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INTRODUCTION

The fact that, in the index of Lacan's *Ecrits*, the name "Hegel" occurs more often than "Freud", renders palpable the central role of the philosophical reference in Lacan's theory. In different stages of his teaching, he entered into a dialogue with most of the great thinkers of our past and present, from Plato and Aristotle to St Augustine and Aquinas, from Descartes and Spinoza to Kant and Hegel, from Marx to Nietzsche, from Heidegger to Wittgenstein. The connection runs also in the opposite direction: almost all of today's main philosophical orientations, from phenomenology to (post) Marxism, proposed their own Lacan. The second volume thus presents the key philosophical readings of Lacan.

Against the commonplace, according to which the Freudian subject, the site of dark "irrational" passions, is the opposite of the transparent rationality of the Cartesian *cogito*, Lacan emphasized that the subject of psychoanalysis is none other than the Cartesian *cogito*. It is thus appropriate to start this second volume with Mladen Dolar's detailed elaboration of the topic of *cogito* as the subject of the unconscious, accompanied by Alain Badiou's article, which is more critical of the link between Descartes and Lacan. However, the key philosophical reference of Lacan is not Descartes, but Kant who, according to Lacan, was the first to formulate the dimension of what Freud later designated as "beyond the pleasure-principle". The seminal essay by Bernard Baas on "pure desire" develops in detail the parallel between Kant and Lacan: the Kantian Thing-in-itself is the Lacanian Real, the network of transcendental categories is the symbolic order, transcendental schematism plays the role of *objet petit a*, etc. Bass' essay is followed by "The subject of the law", in which Alenka Zupančič presents a powerful alternative Kantian reading of Lacan. Two further texts (by Joan Copjec and Slavoj Žižek) elaborate the unexpected link between the Kantian opposition of mathematical and dynamic sublime and Lacan's "formulae of sexuation".

Since Lacan himself often referred to the work of Martin Heidegger, arguably the key philosopher of the twentieth century, it is no wonder that there is a whole series of Heideggerian approaches to Lacan. From this vast
field opened up decades ago by William Richardson, this volume contains Richard Boothby’s “Figurations of the Objet a”, a chapter from his recent *Freud as Philosopher*, as well as Edward S. Casey’s and J. Melvin Woody’s “Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan: the dialectic of desire”. And since Heidegger is also a German philosopher *par excellence*, it is appropriate to conclude this block with “Language and finitude”, the final chapter of Hermann Lang’s *Language and the Unconscious*, not only the first and still the best systematic hermeneutic reading of Lacan, but also the first introduction of Lacan’s thought into Germany.

Although Lacan does not belong to the field usually designated as that of “deconstructionism”, there was a lively and important exchange between Lacan and other figures which, at least in the Anglo-Saxon perception, count as “deconstructionists” or “poststructuralists”. Perhaps the two highlights of this exchange are a dozen of so dense, but absolutely crucial, pages from Gilles Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense*, and Barbara Johnson’s “The frame of reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida”, a detailed and well-argued reply to Derrida’s reading of Lacan “Seminar on The Purloined Letter”. Last, but not least, we include an excerpt from Jean-Claude Milner’s *For the Love of Language*, a path-breaking reflection on the consequences of Lacan’s theory for the studies of language.
In the opening paragraph of one of the earliest pieces in his Écrits, the famous paper entitled “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience” (1949, presented in Zürich at the International Congress of Psychoanalysis), Lacan situates his notion of the mirror stage in the following way: “The conception of the mirror stage that I introduced at our last congress, thirteen years ago [that was the congress in Marienbad in 1936, the last one where Freud was present as well], 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” (Lacan 1977, I; 1966, 93). So in the very first paragraph of the first notorious écrit, there is a clear alternative, an emphatic choice that one has to assume: either the mirror phase or the cogito. One has to decide one way or the other between psychoanalysis and philosophy, which has, in the past three centuries, largely issued from cogito, despite its variety of forms and despite its often proposed criticism of cogito. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, if properly understood and practiced, promises to offer a way out of the “age of cogito.” The alternative that Lacan has in mind, in this particular strategically situated spot, is the following: the mirror stage, insofar as it is indeed formative of the function of the I, demonstrates that the I, the ego, is a place of an imaginary blinding, a deception; far from being the salutary part of the mind that could serve as a firm support of the psychoanalytic cure, against the vagaries of the id and the superego (such was the argument of ego-psychology), rather, it is itself the source of paranoia, and of all kinds of fantasy formations. If such is the
nature of the I, then it must be most sharply opposed to cogito, with its inherent pretension to self-transparency and self-certainty.\footnote{1}

But even apart from Lacan’s particular theory of the mirror stage, with all its ramifications, the dilemma seems to pertain to psychoanalysis as such, to its “basic insight.” For is the discovery of the unconscious not in itself inherently an attack on the very idea of cogito? The self-transparent subjectivity that figures as the foundation of modern philosophy—even in those parts of it that were critical of cogito—seems to be submitted to a decisive blow with the advent of psychoanalysis. Cogito must be seen not only at odds with, but at the opposite end in relation to the unconscious. Such was Freud’s own implicit self-understanding (although he didn’t deal at any length with Descartes, except for his curious short paper on Descartes’s dream, “Über einen Traum des Cartesius,” [Freud 1929b]), and this is the spontaneous, seemingly self-evident, and widespread conception of that relation. This view can then be considered alongside other contemporary radical attempts to dismantle cogito, most notably with Heidegger, who was also during that period Lacan’s source of inspiration. So both the analysis of the ego and that of the unconscious, although running in different directions, appear to undermine the very idea of cogito.

Yet, Lacan’s position in that respect has undergone a far-reaching change. First of all, a clear distinction had to be made, in his further development, between the “I,” the ego, on one hand, and the subject on the other. The “I” is not the subject, and the mechanism discovered in the mirror stage, the blinding, the recognition that is intrinsically miscognition, while defining the function of the “I,” doesn’t apply at all to the function of the subject. If the first one is to be put under the heading of the Imaginary, the second follows an entirely different logic, that of the Symbolic. In this division, cogito, surprisingly for many, figures on the side of the subject.

Lacan’s perseverance toward retaining the concept of the subject certainly ran against the grain of the time, especially in the days of a budding and flowering structuralism that seemed to have done away with the subject, inflicting upon it a final mortal blow after its protracted moribund status. The general strategy promoted by structuralism could, in a very simplified manner, be outlined as an attempt to put forward the level of a “nonsubjective” structure as opposed to the subject’s self-apprehension. There is a nonsubjective “symbolic” dimension of which the subject is but an effect, an epiphenomenon, and which is necessarily overlooked in the subject’s imaginary self-understanding. This basic approach could be realized in a number of different ways: Lévi-Strauss’s structure as the matrix of permutations of differential elements regulating mythologies, rituals, beliefs, habits, etcetera, behind the subjects’ backs; Foucault’s *episteme*, “anonymous” discursive formations and strategies, or later the dispositions of power, etcetera; Althusser’s “process without a subject” that science has to unearth behind the ideological interpellanllation that constitutes subjectivity; Derrida’s notion
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of writing, or *la différence*, as "prior" to any split into subject/object, interior/exterior, space/time, etcetera; Kristeva's opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic. In spite of great differences between those attempts and their sometimes sharply opposed results, there was a common tendency to conceive of a dimension "behind" or "underneath" or "anterior to" the subject, the very notion of the subject thereby falling into a kind of disrepute and becoming synonymous with "self-deception," a necessary illusion, an essential blinding as to the conditions that produced it. The structuralist revolution has thus seen itself as a break away from the humanist tradition centered on the subject (cf. Foucault's ponderous reference to the "death of man"), and particularly as a radical rupture with the philosophical tradition based on cogito.

Lacan's view sharply differed from this model by firmly clinging to the notion of the subject and "rescuing" it all along. His talk about *the subject of the unconscious* was certain to provoke some astonishment. He saw the unconscious, along structuralist lines, as a structure—"structured as a language," as the famous slogan goes—discovering in it the Saussurean and Jakobsonian operations of metaphor and metonymy, etcetera, but as a *structure with a subject*, a subject conceived as opposed to the consciousness and the "I." So for Lacan, on whatever level we look at matters, there is no process, and no structure, without a subject. The supposedly "nonsubjective" process overlooked in the constitution of subjectivity, was for Lacan essentially always already "subjectivized," although the subject it implied was a very different entity from the one that the structuralist strategy strove to dismantle. Retaining the concept was for him far more subversive in its effects than simply dismissing it.

In the next step, he went even further with the baffling suggestion that cogito *was* the subject of the unconscious, thus turning against some basic assumptions (shall one say prejudices?) of that period. It was a suggestion that has baffled Lacan's opponents and followers alike. Lacan largely defined his project with the slogan announcing a "return to Freud," but subsequently it turned out that this slogan had to be complemented with a corollary: the return to Freud had to pass by way of a return to Descartes. So there is a huge gap that separates Lacan from the rest of the structuralist generation, which defined itself as basically anti-Cartesian (and also as anti-Hegelian, but that is another story), regardless of many differences between the proposed theories, whereas Lacan saw himself rather as an heir to that tradition. This divide ultimately depends on the different ways of grasping subjectivity.

At the simplest level, one can approach this divide with the notion of recognition, which was largely seen as the necessary and sufficient condition of subjectivity, turning it thus necessarily into an imaginary or "ideological" notion that one has to be rid of. For Lacan, however, *the subject emerges only at the point of a nonrecognition*: all formations of the unconscious have this in common, they are accompanied by a "this is not me," "I was not there,"
although they were produced by the subject him/herself (or to put it in the terms of cogito: they cannot be followed by a “therefore I am”). They depend on the emergence of an “alien kernel” within subjectivity, an automatism beyond control, a “discourse of the Other,” the breakdown, in certain points, of the constituted horizon of recognition and sense. This non-integration is constitutive for the subject, although it may appear as its limit, reduction, or failure. So Lacan’s criticism of the “I,” the illusion of autonomous and self-transparent subjectivity, was well embedded in the general structuralist strategy, but the fact that he nevertheless stubbornly espoused the concept of the subject was the mark of his far-reaching dissent and opposition.

How can the subject of the unconscious be possibly conceived of as cogito? How to conceive of cogito after the advent of psychoanalysis? Is there a Freudian cogito? The question should perhaps be reversed: is there an unconscious outside of cogito? Lacan’s wager is that there is not. Hence his insistence that the subject that psychoanalysis has to deal with is none other than the subject of modern science, thoroughly dependent on cogito. The Freudian unconscious is the unconscious of cogito, in both senses of the genitive. There is, however, a subplot in this story, for if the subject of the psychoanalysis is that of science as well, its object is not. The object that psychoanalysis has to deal with by definition eludes science, it cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny, it is the evasive singular object that provides jouissance. So the tricky problem that the two Lacanian accounts of cogito will attempt to solve is also the following: how does the subject of the unconscious, as cogito, relate to jouissance?

One can start with a simple observation about Descartes’s own procedure in the Meditations, the procedure of a “methodical doubt,” which can be seen as a gradual reduction of consciousness, its “evacuation.” Consciousness must lose any worldly support, it must be cleansed of any objective counterpart—and the recognition/miscognition, in relation to the object opposed to it, is precisely what defines the meanderings of the Imaginary, which the mirror stage has dealt with at their core. It must also eliminate the support in the signifier, any received truths and certainties, the seemingly evident mathematical laws, etcetera. What eventually remains, is a pure vanishing point without a counterpart, which can only be sustained in a minimal gesture of enunciation. It is questionable whether this yields the subject of thought—Descartes himself considered alternative suggestions of “I doubt, I err, I lie,” etcetera, ergo sum, the minimal form of which is “I enounce, ergo sum.” One has to entrust oneself to the signifier, yet the subject that is at stake has no signifier of its own, it is the subject of enunciation, absent from and underlying what is enunciated: “Note in passing that in avoiding the I think, I avoid the discussion that results from the fact that this I think, for us, certainly cannot be detached from the fact that he can formulate it only by saying it to us, implicitly—a fact that [Descartes] forgets” (Lacan 1986, 36).
What remains is purely an empty spot occupied by the subject of enunciation. For being empty, it can be universal, and it can indeed be seen as the form of subjectivity implied by science, a merely formal subjectivity purified of all content and substance. Each proposition of science must display the ability to be posited universally, that is, in such a way that it can be assumed by the empty form of subjectivity epitomized by cogito.

To be sure, this view already departs from Descartes. People as divergent in thought as Kant, Hegel, Husserl, and Lacan all agree that Descartes’s “error,” if it can be so called, consists in substantializing this empty spot of cogito by turning it into res cogitans. Cogito marks a “non-place,” a gap, a chasm in the chain of being, it doesn’t delineate a certain sphere of being to be placed alongside other spheres, it cannot be situated in some part of reality, yet it is at the same time correlative to reality as such.⁴

Lacan’s starting point in this reading of cogito is the assumption that cogito implies, in its pure and minimal form, a non-imaginary subject as a void. This is immediately followed by a tour de force: the coupling of this empty spot with the lack implied by the Symbolic that has been produced in other ways. Lacan has spent much time demonstrating that this second lack can ultimately be deduced from Saussure’s algorithm of the signifier and its underlying logic. In a nutshell, it follows from the basic property of the signifier that it can never be counted for one; “one” signifier already counts for two, because the empty place of its absence also counts. Differentiality, the Saussurean definition of the signifier has to be extended to the point where the signifier differs from itself: ultimately, it is the difference between itself and the void of its absence. Once we find ourselves in the realm of the Symbolic, there is never a simple absence or an innocent lack, and this invisible “missing half” that inherently sticks to the signifier is for Lacan precisely the place to which the subject can be “pinned” (hence the notion of suture). At a later stage, Lacan extensively uses some devices of set theory (as we shall see), which, in the most rudimentary form, implies (and formalizes) the difference between the set and the element it contains. The empty set, in this entirely formal view, is precisely the place of the subject. Its emptiness and its purely formal character have been designated by Lacan, in his algebra, by the signum $S$, to be read as sujet barré, the barred subject—there is quite literally a bar crossing its S, it is what remains when any S, with any positive feature, has been “crossed over,” erased. Nothing remains, but this nothing counts.

To be sure, again, this view can hardly be seen as Cartesian, for Descartes, having produced this vanishing point, didn’t allow it to vanish. Quite the opposite, his whole problem was how to proceed from there, and it turned out that this point could only be sustained by being pinned to the Other, the big Other epitomized by God: “When Descartes introduces the concept of a certainty that holds entirely in the I think of cogitation . . . one might say that his mistake is to believe that this is knowledge. To say that he knows
something of this certainty. Not to make of the I think a mere point of fading. . . . He puts the field of this knowledge at the level of this vaster subject, the subject who is supposed to know, God’’ (Lacan 1986, 224). So the barred subject needs the guarantee of the Other if there is to be any following step, the emergence of any knowledge, and in this way, by this support, it can be rid of its bar. This thesis encroaches upon a notorious controversy concerning the question of whether Descartes has committed a circulus in demonstrando, a vicious circle in his argument. The debate started already with the objections to the Meditations, and in his response, Descartes had to defend himself against the criticism about la faute qu’on appelle le cercle. The debate has a long history and I cannot venture into this difficult matter here. For our present purpose it suffices to say that according to Lacan, Descartes did indeed commit such a fallacy.5

The implication of this reading is that the existence of cogito as such cannot be sustained—at least not without reverting to the support of the big Other, the figure of God, the intimidating subject supposed to know. If the cogito is indeed just a pure vanishing point of the subject of enunciation, then its existence doesn’t follow from it. It cannot assume an ergo sum. All consistence it has is pinned to a signifier—there is no S without a signifier—but only as a void that sticks to it and cannot be presentified as such. In order to see what this means and how this works, one has to consider the mechanism of alienation, itself a necessary effect of language.

Alienation was for Lacan always essentially connected with the idea of a forced choice, although the terms of this choice and its implications varied at different stages of his teaching. The subject is subject to a choice—this is what makes it a subject in the first place—but this choice is rather the opposite of the free and autonomous choice one is accustomed to associate with the subject. One could say that the very elementary device of psychoanalysis, free associations, spectacularly stages this paradox: one is supposed to freely say anything that passes through one’s mind, autonomously choosing whatever one wants, yet the moment one begins, it becomes clear that one is trapped; every free choice, in free associations, turns out to have been a forced one.

There is a mechanism at the bottom of forced choice that Lacan attempts to delineate: the subject can choose only one way, and furthermore, by choosing s/he meets with a loss. This doesn’t mean simply that by choosing one side one loses the other, but also that even the side one has chosen is ridden with a loss—one can only get it curtailed, cut off from its part, so that the choice requires a double loss. Lacan has demonstrated this by the famous situation of a vel, epitomized by the somewhat drastic example of “your money or your life,” la bourse ou la vie. The two sides of the choice are not symmetrical: I can only choose to cling to my life, thus losing the money while clinging to money would entail losing both, the life and the money. The choice is decided in advance, there is no freedom of choice, and the choser.
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element can only be retained as curtailed, écorné (the life minus the money), or else one would lose both.

Here is the next tour de force in Lacan's reading of cogito: there is a way in which cogito has the same structure, it can be taken as a case of "your money or your life." This is the scene of the Lacanian cogito: one is pushed against the wall, the gun pointing at one’s head, with an unfathomable voice crying out in the dark: "Your thought or your being! Make up your mind!" One can appreciate the irony of the situation, for the moment one stops to think it over, the choice is already decided, one has lost one’s being by thinking. And one can only hold on to being if one doesn’t stop to think, but stops thinking.

In 1964, in the seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, generally taken as Lacan’s "standard account" of cogito, Lacan proposes the cogito as a forced choice between cogito and sum. There is an alternative: either to think or to be, and since there is no freedom of choice, one can only choose one way—but which one? One could assume that, following the model of "your money or your life," one is supposed to cling to one’s being at the price of losing thought, but Lacan surprisingly sees the situation in the opposite way: one must choose thought, the thought that makes sense, curtailed of being. More paradoxically still, as we shall see, some years later Lacan espoused the opposite view, that one is forced to opt for being at the expense of thought, eventually yielding a quite different account of cogito.

If I choose *I think*, I lose my being by entrusting myself head over heels to the tricky logic of the signifier. This is the choice that Descartes proposes, making the being of the subject dependent on thought and deducible from it. But Lacan’s point, in this forced choice, is that *sum* doesn’t follow once one has made the first step. Thought depends on the signifier, which turns the subject into the empty point of enunciation, instead of founding his/her being. In the place of the supposed certainty of the subject’s being, there is just a void. *It is not the same subject that thinks and that is*, the one *that is* is not the one *that thinks*, even more, the one *that is* is ultimately not a subject at all. One should already mark here that should one choose being, one would have to espouse the object, precisely the object that Lacan has labeled *objet a*, the object that detains being, but a being over which one cannot be master. Choosing being would entail desubjectivation, one would have to give up the status of the subject altogether. But apart from that, from Descartes’s own point of view choosing being would be void, it would thrust the subject back into the vagaries of the Imaginary, a confusion without hope for foundation and consistency, the black hole of being outside rationality, briefly, a non-being.

Since the choice of being is an impossible choice, coinciding with the non-being of the subject, one is bound to choose thought insofar as it makes sense (but there is a thought that doesn’t, and this will emerge as the
unconscious). And although one can make sense only by adopting signifiers, this seals the subject’s fate, for s/he becomes merely what “a signifier represents for another signifier,” thus essentially chained to it, while gliding along the signifying chain. This is the point of the little scheme that one finds in the English translation (figure 1): “If we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-sense. If we choose sense, the sense survives only deprived of that part of non-sense that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realization of the subject, the unconscious. In other words, it is of the nature of this sense, as it emerges in the field of the Other, to be in a large part of its field, eclipsed by the disappearance of being, induced by the very function of the signifier” (Lacan 1986, 211; translation modified). There is a choice between being and sense, where one is forced to wind up with sense, but a sense that is necessarily curtailed, cut off from its part, the part of non-sense, and this is precisely the part where one has to place the unconscious. The unconscious is to be situated at the intersection, the lost intersection of being and sense, whereas the part of being, as an impossible choice, is an empty set. It is in the place of the loss—the loss of being—in this empty set, that the subject is located. The subject’s place is the formal empty set of an impossible choice—for the forced choice is not simply an absence of choice: choice is offered and denied at the same time, but its empty alternative is what counts for the subject. The implication can also be read as follows: one cannot choose oneself as a subject, one can only remain a subject by holding on to something else, a positive element of sense, which, paradoxically, entails aphanisis, that is, the disappearance of the subject—but this oscillation between sense and aphanisis precisely constitutes the subject: “Alienation consists in this vel, which . . . condemns the subject to appearing only in that division . . ., if it appears on one side as sense, produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as aphanisis” (Lacan 1986, 210; translation modified). In this scheme Lacan inscribes the subject, superimposed at the void place of being, and the Other, superimposed on sense. The sense one chooses is necessarily entrusted to the Other, it is only by subscribing to the signifiers that are at a disposal in the Other—as the reservoir of signifiers—that one can “make sense” at all.

![Figure 1](image-url)
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Perhaps things can be made clearer if we introduce Lacan’s later notation, which he developed in the following years in an attempt to be as economical and as clear as possible (figure 2). (Maybe the difficulty in understanding Lacan stems largely from his attempts to be simple, to clarify matters to the utmost.) One necessarily chooses $S_2$, the signifier of sense and knowledge, which schematically condenses and represents the entire chain of signifiers. But that choice exacts its revenge: we are cut off from an essential signifier, marked by $S_1$, the signifier without a signified, a senseless signifier, which reemerges as the incomprehensible, nonsensical message of the unconscious—“this is not me,” “I was not there.”

We can consider separately the left circle and the right circle of this scheme. On the left side, we have $S/S_1$, which can actually be seen as an interpretation of the slogan “cogito as the subject of the unconscious.” $S$ is the subject that can be ascribed to the formations of the unconscious, the place where the Freudian subject emerges: “I am not saying that Freud introduces the subject into the world—the subject as distinct from psychical function, which is a myth, a confused nebulosity—since it was Descartes who did this. But I am saying that Freud addresses the subject in order to say to him the following, which is new—Here, in the field of the dream, you are at home. Wo es war, soll Ich werden” (Lacan 1986, 44). The subject, $S$, has to be ascribed to $S_1$ of the unconscious—but that makes it something very different from the overwhelming talk about modern subjectivity (Heidegger, etc.). The Lacanian cogito is not the modern subject that philosophers love to talk about; caught as it is in the structure of alienation, it cannot found its being in its thought; rather, the repressed part of thought (the unconscious) comes constantly to haunt it and dislocate it, and it is maintained only through this repression. It emerges only through the impossibility of integrating this lost part, the intersection where sense and being would seemingly coincide and ground the subject. Yet, for not being the modern subject of the philosophical doxa, it is not something else either: it emerges with and within cogito, as its invisible reverse side. There is a recurring criticism that Lacan’s subject still remains within the framework of cogito—but this is the whole
point. The Lacanian subject is indeed “structured as cogito,” as it were, just as the unconscious is structured as a language. What was so difficult to swallow with the concept of the unconscious was its closeness to the “normal” ways of thinking, its being structured just as the language that we are familiar with, just slightly displaced—and it goes the same for the subject as the dislocation of cogito.9

On the right-hand side, we have the couple of signifiers, $S_1/S_2$. If one is forced to choose sense, $S_2$, this has to be paid for by the loss of an essential signifier that remains structurally inaccessible—this is what Freud aims at with *Urverdrängung*, the primary repression as the pre-condition of all other repression, and also with *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, the representation that is essentially a stand-in for the structurally missing representation. The *urverdrängt* part is a place where signification and being would coincide—and this is indeed the usual understanding of cogito: a sense that immediately involves being and a being that immediately “makes sense,” the grounding of being in sense (in thought), and vice versa. For Lacan, this is a mirage, a mythical point of coincidence and transparency that tries to get rid of, or to disavow, the essential disparity of signification and being. Thus the lost part reemerges only as the non-sense of the unconscious, an $S_1$ to which, to be sure, one can always ascribe a series of $S_2$, trying to make sense of it. This is the fate of the process of analytical interpretation: it endeavors to reduce the non-sense produced by the formations of the unconscious by adding a series of $S_2$ that would hopefully shed light on it. Yet, the prolongation of the series, enlightening as it may be, doesn’t bring about a final resolution—and the analysis can indeed run into infinity, in a vain search for some ultimate signifier. This is why the business of making sense of non-sense is only the first part of interpretation, a prelude to be followed by its opposite: “The consequence of alienation is that interpretation is not limited to providing us with the meanings of the way taken by the psyche that we have before us. This role is no more than a prelude. Interpretation is directed not so much at sense as towards reducing the signifiers to their non-sense, so that we may rediscover the determinants of the subject’s entire behaviour” (Lacan 1986, 212; translation modified). Instead of looking for an ultimate $S_2$ that could stop the extension of the chain as its final link and thus provide the conclusive interpretation, one has to admit the irreducibility of this structure, the impossibility to catch and grasp $S_1$ by $S_2$. And this is what this scheme of alienation tries to pinpoint in the minimal way.

One can also see, on this right-hand side, why Lacan insists that the Other is barred as well, or that there is the lack in the Other. What the other lacks is precisely the $S_1$ of the intersection, the inaccessible signifier that could found it and complete it, and that can only be represented by a stand-in for the inherently missing part (hence the mechanism of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*). This signifier is what Lacan designates by $S(A)$, the signifier of the barred Other, and $S_1$ is nothing but the positivation of this irreparable absence.
But there is a second movement that follows and complements the forced choice of alienation, the step that Lacan calls separation and that forms a conceptual pair with it. In the first step, as we have seen, the intersection was necessarily eluded whatever one chose; now in the second step, the subject is precisely forced to face the intersection. But what is there in this intersection? We have seen in the first part that the subject coincides with its own *aphanisis*, while the Other contains only the signifiers that remain of its disappearance. There is no element of the Other that would intersect with the subject, and vice versa—except the lack as such. The Other and the subject intersect only in the lack. This lack in the Other appears in the very intervals between signifiers, the intervals of discourse, and those intervals present an enigma. The Other cannot simply be reduced to the signifiers it contains, there is a question constantly running in the gaps between them:

A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of the Other, there emerges in the experience of the child something that is radically mappable, namely, *He is saying this to me, but what does he want?*

In this interval intersecting the signifiers, which forms part of the very structure of the signifier, is the locus of what . . . I have called metonymy. It is there that what we call desire crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret. The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other.

(Lacan 1986, 214)

The subject’s response to this inscrutable, unfathomable desire of the Other, emerging in the lacks, is to offer his/her own being as the object of this desire, to offer his/her own loss: “Now, to reply to this hold, the subject . . . brings the answer of the previous lack, of his own disappearance, which he situates here at the point of lack perceived in the Other. The first object he proposes for this parental desire whose object is unknown is his own loss—*Can he lose me?* The phantasy of one’s death, of one’s disappearance, is the first object that the subject has to bring into play in this dialectic” (Lacan 1986, 214). Two lacks are thus superimposed in the intersection—but what can this yield? Can two lacks produce some “positive” result? In order to deal with the lack in the Other, the subject has to pawn his/her own being, but not the kind of being seemingly implied by cogito. If alienation excluded the choice of being, which would coincide with turning into the object and thus losing subjectivity, then in the second stage the subject seems to be forced to assume precisely that which was excluded: to present itself as the object of the desire of the Other, an object to fill its lack. One pawns one’s being by offering one’s non-being, in order to find out whether one detains the object of the Other’s desire. If alienation forced the subject to hold on to sense in order to
retain subjectivity, then it is separation that forces him/her to abandon sense in order to sustain the Other as his/her support. It is when the Other doesn’t make sense that its lack and its desire appear, and this is the only foundation for the subject’s own desire. So the separation is first the separation from sense, from the realm of signification, and in the same movement the separation from subjectivity, for it demands that the subject separates him/herself from the object. The desire of the Other presents a question—what does he want?—which is countered by another question—do I possess what he wants? What is it in me that could possibly satisfy this desire? So the subject is ultimately put in a position of offering not only what s/he has, but essentially what s/he doesn’t possess—and this is precisely Lacan’s definition of love: donner ce qu’on n’a pas, “to give what one doesn’t have.”

In alienation, non-sense was placed at the intersection of the subject and the Other, but now it appears that what even more radically doesn’t make sense is the lack, the interval between signifiers. “Non-sense” could be dealt with through interpretation, the infinite task of endowing it with sense, adding new signifiers. The lack presents a trickier problem: it can only be “interpreted” by the offer of an object, and the impossible task is now to procure an object that could measure up to it, that would be on the level with the Other’s desire.

Lacan’s brief mention of metonymy can provide us with another clue: the opposition between alienation and separation can also be read as an elaboration of the difference between metaphor and metonymy in his previous theory (cf. in particular “The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud,” Lacan 1977, 159–71). The account of the metaphor focused precisely on the elision of a signifier (“one signifier for another”) that linked the status of the subject to metaphoricity (“le métaphore du sujet,” was Lacan’s frequent dictum), and this mechanism was now formalized in alienation; while metonymy, with its evocation of the “unsayable,” its infinite gliding along the signifying chain from one signifier to another (like “the ferret” of the children’s game), corresponds to the mechanism of separation. So alienation and separation give a new formalized version of the Lacanian tenet that the “metaphor of the subject” provides the basis of the “metonymy of desire” (figure 3). The covering of two lacks produces something: the very

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{Figure 3} \\
  S & \cap \ S_1 \cap S_2 \\
  \text{(Subject)} & \cap \text{(Other)} \\
  a & \text{a}
\end{align*}
\]
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status of the object of desire, which appears precisely where the two lacks coincide—the lack of the subject and the lack of the Other. There is an object involved on both sides, figuring as a pivotal point of fantasy—the object “within the subject” that one tries to present in order to fill the lack in the Other, to deal with its desire; and on the other hand, the object “within the Other,” its surmised surplus, the source of its unfathomable jouissance, the secret clue to what makes the Other enjoy and that one wants to partake of. Ultimately, what makes the Other the Other, what makes it unfathomable, is what appears in its lack, an object heterogeneous to signification, irreducible to signifiers, which poses the radical problem of desire. What the Other lacks now is not just a signifier—be it S(\text{fi})—but, more intriguingly, the object. The surplus pairs with the lack, the coincidence of two lacks, and this is the way in which the subject, having lost its being in alienation, nevertheless partakes of it in separation—through the elusive surplus object one can never get hold of.

Indeed, ironically, in separation as the second step, a being does follow from the cogito of alienation, but not the kind of being to rejoice Descartes and to procure any foundational certainty.

This reading of cogito, usually taken as the standard Lacanian view of the matter, has been proposed in the most famous of Lacan’s seminars, which also happened to be the first one to be published. However, there is another reading that in a way continues the one briefly presented here, and also gives it some unexpected twists. This second reading was given by Lacan in 1966-67, in the seminar entitled La logique du fantasme (The logic of fantasy), which has not yet been published, so that this other approach has rarely attracted proper attention and has not been subjected to much scrutiny. It is still relegated to the somewhat obscure realm of secretly circulated copies that can be highly unreliable, while Lacan himself has written only a frustratingly short and cryptic account of it (Lacan 1984, the summary of the course composed for the Annuaire of the École pratique des hautes études, the academic institution that provided the formal framework for his seminar at the time).

It seems that this second account of cogito in many respects turns things upside down in relation to the first one. The problem is approached from another angle, that of the logic of fantasy, and fantasy, in Lacan’s view, is precisely something that confronts the subject with being—a being heterogeneous to signifiers and their play, their differentiality, etcetera; and on the other hand, a being irreducible to objectivity, to the (imaginary) counterpart of consciousness, the perceived being that one can lay one’s hands on and which one can manipulate, or which can be submitted to scientific investigation. Lacan, again trying to simplify matters to the extreme, proposed a rudimentary formula of fantasy, S0a—the subject confronted with that being, that bit of the Real, which s/he tries to cope with in fantasy (“there is
no other entry for the subject into the real except the fantasy” [Lacan 1984, 16]). So what is at stake in fantasy is a certain “choice of being” that pins down one’s jouissance. If the chain of signifiers is always prone to extension, without an ultimate signifier that could stop its gliding, without the proper signifier of the subject that could fix it (in both senses of the word), then the object that is at stake in fantasy is something that does stop the endless gliding—but only at the price of not being a signifier. It provides the subject with what Lacan calls its complement of being, le complément d’être, but the problem is that the two parts, the lack and the object, never fit or make a whole. And since this object is something nonsignifiable, it also follows that it defies interpretation. Whereas the interpretation of the formations of the unconscious can run into infinity, the fantasy, on the other hand, is not to be interpreted, as Lacan’s frequent slogan goes (on n’interprètes pas le fantasme). It is the halt of any interpretation, the infinity is suspended by the object.

The consideration of fantasy demands a reinterpretation of cogito. In the above account Lacan has used the simple scheme of the intersection of two circles quite innocuously, as a very elementary and generally comprehensible device of set theory. But now, three or four years later, this device has acquired a much more precise and technical meaning; it seems that Lacan has in the meantime devoted much time to studying the set theory and some other mathematical devices (Klein’s group, etc.). Lacan’s point can be made independently of the technicalities that call for some expert mathematical knowledge.

Cogito aims at the intersection of thought and being, and this intersection is inaccessible, a mirage, as we have seen—this point of the prior analysis retains the same validity. Now according to De Morgan’s laws in set theory, the negation of the intersection is equivalent to the conjunction of what remains of the two intersecting circles—that is, of a being without thought and of a thought without being. So one can reformulate the alternative between “I think” and “I am” as the one between “I don’t think” and “I am not”—ou je ne pense pas ou je ne suis pas (Lacan 1984, 13). Where I am, I don’t think, and where I think, I am not.

Our hypothetical situation of cogito as a choice at gunpoint now takes a new turn. As a subject, one has to choose being, but a being devoid of thought. This is the basis of assuming a cogito, while the other alternative, that of thought without being, belongs to the unconscious. What are the compelling reasons for this forced choice, and what does one lose by it in this new constellation? Lacan’s considerations can be seen as more elementary than those underlying the previous account, and, further, can be seen actually to produce not the cogito as the subject of the unconscious, but rather the cogito opposed to it.

Let us first consider the second part of the alternative, the thought without being. Is this not a good definition of the unconscious—the place where thinking takes place, but devoid of an “I,” and where one can never draw the
implication “therefore I am”? It is a thought that cannot be chosen; I cannot choose the unconscious, it always makes its appearance as an intruder that chooses me. And it is a thought that doesn’t make sense—if Lacan, in the previous account, tacitly assumed that the choice of thought involved the choice of sense, now he sharply opposes the two. It is also a thought without an “I,” and the first question that the analysis of cogito must resolve is on what conditions one can assume an “I” at all. If I am to assume an “I,” I cannot choose thought, which pertains to the unconscious, so that I am forced to choose being, thereby giving up thought. The fundamental choice of the subject is the choice of being without thought. Je ne pense pas, je suis—I don’t think, therefore I am—this is the new version of cogito; furthermore, I don’t think in order to be—je ne pense pas pour être. In order to be, I have to exclude a knowledge that I don’t want to know anything about. The excluded thought emerges in the unconscious, so that cogito, as the choice of being, coincides with the exclusion of thought as unconscious, of the unconscious as thought. If before I couldn’t choose being—this choice concurred with non-being—it now appears that I cannot do otherwise but to choose being, yet at the price of an “I don’t think” (figure 4).

The choice of being is the choice of a subject without the unconscious, thus the choice of consciousness, the choice of a “normal,” a seemingly “natural” form of subjectivity. It is this choice that now constitutes the fundamental alienation of the subject. “[In] ‘I don’t think,’ [the subject] imagines himself to be master over [of] his being, i.e., not to be of language” (Lacan 1984, 14; my translation). The choice endeavors to secure a mastery over one’s being and to reject, or disavow, the part where the subject is an effect of language and dependent on the signifier. (There is an untranslatable pun in French that Lacan was very fond of, the homonymy between maitre and m’être, the master and “self-being.”) And since this choice involves a basic disavowal, it can only yield a false being, un faux être, a “counterfeit” being, a fake, which serves as the support of consciousness. If the subject necessarily chooses being, and avoids thought, the being s/he chooses has to differ from the being of the object; s/he chooses being in such a way so as not to turn into the object. The pit of desubjectivation, of turning into the objet

Figure 4
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a, was what prevented the choice of being in the previous account. Now the same scheme serves another insight: there is a being at stake in consciousness, but which has to remain a “half-being,” a false being, given the impossibility to espouse the object a. It is this false being that gives support to the “I” and thus enables the mechanism of the Imaginary, providing the ground, as it were, to the vagaries of the mirror. “I,” in the gesture of recognition, espouses the false being, accompanied by the corollary “I don’t think.” It constitutes what Lacan now calls “moi-je,” based on a rejection of thought, yet experiencing itself precisely as the subject of thought in the usual and accepted sense of the word. So the current notion of “thinking” relies on a tacit choice, a rejection of thought that relegates it to the unconscious.

This is now the basic point of this second reading of cogito: it should be read as sum, ergo cogito, the choice of being to found thought, but this is what strikes with inanity the thought produced by this choice. The forced choice of sum, ergo cogito is the invisible truth of the Cartesian gesture.

The thought worthy of its name emerges only with the second option, that of the thought without being, but not as what one could possibly choose. Freud insisted that “the unconscious thinks,” and Lacan would go even further, adding another twist: it is only the unconscious that thinks, with the true dignity of thought that never fails to astonish by its novelty. In the previous account, the necessary choice of thought coincided with the choice of sense, to be paid by the return of non-sense; now the two are opposed—the true thought is separate from sense, cut off from understanding. It is a thought without being or substance—whereas one can make substance of the half-being of moi-je, and this is indeed what Descartes did with res cogitans, the thinking thing (and perhaps it goes the same for all notion of substance). It is also a thought without an “I,” though not without a subject.

Alienation now appears to mean quite the opposite from the previous account: before it meant that the subject had to entrust him/herself to the signifier in order to be a subject at all, alienation was alienation in the signifier, synonymous with the entry into language and its signifying logic. Now alienation figures precisely as the refusal of this logic, the choice of being against the effects of the signifier, the rejection of the signifier. If before one had to entrust oneself to the Other, now the basic gesture is that of the rejection of the Other. One cannot choose oneself as a subject, but the other side of the alternative is that one is forced to choose oneself as an “I,” with the false being deprived of thought. Yet, there is a basic postulate of psychoanalysis, an axiom, so to speak, that makes it possible at all: that the “subject” of false being can be induced to be permeable to the effects of the unconscious thought; that the part that one has been forced to choose can be open to the part that one has tried to reject; that the false being can be exposed to (the unconscious) thought. The line connecting the two can be seen as the one that defines transference: “Psychoanalysis postulates that the unconscious, where the ‘I am not’ of the subject has its substance, can be
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invoked from the ‘I don’t think’ where he imagines himself to be master of his being, i.e., not to be of language” (Lacan 1984, 14; my translation). The transference is “the diagonal joining the two extremities” (14), thus enabling the “subject” of alienation, with his/her false being, to undergo the effects of truth (the unconscious). Psychoanalysis, ultimately, is this connecting line. The hypothetical initial situation was endowed with two vectors: the vector of alienation (being without thought) and the vector Lacan simply called “truth,” pointing toward the unconscious. So the transference, joining the two extremities, is the lever to open the alienated subject of forced choice to the effects of the truth of the excluded choice.\(^{18}\)

The schematic presentation of this choice between “I don’t think” and “I am not,” the choice between the two circles that are both curtailed at their intersection, was introduced by Lacan also with an additional end in view. There is a huge problem that has been pointed out a number of times since Freud’s discovery of psychoanalysis and that Freud himself endeavored to solve in various ways. One could say that the discovery of psychoanalysis seems to involve two different steps, and it is not easy to see how they fit together.

On the one hand, there were the analyses of dreams, of slips of the tongue (parapraxes), and of jokes, which formed the substance of Freud’s three separate volumes published between 1900 and 1905. They all dealt with the formations of the unconscious that could be put under the heading of “the unconscious structured as a language.” Indeed, it was Lacan’s great tour de force to have detected in them the very mechanisms that followed from Saussurean linguistics (as read by Jakobson), the mechanisms of the signifier where the Freudian Verdichtung and Verschiebung, for example, could be read as a paramount version of the great divide between the basic mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy. The “substance” of the unconscious that comes to light here is manifested in the play of signifiers.

On the other hand, we have Freud’s Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, published in 1905, where the scenery seems to be quite different. The problems there include, among others: the stages in the development of libido; the object around which those stages turn; the partial object epitomized, for instance, by the breast and the feces; the lost object around which the drives circulate; the deviations of the drives as to their goal or their object. And there, surprisingly, we don’t find any plays of the signifier, no glittering linguistic metaphors or metonymies. If the unconscious speaks (and Lacan never tired of repeating that in the unconscious, it speaks, ça parle), then the drives keep remarkably silent (le silence des pulsions, says Lacan). And if the play of the signifiers was the privileged theater of the mechanisms of desire (Freud’s basic assumption, in the analysis of dreams, was that the dream was a Wünscherfüllung, a fulfillment of desire), then the drive, la pulsion, is a rather different matter. Indeed, in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, one can see that two of those concepts were
precisely the unconscious and the drive, forming a sort of paradigmatic opposition. So how does the “unconscious structured as a language” relate to the dimension of the drives?

Lacan tried to disentangle that problem first by a terminological twist. He took two of the terms proposed by Freud himself, though at different points of his development, namely the unconscious and the id (it, Es, le ça). Those two terms were usually taken as largely synonymous, pertaining to different periods of Freud’s thought, where the second terminology, that of id-ego-superego, was supposed to have superseded the first one (that of the unconscious-preconscious-consciousness). Lacan’s point was to take them together, so that the unconscious would be reserved for the first step, that of “the unconscious structured as a language,” while the id would cover the other step, the dimension of the drives. There are two different logics that overlap in certain ways, yet which have to be considered separately. One can already surmise that the two mechanisms of alienation and separation, in the first interpretation of cogito, were among other things also designed to cover those two different logics, the heterogeneous spheres of the subject of the unconscious, S, and that of jouissance.

How to situate the two logics on our scheme, designed, as Lacan says, “to open the joint of the id and the unconscious” (Lacan 1984, 14; my translation)? The logic of the drives, the id, always involves the question of being, as well as a dimension of “non-thought”—the drives don’t think, the unconscious does. The id should thus be placed on the side of “I don’t think, I am,” and Lacan proposed the elegant solution that it is to be located in the very part of intersection of which the choice of being has been curtailed. The precarious situation of the “I” was the choice of being while keeping at bay the object, so that the being “I” gets is itself curtailed, cut off from its essential part. And if the part of false being is covered by a moi-je, then the supplementary remainder can be labeled as a pas-je, a “non-I” (figure 5):

“The ‘I don’t think’ which here founds the subject in the option which is for him less bad [la moins pire], is curtailed of ‘am’ [écorné du ‘suis’] of the intersection negated by his formula. The non-I which can be supposed there, is, although not being, not without being. [Le pas-je qui s’y suppose, n’est,
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d'etre pas, pas sans être.) It is well designated by *It* [çà]” (Lacan 1984, 14; my translation). There is a part of “I” that is curtailed from “I,” but which nevertheless forms its core, the part where “I” is necessarily based on drives (and Freud spoke precisely of *Ichtriebe*, the ego drives, as well as of an unconscious nucleus of “I”). So the two entities proposed in the famous title of Freud's paper, *The Ego and the Id*, find their respective places as two parts of the same circle. The id, although placed on the side of the choice of being, is nevertheless the part to which being cannot simply be ascribed, not in any ordinary sense, not in the sense massively covered by “false being.” Yet it is not without being, as Lacan says—a paradoxical kind of being that encroaches upon the false being and truncates it, curtails it, pointing toward the object eluded in it. It is the part that cannot be subjectivated, assumed by an “I,” but which keeps intruding, returning to the same place.

There is another turn of the screw. Lacan continues the above quotation as follows: “It is well designated by *It*, with an index which points toward the subject by grammar. *It* [çà] is the index carried by *ne*, the knot [noeud] which glides along the sentence to assure its unsayable metonymy” (Lacan 1984, 14; my translation). So there is, maybe surprisingly, a grammar involved in the drives. If the signifier is endowed with logic, then the drives are endowed with grammar. “It” (as well as in German, *Es*, and in French, çà) is the marker of a grammatical subject, the nonpersonal subject, the one that cannot be assumed by an “I.” It is a *pas-je* non-I, as opposed to *moi-je*. The drives involve the grammatical structure—as opposed to the “I.” This is after all not so surprising if we remember some Freudian examples. Consider, for example, Freud's deduction of various forms of paranoia, in Schreber's case, from the grammatical transformations of a single sentence (“I (a man) love him”; Freud 1981, 9:200–204). One can witness the deployment of the whole panoply of quasi-Chomskian syntactic structures. Or consider some of the “vicissitudes of drives” in his famous metapsychological paper (Freud 1983, II:105ff.), which can be seen as the grammatical passage between the active and the passive voice. The drives may well be silent, but they nevertheless possess a grammar, or more precisely, a syntax. They don't speak, but they are not simply outside language. They aim at, and turn around, what cannot be said in the metonymy of signifiers, what dwells in the intervals between the signifiers—precisely those intervals that the separation had to deal with and that placed separation on par with metonymy. So the grammar, as opposed to the signifying logic, implies the object around which the drives turn. The grammar of the drives is what curtails the “I,” thus sustaining the “logic of fantasy.”

On the other side, the side of the thought without being, there is also a curtailment encroaching upon the circle of the unconscious. It is there that Lacan placed the castration (designated in his algebra by *minus phi*). For the play of the signifiers that is the stuff of the unconscious thought turns around a lack, the lack of a foundation that could ground signification in
being, and that is at the same time the curtailment of jouissance. There is the unconscious because this essential part is missing. The two curtailed parts, which together form the intersection, finally go hand in hand, they overlap and form a pair—it is in the place of the lack, the castration, that one can locate the object that the drives aim at and around which they turn. So we ultimately have, at the kernel of our being, the overlapping of castration (minus phi) and of the object (a), that is, of a being that comes into the place of an inherent lack, and that is nothing but the elusive cover of a void. It is a being over which we are not masters, yet which provides the only elusive bit of jouissance accessible to the "speaking being."

We can see that this second account in a way condenses the two schemes of alienation and separation into a single scheme. The unconscious that previously figured in the intersection of alienation is now one of the two curtailed terms, that of an impossible choice. As such it coincides with the impossible choice of the subject, S, and with the Other. So the three terms of previous alienation are now all to be found in the same circle on the right-hand side. Its curtailment is now epitomized by castration, the fundamental loss that condenses both the repression of the primary signifier and the loss of the object, the privation of jouissance. The other circle, that of "the ego and the id," suggests that what Lacan now calls alienation is actually much closer to what he previously called separation; one can already see that by the primacy accorded to the choice of being. But the being one chooses now is not the result of the subject’s involvement with the Other, but quite the opposite, it results from a refusal: "But the sense of Descartes’s cogito is that it substitutes this relation between thought and being [in the line of Aristotelian tradition] with purely and simply the instaturation of the being of ‘I’. . . . The fact of alienation is not that we are taken, remodeled, represented in the Other, on the contrary, it is essentially founded on the rejection of the Other, insofar as this Other has replaced this interrogation of being, around which turns the limit, the surpassing of cogito” (Lacan 1966–67, 11 January 1967; my translation). It is the being that founds the "I" as opposed to the subject and the Other (not the being the subject had to offer to the Other in separation in the aftermath of his alienating entanglement with the Other), a false being cleft from the id that detains its clue. It seems as though Lacan now transformed the programmatic title of "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the ‘I’ into ‘Cogito’ as formative of the function of the I.” Cogito finds itself on the same side with the “I” and the mirror stage, as its foundation. Alienation as the choice of being involves separation from sense and signification (the rejection of the Other), as well as the separation from the object, now figuring as the separation between the ego and the id, the “I” and the drives that sustain it. The crucial moment is the reversal of succession: there is an alienation that precedes the alienation in the Other, or the first response of the subject in relation to the Other is that of a rejection, an
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alienation of being prior to signification (with the emergence, on the other side, of the Symbolic prior to subjectivity and meaning). The choice of being relegates the “I” to the underpinnings of the Imaginary (the false being of fantasy) and to the drives, while the emergence of the subject results from the second step, the intrusion of the unconscious. It seems that Lacan, in the second account, goes back to his beginnings and reinterprets them: the primary alienation is not the alienation in the Other, but the espousal of an “imaginary” being of an “I” sustained by the grammar of the drives. The pure vanishing point of the subject of enunciation in cogito is preceded by a choice of res cogitans, a false being of the “I” framed by fantasy. So Descartes’s indigenous error was to deduce “the thinking being” from what was but a void, but the things have to read in reverse: there is a “stain of being” that forgoes the pure void of the subject, the “stain of sum” prior to cogito.23

If we put the two circles together, one could venture to interpret this scheme as a disposition of the three basic dimensions that, throughout Lacan’s teaching, underlie all human experience: the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary (figure 6). The Real, at the intersection between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, would be thus what holds them together, presenting the two faces of the drives (as pertaining to the “I”) and desire (as pertaining to the unconscious). The object a (both the object that causes desire and the object around which the drives turn) would thus be the pivotal point between the “I” and the subject of the unconscious. The forced choice in the first instance concerns the imaginary being, which is counteracted by the intrusion of the unconscious, the revenge of the rejected Other, while the Real, the impossible jouissance, is always necessarily lost, yet returns as an elusive leftover in the desire and the drives.

One can already see that this scheme is at odds with the notorious presentation that Lacan gave on the relation between those three dimensions in the Borromean knot. The Borromean knot is the connection of three circles in such a way that any two of them are connected by the third one. So each of the three dimensions, the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, have been given a separate circle, and they are tied in such a way that each of them holds the other two together. Our scheme looks like a flattened

Figure 6

23
two-dimensional Borromean knot, where the Real is confined to the mere product of the intersection. Lacan, dissatisfied with this scheme, proposed another device, the Borromean knot, which ultimately allowed him to situate the entity that was to become his predominant preoccupation in the later years: the symptom, interpreted in a new light as sinthome (an entity different from the formations of the unconscious in the previous accounts). Sinthome comes to be placed in the center of the three circles of the Borromean knot, that which actually keeps them together in order to form a knot. And since this elaboration of cogito took form within the framework of “The logic of fantasy,” as the title of this seminar goes, the logic of the symptom turned out to be something that couldn’t be covered by it in a satisfactory way.

So which of these versions is the right one? Are we forced to choose between the two versions of the Lacanian cogito and then the further theory centered on symptom? When faced with our hypothetical villain shouting “your thought or your being,” should one cling to thought or to being, or else exclaim “I give up both, only leave me my symptom”? Rather than deciding on some “definitive” account, one should see the progression through the different accounts of cogito as a clue to the general development of Lacan’s thought, and, in particular, as a clue to his different ways of conceiving the subject. In the first stage, when his main interest was focused on the Imaginary, cogito was rejected as opposed to the mirror phase—it was seen as the support of an illusory self-transparency that the mirror phase could effectively dismantle. In the second stage, focused on the Symbolic, cogito was taken as the best way to conceive the subject of the signifier, as opposed to the imaginary “I,” and its relation to the unconscious. Separation, as the counterpart to the subject’s alienation in the signifier, could show how, at the same time, this subject was to figure as the subject of desire. In the third stage, now focused on the Real, the whole problem was shifted toward the realm of drives and fantasy, as opposed to the symbolic logic and the desire. Although drives lack subjectivity (though Lacan occasionally and mysteriously speaks of a “headless subject,” sujet acéphal, of drives), they sustain the very assumption of an “I” (so that one could even paradoxically maintain that the “I” is the “subject” of drives). Finally, the three heterogeneous dimensions, whose problematic coexistence is at the kernel of Lacan’s entire teaching, could be seen to revolve around the nodal point of sinthome. Maybe the best way to put it is to claim that cogito itself is that symptomatic nodal point around which those three dimensions turn, the point that pushes subjectivity first “beyond” the imaginary “I,” then “beyond” the symbolic subject; any ultimate foundation (for example, “the Real of the anonymous drives”) turns out to be caught in this circular movement and cannot be grasped as such independently of the other two. For is the impossible coupling of thought and being not at the very core of the symptom upon which any subjectivity depends?
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The problem with understanding Lacan stems, among other things, from the fact that one has to follow the logic of the development of his theory and not to take any of its stages for granted, as some definitive shape of truth. While his preoccupations remained remarkably the same and his research presents an exceptional unity, there are at the same time quite baffling differences among the various answers that he proposed at different times. The new answers never simply discarded the previous ones and disclaimed their validity: the preceding steps found their place within the new pictures of growing complexity. Lacan’s dogmatic stance goes hand in hand with his most undogmatic demeanor. Only a dogmatist “on the level of his task” can never be afraid of putting into question the previous results, turning them upside down without mercy if the new quests make it necessary, thus turning them into provisional stages of a search. It is the stubborn continuity and the implacable logic of this search that is his main message, rather than any one given result.

Notes

1 Even the best contemporary philosophy—such as the one promoted by Sartre, who is briefly alluded to—remains prey to cogito: “But unfortunately that philosophy [of being and nothingness] 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... on borrowings from psychoanalytic experience, culminates in the pretention of providing an existential psychoanalysis” (Lacan 1977, 6).

2 A formulation like “the subject of the unconscious” (as well as “the subject of science”) was at that time deemed to be an “idealist reinscription” of Lacan committed by Lacan himself, Lacan supposedly falling back into the traps of superseded ways of thinking, or even failing to understand the significance of his own work. Althusser, for instance, expressly declared that the “process without a subject” was the key to Freud’s discovery of the unconscious.

3 “To say that the subject on which we operate in psychoanalysis can be no other than the subject of science, may appear as a paradox” (Lacan 1966, 858; my translation). In what follows I will leave aside the cardinal problem of the relationship of psychoanalysis to science.

4 Cf. “However, by reducing his cogito to res cogitans, Descartes, as it were, patches up the wound he cut into the texture of reality. Only Kant fully articulates... the impossibility of locating the subject in the ‘great chain of being’, into the Whole of the universe—all those notions of the universe as a harmonious Whole in which every element has its own place... In contrast to it, subject is in the most radical sense ‘out of joint’; it constitutively lacks its own place, which is why Lacan designates it by the mathem $S$, the ‘barred’ $S$” (Žižek 1993, 12).

5 “Let us go back to our Descartes, and to his subject who is supposed to know. How does he get rid of it? Well, as you know, by his voluntarism, by the primacy given to the will of God. This is certainly one of the most extraordinary sleights of hand that has ever been carried off in the history of the mind” (Lacan 1986, 225).

6 One of the most famous quotations from Écrits states the following: “My definition of a signifier (there is no other) is as follows: a signifier is that which
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represents the subject for another signifier” (Lacan 1977, 316.) Cf.: “The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject” (Lacan 1986, 207).

7 “In a precisely similar way, Freud, when he doubts—for they are his dreams, and it is he who, at the outset, doubts—is assured that a thought is there, which is unconscious, which means that it reveals itself as absent. . . . [I]t is to this place that he summons the I think through which the subject will reveal himself. . . . It is here that the dissymmetry between Freud and Descartes is revealed. It is not in the initial method of certainty grounded on the subject. It stems from the fact that the subject is ‘at home’ in this field of the unconscious” (Lacan 1986, 36).


9 Cf. “Indeed, this is the essential flaw in philosophical idealism which, in any case, cannot be sustained and has never been radically sustained. There is no subject without, somewhere, aphanisis of the subject, and it is in this alienation, in this fundamental division, that the dialectic of the subject is established” (Lacan 1986, 221).

10 There is a technical aspect to it pertaining to the use of set theory. “Whereas the first phase is based on the substructure of joining, the second is based on the substructure that is called intersection or product. It is situated precisely in that same lunula in which you find the form of the gap, the rim” (Lacan 1986, 213). It can be given a more precise formal background with De Morgan’s laws, but Lacan inflects those technical aspects for his own purposes.

11 “It is in so far as [the desire of the Other] is beyond or falls short of what [the mother as the first Other] says, of what she hints at, of what she brings out as meaning, it is in so far as her desire is unknown, it is in this point of lack, that the desire of the subject is constituted” (Lacan 1986, 218-19; translation modified).

12 “Through the function of the object a, the subject separates himself off, ceases to be linked to the vacillation of being, in the sense that it forms the essence of alienation” (Lacan 1986, 258).

13 The two sides also appear in the process of transference: the “subject supposed to know” functions on the level of alienation, the supposition of a signifier in possession of the Other, whereas the other slope of transference, its second stage, as it were, transference as love, involves the supposition of a secret object hidden and detained by the other, agalma, in relation to which one is prepared to offer everything, including what one doesn’t possess, the Lacanian definition of love, and this is where being comes into play.

14 “One lack is superimposed upon the other. The dialectic of the objects of desire, in so far as it creates the link between the desire of the subject and the desire of the Other—I have been telling you for a long time now that it is one and the same—this dialectic now passes through the fact that the desire is not replied to directly. It is a lack engendered from the previous time that serves to reply to the lack raised by the following time” (Lacan 1986, 215).

15 For what follows I am much indebted to the courses given by Jacques-Alain Miller, particularly his seminar entitled 1, 2, 3, 4 given in 1984–85.

16 One is tempted to quote Adorno’s dictum from Minima moralia: “True are only the thoughts that don’t understand themselves.”

17 “Without substance, yet as a subject” could be taken as a rephrasing of the Hegelian “not only as a substance, but also as a subject”—for one could say that the subject appears precisely at the point of a “lack in the substance,” the failure of substantiality.

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18 This doesn’t entail that one should become aware of the unconscious as one’s truth, but rather the reverse: “the ‘I don’t think,’ as correlative of It [ca], is called to join the ‘I am not,’ as correlative of the unconscious, but in such a way that they eclipse and occult each other in being superimposed. In the place of ‘I am not’ It [ca] will come, giving it a positive form of ‘I am It [ca]’ which is a pure imperative, precisely the imperative which Freud has formulated in *Wo es war, soll Ich werden*” (Lacan 1966–67, 11 January 1967; my translation).

19 One can mention in passing that the famous “graph of desire” (Lacan 1977, 315) displays those two dimensions on two parallel stages, and the graph can be seen as nothing but an attempt to link them, to conceive them together.

20 Cf. “It is certain that much of the ego is itself unconscious, and notably what we may describe as its nucleus; only a small part of it is covered by the term ‘pre-conscious’” (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” [Freud 1983, 11:289–90]). “We have come upon something in the ego itself which is also unconscious, which behaves exactly like the repressed—that is, which produces powerful effects without itself being conscious and which requires special work before it can be made conscious . . . A part of ego, too—and Heaven knows how important a part—may be unconscious, undoubtedly is unconscious” (“The Ego and the Id” [Freud 1983, 11:356]).

21 “As to the relation between the drive and activity/passivity, I think I will be well enough understood if I say that at the level of the drive, it is purely grammatical” (Lacan 1986, 200).

22 “When I say structure, logical structure, you should understand that as grammatical [structure]. It’s nothing else but the support of what is at stake in drive . . . a grammatical montage, whose inversions, reversions, complex turnings are regulated in the application of diverse inversions, *Verkehrung*, chosen and partial negations, and there is no other way to make function the relation of I, as a being-in-the-world, but to pass it through this structure which is nothing else but the essence of It [ca]” (Lacan 1966–67, 11 January 1967; my translation).

23 Žižek (1993, 59–60) makes an interesting suggestion that the two versions of cogito can be taken as the feminine and the masculine versions: the feminine position would present the choice of thought in the first account, and the masculine one the choice of being in the second. This suggestion is in many ways illuminating and inspiring, but it is hard to reconcile with the detail of Lacan’s text.

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[The cogito], as a moment, is the aftermath (défilé) of a rejection (rejet) of all knowledge, but it nevertheless claimed to establish for the subject a certain anchoring in being.


It can never be sufficiently emphasized that the Lacanian watchword of a return to Freud is originally coupled with an expression of Lacan’s which goes back to 1946: “the call for a return to Descartes would not be superfluous.” The means by which these two injunctions are connected is the dictum that the subject of psychoanalysis is nothing other than the subject of science. But this identity can only be grasped by attempting to think the subject in its own place. That which localizes the subject is at the same time the point at which Freud is intelligible only through the lineage of the Cartesian gesture, and where he subverts, through de-localization, the pure coincidence of the subject with itself, its reflexive transparency.

What renders the cogito irrefutable is the form which one can give to it where the place insists: “Cogito ergo sum,” ubi cogito, ibi sum. The point of the subject is that there where it thinks that thinking it must be, it is. The connection of being and place founds the radical existence of enunciation as subject.

Lacan exposes the chicanery of place in the disorientating utterances of the subject that supposes that “I am not, there where I am the plaything of my thought: I think of what I am where I do not think to think.” The unconscious designates that “it thinks” there where I am not, but where I must come to be. Thus the subject finds itself decentered [excentré] from the place of transparency where it announces its being, without failing to read in this a complete rupture with Descartes, which Lacan indicates by saying that the subject does not “misrecognize” that the conscious certainty of existence.
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- the home of the cogito – is not immanent but transcendent. “Transcendent” because the subject can only coincide with the line of identification that proposes this certainty to it. More precisely, the subject is the refuse of this certainty.

