoanalysis had progressed by virtue of its marriage to structural linguistics, Lacan claimed that linguistic science itself would benefit from his psychoanalytic espousal of Structuralist ideas.

It is tempting to entertain the idea that Lacan’s gradual departure from structural linguistics and his concurrent divergence from the Structuralist paradigm in general, fostered the ascendance of topological investigations in his work. Topology is a branch of mathematics which came to prominence towards the end of the nineteenth century and which deals with those aspects of geometrical figures that remain invariant when they are being transformed. As such, a circle and an ellipse are considered topologically equivalent because the former can be transformed into the latter through a process of continuous deformation – that is, a process which does not involve cutting and/or pasting. References to topology abound in Lacan’s texts, and topological surfaces such as the Mobius strip, the Klein bottle, the torus, and the cross-cap emerged intermittently in his seminars from the early 1960s until the early 1970s. Yet during the last decade of his life, from 1971 to 1981, Lacan spent more time than ever studying the relevance of these surfaces for the formulation of a scientific theory of psychoanalysis.

After having discovered the so-called “Borromean knot” during the winter of 1972, Lacan would often spend hours and hours weaving ends of rope and drawing complicated diagrams on small pieces of paper. His preoccupation with topological transformations became so overwhelming that during his seminar of 1978–79 he even silenced his own voice in favor of the practice of writing and drawing, treating his audience to the speechless creation of intricate knots on the blackboard.

Does topology supplant Structuralism in Lacan’s intellectual itinerary? Does topology address the problems Lacan identified within structural linguistics? Does it constitute a more scientific approach to the practice of psychoanalysis than the doctrine of Structuralism? Is it more in tune with the subject of the unconscious than the linguistic research tradition? Within the space of this paper, I can only touch the surface of these issues, due to the fact that they put at stake the entire epistemology of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the transmission of psychoanalytic knowledge within and outside clinical practice, and the conflctual relationship between speech and writing. Lacking the space for developing the long reply to the above questions, I shall restrict myself to giving the short answer, which can only be “yes and no.”

Let me start with the affirmative side of the answer. Topology does indeed replace structural linguistics within Lacan’s theoretical advancements of the 1970s. To verify this claim one need not look further – although I can imagine that many readers of Lacan will already situate this point way beyond their intellectual horizon – than his 1972 text “L’Étourdit.” Juxtaposed to his explicit devaluation of linguistics is the affirmation that topology constitutes the essential reference and prime contributing force to the analytic discourse. Unlike linguistics, Lacan contended, topology is not “made for guiding us” in the structure of the unconscious. For topology is the structure itself, which entails that (unlike linguistics) it is not a metaphor for the structure. It should be noted here that Lacan did not define topological transformations in general as the equivalent of unconscious structure, but only those that apply to non-spherical objects, such as the torus and the cross-cap (projective plane). Topology’s advantage over linguistics thus comes exclusively from its non-spherical applications, that is to say those transformations implemented on objects without a center. If Lacan’s critique of structural linguistics stemmed largely from the latter’s inherent presupposition of a total and totalizing language system centered around the primordial incidence of the signifier, his recourse to topology was meant to account for the very absence of a nodal point in the unconscious. Whereas linguistics did make ample room for the study of structural transformations – as exemplified by Lévi-Strauss’s massive, four-volume “science of mythology” series – it was, at least according to Lacan, incapable of explaining the occurrence of these transformations without continuing to presuppose the presence of a creative or transformative agency. In the unconscious, however, the subject is real; it is the very absence of being that rules the organization and transformation of knowledge. This is what Lacan endeavored to demonstrate with his non-spherical topology.

The negative side of the answer is slightly more difficult to explain. Topology does not replace structural linguistics within Lacan’s theoretical advancements of the 1970s, partly because topology emphasizes writing to the detriment of speech, partly because topology is equally at risk of functioning as...
a mere metaphor for the mechanisms of speech and language in the unconscious. During the early to mid 1970s Lacan engaged in a lengthy paean to the virtues of writing, because he believed that, by contrast with the signifier, writing operates within the dimension of the real and is therefore able to guarantee a complete transmission of knowledge. In his seminar Encore, Lacan confessed unreservedly to his faith in the ideal of mathematical formalizations, because he considered them to be transmitted without the interference of meaning (S XX, pp. 108, 109). For many years, writing in its various avatars (the letter, algebraic formula, topological figures, drawings of Borromean knots) was Lacan’s preferred mode of demonstration, and he relentlessly imbued his followers with his latest achievements in the realm of knot theory. Yet what he seemed to forget at this stage is that psychoanalytic practice does not rely on an exchange of letters, but on the production of speech. Topology may have taken Lacan to the real heart of the psychoanalytic experience, it also drove him away from its necessary means and principal power.

At the same time when Lacan expressed his confidence in formalization, he also divulged that mathematical formulae cannot be transmitted without language, so that the re-emergence of meaning presents an ongoing threat to the possibility of an unambiguous, integral transmission of knowledge. Nonetheless, Lacan continued to step up his campaign for the acknowledgement of writing, mathematical formalization, and topology until the end of his 1976–7 seminar, when he admitted that the entire project was likely to fail in light of the inevitable interference of meaning. Towards the very end of his career, Lacan expressed this failure even more strongly, when formulating the most trenchant self-criticism of his entire life’s work and admitting to the fact that instead of conveying the real of psychoanalytic experience the Borromean knot had just proved to be an inappropriate metaphor. In this way, he opened up new avenues for a return to the study of speech and language in the unconscious, not via the re-invention of structural linguistics, but possibly via another, more psychoanalytically attuned theory of language. Unfortunately, Lacan did not live long enough to embark on this new, challenging project.

NOTES

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2. See Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sëchéhaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Peter Owen, 1960). Hereafter cited in the text as CGL. Saussure’s book is also available in a more recent translation by Roy Harris, yet owing to its idiosyncratic rendering of some of Saussure’s key terms, the reader will find this version quite difficult to use, especially in light of the fact that the bulk of the secondary literature on Saussurean linguistics has not adopted Harris’ options.


10. Ibid. p. 61.


18. The formula appeared for the first time, in rudimentary form, in Lacan's seminar of 1955–56: “Translating Freud, we say – the unconscious is a language” (S III, p. 11).


26. The reader should note that Baskin has translated the term *parole* as “speaking,” reserving “speech” rather confusingly for *langage*. Harris has adopted “speech” for *parole*, but fails to distinguish consistently between *langue* and *langage*. Sometimes he translates *langue* as “the language itself,” and sometimes as “a language system” and “language structure,” thus introducing a notion (that of structure) which has no conceptual status in Saussure's work. At other times he also renders *langue* erroneously as “individual languages.”


No writer in the history of psychoanalysis has done more to bring Freudian theory into dialogue with the philosophical tradition than Jacques Lacan. His work engages with a dauntingly wide array of thinkers, including not only his near contemporaries (Saussure, Bénveniste, Jakobson, Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, Lévi-Strauss, Piaget, Sartre, Kojève, Hyppolite, Koyré, and Althusser), but also other figures reaching back to the Enlightenment (Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Aristotle, Plato, and the pre-Socratics). His references, moreover, are not limited to the familiar landmarks of the post-Structuralist tradition who have so often been used to interpret him (Kojève and Hegel, Saussure and Lévi-Strauss), but include numerous figures from the British tradition (Bertrand Russell, Jeremy Bentham, Isaac Newton, Jonathan Swift, and George Berkeley), as well as from the history of science and mathematics (Cantor, Frege, Poincaré, Bourbaki, Moebius, Huyghens, Copernicus, Kepler, and Euclid). While some of these references are no doubt merely grace notes, introduced to embellish a notoriously labyrinthine and Gongoristic style, it is impossible to ignore the fact that his engagement with a large number of these figures is serious, focused, and sustained over many years.

The task of commentary is therefore enormous. Lacan’s early seminars (1953–5) are marked by a prolonged encounter with Hegel, who had a substantial and abiding effect not only on his account of the imaginary and the relation to the other (jealousy and love, intersubjective rivalry and narcissism), but also on his understanding of negation and desire while leading to the logic of the signifier. His Seminar on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, well-known for its extended reading of Sophocles’ Antigone, also contains a treatment of Kantian ethics, Bentham’s utilitarianism, and Aristotle’s philosophy, including not only the Nicomachean Ethics, but also the Poetics and the Rhetoric, and especially their discussions of “catharsis” – a term which has an elaborate history both in esthetic theory and in psychoanalysis itself, while the “cathartic method” played an important role. Here already, an enormous task is proposed, concerning the relations between art and psychoanalysis, as well as the transformation that separates modernity (Kant’s esthetic theory) from the ancient world (Aristotle’s Poetics) – a historical question that is repeatedly marked by Lacan, as if to suggest that psychoanalytic theory, in order to be truly responsible for its concepts, must account for its own historical emergence as it seeks to articulate its place in relation to the philosophical tradition which it inevitably inherits.

Every text is full of such challenges. His Seminar on Transference provides a sustained reading of Plato’s Symposium, and his Seminar on The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis contains a well-known commentary on Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of painting, which appeared in the philosopher’s posthumously published book, The Visible and the Invisible, a work which had a significant impact on Lacan’s concept of the gaze. Each of these encounters, taken by itself, calls for a careful analysis, and there are many others, including influences that were not the subject of explicit commentary, beginning with his attendance at Kojève’s lectures.