There, in truth, is the whole question. Cutting quickly through what this implies as to the common ground between Lacan, Descartes, and what I propose here, which ultimately concerns the status of truth as a generic hole in knowledge, I will say that the debate rests upon the localization of the void.

What still links Lacan (but that “still” is the modern perpetuation of sense) to the Cartesian epoch of science is the thought that it is necessary to hold the subject in the pure void of its subtraction if one wishes that truth be saved. Only such a subject lets itself be sutured in the logical, integrally transmissible form of science.

Yes or no – is the empty set the proper name of being as such? Or must we believe that this term more appropriately applies to the subject – as if its purification from all substance that one could know should deliver the truth (which speaks) through de-centering the null point in eclipse in the interval of the multiple that, under the name of “signifiers,” guarantees material presence?

The choice here is between a structural recurrence, which thinks the subject-effect as the empty set, so exposed in the uniform network of experience, and a hypothesis of the rarity of the subject, which defers its occurrence to the event, to the intervention, and to the generic paths of fidelity, referring back and founding the void on the function of the suturing of being for which mathematics exclusively commands knowledge.

In neither case is the subject substance or consciousness. But the first road conserves the Cartesian gesture, its decentered dependence with regard to language. I have proof of this, since Lacan, in writing that “thought only grounds being by knotting itself in speech where every operation goes right to the essence of language,” maintains the design of ontological foundation that Descartes encounters in the transparency, both void and absolutely certain, of the cogito. Certainly, he organizes the turnings very differently, since the void for him is delocalized, no pure reflection can give us access there. But the intrusion of the outside term – language – does not suffice to reverse this order which implies that it is necessary from the point of the subject to enter into the examination of truth as cause.

I maintain that it is not truth which causes the suffering from false plenitude when the subject is overcome by anxiety (“does or doesn’t what you [analysts] do imply that the truth of neurotic suffering lies in having the truth as cause?”). A truth is that indiscernible multiple a subject supports the finite approximation of. In result, its ideality to come (the nameless correlate of the name an event would have if it could be named) is the truth from which one may legitimately designate a subject – that random figure which, without the
indiscernible, would only be an incoherent continuation of encyclopedic determinations.

If one would point to a cause of the subject, it is less necessary to return to the truth, which is above all the stuff of the subject, or to the infinite, for which the subject is the finite, as to the event. Consequently, the void is no longer the eclipse of the subject, being in relation to Being such that it has been summoned up by the event as the errancy in the situation by an intervening nomination.

By a sort of inversion of these categories, I will arrange the subject in relation to the ultra-one (l'ultra-un), even though it would itself be the trajectory of multiples (the inquiries), the void in relation to being, and truth in relation to the indiscernible.

Besides, what is at stake here is not so much the subject — save to free that which still, by the supposition of its structural permanence, makes Lacan a founder among those who echo the previous epoch. Rather, it is the opening on a history of truth finally totally disjointed from what Lacan, with genius, called exactitude, or adequation, but what his gesture, too welded to a single language, allowed to survive as the reverse of truth.

A truth, if one thinks of it as being only one generic part of the situation, is the source of the veridical from the moment that the subject forces an undecidable into the future anterior. But if the veridical touches language (in the most general sense of the term), truth only exists there as undifferentiated; its procedure is generic insofar as it avoids the entire encyclopedic hold of judgments.

The essential character of names, the names of the language-subject, attaches itself to the subjective capacity of anticipation, by forcing (forçage) that which will have been veridical from the point of a supposed truth. But names only create the appearance of the thing in ontology, where it is true that a generic extension results from the placing-into-being of the entire system of names. However, even there, it is just a matter of simple appearance. For the reference of a name depends upon the generic part which is implicated in the particularity of the extension. The name only founds its reference under the hypothesis that the indiscernible will have been already completely described by the set of conditions that, in other respects, it is. In its nominal capacity, a subject is under the condition of one indiscernible, thus of one generic procedure, thus of one fidelity, of one intervention and ultimately of one event.

What is lacking in Lacan — even though this lack would only be legible to us having first of all read in his texts that which, far from lacking, founded the possibility of a modern regime of the true — is the radical suspension of truth in the supplementation of a Being-in-situation by an event, separator of the void.

The “there is” (il y a) of a subject is, by the ideal occurrence of a truth, the coming-to-be of the event in its finite modalities. Moreover, we always have
to understand that there was no “il y a” of the subject, that this “il y a” is no more. What Lacan still owes to Descartes, the debt whose account must be closed, is the assumption that “il y a” was always there.

When the Chicago Americans shamelessly utilized Freud to substitute the re-educative methods of a “consolidation of the ego” for the truth from which a subject proceeds, it was with just cause, and for the salvation of all, that Lacan opened against them this merciless war that his true students and heirs have continued to prosecute. But they have been wrong to believe that – things remaining as they are – they could win.

Because it was not a matter of an error or of an ideological perversion. It is obviously what one could believe, if one supposed that there were an “always” of the truth and of the subject. More seriously, the people in Chicago acknowledged in their own fashion what the truth withdraws from and, with that, the subject which authorizes it. They are situated in a historical and geographical space where fidelity to the events – of which Freud or Lenin or Cantor or Malevich or Schoenberg are the operators – is no longer practicable apart from the ineffective forms of dogmatism or orthodoxy. Nothing generic could ever be imagined in this space.

Lacan thought that he redressed the Freudian doctrine of the subject, but in fact, newcomer to the Viennese shores, he has reproduced an operator of fidelity postulating the horizon of an indiscernible, and we are persuaded again that there is, in this uncertain world, a subject.

If we now examine what is still allowed us in philosophical traffic in the modern dispensation, and consequently what our tasks are, we can make a table like this:

a. It is possible to reinterrogate the entire history of philosophy since its Greek origin under the hypothesis of a mathematical ordering of the ontological question. One will thus see taking shape at the same time a continuity and a periodization very different from that deployed by Heidegger. In particular, the genealogy of the doctrine of truth will lead us to pinpoint, by singular interpretations, how the unnamed categories of the “event” and of the “indiscernible” work throughout the text of metaphysics. I believe I have given several examples of this.

b. A close analysis of the procedures of logico-mathematics since Cantor and Frege will make it possible to think what this intellectual revolution (a blind return of ontology onto its own essence) conditions in contemporary rationality. This work will make it possible to undo, on its own ground, the monopoly of Anglo-Saxon positivism.

c. As regards the doctrine of the subject, this particular examination of each of the generic procedures will open up to an aesthetics, to a theory of science, to a political philosophy, and finally to the mysteries of love, to a non-fusional conjunction with psychoanalysis. All of modern art, all of the uncertainties of science, all of the militant tasks still prescribed
by a ruined Marxism and finally, all of that designated by the name of Lacan will be re-encountered, reworked, gone through, by a philosophy brought up to date through clarified categories.

And we will be able to say in this voyage, at least if we have not lost the memory of that which the event alone authorizes, that Being – that which is called Being – founds the finite place of a subject who decides: “Nothingness gone, the castle of purity remains.”
Bernard Baas, “Le désir pur”

In his “Kant avec Sade”, Lacan claims that, in the history of ideas, Kant’s philosophy designates the starting point out of which the Freudian revolution emerged. In his elaboration of this claim, Baas gives a detailed parallel between Kantian critical edifice and Lacan’s theory, whose underlying premise is that Lacan’s achievement is best conceived as a “critique of pure desire”: while, for Kant, every desire is “pathological” (dependent on contingent empirical objects), Lacan sustains the “pure” desire whose object-cause is precisely object petit a. Within this perspective, the Kantian prohibition to access directly the noumenal Thing-in-itself equals Lacan’s notion of “symbolic castration”, the loss of the maternal Thing which sustains human desire. The second axis of Baas’ essay is the parallel between Kant and Sade (i.e. Lacan’s scandalous claim that the ethical stance implicit in Sade’s writings is the “truth” of the Kantian ethics). The point is not that Kant was a closet sadist (recall the standard notion of the “sadist” nature of the unbearable pressure exerted on the subject by the categorical imperative), but that Sade was a Kantian: Sade’s injunction to enjoy unconditionally, beyond the limitations of pleasure, elevates the Will-to-Enjoy to an ethical agency in the strict Kantian sense – Sadean heroes are propelled by a weird and obscene categorical imperative.

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

18

LE DÉSIR PUR

A propos de “Kant avec Sade” de Lacan

Bernard Baas


«Il semblerait difficile, impossible même d’arriver à quelque chose de plus ardent; et cependant une dernière fusée vient tracer un sillon plus blanc sur le blanc qui lui sert de fond. Ce sera, si vous voulez, le cri suprême de l’âme montée à son paroxysme.»

BAUDELAIRE (Lettre à Richard Wagner.)
«Désir pur» est une expression qu'on ne serait pas surpris de lire dans un dialogue de Platon. À ma connaissance, elle ne s'y trouve pas, du moins pas sous cette forme littérale. En revanche, Platon parle du «plaisir pur» — et c'est à cette occasion qu'il affronte au plus près la question du désir — dans le *Phèdè*, l'un des derniers dialogues, consacré à la détermination de la place du plaisir dans ce que Platon appelle «la vie bonne». La partie centrale et la plus importante du *Phèdè* porte ainsi sur le statut éthique du plaisir. Résumons brièvement: Platon distingue entre état de plaisir, état de douleur et état neutre. Cet état neutre est aussi appelé «harmonie», de sorte que la douleur caractérise la dissolution de l'harmonie, et que le plaisir accompagne le mouvement qui tend à la reconstitution de cette harmonie. L'état de l'homme qui n'éprouverait ni douleur ni plaisir, qui donc ne connaîtrait que l'état neutre, l'harmonie, serait tel qu'on pourrait dire que «sa vie est la plus divine de toutes».

Pourtant, cet homme divin, c'est-à-dire celui dont la vie est absolument bonne — en un mot (pour Platon): le sage, le philosophe —, ne saurait rester étranger à tout plaisir, tant il est vrai que, pour les Grecs, on ne saurait séparer le Bien et le bonheur. Le sage connaît donc des plaisirs qui lui sont propres: les plaisirs purs, c'est-à-dire les plaisirs qui ne sont précédés d'aucune souffrance, d'aucun manque douloureux. Mais cela ne signifie pas qu'ils ne seraient précédés d'aucun désir. Car l'âme du philosophe désire le bien, le savoir et la vérité. Ce serait donc là le «désir pur» en tant que mouvement de l'âme non accompagné de cette douleur, de ce manque qui caractérise les autres désirs et qui fait les plaisirs impurs.

«Ajoutons à ces plaisirs ceux que procurent les sciences, si nous n'y trouvons pas incluses une fringale d'apprendre et, avec cette faim de sciences, une douleur originelle. [...] Ces plaisirs de la connaissance ne sont mêlés d'aucune douleur et, loin d'appartenir à la masse des hommes, ils sont le lot d'un tout petit nombre [...]. Voilà donc séparés les plaisirs purs et ceux qu'on pourrait avec quelque raison appeler impurs.»

Ainsi, au plaisir pur correspondrait un désir pur. Platon l'appellerait plutôt le «désir vrai», ce que nous devons tout aussi bien entendre comme «désir du vrai».

On pourrait s'en tenir là et ne qualifier de purs que les plaisirs de la connaissance, de sorte qu'eux seuls seraient admissibles dans le «mixte» que constitue la «vie bonne». Mais Platon conçoit bien l'insuffisance de cette détermination, et c'est pourquoi il va s'employer à fournir un exemple de plaisir pur sensible. Ce sera le plaisir qu'on peut — paraît-il — éprouver à percevoir du blanc pur de toute autre couleur. À peine exposé cet exemple singulier, Platon déclare résolue la difficulté et laisse sans réponse la question de savoir ce que serait le désir vrai ou le désir pur de la pure blancheur. Pourtant, la difficulté subsiste, et elle ne peut que subsister parce qu'elle vient de ce que Platon essaie de penser le pur dans l'ordre empirique. Ce qu'on peut formuler plus naïvement: toute la difficulté vient de ce que Platon n'est pas Kant.
Car pour Kant — on le sait — le pur (le pur de la raison pure) et l'empirique sont radicalement hétérogènes; c'est même cette hétérogénéité qui constitue le pur en tant que tel, c'est-à-dire: «pur de toute expérience». Dès lors, parler de «désir pur» dans le cadre de la philosophie kantienne n'est pas seulement une difficulté, mais une impossibilité. Selon Kant, en effet, le désir concerne le mouvement du sujet vers des objets empiriques, en tant que ce mouvement se rapporte au bien-être du sujet dans ses sensations ou dans ses sentiments. Autrement dit: le désir relève toujours de l'inclination ou de l'amour de soi. Il ne saurait donc être pur.

Pour Kant, il n'y a de pureté que de la raison, c'est-à-dire de la faculté de l'universel a priori. Déterminer cette pureté de la raison est l'enjeu déclaré de la philosophie transcendantale. Rappelons que Kant appelle «transcendantale» la question qui porte sur les conditions de possibilité a priori de la raison, soit dans l'ordre de la connaissance, soit dans l'ordre de l'action. Est donc transcendantale la philosophie de la raison pure dans son usage théorique et/ou dans son usage pratique.

Parler de «désir pur» revient donc à poser — d'une certaine façon contre Kant, mais c'est aussi «avec Kant» (expression dont l'occurrence imposera de rendre compte dans toute sa résonance) — la question transcendantale au sujet du désir. De manière homologue à Kant, qui distingue l'objet connu et la faculté de connaître (laquelle est a priori), il s'agirait de distinguer, dans le désir, entre l'objet du désir et la faculté de désirer ⁷. Serait a priori la faculté de désirer, de sorte que le désir serait certes occasionné par l'objet — à entendre ici comme objet sensible donné dans l'expérience — mais non causé par lui. Forgeons pour l'occasion le mot d' «épithumène» ⁸, analogue pour le désir à ce qu'est le phénomène pour la connaissance. Il y aurait donc, avant tout objet de désir, avant tout épithumène, une faculté de désirer: voilà ce que je désigne ici comme le désir pur.

Poser une telle question ferait se conjoindre ce que Kant a rigoureusement séparé: l'a priori et le désir. Ce serait s'attaquer à une théorie transcendantale du désir et, en quelque façon, indiquer qu'il y aurait à faire une «critique du désir pur». Ce serait donc aussi se faire croiser la philosophie transcendantale et la psychanalyse.

Ce croisement, ou plutôt cette rencontre, Freud a bien failli la connaître. À l'article «L'inconscient» de la Métapsychologie, on peut lire en effet: «De même que Kant nous a avertis de ne pas oublier que notre perception a des conditions subjectives et de ne pas la tenir pour identique avec le perçu inconnaisable, de même la psychanalyse nous engage à ne pas mettre la perception de conscience à la place du processus psychique inconscient qui est son objet.» ⁹ Mais cette sorte d'optimisme théorique, qui caractérise si souvent Freud, lui fait manquer la pointe de cette référence à Kant, qu'il réduit alors à la question de la perception:

«Tout comme le physique, le psychique n'est pas nécessairement en réalité tel qu'il nous apparaît. Toutefois, nous n'allons pas tarder à apprendre avec
satisfaction que la correction de la perception interne n’offre pas une aussi grande difficulté que celle de la perception externe, que l’objet intérieur est moins inconnaissable que le monde extérieur.»

Ce passage ne constitue pas la seule référence de Freud à Kant. L’occasion la plus fréquente de cette référence est exactement celle qui nous occupe ici: la question éthique. Freud fait appel à la conceptualité kantienne pour caractériser la conscience morale dans son articulation au complexe d’Œdipe et au surmoi:

«Le surmoi, la conscience morale à l’œuvre en lui, peut alors se montrer dur, cruel, inexorable à l’égard du moi qu’il a sous sa garde. L’impératif catégorique de Kant est ainsi l’héritier direct du complexe d’Œdipe.» On peut lire des remarques tout à fait analogues dans «Le moi et le ça», où Freud parle de l’impératif catégorique à propos de la cruauté du surmoi telle qu’elle se manifeste dans le sentiment de culpabilité. Je reviendrai plus loin sur ces références de Freud à Kant. Pour l’instant, elles nous permettent au moins de comprendre que l’articulation de la philosophie transcendantale et de la question du désir ne peut être examinée que sur le terrain où Kant les a précisément séparées: celui de la raison pure pratique, plus précisément au point de ce qu’on nomme la loi morale.

C’est exactement ce que vise Lacan, comme il l’indique dans le livre XI du Séminaire, juste après avoir évoqué la célèbre formule de Spinoza («Le désir est l’essence de l’homme»): «L’expérience nous montre que Kant est plus vrai, et j’ai prouvé que sa théorie de la conscience, comme il écrit de la raison pratique, ne se soutient que de donner une spécification de la loi morale qui, à l’examiner de près, n’est rien d’autre que le désir à l’état pur, celui-là même qui aboutit au sacrifice, à proprement parler, de tout ce qui est l’objet de l’amour dans sa tendresse humaine — je dis bien, non seulement au rejet de l’objet pathologique, mais bien à son sacrifice et à son meurtre. C’est pourquoi j’ai écrit Kant avec Sade.»

Reste donc à «examiner de près» ce qui se donne ici non seulement comme conjonction mais même comme identification de la «loi morale» et du «désir à l’état pur». Que Lacan ait tenu à rendre compte, après coup et en ces termes, de son texte suffit pour l’instant à indiquer ce que visent le titre et le sous-titre de mon propos: Le désir pur (à propos de Kant avec Sade) — «à propos», et non «sur». Car il ne s’agit pas ici d’étudier le détail de ce texte, mais d’y être assez attentif pour parvenir à y déterminer le rapport de Lacan à Kant, qui est tout aussi bien celui de la psychanalyse à la philosophie, Lacan n’y faisant pas seulement office de commentateur de Kant, mais peut-être aussi de commettant. C’est pourquoi on ne saurait entrer dans l’étude de ce texte sans passer par le seuil que Lacan lui-même nous enjoint de franchir: la philosophie morale de Kant. J’en rappellerai succinctement les éléments essentiels à ce qui nous intéresse ici.

*
Dans une note de la Préface de la *Critique de la raison pratique*, Kant répond à l'objection qu'on pourrait lui faire de n'avoir pas commencé son propos par une définition de la faculté de désirer. Il écrit alors: «Vivre, c'est le pouvoir qu'a un être d'agir suivant les lois de la faculté de désirer. La faculté de désirer est le pouvoir qu'il a d'être, par ses représentations, cause de la réalité des objets de ces représentations. Le plaisir est la représentation de la concordance de l'objet ou de l'action avec les conditions subjectives de la vie, c'est-à-dire avec le pouvoir de causalité d'une représentation relativement à la réalité de son objet.»

De ce point de vue, la faculté de désirer se rapporte au bien-être (*Wohl*) du sujet. Or, seule l'expérience sensible pouvant décider du plaisir, il n'y a là aucune possibilité d'une détermination *a priori*. Autant dire que la faculté de désirer procède alors de l'impératif hypothétique, que l'on peut ainsi résumer: si, par hypothèse, le résultat de l'action doit contribuer au bien-être, alors, les moyens mis en œuvre pourront être dits bons. Se laisse entendre ici la maxime: «la fin justifie les moyens», c'est-à-dire le principe même de l'immoralité, puisque cette fin est toujours rapportée, d'une façon ou d'une autre, au bien-être. Ce bien-être, ce *Wohl*, n'est pas seulement le plaisir brut; c'est aussi bien le sentiment de sympathie pour autrui, ce que Kant appelle, dans les *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*, l'«amour pathologique» (à entendre bien sûr en un sens non pas clinique mais étymologique), amour pathologique qui réside dans le penchant de la sensibilité, et qui relève toujours d'une «compassion amollissante». Autrement dit, agir en vue du bien-être d'autrui par *sympathie* pour autrui, c'est déjà agir en vue de son propre bien-être à soi, ce qui rend l'action *pathologiquement* déterminée, et donc étrangère à la moralité. C'est ce que résume la seconde proposition des *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*: «Une action accomplie par devoir tire sa valeur morale non pas du *but* qui doit être atteint par elle, mais de la maxime d'après laquelle elle est décidée; elle ne dépend donc pas de la réalité de l'objet de l'action, mais uniquement du *principe du vouloir* d'après lequel l'action est produite sans égard à aucun des objets de la faculté de désirer.»

C'est pourquoi la raison pratique ne saurait dépendre d'aucun objet empirique. Le concept d'un tel objet est le Bien, *das Gute*, à entendre selon la distinction qui l'oppose au bien-être, *das Wohl*. C'est parce que la raison pratique est aussi raison pure que «le concept de Bien ne doit pas être déterminé avant la loi morale, mais seulement après cette loi et par elle»20. C'est donc la loi qui fait l'action moralement bonne, et non la fin empirique que sert ou qu'est supposée servir cette action. Tel est le sens de ce que Kant appelle la «volonté bonne» (et qui est — rappelons-le — tout le contraire de ce que nous entendons habituellement en français par «bonne volonté»): c'est la volonté qui agit par devoir et seulement par devoir. Son impératif n'est pas hypothétique mais catégorique (*c'est-à-dire *a priori*), ce qui signifie que la raison pure dans son usage pratique, et en tant qu'elle est pure, ne peut que se rapporter à elle-même. C'est pourquoi la volonté raisonnable est
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autonome, et non pas hétéronome comme l’est une volonté soumise à l’ordre sensible, c’est-à-dire au désir

Pourant, il faut aussi que cette volonté raisonnable se rapporte à l’action empirique et réalise, dans l’ordre pratique, la synthèse de l’a priori et de l’empirique. Tel est l’enjeu de la «typique» de la raison pure pratique: la maxime de l’action, pour être morale, doit avoir pour «type» la loi de la nature — non pas quant à son contenu, mais seulement quant à sa forme, laquelle est précisément rationnelle. C’est ce qu’énonce l’impératif catégorique: «Agis comme si la maxime de ton action devait être érigée par ta volonté en loi universelle de la nature.»

La moralité de l’action ne dépend donc nullement du principe subjectif du désir, lequel relève toujours du «pathologique»; elle ne dépend que de la volonté qui affirme son autonomie en légiférant pour elle-même, selon le principe formel de l’universalité a priori de la loi. Ce principe formel est la non-contradiction, de sorte qu’une volonté raisonnable ne peut pas vouloir la contradiction: «Est absolument bonne la volonté qui ne peut être mauvaise, dont par suite la maxime, quand elle est convertie en loi universelle, ne peut jamais se contredire elle-même.»

Ce qu’illustre l’apologue du depositaire, auquel Lacan fait allusion: en tant que depositaire, je peux certes désirer disposer pour moi-même du bien qui m’a été confié; mais je ne peux pas le vouloir, car ériger en loi universelle la maxime d’une telle action signifierait que tout le monde est fondé à nier le dépôt qui lui est confié, de sorte qu’il n’y aurait plus de dépôt et donc plus de depositaire. En résumé: je ne peux pas vouloir qu’il n’y ait plus de dépositaire au moment même où je prétends profiter de ma qualité de dépositaire.

Tel est donc le fondement rationnel pur de la moralité. Seule est dite morale l’action faite par devoir, c’est-à-dire uniquement en rapport à l’impératif catégorique. Et Kant insiste sur ce qu’une action peut bien être conforme au devoir sans être faite par devoir. Pour qu’elle soit véritablement morale, l’action ne doit être motivée par rien d’autre que la loi morale. Il suffit que je songe à mon bien-être, à mon désir, à mes inclinations, il suffit que ma décision soit mue par le moindre mobile «pathologique», pour que mon action ne soit plus morale. Pour agir moralement, il faut donc que je récuse tout «pathos»: «L’apathie est une condition indispensable de la vertu.» Et c’est bien pourquoi aucun exemple de moralité ne peut être assurément présenté dans l’expérience, car aucune preuve sensible ne saurait être donnée de l’apathie du sujet de l’action. Toute l’analyse de Kant est ainsi fondée sur l’identification du sujet à la loi et sur son «apathie», ce que Lacan appelle la «réjection radicale du pathologique». Rejetant tout sentiment, le sujet échappe à toute logique de l’intérêt sensible, et peut s’identifier à la loi, en s’affirmant législateur de cette loi à laquelle il se soumet.

Hannah Arendt a montré, dans son Rapport sur la banalité du mal, ce qu’a rendu possible, sans qu’elle en soit responsable, la philosophie morale de Kant. Il a suffi aux idéologues nazis de remplacer la «raison pratique» de
Kant par la «volonté du Führer» pour donner cette formulation de l’impéra-
tif catégorique dans le IIIe Reich: «Agis de telle sorte que le Führer, s’il avait
connaissance de tes actes, les approuverait.» Certes, ce dévoiement de la
pensée de Kant implique un contresens massif. Mais il conserve de la pensée
kantienne cette idée toute formelle que «respecter la loi (et donc faire son
devoir) signifie non seulement obéir à la loi, mais aussi agir comme si l’on
était le législateur de la loi à laquelle on obéit». C’est à cette idée qu’en
appelèrent pour leur défense, dans les procès de l’après-guerre, bien des nazis
et notamment Eichmann: il ne s’agissait que de «faire son devoir», ce qui
impliquait de taire tout sentiment, toute pitié — Kant aurait dit: toute
«compassion amollissante». En un mot: il faut être «apathique», c’est-à-dire
s’assujettir à la loi en s’instituant soi-même législateur de cette loi.

«Apathie» est précisément le concept avancé par Sade, notamment dans la
Philosophie dans le boudoir (texte auquel le «Kant avec Sade» de Lacan
devait servir de préface dans une édition moderne), où, et de manière au
moins extérieurement analogue à Kant, la maxime du libertin sadique prend
la loi naturelle pour type de la maxime de son action:

«Dolmancé: [... ] La destruction étant une des premières lois de la nature,
rien de ce qui détruit ne saurait être un crime. Comment une action qui sert
aussi bien la nature pourrait-elle jamais l’outrager? Cette destruction, dont
l’homme se flate, n’est d’ailleurs qu’une chimère; le meurtre n’est point une
destruction; celui qui le commet ne fait que varier les formes, s’il rend à la
nature des éléments dont la main de cette nature habile se sert aussitôt pour
récompenser d’autres êtres; or, comme les créations ne peuvent être que des
jouissances pour celui qui s’y livre, le meurtrier en prépare donc une à la
nature; il lui fournit des matériaux qu’elle emploie sur-le-champ, et l’action
que des sots ont eu la folie de blâmer ne devient plus qu’un mérite aux yeux
de cette agente universelle.» Ce n’est donc pas pour son propre plaisir sensi-
ble qu’agit le libertin, mais pour la jouissance de la nature. En ce sens,
apathie doit être opposée à la sensibilité. Le même Dolmancé dit plus loin:
«Les plaisirs qui naissent de l’apathie valent bien ceux que la sensibilité
vous donne.» Certes, Sade emploie encore ici le terme de plaisir. Mais cette
sentence indique sans ambiguïté qu’au-delà du plaisir sensible, c’est autre
chose que rencontrer le sujet apathique.

Tous les commentateurs modernes (M. Heine, Bataille, Klossowski,
Blanchot, Barthes) ont fait remarquer la place déterminante qu’occupe
le concept d’apathie dans l’œuvre de Sade. Et c’est aussi en rapprochant le texte
de Sade et celui de Kant qu’Adorno et Horkheimer ont construit leur thèse
selon laquelle la formalisation de la raison, jointe à l’apathie, conduit à
instrumentaliser tout objet empirique, et donc à traiter les autres comme de
simples choses soumises à la législation d’une pure loi. Tel serait, selon
Horkheimer et Adorno, le sens de ce que la philosophie a écrit depuis Kant
jusqu’à Nietzsche inclus, et que «un seul a réalisé jusque dans les moindres
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détails; l’œuvre du marquis de Sade montre l’entendement non dirigé par un autre, c’est-à-dire le sujet bourgeois libéré de toute tutelle»33. Cela appellerait bien des commentaires, tant sont nombreux et lourds les présupposés de cette sorte de compréhension totalisante de la pensée moderne. Mais, pour ce qui nous occupe ici, disons simplement qu’une telle interprétation méconnaît la division qu’instaure, dans le sujet lui-même (et non simplement dans le corps social), la soumission consentante et apathique à la loi.

A cet égard, la lecture de Sade par Blanchot — dont l’un des mérites est de suivre les contradictions qui traversent l’œuvre de Sade — est plus proche de la thèse de Lacan, dont elle est d’ailleurs strictement contemporaine34. Blanchot montre que, pour Sade, le principe de la négation constitue en l’homme le principe même de la puissance, de sorte que le héros sadien suit cette logique de la négation jusqu’à la négation de la négation. On pourrait presque dire que Blanchot nous propose un «Hegel avec Sade». Mais il montre ainsi que l’apathie comme négation de la sensibilité conduit, au-delà des plaisirs, au-delà du plaisir, à ce qu’il nomme la «jouissance souveraine»: «Tous ces grands libertins qui ne vivent que pour le plaisir ne sont grands que parce qu’ils ont anéanti en eux toute capacité de plaisir. C’est pourquoi ils se portent à d’effroyables anomalies, sinon la médiocrité des voluptés normales leur suffirait. Mais ils se sont faits insensibles: ils prétendent jouir de leur insensibilité, de cette sensibilité niée, et ils deviennent féroces. La cruauté n’est que la négation de soi, portée si loin qu’elle se transforme en une explosion destructrice; l’insensibilité se fait frémissement de tout l’être, dit Sade; “l’âme passe à une espèce d’apathie qui se métamorphose bientôt en plaisirs mille fois plus divins que ceux que leur procureraient les faiblesses”. [...] si, dans cet état d’anéantissement où il (le libertin) n’éprouve pour les pires excès qu’une répugnance sans goût, il trouve un dernier surcroît de force pour augmenter cette insensibilité en inventant de nouveaux excès qui lui répugnent davantage, alors il passera de l’anéantissement à la toute-puissance, de l’endurcissement à la volonté la plus extrême et, “boulversé de toutes parts”, il jouira souverainement de soi au-delà de toutes les limites.»35

C’est précisément ce concept (si toutefois il s’agit d’un concept) de jouissance, en tant que cette jouissance est radicalement distincte du plaisir, que Lacan épingle au cœur du fantasme sadien.

A l’impératif kantien — l’impératif catégorique —, Lacan fait correspondre l’impératif sadien, en tant qu’il commande (selon une logique que je vais tenter de déployer) la jouissance. La jouissance et non le plaisir. Observons que la maxime sadienne est élaborée par Lacan; on ne la trouve pas littéralement formulée dans le texte de Sade. Voici cette maxime, cet «impératif sadien»: «J'ai le droit de jouir de ton corps, peut me dire quiconque, et ce droit je l’exercerai, sans qu’aucune limite m’arrête dans le caprice des actions que j’ai le goût d’y assouvir.»36 Notons d’emblée que le droit dont il est
ici question, droit de quiconque à la jouissance de mon corps, n’est pas limité par mon propre droit. La logique de ce droit n’est donc pas identifiable à celle dite des droits de l’homme, droits qui impliquent toujours la réciprocité. Si la maxime sadienne, comme le dit Lacan, n’exclut pas la charge de revanche, elle exclut toutefois la réciprocité. Elle s’oppose donc directement aux définitions kantiennes du mariage: «l’union de deux personnes de sexe différent pour la possession réciproque et à vie de leurs propriétés sexuelles», et du commerce sexuel: «un commerce sexuel est l’usage réciproque que fait un être humain des organes et pouvoirs sexuels d’un autre». Et c’est pourquoi on n’accéderait à la république sadienne (celle que décrit Francais, encore un effort ...) qu’à la condition, justement, de faire l’effort de renoncer à toute logique de la propriété et du commerce en matière de désir. Que ce droit à la jouissance ne soit pas limité par celui dont le corps en est l’objet implique alors que l’exercice de ce droit ignore toute pitié et toute compas­sion; autrement dit: ce droit implique l’apathie comme sa condition même. Ce droit est donc tout aussi bien l’affirmation d’un devoir qui exclut toute autre motivation en dehors de celle qu’implique sa propre injonction. Il a donc tous les caractères que Kant reconnaît à l’impératif catégorique: à la fois le rejet du pathologique et la pure forme de la loi. C’est pourquoi Lacan juge qu’il faut reconnaître à l’impératif sadien le «caractère d’une règle recevable comme universelle»: «Il faut évidemment lui reconnaître ce caractè­re pour la simple raison que sa seule annonce (son kérygme) a la vertu d’instaurer à la fois — et cette réjection radicale du pathologique, de tout égard pris à un bien, à une passion, voire à une compassion, soit la réjection par où Kant libère le champ de la loi morale, — et la forme de cette loi qui est aussi sa seule substance, en tant que la volonté ne s’y oblige qu’à débou­ter de sa pratique toute raison qui ne soit pas de sa maxime elle-même.» L’impératif sadien serait ainsi exactement homologue à l’impératif kantien. Mais arrêtons-nous tout de suite à cette différence: la logique kantienne de la théorie morale comme théorie de la liberté transcendantale concerne le sujet et le sujet seul. En tant qu’être raisonnable, le sujet kantien est l’auteur de la loi morale; en tant qu’être libre, c’est-à-dire autonome, il est l’exécut­teur de la loi par quoi il se confronte à l’impératif catégorique; et, en tant que doué d’une volonté bonne, il s’assujettit lui-même à la loi. Le sujet est donc à la fois auteur de la loi, exécuteur de la loi et assujetti à la loi.

Or, c’est précisément la distinction de ces trois «rôles» — si l’on peut dire — que Sade rend manifeste dans son texte: la règle générale de toutes les scènes décrites par Sade est de mettre en présence la victime (qui est assu­jettie à la loi), le bourreau (qui exécute la loi) et un tiers (qui dit: «fais ton devoir», c’est-à-dire qui prescrit la loi). Qu’on permette que je m’essaie à mon tour au petit jeu — tant prisé des commentateurs — sur les noms des héroïnes de Sade. Dans la Philosophie dans le boudoir, Mme de Saint-Ange est l’organisatrice de toute l’affaire; c’est elle qui prescrit la loi. Dolmancé en est l’exécuteur. Et, dès la première «posture» (comme dit Sade), il prend pour
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victime Eugénie. Ce que manifeste la conjonction de ces initiales est bien l’éclatement de l’unité du sujet «Sade» en cette sorte de partition trinitaire: SA-D-E.

Même si Lacan n’articule pas les choses de cette manière, c’est pourtant à partir de là que peut se comprendre sa thèse de l’inscription de la division subjective dans le fantasme sadique. Cette division se lit dans la «bipolarité» dont s’instaure la loi, c’est-à-dire la loi morale, aussi bien sous les espèces de l’impératif sadique que de l’impératif kantien. L’un de ces deux «pôles» est le sujet, en tant qu’il est réduit ici à n’être que l’agent-exécuteur de la loi. L’autre pôle est — précisément — celui de l’Autre, qui est tout à la fois auteur (source) de la loi et assujetti à la loi. De cette fonction de l’Autre dans son rapport à la loi, nous aurons à reparler dans un instant. Ce qui doit d’abord être précisé, c’est que le sujet, ici, s’évanouit et se réduit, en tant qu’agent-exécuteur, agent-tourmenteur, à ce que Lacan appelle l’«objet α».


Mais l’agent, justement, n’est que l’agent. Il n’est que le médiateur qui relie, en les rejetant dans une même entité, l’auteur de la loi et celui qui est assujetti à la loi, c’est-à-dire — au double sens de ce mot — le sujet même de la loi. De ce sujet (comme source de la loi), l’agent reçoit l’injonction d’accomplir son devoir, et à ce sujet (comme sujétion à la loi), il fait subir les effets de ce devoir. Pour ce sujet assujetti, il n’est question d’aucun plaisir ni d’aucun bien-être (Wohl): il n’y a que la douleur, douleur patente de la victime dans le cérémonial sadique, douleur de l’humiliation, reconnue par Kant comme le prix dont se paie souvent la soumission à la loi. Pour l’agent exécuteur de la loi, la règle est donc l’apathie, c’est-à-dire la disparition du plaisir. Dans l’impératif kantien, le plaisir est (selon les termes de Lacan) le «rival stimulant de la volonté» de celui qui agit moralement; dans l’impératif sadique, il n’est que le «complice défaillant» de la volonté d’où lui vient la loi. En tant qu’il est apathique, en tant que «sa présence se résume à n’être que l’instrument» de la loi, l’agent-exécuteur accomplit un acte rigoureusement et parfaitement moral, au sens même où Kant définit l’action morale.

Quelle est alors cette volonté qui commande l’accomplissement apathique de la loi? C’est, dit Lacan, la volonté de l’Autre, en tant qu’elle n’est pas volonté de plaisir mais volonté de jouissance. Pour ne pas confondre les perspectives, il faut ici répéter l’impératif sadique et saisir tout ce qu’implique sa formulation par Lacan: «J’ai le droit de jouir de ton corps, peut me dire quiconque [...].» Dans cet impératif, le «je» qui énonce son droit à la jouissance n’est pas le «me» qui énonce l’impératif, de sorte que cet impératif sadique implique et manifeste la division subjective comme division du sujet de l’énoncé et du sujet de l’énonciation: «[...] la bipolarité dont s’instaure la
Loi morale n’est rien d’autre que cette refente du sujet qui s’opère de toute intervention du signifiant: nommément du sujet de l’énonciation au sujet de l’énoncé. La Loi morale n’a pas d’autre principe. Dans l’impératif sadien, le «me» du «peut me dire», le «me» auquel s’impose l’impératif, est le sujet de l’énonciation c’est-à-dire à la fois l’auteur et la victime de la loi, ou encore l’Autre. L’impératif s’impose à ce «me»; ainsi Lacan peut-il dire qu’ici l’impératif nous est imposé «comme à l’Autre».

Le «je» qui dit: «j’ai le droit», le sujet de l’énoncé, se réduit à n’être que l’agent de la loi qu’il impose à l’Autre. Cette division, cette «refente» du sujet est précisément, selon Lacan, ce qu’escamote l’impératif kantien («Agis de telle sorte que ...»), escamotage qui implique ce leurre que la loi vient «de l’Autre», alors qu’elle procède en fait de la division subjective. C’est pourquoi Lacan dit de la maxime sadienne qu’elle est plus honnête, puisqu’elle indique que l’Autre est le sujet de l’énonciation, alors que la maxime kantienne, pour masquer la division subjective, se présente comme émanant d’une voix intérieure.

Observons incidemment que Lacan prête ici à Kant une métaphore qui ne se rencontre pas dans son texte mais appartient en propre à la rhétorique de Rousseau. Cette confusion n’est pas insignifiante, eu égard à ce qui nous intéresse dans cette étude, à savoir l’engagement (effectif quoique impensé — ou tout au moins non explicite) par Lacan du questionnement transcendental dans la théorie du désir. A ne pas percevoir ce qu’il doit à Kant (et pas seulement dans cet écrit, comme nous le verrons plus loin), Lacan en vient à lui prêter un motif qui lui est d’autant plus étranger qu’il ne saurait s’accorder à la perspective transcendantale, puisqu’il relève de la conscience empirique et du sentiment interne, voire de l’amour de soi.

Mais l’essentiel est ici l’invitation lacanienne à reconnaître que Sade est plus vrai que Kant, en ce qu’il manifeste la division subjective, l’évanouissement ou _aphanisis_ du sujet. Pour n’avoir pas à supporter sa division et la douleur cruelle qu’elle implique, le sujet sadien, mais aussi le sujet sadique, reporte sur l’Autre l’effet cruel de la loi qu’il invoque chez l’Autre et, s’évanouissant, il se réduit à n’être que l’agent apathique de cette loi, soit objet a.

Et c’est pourquoi Lacan dit que la _Philosophie dans le boudoir_ «donne la vérité» de la _Critique de la raison pratique_. L’impératif kantien, tout comme l’impératif sadien, procède de la volonté de l’Autre. Au-delà du plaisir que semble viser le désir, il y a la jouissance qui exige l’évanouissement du plaisir. Au-delà du bien-être, du _Wohl_ qui semble motiver toute action, il y a le contentement de soi, la _Selbstzufriedenheit_ dont parle Kant (et que Lacan n’évoque pas — nous y reviendrons), qui implique de faire le sacrifice de son _Wohl_, de son bien-être. Le désir ne serait donc que l’envers de la loi morale et la loi morale l’envers du désir.

Il faut ici marquer un temps et prendre la mesure de l’enjeu de cette conclusion de Lacan, à laquelle s’arrêtent le plus souvent les lecteurs de _Kant avec Sade_, car elle recouvre précisément l’interprétation freudienne de la loi...
morale: l'impératif catégorique comme impératif surmoïque. Que l'on se reporte aux textes de Freud plus haut cités, et plus particulièrement à l'essai intitulé «Le moi et le ça»: Freud y décrit et explique le contentement que le sujet éprouve, dans l'expérience morale, à se soumettre à l'impératif du surmoï, qui pourtant le fait souffrir. Et il poursuit par cette remarque étonnante: «On peut aller plus loin et hasarder l'hypothèse qu'à l'état normal le sentiment de culpabilité doit rester en grande partie inconscient, ce qu'on appelle les scrupules de conscience se rattachant intimement au complexe d'Œdipe, qui fait partie de l'inconscient. S'il se trouvait quelqu'un pour émettre ce paradoxe que l'homme normal n'est pas seulement plus immoral qu'il le croit, mais aussi plus moral qu'il ne s'en doute, la psychanalyse, dont les données servent de base à la première partie de cette proposition, n'aurait aucune objection à éléver contre la seconde.» A quoi est ajoutée cette note: «Cette proposition n'est d'ailleurs paradoxe qu'en apparence; elle énonce seulement qu'aussi bien dans le bien que dans le mal, l'homme peut beaucoup plus qu'il ne croit, autrement dit qu'il dépasse ce que son moi sait à ce sujet grâce à ses perceptions conscientes.»54 Ce qui peut aussi bien se formuler ainsi: il faut choisir entre le désir et la loi, même si le choix est, dans les deux cas, celui du perdant. Car, s'il poursuit son désir, son bien-être, son Wohl, le sujet est coupable d'avoir failli, au regard de la loi. Si, en revanche, il opte pour la loi, il ne lui reste plus qu'à faire le deuil de son désir. Situation d'apparence tragique, et qui semble justifier que Lacan en appelle à la figure d'Antigone (nous reviendrons plus loin sur cette référence). Or, c'est précisément juste après avoir évoqué Antigone que Lacan avance cette affirmation: «Le désir, ce qui s'appelle le désir suffit à faire que la vie n'ait pas de sens à faire un lâche. Et quand la loi est vraiment là, le désir ne tient pas, mais c'est pour la raison que la loi et le désir refoulé sont une seule et même chose, c'est même ce que Freud à découvert. Nous marquons le point à la mi-temps, professeur.»55

Eh bien, puisqu'il faut — semble-t-il — le prendre ainsi, passons à la seconde mi-temps. Je ne sais qui y marquera des points, ni même s'il sera encore question d'en marquer. Car il se pourrait bien que les joueurs en viennent à faire se confondre les couleurs sous lesquelles ils s'avancent... Mais, soyons sportifs; et jouons cette seconde mi-temps.

J'en donnerai le coup d'envoi par cette remarque: «Kant avec Sade» est traversé par une différence qui ne se laisse saisir que dans sa typographie; «loi» est écrit tantôt avec un «l» minuscule, tantôt avec un «L» majuscule. Il ne peut s'agir d'un simple hasard. Quelles sont donc ces deux lois ou, tout au moins, ces deux occurrences de la loi?

Dans le passage qui précède immédiatement la dernière citation, Lacan évoque l'apologue kantien du gibet56: un individu, dit en substance Kant, préférait renoncer à son désir luxurieux, plutôt que de le réaliser au prix d'être pendu au gibet57. Certes, il est patent que bien des héros de Sade
trouveraient dans cette menace de la potence un motif supplémentaire à l’accomplissement du désir, c’est-à-dire à l’accomplissement de leur devoir d’agents-exécuteurs et apathiques. C’est pourquoi Lacan précise: «Car le gibet n’est pas la Loi», avec un «L» majuscule. «La Loi — ajoute-t-il — est autre chose, comme on le sait depuis Antigone»58. Quelle «autre chose»? et pourquoi Antigone? Nous y reviendrons. Pour l’instant, observons que si le gibet n’est pas la Loi, c’est donc qu’il n’est que la Loi. Or, c’est aussi avec une minuscule que Lacan écrit «loi» lorsqu’il dit, quelques lignes plus loin, que «la loi et le désir refoulé sont une seule et même chose». Qu’est-ce que cette loi? Nous l’avons compris il y a un instant: c’est l’impératif surmoïque, la loi surmoïque, dont la logique est strictement freudienne. Selon cette logique freudienne, le surmoi est — si l’on peut dire — la concrétion, en tout cas l’effet du complexe d’Œdipe. Or, de ce complexe d’Œdipe, on sait — au moins depuis Lacan — qu’il est un mythe. C’est même le mythe de Freud (d’autres diraient: son symptôme). La substance de ce mythe freudien consiste à poser la mère comme expérience de satisfaction originaire. Mais, s’il s’agit d’un mythe, la question est alors — au-delà du mythe — de savoir d’où s’origine le désir. Telle est la question que Lacan entend ne jamais oublier. Elle porte au-delà du surmoi, au-delà de la loi (surmoïque); elle est la reprise lacanienne de la question freudienne de l’au-delà du principe de plaisir.

Cette question, que Lacan présente comme la question éthique par excellence, traverse et anime tout le livre VII de son Séminaire, l’Éthique de la psychanalyse, qui n’est antérieur que de deux ans à la rédaction de «Kant avec Sade», dont il constitue — on pourrait aisément le montrer — la préparation59. Toute la recherche de Lacan, dans ce Séminaire, tourne autour de ce qu’il appelle «la Chose» (das Ding), concept (mais en ce cas, plus encore que dans tout autre, on ne sait si l’on peut véritablement parler de «concept») qu’il reprend à Freud, plus précisément au Freud de l’Esquisse60, et qu’il entend inféchir dans un sens plus ou moins heideggerien. Au-delà du désir en tant que désir articulé à un objet désiré (soit à ce que j’appelle ici un épithumène), il y a la Chose, das Ding. Précisons: en tant qu’objet perdu, das Ding renvoie au concept freudien d’«expérience de satisfaction», à entendre bien sûr comme expérience originaire. Mais, justement, c’est cette originalité qui fait ici problème. Pour Freud, il y a bien expérience originale, dont les traces mnésiques constituent une sorte d’image dissoute de l’objet satisfaisant, telle qu’elle détermine l’élaboration du désir du sujet, et l’engage à retrouver ce qui a été perdu, selon une logique de l’identité (identité de perceptions et/ou identité de pensées). Il s’agit donc d’une originalité empirique, d’un vécu, comme on dit. Et l’on sait comment la tradition kleinienne s’est engagée dans cette voie de l’explication de l’activité désirante du sujet, faisant de tous les mécanismes psychiques les moyens plus ou moins directs, plus ou moins détournés, de retrouver l’objet qui, à l’origine, était seul susceptible d’apaiser l’état de détresse, la Hilflosigkeit: le corps de la mère. Voilà la clef des songes et la clef du mystère. Elle ouvre, nous assure-t-on, toutes
LES PORTES DU LABYRINTHE DE L’INCONSCIENT. PARcourez en tous sens le dédale des représentations, les nœuds associatifs, les fantasmes et les rêveries, vous y retrouverez toujours le corps de la mère. Voilà, selon cette tradition, ce qui donnerait sens à cette «chose perdue», voilà ce qui donnerait corps à *das Ding*.

Ainsi *das Ding* serait le sens — peut-être même la vérité — originaire, dont la perte irrémédiable commanderait alors dans l’inconscient les jeux de signifiants, produisant fantasmes et symptômes et, plus particulièrement, sous la forme étrange de cette «libido déssexualisée» dont parlent Freud et Melanie Klein, la sublimation comme tentative de reconstituer cette image mnésique brisée, dissoute, décomposée, du corps de la mère. Il y a là une anthropologie de la détrousse, de la déréliction, qui se soutient de la fable qui, ici comme ailleurs, la constitue: celle de la perte originale d’un bien précieux, d’une origine désignée, plus encore: figurée, imagée. Lacan ne s’y trompe pas, qui parle à ce propos d’un «mythe kleinien» — mais il appartient aussi à Freud. La fonction de ce mythe en tant que leurre est d’éviter ce qui devrait au contraire nous interpeler: comment se fait-il que quelque chose d’aussi précieux que cette expérience originale, quelque chose d’aussi irremplaçable que cette sorte de souverain bien, dont on certifie la réalité empirique initiale, puisse être ainsi oblitéré, jusqu’à ce que la perte en affecte non seulement le vécu, mais l’image même? Plus simplement: qu’est-ce qui, dans le sujet, rend possible la perte dont procède le désir? Voilà très précisément la question que doit poser une théorie transcendantale du désir. Et c’est celle que pose Lacan.

Ou plutôt qu’il ne pose pas, mais à laquelle, pourtant, il répond. Lacan emploie ce mot: «la Chose», *das Ding*, précisément parce que *das Ding* n’est pas dicible, encore moins figurable, parce que donner un contenu à cette Chose, c’est déjà entrer dans le jeu des signifiants, c’est déjà la confondre avec l’objet désiré, la réduire à un épithumène. Or, la Chose est au-delà du jeu signifiant par quoi se trame la fonction désirante du sujet, même si — ou plutôt parce qu’elle en est la condition de possibilité. Elle est, dit Lacan, le «hors-signifié» 62. Voilà ce qui fait de la Chose est au-delà du jeu signifiant par quoi se trame la fonction désirante du sujet, même si — ou plutôt parce qu’elle en est la condition de suggère à Lacan de dire que: «La Chose, si elle n’était pas foncièrement voilée, nous ne serions pas avec elle dans ce mode de rapport qui nous oblige — comme tout le psychisme y est obligé — à la cerner, voire à la contourner, pour la concevoir.» 63 Il s’agit en effet de contourner et non de dévoiler, car comment dévoiler ce qui relève de la catégorie du manque, ou plutôt constitue le manque comme catégorie? Nous employons ici à dessein le terme kantien de «catégorie», mais non pour compléter la table kantienne des concepts purs de l’entendement — d’autant moins qu’on verrait mal à quel «jugement» de l’entendement faire correspondre la catégorie du manque au sens où on l’accepte ici. Cependant, cette catégorie se rapporte bien à un jugement, mais qui ne relève
pas de l'entendement. Il relève de la faculté de désirer, il est tout simplement le jugement du sujet désirant lorsqu'il dit: «Cet objet est désirable.» Et, dans le discours de Lacan, même s'il s'interdit une telle formulation — mais, justement, cette réserve est en soi un problème sur lequel nous aurons à revenir —, il s'agit bien de déterminer les conditions de possibilité a priori de ce jugement, autrement dit d'élaborer une logique transcendantale du désir.

La Chose, das Ding, telle que Lacan la nomme, n'est pas le signifié originaire qui constituerait le continuum de toutes les dérives significantes. Ce procès de dérive, ces mécanismes de substitution ne concernent que le désir entendu comme désir d'un objet désiré, comme désir épithuméval. Or, das Ding est au-delà du désir épithuméval, c'est-à-dire aussi au-delà de la loi surmoïque. Avec das Ding, il n'est question que de ceci: la perte est antérieure à ce qui est perdu. S'il y a du désir, et si le désir emprunte tous les détours du procès substitutif, de la métonymie significante, ce n'est pas en vertu de la perte de quelque origine que ce soit, mais justement parce que la perte est elle-même l'origine. Dans le «paradis perdu» (qu'il s'agisse de la mère ou de tout ce qu'on voudra), le «paradis» relève du mythe, seul le «perdu» relève du réel. Il est même le «réel» au sens où l'entend Lacan, c'est-à-dire non pas le «monde extérieur» de la phénoménologie, mais le non-monde, l'«immonde». Il n'y a rien d'antérieur à das Ding en tant que la perte même, sauf à se leurrer des apparences du fantasme ou du mythe.

C'est pourquoi l'objet du désir, l'objet désiré, est toujours objet retrouvé. Toutefois cet objet, en tant qu'épithuméne, n'a jamais été préalablement perdu: «L'objet est de sa nature un objet retrouvé. Qu'il ait été perdu en est la conséquence, mais après coup.» A cet objet désiré — plus exactement, au désir de cet objet — est articulée la loi, surmoïque. La Loi, elle, est du côté de la Chose, en tant que la Chose est la perte même, le manque fondamental et originaire, pur manque qui constitue le sujet en tant que divisé. Et c'est pourquoi «le gibet n'est pas la Loi», il n'est que la loi, qui menace de la punition et qui, au fond, s'adresse encore au bienêtre, au Wohl, au pathos du sujet: «Car le gibet n'est pas la Loi, ni ne peut être ici par elle voituré. Il n'y a de fourgon que de la police, laquelle peut bien être l'État, comme on le dit, du côté de Hegel. Mais la Loi est autre chose, comme on le sait depuis Antigone.»

C'est en effet ce que Hegel ne sait pas, lui quine voit dans la tragédie de Sophocle que le conflit entre la moralité familiale et le droit de la cité. Du reste, et de manière générale, le rapport de Hegel à Kant est toujours celui d'une transgression, d'un dépassement par quoi Hegel prétend donner contenu et consistance à ce qui n'était que formel dans la pensée kantienne, et notamment dépassement des impasses de la «moralité subjective» dans la «moralité objective», c'est-à-dire la constitution de l'État. A cet égard, il est remarquable que le travail de Lacan ait été en quelque sorte régressif, puisqu'après la référence initiale et massive à Hegel, dont la problématique de la reconnaissance lui permettait de donner contenu et consistance au
désir, il a préféré la référence kantienne, qui l'appelait à penser le désir dans la perspective formelle — *a priori*, c'est-à-dire comme question transcendantale. La logique de cette régression impliquait d'abandonner la consistance du désir pour reconnaître, avant tout contenu empirique, la pure forme de la Loi.

Car il n'y a pas de consistance du côté de la Chose, du côté de la Loi. La Chose ne concerne la Loi du désir qu'en tant qu'elle est l'instance dont procède la faculté de désirer, lorsque cette faculté se donne un objet de désir. Autrement dit, la Chose est le point d'articulation de la Loi parce que, d'un point de vue structural, elle occupe la place exacte de ce que Kant appelle l'«inconditionné absolu», terme que n'aurait pas renié Lacan. Expliquons cette remarque très simplement, par une sorte de parallèle homologique.

Dans l'ordre de la connaissance, telle que l'analyse la *Critique de la raison pure*, l'entendement applique aux phénomènes la catégorie de la causalité; dès lors, on peut concevoir les phénomènes dans une série causale où chacun d'eux, en tant que cause d'un effet, est la condition même de cet effet. C'est pourquoi Kant parle de la «série des conditions». Mais si l'on remonte cette série des conditions, on risque fort de ne jamais pouvoir s'arrêter. C'est pourquoi, explique Kant, au-dessus de l'entendement qui fournit le concept pur de la causalité, il y a la raison, qui apporte à cet entendement l'idée de l'inconditionné absolu (qui sera, en l'occasion, Dieu comme cause première et cause de soi). En cela consiste la fonction régulatrice, et seulement régulatrice, de cette idée de l'inconditionné.

Dans l'ordre du désir, tel que l'analyse Lacan, la faculté de désirer s'applique aux objets du désir. C'est à propos de ces objets du désir, de ces épithumènes, que joue la dérive substitutive ou chaîne métonymique du désir. Si l'on remonte cette chaîne — ce qui s'appelle, dans la terminologie clinique de la psychanalyse, la régression —, on risque fort de n'arriver nulle part (sauf à construire le mythe du corps de la mère ou autre cri primal).
PHILOSOPHY

C'est pourquoi, explique Lacan (du moins selon la lecture qui me semble s'imposer), au-dessus de la faculté de désirer, qui fait de l'objet sensible un objet désiré (qui se rapporte à l'épithumène), il y a la Chose, c'est-à-dire le pur manque, qui n'est le substitut ou la métonymie de rien d'autre avant lui, l'inconditionné.

![Diagramme]

La conjonction de ces deux diagrammes — qui manifeste de manière patente cette rencontre des discours philosophique et psychanalytique que j'avais annoncée — autorise trois remarques, qui sont décisives pour la compréhension, non seulement de la théorie lacanienne du désir, mais aussi — et surtout — de la corrélation, affirmée par Lacan, entre la question du désir et la problématique éthique (c'est-à-dire la question de la Loi).

1. Toute la critique kantienne de la métaphysique, dans la *Dialectique transcendantale*, consiste à établir l'illegimité de toute prétention de l'entendement à connaître l'inconditionné. Kant dit en substance que l'inconditionné n'est pas connaissable, mais seulement pensable. La faculté de connaître procède de l'idée de l'inconditionné absolu, de sorte qu'elle ne saurait constituer cette idée en objet de connaissance. La fonction régulatrice — et seulement régulatrice — de l'idée de l'inconditionné est de «diriger l'entendement vers un certain but, où convergent en un point les lignes directrices de toutes ses règles, et qui, bien qu'il ne soit qu'une idée (*focus imaginarius*), c'est-à-dire un point d'où les concepts de l'entendement ne partent pas réellement, puisqu'il est placé tout à fait en dehors des limites de l'expérience possible, sert cependant à leur donner la plus grande unité avec la plus grande extension»[7]. Kant ajoute que ce «foyer imaginaire» des règles de la connaissance peut donner l' «illusion» d'être lui-même un objet. Mais cette illusion ne doit pas nous tromper: l'inconditionné n'est pas un objet que l'on puisse connaître; il est seulement une idée que l'on peut penser. C'est pourquoi l'usage régulateur est seul légitime, à l'exclusion de l'usage constitutif. La régulation exclut la constitution.
De manière parfaitement homologue, Lacan dit de la Chose qu’elle est articulée dans le désir, mais qu’elle n’y est pas articulable72. Le paradoxe n’est ici qu’apparent; il signifie que, si le désir est supporté par la Chose, il ne porte pas sur la Chose. Le désir, dont la fonction est de porter sur des objets sensibles, des épithumènes en tant qu’objets figurables (y compris dans le rêve et dans le fantasme), n’a pas vocation, n’est pas fondé à prendre la Chose pour objet, parce que la Chose est «hors-signifié». La Chose — pourrait-on dire — est le focus imaginarius du désir, de sorte qu’il ne saurait être question de constituer la Chose en épithumène. Transgresser cet interdit, renverser l’ordre de la Loi dont procède le désir, ne peut se faire qu’en élabo-rant un mythe (l’équivalent de «l’illusion» dont parle Kant à propos de la «subreption transcendantale»73), qui vient donner une figure nécessairement illusoire à cette Chose strictement infigurable.

De toute façon, le mythe ne manque jamais de se révéler pour ce qu’il est. A cet égard, Sade apporte leur vérité aux tenants de ce mythe du «corps de la mère». Car la mère de la jeune Eugénie est vouée, au terme de cette sorte de séance sado-pédagogique qui s’est déroulée dans le boudoir, au pire supplice: la couture de son sexe. Or la victime, dans la structure du fantasme sadien, étant l’Autre, la couture faite sur cet Autre est donc l’aveu que cet Autre doit être et demeurer non barré. L’Autre, comme figure de l’accès à la jouissance, est aussi, dans cette figuration même, figure de l’inaccessibilité essentielle de cette jouissance. Lacan ne s’y trompe pas, qui écrit, en conclusion de son texte: «Dolmancé, Sade l’a-t-il vu, clôt l’affaire par un Noli tangere matrem. V...ée et cousue, la mère reste interdite. Notre verdict est confirmé sur
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la soumission de Sade à la Loi.»


2. Ma deuxième remarque nécessite l’adjonction d’un nouveau diagramme aux deux précédents. Il concerne, cette fois, la structure kantienne de la raison dans son usage pratique. La volonté libre et autonome se rapporte à l’action empirique, en exigeant que la maxime de cette action soit universalisable. Or, comme nous l’avons vu, cette universalisation, en tant qu’elle est la condition même de la moralité, suppose la réjection de tout élément «pathologique». C’est pourquoi, dans la Dialectique de la raison pure pratique, Kant dira que le sujet, en tant qu’il agit moralement, peut — non pas doit mais peut — postuler l’immortalité de son âme et l’existence de Dieu, de sorte que le bonheur (impossible ici-bas du fait même du désir) serait donné à son âme qui, existant éternellement, pourrait alors parvenir à la perfection morale à laquelle elle ne peut parvenir dans l’existence sensible. Tels sont les «postulats» de la raison pratique. Mais, en toute logique, Kant insiste sur

![Diagramme philosophique](image)

ce que la liberté de la volonté est liée au caractère hypothétique des postulats. Car, si nous faisons des postulats de la raison pratique une connaissance certaine pour la raison théorique, il ne serait plus du tout question pour nous d’agir par devoir (selon l’exigence d’autonomie), mais seulement par crainte ou par espérance, ce qui est le propre d’une volonté hétéronome, c’est-à-dire soumise au «pathologique». C’est pourquoi Kant dit (avec une insistance qui lui a valu quelques ennuis) que la foi ne saurait en aucun cas précéder la moralité pour lui servir de mobile, sous peine de devoir considérer la religion comme relevant elle-même du mal radical.

«Admettre l’existence de Dieu n’est pas un devoir», dit Kant. Les postulats de la raison pratique ne constituent pas la condition préalable à la moralité. S’il est nécessaire de croire en Dieu et en l’immortalité de l’âme (nécessité subjective et non objective) pour qu’apparaisse «l’espoir de participer un jour au bonheur dans la mesure où nous aurons eu soin de n’en
être pas indignes»79, il n’est toutefois pas nécessaire d’y croire pour agir moralement, ni même pour éprouver la satisfaction qui accompagne l’accomplissement d’une action morale. En effet, Kant établit la réalité de cette satisfaction avant qu’il ne soit question des postulats de la raison pratique. Cette satisfaction ne relève pas du bienêtre. Elle ne procède ni de l’espoir d’une récompense, ni de la crainte d’un châtiment. Elle n’est donc pas «pathologique» mais, dit Kant, seulement «satisfaction négative»: «Ne dispose-t-on pas toutefois d’un terme désignant non une jouissance, comme le mot bonheur, mais plutôt une satisfaction attachée à l’existence, un analogue du bonheur qui doit nécessairement accompagner la conscience de la vertu? Mais si! Ce terme c’est le contentement de soi-même (Selbstzufriedenheit) qui, au sens propre, ne signifie jamais qu’une satisfaction négative attachée à l’existence, par laquelle on a conscience de n’avoir besoin de rien. […] De cette manière, c’est-à-dire indirectement, la liberté elle-même devient capable d’une jouissance qui ne peut s’appeler bonheur parce qu’elle ne dépend pas de l’intervention positive d’un sentiment, ni béatitude, si l’on veut parler avec précision, parce qu’elle n’implique pas une entière indépendance à l’égard des inclinations et des besoins, mais qui néanmoins ressemble à la béatitude, en tant du moins que la détermination de la volonté peut s’affranchir de leur influence et ainsi est analogue, au moins d’après son origine, à ce sentiment de suffisance en soi-même qu’on ne peut attribuer qu’à l’Être suprême.»

Cette Selbstzufriedenheit se rapporte donc à la Loi. Mais contrairement à ce que laisse à penser Lacan (dans la foulée de Freud), il ne peut pas s’agir ici de la loi surmoïque qui régit le désir du sujet par le sentiment de culpabilité, autrement dit par la menace d’une punition. Car la loi morale, chez Kant, dit: «Fais ton devoir!», et non pas: «Fais ton devoir, sinon tu seras puni.» Ce serait d’autant plus contradictoire que la loi s’adresserait alors au sujet en tant que «pathologique», par où la loi ne serait plus morale, mais serait seulement la loi hégélienne de la punition, la loi du gibet. La loi morale de Kant ne peut donc pas être réduite à cette loi; elle est, quoi que Lacan suggère, la Loi.

C’est pourquoi je propose d’inscrire dans mon diagramme l’indice de cette satisfaction négative, de ce contentement de soi, par la lettre S (Selbstzufriedenheit), au lieu exact où est signifiée la Loi en tant qu’elle interdit de transformer les postulats de la raison pratique en mobile de l’action.

![Diagramme](image-url)
Et l'on pourrait alors demander aux psychanalystes s'il ne serait pas opportun d'inscrire la lettre J, comme indice de la jouissance — non pas, certes, de la jouissance que vise le sujet sadien dans son fantasme (jouissance illusoire d'une «satisfaction positive»), mais de cette jouissance toute particulière, dont Lacan nous assure que quelque chose peut en être atteint dans la cure — d'inscrire, donc, cet indice J de la jouissance ainsi entendue, au lieu exact où est signifiée la Loi, en tant qu'elle interdit l'accès du désir à la Chose.

A qui se demanderait ce qu'il convient d'inscrire, dans le diagramme de la raison pure théorique, comme équivalent de cette sorte de bénéfice de la Loi, on rappellera ce que Kant dit du rapport légitime de l'entendement aux idées de la raison comme idées de l'inconditionné absolu: la régulation, à la condition de ne pas s'inverser en constitution de connaissances, apporte à la faculté de connaître l'unité systématique dont elle a besoin et qui, sans cela, lui ferait défaut. On peut donc compléter par l'indice U de l'unité systématique le diagramme de la raison théorique.

3. Dans chacune des trois structures ainsi exposées (raison théorique, raison pratique, désir pur), est clairement manifestée la distinction entre, d'une part, une faculté a priori (soit, respectivement: l'entendement, la volonté, la faculté de désirer) et, d'autre part, les éléments empiriques, c'est-à-dire a posteriori, auxquels s'applique cette faculté (soit, respectivement: le phénomène, l'action empirique, l'épithumène). Or, à chaque fois (dans la connaissance, dans l'action morale et dans le désir), il s'agit de réaliser l'unité de l'élément a priori et de l'élément empirique, c'est-à-dire de réaliser l'unité
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de deux éléments par nature hétérogènes. A quelle condition une telle unité, apparemment impossible et pourtant nécessaire, est-elle réalisable? Comment quelque chose d’ \textit{a priori} peut-il s’associer, s’unir à quelque chose d’empirique? Comment ramener à l’unité ce qui n’est pas de même nature? C’est là ce que Kant appelle le problème de la synthèse, problème que manifeste, dans chacun des trois diagrammes proposés, la place pour l’instant laissée vide entre la faculté \textit{a priori} et l’élément \textit{a posteriori} auquel cette faculté se rapporte.

On sait que, dans l’ordre de la connaissance (soit, pour le cas de la raison pure, dans son usage théorique), Kant résout ce problème de la synthèse par la théorie du schématisme. Sans en reprendre ici tout le détail, rappelons simplement que le schéme, en tant qu’il est, non pas l’image, mais la représentation d’un procédé général de l’imagination productrice, est d’un côté homogène à la catégorie que fournit l’entendement pur, de l’autre homogène à la phénoménalité sensible: «Cette représentation intermédiaire doit être pure, et pourtant il faut qu’elle soit d’un côté intellectuelle et de l’autre sensible. Tel est le schème transcendantal.»

Dans la \textit{Critique de la raison pratique}, Kant rencontre également ce problème de la synthèse: comment une action nécessairement empirique pourrait-elle procéder en même temps de la volonté autonome, c’est-à-dire de la liberté transcendantale du sujet? Ici — comme cela a été rappelé plus haut — Kant résout le problème de la synthèse par la «typique» du jugement pratique pur: la maxime de l’action empirique, pour être morale, doit pouvoir «soutenir l’épreuve de la forme d’une loi universelle» dont la loi naturelle en général est le type.

On peut donc completer les deux diagrammes (de la raison théorique et de la raison pratique) en inscrivant respectivement le schème et le type à la place où doit être réalisée la synthèse.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{faculté de connaître} \\
\text{= entendement pur} \\
\text{(a priori)}
\end{array}
\quad
\begin{array}{c}
\text{volonté libre autonome} \\
\text{(a priori)}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{synthèse transcendantale} \\
\text{schème}
\end{array}
\quad
\begin{array}{c}
\text{universalisation} \\
\text{type}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{phénomène} \\
\text{action empirique}
\end{array}
\]

Revenons maintenant à la logique transcendantale du désir, telle que nous essayons de la suivre dans le discours de Lacan. La même question de la synthèse s’y laisse lire: quel sera l’élément médiateur permettant d’effectuer la synthèse entre la faculté \textit{a priori} de désirer et l’objet du désir? Pour
paraphraser Kant, je dirai que, d'un côté, il faut que cet élément médiateur soit homogène à la faculté de désirer a priori, en tant que cette faculté procède de l'inconditionné de la Chose; de l'autre côté, il faut qu'il soit homogène à l'objet qui se présente dans la sensibilité, soit à ce que j'ai appelé ici l'épithumène. Plus précisément, cet élément médiateur a pour fonction de rendre désirable l'objet sensible, de sorte que, en son absence, l'objet ne serait pas désirable, et le désir serait sans objet (structure exactement équivalente à celle que suggère Kant: intuition aveugle — pensée vide). En tant qu'il articule le désir à un objet pour faire de cet objet un epithumène, cet élément médiateur peut être dit «cause du désir». Il faut donc distinguer l'objet désiré et l' «objet cause du désir»; ce dernier, toujours qualifié en ces termes par Lacan, n'est autre que l'objet a.

L'objet a occupe ainsi, dans la structure du désir, la place homologue à celle du schème dans la structure de la connaissance. Pas plus que le schème n'est dans l'objet de la connaissance mais constitue (c'est-à-dire cause) cette connaissance, l'objet a n'appartient pas à l'objet désiré (épithumène) mais constitue («cause») le désir de cet objet. Et l'on pourrait ici évoquer tout ce que la clinique psychanalytique lacanienne apporte à l'appui de cette thèse: l'objet a y est toujours désigné comme objet séparé, détaché, que ce soit à propos du sein, des fèces, de la voix ou du regard: «[...] c'est entre le sein et la mère que passe le plan de séparation qui fait du sein l'objet perdu en cause dans le désir.»

Mais, s'il n'est pas réductible à l'objet désiré, l'objet a n'est pas non plus identifiable au sujet du désir. Il est seulement articulé au sujet du désir, mais en tant que ce sujet est divisé. Cette division vient au sujet de ce que son désir ne procède de rien de consistant, mais seulement du pur manque de la Chose. C'est le manque de la Chose qui le barre, S (sujet barré du désir), tel qu'il s'articule (est articulé) à l'objet a dans le fantasme: S 0 a: «Si l'on nous a lu jusqu'ici, on sait que le désir plus exactement se supporte d'un fantasme dont un pied au moins est dans l'Autre, et justement celui qui compte, même et surtout s'il vient à boiter.»

Car le pied boiteux, c'est-à-dire oedipien, du désir n'est pas mu simplement par l'objet empirique désiré, mais d'abord et fondamentalement par la faculté a priori de désirer, en tant qu'elle procède du manque absolu de la Chose. C'est dans le fantasme que le sujet divisé rencontre à son insu la cause de son désir, soit l'objet a. C'est pourquoi Lacan poursuit: «L'objet (c'est-à-dire ici l'objet a), nous l'avons montré dans l'expérience freudienne, l'objet du désir là où il se propose nu, n'est que la scorie d'un fantasme où le sujet ne revient pas de sa syncope.»

Le fantasme rend possible la synthèse de la faculté a priori de désirer et de l'objet empirique, synthèse opérée par l'objet a dans son articulation au sujet barré du désir. C'est exactement le même dispositif que celui dont procède la synthèse transcendantale dans la théorie kantienne de la connaissance. En effet, le schème opère la synthèse transcendantale par l'intermédiaire d'une
determination a priori du temps, laquelle est homogène et à la catégorie et au phénomène. Or le temps, comme «forme du sens interne, c'est-à-dire de l'intuition de nous-mêmes», constitue — si l'on peut dire — la seule réalité permanente du sujet à travers la diversité de ses représentations. Mais il ne s'agit là que d'une réalité empirique, de sorte que le sujet ne peut se connaître lui-même autrement que comme phénomène. «Mais toutes ce questions d'ordre transcendental qui dépassent la nature ne pourront jamais être résolues, quand bien même la nature tout entière nous serait dévoilée, puisqu'il ne nous est pas donné d'observer notre propre esprit avec une autre intuition que celle de notre propre sens intime. En effet, [ . . . ] nous ne nous connaissons nous-mêmes que par le sens intime, c'est-à-dire comme phénomènes.»

Nous pouvons bien poser la nécessité d'un sujet transcendental, nous pouvons même le penser comme substance (c'est-à-dire l'âme, le pur je-pense), mais nous ne pouvons pas prétendre le connaître, puisque l'idée d'un substrat de toutes les représentations n'est précisément qu'une idée, en tant que telle inconnaissable. Le sujet dans sa pureté de sujet (soit comme sujet transcendental) ne saurait se prendre lui-même comme objet de connaissance. Voilà ce qu'on serait fondé à désigner comme la «refente» kantienne du sujet de la connaissance. C'est à ce sujet, sujet divisé, syncopé, que s'articule le schéme dans la synthèse transcendantale.

Dans l'ordre de la connaissance et dans l'ordre du désir, l'unité nécessaire de l'a priori et de l'empirique est réalisée par l'articulation du sujet divisé à l'objet transcendental, ici schéme de la synthèse, là objet a du fantasme.

Kant disait: «Si toute notre connaissance commence avec l'expérience, il n'en résulte pas qu'elle dérive toute de l'expérience.» De manière homologue, nous pouvons dire maintenant: s'il n'y a certes pas de désir sans objet désiré, il n'en résulte pas que le désir dérive de l'objet désiré. Ce qui rend
possible ce désir, ce qui permet à la faculté de désirer de s'exercer, ce qui donc «cause» véritablement le désir, c'est l'objet \(a\), à entendre strictement comme objet transcendantal. L'objet \(a\) est le schème du désir.

Il en est le schème plutôt que le type. Car on doit ici remarquer qu'avec l'objet \(a\), Lacan résout peut-être ce qui faisait le problème du jugement pratique pur. Je renvoie ici au deuxième paragraphe de la «Typique du jugement pratique pur», où Kant établit l'impossibilité d'un schème de la loi pour la volonté libre et, partant, la nécessité du «type» de cette loi\(^92\). Or, cette nécessité de la typique vient de ce que Kant ne conçoit pas d'autre liberté que celle de la volonté transcendantale, à l'exclusion du désir toujours empiriquement déterminé. A partir du moment où, comme le suggère à mon sens la lecture de Lacan, est conçue une faculté de désirer \(a\) priori, alors il est possible de penser la médiation (par laquelle le désir \(a\) priori s'applique à l'objet sensible) selon un procédé non seulement analogue mais même homologue à celui du schématisme.

Constatons simplement, pour confirmer cette homologie du schème et de l'objet \(a\), que Lacan déclare «insaisissable»\(^93\) l'objet \(a\) comme cause du désir, très exactement comme Kant fait du schème, en tant que transcendantal, ce qui, tout en étant nécessairement engagé dans le rapport du sujet connaissant à l'expérience, n'est pourtant pas présentable dans cette expérience. L'objet \(a\) n'est pas présentable, il n'est pas figurable, si ce n'est dans le fantasme, et notamment dans le fantasme sadique (mais justement il s'agit du fantasme, et non de l'expérience), où il est l'agent-exécuteur de la Loi, le bourreau insensible et apathique, autrement dit (comme on l'a vu), le sujet s'évanouissant à n'être plus que l'agent.

L'objet \(a\) est le schème du désir. On pourrait même renverser la formule: le schème est l'objet \(a\) de la connaissance. Un tel renversement signifierait que tout, dans le sujet, est à rapporter au désir comme processus d'universalisation. Qu'il s'agisse de la connaissance phénoménale (désir de savoir), de la volonté autonome (désir de bien faire) ou du désir épithuméval (désir d'objet), le mouvement procède toujours d'une faculté \(a\) priori, elle-même réglée par la Loi de l'inconditionné absolu, et qui ne peut s'appliquer à l'expérience que par l'intermédiaire d'un objet transcendantal (schème, type, objet \(a\)). On pourrait aller jusqu'à dire (mais cela exigerait assurément un examen plus approfondi) qu'il n'y a pas d'autre faculté \(a\) priori que la faculté de désirer. C'est pour ne l'avoir pas reconnu que Kant aurait été forcée de séparer raison théorique et raison pratique. La théorie transcendantale du désir réalisait ainsi l'unité de la critique autour de l'objet \(a\).

C'est là une remarque qu'on ne peut soutenir qu'à titre de suggestion de recherche. Elle est ici insuffisamment argumentée. Mais elle autorise au moins l'hypothèse que cette désignation énigmatique d'objet \(a\) serait venue à Lacan de sa rencontre avec Kant: objet \(a\ldots\) priori. La chute du priori, qui ne laisse que le \(a\), ne serait pas inexplicable. Car, comme on le conçoit peut-être
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| **KANT,**              |
| *Critique de la raison pure pratique* |
| inconditionné absolu  |
| (Dieu — immortalité de l’âme) |
| (postulats)            |
| S                      |
| (mobile)               |
| volonté libre autonome |
| *(a priori)*           |
| universalisation       |
| type                   |
| action empirique        |

| **LACAN,**             |
| *(Critique du désir pur)* |
| inconditionné absolu  |
| (Chose)                |
| (Loi)                  |
| J                      |
| (mythe)                |
| faculté de désirer     |
| *(a priori)*           |
| fantasme objet a        |
| épithumène              |

Je ne le dis pas seulement en guise de boutade. Car il me semble que quelqu’un pourrait écrire un «Lacan avec Kant».


Entendons: à la Ding-ité, à la choséité de la Chose, c’est-à-dire à l’inconditionné (cet inconditionné dont Kant dit qu’en le postulant nous pouvons espérer nous rendre dignes du bonheur). Qu’on se reporte à mon tableau récapitulatif, et l’on comphendra aisément le sens de cette définition: la sublimation présente dans le sensible l’indice de ce qui est absolument imprésentable, absolument hors figuration, c’est-à-dire la Chose. C’est le «Dieu sans figure», comme le dit Lacan — à mettre en parallèle avec la conception kantienne du sublime comme présentation de cela-même qu’il y a de l’imprésentable, c’est-à-dire justement les idées de la raison. Dans les deux cas, la sublimation — le sublime — indique la présence sensible de l’inconditionné, c’est-à-dire de l’absolument imprésentable.

Mais ce qui est beau, ce qui est simplement beau et non sublime, a précisément pour effet de nous préserver de l’insoutenable présence de l’imprésentable. Dans le *Séminaire sur l’Éthique de la psychanalyse*, évoquant la liaison de l’esthétique et de l’esthétique (liaison précédemment établie par Kant dans la *Critique de la faculté de juger*), Lacan parle de la beauté de l’objet désiré comme de ce qui maintient le sujet désirant à distance de la Chose: «La vraie barrière qui arrête le sujet devant le champ innommable du désir radical [...], c’est à proprement parler le phénomène esthétique pour autant qu’il est identifiable à l’expérience du beau — le beau dans son rayonnement éclatant, ce beau dont on dit qu’il est la splendeur du vrai. C’est évidemment parce que le vrai n’est pas bien joli à voir que le beau en est,
sinon la splendeur, tout au moins la couverture.» Autrement dit, la beauté nous maintient du côté de la loi, c'est-à-dire du désir articulé à l'objet désiré (épithumène). A l'appui de sa démonstration, Lacan évoque alors la beauté d'Antigone, ainsi qu'il le rappelle dans «Kant avec Sade»: «([...]) ce que nous avons démontré, dans la tragédie, de la fonction de la beauté: barrière extrême à interdire l'accès à une horreur fondamentale. Qu'on songe à l' Antigone de Sophocle et au moment où y éclate l' ἔρως ἀνιχνεύει μαγνῆν.» Il est probable que Lacan confond ici l'Antigone de la tragédie de Sophocle, c'est-à-dire Antigone fille d'Œdipe, avec une autre Antigone, sœur de Priam, dont la légende a justement pour enjeu sa grande beauté. Mais c'est sans grande importance, puisqu'en effet, dans la tragédie de Sophocle, Antigone est, pour une part, confrontée à la loi, en l'occasion figurée par Créon, la loi du gibet; la loi qui prononce et la culpabilité et le châtiment; bref, la loi surmoïque. Mais, en méprisant l'autorité de Créon, en «ne cédant pas sur son désir»99, c'est à l'autre Loi, à la Loi de la Chose que tend le désir d'Antigone, à cette Loi dont l'intonation la fait consentir à son destin: «vivante parmi les morts et morte parmi les vivants».

Dans la tragédie de Sophocle, au troisième Stasimon, juste après que tombe la sentence de Créon, le chœur invoque Éros. C'est d'ailleurs le passage auquel Lacan fait allusion dans l'extrait cité plus haut. Le chant du chœur loue Éros, le désir, comme le séducteur victorieux de quiконque subit son pouvoir. Mais quelques vers plus loin apparaît le terme himéros100, que les traducteurs rendent habituellement par «désir». Or «désir» en grec, se dit épithumia (c'est le mot dont use Platon). Dans le texte de Sophocle, himéros n'est pas le désir qui anime le sujet désirant, mais il désigne ce qui émane, en s'en détachant, des yeux et des paupières de la jeune fille désirée. Ce que les traducteurs rendent par: «le désir né des regards de la vierge promise»101, ou «l'attrait qui rayonne des yeux de la jeune épousée»102, ou encore (dans la version de Hölderlin traduite par Lacoue-Labarthe): «la toute-puissante prière aux paupières de l'épousée»103. Ces nuances de traduction suffisent à faire comprendre que himéros, dont le chœur sophocléen dit alors qu'il est au nombre des grandes lois qui règnent sur le monde et qui président à toute alliance (nous pourrions dire ici: à toute synthèse), himéros est le regard déjà détaché de l'objet désiré, et qui vient causer le désir du sujet désirant. Himéros, c'est le regard comme objet a.

Mais Antigone, figure «apathique» par excellence (cela n'est nullement paradoxal: que l'on songe à tout ce qui oppose le caractère d'Ismène à celui d'Antigone! Et que l'on compare le couple sophocléen des deux sœurs, l'une tristement affectée, l'autre tragiquement volontaire, à celui dont Sade donne la version de son cru: Justine et Juliette!), Antigone, précisément parce que plus rien ne pourrait l'affecter «pathologiquement» pour la faire revenir sur sa décision tragique, ne se soucie plus de prêter la moindre attention au chant du chœur, ni aux plaintes du coryphée. Elle est déjà au-delà de cette loi par quoi le désir vient à naitre dans le monde. C'est à l'autre Loi qu'elle se
destine, au désir sans objet, au désir horsmonde qui la voue à l’immonde. A vouloir, contre la Loi mais aussi selon la Loi, s’approprier son désir, à vouloir s’approprier l’origine même de son désir, à vouloir s’approprier le Même dont procède son désir et qui reste pourtant interdit à ce désir, Antigone se condamne à n’être plus que sujet pétrifié, rocher froid d’où s’écoulent, telles des sources, ses larmes, ultime figure de l’himéros maintenant chu et séparé. «ANTI-GONE. — On m’a conté jadis la déplorable fin de l’étrangère phrygi-enne, de la fille de Tantale qui, sur le sommet du Sipyle, a brusquement senti sur elle, aussi tenace que le lierre, le roc monter et l’asservir, si bien que maintenant fondant sous l’eau du ciel, à ce que l’on rapporte, elle se voit couverte d’une neige éternelle, et ce sont des rochers qu’inondent désormais les larmes de ses yeux. Voilà bien celle à qui le destin qui m’abat me fait ressembler le plus.»

Curieuse comparaison, puisque Antigone sait déjà qu’elle est condamnée à être emmurée vivante. Mais il est vrai qu’en face de la Chose qui va surgir, et en l’absence de tout objet désiré, il n’est plus besoin de se soucier d’aucune adéquation. Il ne reste plus qu’à figurer l’objet foncièrement manquant du désir, ou plutôt à figurer le manque même de l’objet, c’est-à-dire aussi le Même comme manque: il ne reste plus qu’à figurer la Chose. Et Antigone choisit (choisit-elle?) cette figure de la neige, de cette neige dont la blancheur peut certes imager l’absence de toute culpabilité; mais cette image est encore symbole inspiré par la loi qui, ici, n’est plus de mise. Car la neige, la neige éternelle à quoi aspire le désir sans objet d’Antigone, c’est cette neige dont la blancheur est la blancheur même du linceul. Or, c’est aussi la blancheur que désigne Mme de Saint-Ange, dès le premier dialogue de la Philosophie dans le boudoir, blancheur d’Eugénie future objet désiré mais pour l’instant absente, manquante: «Son teint est d’une blancheur éblouissante... ses yeux d’un noir d’ébène et d’une ardeur!... Oh! mon ami, il n’est pas possible de tenir à ces yeux-là.» Mais quand Eugénie sera, séance tenante, instituée objet désiré, il ne sera plus question de sa blancheur. Elle ne sera plus figure de l’insoutenable mais posture manipulée.

Certes, le rapprochement de ces deux textes, celui de Sophocle et celui de Sade, peut surprendre. Mais sa pointe apparaîtra peut-être si l’on songe au curieux exemple de Platon: le désir pur du plaisir pur de la pure blancheur. Qu’est-ce que cette pure blancheur, cette blancheur — comme le dit Platon — au plus haut point blanche? C’est le blanc sur lequel rien n’apparaît, aucun trait, aucun attrait, aucune figure. C’est la blancheur à proprement parler sublime (sub-limes) juste en-dessous de la limite au-delà de laquelle plus rien n’est figurable. La blancheur sublime est la figuration de ce qu’il y a de l’infigurable; et le désir pur est le désir de cette blancheur sublime.

Le désir pur, c’est le désir blanc.
Notes

7 Kant emploie lui-même cette expression: «la faculté de désirer» (nous y reviendrons dans un instant); mais la finalité éthique de l'entreprise critique lui fait réserver à la seule volonté raisonnable la capacité d'une détermination *a priori*.
8 C'est le terme dont use Platon (*Phèdre*, 35d); le désir: *épithumia*, se rapporte à un objet désiré: *épithumoumenon*, que je contracte, pour simplifier, en «épithumène» (au risque du jeu de mots que certains ne rateront pas).
12 *Le Séminaire*, livre XI, éd. du Seuil, p. 247 (c'est nous qui soulignons).
19 *C.R.Ptque*, première partie, livre I, chapitre 2, p. 76.
22 *F.M.M.*, p. 137.
25 *Métopsychologie des mœurs* (Doctrine de la Vertu), Introduction, § XVII, trad. Philonenko, éd. Vrin, p. 81. Le texte précise: «Cette apathie morale consiste en ce que les sentiments issus des impressions sensibles ne perdent leur influence sur le sentiment moral qu'autant que le respect pour la loi devient plus puissant qu'eux tous.» Cf. aussi: *Anthropologie*, p. III: «L'apathie, lorsque la nature en a gratifié une âme suffisamment forte, est un flegme bienheureux (au sens moral). On n'est pas pour autant un sage; mais on tient de la nature cette faveur de pouvoir le devenir plus facilement qu'un autre.»
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45 De ce que Lacan, en cette occasion, appelle «l'Autre» on ne saurait avancer une détermination univoque. Il est manifeste que l'Autre ne se réduit pas ici au «trésor des signifiants». Car il désigne aussi l'altérité d'une instance qui, pour n'être pas sujet, tient lieu toutefois de sujet pour ce «même» devant qui il surgit comme «Autre». Il ne s'agit donc pas simplement de cet «autrui en nous» dont parle Valéry à propos du langage. Ce n'est pas non plus exactement l'Autre sous l'espèce du semblable, du prochain (du *Nebenmensch* dont parle Freud). Mais l'Autre est au moms un tenant-lieu-de-sujet susceptible de s'investir dans un autre. Sur cette question de l'Autre chez Lacan, cf. notre étude: «La commissure de l'être», *Descartes et les Fondements de la psychanalyse*, à paraître prochainement aux éditions Osiris-Navarin.


51 Cf. KS, p. 774, § 3.

52 Cf. KS, p. 765–766.

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55 KS, p. 782, § 6 (c’est nous qui soulignons).


58 KS, p. 782, § 3.


61 Le Séminaire, livre VII, p. 128.

62 Ibid., p. 67.

63 Ibid., p. 142 (c’est nous qui soulignons).


65 Le Séminaire, livre VII, p. 143.

66 KS, p. 782, § 3.


68 Cf. notamment Phénoménologie, tome I, p. 343 sq. («La raison législatrice»), et p. 348 sq. («La raison examinant les lois»).

69 Cf. Principes de la philosophie du droit, notamment § 135.


72 KS, p. 774, § I.


76 Ibid., p. 143.

77 Cf. la Religion dans les limites de la simple raison.

78 C.R. Pbare, p. 139–140.

79 Ibid., p. 143 (c’est nous qui soulignons).

80 Ibid., p. 132 et 133.


83 Cf. C.R. Pure, «Introduction de la logique transcendante», p. 110: «Sans la sensibilité, nul objet ne nous serait donné; sans l’entendement, nul ne serait pensé. Des pensées sans matière sont vides; des intuitions sans concepts sont aveugles. Aussi est-il tout aussi nécessaire de rendre sensibles les concepts (c’est-à-dire d’y joindre l’objet donné dans l’intuition), que de rendre intelligibles les intuitions (c’est-à-dire de les soumettre à des concepts). Ces deux facultés ou capacités ne sauraient plus échanger leurs fonctions. L’entendement ne peut avoir l’intuition de rien, ni les sens rien penser. La connaissance ne peut résulter que de leur union.»

84 «Position de l’inconscient», Écrits, p. 848.

85 Cf. KS, p. 774, § 5 à 7. — Cf. aussi, dans la «Remarque sur le rapport de Daniel Lagache», Écrits, p. 656: «Bien loin donc qu’il faille que le Moi-sujet s’efforce à reculer le Moi-objet pour se le faire transcendant, le vrai, sinon le bon sujet, le sujet du désir, aussi bien dans l’éclairage du fantasme que dans son gîte hors d’escent,
n’est autre que la Chose, qui de lui-même est le plus prochain tout en lui échappant le plus.»

88 Cf. C. R. Pure, «Du schématisme des concepts purs de l’entendement», p. 188.
92 Cf. C. R. Ptique, p. 82.
93 KS, p. 780, § 10.
95 Le Séminaire, livre VII, p. 133.
96 KS, p. 773, § 1.
97 Le Séminaire, livre VII, p. 256 (cf. aussi p. 342 à 345).
98 KS, p. 775–776.
100 Sophocle, Antigone, vers 798.
105 Sade, op. cit., p. 47.
THE SUBJECT OF THE LAW

Alenka Zupančič


Introduction: the uncommon good

In relation to the notion of ethics, such as it was shaped through the history of philosophy, psychoanalysis introduces a double “blow of disillusionment”: the first one is associated with the name of Sigmund Freud and the second one with that of Jacques Lacan. It is significant that, in both cases, the same philosopher is at the center of discussion: Immanuel Kant.

The “Freudian blow” could be summarized as follows: what philosophy calls the moral law and, more precisely, what Kant calls the categorical imperative, is in fact nothing other than the superego. This judgment provokes an “effect of disenchantment” that calls into doubt any endeavor to base ethics on foundations other than “pathological” ones. At the same time, it places “ethics” at the core of what Freud called “civilization and its discontents.” As far as it has its origins in the constitution of the superego, ethics is nothing more than a convenient tool for any ideology that tries to pass off its own commandments as authentic, spontaneous, and “honorable” inclinations of the subject.

The “Lacanian blow” is of a different nature. It is, in fact, a double blow that aims firstly at Freud and only secondly at Kant. Lacan’s critique of Freud is related to Freud’s discussion of the commandment “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” in Civilization and Its Discontents. Lacan dedicates to this issue one chapter of his seminar The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, the chapter that actually begins with Freud and ends with Kant.

First, he defines traditional ethics as the “service of goods” or the “sharing of the good” and points out that, strictly speaking, there is no ethics involved here, because “it is in the nature of the good to be altruistic.” The register we are dealing with is that of the imaginary: “It is a fact of experience that what I want is the good of others in the image of my own. That doesn’t cost
so much. What I want is the good of others provided that it remain in the image of my own."2 Lacan takes the example of Saint Martin sharing his cloak with a naked beggar and remarks that in this case the philanthropy is strictly correlative to the sharing of the "material" that is, in its very nature, made to be shared and disposed of. Then he invites us to consider a different situation where the naked man begs for something else, namely, that Saint Martin "either kill him or fuck him." This example introduces the difference between philanthropy and love (of our neighbor). And this is precisely what Freud recognizes in the commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself": the invitation to share with one's neighbor something other than one's goods—namely one's jouissance.

Freud turns from this with horror, pointing out that we consider our love to be something valuable and that we feel that we ought not throw it away without reflection, giving it to the first stranger that comes along. In the next step, Freud remarks that not only is this stranger generally unworthy of our love but that he has, because of his hostility and aggressiveness, more claim to our hostility and even our hatred: "if he can satisfy any sort of desire by it, he thinks nothing of jeering at me, insulting me, slandering me and showing his superior power."3 Thus, Freud rejects this commandment together with another one that also "arouses strong opposition" in him, namely, to "Love thine enemies." And yet Freud concludes that it is wrong to see in this second commandment an even greater imposition: "At the bottom, it is the same thing."4

Lacan's critical commentary regarding Freud's position apropos of this question does not in any way imply that Freud was wrong (that our neighbor is not necessarily as bad as Freud indicates, or that the greatness of ethics is precisely that we love him in spite of his hostility). On the contrary, it is precisely insofar as everything that Freud says is true that we must examine this eventuality, this hostility that inevitably rises up in our encounter with our neighbor. Lacan argues that precisely in pointing to this aggressiveness and turning away from it, Freud remains within the horizon of the "traditional ethics." What characterizes the latter—in all its different shapes and systems—is a certain definition of the good that can be summarized as follows: the good is that which keeps us away from our jouissance. "The whole Aristotelian conception of the good is alive in this man [Freud] who is a true man; he tells us the most sensitive and reasonable things about what it is worth sharing the good that is our love with. But what escapes him is perhaps the fact that precisely because we take that path we miss the opening on to jouissance."5

One does not have to look very far in order to grasp all the topicality of this issue. Suffice it to recall the modern, profane version of the commandment "Thou shalt love they neighbor as thyself": "Respect the difference of the other," or, "The other has the right to be different." Admittedly, this commandment does not require that we love this other, it is enough that we
tolerate him/her. And yet, as Freud would have said, at the core it is the same thing. It raises exactly the same problems: what happens if this other is really the Other, if his/her difference is not only a “cultural,” “folkloric” difference, but a fundamental difference? Are we still to respect him/her, to love him/her? Alain Badiou formulated this problem in the following way: “The first suspicion arises when we consider the fact that proclaimed advocates of ethics and of the ‘right to be different’ are visibly horrified by any important difference. For them the African customs are barbarous, the Islamists are hideous, the Chinese are totalitarian and so on. In fact, this famous ‘other’ is presentable only if he is a good other, that is to say if he is the same as we are. . . . Just as there is no freedom for the enemies of freedom there is no respect for the one whose difference consists precisely in not respecting the differences.” It is clear that if the word ethics is to have any serious meaning today, it must be situated at this level and dealt with from the perspective of this hostility and intolerance that inevitably spring up in my encounter with the Other. As is well known, Lacan situates the reasons for this hostility in our encounter with jouissance. Jouissance is by its very definition “strange,” “other,” “dissimilar.” However, the important point here is that I do not experience jouissance as “strange” and “dissimilar” because it is the jouissance of the Other, but, on the contrary, that it is because of this jouissance that I perceive my neighbor as (radically) Other and “strange.” Moreover, it is not simply the jouissance of the neighbor, of the other, that is strange to me. The kernel of the problem is that I experience my own jouissance as strange, dissimilar, other, and hostile. “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” compels me to love “that most neighborly of neighbors who is inside me,” my jouissance. In other terms, one cannot think the radical otherness, the “completely different” (to use the famous Monty Python line) without stumbling against the problem of the Same (which has nothing to do with the semblable, the fellow men who resemble us). “My neighbor possesses all the evil Freud speaks about, but it is no different from the evil I retreat from in myself. To love him, to love him as myself, is necessarily to move toward some cruelty. His or mine?, you will object. But haven’t I just explained to you that nothing indicates that they are distinct? It seems rather that they are the same, on condition that those limits which oblige me to posit myself opposite the other as my fellow man [mon semblable] are crossed.” In fact, the identity, the resemblance, and the sameness can be situated each in one of the three Lacanian registers: the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. The Real is not simply something entirely Other, Different, but is essentially linked to the paradoxes of the Same.

If traditional ethics draws its strength from the fact that it defined the good in such a way that it helps the subject to stay away from his jouissance, psychoanalysis deals precisely with the ingress, the intrusion of jouissance into the subject’s universe. Not only can psychoanalysis not ignore or turn away from the paradoxes of jouissance, the latter constitutes its pivotal point.

69
This is the precise reason why Lacan speaks of the "ethics of psychoanalysis"—which is not in the least "natural" or "obvious," especially if we bear in mind that what Lacan calls the "ethics of psychoanalysis" has nothing to do with "medical ethics," that is, the code that determines what a doctor can or cannot do with his practice. For Lacan, ethics is not an "annex" to the fundamental (clinical) know-how, but rather concerns the very core of the psychoanalytic practice. Because it deals with jouissance, psychoanalysis steps into the field traditionally reserved for ethics (or morality), and it steps into this field at a point "on which that morality turns": the point of the impossible, which was traditionally designated as the Evil. The greatest difficulty, of course, consists in finding the "right" way to reintroduce jouissance into the center of the discussion of ethics, to reformulate ethics from its perspective, without adopting the Sadian discourse. For it was precisely Sade who explicitly made jouissance a matter of ethics.

It was roughly at the same time that Kant wrote his *Critique of Practical Reason*, the first systematic attempt to base ethics on something that lies "beyond the pleasure principle," and to make the impossible the pivot of the ethics. Kantian ethics is no longer an ethics designed to keep us away from our jouissance. In this aspect Kant escapes the criticism that Lacan addresses to Freud; he does not miss "the opening on to jouissance," that is, the Real, and Lacan prizes him for that. However, this prizing is followed by a blow that bears the title "Kant avec Sade." Kant walks on an edge where it is very difficult to maintain balance and not to slip back either to the "traditional morality" or to the Sadian discourse. In fact, according to Lacan, Kant does not succeed in maintaining this balance. On the one hand, he tends to reintroduce, "through the back door," the imaginary dimension; in his examples he "envelops" the moral law in the sympathy for our fellowman, our semblable. On the other hand, he makes the Real an object of the will, which brings his ethics close to Sade. The price to pay for this "wanting the Real" is that the subject has to assume the perverse position where he sees himself as the instrument of the Will of the Other.

**Sex, lies, and executions**

Here is Kant's famous "apologue of gallows" to which Lacan often refers:

Suppose that someone says his lust is irresistible when the desired object and opportunity are present. Ask him whether he would not control his passions if, in front of the house where he has this opportunity, a gallows were erected on which he would be hanged immediately after gratifying his lust. We do not have to guess very long what his answer may be. But ask him whether he thinks it would be possible for him to overcome his love of life, however great it may be, if his sovereign threatened him with the same sudden death unless
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he made a false deposition against an honorable man whom the ruler wished to destroy under a plausible pretext. Whether he would or not he would perhaps not venture to say; but that it would be possible for him he would certainly admit without hesitation. He judges, therefore, that he has to do something because he knows that he ought.

Let us put aside for the moment the first part of the apologue, and focus on the second part, which is made to illustrate the way the moral law imposes itself upon the human subject, even if it implies the ultimate sacrifice. What is wrong with Kant’s argument in this part? Lacan remarks: “In effect, if an assault on the goods, the life, or the honor of someone else were to become universal rule, that would throw the whole of man’s universe into a state of disorder and evil.” We must not overlook the irony implied in this remark. Lacan reproaches Kant for introducing a perfectly pathological motive, hidden behind the appearance of a pure moral duty. In other words, Lacan reproaches Kant for cheating (“Kant, our dear Kant, in all his innocence, his innocent subterfuge”). Kant deceives his readers by disguising the true stakes and the true impact of the (ethical) choice. In his example, he puts the categorical imperative (our duty) on the same side as the good (the well-being) of our fellowman: the reader will follow Kant without much hesitation when he says that in this case the idea of accepting one’s own death is, at least, possible. And the problem resides in the fact that the reader does not follow Kant because s/he is convinced of the inexorability of duty as such, but because of the image of the pain inflicted on the other that plays here the role of the counterpoint. Kant’s example is destined to produce in us “a certain effect of a fortiori” (Lacan), as a result of which we are deceived about the real stakes of the choice. In other words, the reader will agree with Kant for, if we may say so, “nonprincipal reasons,” s/he will agree with Kant on the grounds of an a fortiori reasoning: not because s/he is convinced of the a priori value of the moral law, but on account of a “stronger reason.” We accept Kant’s argument because we are guided by a certain representation of the good in which we situate our duty—and this is heteronomy in the strictest Kantian sense of the word. If we bear in mind that the crucial novelty of Kantian ethics (the point of the “Copernican revolution” in ethics) consists in reversing the hierarchy between the notion of the good and the moral law, then the very least we can say regarding the discussed example is that it obscures this crucial point.

This is why Lacan suggests that we change the example a little, in order to elucidate the real issue: What if I find myself in a situation where my duty and the good of the other are on opposite sides, and where I can accomplish my duty only to the detriment of my fellowman? Will I stop before the evil, the pain that my action would inflict on the other, or will I stick to my duty, despite the consequences? It is only this case that allows us to see whether the
issue is the attack on the rights of the other, as far as s/he is my semblable, my "fellowman," or, rather if it is a question of the false witness, false testimony as such. Thus, Lacan invites us to consider a case of a true witness, a case of conscience that is raised, for example, if I am summoned to inform on my neighbor or my brother for activities that are prejudicial to the security of the state. This is how Lacan comments on what is at stake in this case: "Must I go toward my duty of truth insofar as it preserves the authentic place of my jouissance, even if it is empty? Or must I resign myself to this lie which, by making me substitute forcefully the good for the principle of my jouissance, commands me to blow alternatively hot and cold?" Indeed, it is in this alternative that the crucial issue of Kantian ethics is formulated in the clearest way. If the moral law excludes any prior consideration of the good, then it is clear where this ethics stands in relation to the aforementioned alternative. Once the good enters the stage, the question necessarily springs up: Whose good? This is what Lacan has in mind with the phrase "blow alternatively hot and cold": if I do not betray my brother or my neighbor, I may betray my other countrymen. Who is to decide whose good is more valuable than the others? This is the fundamental deadlock of any ethics based on the notion of the good, be it "individualist" or "communitarian." The project of Kantian ethics is precisely to escape this deadlock, and this is the reason why Kantian ethics is not only a version of "traditional ethics," but an irreversible step toward something else. However, as we have seen, Lacan reproaches Kant for not making this point clear enough: Kant seems to have troubles accepting some consequences of his own principal theoretical stand. Therefore Lacan challenges him with this question: Must I go toward my duty of truth insofar as it preserves the authentic place of my jouissance, even if it is empty? Or must I resign myself to this lie, which, by making me substitute forcefully the good for the principle of my jouissance, commands me to blow alternatively hot and cold?

What is most striking about this "transtemporal" debate between Lacan and Kant is that Kant actually did answer Lacan; he answered him in his (in)famous reply to Benjamin Constant, On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns (Über ein vermeintes Recht aus menschenliebe zu lügen, 1797). Kant begins this brief essay by quoting Benjamin Constant, who wrote: "The moral principle, 'It is a duty to tell the truth' would make any society impossible if it were taken singly and unconditionally. We have proof of this in the very direct consequence which a German philosopher has drawn from this principle. This philosopher goes so far as to assert that it would be a crime to lie to a murderer who asked whether our friend who is pursued by him had taken refuge in our house." Constant's text Des réactions politiques, in which we find the quoted passage, was translated in German by a professor Franz Cramer who lived in Paris. In the German translation, the passage where Constant speaks of a "German philosopher" is accompanied by a footnote in which the publisher states that Constant
told him that the "German philosopher" he had in mind was Kant. What is especially interesting about this case is that, in the work of Kant, we do not find the example to which Constant refers. However, Kant immediately replied to Constant with *On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns*. After quoting Constant (the above passage), Kant adds a footnote saying that he remembers stating somewhere what Constant suggests, but that he does not remember where. The whole affair is quite amusing, because Kant recognizes himself in something that he—at least with these words—never actually wrote. This, of course, becomes irrelevant the moment when Kant takes this position as his own and engages himself in defending it. He states that, even in this particular case, it would be wrong to lie. If there is no other way out, we must tell the murderer who is pursuing our friend the truth.

It is probably not necessary to point out that Kant’s position in this case did not meet with much approval from this critics. On the contrary, it still remains the most “abjected” part of Kant’s philosophy. There were some attempts to save Kant by shifting the issue from moral to political philosophy. Yet, this does not resolve the problem and the discomfort that it generates, it merely sidesteps it by driving our attention to something else. On the other hand, among those who consider it an ethical issue, it is clearly an object of loathing and rejection. Herbert J. Paton, for instance, takes “this mistaken essay” as “illustrating the way in which an old man [Kant was seventy-three when he wrote it] ... can push his central conviction to unjustified extremes under the influence of his early training [namely Kant’s mother who supposedly severely condemned lying].” Paton suggests that we dismiss this essay as a “temporary aberration” that has no impact on the basic principles of Kantian ethics.

However, this attitude is quite problematic in that the issue involved in the discussed example brings into play nothing less than the basic principles of Kantian ethics. If the moral law is indeed unconditional, if it does not follow from any notion of the good, but is itself the ground for any possible definition of the good, then it is clear why Kant cannot accept that the good of our fellowman might serve us as an excuse for not doing our duty. Those who are not willing to accept this aspect of Kant’s position in the discussed example but reject it, are also rejecting the entire edifice of Kantian ethics that hangs precisely upon this point.

If, however, we accept Kant’s position, there is yet another trap to be avoided, namely the “Sadian trap.” The Kantian subject cannot escape the Real involved in the unconditional duty by hiding himself behind the image of his fellowman—but neither can this subject hide behind his duty and use the duty as an excuse for his actions. As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, as an ethical subject I cannot say: “Sorry, I know it was unpleasant, but I couldn’t help it, the moral law imposed that act on me as my unconditional duty!” On the contrary, the subject is fully responsible for what he refers to as his duty.
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The type of discourse where I use my duty as an excuse for my actions is perverse in the strictest sense of the word. Here, the subject attributes to the Other (to the duty or to the Law), the surplus enjoyment that he finds in his actions: “I am sorry if my actions hurt you, but I only did what the Other wanted me to do, so go and see Him if you have any objections.” In this case, the subject hides behind the law.

In order to illustrate this, let us take an example suggested by Henry E. Allison. Suppose that I have a violent dislike for someone and have come into possession of a piece of information about him, which I know will cause him great pain if he learns of it. With the intent of doing so, I decide to inform him of the matter, but I justify the action on the grounds of his right to know. Accordingly, rather than being a vicious act of causing unnecessary pain, I represent it to myself (and perhaps to others) as a laudable act of truth telling. I might even convince myself that it is a sacred duty. Allison uses this example to illustrate what he calls the “self-deception,” by means of which we are able to ignore “the morally salient factor(s)” of a situation. However, we will take this example as an illustration of something else, namely the perverse attitude that consists in presenting our duty as an excuse for our actions. In other words, we are dealing here with two “self-deceptions” and not just one. The first is the one pointed out by Allison: we deceive ourselves as to our actual intention, which is to hurt our fellow man. But this deception is only possible on the basis of another, more fundamental one. It is possible only insofar as we take (the “content” of) our duty to be “ready-made,” preexisting our involvement in the situation. This is why we will not expose the hypocrite in question by saying to him “we know that your real intention was to hurt the other person.” He could go on asserting hypocritically that he had to muster up all his forces in order to tell the truth to the other, that he himself suffered enormously when hurting the other, yet could not avoid it, because it was his duty to do so. . . . The only way to unmask this kind of hypocrite is to ask him: “And where is it written that it is your duty to tell the other what you know? What makes you believe this is your duty? Are you ready to answer for your duty?”

According to the fundamental principles of Kantian ethics, duty is only that which the subject makes his duty, it does not exist somewhere “outside” like the Ten Commandments. It is the subject who makes something his duty and has to answer for it. The categorical imperative is not a test that would enable us to make a list (however inexhaustible) of ethical deeds, a sort of “catechism of pure reason,” behind which we could hide the surplus enjoyment that we find in our acts.19

At this point we can return to Kant’s essay On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives. It is now clear what makes Kant’s position unbearable: not the fact that my duty does not necessarily coincide with the good of my fellowman (this is something that we have to admit as possible), but the fact that Kant takes, in this case, the duty to tell the truth as a ready-made
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duty that passed, once and for all, the test of the categorical imperative and could thus be written on the list of commandments for, so to speak, all the generations to come. It is precisely this gesture that makes it possible for the subject to assume a perverse attitude, to justify his actions by saying that they were imposed upon him by unconditional duty, to hide behind the moral law and present himself as the "mere instrument" of its will. Indeed, Kant goes so far as to claim that the subject who tells the murderer the truth is not responsible for the consequences of this action, whereas the subject who tells a lie is fully responsible for the outcome of the situation. Consequently, instead of illustrating the fact that duty is founded only in itself and that it is precisely this point that allows for the freedom and responsibility of the moral subject, this notorious example illustrates rather the case of a pervert who hides the enjoyment that he finds in the betrayal behind the Law. However, let us stress once again that this itself does not diminish the value of the other aspect of the example. It is possible that someone would make it his duty to tell the murderer the truth: as paradoxical as it may sound, this could be an ethical act. What is inadmissible is that the subject claims that this duty was imposed upon him, that he could not do otherwise, that he only followed the commandment of the Law . . .

This brings us to the core of the relation between the subject and the law. Why is it inadmissible to fulfill, once and for all, the enigmatic enunciation of the categorical imperative with a statement (i.e., "Tell the truth!") which reduces the law to the list of already established commandments? Not simply, as we might suppose, because in this case we neglect all the particular circumstances that may occur in a concrete situation; not simply because one case is never identical to another, so that in any given situation we can come across a factor that we have to take into account when making our decision. The situation is a much more radical one: even if it were possible—by means of some supercomputer—to simulate all possible situations, this still would not imply that we could put together a list of ethical decisions corresponding to the given situations. The crucial problem of the moral law is not the variability of situations to which we "apply" it, but the place or the role of the subject in its very constitution, and thus in the constitution of the universal. The reason why the subject cannot be effaced from the "structure" of the ethical (by means of making a list of duties that would absolve the subject of his responsibility and freedom) is not the particular, the singular, the specific, but the universal. That which can in no way be reduced without abolishing the ethics as such, is not the colorfulness and variability of every given situation, but the gesture by which every subject, by means of his action, posits the universal, performs a certain operation of universalization. The ethical subject is not an agent of the universal, he does not act in the name of the universal or with its authorization—if this were the case, the subject would be an unnecessary, dispensable "element" of ethics. The subject is not the agent of the universal, but its agens. This does not mean simply
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that the universal is always "subjectively mediated," that the law is always "subjective" (partial, selective, prejudicial), it does not point toward a certain definition of the universal, but rather toward a definition of the subject: it means that the subject is nothing other than this moment of universalization, of the constitution or determination of the law. The ethical subject is not a subject who brings into a given (moral) situation all the subjective baggage and affects with it (i.e., formulates a maxim that corresponds to his personal inclinations), but a subject who is, strictly speaking, born from this situation, who only emerges from it. The ethical subject is the point where the universal comes to itself and achieves its determination. As Kant knew very well, we are all pathological subjects, and this is what eventually led him to the conclusion that no ethical act is really possible in this world. What he did not see—or rather, what he saw but did not actually conceptualize—is that the subject who enters an (ethical) act is not necessarily the same as the one who emerges from it.

Here we come across one of the most significant questions of Kant's practical philosophy, namely the question of the possibility of (performing) an ethical act. Is it at all possible for a human subject to accomplish an ethical act? This question can be situated in the context of yet another debate: the debate that concerns the Kantian notion of "diabolical evil" and the exclusion of the latter as impossible.

Like angel like devil

In Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone Kant identifies several different modes of evil. Let us reiterate them briefly.

1. The frailty of human nature, on account of which we yield to pathological motives in spite of our will to do the good. The will is good, we wanted the good, but the realization of this good failed.

2. The impurity of the human will. Here the problem is not a discrepancy between the maxim and its realization. The maxim is good in respect to its object, and we are also strong enough to "practice" it, but we do not do so from the respect for the moral law but, for example, out of our self-love, out of some personal interests, because we think this will be useful for us . . .

3. The wickedness (Bösigmaigkeit) or "radical evil" is structured somewhat differently: Its foundation is a (free, although nontemporal) act in which we make the incentives of self-love the condition of obedience to the moral law. In other words, "radical evil" reverses the hierarchy of (pathological) incentives and the law: it makes the former the condition of the latter, whereas the latter (i.e., the law) ought to be the supreme condition or the "criterion" for the satisfaction of the incentives. We obey the moral law only "by accident," when it suits us or when it is compatible
with our pathological inclinations. "Radical evil" is in fact that which explains the possibility of the first two modes of evil.

To these three "degrees" of evil Kant adds a fourth, the "diabolical evil," which he excludes at the same time as a case that could not apply to men. "Diabolical evil" would occur if we were to elevate the opposition to the moral law to the level of the maxim. In this case the maxim would be opposed to the law not just "negatively" (as it is in the case of radical evil), but directly. This would imply, for instance, that we would be ready to act contrary to the moral law even if this meant acting contrary to our self-interest and to our well-being. We would make it a principle to act against the moral law, and we would stick to this principle no matter what (i.e., even if it meant our death).

The first difficulty that occurs in this conceptualization of diabolical evil lies in its very definition: namely, that diabolical evil would occur if we elevated the opposition to the moral law to the level of a maxim (a principle, a law). What is wrong with this definition? Given the Kantian concept of the moral law—which is not a law that says "do this" or "do that," but an enigmatic law that only commands us to do our duty, without ever naming it—the following objection arises: if the opposition to the moral law were elevated to the maxim or principle, it would no longer be an opposition to the moral law, it would be the moral law itself. At this level, there is no opposition possible. It is not possible to oppose oneself to the moral law at the level of the (moral) law. Nothing can oppose itself to the moral law on principle (i.e., because of nonpathological reasons) without itself becoming a moral law. To act without allowing the pathological incentives to influence our actions is good. In relation to this definition of the good, (diabolical) evil would have to be defined as follows: it is evil to oppose oneself, without allowing the pathological incentives to influence one's actions, to actions that do not allow any pathological incentives to influence one's actions—which is absurd. Within the context of Kantian ethics it makes no sense to speak of the opposition to the moral law: one may speak of frailty or impurity of the human will (which imply a failure to make the law the only incentive of our actions), but not of the opposition to the moral law. The opposition to the moral law would itself be a moral law, there is no way to introduce any distinction between them at this level. In other words, "diabolical evil" inevitably coincides with the "highest good," introduced by Kant in the Critique of Practical Reason as the "necessary object of the will." The way in which Kant introduces diabolical evil is strictly symmetrical to his introduction of the highest good: they are both positioned as the "ideals" in which the will would entirely coincide with the Law, and they are both excluded as cases that cannot apply to human agents. There is only one difference: Kant gives to the highest good the support in the postulate of the immortality of the soul. But we must not forget that the immortal soul could as well
function as the postulate of diabolical evil. We could very well transcribe the first paragraph of the chapter “The Immortality of the Soul as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason” as follows: “The achievement of the highest evil in the world is the necessary object of a will determinable by moral law. In such will, however, the complete fitness of disposition to the moral law is the supreme condition of the highest evil. However, the perfect fit of the will to the moral law is the diabolical, which is a perfection of which no rational being of this world of sense is at any time capable. But since it is required as practically necessary, it can be found only in an endless progression to that perfect fitness. This infinite progress is possible only under the presupposition of the immortality of the soul. Thus the highest evil is practically possible only on the supposition of the immortality of the soul.”

In this paraphrase we only had to invent one term, namely the “highest evil.” This brings us to another interesting point: In the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant distinguishes between, on the one hand, the objects of pure practical reason and, on the other hand, the will. He affirms that “the sole objects of practical reason are those of the good and the evil.” At the same time, he defines a complete fitness of the will to the moral law as holiness. Thus we have, on the one side, the highest good as the object of practical reason and, on the other side, the holy will as its supreme condition. However, when we move from good to evil, this distinction seems to be abolished, the will and the object to be fused together. This is quite manifest in the expression “diabolical evil,” where “diabolical” refers to the will and “evil” to the object. It must be stressed though, that Kant himself never used the expression “diabolical evil”: his terms are “devilish being” and “that is diabolical”—namely “a disposition (the subjective principle of the maxims) to adopt evil as evil into our maxim as our incentives.” Therefore, instead of speaking of “diabolical evil,” we should rather speak of the “highest evil” and “diabolical will.” It is precisely in light of this difference that we can fully grasp the importance of the postulate of the immortality of the soul, which is not as innocent as it might appear. The basic operation introduced by this postulate consists in linking the object of practical reason (the highest good) to the will, in making it an object of the will and positing that the “realization” of this object is only possible under the supposition of the holy will. It is precisely this operation that, on the one hand, brings Kant close to Sade and his volonté de jouissance, “the will for enjoyment,” and, on the other hand, makes it necessary for Kant (who does not want to be Sade) to exclude the highest good/evil as impossible for human agents. So as to avoid this impasse of Kantian ethics, it would be necessary to separate these two things (the object and the will) and to affirm, at the same time:

1. That the diabolical or highest evil is identical to the highest good and that they are nothing other than the definition of an accomplished (ethical) act. In other words, at the level of the structure of ethical act,
the difference between the good and the evil does not exist. The evil is formally indistinguishable from the good.

2. That the “highest evil” and the “highest good” as defined above do exist, or rather, they do occur—what does not exist is holy or diabolical will.

As to the first point, it should be stressed that many critics have already pointed out that virtually any maxim, if suitably formulated, can be made to pass the universalizability test. In other words, Kant was often attacked on the grounds that his conceptualization of the moral law is too “formalistic,” which allows for the fact that even the most “evil” actions can pass the test. However, our point is that this supposed weakness of Kantian ethics is in fact its strongest point and that we should accept it as such. If we tried to avoid it, we would be forced to reintroduce some a priori notion of the good and deduce the moral law from it. The fundamental paradox of ethics lies in the fact that in order to found an ethics, we already have to presuppose a certain ethics (a certain notion of the good). The whole project of Kantian ethics is to avoid this paradox: the moral law is founded only on itself, and the good is good only “after” the moral law. This demands a certain price, namely that, on the level of the law, the evil is formally indistinguishable from the good. Yet this is a price that we have to accept, otherwise we fall into the classical ideological trap. This is what happens to Allison when he tries to save Kant from the attacks that we mentioned above. His argument runs as follows: first, he introduces the notion of self-deception as one of the most important notions of Kant’s ethics. Then, he claims that “it is precisely the testing of maxims that provides the major occasion for self-deception, which here takes the form of disguising from ourselves the true nature of the principles upon which we act. In short, immoral maxims appear to pass the universalizability test only because they ignore or obscure morally salient features of a situation.”

The problem with this argument is, of course, the conceptual weakness of the notion of “morally salient features of a situation.” As we know from Althusser on, the salient or the obvious, which is supposed to protect us from self-deception, can be the most refined form of self-deception. Every ideology works hard to make certain things “obvious,” and the more we find these things obvious, self-evident, unquestionable, the more successfully the ideology has carried out its job. If we accept what Allison suggests, namely that there is something in reality on which we can rely when testing the maxims, then we also accept the logic that underlies the following maxim: “Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it.” We can replace Führer with God and we will get a categorical imperative that is far more acceptable in our culture: “Act in such a way that God, if he knew your action, would approve it.” But we must not forget that the logic and the structure of these two imperatives is exactly the same. We test our maxims against something that is “external” to the moral law and that determines the horizon of what is generally acceptable and what
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is not. This is why we have to maintain that there is absolutely nothing in reality that could help us “guess” what our duty is and that could deliver a guarantee against misjudging our duty. At the same time, this theoretical stance has the advantage of making it impossible for the subject to assume the perverse attitude that we discussed in the previous section: the subject cannot hide behind his duty—he is responsible for what he refers to as his duty.

Let us now examine more closely the logic that underlies Kant’s exclusion of “diabolical evil” (and of the highest good). The exclusion in question seems to correspond to this common wisdom: a man is only a man, he is finite, divided in himself—and therein resides his uniqueness, his tragic greatness. A man is not a god and he should not try to be one, because if he does, he will inevitably cause evil. The problem with this stance is that it fails to recognize the real source of evil (in the common sense of the word). To take the example that is most frequently used, namely the Holocaust: what made it possible for the Nazis to torture and kill millions of Jews is not simply that they thought they were gods and could therefore decide who would live and who would die, but the fact that they saw themselves as instruments of God (or some other Idea), who had already decided who could live and who must die. Indeed, what is most dangerous is not an insignificant bureaucrat who thinks he is God, but rather the God who pretends to be an insignificant bureaucrat. One could even say that for the subject the most difficult thing is to accept that, in a certain sense, he is “God,” that he has a choice. The right answer to the religious promise of immortality is not the pathos of the finite; the basis of ethics cannot be an imperative that commands us to endorse our finite and renounce ourselves to “higher,” “impossible” aspirations, but rather an imperative that invites us to recognize as our own the “impossible” that can occur as the “essential by-product” of our actions.

What the advocates of the Kantian exclusion of “diabolical evil” do not see or pass over in silence, is the symmetry of the (highest) good and the (highest) evil. In excluding the possibility of “diabolical evil” we also exclude the possibility of the good, we exclude the possibility of ethics as such or, more precisely, we posit the ethical act as something that is in itself impossible and that exists only in its perpetual failure to “fully” realize itself.

Thus, our reproach to Kant concerning this matter is not that he did not have enough “courage” to accept something as radical and extreme as diabolical evil. On the contrary, the problem is that this extremity (which calls for exclusion) is in itself already a result of a certain Kantian conceptualization of ethics. This is seen most clearly in the first part of Kant’s apologue of gallows, which we left aside at the beginning of this discussion. Kant invents two stories that are supposed, first, to “prove” the existence of the moral law and, second, to demonstrate that the subject cannot act contrary to his pathological interests for any other reason than the moral law. The first story
concerns a man who is placed in the situation of being executed on his way out of the bedroom if he wants to spend the night with the lady he desires. The other story, which we have already discussed, concerns a man who is put in the position of either bearing false witness against someone who, as a result, will lose his life or of being put to death himself if he does not do it.