Lacan spoke frequently of Heidegger, starting in 1933, in Recherches philosophiques and Evolution psychiatrique, where we find early book reviews of Henri Ey and Eugène Minkowski. References to Heidegger continue in “Propos sur la causalité psychique,” in Seminar II, in “Le Mythe individuel du névrosé,” in the discussion of Heidegger’s “Das Ding” in Seminar VII, in “L’Instance de la lettre,” and elsewhere, including texts that are less well known to Anglo-American readers, such as “Allocutions sur les psychoses de l’enfant,” and the “Rome discourse.” It would be a mistake, moreover, to suppose that all these references merely repeat the same idea or formula, for in one case he is concerned with the temporality of the subject and the text of Being and Time, while in another he is concerned with the distinction between the “thing” and the “object,” and the text of Poetry, Language, Thought. A cursory mention of “the famous being-towards-death” will simply not do justice to these complex relationships. Lacan’s interest was sufficiently piqued that he translated Heidegger’s essay “Logos” for the first issue of La Psychanalyse; and the most frequently cited of these references, taken from the final pages of the “Function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis,” reads almost like a manifesto: “Of all the undertakings that have been proposed in this century, that of psychoanalysis is perhaps the loftiest, because the undertaking of the psychoanalyst acts in our time as a mediator between the man of care and the subject of absolute knowledge” (E/S, p. 105). Such a proposal, placing Freud in relation to both Heidegger’s account of Dasein (the “man of care”) and Hegel’s phenomenology (“the subject of absolute knowledge”), could occupy more
than one doctoral thesis, as could any number of these engagements with the philosophical tradition. 9

Canonical figures in continental philosophy, moreover, are not the only important names for Lacan. Readers who are accustomed to a reception governed by Hegel and Saussure may be surprised to know that Aristotle is one of the most frequent points of reference in the entire Lacanian oeuvre. In Seminar XX: Encore, for example – as we shall see more clearly in a moment – Aristotle provides a guiding thread for an argument that passes from Freud’s account of masculinity and femininity, through symbolic logic (the famous quantifiers of sexual difference), and thence to the modal categories of existence (possibility, impossibility, contingency, and necessity) found in Aristotle but reconfigured through the semiotics of Greimas – all this being punctuated by references to angels (discussed thereafter by Irigaray), the concept of the “soul,” and the Nicomachean Ethics, which is particularly interesting to Lacan for Aristotle’s remarks on “courage” and “friendship.” A heady mix, to be sure, but we shall see that these references are not simply thrown together in a careless manner.

In the face of these many references, we can hardly do more than sketch a few aspects of this vast territory. Even if we bracket the figures in anthropology, linguistics, and mathematics (though they have an unmistakable claim to philosophical significance), drawing a very narrow limit around the title of “philosophy,” each of these relationships, taken by itself, would merit an extended commentary. 10 In addition to these many names, moreover, there are numerous concepts that Lacan develops as an explicit challenge to the philosophical tradition – from “doubt” and “certainty,” or “belief” and “truth,” to “representation” and “reality” – each of which has a basis in Freud (one has only to recall “The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychology,” SE 19, pp. 181–7, or the important discussion of “doubt,” “affirmation,” and the “judgment of existence” in Freud’s remarkable article on “Negation,” SE 19, pp. 233–9). 11 (When I “believe” in the existence of the maternal phallus, even as I “know” that it does not “exist” in “reality,” what exactly are the stakes of these terms, and how might the psychoanalytic elaboration of these terms challenge the philosophical use of this same vocabulary?) And there are countless propositions that Lacan puts forth which have a claim to philosophical significance. These pronouncements have often been used to encapsulate Lacan’s general position, but they are not as simple as they appear. Consider his remark that “there is no such thing as pre-discursive reality.” While such formulae have often been used to construe Lacan as a theorist of “discursive construction,” here too a meticulous treatment is required, for one can hardly conclude from this remark that “everything is symbolic” for Lacan (given that the Real and Imaginary are irreducible to discourse), any more than one can suppose that Lacan’s reasons for putting forth this proposition automatically coincide with the arguments of others (historians, Structuralists, pragmatists, etc.) who might make the very same statement. 12

In addition to all this, moreover, there are extended discussions of figures who have received far less attention in the Anglo-American literature on Lacan, due in part to the fact that many texts have yet to appear in English, or even in French. His discussion of Marx, for example – especially in La Logique du fantasme and D’un autre à l’autre, in both of which he discusses the notion of “surplus value” – remains unpublished. And in the case of Descartes, one would have to account not only for the well-known comments in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis and “The agency of the letter” (comments taken up almost verbatim by Foucault in The Order of Things), but also for Lacan’s remarks in “Propos sur la causalite psychique” (1946), “La Science et la vérité” (1965); and two unpublished seminars, Seminar XII: Problemes cruciaux (1964–5), and Seminar XIV: La Logique du fantasme (1966–7), where one finds an extended variation on the formula “cogito ergo sum.” 13

Nor can one dismiss these many excursions into philosophy as a digression from “properly psychoanalytic” concerns, as though readers with a clinical interest could somehow avoid them, for it is clear that Lacan turns to the philosophical tradition, not for philosophical reasons, but in order to clarify matters that lie at the very heart of Freudian theory. 14 In the case of Descartes, for example, the relation between “thinking” (the cogito) and “being” (sum) is explored, not for epistemological reasons, or in order to establish the truth of any beliefs (“What can I know with certainty? What object escapes the corrosive movement of doubt?”), but for the light it casts on the problem Freud raised by speaking of “representation” (Vorstellung), and more precisely the limits of representation. For, as Freud famously said, there is something of the unconscious that remains unavailable to interpretation. Recall the well-known formulation in The Interpretation of Dreams: “There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream’s navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown” (SE 5, p. 525, emphasis added). This “nodal point” in the unconscious remains inaccessible not because interpretation has been deficient, but in principle and by its very nature, which means not only that it has to be left obscure, but also that it cannot be construed as an object of knowledge: like the navel of the dream, something of the unconscious thus falls outside the field of representation.
Lacan likewise remarks on the limits of representation, and this is what guides his remarks on the disjunction between “thinking” (the ego in ego cogito) and “being” (the register of the subject). As is often the case with Lacan, one has to be particularly careful not to impose a familiar Lacanian dogma on these philosophical references. For the distinction between the “I” of ego cogito and the “I” of ego sum is not the usual Lacanian distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, whereby the “ego” that speaks at the level of consciousness is distinguished from the “subject” of the unconscious, which speaks through the symbolic material that intrudes upon the discourse of the ego. Lacan indeed stresses this distinction, not only in the often quoted “schema L” but in formulae such as the following: “the unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the Other” (E/S, p. 172), or “the unconscious is that part of the concrete discourse, insofar as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse” (E/S, p. 49). But when it comes to this Cartesian meditation of his, played out as a disjunction between thinking and being, we are faced with a very different issue. And here again, we have a limit to the supposedly “linguistic” account of the unconscious in Lacan’s thought. For while signifiers certainly play a formative role in organizing the life of the subject (mapping out various symbolic identifications, as “obedient,” “unconventional,” “masculine,” etc.), functioning differently at the level of conscious and unconscious thought, they will never entirely capture the “being” of the subject, according to Lacan. This disjunction is what the notorious Lacanian “alienation” actually means—not simply the imaginary alienation in which the ego is formed through identification with an alter ego in the mirror stage (a thesis used to link Lacan to Kojève and Hegelian rivalry), nor even the symbolic alienation in which the subject is forced to accept the mediating role of language and its network of representations (a thesis used to link Lacan to Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Althusserian “interpellation”), but rather that alienation in which the subject, by virtue of entering the symbolic order, finds itself lacking, deprived of a measure of its “being”—a thesis which complicates the supposedly symbolic account of the subject, and also has effects on our understanding of the unconscious.

Thus, following Descartes, we are led to the conclusion that, while it may be correct to say the unconscious can be followed through various symbolic manifestations (the lapsus, the dream, free association, negation), there is also an aspect of the unconscious which belongs to the order of the real, understood as a dimension irreducible to representation. The “subject” of the unconscious in Lacan is therefore something other than a symbolic phenomenon, and constantly disappears with the “closing” of the unconscious. “The signifier,” Lacan says, “makes manifest the subject . . . But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier . . . There, strictly speaking, is the temporal pulsation . . . the departure of the unconscious as such—the closing,” which Ernest Jones caught sight of when he spoke of the disappearance or “aphanisis” of the subject. Thus, we may indeed follow the position of the subject at the level of the signer, where unconscious “thought” is revealed, but “aphanisis is to be situated in a more radical way at the level at which the subject manifests himself in this movement of disappearance that I have described as lethal” (S XI, pp. 207–8). This means—contrary to Descartes—that thinking and being will never coincide, and that we are faced with a constitutive rupture between the symbolic and the real. It also means—contrary to what many readers of Lacan may suppose—that the famous symbolic order will never be sufficient to grasp the “subject” of psychoanalysis, because the being of the subject is irreducible to any symbolic or imaginary representation. In short, Lacan’s account of the Freudian theory of “representation” puts a limit to the famous “linguistic” interpretation of psychoanalysis that Lacan is so often said to have promulgated, and Descartes is the avenue through which this point is made.

This thesis is certainly of interest to the philosopher, and to anyone interested in the status of the “subject” in contemporary thought, but we must also attend to the clinical aspects of the argument. For as a result of this claim, analytic practice will require a technique that is able to follow not only the symbolic trail of the unconscious, but also its movement of disappearance or fading—as Freud suggested in his remarks on the death instinct, which concerned a movement of annihilation to which the subject as such is prone. Without developing the technical consequences of this step, we can nevertheless indicate its importance, in terms of the distinction between the symbolic dimension of the unconscious and the transfere. For in fact, as Russell Grigg has shown, it is precisely this opening and closing of the unconscious that led Freud to discover the transfere in the strict sense, as an aspect of the unconscious that is conceptually quite distinct from whatever is revealed through the signifying chain of the dream and free association. As Freud himself remarked, there is often a point in the discourse of the analysand where the chain of associations runs dry. “Perhaps you are thinking of me?” he suggests, as if this impasse in discourse somehow appeared in conjunction with the presence of the analyst. Freud thereby marks a clear division between the signer (the labor of free association and dream elaboration), and a new domain of the transfere, wherein a certain lethal dimension of the subject is revealed. Lacan formulates this clearly in Seminar XI, in a chapter called “The transfere and the drive”: “What Freud shows us, from the outset, is that the transfere is essentially
resistant, *Übertragungswiderstand*. The transference is the means by which the communication of the unconscious is interrupted, by which the unconscious closes up again*” (*S X I*, p. 130). This movement of disappearance or “closing,” in which the “being” of the subject is excluded from the chain of signifiers, also leads Lacan to elaborate a distinction between the signifier and jouissance, understood as a dimension of lethal enjoyment in which the desire of the subject is compromised. Even without developing these points, we can already see that Lacan’s ultimate concern is not with the texts of philosophy, and that his protracted engagement with Descartes has a bearing on Freudian theory. This is finally why Lacan argues that the “being” of the subject as such is irreducible to the symbolic order (the unconscious “I think”).