As a comment to the first alternative Kant simply affirms: "We do not have to guess very long what his [the man's in question] answer would be." As to the second story, Kant claims that it is at least possible to imagine that a man would rather die than tell a lie and send another man to death. As follows from these two comments, apart from the moral law there is no other "force" that could make us act against our well-being and our "pathological interests." To this Lacan raises the following objection: such "force" does exist, namely jouissance (as different from pleasure): "The striking significance of the first example resides in the fact that the night spent with the lady is paradoxically presented to us as a pleasure that is weighed against a punishment to be undergone... but one only has to make a conceptual shift and move the night spent with the lady from the category of pleasure to that of jouissance, given that jouissance implies precisely the acceptance of death... for the example to be ruined." Lacan's argument is even more subtle. He does not posit jouissance as some diabolical force that is capable of opposing itself to the law. On the contrary, he recognizes in jouissance the very kernel of the law: it is enough, he states, for jouissance to be a form of suffering, for the whole thing to change its character completely, and for the meaning of the moral law itself to be completely changed. "Anyone can see that if the moral law is, in effect, capable of playing some role here, it is precisely as a support for the jouissance involved." In other words, if, as Kant claims, no other thing but the moral law can induce us to put aside all our pathological interests and accept our death, then the case of someone who spends a night with a lady even though he knows that he will pay for it with his life, is the case of the moral law. It is the case of the moral law, an ethical act, without being "diabolical" (or "holy"). This is the crucial point of Lacan's argument: there are acts that perfectly fit Kant's criteria for an (ethical) act, without being either "angelic" or "diabolical." It happens to the subject to perform an act, whether he wants it or not. It is precisely this point that excludes the voluntarism that would lead to the romanticization of a diabolic (or angelic) creature. Jouissance (as the real kernel of the law) is not a matter of the will. Or, more precisely, if it is a matter of the will, it is insofar as it always appears as something that the subject does not want. That which, according to Lacan, brings Kant close to Sade, is the fact that he introduces a "wanting of jouissance" (the highest good), that is, that he makes the Real an object of the will. This then necessarily leads to the exclusion of (the possibility of) this object (the highest good or "diabolical evil"), the exclusion that, in turn, supports the fantasy of its realization (the immortality of the soul). For Kant it is unimaginable that someone would want his own destruction—this
would be diabolical. And Lacan's answer is not that this is nevertheless imaginable, and that even such extreme cases exist, but that there is nothing extreme in this: on a certain level every subject, as average as he might very well be, wants his destruction, whether he wants it or not. It is this level that Lacan calls the death drive, and it is here that he situates jouissance.

In other words, the "angelization" of the good and the "diabolization" of the evil is the (conceptual) price to pay for making the Real an object of the will, that is, for making the coincidence of the will with the Law the condition of an ethical act. This means nothing other than claiming that the "hero" of the act exists. In the first step, Kant links the ethical dimension of the act to the will of the subject. From there it follows that if the subject were to (successfully) accomplish an ethical act, he would have to be either an angelic or a diabolical subject. But neither of these cases can apply to men, and Kant excludes them as impossible (in this world). From this exclusion of angels and devils then follows a perpetual diaeresis that operates in what is left. The subject is "handed over" to the irreducible doubt that manifests itself in the persistence of guilt: he has to separate himself from his pathology in indefinitum. In other words, the (internal) division of the will, its alienation from itself, which many critics prize as the most valuable point of Kantian ethics, is in fact already a consequence of the fact that Kant failed to recognize some more fundamental alienation: the alienation of the subject in the act, an alienation that implies that the subject is not necessarily the hero of "his" act. If Kant had recognized this fundamental alienation or division, a "successful" act would not necessitate either a holy or a diabolical will.

In "Kant with Sade," Lacan states: "It is thus indeed the Kantian will which is encountered in the place of this will which can be called the will-to-jouissance only to explain that it is the subject reconstituted from alienation at the price of being no more than the instrument of jouissance." What exactly does this mean? We have a perfect example of this "subjective position" in Choderlos de Laclos's novel Les Liaisons Dangereuses. The only way that Valmont can satisfy his "will for enjoyment" is to become the instrument of the enjoyment (of the Other). The alienation, the split he tries to escape from, is the split between jouissance and the consciousness or awareness (of jouissance). He endeavors to abolish the split, the alienation between the two, by staging their encounter in the place of the Other. For this purpose, the Other must necessarily become a subject, and the Other can only become a subject by undergoing a division. The subject (Valmont) has to become the object that will cause the division of the Other, his subjectivation. This is the nature of Valmont's seduction of Mme de Tourvel. First, he has to awake a passionate desire in her. But, at the same time, this passion must not make her blind (i.e., unaware) of what she is doing. When she is to make the decisive step (i.e., betray all her principles and beliefs and sleep with Valmont), this step has to be accompanied by the clear awareness of
What she is doing and what the consequences of her act may be. Her act must not be “pathological” (i.e., carried out in a moment of “blind passion”): before doing it, she must, in a way, state that she wants it. That is why Valmont twice refuses to take advantage of an opportunity that is offered to him. He writes, “My plan, on the contrary, is to make her perfectly aware of the value and extent of each one of the sacrifices she makes me; not to proceed so fast with her that the remorse is unable to catch up; it is to show her virtue breathing its last in long-protracted agonies; to keep that somber spectacle ceaselessly before her eyes.” Valmont leads Mme de Tourvel to make a certain step, then he stops, pulls himself back and waits for her to become fully aware of the implications of this step, to realize fully the significance of her position. The basic fantasy that underlies Valmont’s actions is best expressed in his triumphal exclamation: la pauvre femme, elle se voit mourir, “the poor woman, she is watching herself dying.” We must not miss what Valmont is actually saying here, namely: l’heureuse femme, elle se voit jouir, “the fortunate woman, she is watching herself enjoying.” In this scene, which utterly fascinates Valmont, he is “reconstituted from alienation at the price of being no more than the instrument of jouissance” of the Other.

Now, how does all this apply to Kant, what exactly is the “fundamental alienation” that Kant refuses to acknowledge and how is this refusal visible? Once again in “Kantian tales” (i.e., examples that he invites us to consider in order to prove his theoretical stances), in the famous example of the false promise, for instance, or in the even more famous example of the deposit: “I have, for example, made it my maxim to augment my property by every safe means. Now I have in my possession a deposit, the owner of which has died without leaving any record of it. Naturally, this case falls under my maxim. Now I want to know whether this maxim can hold as a universal law. I apply it, therefore, to the present case. . . . I immediately realize that taking such principle as a law would annihilate itself, because its result would be that no one would make a deposit.” What exactly is Kant saying here? He is saying that, to use Lacan’s words, there is no deposit without a depository who is equal to his task. There is no deposit without a depository who wholly coincides with and is entirely reducible to the notion of depository. With this claim Kant actually sets as a condition of an (ethical) act nothing less than the holiness of the will (the complete fitness of the will to the moral law—this is implied in the “equal to his task”). This could be formulated more generally: there is no (ethical) act without a subject who is equal to this act. This implies the effacement of the difference between the level of the enunciation and the level of the statement: the subject of the statement has to coincide with the subject of the enunciation or, more precisely, the subject of enunciation has to be entirely reducible to the subject of the statement.

From this perspective it is probably not a coincidence if the lie or lying is the most “neuralgic” point of Kantian ethics. The problem we are dealing with is precisely the problem of the paradox of the liar. If the liar is equal to
his task, he can never say “I am lying” (because he would be telling the truth, etc.). Or, as Kant would have said, because this would make lying impossible. However, as Lacan justly remarked, this is simply not true. We know from our ordinary experience that we have no problem accepting and “understanding” such a statement. Lacan designates this paradox as apparent and resolves it precisely with the conceptualization of the difference between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the statement.\textsuperscript{30} The \textit{am lying} is a signifier that forms part, in the Other, of the treasury of vocabulary. This “vocabulary” is something that I can use as a tool or that can use me as a “talking machine.” As subject, I emerge on the other level, on the level of enunciation, and this level is irreducible. Here we come, once again, to the point that explains why the subject cannot “hide behind” the Law, presenting himself as its mere instrument: what is suspended by this gesture is precisely the level of the enunciation.

“There is no deposit without the depository who is equal to his task,” or, “there is no (ethical) act without the subject who is equal to his act,” implies that we set as the criterion or the condition of the “realization” of an act the abolishment of the difference, of the split between the statement and the enunciation. This abolishment is then posited as impossible (for men) and at the same time (in interpretations of Kant) as forbidden: if we set off to accomplish it, we will inevitably cause evil.

But the crucial question is why should the abolishment of this difference be the criterion or the necessary condition of an act? Why claim that the accomplishment of an act presupposes the abolishment of this split? It would be possible to situate the act in another, inverse perspective: it is precisely the act, the (“successful”) act, that fully discloses this split, makes it present. From this perspective, the definition of a successful act would be that it has precisely the structure of the paradox of the liar, the structure of a liar who utters “I am lying,” who utters “the impossible” and thus fully displays the split between the level of the statement and the level of the enunciation, between the shifter “I” and the signifier “am lying.” To say that there is no subject or “hero” of the act means that at the level of “am lying,” the subject is always pathological (in the Kantian sense of the word), determined by the Other, by the signifiers that precede him. At this level, the subject is reducible, “dispensable.” But this is not all. Whereas the “subject” of the statement is determined in advance (he can only use the given signifiers), the (shifter) “I” is determined \textit{retroactively}: it “becomes a signification, engendered at the level of the statement, of what it produces at the level of the enunciation.”\textsuperscript{31} It is at this level that we have to situate the ethical subject: at the level of something that only \textit{becomes} what “it is” in the act (here a “speech act”) engendered, so to speak, by another subject.\textsuperscript{32}

It is also from this perspective that we can understand the claim, “There is no ethic beside that of the Well-spoken.”\textsuperscript{33} What is the “Well-spoken,” \textit{le bien-dire}? It is a statement that produces some unfamiliar, usually surprising
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effect in which a (new) subject can be discerned. This, of course, presupposes a difference between the “ethics of desire” and the “ethics of drive.” The latter is not so much a heroic subjective position as something, precisely that which, gives rise to a subject. This is why Lacan, when speaking about the drive, introduces the term “headless subjectivation” or “subjectivation without subject.”

The quantum of affect

In Kantian theory, the moral law and the (ethical) subject “meet” at two different levels. One is the level of the signifier (i.e., the level of the categorical imperative), of the “formulation” of the moral law. So far, we have primarily been interrogating this aspect of Kantian ethics and the role that the subject plays in the “formulation” (and “realization”) of the moral law. The other level of the encounter between the subject and the moral law is of a very different nature: it is the level of the “affect.” The moral law “affects” the subject, and this results in a very singular feeling that Kant calls the “respect” (Achtung). Kant’s theory of the respect displays in its own way the fundamental ambiguities of his ethics, especially Kant’s oscillation between two different “portraits” of the moral law: the unconditional and yet “void” moral law and the somehow “subjectivized” law of the superego.

Kant examines the unique feeling that he calls Achtung in the third chapter of the Critique of Practical Reason, “Of the Drives of Pure Practical Reason.” Respect is the only feeling that characterizes the relation of the subject to the moral law. Kant proposes a very elaborate conceptualization of this feeling, which has nothing to do with our ordinary use of the term “respect.” “Respect for the moral law” does not mean “respecting the law,” nor does it mean “to have respect” for the moral law. Rather, it indicates that the law is “nearby,” it indicates the “presence” of the moral law, the “close encounter” of the subject with the (moral) law. Kant detaches respect from some other feelings that resemble it but are in fact of a very different nature. These feelings are inclination, love, fear, admiration, wonder, and awe.

It has already been suggested that the Kantian notion of respect might be situated in the same register as the psychoanalytic (or rather Lacanian) notion of anguish. In fact, if we examine Kant’s developments concerning the feeling of respect, this kinship is quite striking.

The starting point of Kant’s developments in the discussed chapter are the following questions: How is it possible for the moral law to be the direct incentive of the will? How is it possible that something that cannot be an object of representation (Vorstellung) determines our will and becomes the drive of our actions? Kant replies that this “is an insoluble problem for the human reason.” However, Kant proceeds to say that, if it is not possible to show how such a thing is possible, we can at least prove that it exists, that it happens that the moral law determines our will directly. We can “prove” it
because this case produces a certain effect, and it is this effect that Kant conceptualizes in terms of (the feeling of) the respect. The feeling of respect demonstrates that something that is not an object of representation can nevertheless determine the will.

According to Kant, respect is a “singular feeling, which cannot be compared with any pathological feeling. It is of such a peculiar kind that it seems to be at the disposal only of reason, and indeed only of pure practical reason.”37 The feeling of respect is not a pathological but a practical feeling; it is not of empirical origin but is known a priori; it “is not the drive to morality, it is morality itself.”38

In order to fully grasp what is at stake here and to understand what impels Kant to call respect an “a priori” and “nonpathological” feeling, we must bear in mind Kant’s theory of what causes and how something causes our actions. This theory is best summarized in the following passage: “Life is the faculty of a being by which it acts according to the laws of the faculty of desire. The faculty of desire is the faculty such a being has of causing, through its representations [Vorstellungen] the reality of the objects of these representations.”39 In other words, human actions are governed by the law of the faculty of desire. This faculty implies a representation of a certain object (which might very well be “abstract”—things such as “shame,” “honor,” “fame,” “approval (of others)” are all objects of representation). The subject is “affected” by a certain representation and this “affection” is the cause of his actions and, at the same time, the reason why his actions are determined “pathologically.” Now, the problem is that this does not leave any ground for morality, since the latter excludes, by its very definition, all pathological motives for our actions, even the most noble ones. The difficulty—which Kant tries to resolve in the chapter entitled “Of the Drives of Pure Practical Reason”—thus consists in detecting and conceptualizing some other type of causality that is foreign to the mode of representation. As we saw, Kant finds this problem to be an “insoluble problem of the human reason,” and yet the problem that is some way always already “solved” in any ethical action. The answer resides in what Kant names respect as the only drive of pure practical reason.

The avant la lettre Lacanian intent of Kant’s conceptualization of the difference between desire (Begehrung) and drive (Triebfeder) is striking. Whereas desire belongs, essentially, to the mode of representation (the metonymy of the signifier on the one hand, and fantasy on the other hand), the logic of drive is quite different. When Lacan asserts that drive “attains its satisfaction without attaining its goal,” this means precisely that the object of drive is not the object of representation. It is not the object that we aim at, the object that we want to obtain (our “goal”). The object of drive coincides with the itinerary of the drive40 and is not something that this itinerary “intends” to attain. This, as we saw, is exactly how Kant defines respect: it “is not the drive to morality, it is morality itself.”
At first sight, this seems to imply that the respect is linked to the lack of representation (i.e., to the fact that the moral law as noumenal cannot become an object of representation), and that it is this lack or void that causes respect. Yet, if we examine the situation more closely, we realize that it is not simply the absence of representation that gives rise to the feeling of respect, but rather the absence of something that is constitutive of the subject of representation. In Kantian theory, the constitution of the subject of representation coincides with a certain loss. The subject loses, so to speak, that which he never had, namely a direct, immediate access to himself. This is the whole point of Kant’s critique of Descartes’s cogito. The subject who coincides entirely with himself is not yet a subject, and once he becomes a subject he no longer coincides with himself, but can only speak of himself as of an “object.” The subject’s relation to himself does not allow any “shortcut,” but is of the same nature as the subject’s relation to all other objects (of representation). The “I” is just a thought, a representation as any other representation. This fundamental loss or “alienation” is the condition of the thinking subject, the subject who has thoughts and representations. It is this loss that opens up the “objective reality” (the reality of the phenomena) and allows the subject to conceive himself as subject. In Lacanian terms, there is a bit of the Real that necessarily falls out in the constitution of the subject.

Thus, the cause of the singular feeling that Kant calls respect, is not simply the absence of representation, but the absence of this absence, of this lack that is the support of any subject of representation. The representation itself is founded on a certain lack or loss, and it is this lack that runs short. The situation we are dealing with is that of the “lack which lacks”—and this is exactly Lacan’s definition of the cause of the anguish: le manque vient à manquer. 41

In the same way that respect is defined in Kantian theory, anguish is defined in Lacanian theory as an “affect” or “feeling” that is very different from any other feeling. Lacan opposes himself to the theory that claims that anguish differs from fear in that it does not have an object. According to this theory, we always have fear of something, whereas in anguish there is no object that we could point to and say “this is the object of my anguish.” Lacan claims that, on the contrary, it is in anguish that the subject comes the closest to the object (i.e., to the Real of his/her jouissance) and that it is precisely the proximity of the object that is at the origin of anguish. This claim could not be explained only by the specific Lacanian use of the term “object”; one should rather say that it is Lacan’s conceptualization of anguish that explains the specific sense that the word object has in the Lacanian vocabulary. In this distinction between fear and anguish, Lacan basically agrees with Kant: fear is a feeling as any other feeling, it is “subjective” and “pathological.” The fact that we fear some object tells us nothing of this object, it does not mean that this object is “in itself” (i.e., as object of representation) horrible. Or, as Kant puts it, a feeling (Gefühl) “designates
nothing whatsoever in the object." There is no feeling without a representation (i.e., representation is a necessary condition of feeling), although feeling itself is not a representation of an object. The feeling is the way "the subject feels himself, [namely] how he is affected by the representation." Lacan would say that feeling tells us nothing of the object, but tells us something about the subject's "window of fantasy" in the frame of which a certain object appears as terrifying.

Now, as with respect in Kantian theory, anguish is not, in Lacanian theory, a "subjective" but an "objective feeling." It is a "feeling which does not deceive" (Lacan) and which indicates that we have come near the "object" (designating the ex-timate place of our jouissance). If we do not bear in mind this "objective," "objectal" character of a certain subjective experience, we may find ourselves in the position of the analyst from the well-known joke: A patient comes to see him complaining that a crocodile is hiding under his bed. During several sessions the analyst tries to persuade the patient that this is all in his imagination. In other words, he tries to persuade him that it is all about a purely "subjective" feeling. The patient stops seeing the analyst, who believes that he cured him. A month later the analyst meets a friend, who is also a friend of his ex-patient, and asks him how the latter feels. The friend answers: "You mean the one who was eaten by a crocodile?" The lesson of this story is profoundly Lacanian. If we start from the idea that the anguish does not have any object, how are we to call this thing that killed, that "ate" the subject? What is the subject telling the analyst in this joke? Nothing other than: "I have the objet petit a under my bed, I came too close to it."

In his theory of respect, Kant remarks that we tend to "defend" ourselves from this feeling and to "lighten the burden" that it lays upon us. Yet, the question arises as to whether Kant's conceptualization of respect does not, at a certain moment, take precisely the path that already represents a certain "defense" against the real dimension of respect. As a matter of fact, Kant reintroduces the dimension of representation, which allows the subject to "recover," to "regain conscience."

This other path of Kantian conceptualization of respect consists in conceiving it in terms of "consciousness of free submission of the will to the law." A new representation enters the stage, and respect becomes the respect for the moral law as it is presented in this representation. Respect is no longer the effect/affect that produces in us the moral law directly determining our will, rather it becomes a representation of this effect: "The thing, the representation of which, as determining principle of our will, humiliates us in our self-consciousness, provokes ... respect." In other words, what now arouses the feeling of respect is the fact that the subject sees himself being subjected to the law, and observes himself being humiliated and terrified. Kant writes: "In the boundless esteem for the pure moral law ... whose voice makes even the boldest sinner tremble and forces him to hide himself from its gaze, there is something so singular that we cannot wonder at finding
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this influence of a merely intellectual Idea on feeling to be inexplicable to speculative reason." Here, respect is (re)formulated in terms of "boundless esteem" for the moral law, linked to the fear and horror that "makes even the boldest sinner tremble." We are far from respect as a priori feeling. Instead, we are dealing with a law that observes and speaks. It is difficult to understand how it happened that Kant did not see that, with this conceptualization, the feeling of respect turns into pure and simple Ehrfurcht, wonder (defined by Kant as "respect linked to fear"), thus becoming a perfectly pathological motive. It cannot surprise us that there are precisely voice and gaze—the two Lacanian objects par excellence—that spring up in the middle of the Law, transforming it to something frightening, and yet familiar. And the trembling of someone who finds himself in the cross fire of the gaze and the voice of the Law must not bedazzle us—here, the trembling is already a relief. Compared to respect—linked to anguish—fear is already a relief.

If we ask ourselves which is the law that speaks and observes, there is only one possible answer: the superego. In the quoted passage from Critique of Practical Reason we see clearly how the moral law transforms itself into the superego. It is the superego that, by definition, sees everything and does not cease to speak, to produce one commandment after another. This also explains another expression that Kant often uses, but that is not entirely compatible with the strict conception of the moral law, namely that it "humiliates" us and that "the effect of this law on feeling is humiliation alone." One could say in fact that in the discussed chapter Kant actually introduces two different feelings linked to two different conceptions of the moral law: respect and humiliation. Or, more precisely, respect as a priori feeling and respect that springs up from the consciousness that we are being humiliated; respect as a mode of anguish and respect as the mode of fantasy (where we observe ourselves being humiliated by the moral law).

This shift of the moral law toward the superego is not without consequences. It governs the whole dialectic of the sublime, and it also explains why Kant, who previously established a clear distinction between respect and other feelings such as wonder and awe, can conclude the second Critique with the famous phrase: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."

In fact, in the Critique of Judgement Kant repeatedly links the feeling of respect to the feeling of the sublime. But what exactly is the feeling of the sublime? "An abyss," an "exiting liking," an "agitation that can be compared with a vibration, i.e. a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object," "a momentary inhibition of the vital forces." These descriptions could easily be taken for extracts from some erotic novel, describing an orgasm, for instance. Yet, they are all Kant's descriptions of the feeling of the sublime, or rather, of the first moment of the sublime. For the feeling of the sublime is a feeling that presupposes a certain temporal
dimension. It is composed of two different moments and actually describes the movement from one to the other. In the first moment we (as subjects and spectators) are fascinated by a spectacle in which nature exhibits its might (and magnitude), compared to which we are utterly insignificant and impotent. In the second moment we experience a kind of a triumph, a “self-estimation” (Kant): we become aware of the superiority of our “suprasensible vocation” to even the greatest power of nature. What makes this shift from the first to the second moment possible, “is that the subject’s own inability [Unvermögenn] uncovers in him the consciousness of an unlimited ability which is also his.” Kant links this unlimited ability to our suprasensible vocation, and the latter to our moral disposition. In other words, the devastating force above us “reminds” us of some even more devastating force within us: “The object of a pure and unconditional intellectual liking is the moral law in its might, the might that it exerts in us over any and all of those incentives of the mind that precede it.” From there it follows a complete shift of perspective: it is in fact the moral law (or the “suprasensible power”) in us that makes it possible for us to find nature sublime. The true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, and not in the natural object. The feeling of the sublime in nature is in fact nothing other than the “respect for our own vocation. But by a certain subreption . . . this respect is accorded an object of nature that, as it were, makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility.” In other words, the sublime is a spectacle in which nature stages (i.e., makes “intuitable,” “representable” for us) that which escapes intuition and representation. While watching “thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps,” we actually see the moral law moving about in us, striking with lightning and thunderclaps (i.e., gazes and voices) “any and all of those (pathological) incentives of our mind that precede it.”

It could be said that the feeling of the sublime is the way in which the subject who came too close to the moral law (and who experiences a “momentary inhibition of his vital forces”), saves himself from its mortifying proximity by introducing a certain distance between himself and the law. This distance is, of course, nothing other than the intervention of a representation.

It has often been stressed that the sublime is linked to the breakdown of representation. But we must not forget that this is true only insofar as the sublime is, at the same time, a “representation of the unrepresentable,” and this is precisely that which links it to what Lacan calls “the logic of fantasy.”

Kant tells us that there is one necessary condition for the feeling of the sublime: as spectators of some fascinating spectacle of nature we have to be placed somewhere safe, that is, outside the immediate danger. The view of the hurricane is sublime. However, if the hurricane sweeps along our house, we will not perceive this as something sublime, we will simply be scared and
horrified. In order for the feeling of the sublime to emerge, our (sensible) powerlessness and mortality have to be staged "down there," in such a way that we can observe them quietly. The necessary condition of the feeling of the sublime is that we watch the hurricane "through the window," which is nothing other than what Lacan calls "the window of fantasy": "thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanos with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind ... compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place." This constellation where we are at the same time "inside" and "outside," where we are at the same time the "insignificant trifle," the grain of sand that the wild forces play with, and the observer of this spectacle, is strictly correlative to that which becomes, in Kantian theory, the feeling of respect. As we already indicated, what provokes the sentiment of respect is now the fact that the subject watches himself being subjected to the law, that he watches himself being humiliated and terrified by it.

Notes
2 Ibid., 187.
4 Ibid., 12:299.
5 Lacan, Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 186.
8 Ibid., 325.
9 "A decisive step is taken here. Traditional morality concerned itself with what one was supposed to do 'insofar as it is possible,' as we say, and as we are forced to say. What needs to be unmasked here is the point on which that morality turns. And that is nothing less than the impossible in which we recognize the topology of our desire. The breakthrough is achieved by Kant when he posits that the moral imperative is not concerned with what may or may not be done. To the extent that it imposes the necessity of a practical reason, obligation affirms an unconditional 'Thou shalt.' The importance of this field derives from the void that the strict application of the Kantian definition leaves there" (Lacan, Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 315–16).
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 190.
14 Immanuel Kant, Ethical Philosophy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 428.
15 Cf. François Boituzat, Un droit de mentir? Constant ou Kant (Paris: PUF, 1993) and Hans Wagner, "'Kant gegen 'ein vermeintes Recht, aus Menschenliebe zu Lügen',"


19 Cf: "It is therefore wrong to conceive the Kantian categorical imperative as a kind of formal mould whose application to a concrete case relieves the moral subject of the responsibility for a decision: I am not sure if to accomplish the act X is my duty. No problem—I test it by submitting it to the double formal criterion implied by the categorical imperative . . . and if the act X stands the test, I know where my duty lies . . . The whole point of Kantian argumentation is the exact opposite of this automatic procedure of verification: the fact that the categorical imperative is an empty form means precisely that it can deliver no guarantee against misjudging our duty. The structure of the categorical imperative is tautological in the Hegelian sense of the repetition of the same that fills up and simultaneously announces an abyss that gives rise to unbearable anxiety; 'Your duty is . . . (to do your duty)!" (Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 170).

20 Cf: "But if a man is to become . . . one who, knowing something to be his duty, requires no incentive other than this representation of duty itself, *this cannot be brought about through gradual reformation* so long as the basis of the maxims remains impure, but must be effected through a *revolution* in the man's disposition. . . . He can become a new man only by a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation" Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 43.

21 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 60.

22 Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 32.


25 Ibid., 189.


29 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 27.

30 Cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1979), 139: "Indeed, the *I* of the enunciation is not the same as the *I* of the statement, that is to say, the shifter which, in the statement designates him. So, from the point at which I state, it is quite possible for me to formulate in a valid way that the *I*—the *I* who, at the moment, formulates the statement—is lying, that he lied a little before, that he is lying afterwards, or even, that in saying *I am lying*, he declares that he has the intention of deceiving."


32 In his latter work Lacan formulates this same split in terms of another difference: Other/jouissance. In regard to the Other, I am not the author of my acts (i.e., the Other "speaks/acts through me"), and thus I may not be held responsible for them. However, there is something else that "grows" from this act, namely some *jouissance*. It is in this fragment of *jouissance* that we must situate the subject and his responsibility. For a detailed elaboration of this point see Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 93.


36 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 75.

37 Ibid., 79–80.

38 Ibid., 79.

39 Ibid., 9–10 n; translation modified.


43 Ibid., 44.

44 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 81.

45 Ibid., 84; emphasis added.

46 Ibid., 78; translation modified; emphasis added.

47 Ibid., 83; translation modified; emphasis added.

48 Ibid., 82.

49 Ibid., 169.


51 Ibid., 116.

52 Ibid., 131; emphasis added.

53 Ibid., 114.

54 Ibid., 120; emphasis added.
This is what concerns me: a growing sense that in theorizing sex we are engaged in a kind of “euthanasia of pure reason.” I borrow this last phrase from Kant, who used it to label one of two possible responses to the antinomies of reason, that is, to the internal conflicts of reason with itself. Reason, he said, falls inevitably into contradiction whenever it seeks to apply itself to cosmological ideas, to things that could never become objects of our experience. Faced with the apparent unresolvability of these conflicts, reason either clings more closely to its dogmatic assumptions or abandons itself to—and this is the option for which Kant reserved his impassioned put-down—a despairing skepticism. I will suggest that the attempt to contemplate sex also throws reason into conflict with itself and will here declare my opposition to the alternatives we face as a result, particularly to the latter, only because—in critical circles, at least—this is the one that currently claims our attention.

Judith Butler’s strongly argued Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity is an excellent contemporary example of this second alternative. The uncontestable value of this book lies in the way it deftly shakes off all the remaining bits of sleepy dogmatism that continue to attach themselves to our thinking about sexual identity. The notion of sex as an abiding, a priori substance is fully and—if careful argument were enough to prevail—finally critiqued. Without in any way wishing to detract from the real accomplishments of this book or the sophistication of its argument, I would like to challenge some of its fundamental assumptions on the grounds that they may not support the political goals the book wants to defend. The problem, as I see it, with this exemplary book is that its happy voidance of the dogmatic option simply clears a space for the assertion of its binary
opposite, if not for the "despairing skepticism" about which Kant warned us, then for skepticism's sunny slipside: a confident voluntarism. Having successfully critiqued the metaphysical notion that sex is a substance inscribed at the origin of our acts, our discourse, Butler defines sex as a "performatively enacted signification . . . one that, released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meaning" (33). In other words, Butler proceeds as though she believes that the deconstruction of the fiction of innate or essential sex is also, or must lead to, a rejection of the notion that there is anything constant or invariable about sexual difference, that sex is anything but a construct of historically variable discursive practices into which we may intervene in order to sow "subversive confusion." All kinds of practices construct masculinity and femininity as discrete entities, and there is no denying the effectiveness, the reality of this construction, she argues; but if sex is something that is "made up," it can also be undone. What's done, after all, can always be undone—in the order of signification, at least. What's familiar, naturalized, credible can be made strange: defamiliarized, denaturalized, "incredibilized." Negated.

First complex of questions: Are the alternatives offered here—sex is substance/sex is signification—the only ones available? And if not, what else might sex be?

What Butler is primarily intent on undoing is "the stability of binary sex" (6), since she takes it to be the effect of practices seeking to install a compulsory heterosexuality. It is the very twoness of sex, the way it divides all subjects absolutely into two separate, mutually exclusive categories, that serves the aims of heterosexism. Now, this argument makes no sense unless we state its hidden assumption that two have a tendency to one, to couple. But from where does this assumption spring? From the conception of the binary terms, masculinity and femininity, as complementary. That is, it is only when we define the two terms as having a reciprocal relation, the meaning of the one depending on the meaning of the other and vice versa, that we incline them—more strongly, compel them—toward union, albeit one that is sustained through violent antagonisms. For, the complementary relation is, in Lacan's terms, an imaginary one; it entails both absolute union and absolute aggression.

Second complex of questions: Must sexual difference be conceived only as an imaginary relation? Or, is there a different way to think the division of subjects into two sexes, one that does not support a normative heterosexuality?

The stability of the male/female binary is not undone, however, simply by chipping away at the barrier that separates them, calling into question the neatness of their division. If the categories of woman, femininity, feminism cannot ultimately hold, Butler—taking a frequently advanced contemporary position—tells us, this is also due to the fact that these categories are crossed
by all sorts of others—race, class, ethnicity, etc.—that undermine the integrity of the former list of categories. The very heterogeneity of the category of woman is evidenced in the opposition to feminism by women themselves. There will never and can never be a feminism unified in its politics.

**Third complex of questions:** Is sexual difference equatable with other categories of difference? Is one’s sexual identity constructed in the same way, does it operate on the same level, as one’s racial or class identity; or is sexual difference a different kind of difference from these others?

**Fourth complex of questions:** Is the heterogeneity of the category of women, the very failure of feminism to enlist all women, similar to the failure to enlist all men in a single cause? Is the fractiousness of feminism attributable solely to racial, professional, class differences? Why can’t feminism forge a unity—an all—of women?

*What is sex, anyway?* My first question is also the one that initiates the inquiry of *Gender Trouble*. Echoing Freud’s contention that sexual difference is not unambiguously marked either anatomically, chromosomally, or hormonally, that is, questioning the prediscursive existence of sex, Butler automatically assumes, as I noted earlier, that sex must be discursively or culturally constructed. But Freud himself *eschewed* the limitation of these alternatives; he founded psychoanalysis on the refusal to give way either to “anatomy or convention,” arguing that neither of these could account for the existence of sex. While sex is, for psychoanalysis, never simply a natural fact, it is also never reducible to any discursive construction, to sense, finally. For what such a reduction would remain oblivious to is the radical antagonism between sex and sense. As Lacan put it, “Everything implied by the analytic engagement with human behaviour indicates not that meaning reflects the sexual, but that it makes up for it.” Sex is the stumbling block of sense. This is not to say that sex is prediscursive; we have no intention of denying that human sexuality is a product of signification, but we intend, rather, to refine this position by arguing that sex is produced by the internal limit, the failure of signification. It is only there where discursive practices falter—and not at all where they succeed in producing meaning—that sex comes to be.

Butler, of course, knows something about the limits of signification. She knows, for example, that there is no “telos that governs the process” (33) of discourse, that discursive practices are never complete. This is why she makes the claim that “woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end” (33). So far so good—we find nothing here with which we would want to quarrel. The error, the subversion, occurs only in the next step when the argument no longer concerns only the term woman but becomes instead an argument about woman as such. For the thesis of the book is not that the meaning of the term woman has shifted and will continue to shift throughout history but that it is “never possible finally to become a woman” (33), that one’s sexual identity is itself
never complete, is always in flux. In other words, Butler concludes from the changing concepts of women something about the being, the existence of women. I will argue that her conclusion is illegitimately derived: we cannot argue that sex is incomplete and in flux because the terms of sexual difference are unstable. This is first of all a philosophical objection; to argue, as Butler is careful to do, that reason is limited is precisely to argue that reason is unable to move conclusively from the level of the concept to the level of being; it is impossible to establish the necessity of existence on the basis of the possibilities created by concepts.

To say that discourse is ongoing, always in process, is to acknowledge the basic, and by now much taken-for-granted, fact that within discourse there are no positive terms, only relations of difference. One term acquires meaning only through its difference from all the others—ad infinitum, since the final terms is never at hand. Put another way, the statement that discourse is ongoing simply acknowledges a rule of language that prescribes the way we must proceed in determining the value of a signifier. We would not be wrong to call this prescription a rule of reason—reason, since Saussure, being understood to operate not through the modalities of time and space (as Kant believed) but through the signifier. But his very rule entangles us in a genuine contradiction, an antinomy, such as troubled Kant in The Critique of Pure Reason. To be brief (we will return to these points later), this rule of language enjoins us not only to believe in the inexhaustibility of the process of meaning, in the fact that there will always be another signifier to determine retroactively the meaning of all that have come before, it also requires us to presuppose “all the other signifiers,” the total milieu that is necessary for the meaning of one. The completeness of the system of signifiers is both demanded and precluded by the same rule of language. Without the totality of the system of signifiers there can be no determination of meaning, and yet this very totality would prevent the successive consideration of signifiers that the rule requires.

Kant argues that there is a legitimate solution to this contradiction, but first he attacks the illegitimate solutions that function by denying one of the poles of the dialectic. Saussure’s displacement of his own notion of “pure difference” by the more “positive” notion of “determinant oppositions” is a type of illegitimate solution that may be referred to as the “structuralist solution.” Emphasizing the “synchronic perspective” of the linguist and his community, Saussure eventually decided to give priority to the contemporaneous system of signifiers operating at some (hypothetical) frozen moment: the present. Forgetting for his own purposes his important stipulation that meaning must be determined retroactively, that is, forgetting the diachronic nature of meaning, he ultimately founded the science of linguistics on the systematic totality of language. Thus, the structuralist argument ceased to be that the final signifier $S_2$ determines that which has come before, $S_1$ and became instead that $S_2$ determines $S_1$ and $S_1$ determines $S_2$; that is, reciprocal
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oppositions stabilize meanings between coexistent terms, and differential relations no longer threaten the transvaluation of all preceding signifiers.

A certain “poststructuralist” response to this structuralist thesis has taken an antithetical position by simply ignoring the requirement for the completion of meaning. Butler’s position in *Gender Trouble* fits into the second category of response to the antinomic rule of language; it notes merely that signification is always in process and then concludes from this that there is no stability of sex. Kant would argue that her error consists in illegitimately “attribut[ing] objective reality to an idea which is valid only as a rule” (288), that is, in confusing a rule of language with a description of the Thing-in-itself, in this case with sex. But this is misleading, for it seems to imply that sex is something that is beyond language, something that language forever fails to grasp. We can follow Kant on this point only if we add the proviso that we understand the Thing-in-itself to mean nothing but the impossibility of thinking—articulating—it. When we speak of language’s failure with respect to sex, we speak not of its falling short of a prediscursive object but of its falling into contradiction with itself. Sex coincides with this failure, this inevitable contradiction. Sex is, then, the impossibility of completing meaning, not (as Butler’s historicist/deconstructionist argument would have it) a meaning that is incomplete, unstable. Or, the point is that sex is the structural incompleteness of language, not that sex is itself incomplete. The Butler argument converts the progressive rule for determining meaning (the rule that requires us to define meaning retroactively) into a determined meaning. The Kantian/psychoanalytic argument, like this other, wants to desubstantiate sex, but it does so in a different way. First, it acknowledges rather than ignores the contradiction of the rule of reason. Then it links sex to the conflict of reason with itself, not simply to one of the poles of the conflict.

This constitutes a more radical desubstantialization of sex, a greater subversion of its conception as substance, than the one attempted by the Butler position. For sex is here not an incomplete entity but a totally empty one—it is one to which no predicate can be attached. By linking sex to the signifier, to the process of signification, Butler makes our sexuality something that communicates itself to others. While the fact that communication is a process, and thus ongoing, precludes a complete unfolding of knowledge at any given moment, further knowledge is still placed within the realm of possibility. When, on the contrary, sex is disjoined from the signifier, it becomes that which does not communicate itself, that which marks the subject as unknowable. To say that the subject is sexed is to say that it is no longer possible to have any knowledge of him or her. Sex serves no other function than to limit reason, to remove the subject from the realm of possible experience or pure understanding. This is the meaning, when all is said and done, of Lacan’s notorious assertion that “there is no sexual relation”: sex, in opposing itself to sense, is also, by definition, opposed to relation, to communication.
SEX AND THE EUTHANASIA OF REASON

This psychoanalytical definition of sex brings us to our third complex of questions, for, defined not so much by discourse as by its default, sexual difference is unlike racial, class, or ethnic differences. Whereas these differences are inscribed in the symbolic, sexual difference is not: only the failure of its inscription is marked in the symbolic. Sexual difference, in other words, is a real and not a symbolic difference. This distinction does not disparage the importance of race, class, or ethnicity, it simply contests the current doxa that sexual difference offers the same kind of description of the subject as these others do. Nor should this distinction be used to isolate considerations of sex from considerations of other differences. It is always a sexed subject who assumes each racial, class, or ethnic identity.

Why insist, then, on the distinction? The answer is that the very sovereignty of the subject depends on it, and it is only the conception of the subject’s sovereignty that stands any chance of protecting difference in general. It is only when we begin to define the subject as self-governing, as subject to its own laws, that we cease to consider her as calculable, as subject to laws already known and thus manipulable. It is only when the sovereign incalculability of the subject is acknowledged that perceptions of difference will no longer nourish demands for the surrender of difference to processes of “homogenization,” “purification,” or any of the other crimes against otherness with which the rise of racism has begun to acquaint us. This does not mean that we would support a conception of the subject as preexistent or in any way transcendent to the laws of language or the social order, a subject who calculates, using the laws of language as a tool to accomplish whatever goal she wishes. The subject who simply does or believes as she wishes, who makes herself subject only to the law she wants to obey, is simply a variation on the theme of the calculable subject. For it is easy to see that one is quickly mastered by one’s sensuous inclinations, even as one seeks to impose them.

The only way to resolve this particular antinomy—the subject is under (i.e., the determined effect of) the law/the subject is above the law—is to demonstrate that, as Etienne Balibar has recently put it,

she is neither only above, nor only under the law, but at exactly the same level as it. . . . Or yet another way: there must be an exact correspondence between the absolute activity of the citizen (legislation) and [her] absolute passivity (obedience to the law, with which one does not “bargain,” which ones does not “trick”) . . . in Kant, for example, this metaphysics of the subject will proceed from the double determination of the concept of right as freedom and as compulsion.  

To claim that the subject is at the same level as the law is not equivalent to claiming that she is the law, since any conflation of subject with law only
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reduces her, subjects her absolutely, to the law. At the same level as and yet not the law, the subject can only be conceived as the failure of the law, of language. In language and yet more than language, the subject is a cause for which no signifier can account. Not because she transcends the signifier but because she inhabits it as limit. This subject, radically unknowable, radically incalculable, is the only guarantee we have against racism. This is a guarantee that slips from us whenever we disregard the nontransparency of subject to signifier, whenever we make the subject coincide with the signifier rather than its misfire.

To my first, philosophical objection to the Butler definition of sex one must add not only the previous ethical objection but a psychoanalytical one as well. I noted already that there was a crucial difference between hers and the psychoanalytic position on sex. I want now to go further by exposing the "total incompatibility" of the two positions. I choose this phrase in order to echo the charge raised against Jung by Freud, whose characterization of the former's stance in regard to the libido is applicable to our discussion. This stance, Freud says, "pick[s] out a few cultural overtones from the symphony of life and...once more fail[s] to hear the mighty and powerful melody of the [drives]." 8 Freud here accuses Jung of evacuating the libido of all sexual content by associating it exclusively with cultural processes. It is this association that leads Jung to stress the essential plasticity or malleability of the libido: sex dances to a cultural tune. Freud argues, on the contrary, that sex is to be grasped not on the terrain of culture but on the terrain of the drives, which—despite the fact that they have no existence outside culture—are not cultural. They are, instead, the other of culture and, as such, are not susceptible to its manipulations.

Sex is defined by a law (of the drives) with which (to return to Balibar's phrase) "one does not 'bargain,' which one does not 'trick.'" Against the Jungian and contemporary critical belief in the plasticity of sex, we are tempted to argue that, from the standpoint of culture, sex does not budge. This is to say, among other things, that sex, sexual difference, cannot be deconstructed, since deconstruction is an operation that can be applied only to culture, to the signifier, and has no purchase on this other realm. To speak of the deconstruction of sex makes about as much sense as speaking about foreclosing a door; action and object do not belong to the same discursive space. Thus we will argue that while the subject—who is not pinned to the signifier, who is an effect, but not a realization of social discourses—is, in this sense, free of absolute social constraint, he or she is nevertheless not free to be a subject any which way: within any discourse the subject can only assume either a male or a female position.

The Jungian—and contemporary "neo-Jungian"—position, remaining deaf to the "melody of the drives," does not recognize this compulsory dimension of sex, its inescapability. Focusing merely on the cultural "free" play of the signifier, this position disjoins freedom from compulsion: it is for
this very reason voluntarist, despite all its own precautions, despite all the steps taken to inoculate itself against this charge. Gender Trouble, for example, is not careless on this point. The book’s conclusion anticipates and attempts a defense against the accusation of voluntarism that it knows awaits it. Redefining the notion of agency, the final chapter aims to locate the subject “on the same level as” language, neither above (where the naive notion of agency would place it) nor below it (where it would be positioned by a determinist notion of construction). What’s missing, however, and what thus leaves Butler defenseless before the charge she tries to sidestep, is any proper notion of the unsurpassable limit, the impossibility that hamstrings every discursive practice. Even when she speaks of compulsion and failure, she says this:

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures. . . . The coexistence or convergence of [different] discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment.

(145)

What we are provided with here is a description of the effect of the inherent failure of discourse—a riot of sense in which one meaning constantly collides with another; a multiplication of the possibilities of each discourse’s meaning—but no real acknowledgment of its cause: the impossibility of saying everything in language. We repeat, Freud taught us, because we cannot remember. And what we cannot remember is that which we never experienced, never had the possibility of experiencing, since it was never present as such. It is the deadlock of language’s conflict with itself that produces this experience of the inexperienceable (which can neither be remembered nor spoken); it is this deadlock that thus necessitates repetition. But the constraint proper to repetition is occluded in the sentences quoted here, and so, too, is sex. Sex is that which cannot be spoken by speech; it is not any of the multitude of meanings that try to make up for this impossibility. In eliminating this radical impasse of discourse, Gender Trouble, for all its talk about sex, eliminates sex itself.

Sex does not budge, and it is not heterosexist to say so. In fact, the opposite may be true. For it is by making it conform to the signifier that you oblige sex to conform to social dictates, to take on social content. In the end, Butler, wanting to place the subject on the same level as language, ends up placing her beneath it, as its realization. Freedom, “agency,” is inconceivable within a schema such as this.
Let me now confront the objections I know await me. I have been presenting the psychoanalytic position using arguments borrowed from critical philosophy. And yet the subject posed by this philosophy—sometimes referred to as the "universal" subject, as opposed to the concrete individual—seems, by definition, to be neuter, to be unsexed, while the subject of psychoanalysis is, equally by definition, always sexed. How, then, does the sexually differentiated subject enter the framework of critical philosophy? By what route have we arrived at what will no doubt appear to be the oxymoronic conclusion that the "universal" subject is necessarily sexed?

But why, we may ask in our turn, is it so readily assumed that the philosophical subject must be neuter? From our perspective it is this assumption that seems unwarranted. What grounds it, those who hold it suppose, is the subject's very definition as constitutionally devoid of all positive characteristics. From this we may infer that those who desexualize the subject regard sex as a positive characteristic. Everything we have said so far boils down to a denial of this characterization. When we stated, for example, that sexual difference is not equatable with other kinds of difference, we were saying that it does not positively describe the subject. We could put it this way: male and female, like being, are not predicates, which means that rather than increasing our knowledge of the subject, they qualify the mode of the failure of our knowledge.

We have been defining the subject as the internal limit or negation, the failure of language—this in order to argue that the subject has no substantial existence, that it is not an object of possible experience. If this subject is thought to be unsexed, it is not only because sex is naively assumed to be a positive characteristic but also because failure is assumed to be singular. If this were true, if language—or reason—had only one mode of misfire, then the subject would in fact be neuter. But this is not the case; language and reason may fail in one of two different ways. The distinction between these modalities of misfire—between the two ways in which reason falls into contradiction with itself—was first made by Kant in The Critique of Pure Reason and was employed again in The Critique of Judgment. In both works he demonstrated that the failure of reason was not simple, but foundered upon an antinomic impasse through two separate routes; the first was mathematical, the second dynamical.

Many have attempted to locate sexual difference in Kant's texts, but what they in fact were looking for was sexual bias or sexual indifference. Some have discerned in the descriptions of the beautiful and the sublime, for example, a differentiation of a sexual sort. These critics have—if I may say so—been looking for sex in all the wrong places. I am proposing that sexual difference can, indeed, be found in Kant, not in an accidental way, in his use of adjectives or examples, but, fundamentally, in his distinction between the
mathematical and the dynamical antinomies. That is to say, *Kant was the first to theorize, by means of this distinction, the difference that founds psychoanalysis's division of all subjects into two mutually exclusive classes: male and female.*

I intend, then, for the rest, to interpret psychoanalysis's sexuation of the subject in terms of Kant's analysis of the antinomies of reason. More specifically my focus will be on the formulas of sexuation proposed by Lacan in his Seminar XX: *Encore.* In this seminar Lacan reiterates the position of psychoanalysis with regard to sexual difference: our sexed being, he maintains, is not a biological phenomenon, it does not pass through the body, but "results from the logical demands of speech."*10* These logical demands lead us to an encounter with a fundamental bedrock or impasse when we inevitably stumble on the fact that "saying it all is literally impossible: words fail."*11* Moreover, we are now in a position to add, they fail in two different ways, or, as Lacan puts it in *Encore,* "There are two ways for the affair, the sexual relation, to misfire. . . . There is the male way . . . [and] the female way."*12*

The formulas of sexuation, as they are drawn in "A Love Letter," the seventh session of the seminar, look like this:*13*

\[
\begin{align*}
\exists x & \neg \Phi x & \exists x & \neg \Phi x \\
\forall x & \Phi x & \forall x & \Phi x
\end{align*}
\]

Each of the four formulas is a simple logical proposition and, like all propositions, has both a *quantity* and a *quality.* The quantity of a proposition is determined by the quantity of its subject term; the symbols \(\forall\) and \(\exists\) are quantifiers, that is, they indicate the quantity of the subject term. \(\forall\), the universal quantifier, is shorthand for words such as *every, all, none*; but it is important to note that proper nouns are also considered universals. \(\exists\), the existential quantifier, stands for words such as *some, one, at least one, certain, most.* The quality of a proposition is determined by the quality of its copula, either affirmative or negative. The affirmative is unmarked, while the negative is marked by a bar placed over the predicate term.

Since the symbol \(\Phi\) is already familiar to us from Lacan's other texts, a translation of the propositions is now possible:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(\exists x \neg \Phi x)</th>
<th>(\exists x \neg \Phi x)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is at least one (x) that is not submitted to the phallic function</td>
<td>There is not one (x) that is not submitted to the phallic function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\forall x \Phi x)</td>
<td>(\forall x \Phi x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All (x)'s are (every (x) is) submitted to the phallic function</td>
<td>Not all (not every) (x) is submitted to the phallic function</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The left side of the schema is designated the male side, while the right side is female. The first thing to notice is that the two propositions that compose
each side appear to have an antinomic relation to each other, that is, they appear to contradict each other. How have these apparent antinomies been produced, and how do they come to be designated by the terms of sexual difference? Before answering these questions, we need to know a little more about the formulas.

Lacan abandons two of the terms of classical logic that we used in the previous description; instead of subject and predicate, he uses the terms argument and function. This substitution marks a conceptual difference: the two classes, male and female, are no longer formed by gathering together subjects with similar attributes as was the case with the older terms. The principle of sorting is no longer descriptive, that is, it is not a matter of shared characteristics or a common substance. Whether one falls into the class of males or females depends, rather, on where one places oneself as argument in relation to the function, that is, which enunciative position one assumes.

What legitimates Lacan's abandonment of some of the terms, and even some of the premises, of classical logic is the function—the phallic function—that appears in each of the four propositions. This function, and particularly the fact that it does appear on both sides of the table, has been at the center of controversy since Freud first began elaborating his theory of feminine sexuality. Feminists have always revolted against the notion that the phallus should be made to account for the existence of both sexes, that the difference between them should be determined with reference to this single term. They have deplored what they have understood to be a reduction of difference to a simple affirmation or negation: having or not having the phal­lus. But this complaint strikes out against the wrong target, for the peculiar­ity, or singularity, of the phallic signifier is due precisely to the fact that it ruins the possibility of any simple affirmation or negation. It is the phallic signifier that is responsible for the production on each side of the table not of a simple statement but of two conflicting statements. Each side is defined both by an affirmation and a negation of the phallic function, an inclusion and exclusion of absolute (nonphallic) jouissance. Not only is the notorious "not-all" of the female side—not all are submitted to the phallic function—defined by a fundamental undecidability regarding the placement of woman within the class of things submitted to phallic rule, but the male side embraces a similar undecidability: the inclusion of all men within the domain of phallic rule is conditioned by the fact that at least one escapes it. Do we count this "man escaped" among the all, or don't we? What sort of a "man" is it whose jouissance is not limited to the male variety; and what sort of an "all" is it that is missing one of its elements?

So you see, there's no use trying to teach psychoanalysis about undecid­ability, about the way sexual signifiers refuse to sort themselves out into two separate classes. It's no use preaching deconstruction to psychoanalysis because it already knows all about it. Bisexuality was long a psychoanalytical
concept before it was ever a deconstructionist one. But the difference between deconstruction and psychoanalysis is that the latter does not confuse the fact of bisexuality—that is, the fact that male and female signifiers cannot be distinguished absolutely—with a denial of sexual difference. Deconstruction falls into this confusion only by disregarding the difference between the ways in which this failure takes place. Regarding failure as uniform, deconstruction ends up collapsing sexual difference into sexual indistinctness. This is in addition to the fact that, on this point at least, deconstruction appears to be duped by the pretention of language to speak of being, since it equates a confusion of sexual signifiers with a confusion of sex itself.

This, in brief, is the lesson of the formulas of sexuation; it is a lesson learned from Kant, as I will now try to show in greater detail. First, however, we need to say a bit more about the phallic function that is the source of all this undecidability. Its appearance—on both sides of the table—indicates that we are concerned with speaking beings, beings, according to Lacan's translation of the Freudian concept of castration, who surrender their access to jouissance upon entering language. This not only restates what we have been arguing all along—it is the impasses of language that create the experience of the inexperienceable, the unsayable—it also exposes the foolishness of that reading of Lacan's theory of sexual difference which asserts that it strands woman on a dark continent, outside language. Each side of the table describes a different impasse by means of which this question of the outside of language is raised, a different manner of revealing the essential powerless-ness of speech. But while the phallic function produces on each side a failure; it does not produce a symmetry between the sides.

The female side: mathematical failure

We are not going to begin our reading, as is customary, on the left, but rather on the right, or female, side of the formulas. As opposed to the fairly common prejudice that psychoanalysis constructs the woman as secondary, as a mere alteration of the man, the primary term, these formulas suggest that there is a kind of priority to the right side. This reading of the formulas is consistent with the privilege given the mathematical antinomies by Kant, who not only deals with them first but also grants the mathematical synthesis a more immediate type of certitude than its dynamical counterpart. In Kant's analysis, it is the dynamical antinomies (the "male side" of the formulas, in our reading) that appear in many ways secondary, a kind of resolution to a more fundamental irresolvability, a total and complete impasse manifested by the mathematical conflict. One of the things we will want to attend to while investigating the differences between these two modes of conflict is the way the very notions of conflict and solution shift from the first mode to the second. (Finally, however, this notion of the priority of one of the sexes or antinomies over the other must be regarded as a mirage. Rather than two
species of the same genus, the sexes and the antinomies should be read as positions on a Moebius strip.) There is an unmistakable asymmetry between the mathematical and the dynamical antinomies: on moving from one to the other, we seem to enter a completely different space. Rather than remaining baffled by this difference, as so many of Kant's commentators have been, rather than ascribing it to a confusion of thought, we will try, with the help of Lacan, to draw out the logic that sustains it.

What is a mathematical antinomy; how would we describe the conflict that defines it? Kant analyzes two "cosmological ideas" that precipitate this variety of conflict; we will discuss only the first, since it is this one that seems to us to correspond most closely to the antinomy found on the "female side" of the formulas of sexuation. The first antinomy is occasioned by the attempt to think the "world," by which Kant means "the mathematical total of all phenomena and the totality of their synthesis" (237), that is to say, the universe of phenomena such that it is no longer necessary to presuppose any other phenomenon that would serve as the condition for this universe. Reason aims, then, at the unconditioned whole, the absolute all of phenomena. This attempt produces two conflicting propositions regarding the nature of this all—a thesis: the world has a beginning in time and is also limited in regard to space; and its antithesis: the world has no beginning and no limits in space but is, in relation both to time and space, infinite.

After examining both arguments, Kant concludes that while each successfully demonstrates the falsity of the other, neither is able to establish convincingly its own truth. This conclusion creates a skeptical impasse from which he will have to extricate himself, since one of the basic tenets of his philosophy, which opposes itself to skepticism, is that every problem of reason admits of a solution. The solution he arrives at is the following: rather than despairing over the fact that we cannot choose between the two alternatives, we must come to the realization that we need not choose, since both alternatives are false. That is to say, the thesis and antithesis statements, which initially appeared to constitute a contradictory opposition, turn out upon inspection to be contraries.

In logic, a contradictory opposition is one that exists between two propositions of which one is the simple denial of the other; since the two together exhaust the entire range of possibilities, the truth of one establishes the falsity of the other, and vice versa. Contradiction is a zero-sum affair. The negation, which bears on the copula, leaves nothing beyond itself; it completely annihilates the other proposition. A contrary opposition, on the other hand, is one that exists between two propositions of which one does not simply deny the other but makes an assertion in the direction of the other extreme. The negation, which bears this time only on the predicate, does not exhaust all the possibilities but leaves behind something on which it does not pronounce. For this reason both statements may simultaneously be false.
In order to make this logic less abstract, Kant resorts to an uncharacteristically pungent example that successfully illustrates what is at stake in the mathematical antinomies. He opposes the statement "Bodies smell good" to a contrary, "Bodies smell bad," in order to show that the second does not simply negate the first (for which "Bodies are not good-smelling" would have been sufficient) but goes on to posit another smell, this time a bad one. While it is not possible for both of these propositions to be true—since fragrance and foulness cancel each other out—it is possible for both to be false—since neither takes into account another possibility, that bodies may be odor-free.

To illustrate this logical point differently, we might note that it is the structure of contrary opposition that produces the "When did you stop beating your wife?" joke. The form of the question, while seeming to allow the addressee to supply any answer he chooses, in fact allows him only to choose among contraries. It does not allow him to negate the accusation implicit in the question.

Kant avoids the skeptical impasse by refusing to answer the question "Is the world finite or infinite?" and by instead negating the assumption implicit in the question: the world is. As long as one assumes that the world exists, the thesis and antithesis of the cosmological antinomy have to be regarded as contradictory, as mutually exclusive and exhaustive alternatives. One is thus forced to choose. But once this assumption is shown to be ill-founded, neither alternative need be taken as true; a choice is no longer necessary. The solution to this antinomy, then, lies in demonstrating the very incoherence of this assumption, the absolute impossibility (294) (Kant's words) of the world's existence. This is done by showing that the world is a self-contradictory concept, that the absolute totality of an endless progression is inconceivable, by definition.

How so? If the world is an object of experience, as those so eager to determine its magnitude suppose, then the conditions of the possibility of experience must be met in conceiving it. Thus, the essential bankruptcy of the idea of the world will be made visible by the demonstration of its inability to meet these formal conditions. These conditions specify that a possible object of experience must be locatable through a progression or regression of phenomena in time and space. The concept of an absolute totality of phenomena, however, precludes the possibility of such a succession because it is graspable only as the simultaneity of phenomena. The rule of reason that requires us to seek after conditions is therefore abridged by the conception of the rule's total satisfaction, that is, by the conception of the world. Adherence to the rule and the complete satisfaction of the rule are, it turns out, antinomic. The world is an object that destroys the means of finding it; it is for this reason illegitimate to call it an object at all. A universe of phenomena is a true contradiction in terms; the world cannot and does not exist.
Having demonstrated the impossibility of the existence of the world, Kant can then dismiss both the thesis and the antithesis statements. This is indeed what he does when he states his solution twice, first in a negative and then in an affirmative form. "The world has no beginning in time and no absolute limit in space," is the negative solution; it denies the thesis without going on, as the antithesis does, to make a counterassertion. There can be no limit to phenomena in the phenomenal realm, for this would require the existence of a phenomenon of an exceptional sort, one that was not itself conditioned and would thus allow us to halt our regress, or one that took no phenomenal form, i.e., that was empty: a void space or a void time. But clearly these self-contradictions admit of no real possibilities. No phenomena are exempt from the rules of reason that alone make them objects of our experience. Or, there is no phenomenon that is not an object of possible experience (or not subject to the rule of regress): ∃x ¬Φx.

Kant then goes on to dismiss the antithesis by stating that "the regress in the series of phenomena—as a determination of the cosmical quantity, proceeds indefinitum" (294). That is, our acknowledgment of the absence of a limit to the set of phenomena does not oblige us to maintain the antithetical position—that they are infinite—rather, it obliges us to recognize the basic finitude of all phenomena, the fact that they are inescapably subject to conditions of time and space and must therefore be encountered one by one, indefinitely, without the possibility of reaching an end, a point where all phenomena would be known. The status of the world is not infinite but indeterminate. Not-all phenomena are a possible object of experience: ∄x Φx.

The solution offered by Kant’s critical philosophy must be stated twice so as to guard against any possible misunderstanding. For the simple statement that there is no limit to phenomena will imply to those given to transcendental illusions that the world is limitless, whereas the simple statement that that not all phenomena can be known will imply that at least one phenomenon escapes our experience.

Now, it should be obvious that the formulas we have produced from Kant’s two statements regarding the solution of the first mathematical antinomy formally reduplicate those that Lacan gives for the woman, who, like the world, does not exist. But how can this parallel between woman and world be sustained; how is it that Lacan can speak of the nonexistence of the woman? Our response must begin with Lacan’s own explanation: “In order to say ‘it exists,’ it is also necessary to be able to construct it, that is to say, to know how to find where this existence is.” You will be able to hear in this explanation its Kantian tones, but you should hear in it as well echoes of Freud, who argued that in order to find an object, you must also be able to refind it. If the woman does not exist, this is because she cannot be refound. At this point my explanatory restatement of Lacan’s not very well understood dictum will seem no less opaque than its original. My intention, however, is to clarify this explanation as I proceed through the explication of the
dynamical antinomies and, by this, further to establish the link between Kant and Freudian psychoanalysis.