This brings us to the central problem facing anyone who wishes to address the question of “Lacan and philosophy.” On the one hand, Lacan’s references to the philosophical tradition are intended to be serious, and require a rigorous and properly philosophical exposition – he cites particular texts, puzzles over problems of translation, and clearly expects his audience to follow individual passages; on the other hand, his reasons for turning to the philosophical tradition are not, finally, philosophical, but derive from the field of psychoanalysis itself, understood as a domain that, whatever it may stand to learn from philosophy, has its own theoretical specificity, and develops in relation to a clinical field that is simply not present in the philosophical arena. Any attempt to clarify Lacan’s use of philosophical texts must attend to this double trajectory.

Our survey of names, however daunting in itself, thus only hints at the depth of the problem, for with every philosophical reference, Lacan is simultaneously concerned with matters that lie within psychoanalytic discourse itself. This means that the serious reader will be obliged not only to develop the philosophical background of the references Lacan makes (for it must be acknowledged that Lacan himself never provides a properly philosophical exposition of the concepts and texts on which he depends), but also to isolate the clinical issues that are at stake whenever Lacan engages with the philosophical tradition (identification, the object-relation, transference, the drive, and other concepts that are particular to psychoanalysis). A simple gesture towards “philosophy” or “Hegelian alienation” or “structural linguistics” will therefore do nothing to clarify his many allusions. In each case, the clinical stakes of his remarks must be isolated and defined, if we are to see how Lacan makes use of the philosophical tradition. And in each case, we must mark the disjunctions that arise whenever the interests of philosophy run up against the exigencies of the clinical domain.

Lacan’s treatment of negation is an excellent case in point. For his remarkable analysis of the three types of negation in Freud’s vocabulary, while it certainly relies on philosophical resources for its development, and leads him to a long immersion in Hegel’s “dialectical” or “productive” negation, nevertheless has a diagnostic purpose that is entirely absent from Hegel’s own work. For Lacan, *Verneinung, Verleugnung, and Verwerfung* (respectively “denial,” “disavowal,” and “foreclosure”) in Freud’s terminology designate three distinct forms of negation, not merely in a logical sense, but in the sense that they correspond to three distinct psychic mechanisms that can be correlated with the diagnostic categories of neurosis, perversion, and psychosis. Where “denial” indicates the neurotic repudiation of a thought which the unconscious is in the process of expressing (“You will say it’s my mother in the dream, but I assure you it’s not my mother,” *SE* 19, p. 235), “disavowal” by contrast indicates a more profound refusal, which does not so much acknowledge the truth under the sign of negation (“it’s not my mother”), but rather repudiates altogether what is negated. The standard clinical case of disavowal concerns castration, and more precisely maternal castration, and the subjective consequences include a perceptual aspect (an imaginary distortion of sexual difference, notably in fetishism) that is distinct from the symbolic mechanism of neurotic denial. Freud expressly underscores this point in “Fetishism” (*SE* 21, pp. 149–57). Noting, first of all, that the term “repression” can explain this phenomenon, in which an observation (the lack of a penis) has been registered and is nevertheless simultaneously refused, he specifies further. For in the case of denial – “it’s not my mother” – are we not also dealing with a repression, which bears on an unconscious idea? To be precise, then, Freud observes that the affect associated with the perception of woman’s lack of a penis is repressed, while the idea, by contrast, is “disavowed”: “If we wanted to differentiate more sharply between the vicissitude of the idea as distinct from the affect, and reserve the word *Verdrängung* [‘repression’] for the affect, then the correct German word for the vicissitude of the idea would be *Verleugnung* [‘disavowal’]” (p. 153). The affect – anxiety, for example (as in “castration anxiety”) – is then no longer experienced as such, having been repressed, while the idea remains present under the form of disavowal. This “remaining present” suggests why Freud writes that, in the face of woman’s castration, the fetishist “retains this belief [in the presence of the phalus] but also gives it up.” One might think this formulation functions precisely as repression does, since we have a “no” and a “yes” simultaneously, such that the belief is both maintained and renounced (“it is/is not my mother”). But Freud insists that, in fetishism, “repression” characterizes what happens to the affect, whereas “disavowal” is what happens to the idea or “belief” – what Lacan would call the symbolic...
representation, the order of the signifier. What then distinguishes “disavowal” from repression, and why does Freud say that “repression” in this case only bears on the affect? Does not repression normally bear also on ideas, as when a repressed thought emerges under the sign of negation (“it’s not my mother”)?

The solution is that, in the case of “disavowal,” the mode of rejection is stronger than in repression. What is disavowed is not “repressed” (and thus able to return), but is rather more profoundly refused; and in order to clarify this difference, Freud relies on the perceptual dimension. The “idea” (or signifier) of castration is indeed “retained” and “given up,” but unlike repression, where the idea is normally retained only in the unconscious, in disavowal the affect is repressed, while the idea of maternal castration is not repressed, but remains present alongside its negation. This is why the fetishist requires another mechanism by which the negation of this idea can be maintained – not a mechanism of repression, by which the symbolic representation (the idea or signifier) would be lodged in the unconscious, but a mechanism of disavowal, by which the imaginary representation (the visual image) remains present in the field of perception, by means of the fetish. Accordingly, Freud immediately points out that Laforgue is wrong to suggest that in fetishism the perception is simply eliminated, “so that the result is the same as when a visual impression falls on the blind spot on the retina” (SE 21, p. 153). On the contrary: in disavowal, the mode of negation is different from mere absence or blindness, and Freud therefore says that in fetishism, “we see that the perception has persisted, and that a very energetic action has been exerted to keep up the denial of it” (ibid.). We thus see more clearly why Freud claims that the affect is “repressed” while the idea is “denied”: if the subject denies the idea (the concept or signifier), and yet simultaneously retains it as a conscious belief, that retention takes place in the Imaginary, through the perceptual presence of the fetish. The logic of negation in Freud’s work thus requires an account that will be sensitive to the mechanisms of psychic life, at the level of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. As for the final term, “foreclosure” by contrast indicates, for Lacan, a still more profound absence of lack, such that the subject has not even registered the difference, the symbolic differentiation, that the fetishist seeks to conceal. “Foreclosure” thus designates a mode of negation that is closer to psychosis than the other mechanisms, which remain inscribed within the system of representation more securely. Thus, even without elaborating these distinctions in any detail, we can already see that it is not enough to point to Lacan’s supposed reliance on Hegel, or any other logic of negation, without also exploring the clinical dimension of Lacan’s formulations.

This conceptual movement, whereby a meticulous attention to philosophical distinctions is sustained, but mobilized in the interest of the clinical domain, is evident throughout Lacan’s work. In Seminar VII, for example, Lacan turns from Kant’s ethics, which has been a central focus in his argument, and takes up The Critique of Judgement, citing particular passages and insisting that his audience look closely at the text: “I intend to have you go over the passages of Kant’s Critique of Judgment that are concerned with the nature of beauty; they are extraordinarily precise” (S VII, p. 261). Two chapters later, he is still reading the text, focusing in particular on one of the most obscure passages in Kant’s account, namely section 17, entitled “Ideal beauty” – a passage in which Kant argues somewhat strangely that an ideal of beauty cannot properly be considered as belonging to the experience of the beautiful. An “ideal” of beauty is not rejected by Kant because it has an abstract, cognitive component (for an “ideal” is not an “idea”). Nevertheless, the ideal introduces a standard that thwarts the free play of the imagination, and thus it cannot be considered to yield a pure judgment of taste. Without quoting, Lacan repeats Kant almost verbatim: “The beautiful has nothing to do with what is called ideal beauty” (S VII, p. 297). This brings us to the crucial point, for what Kant tells us in section 17 is that there is only one ideal of beauty, and that is the form of the human body. “Only man,” Kant says, “among all objects in the world, admits, therefore, of an ideal of beauty, just as humanity in his person, as intelligence, alone admits of the ideal of perfection.” The human image is therefore not one image among others, but has a special character that disrupts the category of the beautiful in Kant’s analysis, by bringing into play a dimension of infinity, a rupture with visibility, an “ideality” that in fact only genuinely finds its place in the second book of Kant’s text, the analytic of the sublime (this is why Kant excludes the “ideal of beauty” from the category of the beautiful – a point Lacan does not follow, preferring to alter the conception of the beautiful as such, so that it will account for this rupture with the visible). This is the crucial point for Lacan: “Even in Kant’s time,” he says, “it is the form of the human body that is presented to us as the limit of the possibilities of the beautiful, as ideal Erscheinen. It once was, though it no longer is, a divine form. It is the cloak of all possible fantasies of human desire” (S VII, p. 298). Thus, even without following the details of this analysis with the care that they deserve, we can see that Lacan’s reference to “Kant’s theory of the beautiful” is hardly a passing fancy, thrown out to buttress his intellectual credentials, but a genuine and meticulous encounter with the philosophical tradition.

And more important still, for our present argument – and this is why a little detail has been necessary – is the fact that Lacan does not simply impose
his well-worn doctrines about “the imaginary body” onto the philosophical text, but on the contrary, seems to be transforming his own conceptual apparatus under the influence of the philosophers he reads. For he claims here that the image of the human form, unlike other instances of the beautiful that may be apprehended in the perceptual image, has a sublime element to it, a rupture with visibility, an aspect that touches on the infinite and the “unrepresentable,” as Kant says, which means that it can no longer be understood in terms of the thesis on the imaginary body so dear to the early Lacan, in which the human form would be captured by the unified totality that is given through the Gestalt. The impasse that Kant’s own analysis of the beautiful confronts when it reaches the human image (“the limit of the possibilities of the beautiful”) thus provides a path for Lacan’s own conceptual development, even if, as we have already stressed, that path swerves off in the direction of psychoanalysis, towards an account of the “fantasms of human desire.”