For the moment let us continue to attend to the purely Kantian tones of Lacan's statement. Lacan is undoubtedly arguing that a concept of woman cannot be constructed because the task of fully unfolding her conditions is one that cannot, in actuality, be carried out. Since we are finite beings, bound by space and time, our knowledge is subject to historical conditions. Our conception of woman cannot "run ahead" of these limits and thus cannot construct a concept of the whole of woman. But how does this Kantian position differ from the one articulated by Butler and others? Is our position really so much at odds with the one that now so often poses itself against every universalism: there is no general category of woman or of man, no general category of the subject; there are only historically specific categories of subjects as defined by particular and diverse discourses? What is the difference between our interpretation of "the woman does not exist" and the following one: we are misguided when we make claims for the existence of the woman, for

the category of "women" is normative and exclusionary and invoked with the unmarked dimensions of class and racial privilege intact. In other words, the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of culture, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of "women" are constructed. (Butler, 14)

Here it is being suggested that the universal category of woman contradicts and is contradicted by current work that investigates the class and racial differences among women as they are constructed by various practices. The logic of the argument is Aristotelian; that is, it conceives the universal as a positive, finite term ("normative and exclusionary") that finds its limit in another positive, finite term (particular women or "the concrete array of 'women'"). The negation of the all produces, then, the particular. The condemnation of the "binarism of sex" that is launched from this position firmly grounds itself in a binary logic that conceives the universal and the particular as exhaustive possibilities.

Kant had something else in mind when he argued that the mathematical antinomies demonstrated the limits of reason. His point—which bears repeating—is that our reason is limited because the procedures of our knowledge have no term, no limit; what limits reason is a lack of limit. This insight is compromised—not confirmed—whenever we conceive the not-all on the side of extension;¹⁵ that is, whenever we conceive the negation of the world, or of universal reason and its pretension to be able to speak of all phenomena, as simply implying that all we may properly know are finite, particular phenomena. For in this case, we simply supply reason with an external limit
by supposing a segment of time, the future, that extends beyond and thereby escapes reason. This eliminates from reason its internal limit, which alone defines it.

Recall that Kant maintained that the first antinomy provided indirect proof of "the transcendental ideality of phenomena." Here is the proof as Kant summarizes it:

If the world is a whole existing in itself, it must be either finite or infinite. But it is neither finite nor infinite—as has been shown, on the one side by the thesis, on the other side, by the antithesis. Therefore the world—the content of all phenomena—is not a whole existing in itself. It follows that phenomena are nothing, apart from our representations. (286)

Kant's logic would appear to be flawed if the negation contained in the penultimate statement were taken as a limitation of all phenomena, or of the world, to particular phenomena. It is possible to pass to his conclusion only if one takes the penultimate statement as an indefinite judgment. That is, what is involved here is not the negation of a copula such that "all phenomena" is completely canceled or eliminated, leaving its complement—some or particular phenomena—to command the field, but rather the affirmation of a negative predicate. Which is to say, Kant is urging that the only way to avoid the antinomies in which the idea of world entraps us is to affirm that the world is not a possible object of experience without pronouncing beyond this on the existence of the world. This conceives reason as limited by nothing but its own nature (its dependence on the merely regulative idea of totality), as internally limited.

This is the very crux of the difference between the Kantian position and the historicist one. Or, we should say, between the Kantian-Lacanian position and the historicist one, since Lacan adopts a similar stance with regard to the woman. When he says "The Woman is not-all," he demands that we read this statement as an indefinite judgment. Thus, while he does indeed claim, as his readers have often been horrified to observe, that the idea of the woman is a contradiction of reason, and that she therefore does not exist, he also claims, and this has not been as readily observed, that her existence cannot be contradicted by reason—nor, obviously, can it be confirmed. In other words, he leaves open the possibility of there being something—a feminine jouissance—that is unlocatable in experience, that cannot, then, be said to exist in the symbolic order. The ex-sistence of the woman is not only not denied, it is also not condemnable as a "normative and exclusionary" notion; on the contrary, the Lacanian position argues that it is only by refusing to deny—or confirm—her ex-sistence that "normative and exclusionary" thinking can be avoided. That is, it is only by acknowledging that a concept of woman cannot exist, that it is structurally impossible within the symbolic
order, that each historical construction of her can be challenged. For, after all, nothing prohibits these historical constructions from asserting their universal truth; witness the historical assertion that a general, transhistorical category of woman does not exist. The truth of this assertion is simply not available to a historical subject.

Let us be clear that one of the consequences of the Lacanian argument is that it, too, like historicism, calls into question the collectibility of women into a whole. It thus also regards all efforts at a coalition politics as problematic. But unlike the historicists, Lacan sees the collectibility of women as imperiled not by the external collisions of different definitions but by the internal limit of each and every definition, which fails somehow to “encompass” her. Lacan’s position opens out onto a beyond that it is impossible to confirm or deny.

Judging from the feminist brouhaha that has surrounded the reference to this beyond, we can safely assume that it needs further explanation and defense. It has frequently been taken to consist of one more relegation of the woman to the outside of language and the social order, one more attempt to banish her to some “dark continent” (as if any form of life had ever been found to survive within the dead structures of language!). We must therefore be more explicit about just what is meant by the “failure of the symbolic” with respect to the woman, what is signaled by the indefinite judgment. The symbolic fails to constitute not the reality but, more specifically, the existence of the woman. To be more precise: what fails, what becomes impossible, is the rendering of a judgment of existence. As long as it can be demonstrated that world or woman cannot form a whole, a universe—that is, that there is no limit to phenomena of language, no phenomenon that is not an object of experience, no signifier whose value does not depend on another—then the possibility of judging whether or not these phenomena or these signifiers give us information about a reality independent of us vanishes. In order to be able to declare that a thing exists, it is necessary also to be able to conclude otherwise—that it does not. But how is this second, negative judgment possible if there is no phenomenon that is not an object of our experience, that is, if there are no metaphenomena that escape our experience and are thus able to challenge the validity of those that do not? The lack of a limit to phenomena (and to signifiers) precludes precisely this: a metalanguage, without which we are restricted to endless affirmation, that is, to affirming without end—and without being able to negate any—the contingent series of phenomena that present themselves to us. There is, as Freud said of the unconscious, no “no” where no limit is possible. And as with the unconscious, so here, too, contradiction is necessarily ignored, since everything has to be considered equally true. There are no available means of eliminating inconsistency where nothing may be judged false.

So, whereas historicist feminists currently propose that we regard the aggregation of “female subject positions” as the solution to the “riddle of
femininity," that is, that we acknowledge the differences in these various constructions of woman and the nonnecessity of their relation to each other in order finally to lay to rest the question of what a woman is, Lacan proposes that this "solution" is a datum in need of explanation. Why is it—Lacan requires us not to rest content with the observation but to inquire further—why is it that woman does not form an all? Why is it that we must see in the discursive constructions of women a series of differences, and never encounter among them woman as such? Lacan answers that the woman is not-all because she lacks a limit, by which he means she is not susceptible to the threat of castration; the "no" embodied by this threat does not function for her. But this may be misleading, for while it is true that the threat has no purchase on the woman, it is crucial to note that the woman is the consequence and not the cause of the nonfunctioning of negation. She is the failure of the limit, not the cause of the failure.

In sum, woman is there where no limit intervenes to inhibit the progressive unfolding of signifiers, where, therefore, a judgment of existence becomes impossible. This means that everything can be and is said about her, but that none of it is subject to "reality testing"—none of what is said amounts to a confirmation or denial of her existence, which thereby eludes every symbolic articulation. The relation of the woman to the symbolic and to the phallic function is considerably complicated by this argument. For it is precisely because she is totally, that is, limitlessly inscribed within the symbolic that she is in some sense wholly outside it, which is to say the question of her existence is absolutely undecidable within it.

From this we are obliged to recognize that the woman is indeed a product of the symbolic. But we must also recognize that in producing her, the symbolic does not function in the way that we are accustomed to thinking it does. Ordinarily we think of the symbolic as synonymous, in Lacanian terms, with the Other. The Other is, however, by definition that which guarantees our consistency, and, as we have seen, there is no such guarantee where the woman is concerned. She, or the symbolic that constructs her, is fraught with inconsistencies. We are thus led to the conclusion that the woman is a product of a "symbolic without an Other." For this newly conceived entity, Lacan, in his last writings, coined the term lalangue. Woman is the product of lalangue.

The male side: dynamical failure

If we were to play by the rules of historicism, we would have to argue that, like the woman, the man does not exist, that no general category of man is instantiated in the multiplicity of male subject positions that every era constructs. Thus, a nominalist argument, like a kind of theoretical solvent, currently manages to dissolve the categories of man and woman alike. According to Lacan, however, we cannot symmetrically argue that the man
Summary of the Argument of "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamical/Male</th>
<th>Mathematical/Female</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thesis: Causality according to the laws of nature is not the only causality operating to originate the world. A causality of freedom is also necessary to account fully for these phenomena.</td>
<td>Thesis: The world has a beginning in time and is also limited in regard to space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antithesis: There is no such thing as freedom, but everything in the world happens solely according to the laws of nature.</td>
<td>Antithesis: The world has no beginning and no limits in space, but is, in relation both to time and space, infinite.</td>
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\[ \exists x \quad \Phi x \quad \exists x \quad \Phi x \]

\[ \forall x \quad \Phi x \quad \forall x \quad \Phi x \]

does not exist. We have, if the left-hand side of the sexuation table is to be believed, no problem in locating him, in proclaiming his existence.

This statement may come as a surprise—and not only to historicists. For our discussion has led us to assume that the rule of reason, which impels us to seek after a totality of conditions, must forever render any judgment of existence impossible. We are therefore unprepared for the conjuring away of this impossibility, which seems to be implied by the confirmation of the existence of man. A similar surprise is regularly expressed by Kant's commentators, who wonder at the sudden ease with which a resolution of the dynamical antinomies is found. Where thesis and antithesis of the mathematical antinomies were both deemed to be false because both illegitimately asserted the existence of the world (or the composite substance), the thesis and antithesis of the dynamical antinomies are both deemed by Kant to be true. In the first case, the conflict between the two propositions was thought to be irresolvable (since they made contradictory claims about the same object); in the second case, the conflict is "miraculously" resolved by the assertion that the two statements do not contradict each other. If it were merely a matter of the thesis, one would have no difficulty in accepting this argument: the thesis, "Causality according to the laws of nature is not the only causality operating to originate the phenomena of the world. A causality of freedom is also necessary to account fully for these phenomena," concedes the importance of natural causality and merely insists on a supplement of freedom. It is, however, not so easy to bring the antithesis in line with Kant's denial of contradiction. The statement "There is no such thing as freedom, but everything in the world happens solely according to the laws of nature" manifestly resists or negates the thesis. If we are to accept Kant's argument that both statements are simultaneously true, we are going to have to do so despite the clear contradiction. In short, we will have to avail
ourselves of a non-Aristotelian logic—just as we did with the mathematical antinomies.

We will not be concerned in what follows with the specifics of Kant's arguments about the cosmological ideas of freedom and God so much as with the way the second set of antinomies overcomes the impasse presented by the first set. We must also note that the left-hand, or male, side of the formulas of sexuation repeats the logic of Kant's resolution: "There is at least one $x$ that is not submitted to the phallic function" and "All $x$'s are submitted to the phallic function" are both taken to be true, despite the fact that the antithesis's claim to inclusiveness is obviously falsified by the thesis, that is, the all of the antithesis is negated by the thesis.

And yet Kant says that the antithesis is true; he confirms the existence of the all, the universal, just as Lacan confirms the existence of the universe of men. Since the existence of the universe was regarded in the case of the woman as impossible because no limit could be found to the chain of signifiers, it would be smart to assume that the formation of the all on the male side depends on the positing of a limit. But this resolution is more easily surmised than supported, since we were presented on the female side with good reasons for believing that the positing of a limit was impossible, that there could be no metaphenomena, no metalanguage. We cannot, on the male side, depart from the well-established rule of reason—nor do we.

In fact, the limit on the "sinister," or dynamical, side does not produce the possibility of metalanguage but simply covers over its lack. This is accomplished by adding to the series of phenomena (or signifiers) a negative judgment regarding what cannot be included in the series. The phrase "There is no such thing as freedom," which appears in the antithesis of the third antinomy (to take this one as an example), serves precisely this function, the function of limit. By means of this negative judgment, the inconceivability of freedom is conceptualized and the series of phenomena ceases to be open ended; it becomes a closed set, since it now includes—albeit in negative form—that which is excluded from it: that is, it now includes everything. You will note that this everything appears as a consequence in the second phrase of the third antinomy's antithesis: "But everything in the world happens solely according to the laws of nature." Suddenly the world, which was prohibited from forming in the mathematical antinomies, comes into being on the dynamical side.

In speaking of this imposition of a limit as an addition, as a supplementation of natural causality, we have in fact presented the thesis version of what takes place. But another equally accurate, equally true description is offered by the antithesis. According to this version, what is involved in the shift from the female to the male side is a subtraction. Recall Kant's complaint that the thesis and antithesis of the mathematical antitheses both overstepped their official functions, since they both "enounced more than [was] requisite for a full and complete contradiction" (285); that is, both said too much. A
surplus, because illegitimate, affirmation of existence burdened each statement. On the dynamical side, this surplus is subtracted from the phenomenal field and—we can look at it this way—it is this subtraction that installs the limit. The removal or separation of freedom from the realm of mechanical causality is what dissolves the radical inconsistency, the absolute impasse, on the dynamical side. Where the mathematical field was defined by the homogeneity of its elements (which were all phenomena, objects of experience) and the inconsistency of its statements (since none could be counted false), the dynamical field is defined by the heterogeneity of its elements (the result of the separation of the two types of causality, sensuous and intelligible, into different realms) and—what? What is it that corresponds on this side to the inconsistency on the other? Incompleteness. That is, the all forms on the dynamical side, but it is missing an element: freedom. The initial cause cannot be tolerated by, or disappears from, the mechanical field that it founds.

In Lacan’s formulas, the parallels between the two sides are more visible, since the same symbols are used throughout. Thus we can see that the question of existence is carried over directly to the dynamical side. That is to say, the surplus declarations of existence that caused the conflict on the female side are silenced on the male side because it is precisely existence—or being—that is subtracted from the universe that forms there. This is how one should read Lacan’s placing of the existential quantifier as the limit of the all, which is ruled by the universal quantifier. If, therefore, a world (operating solely according to the laws of nature) or universe (of men) can be said to exist on the dynamical or male side, we must not forget that it is merely a conceptual existence that is being claimed for it. Being as such escapes the formation of the concept of world. The universe that forms is thus defined by a certain impotence, since everything can be included therein except being, which is heterogeneous to the conceptual world.

That thesis and antithesis—∃x Δx and ∀x Φx—must both be stated and judged to be simultaneously true is explained, then, by the paradoxical status of the limit, which cannot be understood as entirely missing or as entirely included in the set of men. For, as Kant taught us, if one were to say that a man existed, one would add absolutely nothing to this man, to the concept of man. Thus we could argue that this concept lacks nothing. And yet it does not include being and is in this sense inadequate, since the concept cannot include the fact that the thing named by it does in fact exist.

This brings us back the question of “reality testing” that we raised earlier. We had promised that this procedure, which was ruled out as impossible on the female side, would finally come into play on the male side. We continue to maintain this, though this is clearly the occasion to clarify what reality testing is in Freudian terms. There is no more appropriate place to begin than Freud’s essay “Negation,” since that text is framed in almost the same terms as we, after Kant and Lacan, have been framing our discussion. When Freud
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makes the comment “With the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression and enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning,”20 we should be reminded immediately of the dynamical antinomies. For the symbol of negation is precisely the limit that allowed Kant, in the dynamical antinomies, to assert a knowledge of “everything in the world,” where, in the mathematical antinomies, he was forced to admit that reasoning on the world fails. In the dynamical antinomies, Kant, too, gives himself material, an object of thought, even though, in the earlier conflict, reason was denied the possibility of any such object and was condemned merely to “dispute about nothing” (283).

What does Freud say about the process of reality testing? He says, first of all, something he has been saying since the Project (1895) and that he said most memorably in The Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality (1905): the finding of an object is the refinding of it. Here, the aim of reality testing “is not to find an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to re-find such an object, to convince oneself that it is still there.”21 He says also that one of the problems that presents itself to this process is that

the reproduction of a perception as a presentation is not always a faithful one; it may be modified by omissions, or changed by the merging of various elements. In that case, reality-testing has to ascertain how far such distortions go. But it is evident that a precondition for the setting up of reality-testing is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction.22

Contrary to the common misperception, reality testing is not described here as a process by which we match our perceptions against an external, independent reality. In fact, it is the permanent loss of that reality—or real: a reality that was never present as such—that is the precondition for determining the objective status of our perceptions. Not only is the real unavailable for comparison with our perceptions but, Freud concedes, we can assume that the latter are always somewhat distorted, inexact. What, then, accounts for the distinction between subjective and objective perceptions; what intervenes to transform the welter of conflicting, distorted phenomena into the conviction that our experience is objective? The answer, which should now be half-guessed, goes something like this: to the multitude of our perceptions something is added that is not a new perception, new sensible content; instead this addition is intelligible and contentless: a negative judgment that marks the limit of our perceptions and hence the loss of the object that “brought real satisfaction.” The negative judgment excludes this object from thought—or, more precisely, the exclusion of this object makes thought possible. Which means that the term exclusion is not entirely accurate insofar as
it may tend to imply a nonrelation between the real object and the object of thought, while Freud suggests a definite relation between these two terms. For fleeting perceptions seem to acquire the weight of objectivity only when they are weighted or anchored by the excluded real object. That is, it is only when our perceptions come to refer themselves to this lost object of satisfaction that they can be deemed objective. Referring themselves to the object, they come to be understood as manifestations of it. So, the object is excluded from perceptions, but not simply, since it now functions as that which is "in them more than them": the guarantee of their objectivity. If Freud prefers to name the process of reality testing by the redoubled verb refind rather than find, this is not only because the lost object can never be directly found and must instead be refound in its manifestations but also because it is found a number of times, again and again, in a multitude of perceptions that, however different they are from each other (the distortions, the modifications), must nevertheless be counted as evidence of the same inaccessible reality that they are all—the whole phenomenal universe—powerless to contain. Thus, while guaranteeing that perceptions designate some objective, independent reality, the negative judgment maintains—must maintain—this reality as ungraspable, for if it were to assume a phenomenal form, it would become merely another perception; in which case the universe of thought would collapse.

To return to our discussion of sexual difference, there should now be no confusion about the fact that if the man, unlike the woman, can be claimed to exist, his ex-sistence or being remains inaccessible nevertheless, since it escapes the conceptual or symbolic field in which his existence takes shape. If the differences among men may be disregarded, and one man can be substituted for another because they are manifestations of the same thing, what this thing is is still unknown and must remain so. Correlatively, no man can boast that he embodies this thing—masculinity—any more than any concept can be said to embody being.

All pretentions of masculinity are, then, sheer imposture; just as every display of femininity is sheer masquerade. Through his desubstantialization of sex, Lacan has allowed us to perceive the fraudulence at the heart of every claim to positive sexual identity. And he has done this equally for men and for women. Which is not to say that he has treated them symmetrically or conceived them as complements of each other. A universe of men and women is inconceivable; one category does not complete the other, make up for what is lacking in the other. Were one to believe in the possibility of such a universe, one would believe in the sexual relation, with all its heterosexist implications.

But Lacan does not. On the contrary, he shows us exactly why the heterosexist assumption—which may be formulated thus: men love women and women love men—is not a legitimate proposition. For it presupposes that a universal quantifier, an all, modifies both men and women, and this is
precisely what the formulas contest. While the universe of women is, as we have argued at length, simply impossible, a universe of men is possible only on the condition that we except something from this universe. The universe of men is, then, an illusion fomented by a prohibition: do not include everything in your all! Rather than defining a universe of men that is complemented by a universe of women, Lacan defines man as the prohibition against constructing a universe and woman as the impossibility of doing so. The sexual relation fails for two reasons: it is impossible and it is prohibited. Put these two failures together; you will never come up with a whole.

Sexual difference and the superego

This argument has given itself just two tasks: to challenge the assumptions about sex harbored, often in common, by historicist and deconstructionist positions; and to clarify the alternative offered in Lacan by making explicit his debt to critical philosophy. It would require much more time and space than I have here to develop the implications of this alternative theory of sexual difference. But I do not want to close this chapter of my investigation without at least noting one important point and suggesting a path for pursuing it. The point is this: the Kantian account of the dynamical antinomies and the Lacanian account of the male antinomies both align themselves with the psychoanalytical description of the superego.

In The Critique of Judgment, Kant, speaking of the dynamically sublime, invokes images of threatening rocks, thunderclouds, volcanoes, hurricanes, terrifying images of a mighty and potentially destructive nature that nevertheless have, he says, “no dominion over us.” The “as if” quality that attaches itself to the dynamically sublime has often struck commentators as curious. What does Kant mean by speaking of a fearful object of which we actually have no fear? He means that from our position in the phenomenal world, we can formulate only the possibility of this terrible force and not its existence, just as we can formulate only the possibility and not the existence of God, freedom, the soul. This possibility of a realm beyond, unlimited by our phenomenal conditions, is precisely dependent on the foreclosure of the judgment of existence.

This same explanation accounts for the paradoxes of the superego. Here, again, the ferocity of the superego is not exactly to be feared, for this ferocity depends not on the harshness of its prohibitions (in the sense that the superego might be positively imagined as a kind of strict father or that his interdictions might be positively spelled out) but on the conversion of the father into an impossible real, that is, a being on whose existence we cannot pronounce. The prohibition proper to the superego renders something unsayable and undoable, to be sure, but it does not say what we should not say or do; it merely imposes a limit that makes everything we do and say seem as nought compared to what we cannot. As Lacan explains, “The superego . . . [the
commandment “Enjoy!”] is the correlative of castration, which is the sign that adorns our admission that the jouissance of the Other, the body of the Other, is only promised in infinity.23

Yet once we establish that this logic of the limit or exception defines the dynamical antinomies, the male subject, and the superego, we have a problem, or so it seems on first blush. For we now appear to lend support to the notorious argument that presents woman as constitutionally indisposed to developing a superego and thus susceptible to an ethical laxity. In response to this, all we can suggest at this point is that the field of ethics has too long been theorized in terms of this particular superegoic logic of exception or limit. It is now time to devote some thought to developing an ethics of inclusion or of the unlimited, that is, an ethics proper to the woman. Another logic of the superego must commence.

Notes

1 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1990), p. 231; hereafter page references to this work will be given in the text.
2 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); page references to this work will be given in the text.
6 For a further explanation of this psychoanalytic defense of ignorance, see chapter 4 of this book, “The Sartorial Superego.”
9 This statement need not be taken as dismissive of deconstruction, which would not itself claim that anything other than a signifier is “deconstructible,” or negatable. As a matter of fact, it is only because the other of the signifier does not budge, cannot be negated, that deconstruction is possible in the first place.
13 Ibid., p. 73. This table also appears on page 149 of the translation of this session of the seminar that is included in Mitchell and Rose, Feminine Sexuality.
14 Lacan, Encore, p. 94.
Ibid.: "It is not on the side of extension that we must take the not-all."

For an excellent discussion of the relation of Kant's notion of indefinite judgment to the conflict of the first two antinomies, see Monique David-Ménard, *La folie dans la raison pure*, (Paris: Vrin, 1990), pp. 33 n.

Jacques-Alain Miller develops this Lacanian distinction between inconsistency and incompleteness in relation to sexual difference in his unpublished seminar "Extimité" (1985–86).

Borrowing from Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek adapts the notion of the "vanishing mediator" for a Lacanian explanation of this disappearance of cause from the field of its effects; see Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 182–197.

Thomas Weiskel, in his notable book *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), concludes the exact opposite; according to his explanation, the mathematical sublime is associated with "too little meaning," while the dynamical sublime is characterized by an excess of the signified, or "too much meaning."


Ibid, p. 238.

Jean-François Lyotard, in his *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime* (Paris: Galilee, 1991), argues convincingly that there are not two sublimes, but two modes of considering the sublime.


The Kantian crack in the universal

It may seem paradoxical to evoke a “crack in the universal” apropos of Kant: was Kant not obsessed by the Universal, was not his fundamental aim to establish the universal form (constitutive) of knowledge, does his ethics not propose the universal form of the rule which regulates our activity as the sole criterion of morality, etc.? Yet as soon as the Thing-in-itself is posited as unattainable, every universal is potentially suspended. Every universal implies a point of exception at which its validity, its hold, is canceled; or, to put it in the language of contemporary physics, it implies a point of singularity. This “singularity” is ultimately the Kantian subject himself, namely the empty subject of the transcendental apperception. On account of this singularity, each of Kant’s three critiques “stumbles” against universalization. In “pure reason,” antinomies emerge when, in the use of categories, we reach beyond our finite experience and endeavor to apply them to the totality of the universe: if we endeavor to conceive the universe as a Whole, it appears simultaneously as finite and infinite, as an all-embracing causal nexus and containing free beings. In “practical reason,” the “crack” is introduced by the possibility of “radical Evil,” of an Evil which, as to its form, coincides with the Good (the free will qua will which follows universal self-posited rules can choose to be “evil” out of principle, not on account of “pathological,” empirical impulses). In the “capacity of judging” qua “synthesis” of pure and practical reason, the split occurs twice. First, we have the opposition of aesthetics and teleology, the two poles which, together, do not form a harmonious Whole. Beauty is “purposefulness without purpose”: a product of man’s conscious activity, it bears the mark of purposefulness, yet an object appears as
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“beautiful” only insofar as it is experienced as something which serves no definite purpose, which is here without reason or end. In other words, Beauty designates the paradoxical point at which human activity (which is otherwise instrumental, directed at realizing conscious aims) starts to function as a spontaneous natural force: a true work of art never proceeds from a conscious plan, it must “grow out spontaneously.” Teleology, on the other hand, deals with discerning hidden purposes at work in a nature submitted to blind mechanical laws, i.e., ontologically constituted as “objective reality” by means of transcendental categories among which there is no place for purposefulness. 1

The Sublime is to be conceived precisely as the index of the failed “synthesis” of Beauty and Purpose—or, to use elementary mathematical language, as the intersection of the two sets, the set of what is “beautiful” and the set of what is “purposeful”—a negative intersection, to be sure, i.e., an intersection containing elements which are neither beautiful nor purposeful. Sublime phenomena (more precisely, phenomena which arouse in the subject the sentiment of the Sublime) are in no way beautiful; they are chaotic, formless, the very opposite of a harmonious form, and they also serve no purpose, i.e., they are the very opposite of those features that bear witness to a hidden purposefulness in nature (they are monstrous in the sense of the inexpeditiously excessive, overblown character of an organ or an object). As such, the Sublime is the site of the inscription of pure subjectivity whose abyss both Beauty and Teleology endeavor to conceal by way of the appearance of Harmony.

How then, on a closer look, is the Sublime related to the two sets of Beauty and Teleology whose intersection it is? As to the relationship between the Beautiful and the Sublime, Kant, as is well known, conceives of beauty as the symbol of the Good; at the same time, he points out that what is truly sublime is not the object which arouses the feeling of sublimity but the moral Law in us, our suprasensible nature. Are then beauty and sublimity simply to be conceived as two different symbols of the Good? Or is it not, on the contrary, that this duality points toward a certain chasm which must pertain to the moral Law itself? Lacan draws a line of demarcation between the two facets of law: on the one hand, law qua symbolic Ego-Ideal—i.e., law in its pacifying function, law qua guarantee of the social pact, qua the intermediating Third which dissolves the impasse of imaginary aggressivity; on the other hand, law in its superego dimension—i.e., law qua “irrational” pressure, the force of culpabilitization totally incommensurable with our actual responsibility, the agency in whose eyes we are a priori guilty and which gives body to the impossible imperative of enjoyment. It is this distinction between Ego-Ideal and superego which enables us to specify how Beauty and Sublimity are differently related to the domain of ethics. Beauty is the symbol of the Good, i.e., of the moral Law as the pacifying agency which reins in our egotism and renders possible harmonious social coexistence. In contrast, the
dynamical sublime—volcanic eruptions, stormy seas, mountain precipices, etc.—by its very failure to symbolize (to represent symbolically) the suprasensible moral Law evokes its superego dimension. The logic at work in the experience of the dynamical sublime is therefore: true, I may be a tiny particle of dust thrown around by wind and sea, powerless in face of the raging forces of nature, yet all this fury of nature pales in comparison with the absolute pressure exerted on me by the superego, which humiliates me and compels me to act against my fundamental interests! (What we encounter here is the basic paradox of the Kantian autonomy: I am a free and autonomous subject, delivered from the constraints of my pathological nature, precisely and only insofar as my feeling of self-esteem is crushed down by the humiliating pressure of the moral Law.) Therein consists also the superego dimension of the Jewish God evoked by the high priest Abner in Racine’s *Athaliah*: “Je crains Dieu et n’ai point d’autre crainte . . .”—the fear of raging nature and of the pain other men can inflict on me converts into sublime peace not simply by my becoming aware of the suprasensible nature in me beyond the reach of the forces of nature but by my realizing how the pressure of the moral Law is stronger than even the mightiest of natural forces.

The unavoidable conclusion to be drawn from all this is: if Beauty is the symbol of the Good, the Sublime is the symbol of . . . Here, already, the homology gets stuck. The problem with the sublime object (more precisely: with the object which arouses in us the feeling of the Sublime) is that it fails as a symbol; it evokes its Beyond by the very failure of its symbolic representation. So, if Beauty is the symbol of the Good, the Sublime evokes—what? There is only one answer possible: the nonpathological, ethical, suprasensible dimension, for sure, but the suprasensible, the ethical stance, insofar as it eludes the domain of the Good—in short: radical Evil, Evil as an ethical attitude.2

In today’s popular ideology, this paradox of the Kantian Sublime is what perhaps enables us to detect the roots of the public fascination with figures like Hannibal Lecter, the cannibal serial killer from Thomas Harris’s novels: what this fascination ultimately bears witness to is a deep longing for a Lacanian psychoanalyst. That is to say, Hannibal Lecter is a sublime figure in the strict Kantian sense: a desperate, ultimately failed attempt of the popular imagination to represent to itself the idea of a Lacanian analyst. The correlation between Lecter and the Lacanian analyst corresponds perfectly to the relation which, according to Kant, defines the experience of the “dynamic sublime”: the relation between wild, chaotic, untamed, raging nature and the suprasensible Idea of Reason beyond any natural constraints. True, Lecter’s evil—he not only kills his victims, but then goes on to eat parts of their entrails—strains to its limits our capacity to imagine the horrors we can inflict on our fellow creatures; yet even the utmost effort to represent to ourselves Lecter’s cruelty fails to capture the true dimension of the act of the analyst: by bringing about *la traversée du fantasme* (the crossing of our
fundamental fantasy), he literally “steals the kernel of our being,” the object small a, the secret treasure, agalma, what we consider most precious in ourselves, denouncing it as a mere semblance. Lacan defines the object small a as the fantasmatic “stuff of the I,” as that which confers on the E, on the fissure in the symbolic order, on the ontological void that we call “subject,” the ontological consistency of a “person,” the semblance of a fullness of being—and it is precisely this “stuff” that the analyst pulverizes, “swallows.” This is the reason for the unexpected “eucharistic” element at work in Lacan’s definition of the analyst, namely his repeated ironic allusion to Heidegger: “Mange ton Dasein!”—“Eat your being-there!” Therein resides the power of fascination that pertains to the figure of Hannibal Lecter: by its very failure to attain the absolute limit of what Lacan calls “subjective destitution,” this figure enables us to get a presentiment of the Idea of the analyst. So, in The Silence of the Lambs, Lecter is truly cannibalistic not in relation to his victims but in relation to Clarice Sterling: their relationship is a mocking imitation of the analytic situation, since in exchange for his helping her to capture “Buffalo Bill,” he wants her to confide in him—what? Precisely what the analysand confides to the analyst, the kernel of her being, her fundamental fantasy (the crying of the lambs). The quid pro quo proposed by Lecter to Clarice is therefore: “I’ll help you if you let me eat your Dasein!” The inversion of the proper analytic relation turns on the fact that Lecter compensates Clarice by helping her track down “Buffalo Bill.” Thus, he is not cruel enough to be a Lacanian analyst, since in psychoanalysis, we must pay the analyst so that he allows us to offer him our Dasein on a plate.

If, consequently, the Sublime is opposed to the Beautiful with regard to the two sides of the moral Law (the pacifying Ego-Ideal versus the ferocious superego), how are we to distinguish it from its counterpole in the Critique of Judgement, from teleology in nature? The Sublime designates nature in its purposeless raging, in the expenditure of its forces which does not serve anything (Lacan’s definition of enjoyment from the first pages of Encore), whereas the teleological observation discovers in nature a presupposed (merely reflexive, not constitutive) knowledge, i.e., the regulative hypothesis of teleology is that “nature knows” (the flow of events does not follow “blind” mechanic causality; it is guided by some conscious purpose-fulness).

In the Sublime, nature does not know—and where “it doesn’t know,” it enjoys (we are thereby again at the superego qua law which enjoys, qua the agency of law permeated with obscene enjoyment). The secret connection between such an outburst of the “enjoyment of nature” and the superego is the key to John Ford’s The Hurricane (1937), the story of a sandbar, once an island paradise run by the French governor De Laage (Raymond Massey) who denies mercy to Terangi, an aborigine condemned for hitting back at a Frenchman. When Terangi escapes from the prison to rejoin his wife, De Laage pursues him mercilessly until a hurricane destroys everything. De Laage, of course, is an irrational law-and-order extremist, infested with
myopic arrogance—in short, a superego figure if there ever was one. From this perspective, the function of the hurricane should be to teach De Laage that there are things more important than the penal code: when De Laage is confronted by the ruination caused by the hurricane, he humbly grants Terangi his freedom. Yet the paradox is that the hurricane destroys the native dwellings and their island paradise, while De Laage is spared; so the hurricane must rather be conceived as a manifestation of De Laage’s patriarchal-superego wrath! In other words, what sobers De Laage is his confrontation with the destructive nature of the fury which dwells in him; the hurricane makes him aware of the wild, untamed enjoyment that pertains to his fanatical devotion to the law. He is able to grant amnesty to Terangi not because he gained an insight into the nullity of human laws in comparison with the immensity of the forces of nature as they manifest themselves in the hurricane, but because he realized that the hidden reverse of what he perceived as his moral rectitude is radical Evil whose destructive power overshadows even the ferocity of the hurricane.

The Christian sublime, or, the “downward-synthesis”

Although Christianity remains within the confines of the Sublime, it brings about the sublime effect in a way exactly opposite to that of Kant: not through the extreme exertions of our capacity to represent (which nonetheless fails to render the suprasensible Idea and thus paradoxically succeeds in delineating its space), but as it were a contrario, through the reduction of the representative content to the lowest imaginable level: at the level of representation, Christ was the “son of a man,” a ragged, miserable creature crucified between two common brigands; and it is against the background of this utterly wretched character of his earthly appearance that his divine essence shines through all the more powerfully. In the late Victorian age, the same mechanism was responsible for the ideological impact of the tragic figure of the “elephant-man,” as the subtitle of one of the books about him suggests (A Study in Human Dignity): it was the very monstrous and nauseating distortion of his body which rendered visible the simple dignity of his inner spiritual life. And is not the same logic the essential ingredient of the tremendous success of Stephen Hawking’s A Brief History of Time? Would his ruminations about the fate of the universe remain so attractive to the public if it were not for the fact that they belong to a crippled, paralyzed body communicating with the world only through the feeble movement of one finger and speaking with a machine-generated impersonal voice? Therein consists the “Christian Sublime”: in this wretched “little piece of the real” lies the necessary counterpart (form of appearance) of pure spirituality. That is to say, we must be very careful here not to miss Hegel’s point: what Hegel aims at is not the simple fact that, since the Suprasensible is indifferent to the domain of sensible representations, it can appear even in the guise of the
lowest representation. Hegel insists again and again that there is no special “suprasensible realm” beyond or apart from our universe of sensible experience; the reduction to the nauseating “little piece of the real” is thus *stricto sensu* performative, productive of the spiritual dimension; the spiritual “depth” is *generated* by the monstrous distortion of the surface. In other words, the point is not only that God’s embodiment in a ragged creature renders visible to us, human mortals, His true nature by way of the contrast, of the ridiculous, extreme discord, between Him and the lowest form of human existence; the point is rather that this extreme discord, this absolute gap, is the divine power of “absolute negativity.” Both Jewish and Christian religions insist on the absolute discord between God (Spirit) and the domain of (sensible) representations; their difference is of a purely formal nature: in Jewish religion God dwells in a Beyond unattainable through representations, separated from us by an unbridgeable gap, whereas the Christian God is *this gap itself*. It is this shift that causes the change in the logic of the Sublime, from the prohibition of representation to the acceptance of the most null representation.\(^5\)

This “Christian Sublime” involves a specific mode of the dialectical movement which might be called the “downward-synthesis”: the concluding moment is here not a triumphant “synthesis,” but the lowest point at which the very common ground of position and negation is worn away. What we get stuck with is a remainder which falls out from the symbolic order: the order of universal symbolic mediation as it were collapses into an inert leftover. Apart from the Christian Sublime, the further examples of it are the triad of positive-negative-infinite judgment, the dialectic of phrenology (“Spirit is a bone”), and, of course, the triad of Law which concludes the chapter on Reason and sets the passage into Spirit, into History, in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: reason as lawgiver; reason as testing laws; the acceptance of law for the simple fact that it is law. Reason first directly *posits* laws qua universal ethical precepts (“Everyone ought to speak the truth,” etc.); once it gains an insight into the contingent content and the possible conflictual nature of these laws (different ethical norms may impose on us mutually exclusive forms of behavior), it assumes a kind of reflective distance and limits itself to their testing, to assessing how they fit formal standards of universality and consistency; finally, Reason becomes aware of the empty, purely formal character of this procedure, of its incapacity to procure actual spiritual substance filled out with concrete, positive content. Reason is thus compelled to reconcile itself to the fact that it can neither posit nor reflect upon laws without presupposing our inveteratedness in some concrete, *determinate* ethical substance, in a law which is in force simply *because it is law*, i.e., because it is accepted as a constitutive part of our community’s historical tradition. We pass to history *stricto sensu*, to the succession of actual historical figures of Spirit, only on the basis of our accepting that we are embedded in some historically specified “spiritual substance.”\(^6\) The logic
of these three stages follows the triad of positing, external and determinate
reflection, and, what may surprise somebody not versed in Hegel, the third,
concluding moment that consists of an immediate acceptance of the given
ethical substance; one would rather expect it to constitute the “lowest”
moment, the immediate starting point from which we then “progress” by way
of reflective mediation. The triad of Law in its entirety thus exemplifies the
breakdown of reflection: it ends with the reflecting subject getting accu­
tomed to the ethical substance qua universal, presupposed medium which
mediates his very attempts at reflective mediation. This resigned acceptance
of the immediate character of the very totality-of-mediation is what Hegel
has in mind with “determinate reflection”: reflective totality is “held
together” by a contingent, nonreflected remainder which is “simply there.”

As to its formal structure, this effect of the Christian Sublime hinges on a
certain temporal inversion: a material which, presented in “normal” linear
succession, in no way affects our sensitivity to the Sublime nonetheless
acquires the aura of the “Sublime” the moment it undergoes a purely tem­
poral manipulation. An exemplary case is Paul Newman’s melodrama The
Effect of Gamma-rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, the story of Mathilda,
a girl in her early teens who lives in a poor family with her older sister, the
victim of epileptic attacks by means of which she acts out her frustrations;
and her mother, a resigned, cynical eccentric who “hates the world”; she
escapes domestic misery by investing her energy in biological experiments
with seeds exposed to radioactive rays. Mathilda presents the results of her
experiments at a school competition and, unexpectedly, wins. Upon return­
ing home, she finds her pet rabbit, given to her by the biology teacher, dead
on her bed: her mother has killed it in revenge for the daughter’s public
success. Mathilda puts the rabbit on a pillow and brings it down the stairs
to the garden to be buried, while her mother continues her cynical wise­
cracking. A standard pedagogical melodrama of the daughter’s moral vic­
tory over her resigned mother who failed in her attempt to contaminate the
daughter with her hatred: the daughter transcends her degraded home
atmosphere by way of biological experiments which made her aware of the
mysteries of the universe. What distinguishes this film is a simple temporal
manipulation in its last half hour: the scene of the school competition is
interrupted at the most tense moment, with Mathilda stumbling in her
speech; we pass immediately to the aftermath, when her drunken mother
enters the hall and asks a passer-by who won. We hear the missing part of
Mathilda’s speech, expressing her belief in the mysterious charm of the uni­
verse, at the very end of the film: it accompanies the painful events we see on
the screen (Mathilda carrying the dead rabbit past the drunk mother). And it
is this simple confrontation, this contrast between the visual level (the
humiliated child carrying the dead animal) and the soundtrack (a truly
Kantian triumphant speech on the mysteries of the “starry sky above us”),
which brings about the sublime effect.
Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* resorts to a similar temporal displacement which successfully condenses the ending of Kundera's novel. Late at night, the hero, a dissident doctor exiled to the Czech countryside, returns home with his wife from a dance in a nearby small town; the last sight of them is the point-of-view shot of the dark macadam road illuminated by the lights of their truck. Then, a sudden cut to California a couple of weeks later: their friend Sabina, who lives there as a sculptor, receives a letter informing her of their death in a traffic accident when returning home from a dance, and comments that they must have been happy at the time of their death. What then follows is a cut which transposes us back to the previous scene: a simple continuation of the point-of-view shot, from the driver's seat, of the road into which our gaze penetrates. Here, as well as in *Gamma-rays*, the sublime effect of this last shot which ends the film results from a temporal displacement: it hinges on the coexistence of our, the spectator's, knowledge that the hero and his wife are already dead, with their forward-moving gaze on a strangely illuminated road. The point is not only that the allure of this strange illumination acquires the meaning of death, but rather that this last point-of-view shot belongs to somebody who is still alive although we know that he is already dead: after the flash-forward to California informing us of their death, the hero and his wife dwell in the domain “between the two deaths,” i.e., the same shot which was, prior to the flash-forward, a simple point-of-view shot of a living subject renders now the gaze of the “living dead.”

**The “formulae of sexuation”**

The problem with this account, however, is that it privileges one mode of the Sublime (the “dynamical” superego-Sublime manifested in raging nature, in the display of intense, concentrated Force which threatens to overwhelm us) to the detriment of its second mode, the “mathematical” Sublime (the dizziness that seizes us when we are confronted with an infinite series whose totality lies beyond our grasp). This split of the Sublime itself, of the intersection of Beauty and Teleology, into “mathematical” and “dynamical” Sublime, is far from negligible since it directly concerns sexual difference. The “official” theory of the Sublime sustained not only by Kant but already by Burke, his forerunner and source, links the opposition masculine/feminine to the opposition Sublime/Beautiful; in contrast, our aim is to demonstrate that, prior to the opposition Sublime/Beautiful, sexual difference is inscribed in the inherent split of the Sublime into mathematical and dynamical.

As is well known, the conceptual matrix that underlies the opposition of the two modes of the Sublime is set up already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the guise of the difference between the two types of antinomies of pure reason (*CPR*, B 454–88). When, in its use of transcendental categories, Reason goes beyond the field of possible experience by way of applying the
categories to entities which cannot ever become objects of possible experience (the universe as a Whole, God, soul), it gets entangled in antinomies, i.e., it necessarily arrives at two contradictory conclusions: the universe is finite and infinite; God exists and does not exist. Kant arranges these antinomies into two groups: mathematical antinomies arise when categories are applied to the universe as a Whole (the totality of phenomena which is never given to our finite intuition), whereas dynamical antinomies emerge when we apply categories to objects which do not belong to the phenomenal order at all (God, soul). What is of crucial importance here is the different logic of the two types of antinomies. This difference concerns first of all the modality of the link between the elements of the series whose synthesis brings about the antinomy: in the case of mathematical antinomies, we are dealing with a multitude (das Mannigfaltige) accessible to sensible intuition, i.e., with a simple coexistence of the elements given in the intuition (what is at stake here is their divisibility and their infinitude); in the case of dynamical antinomies, we are dealing with intellect, a synthetic power which reaches beyond a mere sensible intuition, that is to say, with the necessary logical interconnection (Verknüpfung) of the elements (notions of cause and effect).

This difference of the two types of antinomies can be further specified with reference to the opposition homogeneity/heterogeneity: in the mathematical antinomy, all elements belong to the same spatiotemporal series; in the dynamical antinomy, on the contrary, we progress from effect to cause or ground which (in principle, at least) can belong to a different (nonsensible, intelligible) ontological order. The fact that a cause may (also) not be a cause within the series allows for the possibility that both poles of the antinomy are true: conceived phenomenally, the event X—say, my giving a hand to a drowning person—is determined by the universal causal nexus (as a material event, it is submitted to physical causality); conceived noumenally, this same event is brought about by a heterogeneous, intelligible cause (as an ethical act, it depends on the free will of the autonomous subject). Another aspect of the same opposition is that mathematical antinomies concern the real existence of their object (the universe as a Whole), i.e., they extend the scope of reality beyond the limits of possible experience, whereas dynamical antinomies concern an object which does not belong to "reality" conceived of as the field of possible experience (God, the soul furnished with free will...).

This difference in the structure of mathematical and dynamical antinomies hinges on the double negation which defines the status of phenomena: noumenon is a non-phenomenon, a limitation of phenomena, and, furthermore, the field of phenomena itself is never complete or whole. Mathematical antinomies are antinomies of the "non-all" of the phenomenal field: they result from the paradox that, although there is no object given to us in intuition which does not belong to the phenomenal field, this field is never "all," never complete. Dynamical antinomies, on the contrary, are antinomies of universality: logical connection of the phenomena in the universal causal nexus
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necessarily involves an exception, the noumenal act of freedom which “sticks out,” suspending the causal nexus and starting a new causal series “spontaneously,” out of itself. The status of the disputed object therefore differs radically: the “universe as a Whole” is the totality of phenomena, whereas “God” or “soul” are noumenal entities beyond phenomena. Consequently, the solution of the antinomies is also different in each of the two cases. In the first case, both the thesis and the antithesis are false, since the very object to which the thesis attributes finitude and the antithesis infinitude does not exist (the universe as the Whole of phenomenal reality is a self-contradictory entity: it speaks of “reality,” i.e., it uses transcendental categories constitutive for the field of possible experience, yet simultaneously it reaches beyond possible experience, since the universe in its entirety can never be the object of our finite experience). In the second case, where the disputed object (soul, God) is not conceived as an object of possible experience, i.e., as a part of reality, it is possible for both the thesis and the antithesis to be true. This duality of mathematical and dynamical reproduces the duality of object and subject, of theoretical and practical reason: theoretical reason aims at completing the causal chain, i.e., at rendering the entire causal nexus which led to the event to be explained (the regulative Ideal of pure reason), whereas practical reason aims at suspending the causal nexus by way of a free act which begins “out of itself” and therefore cannot be explained by the preceding causal chain.

What has all this to do with sexual difference? Lacan endeavored to formalize sexual difference qua discursive fact by means of his “formulae of sexuation,” in which on the “masculine” side the universal function (Vx.Fx: all x are submitted to the function F) implies the existence of an exception (Ex.notFx: there is at least one x which is exempted from the function F), whereas on the feminine side a particular negation (notVx.Fx: not-all x are submitted to the function F) implies that there is no exception (notEx.notFx: there is no x which could be exempted from the function F):

$$\exists x. \Phi x$$
$$\forall x. \Phi x$$

What we have to be attentive to apropos of these formulae of sexuation is that they are structured like antinomies in the Kantian sense, not like contrary poles: the relationship of contrariety is excluded here. (In the case of the “masculine” antinomy, for example, the contrary to “all x are submitted to the function F” is not “there is at least one x which is exempted from the function F,” but “no x is submitted to the function F.”) Common sense would therefore suggest that the formulae are, if linked in two diagonal pairs, equivalent: is not “all x are submitted to the function F” strictly equivalent to “there is no x which could be exempted from the function F”? And, on the other hand, is not “not-all x are submitted to the function F” strictly
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equivalent to “there is (at least) one x which is exempted from the function F”? Lacan’s aim, on the contrary, is to call into question these two signs of equation: the universal function implies a constitutive exception; the lack of exception to the function F prevents its universal span. What precise notion of sexuality underlies these “formulae of sexuation”? Lacan’s answer is: sexuality is the effect on the living being of the impasses which emerge when it gets entangled in the symbolic order, i.e., the effect on the living body of the deadlock or inconsistency that pertains to the symbolic order qua order of universality. Kant was the first philosopher to formulate the “crack in the universal,” which is why his antinomies of pure reason—antinomies, precisely, of universalization—directly herald Lacan’s formulae of sexuation. Paradoxical as it may sound, the Kantian antinomies designate the moment at which sexual difference is for the first time inscribed in the philosophical discourse, not in the guise of the opposition between the two contradictory poles of every antinomy (the universe is finite/the universe is infinite, etc.), but in the guise of the difference in the two types of antinomies. The first two (“mathematical”) antinomies are “feminine” and reproduce the paradoxes of the Lacanian logic of “not-all”; whereas the last two (“dynamical”) antinomies are “masculine” and reproduce the paradoxes of universality constituted through exception. That is to say, a Lacanian translation of the mathematical antinomies yields the two formulae of the “feminine” side of sexuation. The thesis on the infinity of the universe has to be read as a double negation, not as a universal affirmation: (insofar as we read the function F as “to be preceded by another phenomenon in time”) “there is no phenomenon which is not preceded by another phenomenon” (there is no x exempted from the function F), not “all x are submitted to the function F.” The thesis on the finitude of the universe has to be read as “not-all x are submitted to the function F” (i.e., all phenomena are not infinitely divisible and/or preceded by other phenomena), not as “there is one x which is exempted from the function F.” Dynamical antinomies, on the contrary, display the structure of the “masculine” paradoxes of sexuation: “all x are submitted to the function F” (everything in the universe is caught in the universal network of causes and effects) on condition that there is one x which is exempted from this function (i.e., freedom is possible; there is an element which escapes the universal chain of causes and is capable of starting autonomously, out of itself, a new causal chain).

Feminists are usually repulsed by Lacan’s insistence on the feminine “not-all.” Does it not imply that women are somehow excluded from fully participating in the Symbolic order, unable to wholly integrate themselves into it, condemned to leading a parasitical existence? And, truly, do not these propositions belong to the best vein of patriarchal ideology, do they not bear witness to a hidden normativity to the detriment of woman? Man is able to find his identity in the Symbolic, to assume fully his symbolic mandate, whereas woman is condemned to hysterical splitting, to wearing masks, to
not wanting what she pretends to want. How are we to conceive of this feminine resistance to symbolic identification? We would commit a fatal mistake if we were to read such resistance as the effect of a preexistent feminine substance opposing symbolization, as if woman is split between her true Nature and the imposed symbolic mask. A cursory glance at Lacan’s “formulae of sexuation” tells us that woman’s exclusion does not mean that some positive entity is prevented from being integrated into the symbolic order: it would be wrong to conclude, from “not-all woman is submitted to the phallic signifier,” that there is something in her which is not submitted to it; there is no exception, and “woman” is this very nonexistent “nothing” which nonetheless makes the existing elements “not-all.” And the subject qua S, qua pure “I think” of substanceless self-relating, is precisely such a “nothingness” without any positive ontological consistency of its own, yet nonetheless introducing a gap into the fullness of being.

We are thereby at the paradoxical dialectic of the Limit and its Beyond. Lacan’s point is the logical priority of the not-all to the All, of the Limit to what lies Beyond: it is only afterwards, in a second time, that the void opened up by the Limit is filled out by a positive Beyond. Therein consists the anti-Cartesian sting of the Lacanian logic of “not-all” (as opposed to Descartes’ premise that the less perfect cannot act as the cause of what is more perfect, the premise which serves as the foundation for his proof of God’s existence): the incomplete “causes” the complete, the Imperfect opens up the place subsequently filled out by the mirage of the Perfect. From this perspective, the seemingly misogynist definition of woman as truncated man actually asserts her ontological priority: her “place” is that of a gap, of an abyss rendered invisible the moment “man” fills it out. Man is defined by the dynamic antinomy: beyond his phenomenal, bodily existence, he possesses a noumenal soul. If, in opposition to it, “woman has no soul,” this in no way entails that she is simply an object devoid of soul. The point is rather that this negativity, this lack as such, defines her: she is the Limit, the abyss, retroactively filled out by the mirage of soul.

“I am not where I think”

Both “feminine” and “masculine” positions are therefore defined by a fundamental antinomy: the “masculine” universe involves the universal network of causes and effects founded in an exception (the “free” subject which theoretically grasps its object, the causal universe of the Newtonian physics); the “feminine” universe is the universe of boundless dispersion and divisibility which, for that very reason, can never be rounded off into a universal Whole. In Kant, mathematical antinomy finds its solution in the nonexistence of its very object (universe qua totality of the objects of possible experience); no wonder, then, that in Lacan also “la Femme n’existe pas.” How does this notion of sexual difference affect the Cartesian cogito and Kant’s
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criticism of it? A commonplace of deconstructionist feminism is that the neutrality of the Cartesian cogito is false and conceals male primacy (on account of its abstract-universal character, etc.). What this critique fails to take into account is the moment of the “vanishing mediator,” the void of the pure “I think” which logically precedes the Cartesian res cogitans: the Cartesian cogito is “masculine” not because of its abstract-universal character, but because it is not “abstract” enough. In res cogitans, the nonsubstantial void of “I think” is already obfuscated, surreptitiously transformed into a “thinking substance”—and, to put it succinctly, sexual difference is equivalent to the difference between the Cartesian res cogitans and the Kantian pure form of “I think.”

In the span of three years, Lacan elaborated two opposed readings of the cogito. In both cases, he broke up the unity of cogito ergo sum: cogito is conceived of as the result of the forced choice between thought and being, i.e., “I am not where I think.” However, in the Seminar on the four fundamental concepts (1964–65), the choice is that of thought; the access to thought (“I think”) is paid for by the loss of being. Whereas in the unpublished Seminar on the logic of fantasy (1966–67), the choice is that of being; the access to being (“I am”) is paid for by the relegation of thought to the Unconscious. “I am not where I think” can thus be read in two ways: either as the Kantian “I think” qua pure form of apperception founded on the inaccessibility of the I’s being, of the “Thing which thinks,” or as the Cartesian affirmation of the subject’s being founded on the exclusion of thought. Our idea is to read these two versions of “I am not where I think” synchronously, as the duality which registers sexual difference: the “masculine” cogito results from the “subreption of the hypostasized consciousness”; it chooses being and thus relegates thought to the Unconscious (“I am, therefore it think”), whereas “la femme n’existe pas” involves a cogito which chooses thought and is thus reduced to the empty point of apperception prior to its “substantialization” in a res cogitans (“I think, therefore it ex-sists”).

This duality in the Lacanian thematization of cogito is the effect of a radical shift in his teaching which can be located in a very precise way: it occurs somewhere between the Seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis and the écrit “Kant avec Sade,” written two years later as the résumé of some ideas first proposed in the Seminar. The effects of this shift can be discerned at a multitude of levels. Let us begin with the motif of the sublime body dwelling in the uncanny space “between the two deaths.” This body is first identified as that of the sadist’s victim—the body of the innocent young woman who magically retains her beauty while undergoing endless unspeakable sufferings. In “Kant avec Sade,” however, suddenly the sadist executioner himself is conceived of as an object-instrument (of the Other’s jouissance): he acquires this status of objet a by way of transposing his subjective splitting onto his victim, S. Closely connected with this change in the
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motif of the sublime body is the ambiguous status of Antigone: on the one hand, she epitomizes desire qua desire of the Other (the desire with regard to which she does not yield is the desire of the big Other, of mores, which demands that the (brother’s) body be integrated into the symbolic tradition by way of the appropriate funeral rite); on the other hand, her suicidal act involves a willing self-exclusion from the big Other, a suspension of the Other’s existence. On a more general level, this shift generates a fundamental tension in Lacan’s approach to ethics. On the one hand, we have an ethics of desire, of “not giving way as to one’s desire” (ne pas céder sur son désir) — to put it briefly, yielding to enjoyment (jouissance) means compromising our desire, so the authentic ethical attitude involves sacrificing enjoyment for the sake of the purity of our desire. On the other hand, desire itself is conceived of as a defense against enjoyment, i.e., as a mode of compromise (we take flight into the endless symbolic metonymy of desire in order to avoid the real of jouissance), so that the only true ethics is that of drive, of our commitment to the sinthome which defines the contours of our relation to enjoyment. This tension between an ethics of desire and an ethics of drive further determines Lacan’s shift from distancing to identification. That is to say, up to the last stage of his teaching, the predominant ethical attitude of Lacanian psychoanalysis involved a kind of Brechtian gesture of distancing: first the distancing from imaginary fascination through the work of symbolic “mediation”; then the assumption of symbolic castration, of the lack constitutive of desire; then the “going through the fantasy”: the assumption of the inconsistency of the Other concealed by the fantasy-scenario. What all these definitions have in common is that they conceive of the concluding moment of the psychoanalytic cure as a kind of “exit”: as a move out from imaginary captivation, out from the Other. In his very last phase, however, Lacan outlines a reversal of perspective, unheard of as to its radicality: the concluding moment of the psychoanalytic cure is attained when the subject fully assumes his or her identification with the sinthome, when he or she unreservedly “yields” to it, rejoins the place where “it was,” giving up the false distance which defines our everyday life.

For that reason, we should avoid the trap of interpreting the second version of the cogito choice as Lacan’s “last word” in this matter, devalorizing the first version, or vice versa; instead, we should maintain their irreducible antagonism—again—as an index of the inscription of the sexual difference. But isn’t such a link between cogito and sexual difference all too abstract, all too nonhistorical? We can answer this reproach by referring to Marx, who in the Introduction to Grundrisse, demonstrated how an abstract category, which on account of its abstract-universal character is valid for all epochs, acquires social actuality only at a precisely determined historical moment. What Marx had in mind was the abstract notion of work, of using one’s working force, irrespective of its particular qualitative determination: this notion realizes itself, “becomes actual,” only in capitalism, where the
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working force is offered on the market as a commodity, exchangeable for money and as such indifferent to its particular determinations. What we encounter here is the logic of in itself / for itself in which a thing becomes what it always-already was: in capitalism, “work” becomes what it always-already was. And the same holds for the logic of sexual difference: it is only in Kant—i.e., at the moment when the subject is for the first time explicitly conceived of as nonsubstance, not as “part of the world”—that sexual difference becomes what it always-already was, not a difference of two substantial, positive entities, but the “ontological scandal” of the two types of antinomies and thereby the difference of the two modalities of cogito.

Cogito as the fantasy-gaze

In his critique of Foucault’s reading of Descartes, Derrida conceives cogito as a hyperbolic, excessive moment of madness, the vortex of pure “I think . . .” in its absolute seclusion which is not yet the inwardness, the self-presence, of a thinking substance. This cogito, prior to res cogitans, is the “feminine” cogito. The choice between feminine and masculine cogito is therefore more intricate than it may seem; it eludes the clear-cut alternative of “thought or being”:

- The “masculine” cogito chooses being, the “I am,” yet what it gets is being which is merely thought, not real being (cogito “ergo sum,” I think “therefore I am,” as Lacan writes it), i.e., it gets the fantasy-being, the being of a “person,” the being in “reality” whose frame is structured by fantasy.

- The “feminine” cogito chooses thought, the pure “I think,” yet what it gets is thought bereft of any further predicates, thought which coincides with pure being, or, more precisely, the hyperbolic point which is neither thought nor being. When, consequently, in his Seminar Encore, Lacan speaks of jouissance feminine, of woman enjoying it without knowing it, this in no way entails her access to some ineffable fullness of being: as he explicitly points out, jouissance feminine is nonexistent.

The publicity poster for Alien (on the left side the head of the ET-monster, the slimy metal skull, fixing its gaze on Sigourney Weaver; on the right the terrified face of Sigourney Weaver with her eyes lowered, diverting her gaze from the monster, yet her whole attention fixed on it) could be titled “death and the maiden”: here we encounter cogito at its purest when (what will become) the subject constitutes itself by rejecting the slimy substance of jouissance. It is therefore not sufficient to say that It (the alien Thing) is a “projection of our own repressed”: the I itself constitutes itself by way of rejection of the Thing, by way of assuming a distance toward the substance of enjoyment. In this punctuality of pure horror she thinks; she is reduced to pure thought: the moment we abstain from the confrontation with the “alien,” the moment we recoil from this stain of horror and retreat to the heaven of our “being,” at some decentered place “it” begins to think. This,
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then, is Lacan's version of "the spirit is a bone": the pure "I think" takes place only when the subject endures the confrontation with the senseless stain of jouissance. And do we not encounter another version of it in E. A. Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," one of the recurrent references of Lacan? When Valdemar, for a brief moment awakened from the sleep of death, utters the "impossible" statement "I am dead!", his body, which hitherto retained the frozen, stiff beauty of a Dorian Gray, all of a sudden changes into "a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence," in short, into a pure, formless, slimy substance of enjoyment. The necessary correlate of this slimy substance which exists in its fullness of being is the position of enunciation from which Valdemar pronounces his "I am dead!", the pure-impossible thought, cogito qua the point of thought bereft of being, qua nonexistent-impossible fantasy-gaze by way of which I observe my own nonbeing. At the very moment of my reduction to a pure cogito qua impossible gaze, a formless slime of the substance of jouissance had to emerge somewhere else. This is what Lacan aims at with his formula S 0 a.

Eventually, everything that has hitherto been said is condensed in Frank Capra's It's a Wonderful Life, a film whose unmistakable noir undertones belie the common reduction of Capra's universe to a New Deal populist humanism. When, out of utter despair, the hero (James Stewart) is on the brink of committing suicide, the angel Clarence stops him and submits him to a Kripkean mental experiment with possible universes: he sends him back to his small Massachusetts town, but renders him unrecognizable and devoid of his identity, including his past history, so that he can witness how things might have turned out in the case of his nonexistence. This way, the hero regains his optimism, since the catastrophic consequences of his absence are made manifest: his brother is dead, having drowned long ago (the hero was not there to save him), the old good-hearted pharmacist is rotting in jail (the hero was not there to warn him of inadvertently putting in poison when mixing a medicine), his wife is a despairing old maid, and, above all, his father's small loan society, providing credits to working-class families and thus serving as the last shield of the popular community against the ruthless local capitalist who wants to control the entire town, goes bankrupt (the hero was not there to take his father's business over). So, instead of a community where solidarity prevails and every poor family has a modest home of its own, the hero finds himself in a bursting, violent American small town, full of rude drunkards and noisy night clubs, totally controlled by the local magnate. What immediately strikes the eye here is that the America encountered by the hero when he witnesses the way things would turn out in his absence is the actual America, i.e., its features are taken from grim social reality (the dissolution of communal solidarity, the boastful vulgarity of the nightlife, etc.). The relationship of dream and reality is thus reversed: in the mental experiment that the hero is subjected to, what he experiences as a
nightmarish dream is the actual life. We see him encounter the real in the filmic dream, and it is precisely in order to escape this traumatic real that the hero takes refuge within the (diegetic) "reality," i.e., the ideological fantasy of an idyllic town community still able to resist the ruthless pressure of big Capital. This is what Lacan means when he says that the traumatic Real is encountered in dreams; this is the way ideology structures our experience of reality.

However, of primary interest here is the Cartesian dimension of this mental experiment. That is to say, when Stewart is sent back to his town as a stranger, he is bereft of his entire symbolic identity, reduced to a pure cogito: as the angel Clarence points out, he has no family, no personal history; even the small wound on his lips has disappeared. The only remaining kernel of certainty, the kernel of the Real which remains "the same" in the two different symbolic universes, is his cogito, the pure form of self-consciousness devoid of any content. Cogito designates this very point at which the "I" loses its support in the symbolic network of tradition and thus, in a sense which is far from metaphorical, ceases to exist. And the crucial point is that this pure cogito corresponds perfectly to the fantasy-gaze: in it, I found myself reduced to a nonexistent gaze, i.e., after losing all my effective predicates, I am nothing but a gaze paradoxically entitled to observe the world in which I do not exist (like, say, the fantasy of parental coitus where I am reduced to a gaze which observes my own conception, prior to my actual existence, or the fantasy of witnessing my own funeral). In this precise sense one can say that fantasy, in its most basic dimension, implies the choice of thought at the expense of being: in fantasy, I find myself reduced to the evanescent point of a thought contemplating the course of events during my absence, my nonbeing — in contrast to symptom, which implies the choice of being, since (as we shall see apropos of Freud's case of the wife who cuts her left ring-finger) what emerges in a symptom is precisely the thought which was lost, "repressed," when we chose being.

There is a further feature which confirms this fantasy-status of the Cartesian cogito. The fundamental structure of the fantasy-gaze involves a kind of self-duplication of the gaze: it is as if we are observing the "primordial scene" from behind our own eyes, as if we are not immediately identified with our look but stand somewhere "behind" it. Which is why, in Hitchcock's Rear Window, the window itself clearly acts as a gigantic eye (the curtain raising during the credits stands for opening the eyelids upon our awakening, etc.): Jefferies (James Stewart) is immobilized precisely insofar as he is reduced to the object-gaze behind his own gigantic eye, i.e., insofar as he occupies this space outside reality seen by the eye. What is crucial, however, is that Descartes, in his optical writings, outlined the same fantasy: that of a man interposing between himself and reality a dead animal's eye and, instead of directly observing reality, observing pictures that emerge in the back of the animal eye. Is not the same dispositif at work in a series of gothic or costume films: there is a gigantic eye up on the wall,
usually a relief sculpture, and all of a sudden, we become aware that there actually is somebody hidden behind the eye and observing what is going on? The paradox here is that the gaze is concealed by an eye, i.e., by its very organ. And is not the same economy at work in the (deservedly) most famous scene of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, with Kyle MacLachlan observing the sadomasochistic erotic game of Isabella Rossellini and Dennis Hopper through the crack in the wardrobe, the crack which clearly functions as a half-opened eye and thus posits the viewer behind his own eye? Our point here is the ultimate coincidence between this fantasy-gaze which immobilizes the subject, deprives him of his existence in reality, and reduces him to an object-gaze observing reality from which he is missing, and the Cartesian cogito which, at the height of its radical doubt, is also reduced to a nonexisting gaze acquiring distance from its own bodily presence, i.e., observing reality from "behind its own retina."

"Self-consciousness is an object"

This, then, is the first of Lacan's two versions of cogito: "I think, therefore it is." How are we to conceive of the other version, "I am, therefore it thinks"? Let us recall a small symptomatic act described in Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*:

During a session a young married woman mentioned by way of association that she had been cutting her nails the day before and "had cut into the flesh while she was trying to remove the soft cuticle at the bottom of the nail". This is of so little interest that we ask ourselves in surprise why it was recalled and mentioned at all, and we begin to suspect that what we are dealing with is a symptomatic act. And in fact it turned out that the finger which was the victim of her small act of clumsiness was the ring-finger, the one on which a wedding ring is worn. What is more, it was her wedding anniversary; and in the light of this the injury to the soft cuticle takes on a very definite meaning, which can easily be guessed. At the same time, too, she related a dream which alluded to her husband's clumsiness and her anesthesia as a wife. But why was it the ring-finger on her left hand which she injured, whereas a wedding ring is worn [in her country] on the right hand? Her husband is a lawyer, a "doctor of law" ['Doktor der Rechte," literally "doctor of right(s)"]", and as a girl her affections belonged in secret to a physician (jokingly called "Doktor der Linke" ['doctor of the left']). A "left-handed marriage", too, has a definite meaning.25

A trifling slip, a tiny cut on the ring finger, can well condense an entire chain of articulated reasoning about the subject's most intimate fate: it bears
witness to the knowledge that her marriage is a failure, to the regret for not choosing the true love, the “doctor of the left.” This tiny blood stain marks the place where her unconscious thought dwells, and what she is unable to do is to recognize herself in it, to say “I am there,” where this thought is articulated. Instead, the stain has to remain a blot which means nothing to her, if she is to retain the consistency of her self-identity. Or, as Lacan would put it, there is no I without the stain: “I am” only insofar as I am not where I think, that is to say, only insofar as the picture I am looking at contains a stain which condenses the decentered thought—only insofar as this stain remains a stain, i.e., insofar as I do not recognize myself in it, insofar as I am not there, in it. For this reason, Lacan returns again and again to the notion of anamorphosis: I perceive “normal” reality only insofar as the point at which the “it thinks” remains a formless stain.\(^\text{26}\)

The theoretical temptation to avoid here, of course, is that of identifying this stain too hastily with objet petit a: \(a\) is not the stain itself but rather the gaze in the precise sense of the point of view from which the stain can be perceived in its “true meaning,” the point from which, instead of the anamorphic distortion, it would be possible to discern the true contours of what the subject perceives as a formless stain. For that reason, the analyst occupies the place of objet a: he is supposed to know—to know what? The true meaning of the stain, precisely. Consequently, Lacan is quite justified in claiming that in paranoia objet a “becomes visible”: in the person of the persecutor, the object qua gaze assumes the palpable, empirical existence of an agency which “sees into me,” is able to read my thoughts.

In this sense, objet petit a stands for the point of self-consciousness: if I were able to occupy this point, it would be possible for me to abolish the stain, to say that “I am where I think.” It is here that the subversive potential of the Lacanian critique of self-consciousness qua self-transparency becomes visible: self-consciousness as such is literally decentered; the slip—the stain—bears witness to the ex-sistence of a certain decentered, external place where I do arrive at self-consciousness (Freud’s patient articulates the truth of herself, of her failed marriage, at a place that remains external to her sense of self-identity). Herein lies the scandal of psychoanalysis, unbearable for philosophy: what is at stake in the Lacanian critique of self-consciousness is not the commonplace according to which the subject is never fully transparent to itself, or can never arrive at full awareness of what is going on in its psyche; Lacan’s point is not that full self-consciousness is impossible since something always eludes the grasp of my conscious ego. Instead, it is the far more paradoxical thesis that this decentered hard kernel which eludes my grasp is ultimately self-consciousness itself; as to its status, self-consciousness is an external object out of my reach.\(^\text{27}\) More precisely, self-consciousness is the object qua objet petit a, qua the gaze able to perceive the true meaning of the stain which gives body to the unbearable truth about myself.\(^\text{28}\)
We can now see why self-consciousness is the very opposite of self-transparency: I am aware of myself only insofar as outside of me a place exists where the truth about me is articulated. What is not possible is for these two places (mine and the stain's) to coincide: the stain is not an unreflected remainder, something one could abolish via self-reflection, via a deeper insight into one's psychic life, since it is the very product of my self-awareness, its objective correlative. This is what Lacan has in mind when he writes “symptom” as “sinthome”: the symptom qua ciphered message waits to be dissolved by way of its interpretation, whereas the “sinthome” is a stain correlative to the very (non)being of the subject.

In order to exemplify this distinction, let us recall the two versions of *Cape Fear*, J. Lee Thompson's original from the early sixties and Martin Scorcese's remake from 1991. Although repelled by Scorcese's patronizing self-conscious attitude toward the original film, reviewers nonetheless approvingly noted how Scorcese accomplished a crucial shift. In the original version, the ex-convict (Robert Mitchum) is a figure of Evil who simply invades from outside the idyllic all-American family and derails its daily routine; whereas in Scorcese's remake, the ex-convict (Robert de Niro) materializes, gives body, to traumas and antagonistic tensions that already glow in the very heart of the family: the wife's sexual dissatisfaction, the daughter's awakened femininity and sense of independence. In short, Scorcese's version incorporates an interpretation homologous to the reading of Hitchcock's *Birds* that conceives of the ferocious birds' attacks as the materialization of the maternal superego, of the disturbance that already dwells in family life. Although such a reading may appear “deeper” than the allegedly “superficial” reduction of the force of Evil to an external threat, what gets lost with such a reading is precisely the remainder of an Outside that cannot be reduced to a secondary effect of inherent intersubjective tensions, since its exclusion is constitutive of the subject: such a remainder or object always adds itself to the intersubjective network, as a kind of “fellow traveler” of every intersubjective community. Consider the birds in Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Are they not, notwithstanding their intersubjective status, at their most radical such an overblown stain on a finger? When, upon crossing the bay for the first time, Melanie (Tippi Hedren) is attacked by a gull which strikes her head, she feels her head with a gloved hand and perceives on the tip of her forefinger a small red blood-stain; all the birds who later attack the town could be said to arise out of this tiny stain, the same as in *North-by-Northwest*, where the plane attacking Cary Grant on the empty cornfield is first perceived as a tiny, barely visible spot on the horizon.

This original doubling of self-consciousness provides the foundation of “intersubjectivity”: if, as the Hegelian commonplace goes, self-consciousness is self-consciousness only through the mediation of another self-consciousness, then my self-awareness—precisely insofar as this self-awareness is not the same as self-transparency—causes the emergence of a decentered “it
thinks." When the split between "I am" and "it thinks" is translated into the standard motif of intersubjectivity, what gets lost is the radical asymmetry of the two terms. The "other" is originally an object, an opaque stain which hinders my self-transparency by giving a body to what has to be excluded if I am to emerge. In other words, the ultimate paradox of the dialectics of self-consciousness is that it inverts the standard doxa according to which "consciousness" relates to a heterogeneous, external object, while "self-consciousness" abolishes this decenteredness: instead, the object is stricto sensu the correlate of self-consciousness. No object exists prior to self-consciousness, since the object originally emerges as that opaque kernel which has to be excluded if I am to gain awareness of myself. Or, to put it in Lacanian terms, the original intersubjective correlate of the subject — of the barred S—is not another S, but S, the opaque, full Other possessing what the subject constitutively lacks (being, knowledge). In this precise sense the Other—the other human being—is originally the impenetrable, substantial Thing.

A radical conclusion thus can be drawn: the reproach according to which the Cartesian-Kantian cogito is "monological" and as such "represses" an original intersubjectivity totally misses the point. It is the exact opposite which is true: the pre-Cartesian individual immediately, inherently belongs to a community, but intersubjectivity and (belonging to a) community are to be strictly opposed, i.e., intersubjectivity senso strictu becomes possible, thinkable, only with Kant, with the notion of subject qua S, the empty form of apperception which needs S as correlative to its nonbeing. In other words, intersubjectivity stricto sensu involves the subject's radical decenteredness: only when my self-consciousness is externalized in an object do I begin to look for it in another subject. What we have prior to the Kantian subject is not the intersubjectivity proper but a community of individuals who share a common universal-substantial ground and participate in it. It is only with Kant, with his notion of the subject as S, as the empty form of self-apperception, as an entity which constitutively "does not know what it is," that the Other Subject is needed in order for me to define my own identity: what the Other thinks I am is inscribed into the very heart of my own most intimate self-identity. The ambiguity that sticks to the Lacanian notion of the big Other—another subject in its impenetrable opacity, yet at the same time the very symbolic structure, the neutral field in which I encounter other subjects—is therefore far from being the result of a simple confusion: it gives expression to a deep structural necessity. Precisely insofar as I am S, I cannot conceive of myself as participating at some common substance, i.e., this substance necessarily opposes itself to me in the guise of the Other Subject.

"I doubt, therefore I am"

Lacan's achievement with regard to cogito and doubt could be summed up in the elementary, but nonetheless far-reaching operation of perceiving
(and then drawing theoretical consequences from) the affinity between the Cartesian doubt and the doubt that dwells at the very heart of compulsive (obsessive) neurosis. This step in no way amounts to a “psychiatrization of philosophy”—the reduction of philosophical attitudes to an expression of pathological states of mind—but rather to its exact contrary, the “philosophization” of clinical categories: with Lacan, compulsive neurosis, perversion, hysteria, etc., cease to function as simple clinical designations and become names for existential-ontological positions, for what Hegel, in the Introduction to his *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, called *Stellungen des Gedankens zur Objektivitaet*, “attitudes of thought toward objectivity.”

In short, Lacan as it were supplements Descartes’ *I doubt, therefore I am*—the absolute certainty provided by the fact that my most radical doubt implies my existence qua thinking subject—with another turn of the screw, reversing its logic: *I am only insofar as I doubt*. This way, we obtain the elementary formula of the compulsive neurotic’s attitude: the neurotic clings to his doubt, to his indeterminate status, as the only firm support of his being, and is extremely apprehensive of the prospect of being compelled to make a decision which would cut short his oscillation, his neither-nor status. Far from undermining the subject’s composure or even threatening to disintegrate his self-identity, this uncertainty provides his minimal ontological consistency. Suffice it to recall Lina, the heroine of Hitchcock’s *Suspicion*. Tormented by suspicions that her husband is about to kill her, she persists in her indecision, putting off indefinitely the act which would instantly enable her to dissolve the unbearable tension. In the famous final scene, her gaze becomes transfixed upon the white glass of milk containing the answer to the doubts and suspicions that are tormenting her, yet she is totally immobilized, unable to act—why? Because by finding an answer to her suspicions she would thereby lose her status as a subject. It is this inherent dialectical inversion that characterizes the subject of doubt and suspicion: “officially,” he strives desperately for certainty, for an unambiguous answer that would provide the remedy against the worm of doubt that is consuming him; actually, the true catastrophe he is trying to evade at any price is this very solution, the emergence of a final, unambiguous answer, which is why he endlessly sticks to his uncertain, indeterminate, oscillating status. There is a kind of reflective reversal at work here: the subject persists in his indecision and puts off the choice not because he is afraid that, by choosing one pole of the alternative, he would lose the other pole (that, in the case of Lina, by opting for innocence, she would have to accept the fact that her husband is a mere small-time crook, devoid of any inner strength, even in the direction of Evil). What he truly fears to lose is doubt as such, the uncertainty, the open state where everything is still possible, where none of the options are precluded. It is for that reason that Lacan confers on the act the status of *object*: far from designating the very dimension of subjectivity (“subjects act, objects are acted upon”), the act cuts short the
indeterminacy which provides the distance that separates the subject from the world of objects.

These considerations enable us to approach from a new perspective the motif of “Kant avec Sade.” Today, it is a commonplace to qualify Kant as a compulsive neurotic: the uncertain status of the subject is inscribed into the very heart of the Kantian ethics, i.e., the Kantian subject is by definition never “at the height of his task”; he is forever tortured by the possibility that his ethical act, although in accordance with duty, was not accomplished for the sake of duty itself, but was motivated by some hidden “pathological” considerations (that, by accomplishing my duty, I will arouse respect and veneration in others, for example). What remains hidden to Kant, what he renders invisible by way of his logic of the Ought (Sollen), i.e., of the infinite, asymptotic process of realizing the moral Ideal, is that it is this very stain of uncertainty which sustains the dimension of ethical universality: the Kantian subject desperately clings to his doubt, to his uncertainty, in order to retain his ethical status. What we have in mind here is not the commonplace according to which, once the Ideal is realized, all life-tension is lost and there is nothing but lethargic boredom in store for us. Something far more precise is at stake: once the “pathological” stain is missing, the universal collapses into the particular. This, precisely, is what occurs in Sadeian perversion, which, for that very reason, reverses the Kantian compulsive uncertainty into absolute certainty: a pervert knows perfectly what he is doing, what the Other wants from him, since he conceives of himself as an instrument-object of the Other’s Will-to-Enjoy. In this precise sense Sade stages the truth of Kant: you want an ethical act free of any compulsive doubt? Here you have the Sadeian perversion!30

Of what, more exactly, does this ontological uncertainty of the subject consist? The key to it is provided by the link between anxiety and the desire of the Other: anxiety is aroused by the desire of the Other in the sense that “I do not know what object a I am for the desire of the Other.” What does the Other want from me, what is there “in me more than myself” on account of which I am an object of the Other’s desire—or, in philosophical terms, which is my place in the substance, in the “great chain of being”? The core of anxiety is this absolute uncertainty as to what I am: “I do not know what I am (for the Other, since I am what I am only for the Other).” This uncertainty defines the subject: the subject “is” only as a “crack in the substance,” only insofar as his status in the Other oscillates. And the position of the masochist pervert is ultimately an attempt to elude this uncertainty, which is why it involves the loss of the status of the subject, i.e., a radical self-objectivization: the pervert knows what he is for the Other, since he posits himself as the object-instrument of the Other’s jouissance.31

In this regard, the position of the pervert is uncannily close to that of the analyst: they are separated only by a thin, almost invisible line. It is by no accident that the upper level of Lacan’s mathem of the discourse of the
analyst reproduces the formula of perversion \( (a \diamond b) \). On account of his or her passivity, the analyst functions as objet a for the analysand, as the latter’s fantasy-frame, as a kind of blank screen onto which the analysand projects his or her fantasies. This is also why the formula of perversion inverts that of the fantasy \( (b \diamond a) \): the pervert’s ultimate fantasy is to be a perfect servant of his other’s (partner’s) fantasies, to offer himself as an instrument of the other’s Will-to-Enjoy (like Don Giovanni, for example, who seduces women by enacting one by one the specific fantasy of each of them: Lacan was quite right in pointing out that Don Giovanni is a feminine myth). The entire difference between the pervert and the analyst hinges on a certain invisible limit, on a certain “nothing” that separates them: the pervert confirms the subject’s fantasy, whereas the analyst induces him or her to “traverse” it, to gain a minimal distance toward it, by way of rendering visible the void (the lack in the Other) covered up by the fantasy-scenario.

For that reason, it is quite legitimate to associate perversion, in its fundamental dimension, with the “masochism” of the anal phase. In his Seminar on transference, Lacan made it clear how the passage from the oral into the anal phase has nothing whatsoever to do with the process of biological maturation, but is entirely founded in a certain dialectical shift in the intersubjective symbolic economy. The anal phase is defined by the adaptation of the subject’s desire to the demand of the Other, i.e., the object-cause of the subject’s desire (a) coincides with the Other’s demand, which is why Lacan’s mathem for the “anal” compulsive neurosis is that of drive, \( S \diamond D \). True, the oral phase does imply an attitude of wanting to “devour it all” and thereby satisfy all needs; however, due to the child’s dependency, caused by the premature birth of the human animal, satisfying its needs, from the very beginning, is “mediated” by, hinges upon, the demand addressed to the Other (primarily mother) to provide the objects which meet the child’s needs. What then occurs in the anal phase is a dialectical reversal in this relationship between need and demand: the satisfaction of a need is subordinated to the demand of the Other, i.e., the subject (child) can only satisfy his need on condition that he thereby complies with the Other’s demand. Let us recall the notorious case of defecation: the child enters the “anal phase” when he strives to satisfy his need to defecate in a way that complies with the mother’s demand to do it regularly, into the chamber-pot and not into his pants, etc. The same holds for food: the child eats in order to demonstrate how well-behaved he is, ready to fulfill his mother’s demand to finish the plate and to do it properly, without dirtying his hands and the table. In short, we satisfy our needs in order to earn our place in the social order. Therein lies the fundamental impediment of the anal phase: pleasure is “barred,” prohibited, in its immediacy, i.e., insofar as it involves taking a direct satisfaction in the object; pleasure is permitted only in the function of complying with the Other’s demand. In this precise sense, the anal phase provides the basic matrix for the obsessional, compulsive attitude. It would be easy to quote here
further examples from adult life; suffice it to recall what is perhaps its clearest case in "postmodern" theory, namely the obsession with Hitchcock, the endless flow of books and conferences which endeavor to discern theoretical finesses even in his minor films (the "save-the-failures" movement). Can't we account, at least partially, for this obsession by way of a compulsive "bad conscience" on the part of intellectuals who, prevented from simply yielding to the pleasures of Hitchcock's films, feel obliged to prove that they actually watch Hitchcock in order to demonstrate some theoretical point (the mechanism of the spectator's identification, the vicissitudes of male voyeurism, etc.)? I am allowed to enjoy something only insofar as it serves Theory qua my big Other. The Hegelian character of this reversal of oral into anal economy cannot but strike the eye: the satisfaction of our need by means of the Other who answers our demand "attains its truth" when complying with the Other's demand is directly posited as the sine qua non, the "transcendental frame," the condition of possibility, of satisfying our needs. And the function of the third, "phallic," phase, of course, is precisely to disengage the subject from this enslavement to the demand of the Other.

The precipitous identification

The Althusserian "ideological interpellation" designates the retroactive illusion of "always-already": the reverse of the ideological recognition is the misrecognition of the performative dimension. That is to say, when the subject recognizes himself in an ideological call, he automatically over-looks the fact that this very formal act of recognition creates the content one recognizes oneself in. (Suffice it to evoke the classical case of the Stalinist Communist: when he recognizes himself as the instrument of the "objective necessity of the historical progress toward communism," he misrecognizes the fact that this "objective necessity" exists only insofar as it is created by the Communist discourse, only insofar as Communists invoke it as the legitimation of their activity.) What is missing from the Althusserian account of this gesture of symbolic identification, of recognizing oneself in a symbolic mandate, is that it is a move aimed at resolving the deadlock of the subject's radical uncertainty as to its status (what am I qua object for the Other?). The first thing to do apropos of interpellation in a Lacanian approach is therefore to reverse Althusser's formula of ideology which "interpellates individuals into subjects": it is never the individual which is interpellated as subject, into subject; it is on the contrary the subject itself who is interpellated as x (some specific subject-position, symbolic identity or mandate), thereby eluding the abyss of S. In classical liberal ideology, the subject is interpellated precisely as "individual." The often quoted Marx-brothers joke on Ravelli ("You look like Ravelli.—But I am Ravelli!—No wonder, then, that you look like him!"") ends with Ravelli jubilantly concluding "So I do look alike!" This joyful assumption of a mandate, this
triumphant ascertaining that I am like my own symbolic figure, gives expression to the relief that I succeeded in avoiding the uncertainty of "Che vuoi?". 35

For that reason, the subject’s symbolic identification always has an anticipatory, hastening character (similar to, yet not to be confused with, the anticipatory recognition of "myself" in the mirror image). As pointed out by Lacan already in the forties, in his famous paper on logical time, 36 the fundamental form of symbolic identification, i.e., of assuming a symbolic mandate, is for me to “recognize myself as X,” to proclaim, to promulgate myself as X, in order to overtake others who might expel me from the community of those who “belong to X.” Here is the somewhat simplified and abbreviated version of the logical puzzle of three prisoners apropos of which Lacan develops the three modalities of the logical time: The head of a prison can, on the basis of amnesty, release one of the three prisoners. In order to decide which one, he makes them pass a logical test. The prisoners know that there are five hats, three of them white and two black. Three of these hats are distributed to the prisoners who then sit down in a triangle, so that each of them can see the color of the hats of the two others, but not the color of the hat on his own head. The winner is the one who first guesses the color of his own hat, which he signifies by standing up and leaving the room. We have three possible situations:

- If one prisoner has a white hat and the other two black hats, the one with the white hat can immediately “see” that his is white by way of a simple reasoning: “There are only two black hats; I see them on the others’ heads, so mine is white.” So there is no time involved here, only an “instant of the gaze.”

- The second possibility is that there are two white and one black hat. If mine is white, I will reason this way: “I see one black and one white hat, so mine is either white or black. However, if mine is black, then the prisoner with the white hat would see two black hats and immediately conclude that his is white; since he does not do it, mine is also white.” Here, some time had to elapse, i.e., we already need a certain “time for understanding”: I as it were “transpose” myself into the reasoning of the other; I arrive at my conclusion on the basis of the fact that the other does not act.

- The third possibility—three white hats—is the most complex. The reasoning goes here like this: “I see two white hats, so mine is either white or black. If mine is black, then any of the two remaining prisoners would reason the following way: ‘I see a black and a white hat. So if mine is black, the prisoner with the white hat would see two black hats and would stand up and leave immediately. However, he does not do it. So mine is white. I shall stand up and leave.’ But since none of the other two prisoners stands up, mine is also white.”

Here, however, Lacan points out how this solution requires a double delay and a hindered, interrupted gesture. That is to say, if all three prisoners are
of equal intelligence, then, after the first delay, i.e., upon noticing that none
of the others is making any move, they will all rise at the same moment—and
then stiffen, exchanging perplexed glances: the problem is that they will not
know the meaning of the other's gesture (each of them will ask himself: "Did
he others rise for the same reason as me, or did they do it because they saw
on my head a black hat?"). Only now, upon noticing that they all share the
same hesitation, they will be able to jump to the final conclusion: the very
act of the shared hesitation is a proof that they are all in the same situation,
_i.e._, that they all have white hats on their heads. At this precise moment,
lelay shifts into haste, with each of the prisoners saying to himself "Let me
ush to the door before the others overtake me!"

It is easy to recognize how a specific mode of subjectivity corresponds to
each of the three moments of the logical time: the "instant of gaze" implies
the impersonal "one" ("one sees"), the neutral subject of logical reasoning
without any intersubjective dialectic; the "time for understanding" already
involves intersubjectivity, _i.e._, in order for me to arrive at the conclusion that
my hat is white, I have to "transpose" myself into the other's reasoning (if
he other with the white hat were to see on my head a black hat, he would
immediately know that his must be black and stand up; since he does not do
t, mine is also white). However, this intersubjectivity remains that of the
indefinite reciprocal subject, "as Lacan puts it: a simple reciprocal capabil-
ity of taking into account the other's reasoning. It is only the third moment,
he "moment of conclusion," which provides the true "genesis of the I":
what takes place in it is the shift from _S_ to _S_1, from the void of the subject
pitomized by the radical uncertainty as to what I am, _i.e._, by the utter
undecidability of my status, to the conclusion that I am white, to the assump-
ion of the symbolic identity—"That's me!"

We must bear in mind here the anti-Lévi-Straussian thrust of these
Lacan's ruminations. Claude Lévi-Strauss conceived the symbolic order as
not as a subjective structure, an objective field in which every individual occupies,
ills in, his or her preordained place; what Lacan invokes is the "genesis" of
his objective socio-symbolic identity: if we simply wait for a symbolic place
be allotted to us, we will never live to see it. That is, in the case of a
symbolic mandate, we never simply ascertain what we are; we "become what
we are" by means of a precipitous subjective gesture. This precipitous identi-
ication involves the shift from object to signifier: the (white or black) hat is
he object I am, and its invisibility to me renders the fact that I can never get
an insight into "what I am as an object" (i.e., _S_ and _a_ are topologically
compatible). When I say "I am white," I assume a symbolic identity which
ills out the void of the uncertainty as to my being. What accounts for this
nticipatory overtaking is the _inconclusive_ character of the causal chain: the
ymbolic order is ruled by the "principle of insufficient reason": within
he space of symbolic intersubjectivity, I can never simply ascertain what I
m, which is why my "objective" social identity is established by means of
“subjective” anticipation. The significant detail usually passed over in silence is that Lacan, in his text on logical time, quotes as the exemplary political case of such collective identification the Stalinist Communist’s affirmation of orthodoxy: I hasten to promulgate my true Communist credentials out of fear that others will expel me as a revisionist traitor. [38]

Therein resides the ambiguous link between the Symbolic and death: by assuming a symbolic identity, i.e., by identifying myself with a symbol which is potentially my epitaph, I as it were “outpass myself into death.” However, this precipitation toward death at the same time functions as its opposite; it is designed to forestall death, to assure my posthumous life in the symbolic tradition which will outlive my death—an obsessive strategy, if there ever was one: in an act of precipitous identification I hasten to assume death in order to avoid it.

Anticipatory identification is therefore a kind of preemptive strike, an attempt to provide in advance an answer to “what I am for the Other” and thus to assuage the anxiety that pertains to the desire of the Other: the signifier which represents me in the Other resolves the impasse of what object I am for the Other. What I actually overtake by way of symbolic identification is therefore object a in myself; as to its formal structure, symbolic identification is always a “flight forward” from the object that I am. By way of saying “You are my wife,” for example, I elude and obliterate my radical uncertainty as to what you are in the very kernel of your being, qua Thing. [39] This is what is missing from Althusser’s account of interpellation: it does justice to the moment of retroactivity, to the illusion of the “always-already,” yet it leaves out of consideration the anticipatory overtaking qua inherent reverse of this retroactivity.

One of the ways to make this crucial point clear is via a detour, a foray into one of the finest achievements of analytical philosophy, Grice’s elaboration of the structure of (intentional) meaning. [40] According to Grice, when we mean to say something in the full sense of the term, this involves an intricate four-level structure: (1) we say X; (2) the addressee must perceive that we intentionally said X, i.e., that the enunciation of X was an intentional act on our part; (3) we must intend that the addressee must perceive not only our saying X, but that we want him to perceive that we intentionally wanted to say X; (4) the addressee must perceive (must be aware of) (3), i.e., our intention that we want him to perceive our saying X, as an intentional act. In short, our saying “This room is bright” is a case of successful communication only if the addressee is aware that, by saying “This room is bright,” we not only wanted to say that the room is bright, but also wanted him to be aware that we wanted him to perceive our saying “This room is bright” as an intentional act. If this seems a hair-splitting, contrived, useless analysis, suffice it to recall a situation when, lost in a foreign city, we listen to one of its inhabitants desperately trying to make us understand something in his native language: what we encounter here is level 4 in its pure, as it were distilled
form. That is to say, although we do not know what, precisely, the inhabitant wants to tell us, we are well aware not only of the fact that he wants to tell us something, but also of the fact that he wants us to notice his very endeavor to tell us something. Our point is that the structure of a hysterical symptom is exactly homologous to Grice’s level 4: what is at stake in a symptom is not only the hysteric’s attempt to deliver a message (the meaning of the symptom that waits to be deciphered), but, at a more fundamental level, his desperate endeavor to affirm himself, to be accepted as a partner in communication. What he ultimately wants to tell us is that his symptom is not a meaningless physiological disturbance, i.e., that we have to lend him an ear since he has something to tell us. In short, the ultimate meaning of the symptom is that the Other should take notice of the fact that it has a meaning.

Perhaps it is with regard to this feature that a computer message differs from human intersubjectivity: what the computer lacks is precisely this self-referentiality (in Hegelese: reflectivity) of meaning. And, again, it is not difficult to discern in this self-referentiality the contours of a logical temporality: by means of the signifier of this reflective meaning, i.e., of the signifier which “means” only the presence of meaning, we are able as it were to “overtake” ourselves and, in an anticipatory move, establish our identity not in some positive content but in a pure self-referential signifying form alluding to a meaning-to-come. Such is, in the last resort, the logic of every ideological Master-Signifier in the name of which we fight our battles: fatherland, America, socialism, etc.—do they not all designate an identification not with a clearly defined positive content but with the very gesture of identification? When we say “I believe in x (America, socialism...),” the ultimate meaning of it is pure intersubjectivity: it means that I believe that I am not alone, that I believe that there are also others who believe in x. The ideological Cause is stricto sensu an effect of the belief poured into it from the side of its subjects.

This paradox of the “precipitated” identification with the unknown is what Lacan has in mind when he determines the phallic (paternal) signifier as the signifier of the lack of the signifier. If this reflective reversal of the lack of the signifier into the signifier of the lack seems contrived, suffice it to recall the story of Malcolm X, the legendary African-American leader. Here are some excerpts from a New York Times article apropos of Spike Lee’s film Malcolm X—and the New York Times for sure cannot be accused of a Lacanian bias:

X stands for the unknown. The unknown language, religion, ancestors and cultures of the African American. X is a replacement for the last name given to the slaves by the slave master. . . . “X” can denote experimentation, danger, poison, obscenity and the drug ecstasy. It is also the signature of a person who cannot write his or her name. . . . The irony is that Malcolm X, like many of the Nation of Islam and
other blacks in the 60's, assumed the letter—now held to represent his identity—as an expression of a lack of identity.\(^{43}\)

The gesture of Malcolm X, his act of replacing the imposed family name, the Name-of-the-Father, with the symbol of the unknown, is far more complex than it may seem. What we must avoid is getting lured into the "search for the lost origins": we totally miss the point if we reduce the gesture of Malcolm X to a simple case of longing for the lost Origins (for the "true" African ethnic identity, lost when blacks were torn out of their original environs by slave traders). The point is rather that this reference to the lost Origins enables the subject to elude the grasp of the imposed symbolic identity and to "choose freedom," the lack of fixed identity. X qua void exceeds every positive symbolic identity: the moment its gap emerges, we find ourselves in the fantasy domain of "experimentation, danger, poison, obscenity and the drug ecstasy" that no new symbolic identity can fill out.

The further point to be made, however, is that this identification with the unknown, far from being an exception, \textit{brings to light the feature constitutive of symbolic identification as such}: every symbolic identification is ultimately identification with an X, with an "empty" signifier which stands for the unknown content, i.e., it makes us identify with the very symbol of a lack of identity. The Name-of-the-Father, the signifier of symbolic identity par excellence, is, as Lacan emphasizes again and again, the "signifier without a signified." What this means with regard to Malcolm X is that although X is meant to stand for the lost African Origins, at the same time it stands for their irrevocable \textit{loss}: by way of identifying ourselves with X, we "consummate" the loss of Origins. The irony therefore is that in the very act of returning to "maternal" Origins, of marking our commitment to them, we irrevocably renounce them. Or, to put it in Lacanian terms, Malcolm X's gesture is the Oedipal gesture at its purest: the gesture of substituting Name-of-the-Father for the desire of the mother:\(^{44}\)

\[
\frac{\text{Name-of-the-Father}}{\text{the desire of the mother}}
\]

What is crucial here is the virtual character of the Name-of-the-Father: the paternal metaphor is an "X" in the sense that it opens up the space of virtual meaning; it stands for all possible future meanings. As to this virtual character that pertains to the symbolic order, the parallel to the capitalist financial system is most instructive. As we know from Keynes onwards, the capitalist economy is "virtual" in a very precise sense: Keynes's favorite maxim was that in the long term we are all dead; the paradox of the capitalist economics is that our borrowing from the (virtual) future, i.e., our printing of money "uncovered" in "real" values, can bring about real effects (growth). Herein lies the crucial difference between Keynes and economic
COGITO AND THE SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

“fundamentalists” who favor the actual “settling of accounts” (reimbursing the credits, abolishing the “borrowing from the future”). Keynes’s point is not simply that “unnatural” crediting by way of “uncovered” money, inflation, or state spending can provide the impulse which results in actual economic growth and thus enables us eventually to achieve a balance whereby we settle accounts at a much higher level of economic prosperity. Keynes concedes that the moment of some final “settling of accounts” would be a catastrophe, that the entire system would collapse. Yet the art of economic politics is precisely to prolong the virtual game and thus to postpone ad infinitum the moment of final settlement. In this precise sense capitalism is a “virtual” system: it is sustained by a purely virtual keeping of accounts; debts are incurred which will never be cleared. However, although purely fictitious, this “balancing” must be preserved as a kind of Kantian “regulative Idea” if the system is to survive. What Marx as well as strict monetarists commonly hold against Keynes is the conviction that sometimes, sooner or later, the moment will arrive when we actually shall have to “settle accounts,” reimburse debts and thus place the system on its proper, “natural” foundations. Lacan’s notion of the debt that pertains to the very notion of the symbolic order is strictly homologous to this capitalist debt: sense as such is never “proper”; it is always advanced, “borrowed from the future”; it lives on the account of the virtual future sense. The Stalinist Communist who gets caught in a vicious circle by justifying his present acts, including the sacrifice of millions of lives, with reference to a future Communist paradise brought about by these acts, i.e., who cites beneficent future consequences as what will retroactively redeem present atrocities, simply renders visible the underlying temporal structure of sense as such.

Notes

2 This notion of the Sublime provides a new approach to Lacan’s “Kant avec Sade,” i.e., his thesis on Sade as the truth of Kant. Let us begin with an everyday question: what accounts for the (alleged) charm of sexual manuals? That is to say, it is clear that we do not really browse them to learn things; what attracts us is that the activity which epitomizes the transgression of every rule (when we are engaged in “it,” we are not supposed to think, but just to yield to passions . . . ) assumes the form of its opposite and becomes an object of school-like drill. (A common piece of advice actually concerns achieving sexual excitement by imitating—during the foreplay, at least—the procedure of cold, asexual instrumental activity: I discuss with my partner in detail the steps of what we will do, we ponder the pros and cons of different possibilities—shall we begin with cunnilingus or not?—assessing every point as if we are dealing with an elaborate technical operation. Sometimes, this “turns us on.”) What we encounter here is a kind of paradoxically inverted sublime: in the Kantian Sublime, the boundless chaos of sensible experience (raging storm, breathtaking abysses) renders forth the presentiment of the pure Idea of Reason whose Measure is so large that no object of experience, not even nature in the wildest and mightiest display of its forces, can come close to it (i.e., here, the
Measure, the ideal Order, is on the side of the unattainable Idea, and the formless chaos on the side of sensible experience); whereas in the case of “bureaucratized sexuality,” the relationship is reversed: sexual arousal, as the exemplary case of the state which eludes instrumental regimentation, is evoked by way of its opposite, by way of being treated as bureaucratic duty. Perhaps, it is (also) in this sense that Sade is the truth of Kant: the sadist who enjoys performing sex as an instrumentalized bureaucratic duty reverses and thereby brings to its truth the Kantian Sublime in which we become aware of the suprasensible Measure through the chaotic, boundless character of our experience.

3 In this precise sense, the Kantian distinction between the constitutive and the regulative dimension corresponds to the Lacanian distinction between knowledge and supposed knowledge: the teleological regulative Idea has the status of “knowledge in the real,” of the inherent rational order in nature which, although theoretically unprovable, has to be presupposed if our positive knowledge (structured through constitutive categories) is to be possible.

4 The choice of Raymond Massey for the role of the superego-driven governor is deeply significant if we bear in mind his screen persona: he also played John Brown, whose name epitomizes (in the eyes of the predominant ideology) the obsession with justice which, on account of its overzealous character, turns into ravaging Evil.

5 If we are not to miss this paradox of the Christian Sublime, it is of crucial importance that we bear in mind the structure of the Möbius strip that pertains to judgment in Hegelian theory. The judgment of reflection, for example—“Socrates is mortal”—renders the identity of the two moments: the (logical) subject, a certain nonconceptual “this” pointed out, designated, by a name (standing for the immediate, indeterminate, unity-with-itself of an entity), and the predicate which is this same unity in its mode of alienation, i.e., separated, torn from itself, opposed to itself in the guise of a universal “reflective determination” under which the immediate “this” is subsumed (“reflective determination” of an entity is its very essence, the innermost kernel of its identity, yet conceived in the guise of its opposite, of a totally indifferent and external universal determination). Consequently, we do not have two elements united, tied up, in the common space of the judgment, but one and the same element which appears first in the mode of immediate-nonreflected unity-with-itself (“this,” the logical subject), then in the mode of its opposite, of self-externalization, i.e., as an abstract reflective determination. Perhaps even more appropriate than this metaphor of the two surfaces of the Möbius strip is the science fiction paradox of the time-travel loop where the subject encounters a different version of itself, i.e., runs into its own later incarnation. Therein consists Hegel’s point: subject and predicate are identical, the same thing, their difference is purely topological.

6 The same paradox is repeated at the very end of the chapter on Spirit, where we pass from the objective Spirit to the sphere of the Absolute (religion, philosophy) via the resolution of the impasses of the Beautiful Soul. Significantly, Hegel here for the first time uses the term “reconciliation” (Versöhnung): the Beautiful Soul has to recognize its complicity with the wicked ways of the world it deplores; it has to accept the factum brutum of its environs as “its own.”

7 In the history of modern cinema, the progressive modes of how to present “pathological” libidinal economies (hysteria, etc.) perfectly follows the matrix of this “downward-synthesis.” Up to a certain point, formal procedures—extravagant as they may appear—remain “anchored” in the diegetic reality, i.e., they express the “pathology” of a diegetic personality. In the films of Alain Resnais, for example, the formal convolutions (time-loops, etc.) render the paradoxes of the memory of a diegetic personality; in John Cassavetes’ work, the diegetic content—the hysteria
of everyday American married life—contaminates the cinematic form itself (the camera gets "too close" to the faces, rendering in detail the repulsive facial convulsions; shots from a hand-carried camera confer upon the very cinematic frame the precipitous trembling that characterizes hysterical economy; etc.). At a certain point, however, the diegetic underpinning "explodes" and the film sets out to render directly the hysterical economy, bypassing altogether the diegetic content. It is thus impossible to distinguish three phases:

—"realism": the form is not yet contaminated by the hysterical, etc. content; no matter how pathological the diegetic content, it is rendered from a neutral distance of an "objective" narrative.

—its first negation: the hysterical content "contaminates" form itself. In many a modernist film, the form seems to narrate its own story, which undermines the film's "official" diegetic content; this antagonism between diegetic content and form, the surplus of the latter over the former, is what the standard use of the term "writing" designates. Suffice it to recall the famous Cahiers du cinema analysis of John Ford's *The Young Lincoln* in which the form registers the ominous, superego, monstrous-inhuman side of the main character, and thus runs counter to the patriotic elevation of Lincoln, the "official" theme of the film.

—the "negation of the negation": the modernist "abstract cinema" which renders its "pathological" content directly, renouncing the detour through a consistent diegetic reality.

8 See section 3 of Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991). What is of special interest here are the perverse paradoxes Kant gets involved in when he endeavors to articulate the interaction of a beautiful woman and a sublime man: man's ultimate message to a woman is "even if you do not love me, I shall force you to respect me by the sheer force of my sublime grandeur," whereas woman's counter-claim is "even if you do not respect me, I shall force you to love me for my beauty." These paradoxes are perverse insofar as their underlying premise is that, in order to discover the sublime grandeur of man's moral stance, woman must cease to love him, and vice versa, man must disdain woman for her lack of proper moral attitude if he is to experience the true character of his love for her. Along these lines, Kant even provides his own formulation of the impossibility of sexual relationship: in sexuality, man's object is either the nonspecified universality of "any woman" (if he is driven by raw bodily passion) or the fantasy-image to which no actual woman can ever correspond in reality (the romantic notion of sublime infatuation). In both cases, the real object—the actual woman in her uniqueness—is annihilated.


11 It is the recent revival of the "human rights" problematic which offers an opportunity to demonstrate how Lacan's opposition of masculine and feminine formulas can be of "practical use." The "masculine" approach to human rights is
based on universalization: "every human being must enjoy the rights to . . . (freedom, property, health, etc., etc.)," with an exception always lurking in the background. It is easy, for example, simply to proclaim that every x has to enjoy these rights insofar as she or he fully deserves the title of "human being" (i.e., of our idealized-ideological notion of it), a move which allows us to exclude covertly those who do not fit our criteria (insane, criminals, children, women, other races . . .). The "feminine" approach, on the other hand, seems much more appropriate to our "postmodern" attitude: "there must be nobody who is denied his or her specific rights"—a move which guarantees that specific rights, the only ones which really matter, will not be excluded under the guise of an apparently neutral, all-embracing universality. See Renata Salecl, The Spoils of Freedom (London: Routledge, 1993).

Or, to put it in the Lacanian way, man and woman “are split differently and this difference in splitting accounts for sexual difference” (Bruce Fink, “There’s No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship,” Newsletter of the Freudian Field, vol. 5, nos. 1–2 [1992]:78).

There seem to be grounds for an opposite reading which would link dynamic antinomies to the feminine side of the formulae of sexuation and mathematical antinomies to the masculine side: as pointed out by Jacques-Alain Miller, feminine antinomies are antinomies of inconsistency, whereas masculine antinomies are antinomies of incompleteness—and are dynamic antinomies not about the inconsistency between universal causal links and the fact of freedom? On the other hand, do mathematical antinomies not hinge on the finitude, i.e., incompleteness, of our phenomenal experience? (See Jacques-Alain Miller, “Extimité” [unpublished seminar], Paris, 1985–86.) However, the “not-all,” incomplete character of the phenomenal field in Kant does not imply that something lies beyond or outside this field; instead, it implies the field’s inherent inconsistency: phenomena are never “all,” yet for all that there is no exception, nothing outside them. It is only the dynamic antinomy which deals with the opposition of phenomena and their noumenal Beyond.

It is on the contrary man for whom it can be said that “a part of him eludes the phallic function”—the exception constitutive of the Universal. The paradox is therefore that man is dominated by the phallic function insofar as there is something in him which evades it, whereas woman eludes its grasp precisely insofar as there is nothing in her which is not submitted to it. The solution to this paradox is that the "phallic function" is, in its fundamental dimension, the operator of exclusion.

For a more detailed account of it, see Chapter 3 of the present book.


This ethics of desire, for example, would compel us to reject Lars von Trier’s Europa (Zentropa), a film which seems to realize fully Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s anti-Semitic program of aesthetics as the only medium for the reconciliation of Germany with its Nazi past. (In his recent work, Syberberg claims that those truly responsible for the German inability to “work through” their Nazi past are Jews themselves with their anti-aesthetic prohibition—Adorno’s “no poetry after Auschwitz.”) The aestheticist myth of Europe offered by the film is that of a continent caught in the vicious circle of self-indulging decadent jouissance: it is this very over-proximity of jouissance which suspends the efficiency of the performative, of the social link of symbolic authority. (Injunctions are inoperative:}
when the young American working on a German train undergoes examination for the post of the sleeping-car steward, the committee, instead of provoking anxiety, acts ridiculously with its meaningless questions and out-of-place punctuality.) The ultimate lesson of the film is that even the innocent American gaze cannot escape the decadent whirlpool of the European jouissance which finally draws him into itself. Although the film takes place in the autumn of 1945, immediately after the German defeat, the ruined Germany is clearly presented as a timeless metaphor for “Europe” as a continent caught in the circle of its decadent jouissance. The entire film is staged as a kind of hypnotic trauma masterminded by an anonymous narrator (Max von Sydow) who addresses the hero, telling him what to do and what lies ahead. The ultimate aim of psychoanalysis is precisely to deliver us from the domination of such a voice.

20 I.e., symptom. As to this notion of “sinthome,” see Chapter 5 of the present book.
23 Among the numerous variations on this motif of “death and the maiden,” suffice it to mention the death-accident of Karen Silkwood in Mike Nichols’s Silkwood: Meryl Streep behind the wheel of a car on a night drive, occupying the right side of the screen, her gaze intensely fixed on the car mirror above her head through which she observes the light of a giant truck approaching her car from behind, and, on the left side of the screen, seen through the rear window of the car, the light of the truck gradually spreading into a formless dazzling spot overflowing the entire screen.
24 For a more detailed description of it, see Miran Božović, “The Man behind His Own Retina,” in Slavoj Žižek, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock) (London: Verso, 1992).
26 The Kantian split between the pure form of “I think” and the unknowable “Thing which thinks” is therefore not yet the Freudian Unconscious: the Unconscious stricito sensu takes place only with the choice of being; it designates the “it thinks” which emerges the moment I “am,” the moment the subject chooses being. In other words, Lacan’s two versions of cogito enable us to distinguish clearly between the Unconscious and the Id (Es): the Unconscious is the “it thinks” in “I am, therefore it thinks,” whereas the Id is the “it is” in “I think, therefore it is.”
27 It is against this background that computer phobia can be properly situated: the fear of a “machine which thinks” bears witness to the foreboding that thought as such is external to the self-identity of my being.
28 Is not the exemplary case of such an object qua self-consciousness the Hitchcockian object? Is its traumatic impact not due to the fact that it gives body to an unbearable gaze which catches sight of the unbearable truth about the subject? Let us recall the victim’s pair of glasses in the first murder in Strangers on a Train: while Bruno is strangling Miriam, Guy’s promiscuous wife, we see the distorted reflection of the crime in her glasses, which fell to the ground when Bruno first attacked her. The glasses are the “third party,” the witness to the murder, the object which gives body to a gaze. (Six years later, in The Wrong Man, the same role is assumed by the big table lamp, the witness of Rose’s outburst against Manny. See Renata Salecl, “The Right Man and the Wrong Woman,” in Žižek, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock).) For that reason, it is essential to read this scene together with the later unique scene of Bruno strangling an old society lady at a party. Bruno first
engages in what is a simple, if somewhat tasteless, social game: he demonstrates to an elderly lady (who willingly offers her bare neck) how it is possible to strangle somebody so that the victim is unable to utter the slightest sound. However, things get out of control when the dual relationship is supplemented by a “third party,” i.e., when Bruno perceives behind the lady he mockingly is strangling a girl with glasses (the sister of Ann, Guy’s love). At this point the game suddenly takes a serious turn: as indicated by the musical score, the girl’s glasses recall to Bruno’s mind the scene of the first murder, and this short-circuit pushes Bruno to begin to strangle the old lady for real. This girl (played by Hitchcock’s daughter Patricia) is made into “the woman who knows too much” purely on account of her glasses. What triggers the murderous drive in Bruno is the unbearable pressure exerted on him by the glasses; they are the object which “returns the gaze,” i.e., because of the glasses, Bruno sees in the poor girl’s surprised gaze “his ruin writ large.”

29 See Mladen Dolar, “The Father Who Was Not Quite Dead,” in Žižek, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock).

30 Patricia Highsmith’s masterpiece The Cry of the Owl stages perfectly the delicate balance that defines the perverse position. A woman living alone in a country house suddenly becomes aware that she is observed by a shy voyeur hidden in the bushes behind the house; taking pity on him, she invites him into the house, offers him her friendship and finally falls in love with him—thereby inadvertently trespassing the invisible barrier that sustained his desire and thus provoking his repulsion. Therein consists the kernel of the perverse economy: a proper distance has to be maintained which prevents the subject from engaging in a “normal” sexual relationship; its transgression changes the love-object into repulsive excrement. What we have here is the zero-level of the logic of the “partial object” which, under the guise of obstructing the sexual relationship, actually conceals its inherent impossibility: the “partial object” is here reduced to the distance as such, to the invisible barrier which prevents me from consummating the sexual relationship; it is as if we have to do with the form of fetishism without fetish. (Patricia Highsmith is generally at her best when she renders with unmatched sensitivity the point at which compliance turns into intrusiveness: in Dog’s Ransom, her other masterpiece, the young police detective who offers his help to the couple whose dog was stolen gradually becomes an embarrassing intruder.)

31 The difference between neurotic and perverse symptom hinges upon this same point (see Colette Soler, “The Real Aims of the Analytic Act,” Lacanian Ink 5 [1992]: 53–60). A neurotic has nothing but troubles with her symptom; it inconveniences her; she experiences it as an unwelcome burden, as something which perturbs her balance—in short, she suffers on account of her symptom (and therefore turns for help to the analyst), whereas a pervert unabashedly enjoys his symptom. Even if he is later ashamed of it or disturbed by it, the symptom as such is a source of profound satisfaction; it provides a firm anchoring point to his psychic economy and for that very reason he has no need for an analyst, i.e., there is no experience of suffering which sustains the demand for an analysis.


33 An example can be provided by the author of these lines who is unable to indulge alone in a rich meal in an expensive restaurant. The very idea of it gives rise to the feeling of an obscene, incestuous short-circuit; the only way to do it is in company, where having a good meal becomes part of a community ritual, i.e., where enjoying good food coincides with displaying to others that I enjoy it. An obsessional neurotic’s ethic can be further exemplified by a patient who, apropos of every woman he tried to seduce, went to excessive pains to please her (and thus again and again succeeded in organizing his failure). When he endeavored to seduce a
woman who loved deep sea diving, he immediately enrolled in a diving course
(although he was personally repulsed by the very idea of it); even after this woman
left him for good and he was devoting his amorous attention to a new woman who
was totally indifferent toward diving, he nonetheless out of a sense of duty con­
tinued to participate in the diving course!

34 See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Lenin and

35 An exemplary case of how somebody can “look alike” is to be found in Lubitch’s
To be or not to be: a Polish actor, as part of an intricate plot to deceive the Nazis,
impersonates a notorious Gestapo butcher; he wildly articulates and laughs, so
that we, the spectators, automatically perceive his acting as a caricatural exagger­
ation; however, when, finally, the “original” himself—the true Gestapo butcher—
enters the stage, he behaves in exactly the same way, acting as it were as his own
 caricature—in short, he “looks alike [himself].”

36 See Jacques Lacan, “Logical time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty,” in

37 And, perhaps, the (future) master is simply the one who takes a chance and is the
first to make the move, i.e., to say “I am white”: he becomes a new master if his
bluff pays off.

38 At a different level, Rosa Luxembourg discerned a homologous anticipatory move
in the matrix of a revolutionary process: if we wait for the “right moment” of a
revolution, it will never occur; the “right moment” emerges only after a series of
failed “premature” attempts, i.e., we attain our identity as a revolutionary subject
only by way of “over-taking” ourselves and claiming this identity “before its .time
has arrived.” For a more detailed reading of this paradox, see chapter 5 of Slavoj

Seuil, 1975), pp. 47–48. In this sense, hysteria designates the failure of interpella­
tion: the hysterical question is “Why am I what you are saying that I am?”, i.e., I
question the symbolic identity imposed on me by the master; I resist it in the name
of what is “in me more than myself,” the object small a. Therein consists the anti­
Althusserian gist of Lacan: subject qua S is not an effect of interpellation, of the
recognition in an ideological call; it rather stands for the very gesture of calling
into question the identity conferred on me by way of interpellation.


41 In our everyday experience, this gap separating different levels of intention is at
work in what we call “politeness”: when, upon engaging in a conversation, we say
“How are you today?” we of course “do not mean it seriously”; we just offer an
empty conversational form which calls for a ritualistic “OK” (the best proof of
this emptiness of form is the uneasiness that emerges if our partner takes the
question “seriously” and proceeds to offer an elaborate answer). It is nonetheless
totally out of place to denounce this question as an insincere feigning of our
concern: although its literal, first level of intention is not “meant seriously,” i.e.,
although I am not really interested in how are you today, the question bears
witness to my absolutely “sincere” intention to establish a normal, friendly com­
munication with you.

42 In Hitchcock’s films, such an element is the notorious “MacGuffin,” the secret
which sets in motion the narrative, although it is in itself “nothing at all”: its
meaning is purely self-referential; it amounts to the fact that the subjects involved
in the narrative ascribe a meaning to it.

43 Phil Patton, “Marketers Battle for the Right to Profit from Malcolm’s ‘X,’” New
Lacan’s notion of Oedipus is to be opposed here to the “anti-Oedipal” notion of Oedipus qua the “repressive” force which canalizes, domestifies, the polymorphous perversion of partial drives, straining them to the Procrustian triangle of Father-Mother-Child. With Lacan, “Oedipus” (i.e., the imposition of the Name-of-the-Father) stands for a purely negative logical operator of “deterritorialization” (see his pun in French on the homophony between Nom-du-Père and Non-du-Père): “Name-of-the-Father” is a function which brands every object of desire with the sign of a lack, i.e., which changes every attainable object into the metonymy of lack; apropos of every positive object, we experience how “That’s not it!” (And “Mother” qua incestuous object is nothing but the reverse of this same operation: the name for that x missed by every given object.) What can be of help here is the reference to the Wittgensteinian motto “the meaning of a word equals its use”: “father” qua paternal metaphor is used only and simply to introduce this gap which lurks in the background of every object of desire. We should therefore not be fascinated by the imposing presence of the father: the positive figure of the father merely gives body to this symbolic function, without ever fully meeting its requirements.

As to this virtual character of capitalist economy, see Brian Rotman, Signifying Nothing (London: Macmillan, 1987).
FIGURATIONS OF THE OBJET A

Richard Boothby


The previous chapter traced the contours of the Freudian Things as the uncognizable dimension of every object, the empty site in which judgment seeks to close the gap between memory and perception. Seizing upon this point of Freud’s text and radicalizing its reference to the fellow human being, the *Nebenmenschen*, Lacan locates in the negative space of *das Ding* the impenetrable nucleus of what is most unknowable in the Other, the enigma of the Other’s desire. Lacan then passes beyond anything Freud says of *das Ding* by associating it with the power of language to articulate a pure potentiality-for-meaning. The cardinal function of language resides in the projection of an essential indeterminacy, the establishment of an open horizon of meaning as-yet-to-be-determined. We went on to locate in the structure of the phoneme the most elemental point at which linguistic signification evokes the dimension of *das Ding*. As a hinge between sound and meaning, the pivot point between a level of nonsignifying structure (of differential features) and higher levels of semantic content (of morphemes, words, and sentences), it is the phoneme that makes possible the miracle of linguistic symbolization. Just as the Freudian Thing serves to hold open the site of judgment when comparison to the subject’s own body fails to provide adequate orientation, the phoneme functions to link a system of oppositions modeled on a logic of embodiment with a domain of meaning that transcends all reference to the body.

Lacan’s reconception of the Freudian Thing radically extends and generalizes Freud’s theory of *Nachträglichkeit*. Where Freud was concerned specifically with the delayed effect of childhood trauma, for Lacan a general function of retroaction is constitutive of the very being of the human subject. This Lacanian *Nachträglichkeit* is relevant to the relation between language and perception. The essential action of *Nachträglichkeit* concerns the priority of the word over the image, the way in which the linguistic signifier, though not fully acquired by the human infant until long after functions
of perception have brought about crucial formative effects, can be said to have always already played a decisive role. The retroaction of the signifier implies that there is no pure and innocent empiricism, no product of human perception that is uncontaminated by the structuring influence of language. The power of the word has always already prepared every registration of the image in such a way as to disqualify any claim of sensation to absolute originality.

We now turn to a final and decisive topic. In the spaces opened up by this linguistic retroaction, there emerges a distinctive form, a product of the intersection between the image and the word: Lacan calls it “objet a.” The objet a is a kind of echo of das Ding, circuited by the system of signifiers. As Slavoj Žižek has said of it, “objet petit a designates that which remains of the Thing after it has undergone the process of symbolization.”¹ Like the Thing, the objet a marks a locus of indeterminacy, it is linked to bodily structures, but is also crucially distinct from all embodiment. It is ingredient to every act of signification precisely to the extent that it marks a beyond of all signifying.

The object-cause of desire

The concept of the objet petit a, a phrase that Lacan prefers to leave untranslated, is perhaps his most original contribution to psychoanalytic theory. The lower case “a,” the initial letter of “autre,” indicates an essential relation to the Other but is also intended to designate an algebraic variable or “function” in the mathematical sense. Within the compass of the objet a Lacan gathers the familiar psychoanalytic partial objects relevant to the Freudian stages of development—oral, anal, and phallic—but also adds some of his own. He thus cites as figurations of the objet a: “the mamilla, faeces, the phallus (imaginary object), the urinary flow. (An unthinkable list, if one adds, as I do, the phoneme, the gaze, the voice—the nothing.)” (E:S, 315).