Virtually every text presents us with difficulties of this order, which demand an enormous erudition on the part of the readers, and a careful attention to the details of the texts Lacan takes up, even if (it cannot be said enough) Lacan’s own reasons for pursuing these details will lead him in another direction, not towards a philosophical discourse, but towards problems internal to psychoanalysis – as in the present case, where the stakes of his analysis are clearly focused, finally, on the question of the gaze, the human body, and the concept of “fantasy.” This is indeed the fundamental challenge posed by the conjunction of “psychoanalysis and philosophy.” And Lacan’s major contribution to the analytic community was to push this confrontation to its limit, in order that it might yield genuine results. For psychoanalysis is clearly a discipline in its own right, with a technical vocabulary and a field of investigation that distinguish it from the domain of philosophy; and yet, at the same time, psychoanalysis itself cannot possibly flourish if it refuses to develop its concepts in a rigorous manner, shrouding itself in the private “enigma” of the clinical experience, or borrowing an inappropriate luster from its proximity to a “medical” or “scientific” model that obscures the specificity of the analytic process, and avoids the question of the “subject” in favor of vaguely philosophical notions that distort the very arena in which psychoanalysis operates. “Concepts are being deadened by routine use,” Lacan used to say, and analysts have taken refuge from the task of thinking: this has led to a “dispiriting formalism that discourages initiative by penalizing risk, and turns the reign of the opinion of the learned into a principle of docile prudence in which the authenticity of research is blunted before it finally dries up” (E/S, pp. 31–2). Such is the paradox that leads Lacan to this chiasmus of engagement with philosophy and other conceptual fields: it is only through contact with these other domains that psychoanalysis can find its own way in a more rigorous fashion.

When Lacan draws on philosophical texts, it is never simply to subject psychoanalysis to concepts extracted from another field; on the contrary, the very terms that he borrows from other domains are themselves invariably altered when they enter the clinical arena. If this is indeed the case, however, it should be possible to show precisely how considerations internal to psychoanalysis will affect whatever concepts Lacan may draw from the philosophical tradition. And in fact, Lacan is careful to mark these transformations as he proceeds. Thus, for example, his analysis of Descartes – from the method of radical doubt by which Descartes suspends the pieties of the tradition, interrogating any knowledge he has inherited from his ancestors, and bringing into question every certainty of the subject (in a procedure that is not without interest for the psychoanalyst), right down to the details of the “third party” who stands as a guarantee for the “I am” in the “Third meditation,” when doubt threatens to swallow up every assertion – all this nevertheless leads Lacan to “oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the Cogito” (E/S, p. 1), not because he wishes to elaborate a philosophical position, but precisely because of the clinical orientation that makes Lacan’s relation to the question of the “cogito” something other than a philosophical relation. Lacan says that the Freudian cogito is “desidero,” and when the process of doubt reaches its end in analysis, it is not because an epistemological foundation has been reached, but because a “moment to conclude” has been fashioned for the subject.

The same point arises with respect to his notorious Hegelian influences. Hegel certainly had a powerful impact on Lacan’s conceptual formation, but Lacan does not fail to mark out his difference from Hegel, which derives from a perspective that is clinically informed. Consider the relation between “truth” and “knowledge”: just as, for dialectical thought, the movement of truth will always exceed and disrupt whatever has been established as conscious knowledge, such that knowledge will be exposed to a process of perpetual dislocation and productive negativity, so also for Freud, the consciousness of the ego remains in a state of permanent instability, perpetually disrupted by the alien truth of the subject that emerges at the level of the unconscious (the “discourse of the Other”). According to Lacan, Hegel saw clearly this discrepancy between “knowledge” and “truth,” and gave it both a logical coherence and a temporal significance from which psychoanalysts could certainly profit. Indeed, this Hegelian framework went far towards establishing the crucial distinction between the “ego” and the “subject,” and led Lacan to argue that the analyst should always stand on the side
of truth, which implied a rigorous suspicion with respect to “knowledge” (“truth,” Lacan says, “is nothing other than that which knowledge can apprehend as knowledge only by setting its ignorance to work”). In this sense, “Hegel’s phenomenology . . . represents an ideal solution . . . a permanent revisionism, in which truth is in a state of constant reabsorption in its own disturbing element.” This movement of reabsorption, however, is typical of the philosophical arena, devoted as it is to a conceptual exhaustion of the phenomena it discovers (“an ideal solution”). In this sense, for Hegel, according to Lacan, the disruptive power of the real finds a perpetual synthesis with the symbolic elaboration of knowledge: as Lacan says in “Subversion of the subject,” “dialectic is convergent and attains the conjuncture defined as absolute knowledge,” and as such “it can only be the conjunction of the symbolic and the real” (E/S, p. 296). But where Hegel regarded “truth” and “knowledge” as dialectically intertwined, such that the disruptive power of truth could eventually be formulated conceptually, and thus put in the service of knowledge (“reabsorbed” by the discourse of philosophy, such that negation is always “productive,” always symbolically elaborated), Freud leads us in a very different direction, according to Lacan, insofar as repression – and above all sexuality – put truth and knowledge in a “skewed” relation that cannot be dialectically contained: “Who cannot see the distance that separates the unhappy consciousness . . . from the ‘discontents of civilization’ . . . the ‘skew’ relation that separates the subject from sexuality?” (E/S, p. 297).

For Lacan, then, “Freud reopens the junction between truth and knowledge to the mobility out of which revolutions come” (E/S, p. 301).

Again and again, he will make the same assertion, on the one hand urging psychoanalysts to take greater responsibility for their concepts by having recourse to other fields, but on the other hand insisting that Freud’s discovery has produced a domain which must be grasped and developed as a field in its own right. In the case of Saussure, he insists that psychoanalysis stands in need of the conceptual resources that linguistics can provide, but this is not to turn psychoanalysis into a linguistic discipline. Psychoanalysis would therefore do well to consider the work of linguistics in more detail (and Lacan goes on to link substitution and displacement with metaphor and metonymy), and yet the conceptual task cannot end there, for Lacan immediately adds a twist: “Conversely, it is Freud’s discovery that gives to the signifier/signified opposition the full extent of its implications: namely, that the signer has an active function in determining certain effects” (E/S, p. 284) – effects which concern the clinical register. The most obvious of these effects, which linguistics would hardly be required to consider, is the bodily symptom, which has a symbolic dimension for Lacan, as Freud already suggested when he ascribed the hysterical symptom, not to organic dysfunction,
they are placed in the context of psychoanalysis. The very challenge that is posed by the question of “psychoanalysis and philosophy” will have been eliminated altogether, in favor of a reception that makes Lacan’s work recognizable, but at the cost of eliminating the specificity of the field in which he operates.

Consider the distinction between “need” and “desire.” Lacan borrowed this distinction from Kojève, who insisted that human desire, which Kojève called “anthropogenetic desire,” is essentially a “desire for recognition,” and is therefore fundamentally different from “animal desire,” which Lacan called “need,” and which is modeled on an instinctual relation to the object and the requirements of biological survival (the classical example being the “need for food”). The animal’s relation to the object of need is thus usefully distinguished from the human relation to the other, which is fundamentally a relation to the other’s desire. Hence the famous formula Lacan absorbs from Kojève: “Man’s desire is the desire of the other.” This is all well and good, but Kojève’s conceptual framework does nothing to clarify Lacan’s distinction between “desire” and “demand” (as is evident from the fact that the secondary literature speaks indifferently of a “demand for recognition” and a “desire for recognition” as though there were no difference between the two). The appeal to Kojève’s framework thus obliterates the distinction between demand and desire in the very gesture that offers to explain Lacan’s work. Nor does the reference to Kojève help us to grasp the Freudian problematic of the “object-relation.” Starting from the philosopher’s distinction between the human and the animal, we can speak of the peculiar character of “recognition” and “intersubjectivity” in the human sphere, but when it comes to the object-relation and the question of bodily satisfaction, the Kojèvean framework leaves us at a loss, by presupposing that the bodily “relation to the object” is always a natural or “animal” relation (as with the “need for food”). To be sure, the commodity presents us with an “object-relations” that escapes from the order of need, but in this case, the fundamental function of the object is to mediate a relation to the other’s desire (the commodity only rises above need to the extent that it has a symbolic function in relation to the other), and in this sense, the entire discourse of “recognition” and “intersubjectivity” short-circuits the clinical problem of the “object-relation.”

This is especially important when it comes to the problem of embodiment. In the case of the satisfaction of the oral drive, for example (to stay with the Kojèvean example of food), the subject departs from the order of biological need, and may eat too much, or refuse to eat at all. Such a phenomenon, which Lacan would characterize as a bodily demand – an oral demand in which the desire of the subject is compromised – leaves the philosopher silent.

In short, from Kojève’s perspective, the “human” or “anthropogenetic” relation is deftly explained at the level of intersubjectivity, but the “body” as such is prematurely relegated to nature and animality, in keeping with a long philosophical tradition. As a result, the question of sexuality, the symptom, and the libidinal organization of the body – all of these issues, which were so crucial to Freud’s thinking, are simply cast aside, displaced in favor of a disembodied discourse on the “relation to the other.” And in this way, the terminology of psychoanalysis (“the other” or “the symbolic”) is devoured or incorporated by philosophy, integrated into a familiar discourse on “recognition” as though psychoanalysis made no intervention whatsoever in the vocabulary it borrows from other domains. A relation to the other, indeed. In place of a genuine encounter, the discourse of psychoanalysis is simply reabsorbed by the philosophical tradition, and the problems that animate Lacan’s theoretical development are abandoned in favor of a conceptual arrangement that is already established in the academic discourse of post-modernism. Paradoxically, then, the popular demonstration of Lacan’s debt to philosophy, while it promises to elucidate his work, has tended not only to avoid Lacan’s most important conceptual innovations, but also to promote the erasure of the psychoanalytic domain as such.