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the objet a is its liminal character, and that in two senses. First, the objet a is strangely suspended between the subject and the other, belonging to both and neither. It simultaneously designates what is most other in the Other, yet is intimately bound up with subject itself. Lacan likens it to the bobbin with which Freud’s grandson replays the departure and reappearance of his mother (Fort! and Da!). Paradoxically inner and outer, one’s own and foreign, the objet a is “a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained” (FFC, 62). It is perhaps most with the objet a in mind that Lacan coined the phrase “extimate.” It is something of the subject’s own, indeed, the most intimate part, yet it always appears elsewhere, outside the subject and eluding its grasp.

But the objet a is also liminal in a second sense: it participates in all three of Lacan’s fundamental categories of imaginary, symbolic, and real, yet
belongs exclusively to none of them. It is an object that finds its most primitive representatives in the imaginary, as clearly imaged parts of the body (the breast, the feces . . .), and yet is intended by Lacan to mark the limit of what is imaginable. The \textit{objet a}, as “what is lacking, is non-specular, it is not graspable in the image.”\textsuperscript{2}

Then again, the \textit{objet a} is intimately related to the linguistic signifier and is a kind of constitutive effect of signification. Thus Lacan claims to have “defined a as the remainder of the constitution of the subject at the locus of the Other in so far as it has to constitute itself as a speaking subject, a barred subject, \$S\$” (S.X, 6–12–63). Yet if it could not exist without the signifier, the \textit{objet a} is also essentially resistant to symbolization. As Lacan says, it “symbolizes what in the sphere of the signifier is always what presents itself as lost, as what is lost to signification” (S.X, 3–13–63). \textit{Objet a} is a kind of remainder, a scrap or residue unassimilable by either the imaginary or the symbolic. As such, it is attributable to the real. It is, as Lacan sometimes says of it, an impossible object, an object that paradoxically can never appear as such.

Lacan emphasizes the retroactive character of the \textit{objet a}, describing it as the “object-cause” of desire. What is at stake in this effect of retroaction is nothing less than the constitution of the subject itself. The tendency of common sense, rooted in grammatical habit, is to suppose that there must first be a subject who desires before there can be any question of the object upon which desire fixes. By contrast, Lacan insists that there is always already an object of desire in relation to which the desiring subject is constituted in the first place. But not just any object. The object that functions as the cause of desire is a primordially lost or essentially lacking object, a profoundly negative object which is absent before it can be present, whose non-being precedes its being. By virtue of its paradoxical constitution the \textit{objet a} can only be described topologically as the perpetually absent locus around which the drives revolve. The \textit{objet a} is thus the psychoanalytic object par excellence. It is “that object around which the drive moves . . . that object that rises in a bump, like the wooden darning egg in the material which, in analysis, you are darning—the \textit{objet a}” (FFC, 257).

The \textit{objet a} is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of lack, that is to say of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack. (FFC, 103)

To summarize these preliminary indications: the \textit{objet a} emerges with a special necessity in the relation of the subject to the other. Like the Freudian Thing of which it is a kind of descendent or successor, the \textit{objet a} is spun off from the process of representation as an unassimilable
"something-or-other," a locus of unthinkability, that is continually generated at the limits of the imaginary and the symbolic. In one sense, it is a kind of useless excess, like the intractable piece of gristle that falls to the floor under the butcher's table. And like a piece of gristle, it remains for the subject an indigestible bolus, an unswallowable mass. In another sense, however, nothing could be more crucial for the incitement of desire, for the objet a functions as a stimulus, an intensive vortex around which the drives rotate. It is able to do so by virtue of its essential negativity, the way in which it represents an incarnation of lack. The objet a is at once impossible to possess and impossible to live without. In these ways, the objet a is an embodiment of perfect contradiction. Both inner and outer, subjective and objective, it is at every point both/and and neither/nor. This angle of view sheds light on Lacan's formula for phantasy in which the subject stands in relation to the objet a: $S ∩ a$. The central term of the formula, the pointon, fuses the logical symbols of conjunction and disjunction, indicating both inclusion and exclusion, both necessity and contingency, both implication and impossibility. The objet a is the point at which the subject assumes a certain paradoxical consistency precisely by virtue of marking the impossibility of coincidence of the subject with itself.

We can further elaborate the concept of this specifically negative object, this paradoxic object that functions as cause of desire by virtue of its very negativity, by reference to Lacan's tenth seminar on Anxiety, in which he retraces the trajectory of the familiar oral and anal stages of development. A key point in this rereading is the concept of a "cedable object" (objet cessible). In each of the stages, the child "cedes" or gives up an object—the breast or the feces. The crucial point centers on the action of the "ceding" itself. At stake is the very constitution of the subject and its desire. To see more clearly what Lacan has in mind, let us take his discussion of weaning, which is particularly challenging, at least for the conventional interpretation of the Freudian teaching. According to the received view, one of those commonplaces of psychoanalytic theory that have passed into general circulation, the infant clings to the breast as long as possible and must be torn away by weaning. Indeed, isn't this the ordinary meaning of the Oedipal drama: the child is split off from the maternal body under the father's threat of castration? By contrast, in recasting the breast as a "cedable object," Lacan invites us to think of it as something the child yields or gives up. Thus he remarks that "it is not essentially true that the child is weaned: he weans himself, he detaches himself from the breast, he plays . . . at detaching himself from this breast and taking it up again" (S.X, 7–3–63).

A number of fascinating and far-reaching reflections follow from this supposition. We are reminded, for example, of Freud's discussion in the first part of Civilization and its Discontents, in which he describes the process by which the ego progressively splits itself off from the external world. Freud remarks that "originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an
external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and world about it” (SE, 21:68). We are reminded, too, of our earlier discussion of sacrifice. Weaning, in Lacan’s view, is tantamount to a primordial act of sacrifice in which the child in some sense offers the breast to the mother. Indeed, in the light of Lacan’s notion of the cedable object, we are led to suppose that the entirety of the world has its origin in an activity of subjective ceding or yielding. Ultimately, the world itself is an object of sacrifice.

Sacrifice to whom and for what? The object is ceded as a way to avoid anxiety. Again Lacan’s approach runs contrary to a commonplace of psychoanalytic theory according to which anxiety is triggered by loss. On the Lacanian view, anxiety predates the loss of the object—“the function of anxiety is prior to this ceding of the object” (S.X, 7–3–63). Moreover, the object is given up precisely in order to quell anxiety. Why? The reason is to be found in Lacan’s distinctive interpretation of anxiety, namely that “anxiety . . . is linked to the fact that I do not know what object a I am for the desire of the Other” (S.X, 7–3–63). The infant at the breast is confronted above all by the unanswerable question of the mother’s desire. It is in the face of this question that the mother assumes the proportions of das Ding, not the little other of the imaginary object, the mirror image of the other human being, but the unknowable, unmasterable, and monstrous big Other. Crudely considered, the strategy of the infant at this point seems comparable to that of certain species of lizards, whose mode of escape from the clutches of a predator is to give up that portion of their tail that is capable of regeneration. In like fashion, the breast, heretofore part of the infantile ego itself, is given up, or ceded, to the other. But the Lacanian point is more subtle. The action of ceding is more precarious, more ambiguous. The infant does not detach the breast from its own body, as if amputating one part in order to preserve the whole, but rather comes to experience itself as a body for the first time with the separation or ceding of the breast. Thus Lacan speaks of “this function of the cedable object as a separable fragment carrying in a way primitively something of the identity of the body which antecedes the body itself as regards the constitution of the subject” (S.X. 6–23–63).

The trickiest point concerns the granting of agency to the infant, as if the action of ceding could be conceived as an intentional tactic of survival, as if it could be thought of as an act at all. Lacan’s point is much more radical and paradoxical: far from it being the case that there exists an infantile subject who voluntarily or deliberately yields the breast, it is only in the moment of ceding the object that the subject can be said to come into being at all. “This primitive mythical subject who is posed at the beginning as having to constitute himself in the confrontation, [is what] that we never grasp—and for good reason—because the [little] a has preceded him, and because it is in a way itself marked by this primitive substitution, that it has to re-emerge
beyond” (S.X, 6–26–63). In ceding the object, the locus of the subject emerges for the first time, the loss of the part establishes the whole virtually, negatively, retroactively. What is at stake, Lacan insists, is “what one could call the most radical essentiality of the subject” (S.X, 6–26–63). Put back into the language of sacrifice, the being of the sacrificer emerges for the first time only with the loss effected by the act of sacrifice.

The paradox at issue here can be seen from another angle of view when we consider the relation between the ceding of the object and the genesis of desire. The object is ceded not in order to preserve an already formed desire but, in the most radical sense, desire originates precisely in such ceding. The object is thrust away so that it can be desired, it is lost so that it can be found for the first time. Desire paradoxically comes into being in and through its limitation, the upsurge of desire is thus coincident with its inhibition. As Lacan continues, “the first developmental form of desire is thus and as such akin to the order of inhibition. When desire appears for the first time, it opposes itself to the very act through which its originality as desire is introduced” (S.X, 7–3–63).

Lacan explicitly links the cedable object to the object of sacrifice and re-illuminates our earlier discussions of sacrifice. The real function of sacrifice, he insists, is less to enact a specific transaction, any particular quid pro quo with the other, than to determine the Other as a desiring being; less to effect a specific exchange than to establish the very possibility of exchange. Sacrifice serves to bring the desire of the other out of the real, out of the monstrous domain of das Ding, and to anchor it in a symbolic order. Thus Lacan claims that “sacrifice is destined, not at all to be an offering or a gift which spreads itself into a quite different dimension, but to be the capture of the Other as such in the network of desire” (S.X, 6–5–63). Ceding the breast in order to avoid the anxious confrontation with the real of the maternal Thing, the child repeats with the mother the essential gesture of sacrifice to the ancient gods. Subjective ceding founds the desire of the subject precisely to the extent that it gives form, through the mediation of the object, to the desire of the Other. “The whole question was to know whether these gods desired something. Sacrifice consisted in behaving as if they desired like us. . . . That does not mean that they are going to eat what is sacrificed to them, nor even that it can be of any use to them; but the important thing is that they desire it and, I would say further, that this does not provoke anxiety in them. . . . To tame the god in the snare of desire is essential, and not to awaken anxiety” (S.X, 6–5–63).

In Lacan’s view, the subject emerges as a kind of remainder, an effect of the negative space hollowed out in the ceding of the object. As objet a, this object is not identical with the subject, but is a kind of negative stand-in for it. The objet a, says Lacan, “is the substitute (suppléant) for the subject” (S.X, 6–26–63). But to say that the objet a is a substitute for the subject is also to insist on some separation between them. The sustainability of desire depends
FIGURATIONS OF THE OBJET A

upon the moment of difference, or negation, signified by the *poinçon* in the formula $S \Diamond a$. In this way, we can make sense of the relation—which must strike any reader familiar with Lacan’s work—between Lacan’s discussion of the cedable object and his other reliance on the word “cedable” to characterize the ethical import of psychoanalysis as a question of “not ceding on one’s desire.” “From an analytic point of view the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having ceded (of having given ground or compromised) relative to one’s desire” (S.VII, 319). Are we not to read these two usages of *céder* in correlation with one another? Is the point not that the Lacanian subject is enjoined to give up the object, but to not give up the negative space left by its lack? The two moments of ceding are exactly complementary: the subject must cede the object in order not to cede on its desire.

“You don’t love me... you just don’t give a shit.”

Along with the breast, the other great “cedable object” of infancy is, of course, the feces, and with respect to the excremental object, this second great figure of the objet a, the relation between the objet a and the desire of the other emerges with special clarity.

Lacan begins by acknowledging the “natural attitude” toward excrement. For the animal “excrement is characterized ... as something rejected and as a consequence it is rather in the sense, in the current, in the flow of that which the living being as such tends to disinterest himself in. What interests him is what enters; what goes out seems to imply in the structure that he has no tendency to retain it” (S.X, 6–19–63). By contrast with the animal, however, the developing human being becomes aware from a very early age that everything surrounding the substance of feces appears to be of the very greatest import. The appearance of excrement typically elicits meticulous attention on the part of the mother or caretaker—attention that is clearly marked by anxious concern. How could the infant fail to conclude that this otherwise worthless substance is in fact the most valuable stuff in the world? And how could the infant fail to realize that the zone of the body which produces it links the infant to the mother in a particularly constant and intimate way? In Lacanian terms, the infant’s feces is the privileged object of the mother’s demand.

Along what path does excrement enter into subjectification? ... it involves education in what is called cleanliness, which commands the child to retain ... the excrement and because of this already to outline its introduction into the domain of belonging, of a part of the body, which for at least a certain time must be considered as not to be alienated, then after that to release it, always on demand ... thanks to the fact that the demand also becomes here a determining part in the releasing in question ... the subject has some
apprehension he is taking on, this part becoming at least valorised by the fact that it gives its satisfaction to the demand of the Other. (S.X, 6–19–63)

The consequences of this insertion of the feces into the circuit of demand of the other are far from trivial. Consider, first, their influence on the subject's own body. Toilet training attests to the fact that the Other is intensely interested in the most primitive and quasi-automatic functions of the infant's physiology. By this means, the anus is charged with the demand of the other. For this reason, the anal sphincter, despite the socially rehearsed repugnance that attaches to everything excremental—or rather precisely because of that repugnance—must be considered the most profoundly social organ of the body. It is the site at which the most elemental physiological functions, the rhythmic movements of peristalsis, are entwined with the most subtle psychological and interpersonal dynamics, laid down by the subject's experience of the other's love or rejection. In toilet training, the anus is "colonized," to invoke a happily apt pun, by the other's desire. Throughout the future life of the individual, the contractions and relaxations of the anal muscle will inevitably call up immensely more global connotations of mastery or submission, independence or dependence.

Taken up into this physiologico-emotional complex, the fecal material becomes freighted with significance that utterly outstrips all natural or animal attitudes toward excrement. In accord with a symbolic equivalence already familiar to Freud, the feces become privileged tokens in an exchange of love—excrement as primordial gift. In this way is accomplished a radical "revaluation of all values." By fixing upon what is most naturally worthless, the range of possible objects of human desire is henceforth established as formally infinite, potentially inclusive of even the most abject and revolting content. At the same time, this elevation of excrement to the level of the very index of love will color all subsequent experience of the libidinal bond with a profound ambivalence. In the heart of the love relation is something that may at any moment reveal itself to be repulsive and worthless. Jokes about the sexual function thus become "dirty jokes." Love is perpetually haunted by the deeply rooted suspicion—a reality on the level of the unconscious—that it is "much ado about nothing." Something similar can be said about the way in which the drama of toilet training establishes an ambivalence concerning the entirety of human social life and the institutions that structure and support it. In a very real sense, the human being enters civilized life by way of an unnatural investment of libidinal interest in functioning of its bowels. The edifice of civilization is founded upon the unconscious libidinalization of excrement.

The identification of the objet a with the anal object is especially illuminating for Lacan's definition of the objet a as produced at the site of the body's orifices, as a function of the organs that possess a "rim," the line at which
what is inner is separated from what is outer and other. In this invocation of
the rim, we see especially clearly the imaginary staging of the objet a, not
only its positioning at the unstable in-between of the subject and the other,
but also its role as an interruption or discontinuity of the bodily gestalt. As a
breaching of the body's integrity, the fecal object sites the question of what
other monstrosities of the real are hidden and contained by the skin.

It is this point that we can append a remark about the relation of the
objet a to the psychological function of the stain so often pointed to by
Lacan. The irregular blotch of the stain violates the field of an homogen­
eous surface and thus serves to evoke the question of what lies behind
the surface, what more there is than the image. The capacity of the objet a
to instantiate lack, to body forth a registration of the negative, is here based
on a marking of the body surface by a blemish. Lacan illustrates this point
by reference to the beauty mark, the charming effect of the discrete mole
off to one side of the otherwise flawless face. The source of this charming
effect resides in its serving to evoke the objet a. The beauty mark "shows the
place of a, here reduced to the zero point whose function I evoked the last
time. The beauty spot, more than the shape that it stains, is what looks at
me" (S.X, 5–22–63) "With the stain there appears, there is prepared the
possibility of the resurgence, in the field of desire, of what is hidden
behind" (S.X, 6–5–63).

Lacan's reinterpretation of the oral and anal stages shows clearly how the
drive in the human being emerges in the context of natural functions of
suckling and defecating but only by deflecting those functions into new and
denaturalized strivings. Eating and eliminating become truly human only
when they are drawn into the orbit of a demand for something wholly
superfluous to the satisfaction of any natural need. This extranatural el­
ement, split off from the exigencies of biological need and established as an
independent power, the eccentric locus around which the drive will perpetu­
ally revolve without ever achieving fulfillment, is the objet a. Thus Lacan
concludes that "the objet petit a is not the origin of the oral drive. It is not
introduced as the original food, it is introduced from the fact that no food
will ever satisfy the oral drive, except by circumventing the eternally lacking
object" (FFC, 180). For the same reason, the "development" of the human
child through successive "stages," far from being attributable to any natural
evolution of maturation, must rather be understood as a migration of the
function of the objet a, passing like a restless and irremediable exile from one
organ system to another.

The passage from the oral drive to the anal drive can be produced
not by a process of maturation, but by the intervention of something
that does not belong to the field of the drive—by the intervention,
the overthrow, of the demand of the Other . . . There is no natural
metamorphosis of the oral drive into the anal drive (FFC, 180).
PHILOSOPHY

Between the look and the gaze

We have yet to describe a key aspect of the Lacanian *objet a*, one that is especially significant for the trajectory of argument we have been following in this book. It is an aspect that is particularly well illustrated by Lacan’s identification of the *objet a* with the gaze.

Introduction to Lacan’s concept of the gaze can usefully be made by way of the theory developed by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. Lacan more than once refers to Sartre’s view, though ultimately in order to rigorously distinguish his own position from it. It is convenient, therefore, that the French word used in both instances, *le regard*, is generally translated differently in Sartre’s case, not as “gaze” but as “look.”

Lacan is not unappreciative of Sartre’s contribution, which he calls “magisterial” and “essential reading for an analyst” (S.I, 215). To his credit, Sartre recognizes both the primordiality of the phenomenon and its centrality for the experience of the other human being. Sartre is right to insist, as Lacan puts it, that “the human object is originally distinguished, *ab initio*, in the field of my experience, and cannot be assimilated to any other perceptible object, by virtue of being an object which is looking at me” (S.I, 215). Sartre also rightly maintains that what is at stake in the gaze far transcends the literal presence of the other’s eyes. Lacan underlines this point by suggesting that the most intense experience of the gaze may be produced by “the blankness of the eye of the blind man” or by the lowered eyelids so characteristic of statues of Buddha (S.X 5–22–63). Thus the experience of the gaze may be less intensely aroused by the eyes of the other *per se* than by an oblique evidencing of their presence. “If you turn to Sartre’s own text,” Lacan reminds us, “you will see that, far from speaking of the emergence of this gaze as of something that concerns the organ of sight, he refers to the sound of rustling leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting, to a footstep heard in a corridor” (FFC 84).

The gaze in question must on no account be confused with the fact, for example, of seeing his eyes. I can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not even see, not even discern. All that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there. This window, if it gets a bit dark, and if I have reasons for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straightaway a gaze (S.I, 215).

Few people are wholly unfamiliar with Sartre’s view, if only because it implicitly informs so many recent feminist discussions of the objectifying male attitude toward women’s bodies. Sartre’s basic idea—*itself* modeled on another account, that of the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave—supposes a kind of duel between one consciousness and another. Only one of
them will emerge as a true subject; the other will be objectified under the force of the look. Sartre's paradigmatic example is the experience of shame that overcomes the voyeur when, poised at the keyhole in the act of enjoying another's objectification, he is himself objectified under the look of a third person who happens along and discovers him. The relevance of Sartre's account for a feminist critique is well displayed by considering what is probably the quintessential fashion pose, countless examples of which crowd the pages of magazines like *Vogue, Glamour, Elle.* In this gesture, far more commonly adopted by female models than by their male counterparts, the model languorously casts her look away from the viewer. Whether the eyes are demurely turned down, thrown distractedly off to one side, or allowed to float vaguely upward, the defining characteristic of this pose is that the eyes appear not to focus on anything. They seem willingly to evacuate any intention of their own, to abdicate their own power of seeing. The purpose of this aimless look is not difficult to determine: it signals a suspension of the model's own claim to subjectivity and thereby grants the prerogative of looking to the other who enjoys unchallenged visual access to her body. To the gaze of the other these eyes say "Take me!" Given this sort of example, one might well ask, with Laura Mulvey, Ann Kaplan, and others, "Is the Gaze Male?"

Sartre's account interests Lacan in part because it identifies "a register in which you have to recognize the plane of the imaginary" (S.I, 215). Yet therein consists its limitation as well. For Sartre's conception of the look remains essentially dyadic. It is a binarism that shows itself in Sartre's reduction of love to a dialectic of sadism and masochism, but also and more generally informs his most fundamental categories of the for-itself and the in-itself. This binary model raises a number of problems, among which is Sartre's tendency to assume an either/or relation between the two poles it identifies: either the other retains his rights as a subject by objectifying me with his look, or he is himself rendered an object under my look. From a Lacanian point of view, however, there is nothing to prevent both positions from being occupied simultaneously. To cite an example, let us return to the glossy fashion magazine. Especially during the 1980s, the covers of these magazines typically displayed the dazzling image of the "cover-girl," indeed the presence of this intensely focused face, this modern-day icon, virtually defined the genre of women's fashion magazines.

In order to grasp the function of the cover-girl face, it is essential to notice how it simultaneously produces two distinct but interrelated effects. On the one hand, and most immediately, the cover girl presents an image-object of uncommon fascination. Extraordinary care is taken, formerly by airbrush and now by computer retouching, to produce an epiphany of uncannily flawless beauty. The result is a magical image of mesmerizing power. On the other hand, the cover-girl face typically looks directly back at the viewer with an almost unbelievably intense gaze. Here, too, very deliberate care is taken
to achieve the effect. Reflective highlights in the eyes are strategically placed in order to produce an electrifying stare. Whatever the captivating attractiveness of the rest of the face, these glittering, jewel-like eyes stand out with such unmistakable brilliance that they exert an arresting effect all their own.

The cover girl thus seems to embody the two poles of the Sartrian look: the captivating object and the gazing subject. And proceeding on Sartrian premises, we might suppose that the viewer is doomed to fall one way or the other. Either the fascinating object-character of the face is privileged, thus undergirding the self-possession of the viewer-subject in confrontation with the inert object, or else the viewer wilts under the extraordinary force of the gaze, the effect of which is to produce in the viewer a disabling, shaming self-consciousness, a painful awareness of the viewer’s own objectification. But it is not difficult to conclude that the real power of the cover-girl image lies precisely in its capacity to induce both effects at once. Indeed, the two moments dialectically reinforce each other: the more the viewer feels undone by this penetrating gaze, the more the face is reinvested as a fascinating object of beauty. Conversely, the more the face is inflated with the value of the beautiful, the more commanding and dangerous its gaze becomes. And this double function shouldn’t surprise us. Its resulting dialectic of shame and fascination provides the perfect mechanism for selling magazines to women anxious about their own appearance. At the same time that the cover-girl gaze excites a feeling of self-doubt it also promises an escape from doubt and shame by providing a marvelous and remobilizing image upon which the threatened ego can feed, the wherewithal to mimic which is available for sale within the pages of the magazine.

The example of the cover girl helps point us toward the essentials of the Lacanian notion of the gaze. The key point is the distinction Lacan draws between the eye and the gaze. The eye fixes upon visible objects precisely in order to escape from the gaze. It is this distinction between the eye and the gaze that most separates Lacan’s account from Sartre’s. For Lacan, the structure of the gaze is not dual but triadic. It includes the subject (the one who sees), the visual object (the other who is seen), and the gaze (a third locus that fails to coincide with the visual other). Thus Lacan remarks that “Sartre does not perceive that the intersubjective field cannot but open on to a numerical structuration, on to the three, the four, which are our benchmarks in the analytic experience” (S.I, 224).

How does this Lacanian distinction of eye and gaze work in the example of the cover girl? Notice, first, the way in which it parallels our discussion of the Thing. The cover-girl face is a perceptual complex in the sense Freud defines it: it presents a familiar object to the extent that it mirrors the viewer’s own body image. But it also calls up an unencompassable dimension, the otherness of this Other, alive in the question that is thrown back on the viewer about what this intense gaze sees. Behind this threatening gaze lurks the question of das Ding. As we have just seen, both these levels are
operative in the encounter with the cover-girl face. Consciously, the cover girl appears as a supremely attractive object. But this attractiveness (along with the promise of an identification with the beautiful model who embodies it) is coupled with a simultaneous excitement of anxiety (which arises with the viewer's painful recognition of how little she resembles the beauty queen displayed on the magazine cover). In order for the cover-girl image to succeed in its basic purpose—that of selling the magazine—the anxiety it arouses must be controlled in some way. How? The anxiety remains unconscious by means of a reinvestment in the radiant image of beauty. The attractiveness of the cover-girl object is substituted for the monstrous presence of the Thing. The beauty of the face gets repainted over the hole opened up by the Thing. In Lacanian terms, the eye triumphs over the gaze. A precisely similar process operates in the adoration felt by the lowly peasant for the radiant King or Queen. What might otherwise emerge as uncontrolable panic in the presence of the sovereign power is transformed into an enormously magnified sense of aesthetic awe.

Lacan extends this distinction between eye and gaze to propose a general theory of vision in which the act of seeing functions precisely to avoid the gaze. He thus suggests that painting produces a "pacifying, Apollinian effect" that feeds the eye with reassuringly stable objects in order to allow the viewer to put the gaze out of play. In painting, "something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the laying down, of the gaze" (FFC, 101). How are we to understand this laying down of the gaze? The painter offers the picture to mollify the gaze of the spectator, as if the gesture of painting were a matter of escaping from a predator by distracting it with a piece of meat.

The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus—You want to see? Well, take a look at this! he gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons. (FFC, 101)

By referring the act of seeing to some third point off the axis of seer and seen, Lacan succeeds in revealing the internal complexity of the scopic drive. The third position, itself invisible yet functioning continually to reenergize the subject's investment in the object of sight, is none other that the objet a. Its presence-by-absence serves to produce "the ambiguity that affects anything that is inscribed in the register of the scopic drive" (FFC, 83). To illustrate this point, we can return to the example of the voyeur who, relentlessly goaded on by the scopic drive, is most completely reclaimed by the force of the drive precisely when he fails to see what he is looking for. That is to say, as a search for the objet a, an object that by definition cannot be given,
the scopic drive is most surely reinforced and recreated at the moment when it appears to draw closest to its objective, yet fails to grasp it. It is as if this very failure is the evidence that the objet a is there. The point is perfectly demonstrated by the essential pose, the veritable sine qua non, of soft-core pornographic magazines: the so-called spread shot. The centerpiece of this shot is the vulva spread wide for the camera to inspect. Seeking to explain the appeal of this defining image we might naively suppose that the spread shot satisfies insofar as it “shows all.” It leaves nothing to the imagination. The viewer has finally won unimpeded visual access to the inner secret of the feminine. From a Lacanian point of view, however, the conclusion is exactly the opposite. What attracts the scopic drive to the vaginal spread shot is precisely what it doesn’t show, to what in fact cannot be shown. The result of the “show all” strategy is to create even more intense hunger for the thing that cannot be imaged: the objet a. The more you see, the less you find what you are really looking for. The “proof” of the Lacanian view lies in the compulsiveness with which the consumer of pornography moves from one girlie image to another, to another, and so on. If the spread shot really succeeded in “showing all,” then one image would be enough. But the pornographic drive shows its real essence less in the excitement created by one image than by the insatiable hunger it generates for yet another image. The enormous commercial potency of pornography derives in part from the fact that it succeeds in continually restimulating the very hunger it promises to satisfy.

The investment of interest in pornography depends upon the subject’s relation to something that ceaselessly escapes the roving, lustful eye, some moment of ultimate satisfaction that is continually promised but never fully given. In this way, the example of the pornographic image shows very well what Lacan means by saying that the objet a is not the aim of the drive but rather the perpetually eccentric point around which the drive revolves. The point of crucial theoretical importance in all of this concerns the way in which the objet a irrecoverably triangulates the subject’s relation to the aim of the drive. Despite the fact that his conclusions are repeatedly pressed back into the mold of one or another dualism, Sartre’s account of the gaze comes close to acknowledging this essential triangularity of the gaze. In the paradigmatic example of the voyeur discovered at the keyhole, for example, the relation of the subject and his object is disturbed by the upsurge of another look, a third position. To be caught in this way by the appearance of a third party, says Lacan, “changes all perspectives, the lines of force, of my world” (FFC. 84). It is a similar rupture of the dual axis of sight that Lacan analyzes in Holbein’s painting The Ambassadors. In order to see that the strange, oblong object floating in the foreground is in fact a skull, the viewer must shift position altogether, looking back at the painting from a new stance lower down and far to one side—shifting, that is, to a third position that lies off the dual axis described by the previously established line of sight. But the
central Lacanian point is that this third position is always there, always exerting a constitutive influence on what emerges on the stage of awareness. In effect, the voyeur is always already seen by the gaze. Indeed, the deliciously anxious excitement of his act of peeping is constituted by this very exposure to the gaze. At the deepest level, the voyeur's thrill derives less from his enjoyment of a stolen view of another's private moments than from the way in which this theft is itself seen by the gaze. What is most profoundly seen in voyeurism is the voyeur himself.

By identifying the gaze with objet a, Lacan describes a structure that in principle cannot be mapped in a linear fashion but can be described only by recourse to topology. What, then, is the gaze as objet petit a? In the terms we have evolved over the course of this essay, the objet a must be located in the dispositional field. What distinguishes this object from all others is the fact that it cannot occupy the positional focus of attention. Yet it remains active in the invisible framing that produces all positional awareness. This, then, is what it means that the objet a is not the aim or object of desire but its object-cause. The objet a is a dispositional object. It is the dispositional character of the gaze that accounts for what Lacan calls its “inside-out structure.” The gaze forms what he calls the “underside of consciousness” (FFC, 82–83). Where for Sartre the revelation of the other's look threatens an extinction of my consciousness, for Lacan the gaze is the very condition of consciousness. The gaze is the horizon within which the realm of the visible is established. With respect to the structuring of the scopic domain, the distinction between the eye and the gaze is a way of specifying the dependence of consciousness upon the structure of the unconscious: behind the coming to presence of all the objects of my world there lurks a constitutive absence that is animated by the desire of the other.

There is something intrinsically ungraspable, unmasterable, about this horizon of the visible. Even as it makes possible the emergence of things into visibility, the gaze remains “unapprehensible,” subject to a primordial “scotoma” (FFC, 83). Ultimately, what Lacan means by the gaze thus has less in common with the quasi-Hegelian duel of objectifying looks described by Sartre than it does with Merleau-Ponty's effort to radicalize metaphysics through a meditation on the visible and the invisible. The point, as Lacan remarks in the last session of his eleventh seminar, is that “there is something that looks before there is a view for it to see” (FFC, 273). This gaze does not emanate from any particular pair of eyes, but precedes and possibilizes the field of the visible altogether. It is an all-encompassing survey that simultaneously takes in the position occupied by the other human being who looks at me and also my own position. “What we have to circumscribe,” says Lacan, “... is the pre-existence of a gaze—I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (FFC, 72). In the light of this all-seeing gaze that is always already there and belongs to no one in particular, the particular example of painting becomes a subset of a more general
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phenomenon of the picture, the very body of the visible, as screen for the gaze.

That which is light looks at me, and by means of that light in the depths of my eye, something is painted—something that is not simply a constructed relation, the object on which the philosopher lingers—but something that is an impression, the shimmering of a surface that is not, in advance, situated for me in its distance. This is something that introduces what was elided in the geometral relation—the depth of field, with all its ambiguity and variability, which is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment, and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape, something other than what I have called the picture.

The correlative of the picture, to be situated in the same place as it, that is to say, outside, is the point of gaze, while that which forms the mediation from the one to the other, that which is between the two, is something of another nature than geometral, optical space, something that plays an exactly reverse role, which operates, not because it can be traversed, but on the contrary because it is opaque—I mean the screen. (FFC, 96)

Lacan's concept of the gaze thus enables us to rejoin our point of departure in the concept of the dispositional field. To the extent that the Lacanian gaze becomes constitutive of vision, it establishes the very possibility of the visible in a way precisely parallel to the effects of lighting that Monet called the enveloppe. For Lacan, it is in the unlimited medium established by the enveloppe of the gaze that the desire of the Other addresses itself to us. The gaze is that moment of the Other that escapes from the merely imaginary aspect, it is the Other in the other. The gaze is the moment of dispositionality in the other.

The Lacanian gaze is thus understandable only in the triadic structure of desire, the Oedipal structure in which the subject is faced with the question of the Other's desire. In the actual experience of the Oedipal stage, the experience of the gaze begins to unfold when the mother no longer simply presents an image to the child but is seen to be looking for something herself, the moment when the suspicion dawns that the mother's desire is directed beyond the child itself to some third position. Said otherwise, the gaze is one of the prime figures in which the imaginary relation opens out upon a symbolic horizon. It is by virtue of its capacity to excite an experience of this dimension of the gaze, precisely through preventing the analysand from seeing the eyes of the analyst, that psychoanalysis sets up the special force field of the transference. Its place will come to be occupied by the entirety of the
symbolic order. In the place of the gaze, the subject will come to experience the call of the signifier. Correlatively, it is a certain suspension or avoidance of the gaze that founds the entirety of the imaginary register, both the ego and its objects. This elision of the gaze is the very essence of imaginary méconnaissance. Lacan therefore asks of narcissism and of the “satisfaction, not to say self-satisfaction, that diffuses from it, which gives the subject a pretext for such a profound méconnaissance...—can we not also grasp that which has been eluded, namely, the function of the gaze?” (FFC, 74).

To give a final suggestion of what is at stake in this aspect of the gaze, let us take another example: that of the monumental architecture designed for Adolf Hitler by Albert Speer. Speer’s architecture is precisely calculated to stage a certain experience of the gaze. In the enormity of this architecture, it is the negative space, the yawning, open expanses, that are most important. This architecture is meant less to be seen by a viewer, than to produce in the viewer an experience of being seen in and by it. Individuals find themselves taken up into an overwhelming embrace precisely because the spectacle of which they are a part is too enormous to be the object of any single human eye. This experience of a gaze that is unencompassable, that surpasses every particular viewpoint, uplifts and transforms the viewers’ sense of themselves, of their aspirations, their motivations, their possibilities. The experience of being projected ecstatically outside oneself is coextensive, as the title of Speer’s memoir suggests, with being “inside the Third Reich.” A parallel solicitation of the gaze is powerfully present in Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will, the opening sequence of which features footage taken from an airplane. This opening shot lingers for a long time among the clouds before finally descending upon the columns of marching soldiers and cheering throngs that line the village streets. Only when the plane lands and Adolf Hitler steps out does this evocation of the gaze become particularized: it is the gaze of the Führer himself.

What is absolutely crucial in this fascistic incitement of the gaze is its collective character, the way in which it is not the individual but the solidarity of the group that is its object. It is at this point that a Lacanian analysis contributes significantly to Freud’s theory of the ego ideal in mass psychology. In and through its collectivizing effect, the overwhelming sense of the gaze in mass psychology brings the subject into a position of being completely dominated by the desire of the Other. It is the precise opposite of the function of the gaze in the analytic transference. Both situations result in the incitement of aggressivity. What distinguishes them is that in the case of mass psychology the violence will be directed outside the group in the name of the leader who instantiates the gaze. In the analytic situation, by contrast, an aggressive impulse will finally erupt toward the very locus of the gaze, the unseen analyst whose desire remains an enigma, and will initiate the process by which the subject reclaims some greater portion of his or her own desire.
Why one and one make four

The foregoing discussions have placed the Lacanian objet a into the architecture of concepts we have developed over the course of this study. In the terms we have evolved, the objet a must be conceived as a dispositional object. It cannot be given as a positional locus. It is a kind of paradoxical, negative object, the unconscious object par excellence. Indeed, even to refer to it as an "object" involves a measured abuse of language, for the objet a is less an object than the function by which objects will be established. It is, Lacan says, "the object of objects," less an instance of objectivity than a function of "objectality" (S.X, 5–8–63)

To designate the petit a by the term object is, as you see, a metaphorical usage, since it is borrowed precisely from this subject-object relationship from which the term object is constituted, which no doubt is suitable for designating the general function of objectivity; and this object, of which we have to speak under the term a, is precisely an object which is outside any possible definition of objectivity. (S.X, 1–9–63)

Yet there no doubt remains good deal about this crucial Lacanian concept that is stubbornly mysterious. How to further specify its meaning? It might fairly be said that Lacan himself had the same problem, and no wonder, given the novelty and radicality of his intention. In the last years of his teaching, Lacan sought to theorize the nature and function of the objet a by relying on analogies to mathematical topology and by developing a series of terse symbolic expressions, his so-called mathemes, such as the formula for the phantasy, S 0 a. In this formula, the subject S is "barred" by virtue of its submission to the law of the signifier and placed in a complex relation to the objet a. Toward the same end, Lacan also employed a number of graphs and schemata, such as the Schema L, to which we have already referred more than once, and his later Schema R. Let us now make the experiment of trying to clarify the objet a by redrawing those schemata.

We begin by placing the Thing opposite the subject, on the side of the other, but distinguished from it, to signify that the Thing concerns that aspect of the other that remains unrepresentable, uncognizable (Fig. 16). The Thing is that ungraspable dimension of the Nebenmensch, called up
especially by the sounding of the voice, that overflows the body image of
the other.

This arrangement immediately begins to resemble the three corners
Lacan’s Schema L (cf. Fig. 4, page 83 above), and for good reason: the Thing
locates precisely what is most Other about the other. It provides a first orienta­
tion to what Lacan calls “the big Other,” the Other with a capital “O.”
Moreover, we have already seen how this relation to the Thing has the effect
of rebounding on the subject itself. There is a profound resonance between
the Thing, as the unencompassable kernel at the heart of the object, and the
as-yet-unknown dimension of the subject’s desire, the unrepresented pulsional
interior. There is a correspondence between *das Ding* and *das Es*. We
can add this correspondence to our developing graph by connecting the posi­
tions of Thing and subject with a dotted line to indicate its character as a
relation to-be-realized (Fig. 17).

![Figure 17](image)

The real of the Thing, we have said, is approachable only by means of
the signifier and the diacritical system in which it is situated. This action of the
signifier is a genuinely mediating function, as it serves simultaneously to link
the subject to the Thing and also to keep them separate. The necessity of this
mediating function, stabilizing a relation to the Thing without collapsing the
distance that separates the subject from it, cannot be overestimated. For
Lacan, it is nothing less than the fundamental meaning of the prohibition of
incest (S.VII, 67–69). Its failure, as we see it in the Schreber case, triggers
descent into psychosis. For Schreber, *das Ding* appears in the place of the
imaginary other, but with all the power and uncanny monstrousness of
the primordial object. Thus Schreber becomes the victim of the desire of the
Other in a completely unmediated way—he becomes the beloved of God.

With these points in mind, we can complete the parallel between the dia­
gram we have constructed and Lacan’s L (Fig. 18). The Lacanian Big Other

![Figure 18](image)
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(O), which represents what in the Other escapes from the relation to the imaginary other (o), is located in the lower right of the schema. It is this Big Other that Lacan associates with the locus of the signifying code, the Other at stake in the Lacanian claim that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other. But immediately we notice that in the alignment we have proposed, the locus of the Big Other, associated by Lacan with the father, coincides with that of the Thing, linked most closely with the mother.

In collapsing the maternal and paternal positions, has our attempt at a schema already gone awry? Not at all. The coincidence of these two positions is precisely what the Lacanian theory of the paternal metaphor suggests. The function of the paternal metaphor is to submit the desire of the Mother (which is of the order of the Thing) to the law of the Father (which comprises the totality of the signifying system, the structure of the symbolic order). The primary achievement of the Oedipus complex is to effect this shift in the lower right corner of the schema from the maternal Thing to the paternal Law. Clarifying this point avoids what might initially appear to be a contradiction, but also indicates that the schema represents positions that are tensed with a temporal unfolding. The schema represents a relation of the subject to the Thing that develops over time. As we will see, the objet a emerges as an effect of that development.

Let us now take account of the other thread of our inquiry, in accordance with which we have tried to bring certain key points of the psychoanalytic theory into relation with the lessons of Gestalt psychology. It is not difficult to suggest a translation of our first diagram into the Gestaltist terms of figure and ground (Fig. 19).

![Figure 19](image)

In this scheme, the function of the ground is attributed to the primitive subject and the heterogeneity of impulses that animate it. The image of the other in relation to which the subject first mobilizes itself is fittingly compared with the gestalt figure. This is the moment of identification with the other in the mirror phase. It represents the other as mere image, as perceptual registration of an object. Given this initial couplet of ground and figure, the Thing occurs initially in purely negative terms as “Not Figure.” It is plainly opposite to the subject (thus differentiated from the inchoate ground) and is implied by the other/object but is not identical with it (thus “not figure”).

At this point, the schema we are developing in Lacanian terms can be recognized as homologous with the basic schema of structuralism, based on
the logic of the Klein Group and most evocatively worked out in the semiotic square of A.J. Greimas. Rosalind Krauss makes exactly this point in her study of *The Optical Unconscious*. Greimas's semiotic square presents a logic of "contraries," represented by the two top terms, $S_1$ and $S_2$, and relations of "implication," corresponding to the diagonals linking the upper and lower corner terms, $S_1$ and $S_2$, $S_2$ and $S_1$. The vertical segments ($S_1$ and $-S_1$, $S_2$ and $-S_2$), represent relations of "contradiction." The resulting square is presented in Fig. 20.

![Figure 20](image.png)

The overarching aim of Greimas's semiotic square is to define the most elementary structure of meaning. It does so by presenting a logic of semantic implication by means of which a given term is opened up to the dimensions of difference that define its particular semantic field. The procedure begins by setting the initial term in binary opposition to its contrary—we cannot define "white," for example, apart from its opposition to "black." However, for each of the contraries, it is possible to posit contradictories (non-white, non-black) which open a larger and more complex field of meaning. The resulting relations can be mapped as shown in Fig. 21.

Greimas's construction is broadly applicable for analyzing systems of meaning. The contraries of "having-to-do" and "having-not-to-do" (being obligated vs. being prohibited), for example, generate a square that describes the dynamics that govern many sets of cultural rules (Fig. 22).

![Figure 21](image.png)
When this scheme is applied to a specific set of rules (as, for example, those governing sexual relations) we notice how groupings of terms can be made (e.g., $S_1$ and $\sim S_2$, $S_2$ and $\sim S_1$) that describe new conceptual distinctions—in this case, the opposition between "culture" and "nature" (Fig. 23).

Completing our diagram of gestalt concepts along the lines of Greimas's square, we arrive at Fig. 24.

When we now try to align this graph of gestalt concepts with the Schema L, however, we notice a wrinkle. The problem is that the position of the imaginary ego (in the lower left corner of the Schema L) must be identified with the locus of the "not-ground." Aside from the fact that it is not yet clear what "not-ground" might mean here, the whole point of Lacan's theory of the imaginary ego is to assert an equivalence between the imago of the other—a kind of gestalt figure—and the primitive identity of the ego. In gestaltist terms, the ego is a figure. How are we to clarify all of this?
The way beyond this impass—and the way toward a more satisfying elaboration of our entire discussion—lies in recognizing that the gestaltist square we have proposed cannot be aligned with the Schema L without qualification. It can, however, be aligned with another of Lacan's basic schemata: the so-called Schema R. Lacan first develops this schema in his discussion of the Schreber case. It is presented there as shown in Fig. 25.

This schema is roughly homologous with the Schema L, whose two cardinal terms—S and O (the subject and the Other)—are inscribed just inside the two corners of the square. To briefly translate the other terms: at the outside of the upper left and lower right corners we have $\Phi$ (the phallus), M (the "signifier of the primordial object," the maternal Thing), F (the father and the symbolic law he represents or "Name-of-the-Father"), and I (the ego ideal). Completing the central trapezoid are two additional points: m (for the ego, or moi) and i (for the imaginary other). I, R, and S, describe the domains of the imaginary, real, and symbolic.

It is now possible to plot the square of gestalt concepts in relation to the Lacanian schema in a way that is illuminating for both. What is new in this alignment is that the positions of figure and not-ground are no longer merely
single points or corners of the graph but are distributed along two internal axes. The first axis, that of the figure, connects the imaginary other and the ego. The second axis, associated with "not-ground," extends between the ego ideal (I) and the primordial signifier of the Other (M). Even without yet working out all the implications, we can immediately recognize the sense this association makes: the ego ideal is precisely a function of identification that moves beyond the imaginary, it is a shaping of identification that is at once unimagable (it is not an imaginary figure), though it is also something differentiated from the archaic and formless ground of the subject (therefore not-ground). The symbolic identification of the ego ideal (I) thus becomes a locus of a purely virtual positionality, an unimaged figure or "not-ground."

This alignment of the terms allows us to adjust and correct our previous schematization while also revealing the underlying dynamics of the Lacanian diagram with special clarity. The key point concerns the inner trapezoid described by points m, i, I, and M. Lacan associates this trapezoid with the real. Its space is opened up by the action of the symbolic and enables the subject to make two complementary differentiations: on the one hand, between the imaginary other and an unimaged beyond of the other (the Thing), and, on the other hand, between the imaginary ego and an unimaged identification that transcends the ego (the ego ideal). Plotted onto the basic frame of the Schema R, this movement of differentiation separates two planes or axes, the properly imaginary plane of the figure that links the imaginary ego and its specular other (m and i) and a symbolically mediated plane stretching between the ego ideal and the locus of the primitive object, the Thing (I and M). We can represent it as shown in Fig. 26.

The four terms of our original square of gestalt concepts are printed in bold type. In the resulting schema, the ego (m) is associated, as it should be, with the gestalt figure, and is coupled with its specular double, the imago of

![Figure 26](image-url)
FIGURATIONS OF THE OBJET A

the other (i). Together, they form an imaginary axis, the base of the triangle of the imaginary marked with a bold capital I. Correlative with this axis (but separated from it by the space of the real) is another, non-imaginary axis, that between the ego ideal (I) and the signifier of the primordial object (M). As the two pairings of lower and upper case letters indicate, the mid-section of the Schema R, the trapezoid associated by Lacan with the zone of the real, is susceptible to an opening or closing as the non-imaginary axis I-M is differentiated from its imaginary counterpart m-i. The process that opens the space between the two diagonal axes of the Schema L is the movement by which the sign is differentiated from the image, the movement semioticians call “demotivation.” (Indeed, we could even associate the two axes, the first tied to the image-registration of the object and second differentiated from the first by the mediation of a symbolic function, with the signifier and signified respectively.) It is a movement of differentiation made possible by the existence of a symbolic code (O).

Plotting these associations onto the schema is especially satisfying because it so clearly shows the opening up of the signifying function between a subject and the locus of the symbolic code. The differentiating action of demotivation is what Lacan refers to as symbolic castration. The task of castration, as we have seen in earlier chapters, is to introduce a fundamental shift in the subject’s relation to the image, that is, to relate the positional moment of the image to the dispositional horizon of a symbolic system. The Schema R thus serves to map an essentially temporal process. The central trapezoid of the real forms a kind of ventricle that pulses open under the influence of the signifier and then restabilizes in relation to new imaginary formations.

Explicating the Schema R in this way allows us to clarify its relation to the Schema L. If the movement of demotivation fails, the symbolic axis of the ego ideal fails to be differentiated from the imaginary. The result, in which a defensive and narcissistic over-investment in the imaginary ego resists symbolic mediation, is precisely the situation mapped by the Schema L. It is from this point of view that the Schema L is rightly interpreted as the schema of the analytic situation. What the Schema L really shows is the neurotic inflection of the personality in which the ego assumes the status, as Lacan says, of the symptom par excellence. The trick for the analyst is to engage the imaginary transference along the axis o’–o, and then, by occupying the position of the big Other (O) of the symbolic code, to open it to the influence of the signifier. The aim is to open the real under the influence of the signifying function with the result of bringing the subject into a new relation both to the Thing and to the ego ideal. By contrast to the Schema L, which is more specific to the analytic situation, the Schema R charts the inner workings of the Oedipus complex in symbolic castration and thus represents a fuller and more “normal” picture of psychical structure.
How the real world became a phantasy

Where, then, in all of this is the objet a? In fact, Lacan offers the entire Schema R as “a mapping of the objet a”:

What the Schema R shows is a projective plan. In particular the points, and it is not by chance (or by a sense of play) that I chose the letters that correspond to them—m, M, i, I—and which are those that frame the only valid cut in this schema (the cut m M, i I), are sufficient indication that this cut isolates a Moebius strip in the field. . . . I mean that only the cut reveals the structure of the entire surface from being able to detach from it those two heterogeneous elements (represented in my algorithm (S ⊗ a) of the phantasy: the S, S barred by the strip to be expected here in fact, that is to say, covering the field R of reality, and the a, which corresponds to the fields I and S. It is as representative of the representation in phantasy, therefore, that is to say as the originally repressed subject that S, the barred S of desire, here supports the field of reality, and this field is sustained only by the extraction of the objet a, which, however, gives it its frame. (E:S, 223).

Let us conclude this chapter with an explication of this passage. Of key importance is the moment of the cut, originally a cut in the body of the imaginary object by which a series of partial objects (the breast, the feces, the phallus, voice, gaze, etc.) are separated from the body of the other. By means of this separation, a succession of objects are established that will mediate symbolically between the subject and the other. It is in this sense that Lacan claims that the objet a is a “remainder in the dialectic of the subject and the other” (S.X 5–15–63). Said otherwise, the successive figurations of the objet a offer to the subject a means, like a series of stepping stones that both differentiate and connect, by which the desire of the Other as Thing is separated from the imaginary order and passed into the symbolic circuit. Each step in this succession provides the symbolic wherewithal by which the subject is able to represent the moment of lack that is constitutive of desire. That is to say, each incarnation of the objet a allows the subject, not to provide any final answer to the question of the Other’s desire, the unthinkable dimension of the imaginary other that emerges primitively as das Ding, but to pass that question into the unfolding of a symbolic process. The stakes of desire become oral, anal, phallic, scopic and, finally, with the emergence of the phoneme and the voice, verbal. This process of representation of lack is what opens the space between the imaginary and symbolic axes that cross the Schema R on the diagonal, the space of the real.

The final terms of this process are indicated in the opposing corners of the schema, the outer points of the imaginary and symbolic triangles, the phallus
and the locus of the Code or Name-of-the-Father. Why does the subjective side of this differentiation come to be associated with the phallus? What outfits the phallus in particular to assume the status of a master signifier? Why, said otherwise, does the ultimate form of the cut take the form of the phantasy of castration? We already sketched part of the answer in a previous chapter: the phallus offers an especially fortuitous junction of the imaginary and symbolic. The male member is at once a privileged representation of the cut (it is actually missing in the body image of the female) and readily models the binary opposition of the signifier (as it marks sexual difference between male and female). To which we can now add: the phallus is the last in a series of figurations of the objet a that display a conspicuously imaginary character (the imaginary dimension, the reference to a part of the body, is obviously diminished in the case of the gaze and the voice). It is for this reason that the range of perversions—those efforts to side-step or short-circuit the effects of castration: in fetishes, scopophilic compulsions, pederasty, etc.—will take the imaginary phallus as a privileged point of reference. Moreover, unlike the breast or feces, the phallus inevitably points away from the mother toward the third position of the father, off the axis of relation that binds the imaginary ego to the mother. For all of these reasons, the phallus is not merely one figure of the objet a among others but assumes a special status.

Reference to castration serves to remind us that the cut that issues in the objet a, if it is primitively figured in the body of the other, is also a cut internal to the subject itself. As we have already seen, the unimagable dimension of das Ding in the other is correlative with a similarly unthinkable dimension in the subject, das Es. Among the effects of the process by which the Thing is established in a symbolic dimension, increasingly independent from the imaginary form in which it was originally anchored, is thus not only a differentiation of the image of the other (i) from the question of its desire (M), but also the imaginary form of the ego (m) from the ego ideal (I). That these two moments of differentiation—i and M, m and I—occur together is part of what Lacan means by comparing the quadrilateral described by the four points to a Moebius strip. Prior to the submission of the subject to symbolic castration, the imaginary and symbolic functions are collapsed upon one another, just as the two sides of a Moebius strip are in fact only a single side. By cutting the strip, that is, by opening up the moment of separation between imaginary and symbolic under the influence of an established code (the function Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father), a novel modality of symbolically mediated identification becomes possible in the form of the ego ideal. The emergence of the ego ideal mobilizes the desire of the subject in the pursuit of aims and objects that transcend the register of the image. The properly symbolic function of desire is set in motion, one in which the subject, as Lacan says, is represented by a signifier for another signifier.

The Schema R is thus, quite literally, a homologue of the formula $S \Diamond a$. In the rectangular poinçon at the center of the formula we recognize the
trapezoidal band of the real that slices across the Schema R. The bar that crosses the S of the subject indicates that this function of the real has been taken into the subject by means of a symbolic mediation. The effect of this submission to the signifier is a passage beyond the captures of the imaginary. It is a transformation that is made possible by the way in which the lack, the deficit in the subject’s capacity to know the desire of the other, a lack marked provisionally in the successive figures of the objet a, is increasingly passed into the defile of the signifier. The result is not that the unthinkable Thing is now thinkable, but rather that the question of the Thing becomes circuited by the chain of signifiers. Desire, as the ceaseless posing of that question, assumes its symbolic destiny as an unending metonymy.

We can now better appreciate the significance of the fact that the internal trapezoid of the real borders the imaginary on one side and the symbolic on the other. This circumstances graphically represents the distinction, so central to Lacan’s entire outlook, between everyday “reality” (the predictable, even banal, domain of stable objects and routinized actions in which we ordinarily live) and the “real” in the properly Lacanian sense (as an uncanny and ultimately unknowable dimension of Otherness). The world of everyday reality, comparable to Heidegger’s notion of the inauthentic domain of Dasein’s everydayness overseen by the authority of an anonymous “they,” is the domain of the ego in relation to its imaginary objects. It is represented in the Schema R by the axis between m and i. Under the influence of the signifier, the subject is opened to the movement of desire beyond the image, to a world beyond the familiar confines of the ego and its banality. In all fairness, then, the line in the Schema that indicates the border of this symbolic dimension (joining I and M) ought not be represented by a line at all, but rather by a kind of semi-permeable zone through which the subject is drawn beyond its capacity to know itself as image. It is in passing into this zone that the subject is “barred,” as it can no longer identify itself simply as this or that (a particular social role, etc.) but becomes ecstatically unknowable to itself.

How and why does Lacan link the frame of the real to phantasy? The answer is related to the profound ambiguity of all phantasy, for phantasy is always a picturing, a imaginal figuration, yet also aims toward something unimagable. What is most deeply sought by desire in the phantasy cannot be given in the register of the image. This ambiguous, Janus-faced character of phantasy is an effect of its middle position between imaginary and symbolic. And it is that middle zone that is mapped in the trapezoid of the real. On the side of the ego’s stabilization in everyday reality, what we have is an elaboration of the imaginary register, a kind of taming of the real in a matrix of objects. But this everyday reality is precisely a phantasy, now in the quasi-derogatory sense, to the extent that it excludes the unknowable kernel at which desire aims. As such it is intrinsically unstable and liable to eruptions of something “untoward” and ill-fitting (as, for example, when the man who
FIGURATIONS OF THE OBJET A

has settled comfortably into the “good life” of the modest career, the wholesome family, etc., symptomatically pursues some “crazy” or even ruinous act—his visits to a prostitute, his compulsion to gamble—the sort of thing about which he is forced to say afterwards “I don’t know what caused me to do it, I must have been out of my mind”.

We now recognize the fuller meaning of the formula for the phantasy, S ◊ a. The objet a is there, in the space beyond the imaginable, and functions to keep the phantasy open to its ultimate destination in the real of desire. Moreover, we see how and why Lacan associates the end of analysis with a “traversing of the phantasy.” In the analytic situation, the analyst occupies the position of the objet a with the result that the analysand is progressively drawn beyond the imaginary sedimentations of phantasy toward a symbolic horizon in which the lack that stimulates desire remains open to the play of signifiers. “Traversing the phantasy” thus does not mean that the subject somehow abandons its involvement with fanciful caprices and accommodates itself to a pragmatic “reality,” but precisely the opposite: the subject is submitted to that effect of the symbolic lack that reveals the limit of everyday reality. To traverse the phantasy in the Lacanian sense is to be more profoundly claimed by the phantasy than ever, in the sense of being brought into an ever more intimate relation with that real core of the phantasy that transcends imaging.

This discussion also illuminates our earlier characterization of the objet a as a dispositional object. The objet a functions to “dispose” the subject in the direction of the ungraspable horizon of the Thing. As such, it founds a “disposition” in the more ordinary connotation of the word as an internal orientation of the subject toward an end, aim, or action. But the objet a is also appropriately called “dispositional” in the sense, as we have seen, that it cannot be presented as such. It is a paradoxically non-objective object.

We can now take a further step toward clarifying this paradoxical status by returning to our effort to show the Lacanian schemas in overlay with a structural square of Gestalt concepts—figure and ground, not-figure and not-ground. The objet a is appropriately identified with the “not-ground.” Of the primitive Thing, it was possible initially only to say that it is “not-figure.” The Thing marks the limit of the image of the other, but as such is strictly negative and utterly unknowable. But as the space of the Thing comes to be imbricated in the system of signifiers, it is as if a wholly virtual object is thrown into relief. By means of its systemization, the not-figure thus gives rise by a special effect of retroaction to a not-ground. This new locus of a not-ground, as an indeterminate figure, then displays the ambiguity of the phantasy, indeed the not-ground of the objet a describes the very structure of phantasy. On the one hand, it inevitably tends to be filled out with imaginary contents, the familiar clothing of phantasies. It is on this side of its function that the objet a is launched in the parade of part-objects (the breast, feces, phallus, etc.). On the other hand, as it continues to be evacuated

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of content by the open-endedness of signification. The not-ground of the objet a remains unspecified, a figure of pure lack. It is that around which the traverse of the phantasy revolves.

In identifying the objet a as "not-ground," we are able to make new sense of Lacan's claim that the objet a serves to "frame" the experience of the real. As "not-ground," the objet a functions as a particular enhancement, we might even say a "focusing," of the dispositional field. It is in this sense that the petit a constitutes the "cause" of desire. It entrains the movement of desire precisely because it is not and cannot be the aim or object of desire, but "disposes" desire from a perpetually eccentric locus.

The objet a is intrinsically paradoxical, even contradictory—a circumstance expressed by the oxymoronic term we have chosen to describe it, that of a "dispositional object." As dispositional, it is something that in principle cannot be made present to awareness. At the same time, however, it has the character of a discrete entity. The psychoanalyst must therefore postulate its existence somewhat in the way that astronomers theorize about black holes, the super-dense remnants of dead stars whose gravitational field is so great that all radiation emanating from them is immediately sucked back in. We know of their existence only by observing their influence on other visible objects that surround them.

If we cannot simply point to the paradoxical objet a, we can nevertheless locate its effects in perfectly classical Freudian terms (and thereby recognize that we aren't dealing with some "foreign import" of Lacanianism) by reminding ourselves of the most basic assumption of the psychoanalytic theory of love. If a man is to find satisfaction in love, the object of his erotic attentions must succeed in revivifying the archaic memory of the mother (because love is a refinding of the lost object). But at the same time, it is equally indispensable that the object not be the mother (because the prohibition against incest must be preserved). Happiness in love thus requires that the love object both be and not be the mother. This means that love is never related simply to the given object before us but to another object that remains paradoxically suspended between presence and absence.

Every experience of love has this structure. Passion reaches beyond the sum of the object's actual qualities toward another dimension projected beyond it. This ungraspable dimension is the real core-generator of the power of love. The virility of a man or the allure of a woman, for example, continually evoked by a variety of clues, is never wholly present but resides in a kind of "fourth dimension" of the love object. It is with respect to this dimension of a beyond-of-the-object, the dimension of the objet a, that we can make sense of Lacan's definition of love as "giving what one doesn't have." What the lover finds in the beloved is something the beloved doesn't actually possess, something that is never concretely present in the beloved but—we can now use the word with the full weight of its meaning in Lacanian theory—is signified by them.
Figurations of the objet a

This view of the matter explains the familiar "blindness" of love, the way in which the lover overlooks the flaws in the beloved. The tableau presented by the actually perceived qualities of the beloved is continually repainted under the magical influence of a hidden, inward quality. Love routinely transforms a sow's ear into a silk purse. By a kind of refraction, the captivating force of the objet a illuminates the mundane object from beyond it. The mechanism at work is related to the effect we noted earlier in the cover-girl face, in which the anxiety elicited by her over-intense gaze is circuited back into a revivified sense of her transcendent beauty. It is in this sense that love is truly blind: the lover remains unaware of the way in which the two levels that we here distinguish theoretically—the level of the image and of something in the ungraspable beyond of the image—are always collapsed in the actual experience of love. To fall in love is to become subject to the spell of this illusion. It is also this illusion that operates in the most successful instance of sublimation. The art object, says Lacan in his definition of sublimation, "raises the object to the dignity of the Thing."