Generally speaking, the central problem in the reception of Lacan in the English-speaking world has been the mobilization of an interpretive machinery on the part of readers who simply do not know enough about psychoanalysis, and for whom the erasure of the clinical domain takes place without even being noticed. But this difficulty is also something for which psychoanalysis itself is responsible. For the psychoanalytic community has often been all too reluctant to develop its conceptual apparatus in a way that would speak to other disciplines – though Freud himself obviously had such ambitions for his work. This is perhaps understandable, since the principle interest of psychoanalysis rightly rests with its own internal affairs, and not with an exposition of its consequences for another field. Thus, if the Lacanian concept of the gaze develops in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty, the task of the analyst is not to demonstrate the effects of this concept on the phenomenological account of perception, but simply to refine the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis itself, and to grasp what Lacan means when he characterizes the gaze as an “object of the drive.” And yet, Lacan’s work does have consequences for other fields which are worthy of greater exposition, as in the cases of Kojève and Saussure.

This same difficulty could be traced across an entire range of thinkers. We have seen how Lacan was “influenced” by Heidegger, and how he referred to the philosopher on many occasions. But we do not yet know how Lacan’s discussion of anxiety, based as it is on a clinical problematic (the logic of
the relations among anxiety, jouissance, and desire) and a reading of Freud’s work, might challenge the philosopher’s account of Being-in-the-World. Is anxiety, in the peculiar relation to death which it discloses, together with the ex-static temporality it reveals, the manifestation of our fundamental and authentic mode of being, as Heidegger suggests, or is it in fact a transformation of libido, or perhaps rather a disposition of the ego in the face of some danger, as Freud argues? Or is it still rather a particular moment in the relation to the Other, a mode of jouissance in which the desire of the subject is suspended, as Lacan claims in his analysis of Abraham and Isaak? In order to begin to answer such questions, the philosopher would have to read the texts of psychoanalysis with a view to grasping the clinical stakes of these issues. A simple documentation of the references Lacan makes in passing to the texts of Kierkegaard, Heidegger or Sartre will do nothing to clarify such questions, but will only perpetuate the vague idea that Lacan somehow borrows the idea of “being-towards-death” from his philosophical rival. In this way, the encounter between philosophy and psychoanalysis will once again be missed.

Even among Lacanians, who are generally more engaged with conceptual developments in other fields, a genuine encounter with philosophy has been largely circumvented, as is evident in the secondary literature, where a gesture of expertise among devotees has tended to dismiss the philosophical tradition as an arena of benighted confusion. This is, of course, the strict counterpart to the recuperative gesture of academic knowledge, which delights in demonstrating the absolute dependence of Lacan on the thinkers to whom he refers (“once again, the shadow of Hegel falls over the corpse of Lacan’s terminology”). These gestures of authority and debunking (“Lacan alone can explain what all previous thinkers misunderstood,” or “Lacan merely quotes and recapitulates an assemblage of sources”) are the predictable signs that a disciplinary boundary is simply being protected, and has yet to be traversed in a mature fashion – which only indicates that important work remains to be done. But even this hasty suggestion that Lacan’s own procedure was more open, and that he read the texts of philosophy with a seriousness of purpose, and with a willingness to have his own concepts challenged, while at the time preserving the specificity of his task, and the difference between the clinical and philosophical domains.

By the same token, therefore, it would be a mistake to conclude that Lacan’s own system is a self-contained apparatus, an interpretive juggernaut that can be mechanically applied to every other conceptual field – as though the categories of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, having established themselves with dogmatic certainty, could now be unleashed on painting, cinema, Yanomamo culture, theories of democracy, or contemporary debates about ethnicity and national identity, without the theory itself developing in response to the fields with which it engages. If there is traffic between philosophy and psychoanalysis, it does not move in only one direction. When one follows the procedure of Lacan himself, and his often labyrinthine protocol of reading, it is clear that the self-sufficiency of the Lacanian system – however satisfying it may be for his followers to deploy – was never so secure, and that Lacan himself insisted on this long detour into foreign philosophical territory, not to demonstrate what he already knew, but to develop his own conceptual apparatus through the challenge of this other domain.

Lacan turned to other thinkers, then, neither to demonstrate their failure to arrive at properly psychoanalytic conclusions, nor to deploy his own categories, repeating on other terrain the conclusions he had already reached, but rather because the psychoanalytic community had not done enough to refine its own conceptual domain, and stood to gain from a sustained encounter with its neighbors. His turn to philosophy was therefore neither an abandonment of psychoanalysis in favor of Structuralism or anthropology or philosophical discourse (since he is not ultimately interested in solving philosophical problems), nor simply a matter of stealing from others (since the concepts he finds are invariably altered when they enter the domain of psychoanalysis); nor, finally, did he aim at the sort of self-enclosed system that could serve as the intellectual trump card in relation to other knowledge. This is the great gift bequeathed to us by Lacan’s often infuriatingly difficult work: one can no more be content with a superficial glance at “the famous being-towards-death,” tossed off on the way to a demonstration of Lacan’s superiority to every other thinker, than one can retreat into the haven of familiar formula drawn from Kojève and Saussure.

This double gesture is the fundamental mark of Lacan’s relation to the philosophical arena – maintaining without compromise the theoretical specificity of the psychoanalytic field, which has its own complex and often technical vocabulary, and develops in response to a distinctive clinical field, and yet taking full responsibility for the articulation of its concepts, by a rigorous engagement with other relevant domains, as the earliest analysts themselves were always careful to do. The persistent exploration of this disciplinary border, and the double movement it entails, is the hallmark of Lacan’s relation to other areas of knowledge: “In a discipline that owes its scientific value solely to the theoretical concepts that Freud forged . . . it would seem to me to be premature to break with the tradition of their terminology. But it seems to me that these terms can only become clear if one establishes their equivalence to the language of contemporary anthropology, or even to the latest problems in philosophy, fields in which psychoanalysis could well regain its health” (E/S, p. 32).
It is clearly not possible to cover such a complex set of issues in a short space, but having sketched out the general terrain, let us now narrow our inquiry quite sharply and take up an example in a bit more detail, in order to see more concretely how Lacan works across various borders as his thinking unfolds. We will see how a number of threads are woven together, linking Aristotle’s *Ethics*, modal logic, and sexual difference in a strange but intriguing fabric. The complications of the argument are enormous, as will quickly become apparent, and we will do no more than outline a few of the pathways that are opened by this example – four paths, to be precise, before we conclude. But even this minimal sketch will be sufficient to give readers a more concrete sense of how Lacan’s thought intersects with the philosophical tradition.

In 1972–3, Lacan gave a seminar entitled *Encore*, in which his thinking about sexual difference takes a dramatic step forward. The text of this seminar, recently translated as *On Feminine Sexuality*, has had an enormous influence, not only within the Lacanian tradition, but in French feminist theory and in broader debates about gender and sexual difference in the Anglo-American context, due largely to the translation of a portion of the work in Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell’s anthology, *Feminine Sexuality*. In *Seminar XX: Encore*, Lacan famously develops an account of “feminine sexuality” – or more precisely of the “Other jouissance” – which seems to break with his earlier work. For in earlier years, Lacan had provocatively insisted upon maintaining Freud’s thesis that “there is only one libido,” and that this libido is “phallic,” arguing that what Freud meant thereby – though obviously he did not use this terminology – was that human sexuality is not governed by the laws of nature, and does not culminate in a “normal genital sexuality” which aims at procreation, but is rather governed by the symbolic order and the law of the signifier. As Freud said in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, there is no genital normalization leading to a proper biological object, but only a series of libidinal sites (usually located in relation to the bodily orifices) which are not mechanically situated in a natural development, but are shaped by psychic traces of memory and relations with others. Sexuality has a *history* in the human animal, rather than a simple *evolutionary unfolding*, precisely because it is not automatically bound to the mechanisms of natural development (so much for Steven Pinker). And this fact about sexuality holds for all speaking subjects as such, regardless of sex or gender: there is only one libido, and it is phallic, in the sense of being subject to the signifier. Where instinct provides animals with a biological grounding and a *telos* of reproduction, divided between two sexes, humans are faced instead with modes of libidinal satisfaction that are organized by representation. Without entering into the details of this discussion, we can nevertheless see why Lacan claims that “there is only one libido,” meaning that the satisfaction of the drive in human beings is detached from the order of nature, and subjected to a symbolic organization, such that the satisfaction of the drive is always caught up in the relation to the other, and the symbolic codification of the body.

The peculiarity of this position is that there seems to be no clear way of distinguishing between the sexes. And indeed this is Lacan’s position for many years: for psychoanalysis, sexuality is not divided into a “feminine” and “masculine” form, or structured according to the two biological “sexes” – as though biological difference might, after all, provide a foundation for this question, in spite of Freud’s claims to the contrary. Nor can one take comfort in the culturalist notion that the social codification of “gender” will somehow establish what nature fails to provide. Historically speaking, of course, various cultures indeed organize sexuality in many ways, and Lacan hardly ignored this fact. But the social dimension of “gender identity,” structured as it is at the general level of cultural practices and norms, is insufficient to tell us what psychoanalysis needs to know about the subject, whose *relation* to the symbolic order is always particular. Thus, while a given culture may well mobilize a host of images for femininity which offer an emaciated ideal of the body, we cannot conclude that every woman will automatically become anorexic in response, as if the subject were simply a social construction. Lacan’s “advocacy of man’s relation to the signifier has nothing to do with a ‘culturalist’ position in the ordinary sense of the term” (*E/S*, p. 284). “Gender” is thus a useful category for historical analysis, but from the standpoint of psychoanalysis, the subject’s sexuality will be fashioned in every case according to a distinctive organization, with particular modes of satisfaction, and this is why psychoanalysis, as a matter of methodical procedure, cannot take place in a classroom, or be transmitted like other forms of knowledge, but rather requires that each subject explore the singular discourse that defines each one alone. This is the great mystery of psychoanalysis, but also its philosophical importance, when it comes to sexual difference: the question of “sexual difference” cannot be resolved by any appeal to the usual categories of biological “sex” and cultural “gender.” And paradoxically, it is the thesis on “one libido” that helps to establish this claim.

In 1972, however, Lacan’s thinking takes a new step forward. Where he had previously insisted that the libido, in humans, is governed by the symbolic order and the laws of language – a “relation to the Other” which structures every subject, regardless of biological sex – he now proposes that there is more than one way of relating to this Other. Lacan even stresses the apparent contradiction this presents, in relation to his earlier work: “I say that the unconscious is structured like a language. But I must dot the i’s
and cross the t’s,” and this means exploring not only the laws of the symbolic order, but also “their differential application to the two sexes” (§ XX, p. 56). And he knows his audience will be stunned: “So, you’ve admitted it, there are two ways to make the sexual relationship fail” (§ XX, pp. 56–7), he writes, two ways for the lack of genital normalization to be manifested. Such is the claim in 1972, and we can perhaps understand already why Lacan hesitates to designate this “second way” under the sign of “femininity,” since the customary usage of such a term would imply that we are dealing either with biological sex or with the broadly social category of gender identity, while in fact it is a question of another jouissance that appears with some subjects, but cannot be attached to a social or biological group as a whole (“women”), or even restricted, necessarily, to one gender or one sex: “There is thus the male way of revolving around it [i.e. the phallic way], and then the other one, that I will not designate otherwise because it’s what I’m in the process of elaborating this year” (§ XX, p. 57). One understands the hesitation, then, but it is nevertheless clear that Lacan’s aim is to intervene in the classical psychoanalytic debate on sexual difference, through this thesis on a mode of jouissance that is “not-all in the Other,” or not wholly governed by the order of the “phallic” signifier: “it is on the basis of the elaboration of the not-whole that one must break new ground . . . to bring out something new regarding feminine sexuality” (§ XX, p. 57).

This is our example, then, and in many respects, we can recognize it as an attempt to clarify some of Freud’s most famous remarks on femininity: for Freud observes that women have a different relation to castration, and indeed a different relation to the “law,” as his notorious claims about the lack of a super-ego in women (or, more precisely, the formation of a different super-ego in women) make clear. And Lacan elaborates these claims by suggesting that femininity entails the possibility (and I will already stress this word, possibility, in which sexual difference and modal logic come together – as though femininity were only a possible and not a necessary mode of being) of a different relation to the symbolic order, a relation that may have ethical as well as clinical consequences.

The debates about Freud’s views on “femininity” are obviously enormous, and we can do no more than mark the issue in a general way. Let us then simply recall Freud’s statement in “Some psychical consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes”:

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics

Whether one dismisses this statement as a stereotypical expression of the prejudices of Freud’s day, or celebrates it as an insight into the fact that sexual difference may have a bearing on ethical questions (such that femininity may make possible a “different voice” or an “ethics of care” – a sense of justice in which the rigidity of a masculine law is implicitly criticized), it is clear that Freud has opened a path that is at once clinical and philosophical, insofar as it points to a “modification” in the form of the super-ego (what Lacan would call a different relation to the law) that not only seeks to identify some aspects of psychic life, but also has implications for our understanding of what Freud calls “justice.” In Freud, the question of sexual difference is thus explicitly linked to ethics, and here again we should stress the double trajectory that Lacan has done more than any other figure in the history of psychoanalysis to maintain. For the interpreter’s task is complicated by the fact that the clinical field cannot be directly superimposed on the domain of philosophy: the “law” in psychoanalysis (and its “modification”) does not immediately coincide with the “law” in the philosophical domain, and cannot automatically be translated into a generalized discourse on ethics and the good. Nevertheless, if we recall that Freud himself spoke of the super-ego as the foundation of the moral imperative in Kant, we begin to see how clinical issues, forged on the terrain of psychoanalysis, might nevertheless have a legitimate impact on the domain of philosophy. With this example in mind, let us follow Lacan’s itinerary a little further.

First path: the sexuation graph. Having taken this step towards the “Other jouissance,” in which the general law of symbolic castration is no longer the whole story, Lacan now develops Freud’s claim by means of symbolic logic, in the “sexuation graph” which maps out two modes of relation to the Other, correlated with sexual difference.

On the “male” side, the “normal” or “phallic” position is defined through the proposition that all subjects, being unmoored from nature, are destined to find their way through the symbolic order. Lacan expresses this claim in symbolic notation, with the formula $\forall x \in \Phi_1$ (“All subjects are submitted to the phallic signifier”). Now this position (the universal law of symbolic existence) is paradoxically held in place by an exception to the law, which Lacan elaborates in keeping with Freud’s analysis of the primal horde in
Masculine  |  Feminine
--- | ---
∃₁Φ₁ | ∀₁Φ₁
∀₁Φ₁ | ∃₁Φ₁

Figure 8.1. Lacan’s sexuation graph

**Totem and Taboo**, where Freud explains that the sons all agree to abide by the law (to accept symbolic castration), precisely in contrast to the “primal father,” who stands as the exception to the rule, in relation to which the law is to be secured. Thus, the “male” side of the sexuation graph includes another formula, ∃₁Φ₁ (“There is one subject who is not submitted to the phallic signifier”), and this second formula, which forms part of the law of castration on the male side, is cast as an excluded position, an exception to the law, as Freud also claims when he explains that the primal father must always be killed, since his expulsion from the community by murder insures that the symbolic community will be established. The two formulae thus appear to present a simple contradiction, logically speaking, but in a clinical sense they are intended to define the antimony that structures masculine or phallic sexuality, in the sense that the exception to the law, where the possibility of an unlimited jouissance is maintained (∀₁Φ₁), is precisely the jouissance that must be sacrificed, expelled, or given up for the field of desire and symbolic exchange to emerge. Such is the logic of symbolic castration. It would obviously be possible to play out this “logic of masculinity” in more detail, with reference to Arnold Schwarzenegger and others, whose films represent the masculine fantasy in which the law of the civilized community can only be upheld, paradoxically, by an exceptional figure who is able to command an absolute power of violence, which is itself used to expel the monstrous, mechanical, or demonic figure (the uncontrollable machine or corrupt corporate demagogue) whose absolute jouissance threatens the space of democracy and capitalistic exchange. In masculinity, democracy and totalitarianism are not simply contradictory, as though they could not exist together, but are on the contrary twins, logically defining and supporting one another. Such elaborations – always too quick in any case – are not our purpose here, but we can at least note Lacan’s attempt to provide a rigorous theoretical account, through symbolic logic, of the “contradictions” of masculinity.

While the “masculine” side of the graph provides a relation to symbolic castration which is total (“All men are subject,” etc.), the “feminine” side, by contrast, provides a second pair of formulae in which the subject is not altogether subjected to the law. The second of these formulae, ∀₁Φ₁, can be read as “Not all of a woman is subject to symbolic castration.” The universal, which functions on the masculine side (“All men”), is thus negated on the side of femininity (“Not all”). Something of woman may thus escape symbolic castration, or does not entirely submit to the symbolic law (“they show less sense of justice than men” and “their super-ego is never so inexorable”). “Feminine jouissance” is thereby distinguished from “ phallic jouissance” by falling partly outside the law of the signifier. Subjected to the symbolic order like all speaking beings, the “feminine” position is nevertheless “not-all” governed by its law. And as was the case on the masculine side, so here we find a second formula, but in this case it is not an exception to the law (as with the primal father). Instead, we find a formula that indicates an inevitable inscription within the law: ∃₁Φ₁ (“There is no subject that is not subjected to the symbolic law”). These formulae have been much discussed, and there is no need to rehearse the literature here. But since we are exploring the way in which Lacan uses symbolic logic to sharpen some issues in the debate on sexual difference, and to account for its peculiar “paradoxes,” it is worth noting that in this second formula, which articulates the feminine version of subjection to the law, we do not find a universal proposition, a statement that could be distributed across all subjects (“All men,” etc.). Instead, we find a formulation that relies on the particular (“There is no woman who is not” etc.). The universal quantifier “all” (∀) is thus replaced with a quasi-existential “there is” (∃) which any reader of Heidegger or Derrida will recognize is immensely rich and complex – the il y a (or “there is”) in French being also the translation of Heidegger’s *es gibt*, in which a massively complex meditation on the “givenness” of Being can be found. With Lacan, then, there is a link between the mode of being of femininity – which does not appear or give itself in the universal, and is not entirely inscribed within the symbolic law – and the question of Being itself. And the form of symbolic logic brings these issues prominently to the surface.

An enormously tangled set of issues thus emerges, and one can see how Irigaray took up this challenge, linking femininity to questions of being and language. And angels.⁴ For Lacan remarks on the “strangeness” of this feminine mode of being: it is *étranger*, Lacan says, playing on the word for “angel” (*être ange* means “to be an angel”), this mode of being which falls outside the grasp of the proposition (“it is . . .”). We cannot say that “it is” or “it exists,” just like that, because it does not all belong to the domain of
symbolic predication, and yet, this same impasse in symbolization means that we cannot say “it is not” or it “does not exist” (or indeed that “there is only one libido”). Beyond the “yes” and “no” of the signifier, beyond symbolic predication and knowledge (is/it not), this mode of being, presented through the Other jouissance, would thus be like God, or perhaps (peut-être – a possible-being) more like an angel. Thus, as Lacan suggests, and as Irigaray also notes, though in a very different way, the question of feminine sexuality may well entail a theology and an ontological challenge in which the law of the father is not the whole truth. “It is insofar as her jouissance is radically Other that woman has more of a relationship to God” (S XX, p. 85).

In these formulae for femininity, moreover, we again find a curious use of negation, for the strange “there is” of femininity, already detached from the simple assertion of existence, is also presented only under the sign of a certain negation (“Not all of a woman is . . .”). Even in the first formula, we are faced with a double negation (“There is no woman who is not”). This is very different from what we find on the masculine side (“All men are . . .”). “It is very difficult to understand what negation means,” Lacan says. “If you look at it a bit closely, you realize in particular that there is a wide variety of negations” and that “the negation of existence, for example, is not at all the same as the negation of totality” (S XX, p. 34). Thus, we cannot regard the feminine formulation for symbolic inscription (“There is no woman who is not subject to the signifier”) as the equivalent of its masculine counterpart (“All men are subject to the signifier”), even though logically these two may be the same. In fact, sometimes a thing can “appear” or “exist” only by means of a kind of negativity (“there is . . . none that is not . . .”), particularly if the “normal” symbolic discourse of propositions (“All men are”) already presupposes a mode of being or existence that is itself inadequate. The vehicle of symbolic logic thus seems to force to the surface a variant in the mode of negation that ends up bearing on sexual difference. Woman does not “exist,” then, and yet “there is” femininity. We cannot say, in the form of a symbolic assertion, that she “is” this or that (a subject with a predicate that would cover the field of “all women,” and allow us to capture her essence as a social or biological totality), and yet it is “possible” that “there is” something of femininity, which has precisely the character of not being fully inscribed in the signifier – a being in the mode of “not-being-written,” Lacan says. “The discordance between knowledge and being is my subject,” Lacan says (S XX, p. 120). Lacan does not say that woman “exists,” then, or indeed that she “is not,” but rather that she exists: “Doesn’t this jouissance one experiences and yet knows nothing about put us on the path of ex-sistence?” (S XX, p. 77). All of this may seem far removed from the clinical field we have stressed, and yet it is clear that many experiences, from practices of meditation or ecstatic dance to the paralyzing encounter with absolute solitude into which no other can reach – a black hole of truth from which no words can escape – all testify to a place on the margin of language where enjoyment and exile await us all. Thus, while the I may belong to speech, not all of the subject is inscribed there. As Lacan says: on the one hand, “the I is not a being, but rather something attributed to that which speaks”; but on the other hand, “that which speaks deals only with solitude, regarding the aspect of the relationship I can only define by saying, as I have, that it cannot be written” (S XX, p. 120).

A parenthetical note of a methodological nature is worth making at this point. For one might think that these exotic formulae are intended to describe in a more or less logical way what has already been discovered in the clinical domain, so that these formulae would be nothing more than the dispensable and esoteric Lacanian translation of Freud’s theses on the feminine super-ego or Totem and Taboo. These attempts at a logical formalization of Freud are not merely descriptive, however, but are used as a means of discovery. It is almost as if Lacan believes that the conceptual impasses which his logical formulations produce are themselves capable of revealing something about the real. That is to say, if our theories have developed to some extent, but remain inadequate in some respects, and incapable of reaching as far as one might wish, such formulations may produce a sort of impasse that bears fruit. “The real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization,” Lacan says (S XX, p. 93). A similar wager is present in contemporary science, whereby mathematical accounts of cosmic phenomena, by virtue of their own internal consistency or instability, are somehow supposed to point to features of reality itself ("God does not play dice with the universe"). Mathematics is thus not merely a descriptive device, but an actual method of investigation and research (a curious border between the purely symbolic operations of mathematics and the real of the universe for which physics is intended to be responsible). Here again, we see that Lacan’s appeal to other disciplines, however strange and exotic it may seem, is not a simple departure from psychoanalytic concerns but is rather an attempt to use what he finds in other domains to explore the terrain of psychoanalysis itself.

Second path: equivocation, conditional being. Leaving all these questions abruptly to one side, let us now take the next step, in order to see how Lacan immediately reformulates this entire presentation in terms of a certain “equivocation.” For as we have already seen, “there is only one libido,” and yet, perhaps . . . How, then, does this equivocation reformulate what we have just seen expressed in symbolic logic? We know that the sexual relationship fails, for Lacan, in the sense that there is no libidinal maturation that would secure masculine and feminine sexuality in a harmonious mutual destiny of.
natural reciprocity. In place of the sexual relationship, we have a passage through the signifier in which “sexuality” is produced as a phenomenon that is irreducible to any natural reproductive instinct. Accordingly, Lacan will go on to say that “what makes up for the sexual relationship is, quite precisely, love” (§ XX, p. 45). This thesis on the symbolic displacement of sexuality, its lack of any natural foundation, guided Lacan for many years, and led him to claim that the sexual relation fails. Such is the consequence of life in the universe of discourse: “the universe is the place where, due to the fact of speaking, everything succeeds . . . Succeeds in what? . . . succeeds in making the sexual relationship fail” (§ XX, p. 36).

Now in the sexuation graph, Lacan defines this failure on the masculine side in terms of a logical duality, such that inscription within the symbolic law is attended by an exception, and it is precisely this exception (an absolute jouissance) that must be excluded in order for the sons to enter the universe of symbolic exchange (just as the child, for Freud, must relinquish the oceanic feeling of infantile grandiosity or “primary narcissism” in order to communicate with the other). But this same duality in relation to the symbolic law can be formulated in another way, as a prohibition: “primal jouissance must be renounced, in order for the pleasure principle and the order of symbolic exchange to be established.” This “it must” (or il faut – it is necessary) is the law of symbolic castration. And Lacan thus says of absolute jouissance that it “must not be” (qu’il ne faut pas), in the sense that it must be relinquished or cast off. And yet – for here is the equivocation – this very statement, the very enunciation of this law, carries an ambiguity in it which holds out the possibility of the very thing that has been prohibited. For as Lacan points out, “il ne faut pas” (it must not be) in French also suggests that “it never fails.” Playing on the equivocation between two verbs, falloir (“to be necessary”) and faillir (“to fail”), two verbs which share the same form in the third person (il faut), Lacan thereby points to an equivocation: the jouissance that must be excluded or prohibited never fails to arrive anyway (§ XX, pp. 48–9). Phallic jouissance, which covers all speaking beings, all subjects who submit to symbolic castration, is thus a jouissance of the signifier (Freud’s libido) which nevertheless retains an obscure relation to the primordial jouissance that was purportedly renounced. This might seem to hold true for all speaking subjects who are faced with “sexuality” as such, and yet, Lacan now marks this equivocation as a masculine phenomenon. This equivocation, given through the ambiguity of natural language, would thus reformulate what the sexuation graph provided through symbolic logic.

What, then, of femininity, in this new formulation? Particularly if the only jouissance we know, the only one of which we can speak, is phallic jouissance? How to designate, or approach, another jouissance, if such a thing exists (and we cannot say “it is”)? Lacan continues, using the conditional tense: “were there another jouissance than phallic jouissance, it shouldn’t be/couldn’t fail to be that one” (§ XX, p. 59, italics added). That is to say, if we were for a moment to entertain another jouissance, it would only be sustained through the conditional, in the grammatical form of a “contrary to fact” (“were there another one . . .”). And as soon as one sought to consolidate this possibility into an assertion of existence, it would have already been translated into phallic jouissance. “What does that one designate?” Lacan asks. “Does it designate the other [the Other jouissance] or the one on the basis of which we designated the other as other [namely, phallic jouissance]” (§ XX, p. 60). Femininity is thus sustained in the conditional mode, for a time (“were there another . . .”), until it is designated as “existing” (“it couldn’t fail to be”), at which point it disappears, having been replaced by the usual phallic jouissance (“that one”).

We thus see, in this second version of the argument, where the notations of symbolic logic are replaced with an actual statement or sentence, the curious way in which femininity “haunts” the margin of language, emerging as a possibility, but refusing to be rendered in propositional form. Where masculinity can be formulated more directly, “presented” as it were in an equivocation (the one that is excluded/never fails), feminism by contrast emerges under the conditional, and remains possible for a time that the sentence suspends before us (“were there another . . .”), a time that is held open only until this possibility is designated “to be,” at which point it disappears (“to be that one”). Note that, in this second formulation, Lacan stresses that the conditional tense (“were there another . . .”) also functions like an “if . . . then” proposition. “If there were another jouissance . . . then . . .” Speaking of this conditional tense, Lacan says: “that suggests to me that to use it we could employ protasis and apodosis” (§ XX, p. 59). As the annotations to the translation point out, “the protasis takes on the meaning of an ‘if’ clause in an if-then type proposition, and the apodosis takes on the meaning of the ‘then’ clause” (§ XX, p. 59, note 23). What is gained through this formulation that the mathemes of the sexuation graph did not reveal is that we can designate – or better, begin to approach – the question of the “existence” of the Other jouissance only if we distinguish the propositions of the symbolic order (“All men are . . .”), not only from the conditionality he has outlined (“if there were . . .”), the “contrary to fact” statement in which no assertion is actually made, but also from the mode of being implied in the “if-then” proposition.

For in such propositions, as Russell and Whitehead argued, we are not asserting that something exists, but only that if it exists, then it will have such and such a mode of being – namely, the mode of being that does not
consolidate itself into an entity of which one can say, “it is.” Thus, “it is false that there is another one, but that doesn’t stop what follows from being true”; or again, “the first part of the sentence designates something false – were there another one, but there is no other than phallic jouissance [and the case seems to be closed, except . . .] except the one concerning which woman doesn’t breathe a word, perhaps . . .” (§ XX, p. 62). These two formulations thus bring out another dimension of what we have seen presented through symbolic logic – an equivocation that reconfigures the “masculine” side of the sexuation graph, and a conditional possibility (“were there,” and “if-then”) that reworks the formulae for femininity, by stressing a conditional mode of being and a peculiar temporality sustained by a discourse that collapses as soon as it seeks the resolution of a judgment of existence.

Third path: modal logic. The equivocation we have just followed (il ne faut pas as “it must not be” and “it never fails”) is thus a reworking of the “masculine” antinomy from the sexuation graph, while the conditional sentence, with its peculiar capacity to sustain another jouissance without asserting its existence, together with its logical formulation as an “if” that can be elaborated without requiring that the thing in question be actual – all this will now be reformulated once again, in a third version which will have much greater consequences for Lacan, but whose character we can only touch on briefly. This time, it is a question of modal logic, and once again, it will entail a treatment of the two formulae with which we began. Once again, moreover, it would seem that Lacan’s emphasis falls on femininity, and that his reason for working and reworking this terrain has to do with an effort to formulate a jouissance that lies at the limit of symbolization.

Let us begin again with the “masculine” side. Phallic jouissance, which is characteristic of all speaking beings, is the jouissance that “never fails.” It is the jouissance to which “all men” are subject, as all are subject to a libido that is distinct, according to Freud, from instinctual sexuality. In this sense, we can say that phallic libido is “inextricable” for all speaking beings. It has the mode of being of necessity. But the advantage of modal logic is that it allows us to formulate other modes of being. We may be able to say that something “is” or “is not,” but this is not enough, for we may ask of something that “is” whether it is in fact, or only as a possibility, whether it is necessarily, or only in a contingent way. The modal forms allow us to be more precise than the simple judgment of existence. If Socrates tells us that “All men are mortal,” this means that mortality attaches to “men” as an inescapable predicate, and that it is a necessary feature of their being. But if I am a man, I may not necessarily be living in New York. If I am in fact living in New York, this attaches to me, not by necessity, but in a contingent way. It is in fact the case, but it could be otherwise. Another mode of being, distinct from the necessary, is the possible, for as Aristotle showed at great length, a thing can “be” in the mode of being-possible, without being actually the case. Contingent being is therefore distinct from possible being, and both of these are distinct from necessity. And there are beings which we must designate as “impossible,” such as “round squares.”

These categories – the necessary, impossible, contingent, and possible – which Lacan discusses in a chapter called “Aristotle and Freud,” have been organized into a logical square, which gives rise to further relations that are quite complex. Without entering into those relations (though they are important to Lacan), let us simply recall the standard version presented by Algirdas Greimas.

The square not only designates each of the four modes of being, but maps out their relations to one another, as indicated by the connecting arrows. The necessary is thus opposed to the contingent, as the possible is opposed to the impossible. If we then return to the “contradiction” of masculinity, we can say that phallic jouissance, which is “necessary” as the law of the symbolic order, appears only when the unlawful jouissance of the primal father has been expelled – excluded or banished as “impossible.” In the universe of discourse, phallic jouissance is necessary, it never fails to arrive, and it is predicated on the exclusion of the absolute jouissance of the primal father, henceforth designated as unlawful or “impossible.” Lacan’s earlier exposition thus leads him to modify the usual logical square, by opposing the “necessary” to the “impossible.” He is explicit about this revision: “the necessary,” he writes, “is a modal category,” and its opposite “is not the one you might have expected to be opposed to the necessary, which would have been the contingent. Can you imagine? The necessary is linked to the impossible” (§ XX, p. 59). Lacan’s reconstruction is therefore as follows.
As we saw in the sexuation graph, then, phallic jouissance has the force of necessity (All men), and depends on the exclusion of an unlawful or “impossible” jouissance of the primal father. On this reworking, femininity will therefore be elaborated in terms of the “possible” and the “conditional.” We have already approached this point in our previous remarks, which underscored Lacan’s claim that, when it comes to feminine jouissance, we cannot say that it “is” (necessarily), or even that it “is not” (or that it is “impossible”), but only that it “may be” or “is possible.” But there is a further distinction between the possible and the actual that femininity may require us to elaborate. For if we say that femininity, or the Other jouissance, cannot be excluded (since we can no longer say “there is only one libido”), this does not mean that the possibility will actually come to pass. If it were to be, it would not be in the mode of necessity, but only in the mode of a contingent being, but we do not know that this contingent being is actual. We only know thus far that it is a possibility. How then do we pass from the possible to the contingent? This is the crucial question raised by Lacan’s reformulation of the logical square, where, once again, the curious operations of logic seem to yield unexpected fruit.

It is here, to conclude, that we must turn to Aristotle, who speaks of “friendship” and “recognition” under the sign of love: “...what Aristotle evokes with the term φιλία (philia), namely what represents the possibility of a bond of love between two of these beings, can also, manifesting the tension towards the Supreme Being, be reversed...” is in their courage in bearing the intolerable relationship to the Supreme Being that friends, φιλοί (philoi), recognize and choose each other” (§ XX, p. 85). Such friendship, of course – “the eminently contingent encounter with the other” (p. 145) – is an approach to a relation (love) that would take the place of the sexual relation, that natural reciprocity which does not exist in the human sphere. As such, this friendship would not be evidence of “femininity.” But it does show us the movement by which a “possibility” of love “can...be reversed,” and actualized as the contingent being of friendship.

This same axis moving from the possible to the contingent reappears at several crucial moments in Lacan’s text, in a movement of exposition that eventually binds the question of “the sexual relation” to that of femininity, as two modes of being which cannot be entirely inscribed in the symbolic law. For both of these, in Lacan’s account, “do not exist.” We have seen that “there is no sexual relation,” for Lacan, and we have seen that, when it comes to femininity, we cannot simply say that “it exists.” As his seminar progresses, however, we also see that, by the same token, we cannot simply say “there is no such thing” as the Other jouissance, and the logic of femininity thus holds open a possibility beyond the affirmation or negation of our normal discourse. Because of this possibility, phallic jouissance cannot be the whole truth. “Because of this,” Lacan says, “the apparent necessity of the phallic function turns out to be mere contingency” (§ XX, p. 94). Towards the very end of the seminar, Lacan returns to this issue, stressing the impossibility of the sexual relation, but also the other modes of being which proliferate around this impossibility: “Isn’t it on the basis of the confrontation with this impasse, with this impossibility by which a real is defined, that love is put to the test? Regarding one’s partner, love can only actualize what, in a sort of poetic flight, I called courage — courage with respect to this fatal destiny” (§ XX, p. 144). Such “actualization” allows the possibility of a relation to take form, to emerge beyond mere possibility, in all its mortal and precarious being, for a time, however contingent. A curious mode of being, but “Isn’t it in love’s approach to being that something emerges that makes being into what is only sustained by the fact of missing each other?” (§ XX, p. 145).

NOTES


For a longer discussion of Freud’s “Negation” which includes material on Spitz and other analysts, see Wilfried Ver Eecke, Lacan avec les philosophes, pp. 397–426, and essays by others on Heidegger in the same volume. Lacan’s (incomplete) translation of Heidegger’s “Logos” article appeared in La Psychanalyse 1 (1959), pp. 59–79.


One of the major puzzles for Anglo-American interpreters has been to determine whether Lacan’s work coincides with the arguments of “social construction” (by virtue of his emphasis on the “symbolic order”), or whether there is a dimension of his work (“sexual difference” or “the real”) that gives it an ahistorical dimension, or a biological foundation that conflicts with the arguments for social construction. This has been perhaps the central issue in the Anglo-American reception of Lacan, and yet, one might argue that the very question is misplaced. I have addressed this problem in “The intimate alterity of the real,” Postmodern Culture, vol. 6, no. 3 (May 1996), focusing on the question of whether the concept of the “real” in Lacan is pre-discursive, as some commentators have claimed, or whether it is a non-discursive effect of the symbolic order, in which case, I argue, we are faced with a conceptual difficulty (one might call it the “limits of formalization”) that Lacan shares with a number of contemporary philosophers, even if his response to the problem differs from theirs.


15. A Freudian marks this distinction by saying, “Jacques Lacan is the first, last, and always a psychoanalyst.” He certainly “theorizes about his practice,” and “this has led him to dip into the waters of the philosophical tradition more often and more deeply than any other interpreter of Freud,” but his purpose, Richardson insists, is not guided by the internal affairs of philosophy. “Philosophers have the right . . . to probe the implications of these allusions according to the criteria of their own discipline,” but the clinical dimension of Lacan’s work should not be ignored. William J. Richardson, “Lacan and non-philosophy,” Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty, p. 120.

16. Readers who wish to pursue a similar thread in Freud’s own discourse may follow his remarks in the article on “Repression,” in which “ideas” or “representations” (“signifiers” in Lacan), are distinguished from another dimension of the unconscious, which Lacan will develop through the concept of jouissance. Freud marks this distinction concerning the limits of representation as follows: “In our discussion so far, we have dealt with the repression of an instinctual representative, and by the latter we have understood an idea or group of ideas which is cathered with a definite quota of psychic energy (libido or interest) coming from an instinct. Clinical observation now obliges us to divide up what we have hitherto regarded as a single entity; for it shows us that besides the idea, some other element representing the instinct has to be taken into account, and that this other element undergoes vicissitudes of repression which may be quite different from those undergone by the idea. For this other element of the psychic representative the term quota of effect has generally been adopted. It corresponds to the instinct insofar as the latter has been detached from the idea and finds expression, proportionate to its quantity, in processes that are sensed as affects. From this point on, in describing a case of repression, we shall have to follow up separately what, as a result of repression, becomes of the idea, and what becomes of the instinctual energy linked to it” (SE 14, p. 152, original italics). I have discussed this passage in “The elements of the drive,” Umbr(a) 3 (Fall 1997), pp. 131–45. See also André Green, The Fabric of Affect, pp. 38–45.


20. For another treatment of the difference between Hegel and Freud, one could turn to the distinction between the “discourse of the master” (which takes Hegel as its model) and the “discourse of the analyst” – a distinction formulated at length in Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, forthcoming). Lacan suggests here that the position maintained by the analyst is structurally different from that of the “agent” of a philosophical discourse, and that the “product” of each discursive structure is also distinct. In “Subversion of the subject” he also says that the “subject” of Hegelian dialectic (the Selbstbewusstsein or consciousness-of-self in which Hegel’s thought culminates) is distinct from the subject of psychoanalysis.

21. Lacan’s reliance on Köjève and a Köjévean approach of Hegel is the most conspicuous occasion for this temptation; it has been much discussed and overused by certain interpreters, who, in the course of exploring the relation between the two thinkers, end up reducing one to the other, thereby diminishing the specificity of Lacan’s concepts, and ignoring their clinical dimension altogether, in favor of an interpretive schema of existential negativity that is more familiar to the continental tradition. See Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Lacan: The Absolute Master, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), Peter Dews, Logics of Disintegration (London: Verso, 1987), and David Macey, Lacan in Contexts (London: Verso, 1988). For a response to this overreliance on Köjève, and to the general tendency to reduce Lacan to his sources, see Tim Dean, Beyond Sexuality, pp. 22–60.


23. If we consider, for example, Lacan’s distinction between “demand” and “desire,” it is clear that the accounts which rely on Köjève eliminate the problem of the unconscious, and avoids altogether the questions of embodiment and symptom-formation which Lacan’s distinctions were intended to address. The