We have returned repeatedly to the importance of the central trapezoid of Schema R, the zone Lacan associates with the real. But what relation obtains between the Lacanian sense of the real and the Freudian "reality principle"? The answer offers a last opportunity to clarify the function of the objet a. Lacan must be credited with rescuing Freud's idea from the oversimplifications of many of Freud's followers and restoring its true radicality. The great temptation is to conceive the reality principle from a naively empiricist standpoint. From this point of view, the wishful psyche is free to hallucinate its satisfactions until the brute fact of reality is pressed upon it by perception. This notion, or something very like it, underlies the stress on adaptation to reality championed by the school of ego psychology toward which Lacan remained so polemically opposed. It is a notion based on doubly mistaken assumptions.

The first error is to suppose that the essential conflict uncovered by the Freud is that between wishes and their fulfillment, between acting on one's desires versus bumping up against the constraints of external reality. This way of thinking reduces Freud's theory to the most commonsensical view of things. It assumes that we all know what we want (as a function of the pleasure principle) but we are hemmed in by a harsh and unforgiving world (the reality principle). The genuine Freudian insight places the most important site of conflict not between our wishes and the world that limits their fulfillment, but between our wishes and ourselves. The problem is not that we are prevented by reality from fulfilling our desire but that we are prevented from knowing that desire in the first place. The Lacanian innovation is to insist on the rootedness of desire in the real, that is, on the way in which the sources of our own desire are always beyond us, the way in which desire harbors an irreducible opacity, an impossibility not just to satisfy desire but also to represent it to ourselves. We see how this Lacanian "innovation" is
hardly new but rather truly a return to Freud's own conception when we recognize the congruence of the Lacanian notion of the real and the Freudian id, the unthinkable "it" at the heart of the subject.

The second error of the naive conception of the reality principle is related to the first. It again has to do with the Lacanian sense of the real but this time in relation to the world outside the subject. The mistake here is to think that the reality principle concerns an accommodation to something simply given in the world, the only problematic aspect of which is the challenge it poses to the subject's powers of adaptation. Lacan reorients us in this respect, forcing us to consider the way in which the reality principle ultimately concerns the real in his sense of the term as the unknowable, even impossible, kernel of the Thing. The key point is that relation to reality, far from being founded upon the certainties of perception, becomes a possibility for the human subject only when perception is destabilized by the influence of the signifier. The sense of reality is predicated upon a discontinuity, the eruption of an uncertainty with respect to the object. Lacan makes this point with special clarity in his discussion of the Schreber case. In the depth of his psychosis, Schreber loses his sense of reality, but he has an unshakable sense of certainty (which forms the basis of his delusions). In fact, this combination of absolute certainty without reality could function as a shorthand definition of paranoia. The non-psychotic orientation to the world, on the contrary, has a firm sense of reality precisely because it doesn't have absolute certainty. "Reality testing" is thus almost the exact opposite of what the naive empiricist would have us believe. Far from a way of being grounded in the givenness of objects to perception, the capacity of relating oneself to "reality" is a matter of relating oneself to what is not there, to what is missing or incomplete in perception. I relate myself to the reality of the coffee cup in front me by virtue of my capacity to leave open the question of its "true being" —and this in various senses, some as elementary as my awareness that the cup has a backside that is presently hidden from my sight but allowed for in my perception of the cup as an aspect of its "reality." "Reality testing" occurs when the subject experiences what is there in relation to what is not there. Said otherwise, the sense of reality is grounded on the experience of the object in its relation to the Thing.

From this vantage point, we can grasp the core meaning of Lacan's theory of psychosis. The Lacanian formula for psychosis as a foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father implies that the psychotic suffers an impairment of the relation to the object a due to a deficiency of the symbolic function. What the psychotic lacks is the lack itself. With this point in mind, we can interpret the last enigmatic portion of Lacan's text in which he asserts that the field of reality "is sustained only by the extraction of the objet a, which, however, gives it its frame." In order to function as the cause of desire and —what comes to the same thing—in order to ground the genuine experience of reality, there must be something essentially missing. There must be a constitutive
blind spot, an empty space in the field, in which the sense of uncertainty can be continuously regenerated. The experience of the “realness” of reality depends on such a continual suspension in uncertainty. By means of a relation to the irrecoverably lost object of the \textit{objet a}, the subject is brought up before the dimension of what is “in me more than me,” and simultaneously what is “in the world more than the world.”

\textbf{Notes}

3 “There is never a simple duplicity of terms. It is not only that I see the other, I see him seeing me, which implicates the third term, namely that he knows that I see him. The circle is closed. There are always three terms in the structure, even if these three terms are not explicitly present” (S.I, 218).
4 “All dual relations are more or less of an imaginary style; and in order for a relation to take its symbolic value, it is necessary that there be a meditation by a third person which realizes, by relation to the subject, the transcendent element thanks to which his relation to the object can be sustained at a certain distance.” Jacques Lacan, “Le symbolique, l’imaginaire, et le réel,” Unpublished conference paper presented on July 8, 1953.
5 The diagrams offered here that map the Schema L in relation to Gestalt concepts of figure and ground and in relation to the Greimasian semiotic square are exactly those drawn by Rosalind Krauss in her study \textit{The Optical Unconscious} (New York: MIT Press, 1994). See especially pages 13–14.
6 The presentation of the Schema R in the English translation of Lacan’s \textit{Écrits} marks the position of the ego with an “e” rather than an “m” (for moi). The unfortunate aspect of this translation is that the reader misses the double pairing of terms in the central trapezoid: i and I, m and M.
Psychoanalysis is constantly tempted by reductionism. That temptation stems from the desire to establish psychology on a genuinely “scientific” basis and to attain the rigor of the natural sciences by explaining the human in terms of the nonhuman. If all dimensions of human mental life could be translated into the terms of the sciences of nature, the recognizably human would be reduced to something already explained by “real” sciences such as physics and biology. The danger, of course, is that we may no longer recognize ourselves in the image which results—that the peculiarly human will somehow be lost in the reducing glass.

Freud himself was an eloquent spokesman for such a strategy. The opening of his “Project for a Scientific Psychology” provides a classic statement of this reductionist program:

The intention [of this project] is to furnish a psychology that shall be a natural science: that is, to represent psychical processes as quantitatively determinate states of specifiable material particles, thus making those processes perspicuous and free from contradiction. Two principal ideas are involved: (1) What distinguishes activity from rest is to be regarded as \( Q \) [quantity], subject to the general laws of motion. (2) The neurones are to be taken as the material particles. [1895, p. 295].

Freud soon abandoned this neurophysiological program and declared forthrightly that, henceforth, “I shall remain upon psychological ground” (1900-01, p. 536). But similar reductionist motives remain prominent in his works, where the neuron’s role as a naturalistic explanatory principle is supplanted...
by the conception of instinct or drive (Trieb) as a form of biological energy. The ambitions of the 1895 "Project" still echo in An Outline of Psycho-
Analysis, posthumously published in 1938, where Freud declares that psy-
chology is "a natural science like any other" (p. 158). In the light of such
statements, it is easy to interpret Freudian psychoanalysis as a form of
reductionist psychology that attempts to resolve everything human into a
biological substrate of instinctual energies.

Jacques Lacan proposes an audacious alternative to this reductionist
interpretation of Freud. He argues that what is central to Freud's view is not
his official materialism, but a theory of symbolism. Lacan would thus substi-
tute linguistics for biology as the scientific foundation and model for psycho-
analysis, thereby ensuring that the human will be understood in terms of
the human, since language is a uniquely human achievement. It is this
proposal—that linguistics replace biology as the scientific paradigm for
psychoanalysis—which links Lacan with the French structuralist school.

But if Lacan offers us an alternative to reductionistic versions of Freud
and of psychoanalysis, it is not only because of his emphasis upon lin-
guistics. It is also because his view is profoundly influenced by the phil-
osophies of Heidegger and Hegel and, even more specifically, by Alexandre
Kojève's provocative interpretation of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit,
which had such a major impact upon French thinkers of Lacan's generation.

Indeed, the influences of Heidegger and Hegel converge in Kojève, whose
interpretation of Hegel's Phenomenology exhibits an original and exciting
blend of Marxist and Heideggerian ingredients. Since many readers of
Lacan are not familiar with Heidegger or Hegel, still less with Kojève's ver-
sion of the Phenomenology, Lacan's Heideggerian allusions and frequent
references to Hegel only aggravate the difficulty of wrestling with his her-
metic prose style.

We will try to alleviate this difficulty by presenting some of the most
salient ideas of Hegel and Heidegger that are important to understanding
Lacan. Our purpose is not merely to clarify Lacan by tracing historical influ-
ences, however. We will also attempt to show how Lacan's assimilation of
Hegel and Heidegger invites a reconsideration of the founding insights
of Sigmund Freud in a less reductionistic way. Reductionism will give way to
a dialectic that leads to a psychoanalysis no longer regarded, or regardable,
as anything like a natural science.

Hegel

Lacan claims to be an orthodox Freudian, championing Freud's authentic
meaning against the challenge of French phenomenology and the heretical
ego psychology of the American Freudians. He attacks both the transparency
of consciousness in Sartre's existential phenomenology and the primacy of
the ego in American psychoanalytic theory, insisting that the ego is not the
locus of truth and reality and autonomous control, but is rather a concretion of illusions, a source of "méconnaissances" or "misrecognitions" that must be dissolved in the course of psychoanalysis in order to liberate the authentic self, the "je" or "I."

Lacan finds Hegel a natural ally in these quarrels because Hegel, too, is a critic of consciousness and of the ego—not of ego psychology, of course, but of the ego-centered philosophies that have dominated modern European thought. These include Descartes's rational cogito, the introspective consciousness of English empiricism, and the autonomous, transcendental ego of Kant and Fichte. All are misconceptions insofar as they are founded in the idea of a purely epistemological ego—or "thinking being." For they thereby abstract not only from human activity and labor but also from the social, cultural, and historical conditions of human mentality. Thus, Kojève describes the program of The Phenomenology of Spirit somewhat dramatically by depicting it as Hegel's attempt to understand himself—not as a disembodied ego or Cartesian cogito, but as he sits at a table in Jena in 1806, writing the Phenomenology and hearing, in the distance, the cannon shots on the eve of the Battle of Jena, in which Napoleon defeated Prussia. To understand himself, Hegel must understand what it is to philosophize at that historic moment, in a world in which Napoleon is about to end the Holy Roman Empire which Charlemagne had begun a thousand years before. But, Kojève asks,

What is it to "understand" Napoleon? . . . Generally speaking, to understand Napoleon is to understand him in relation to the whole of anterior historical evolution, to understand the whole of universal history. Now, almost none of the philosophers contemporary with Hegel posed this problem for himself. And none of them, except Hegel, resolved it. For Hegel is the only one able to accept, and to justify, Napoleon's existence. . . . The others consider themselves obliged to condemn Napoleon, that is, to condemn the historical reality; and their philosophical systems—by that very fact—are all condemned by that reality. [Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, pp. 34–35; Kojève's italics]

These philosophers condemn Napoleon—and thereby themselves—because the abstract purity of the epistemological ego has been translated into a moralizing "beautiful soul" so obsessed with the purity of its own intentions that it does not act, but only passes judgment upon those who do—and of course Napoleon is the preeminent historic agent of the era. These philosophers are all words and no deeds, and by their very opposition to historical reality they show that their words are empty abstractions. They fail to understand Napoleon, as they fail to understand themselves, because they do not recognize that their abstract conception of themselves and
Napoleon are both products of the culture of the Enlightenment, and that their condemnation of history is merely the verbal counterpart of what the Revolution and Napoleon are actively realizing by the destruction of the old order and the Holy Roman Empire. To understand Napoleon they would have to acknowledge this underlying identity of self and other, give up their abstract moralistic purity, and accept their own historicity.

Hegel insists that the individual who fails to recognize his own historicity and sets himself up as a pure, autonomous ego, independent of the customs and culture of his society and era, is a stranger to himself. Much of the work of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is intended to dissolve such an illusory conception of the self as an abstract ego and bring the self-estranged consciousness to a full recognition of itself as both creature and creator of history. It is an enterprise that may well be compared with psychoanalysis and with Lacan’s attack upon the ego as a source of mis-recognition and the alienation of the authentic subject. The easiest way to exhibit the Hegelian background of Lacan’s view is to explore the parallel between these two programs for rescuing the self from its estrangement, or its “captivation by the ego,” in Lacan’s phrase.

The point of departure for Hegel’s critique of ego philosophies is his analysis of consciousness, which culminates in a critique of the sort of naive scientific thinker who seeks to contemplate an objective world uncontaminated by subjectivity. This thinker still does not recognize that the mind plays an active role in knowledge, that the scientific object is a reflection of the scientific subject. The account ends with a strange passage on “die verkehrte Welt,” an inverted, mirror world in which all scientific polarities are reversed—rather like speculations about a universe of anti-matter in recent physics. Hegel carries this out to comic lengths to emphasize that the scientific consciousness must recognize itself in this mirror in order to get beyond mere consciousness and reach the level of self-consciousness. But self-consciousness emerges only if it is not nature that is the object of consciousness, but rather another self. Hegel therefore turns to the origins of consciousness in the relation to an alter ego:

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. [p. 111; Hegel’s italics]

This image of the emergence of self-consciousness from the recognition of the self in a mirror, or in another self, is familiar to readers of Lacan. The point of departure for Lacan’s critique of ego psychology is his account of “the mirror stage”—the stage when the infant, still uncoordinated and relatively powerless, first achieves consciousness of itself by recognizing itself in
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an object outside itself, its image in a mirror. According to Lacan, this specular, mirror image of the self is “the matrix and first outline of what is to become the ego,” and since it shows the body in reversed form, it presages the ego’s role as a source of misrecognition and illusion.

What is not to be found in the looking glass, according to both Hegel and Lacan, is any awareness of self as subjective agency. The two agree that what the mirror does not reflect is the subject’s desire, which is the motive source of all human activity and is the simplest, most primitive form of self-awareness. Kojève explains that

the man who attentively contemplates a thing, who wants to see it as it is without changing anything is “absorbed” so to speak by this contemplation—that is, by this thing. He forgets himself . . . [But] when he experiences a desire, when he is hungry, for example, and wants to eat . . . he necessarily becomes aware of himself. Desire is always revealed as my desire. [p. 37; Kojève’s italics]

In contrast to the knowledge that keeps man in a passive quietude, Desire disquiets him and moves him to action. [p. 4]

Thus far, Lacan could concur on purely Freudian grounds—and might defend his orthodoxy with references to Freud’s discussions of Eros and Thanatos and the economics of the libido. But what Lacan in fact does is to take over Hegel’s analysis of desire as interpreted and elaborated by Kojève. Hegel’s analysis focuses upon what distinguishes human desire from merely vital, biological drives. If Lacan’s version of Freudian theory and practice offers an alternative to reductionism, it is as much the result of this adoption of Hegel’s analysis of desire as it is of the linguistic theory of the unconscious. Indeed, the linguistic and Hegelian themes may be regarded as necessary complements of one another. Paul Ricoeur objects to Lacan’s interpretation of Freud because it “eliminates energy concepts in favor of linguistics” (p. 367, n. 37). By insisting upon a linguistic or semiotic theory of the unconscious, Ricoeur argues, Lacan and his followers are led to neglect the energetic, biological dimension of Freud’s theory, the “economics” of the libido. But, Ricoeur insists, it is just this natural, energetic ingredient that is required to explain the difference between ordinary language and the symbolism of the unconscious. Ricoeur regards this as the critical juncture for the philosophical interpretation of Freud:

For a philosophical critique, the essential point concerns what I call the place of that energy discourse. Its place, it seems to me, lies at the intersection of desire and language. . . . The intersection of the ‘natural’ and the ‘signifying’ is the point at which the instinctual drives are ‘represented’ by affects and ideas; consequently the coordination of the economic language and the intentional language is the main
question of this epistemology and one that cannot be avoided by reducing either language to the other. [p. 395]

But, Ricoeur admits, the difficulty here centers in "the idea of an 'energy that is transformed into meaning.'" And he concedes that in order to resolve this difficulty, "it may be that the entire matter must be redone, perhaps with the help of energy schemata quite different from Freud's" (p. 395).

It is at just this point, "the intersection of the 'natural' and the 'signifying,'" that Lacan's adoption of Hegel's account of human desire plays such a decisive role. The linguistic interpretation of the unconscious seems to call for a complementary redefinition of desire in less naturalistic terms than those afforded by Freud's "energy discourse." Hegel's discussion of desire in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* supplies this complement by focusing upon how human desire transcends biological needs and organic drives. And if Ricoeur is correct in claiming that psychoanalysis is essentially a "hermeneutics of desire," then the adoption of the Hegelian theory of desire is bound to have important implications for both the theory and the practice of the interpretation of the "language" of the unconscious. Kojève's elaboration of Hegel's analysis of desire might almost have been designed to address this enigma of how "energy is transformed into meaning" in a way that pertains directly to the problem of interpretation as it appears within the interpersonal setting of analysis.

In his commentary upon Hegel's discussion of desire, Kojève explains that the very being of man implies and presupposes a biological reality, an animal life and animal desire. But,

if animal Desire is the necessary condition of Self-Consciousness, it is not the sufficient condition. [p. 4]

The animal attains only Selbst-gefühl, Sentiment of self, but not Selbst-bewusstsein, Self-Consciousness—that is, it cannot speak of itself, it cannot say "I." . . . For Self-Consciousness to exist . . . there must be transcendence of self with respect to self as given. And this is possible, according to Hegel, only if desire is directed not toward a given being, but toward a nonbeing . . . that is, toward another Desire, another greedy emptiness, another I . . . . Desire is human—or, more exactly, "humanizing," "anthropogenetic"—only provided that it is directed toward another Desire and an other Desire. [pp. 39–40; Kojève's italics]

Thus, in the relationship between a man and a woman, for example, Desire is human only if the one desires, not the body, but the Desire of the other; if he wants "to possess" or "to assimilate" the Desire taken as Desire—that is to say, if he wants to be "desired" or
"loved," or, rather, "recognized" in his human value, in his reality as a human individual. [p. 6]

Lacan takes up this analysis and elaborates it into a three-way distinction between desire; merely natural or biological need, which is mute; and demand, which is that peculiarly human demand for love that transcends all mere objects of satisfaction and transmutes them into proofs of love. Lacan reserves the word "desire" to refer to that transcendent, unconditional ingredient in the demand for love, the peculiarly human emptiness that cannot be satisfied by any object or proof of love. As Lacan puts it, "for both partners in the relation, both the subject and the Other, it is not enough to be subjects of need, or objects of love... They must stand for the cause of desire" (Écrits, p. 287). So, Lacan explains, "if the desire of the mother is the phallus, the child wishes to be the phallus in order to satisfy that desire" (p. 289). And elsewhere he elaborates:

The child, in his relation to the mother, a relation constituted in analysis not by his vital dependence on her, but by his dependence on her love, that is to say, by the desire for her desire, identifies himself with the imaginary object of this desire in so far as the mother herself symbolizes it in the phallus. [Écrits, p. 198]

Lacan’s understanding of the significance of the phallus is crucial here. The phallus is not the physical organ, the penis or clitoris, but the symbolic object whose unveiling culminated the ancient mysteries. Lacan insists upon this special symbolic status: "The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire (1977, p. 287). The phallus thus stands at that "intersection of desire and language" which Ricoeur describes as the philosophically critical crossroads of psychoanalytic theory. For Lacan, it marks the transcendence of human desire beyond organic need—a transcendence that is owing to language. It also stands for jouissance, that unconditional fulfillment or perfection of being which is the aim of a human desire that cannot be satisfied by any object because "the being of language is the non-being of objects" (p. 263). In effect, the phallus is the symbol of that movement whereby man surpasses the merely vital or biological toward a fulfillment that is forever wanted—and forever wanting—in human existence.

Hegel, too, had insisted that this distinctively human desire to be desired aims beyond every determinate need and seems even to defy any form of satisfaction. It is a desire to be desired as a desirer; not simply to satisfy a need, nor as an object of love, as Lacan says, but as a human subject who transcends every object or instinct or merely vital need. But an individual can only prove to the other that he is such a transcending subject by risking his life in conflict with another subject. Kojève explains:
For man to be truly human, for him to be essentially and really different from an animal, his human Desire must actually win out over his animal Desire . . . All the Desires of an animal are in the final analysis a function of its desire to preserve its life. Human Desire, therefore, must win out over this desire for preservation . . . [pp. 6-7.] In other words, Man will risk his biological life to satisfy his nonbiological desire. And Hegel says that the being that is incapable of putting its life in danger in order to attain ends that are not immediately vital—i.e., the being that cannot risk its life in a fight for Recognition, in a fight for pure prestige—is not a truly human being. [p. 41; his italics]

But one cannot extract recognition from a corpse! A struggle to the death can only end in impasse. If the struggle is to have any positive result, one of the two adversaries must surrender, abnegate his own desire in order to save his life and become a slave who labors to satisfy the desire of the other, the master. But the master cannot be fully satisfied by the recognition of a mere slave who has sacrificed his human autonomy to save his life. Self-consciousness is achieved only through consciousness of another self, an alter ego, and the master cannot encounter a fully human self in the slave. It is only the slave who encounters in the master, as his alter ego, a fully autonomous human being. But this otherness must be overcome; the self must recognize itself in its other. The master must acknowledge his dependence upon the slave, and the slave must recognize his own mastery. In fact, it is the slave who, by means of his labor, may eventually achieve satisfaction and recognition. The slave alters and reshapes the world through his work and thereby realizes and embodies his own subjective agency in the world. He can therefore recognize himself in that world. By laboring to satisfy the desire of the other, then, the slave works through his natural fear of death and realizes his freedom by mastering the natural world, thereby achieving self-recognition.

Lacan applies this analysis of the struggle for recognition and the master-slave relation to the development of the child and to the psychoanalytic process. The child desires to be desired—desires, symbolically, to be the phallus which the mother desires. But he must repress this desire under the prohibition of the paternal “No,” or as Lacan puts it “in the Name of the Father,” which signifies the socialization of the child, the acquisition of language, law, and culture whereby the individual becomes human. This subordination of desire to law and language is the locus of primal repression. The threat of castration is simply the apt symbol for this abnegation of the desire to be desired, symbolized by the desire to be the phallus. Lacan also finds here the source of the necessity which led Freud to “link the appearance of the signifier of the Father, as author of the Law, with death, even to the murder of the Father” (Écrits, p. 199).
Thus, according to Lacan, there is a "life and death struggle" at the origin of individual acculturation much like that which Hegel saw as the precondition of all human history. In both cases, this struggle leaves the desire for recognition unsatisfied, and the subsequent development—whether of the career of the individual or the history of the species—is plagued by tensions that betray the unresolved conflict whence it springs. Lacan writes:

The concrete field of individual preservation . . . is structured in this dialectic of master and slave, in which we can recognize the symbolic emergence of the imaginary struggle to the death in which we earlier defined the essential structure of the ego. [Écrits, p. 142]

Lacan sees this same dialectic in psychoanalytic transference. He frequently characterizes the analytic relationship in just these Hegelian terms, describing it as a struggle for recognition or as a master-slave relation in which the analysand assumes the role of the slave, who agrees initially to undertake the "work" of analysis in order to satisfy the analyst-master. If the process is to be fruitful, however, the analyst must eventually eschew the role of master and help the analysand toward self-recognition through the labor of free association, thereby freeing an authentic "I" from captivation by the ego.

Of course, all of this must be taken metaphorically. In Lacan's case, nothing should be taken too literally—and Lacan himself remarks that Hegel's account describes "a mythical rather than a real genesis" (Écrits, p. 308). It is probably best to see Hegel's analysis of the struggle for recognition and the master-slave dialectic as his substitute for the Enlightenment's myth of the origin of human civilization in a social contract between autonomous, rationally self-interested egos. Kojève treats this dialectic as a metaphor for the whole of human history, in which the labor of the slave corresponds to the historical process of Bildung, or culture-building, wherein man both creates and alienates himself:

The historical process, the historical becoming of the human being, is the product of the working Slave and not of the warlike Master. . . . Thanks to his work, he can become other; and thanks to his work, the World can become other. And this is what actually took place as universal history and, finally, the French Revolution and Napoleon show. [pp. 52–53]

And that brings us back to the beginning, to Hegel's effort to understand himself as he writes, hearing the sounds of Napoleon's cannon at Jena, and to his attempt to help the reader overcome his self-estrangement by appropriating his own historicity, recognizing himself as both creature and creator of history. It is, again, an undertaking which invites comparison with
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psychoanalysis, especially as Lacan describes it: "Analysis can have for its goal only the advent of a true speech and the realization by the subject of his history in his relation to a future" (Écrits, p. 88).

Yet for all the fertile parallels Lacan discovers between psychoanalysis and the program of Hegel's Phenomenology, the two enterprises are not the same, and he is well aware of how they differ. In Hegel's case, the task of reconciliation with his own historical reality requires an understanding of the whole of world history, or at least of how the history of the West has led to the confrontation between the German intellectual and the Napoleonic armies. Only the philosophical comprehension of the history that culminates in Napoleon will yield such self-understanding and reconciliation. Self-knowledge is not to be attained through the simple transparency of the Cartesian cogito or Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, for man is not an enduring substance, knowable through the contemplation of some timeless essential attributes. Man is a free agent and he cannot know what he is until he acts, since he constitutes himself through acting upon and altering his world. Man's essence is defined by his history, by what he has done, and that means that he can only come to know himself by alienating or othering himself, by building himself a world and then recognizing himself in that world of culture and history, understood as the product of his human deeds.

But the individual who fully recognizes all this, and understands that history is a human creation, is himself no longer a mere creature of history. That individual, of course, is Hegel himself. By fully understanding his own historicity, Hegel claims to transcend it, not by ascending to a realm of Platonic Ideas, nor by escaping into a timeless mystic unity, but precisely by insisting that man's freedom makes him radically temporal and historical; and yet to understand this history is to transcend it in a knowledge that is absolute because it grasps the truth of all the antecedent forms of consciousness and culture, and knows itself to be the product of those forms. It thereby comprehends the whole of history within itself. So, Hegel concludes,

Spirit necessarily appears in Time, and it appears in Time just so long as it has not grasped its pure Notion, i.e., has not annulled Time. . . . Time, therefore, appears as the destiny and necessity of Spirit that is not yet complete within itself, the necessity to enrich the share which self-consciousness has in consciousness. [Phenomenology, p. 487]

Hegelian phenomenology and Lacanian psychoanalysis part company here. For Lacan would forswear such a claim to absolute knowledge, emphasizing that the analyst must abjure any comparable assertion of omniscience. And this is surely not because of any modesty on Lacan's part, but because of his conviction that there is no final insight or definitive version of truth to be had. If Lacan nevertheless acknowledges the radical
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historicity and temporality of human existence by insisting upon the roles of language, law, and culture in the constitution of the individual subject, he must avail himself of a different conception of human temporality, historicity, and culture than Hegel's. He found such an alternative conception ready to hand in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger

For Lacan the human subject is something more than ego and even more than consciousness. At one point, Lacan is tempted to connect his view of the subject with Descartes's insofar as both seek certainty in the midst of doubt: "The subject," says Lacan, is always "looking for his certainty" (Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, p. 129). He is a subject who is "supposed to know" (le sujet supposé à savoir: "posited as in the know") but who does not know because of the misunderstandings and mystifications in which he or she is embroiled in the imaginary register that begins with the infant's captivation by its reflection in the mirror. But it is just here that the parallel with Descartes collapses. For the Cartesian subject achieves certainty by recognizing its being through self-reflection, and can be defined with metaphysical precision as a res cogitans, an undivided thinking substance—whereas the subject of (and in) psychoanalysis has "wider bases" and is radically indeterminate: a subject always "split" and "fading" from itself in self-division (cf. Four Concepts, p. 126; Écrits, pp. 299, 313).

There are various sources of such splitting of the subject. They include the intrinsic incommensurabilities between the repressing and the repressed elements of the self, the signifier and the signified, language and speech, self and other, ego and Other. This split and divided condition of the subject, which Lacan signifies by the symbol $\mathbb{S}$, means that the immediate reflective certainty of the Cartesian cogito is an illusion, a mis-recognition. And as this cleavage in the self is radical, it cannot be transcended or reconciled through the mediated self-recognition of Hegelian absolute knowledge.

Does this mean, as some have suspected, that the Lacanian subject can be neither known nor defined? In fact, there are at least three ways to define this subject, all of which are explicitly philosophical and each of which contributes to an understanding of its radically divided character.

The effects of the signifier

The subject for Lacan is a speaking subject—or rather, a spoken subject, created by the play of the signifier. Instead of being a source of causal efficacy (as it is in nearly all substantialist/personalist views), the subject is to be regarded as an effect—indeed, the primary effect—of speaking. And it is precisely at this juncture that the unconscious enters the scene:
One should see in the unconscious the effects of speech on the subject—insofar as these effects are so radically primary that they are properly what determine the status of the subject as subject. . . . The unconscious is the sum of the effects of speech on a subject, at the level at which the subject constitutes himself out of the effects of the signifier. [Four Concepts, p. 126]

For all of the obvious origins of such a statement in Saussure, Jakobson, and Lévi-Strauss, each of whom offers evidence of the massive “effects of the signifier,” it is also rooted in the philosophy of Heidegger, who has insisted on the primacy of language over the speaking subject in his extremely condensed formula, “language speaks” (die Sprache spricht). At best, human beings can serve only to guard and preserve the truth thus spoken. At worst, and more typically, they may abandon authentic meaning and subjectivity in a life dominated by the cliché and by everyday gossip. David Riesman once epitomized the heteronomy of such a life by describing it as “other-directed.” Heidegger expresses the same theme by saying that this inauthentic, everyday subject is not myself, but the impersonal “one” (das Man, the equivalent of the French on).

Lacan articulates this theme by speaking of the dominance of the Other. In the last section of his 1957 essay “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” entitled “The Letter, Being and the Other,” he speaks of “the radical heteronomy that Freud’s discovery [of the unconscious] shows gaping within man” and of “this other to whom I am more attached than to myself” (Écrits, p. 172). This “Other,” which Lacan distinguishes from any particular other by capitalization (“le grand Autre”), is not distinguishable from the signifying chain of speech in which it manifests itself in psychoanalysis; indeed, it is “the locus of the signifier” (p. 310). Hence Lacan’s celebrated dictum. “The unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (p. 172). The unconscious is structured as a language because, and to the exact extent that, it is structured by language. Or, to put it another way: language provides the “structure and limit” (p. 56) of the field in which the subject comes-to-be, and this means above all the psychoanalytic subject.

The ecstatic self

But what is this subject, after all, this being who is defined by language and who becomes Other to himself by being in language? “What constitutes me as subject is my question,” remarks Lacan (Écrits, p. 86), echoing Heidegger’s description of Dasein as a questioning being in the introduction to Being and Time. Questioning—whether of oneself, of other beings, or of Being itself—is itself a fundamental form of splitting within the subject, since it inexorably introduces a division between the questioner and the questioned, the known and the unknown. Lacan therefore speaks of the subject.
as "ex-centric," as alienated from himself. The philosophical origins of this conception of the subject again derive from Heidegger's analysis of subjectivity in *Being and Time*. In this work of 1927, Heidegger designates human existence as "Dasein": literally, being-there. To be-there is to exist, to stand out in one's being-in-the-world. Such existing is a way in which to-be:

The 'essence' of this entity [Dasein] lies in its 'to be' [Zu-sein: about to be, implying possibility]. . . . The essence of Dasein lies in its existence. . . . In each case Dasein is its possibility. [*Being and Time*, pp. 67–68; Heidegger's italics]

Dasein exists, then, by standing out—out from the world regarded as a collection of indifferent, present-at-hand particulars and out from itself as a centered substrate. As thus ex-centric and ex-static, Dasein stands out as being something other than its mundanity or egocentricity would prescribe or predict; and it does so in two basic ways: (1) *Dasein* exists by the projection of existentially significant possibilities through its understanding of the world and itself: an understanding that is essentially projective by virtue of its fore-structure, through which it is ineluctably drawn into the hermeneutical circle of knowing projectively what it comes to know in detail in cognitive (and other forms) of inquiry; and (2) *Dasein* also stands out from itself by its involvement with others in the "with-world" of human sociality, especially in the crucial activity of "leaping ahead" in relation to others rather than "leaping in" for them by directly disburdening them of their anxiety or cares—where "leaping ahead" has remarkable affinities with psychoanalytic techniques of abstinence, silence, and empathic understanding. Such leaping ahead contrasts with the deadened and deadening passivity of *das Man* understood as the "they-self" which dictates conformity and submission.

**Temporality**

Basic to all these ex-centricities and making them possible is the temporality of the self. If the human subject could not distance itself from itself in time, it would live an unsplintered life of immediacy, of continuous bodily need and its gratification (whether actual or hallucinated). For the advent of demand and desire, there must be a power of projecting satisfactions in time—whether through memory or through anticipation of a wished-for object. Either way, whether I project toward a past or a future horizon, temporality exhibits itself in its radically differentiating role: as allowing me to differ from my present self, to be other than myself, to be self-alien in time.

Heidegger therefore defines temporality as "the primordial 'outside-of-itself' in and for itself" (*Being and Time*, p. 377). By this designation, he means to emphasize that the human experience of time cannot be confined
to a succession of nows, arranged primly on some time-line. The series of
now-points to which we are so often tempted to reduce temporal experience
results from quantifying and shrinking a temporality that in and by itself is
profoundly nonlinear. Such temporality, which belongs to Dasein precisely as
ex-istent or standing outside its own self-enclosed ego, is termed “ecstatico-
horizontal” by Heidegger. Each of the three main forms of temporality—
past, present, and future—can be seen as an open horizon which we actively
project out of our existential concerns and preoccupations. Each temporal
horizon is outside the center or source of the projecting, whether as having-
already-been, going-to-be, or making-present. As such, each is a possible
mode of temporalization, of being-in-time ec-statically. But of the three
modes, the future has priority: “The primary phenomenon of primordial and
authentic temporality is the future” (p. 378). Why so? The reason is that in
relation to the future, Dasein is outside itself, apart from itself, in the most
radical way: its basic “to-be” character, as accomplished in the projection of
possibilities, is realized most completely in relation to the future, which is
indeterminately open and is the locus of one’s being-toward-death. It is in
and through such temporalization of its existence that Dasein is self-
centrifugal: alienated from itself in the literal sense of being, in time, other
than itself. This is not to be regretted, Heidegger thinks; indeed, it is the way
in which we live out our human existence most authentically. Inauthenticity
enters only when the diasporadic, spread-out and opened-up sense of tem­
porality just described is closed down and confined to a mere sequence of
nows—to sheer “within-time-ness” (Innerzeitigkeit), in contrast to the dis­
junctive, ecstatico-horizontal temporality of authentic Dasein.

What do such apparently arcane descriptions of human temporality have
to do with psychoanalysis? Lacan finds that Heidegger’s analysis applies
directly to the practice of psychoanalysis because “time plays its role in ana­
lytic technique in several ways” (Écrits, p. 95). The most obvious temporal
parameters of the analytic process are its duration as a whole and the length
of each session.

Total duration

The length of analysis cannot be determined in advance. For the subject in
treatment, the total time it will take “can only be anticipated . . . as indefin­
ite” (Écrits, p. 95). Why is this? Lacan’s immediate response is that the temps
pour comprendre—the time required for understanding and bespeaking one-
self as subjectivity—is strictly unpredictable. Lacan’s phrase “anticipated as
indefinite” evokes the very terms Heidegger used to describe the decisive
notion of authentic temporality as involving being-toward-death (Sein-zum-
Tode). Although death is the ending of life, Heidegger explains, it is neither a
goal to be sought nor a terminal point to be merely awaited; it is the kind of
thing we are always tending toward, yet may be either kept concealed from us

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or authentically anticipated (see Being and Time, p. 303). But since my death cannot be determined precisely in advance, in its exact character or position in the future, it is something I can only anticipate in an open-ended way, as “indefinite.”

If the analytic experience is indeed analogous to being-toward-death, then it would be a grievous technical error to try to fix its end in advance. Freud attempted to do this in the case of the Wolf Man and came to regret it. Here the end was held out as definite, as something to be awaited and expected. This made the point of termination too determinate and produced what Lacan calls a “mirage,” a “spatializing projection” (Écrits, pp. 95–96), because it destroyed the element of nonfixed standing-out which is an indispensable feature of Dasein’s temporality. Since the subject of psychoanalysis is a genuinely temporal being, the analytic process must reflect this fact by becoming itself intrinsically indefinite in duration. It is in this sense, indeed, that psychoanalysis can be said to be “interminable,” in Freud’s term, which Lacan revealingly translates into French as “indéfinie.” To understand psychoanalysis as terminable in a definite, end-posing way is to transform its diffuse temporality into an alienated spatiality, and thus to foster “the vertigo of the domination of space” (p. 28).

Length of session

One of the most controversial features of Lacan’s own practice has been his alteration of the length of the psychoanalytic session. The duration of this session is fixed by tradition at fifty minutes. Lacan finds the strict and unquestioning adherence to this time span suspiciously obsessional, and has advocated the seemingly arbitrary practice of terminating the session at the discretion of the analyst, reportedly after as little as several minutes.

We make no attempt to attack or defend this practice but wish only to point to its roots in Heidegger’s contrast between human time and clock time. Although certainly useful for many purposes, clock time does not begin to reflect adequately the temporality of Dasein, much less of the unconscious. According to Heidegger, the time of clocks is the result of leveling down primordial temporality to a measurable (and measuring) public time that is impersonal and impartial. Lacan remarks that the advent of clock time “is relatively recent, since it goes back precisely to Huyghens’ clock—in other words, to 1659—and the malaise of modern man does not exactly indicate that this precision is in itself a liberating factor for him” (Écrits, p. 98).

Lacan warns that strict observation of the fifty-minute rule may prove more oppressive than liberating. One is oppressed by the fateful inevitability with which one measured moment succeeds another until the set interval is marked off on some indifferent clock face. Indifference, indeed, is the heart of the matter:
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The indifference with which the cutting up of the ‘timing’ interrupts the moments of haste within the subject can be fatal to the conclusion towards which his discourse was being precipitated, or even fix a misunderstanding or misreading in it, if not furnish the pretext for a retaliatory ruse. [p. 99]

In order to make the inadequacy and oppressive indifference of the standard session tolerable, a patient may collude with clock time itself: submit to it, labor in it conscientiously, yet temporize all the while. This labor, observed most dramatically in obsessives, is “forced labor” whose motive lies in the awaited death of the analyst qua master (cf. Écrits, p. 26). But any such attitude toward death, whether it be one’s own or another’s, is manifestly inauthentic and deadens the analytic process itself through the patient’s identification with the quasi-impendingly dead analyst. The patient lives “in the [expectation] of the master’s death, from which moment he will begin to live, but in the meantime he identifies himself with the master as dead, and as a result of this he is himself already dead” (p. 100). This result, adds Lacan, is one of the aspects of the master-slave dialectic which Hegel did not describe but which is powerfully operative in psychoanalytic practice.³

The vicissitudes of the influences

Investigation of Lacan’s Hegelian roots led us to turn to Heidegger; reflection upon his debt to Heidegger has now led us back to Hegel. But the ingression of these two influences in Lacan’s thinking is not as conveniently complementary as this circle might suggest. A number of unresolved issues emerge from their convergence, and we shall pose these in order to set the stage for a discussion of how Lacan appropriates both influences in a psychoanalytic theory that is at once both deeply Freudian and strikingly original.

The displacement of consciousness

The point at which the convergent influences of Hegel and Heidegger most obviously collide concerns the question of consciousness. There is no obvious way to harmonize their views on this subject, hence no way in which Lacan might integrate them in a higher synthesis. Although Hegel certainly does not conceive of consciousness as the consciousness of the Cartesian ego, he is nevertheless ineradicably committed to the concept of consciousness, or more exactly and significantly, to a dialectic which transforms all consciousness into self-consciousness. The Phenomenology of Spirit traces an evolution of forms of consciousness in which whatever consciousness takes to be an independent substance is shown to be only an object-for-consciousness and thereby appropriated by self-consciousness.
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Hegel even says that mind or spirit is precisely this process of transforming “Substance into Subject, the object of consciousness into the object of self-consciousness. . . . The movement is the circle that returns into itself, the circle that presupposes its beginning and reaches it only at the end” (p. 488; Hegel’s italics).

Heidegger, by contrast, deliberately rejects the language of consciousness in Being and Time because he believes that the entire “epoch” of post-Cartesian philosophy, including Hegel and Husserl, has been too self-centered on the metaphysics of the subject. Much as Lacan claims that psychoanalysis must move away from the narcissistic discourse of the empty word—from “the mirage of the monologue” (Écrits, p. 41), which is nevertheless its natural and necessary beginning point—so Heidegger demands that pure consciousness, the very foundation of the Cartesian cogito and of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, be transcended in the existential analytic of Dasein, whose structures of “being-in” (state-of-mind, understanding, discourse, and fallenness) do not include the least vestige of pure consciousness.

It is not surprising that Lacan should side with Heidegger in this dispute. Just as Freud had excoriated philosophers generally for conflating mind with consciousness, so Lacan takes Hegel to task for not allowing more adequately for the dispossession of consciousness, its displacement or “subversion” by the subject of desire:

Freud’s discovery was to demonstrate that this verifying process [i.e., that the real is rational] authentically attains the subject only by decentering him from the consciousness-of-self, in the axis of which the Hegelian reconstruction of the phenomenology of mind maintained it. [Écrits, p. 80]

For Hegel, Lacan argues, “the subject knows what he wants” (p. 301) from the very outset. Since whatever is recognized by self-consciousness was already present to consciousness, the end is present from the beginning, and perfect self-consciousness is therefore “the fundamental hypothesis of this whole process. [It] is named, in effect, as being the substratum of this process: [it] is called the ‘Selbstbewusstsein’, the being conscious of self, the fully conscious self” (p. 296). But for Lacan the subject cannot know what he wants at the outset: his very existence consists in a systematic méconnaisance.

The very process of psychoanalysis is one of coming to know one’s desiring self from a state of initial symptomatic ignorance; it is a matter of the recognition of repressed desire, a recognition which requires the mediating role of the analyst as the foil from which the expression of one’s own self-unknown desire returns in a reversed form that lays it bare (Écrits, p. 85). Another way of putting this is to stress the essential opacity of the “I” in contrast with the putative clarity of consciousness:
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The promotion of consciousness as being essential to the subject in the historical after-effects of the Cartesian cogito is for me the deceptive accentuation of the transparency of the ‘I’ in action at the expense of the opacity of the signifier that determines the ‘I’; and the sliding movement [glissement] by which the Bewusstsein serves to cover up the confusion of the Selbst eventually reveals, with all Hegel’s own rigour, the reason for his error in The Phenomenology of Spirit. [p. 307]

Hegel too naively assumed that the self finds complete and transparent expression in the language and culture it produces and can attain full satisfaction and freedom by recognizing itself therein. But Freud discovered that the conscious significance may only dissimulate the subject’s real desire in order to satisfy the demands of a superego imposed upon the subject by the very acquisition of language and culture.

Here we cannot speak seriously of any strict complementarity between Hegel and Heidegger, for it is not a question of what would fill out consciousness to make some larger whole, but of that which undermines the self-confidence and self-certainty of consciousness itself. For Heidegger and Lacan, consciousness is self-extirpating, not self-exfoliating.

Totality

The mention of “whole” brings us to another major confrontation between Lacan’s primary philosophical progenitors. For Hegel, the truth lies in the whole—in the totality of the philosophical system which is attained in absolute knowledge. The truth of any given stage of development always lies in the necessarily more ample successor stage, and ultimately in the totality of stages. Heidegger recognizes no such cumulative dialectic; Being and Time presents us with a scattered set of Dasein’s existential structures. This results in such a disconcerting array of features that Heidegger is driven to draw them together under such englobing rubrics as “care” and temporality. But neither care nor temporality represents a higher level, or a more truthful phase, of fundamental ontology: in the text they function mainly as modes of encirclement and repetition. No progressive or even strictly successive movement is realized in the pages of Being and Time, much less in Heidegger’s later writings.

Once again, Heidegger and Lacan are natural colleagues compared with Hegel; but this time Lacan goes still further in his dissociation from the latter. What is most primordial and most valued is not systematic totality but dispersal or discontinuity itself—in a word, difference rather than identity. Lacan’s phrases for such ur-difference include references to the subject’s “original splitting,” to his “radical heteronomy,” to his status as a “discontinuity in the real” (Écrits, pp. 28, 172, 299). The critical factor in the
determination of the subject in psychoanalysis always occurs in the form of a disconnection or “cut” (coupure) in the conscious chain of signifiers:

Discontinuity, then, is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon—discontinuity, in which something is manifested as a vacillation. Now, if this discontinuity has this absolute, inaugural character in the development of Freud’s discovery, must we place it—as was later the tendency with analysts—against the background of a totality?

Is the one anterior to discontinuity? I do not think so, and everything I have taught in recent years has tended to exclude this need for a closed one. . . . You will grant me that the one that is introduced by the experience of the unconscious is the one of split, of the stroke, of rupture. [Four Concepts, pp. 25–26]

The bar of repression is a strictly unsurpassable barricade which splits the subject (S) just as the bar (——) splits the sign into signifier and signified (f).

What is the subject thus split into? Not into id, ego, and superego, as on Freud’s structural model. Instead, the split finds its paradigm in Heidegger’s distinction between the “ontic” and the “ontological,” between particular beings and Being. Heidegger claims that our preoccupation with particular beings covers up and conceals the question of the meaning of Being. Similarly, Lacan distinguishes between the Other and others. The Other is the unconscious regarded as “the pure subject of the signifier” (Écrits, p. 305), whereas others are the counterparts of the ego: any object, including other persons qua objects, with which the subject may affiliate in a real, imaginary, or symbolic mode. The difference between Other and other is constituted by the bar of repression, much as attention to particular beings veils the meaning of Being, according to Heidegger. In Heidegger’s later writings, “difference” and “rift” emerge as still more central than in Being and Time, and these concepts have influenced not only Lacan, but Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, and Derrida. Common to all these thinkers is an emphasis on differentiation at the expense of totalization, which distinguishes them sharply from Hegel, whose entire system is epitomized in the idea that “the truth is the whole.”

Death

Yet Heidegger himself recognized quite clearly that his emphasis upon the existential and ec-static raises serious problems about Dasein’s totalization. The second division of Being and Time, the analysis of temporality, begins with a section entitled “The Seeming Impossibility of Getting Dasein’s Being-a-Whole into our Grasp Ontologically and Determining its
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Character." Here we read that "as long as Dasein is as an entity, it has never reached its 'wholeness.' But if it gains such 'wholeness,' this gain becomes the utter loss of Being-in-the World" (p. 280). It is in answer to this paradox, indeed, that Heidegger embarks upon his analysis of being-toward-death as the only way in which Dasein's being-a-whole is realizable. Nevertheless, one cannot achieve totality in death, since by dying one ceases to exist. Being-a-whole is therefore "realizable" only as something continually receding, not as an end-state or as a completion "still outstanding" which we could expect or await. Still, being-toward-death is the most complete and most authentic way in which one can be ahead-of-oneself. But what one is ahead for or about is not the event of dying—which is mere "perishing"—but something which is inherently indefinite, as we have seen. It is a matter of the "possible impossibility" of one's existence, and one is almost perversely advised to be resolute about that which, by its very nature, can never be definitively resolved. If Hegel allows spirit to achieve its end in absolute knowledge, Dasein is consigned to being toward an end which it cannot attain without ceasing to exist and losing its "to-be" character. Being-toward-death is thus a strangely nonfinal form of finalism, a nontelic teleology.

Contrast with this suspended state the situation at the end of The Phenomenology of Spirit. In this finale, finalism is genuinely finalistic. There is nothing more to be anticipated, since the end is all encompassing. Each prior stage of the dialectic of self-consciousness has been taken up into the next in such a way that nothing has been wholly lost. Hence spirit can be said to survive the demise of each of its preceding avatars and to reach a decisive culmination in absolute knowledge.

This epitomizes Hegel's own account of the acceptance of death. Whereas natural life reaches its limit and end in death, human existence transcends nature in taking the negativity of death into itself and transmuting it into "the labor of the negative." In human culture and history, the fact and fear of death are subordinated to the cumulative development of mind or spirit, which is self-limiting and self-transcending. Death is "of all things the most dreadful," Hegel writes:

But the life of spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself: . . . . Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magic power that converts it into being. This power is identical with what we earlier called the subject. [p. 19]

Thus, although Hegel argues that "it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won" (p. 114), freedom cannot be realized if one's life is actually lost, but only through the ongoing labors of the slave and his or her several
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historical permutations. Spirit “finds its truth” when it re-collects itself from this utter dismemberment in an absolute knowledge which is the appropriation of its own history and in which time itself is overcome and annulled. Such a result would be unthinkable in Being and Time, whose last sentence makes time the unsurpassable “horizon of Being” (p. 488).

The most important disparity between Hegel’s and Heidegger’s views on death, however, emerges from attempting to answer the question, Whose death is at stake here? For Heidegger, death is “my ownmost possibility” (p. 303). Since no one else can accomplish it for me, this possibility is pre-eminently my own and consequently “nonrelational” (p. 303). The authentic anticipation of death therefore “individualizes Dasein down to itself” (p. 308), summoning me out of everyday preoccupations and the anonymity of das Man. Being-toward-death is therefore the ultimate expression of the “mineness” (Jemeinigkeit) which is as primordial a characteristic of Dasein as existence itself (cf. p. 67). In psychoanalytic nomenclature, it is a matter of something strictly intrapsychic, of something one must come to know in one’s essential aloneness.

For Hegel, by contrast, the acceptance of death is achieved through relation to another self—in the struggle for recognition—and the possibility of death becomes entangled in the interpersonal dialectic of the master-slave relation. Wherever the theme of death recurs in The Phenomenology of Spirit, it proves an occasion for a movement beyond the solitude of the mortal person toward community, toward recognizing that the truth of spirit is not “I,” but “We.” In regard to this fundamental issue, Lacan sides with Hegel. The psychoanalytic situation is a scene of interlocution and is thus radically interpersonal and never reducible to two separate selves encountering each other. The we-ness of transference, for example, is confirmed by the fact of countertransference and by the dialectic engendered by the two transferential events. In contrast with the authentic individual’s resolute but lonely anticipation of death, Lacan urges that the dialectic whereby the subject “brings his solitude to realization, be it in the vital ambiguity of immediate desire or in the full assumption of his being-for-death,” is “not individual” (Écrits, p. 105). However solitary the individual’s mortal end, the end of psychoanalysis is a “We,” not an “I”: “The question of the termination of analysis is that of the moment when the satisfaction of the subject finds a way to realize itself in the satisfaction of everyone—that is to say, of all those whom this satisfaction associates with itself in a human undertaking” (p. 105).

But if Lacan here agrees with Hegel that the goal is a personal truth or satisfaction that is at the same time intersubjective, he is not thereby tempted to endorse Hegel’s claim that the truth lies in the whole and is to be achieved in an absolute knowledge which comprehends all particular truths within itself. Psychoanalysis can promise no such consummate truth. The Hegelian insistence upon the intersubjective must be tempered by the Heideggerian
denial of totality. In the absence of the absolute knowledge of Hegel's self-knowing and self-known spirit, there is only the unending, indefinite search for a certainty which will never be attained as such. This is why psychoanalysis must find a third way between, or beyond, Hegel and Heidegger:

Of all the undertakings that have been proposed in this century, that of the psychoanalyst 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. [Écrits, p. 105]

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In what way does psychoanalysis deserve this lofty office? What is lacking in these two great philosophical visions of truth, of self-discovery, and of reconciliation that can only be achieved through psychoanalysis? In the end Lacan dismisses both Hegelian and Heideggerian resolutions as impossible or inadequate. Why?

The answer lies in Freud's "Copernican step" (Écrits, p. 295), in the discovery of a dimension of the mind which transforms the human condition into a riddle: the unconscious. This is what is missing from both philosophical resolutions, and what foredooms any strictly philosophical quest for self-knowledge. Only psychoanalysis can make up for this lack, because only psychoanalysis offers a hermeneutics of the unconscious.

But the unconscious is not merely a cryptogram to be deciphered, whose interpretation would yield that absolute knowledge which Hegel promoted or the overcoming of alienation which Heidegger portrayed as the task of authentic existence. The unconscious is not simply an unknown realm to be incorporated into a more complete version of absolute knowledge, nor a level of man's being to be uncovered by a more fundamental ontology. The problem reaches much deeper. The existence of the unconscious means that the splitting of the subject, which begins with the infant's discovery of his image in the mirror, is as insurmountable for Lacan as it is for Sartre. The unity of the self in philosophical self-reflection is only a permutation of the reflected unity that stems from the situation wherein the infant, still subjectively disjointed, espies in the mirror a specular self having an imaginary unity, but wherein the subject of desire does not appear. This is because a desire is a lack, a want-to-be which cannot appear in an image; it can only refer to what is missing, to the object wanted, or, in this instance, to the very unity and coordination which are still lacking in the infant (see Écrits, p. 315). Nor do the mere maturation of the cortex and the development of motor skills guarantee integral psychic wholeness through natural organic development. The discrepancy between a disparate, incomplete subject and
its imaged unity only anticipates a more profound splitting of the subject due to “the agency of the letter,” to the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order. This subjection of the subject to the effects of the signifier only replaces the image of the body in the mirror with the “I,” a shifty word whose unity is all the more deceptive in that it is only a “shifter” which does not signify the self at all, but only designates whoever is speaking (Écrits, p. 298), and is therefore as indifferent to individuality as Heidegger’s anonymous “one.” Pursued further, this symbolic path will lead to the ego ideal, which does not represent the true subject, but only captivates him once more.

But to say that what is not present in these imaginary or symbolic representations is the self-as-desiring does not mean that what is lacking is the economics of the libido understood as the biological energetics of organic instinct. All this has only to do with need, which is prehuman. The effects of the signifier “proceed from a deviation of man’s needs from the fact that he speaks, in the sense that insofar as his needs are subjected to demand, they return to him alienated” (Écrits, p. 286). The task of psychoanalysis is not to discover Rousseau’s natural man beneath the brittle shell of a culture which imprisons him. Even if that were possible, analysis would not thereby liberate anything like a “noble savage,” but the savagely patricidal brothers of Freud’s Totem and Taboo. In any case, such a retrogression is not possible, because the natural man, uninfluenced by culture, is not a man at all, is not yet human, according to Lacan. And when it comes to man, purely organic need or natural instinct is as much a myth in Freud’s eyes as was the natural man by Rousseau’s own admission. “Instincts,” says Freud, “are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness” (1933, p. 95). Moreover, as Hegel argued, the natural man’s desire is not human desire because it is solipsistic, aimed only at consuming the object or using the other for his own solitary gratification (albeit a certain cunning of nature may in turn use his private pleasure to perpetuate the species).

But haven’t we now returned to the beginning of this entire discussion, where we argued that Lacan simply adopts Hegel’s analysis of desire instead of Freud’s “energy discourse”? We have indeed insofar as Lacan persistently asserts that man’s desire is the desire to be desired, thereby adhering to Hegel’s analysis of desire. In fact, it is not Lacan but Hegel who departs from this very analysis. He does so not by abandoning his own view, but by sublating or transcending desire itself. For Hegel, desire is only the most immediate form of self-consciousness. Whether as hunger, thirst, or lust, it is self-feeling, a form of self-awareness we share with other animals. It becomes truly human only as the desire to be desired, when need becomes subjected to demand. But in either case it is only the most primitive form of self-consciousness, and is transcended through labor and history. Desire is not therein abandoned, but aufgehoben, surpassed and preserved. Thus desire is sublimated, taken up into history, which Hegel insists is only motivated by passion and self-interest (albeit a certain cunning of reason may transform...
private ambition into a means of realizing human truth). Following Kojève's metaphor, we could say that all of history is a permutation of the labor of the slave, who subordinates his own desire to that of the master, sacrificing human desire and pleasure to the fear of death, but finally finding satisfaction by recognizing himself in the objects produced by his labor—just as Hegel claimed to find absolute knowledge by recognizing world history as the progressive realization of that same absolute knowledge.

But for Lacan this is all méconnaisance, like identifying with one's own image in the mirror, since the subject can never be found adequately reflected in any object. There is no redemption or reconciliation to be had through history because the subject of desire can never be absorbed or aufgehoben in history, but only subverted or repressed there. In Lacanian language, Hegel attempted to absorb desire into demand, which is established by the Logos, in the realm of language, wholly mediated by symbolism and governed by the law of the signifier. Lacan agrees with Ricoeur to the extent that he holds that desire can never be entirely translated into demand, or strictly identified with the linguistic order. But at the same time, as we have just seen, he insists that desire can never be reduced to the merely natural, to biological need. Hence, in response to criticism of the Hegelian themes in his work, Lacan asserts that "far from ceding to a logicizing reduction where it is a question of desire, I find its irreducibility to demand the very source of that which also prevents it from being reduced to need" (Écrits, p. 302). What can this mean?

It means that the unconscious is not the hiding place of the natural man, and, further, is not to be confused with the cultural unconscious, wherein are stored such historical treasures as our unexamined beliefs, our tacit values, and the laws of our native language. It is no more a subterranean reservoir of volcanic emotional energy than it is the cerebral storehouse of the rules of a Chomskian transformational grammar. Lacan defines desire straightforwardly as that which rises out of the discrepancy between need and demand: "Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference which arises from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (Spaltung)" (Écrits, p. 287).

It is just here that we reach the origin of the dialectic of desire. Desire belongs neither to the natural nor to the symbolic order. It is situated at the intersection of the natural and the signifying, but neither the natural nor the signifying is left uninstructed by the encounter. Desire arises at this intersection like a herm, that phallic post which the ancient Greeks erected at crossroads and dedicated to Hermes, the messenger of the gods and hence the patron of hermeneutics, the art or science of interpreting symbolism. We have already noted Lacan's insistence that the phallus is not an organ but a signifier, and this Hermetic function reminds us that the mysteries marked at this crossroads are not simply those of the barnyard or the birds and the bees, that the messenger of the gods is also present there. For the phallus points toward a
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**jouissance**, a fullness of being that is not to be attained through purely organic pleasures alone. Such pleasures, Lacan affirms, are transient satisfactions that may fulfill a need or answer the demand for proofs of love; but desire moves beyond the pleasure principle:

> Pleasure limits the scope of human possibility—the pleasure principle is a principle of homeostasis. Desire, on the other hand, finds its boundary, its strict relation, its limit, and it is in the relation to this limit that it is sustained as such, crossing the threshold imposed by the pleasure principle. [*Four Concepts, p. 31*]

This “strict relation” of desire to its limit refers to the internal bond between desire and the Law, which refers in the first instance to the injunction against incest operative in the oedipal situation. But Lacan finds in this very situation a set of relations which go beyond the specific prohibition against incest, something “indestructible” (*Four Concepts, p. 31*) escaping both temporality and historicity. These relations comprise a *structure* (see *Écrits, p. 105*) which transcends “culturalism”—and thus under-cuts the dialectic of spirit—just because it represents the encounter between a needful organism and culture. For any culture inevitably imposes its own unnatural order, that of the signifier, upon the bodily subject. The incest taboo is only the nexus at which these two dimensions of human existence, the natural and the signifying, most conspicuously intersect.

Lévi-Strauss has assiduously demonstrated the same dialectic of nature and culture everywhere—at the intersection of the raw and the cooked, in the origin of table manners, and so forth. But Lacan scarcely needed the help of other French structuralists to discover this generalization of the oedipal conflict, since Freud had already made it the topic of an arresting analysis in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Lacan urges that the father in the oedipal triangle is not the actual father, but must be understood as a signifier, as “the Name of the Father.” As such, he is not the one who provides for biological needs nor the one who might respond to the demand for love. It is the dead Father who “constitutes the law of the signifier” (*Écrits, p. 217; cf. also pp. 199, 310*). It is here that death insinuates itself into the Lacanian concept of desire in a veritable *Liebestod*. No longer a matter of an imminent being-toward-death to be authentically anticipated nor of an absolute master to be overcome by history, death enters as a condition of language:

> So when we wish to attain in the subject what was before the serial articulations of speech, and what is primordial to the birth of symbols, we find it in death, from which his existence takes on all the meaning it has. It is in effect as a desire for death that he affirms himself for others . . . and no being is ever evoked by him except among the shadows of death. [*Écrits, p. 105*]
The birth of symbols spells the death of things, since to begin to deal with the world symbolically is to enter into a world of meanings which mediate all human consciousness. The thing is thereby relegated to the status of that-which-is signified, as all direct awareness of things falls under the shadow of the signifier. Initiation into the Hermetic mysteries of the word therefore means "dying to the world" in a truly Socratic manner: "Thus the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire" (p. 104).

The subject's desire is both eternalized and subverted by the Father's signifying strictures, his prohibiting Law—the law of the signifier—with the result that the desiring subject is constituted as a subverted subject. Lacan calls such superimposing of the cultural upon the natural "primal repression" (in Freud's term) and holds it to be the very origin of the unconscious. But Lacan adds that it is also the origin of desire:

That which is alienated in needs constitutes an Urverdrängung (primal repression), an inability, it is supposed, to be articulated in demand, but it reappears in something it gives rise to that presents itself in man as desire (das Begehren). [Écrits, p. 286]

Hence the law of the signifier sets up a bar dividing the subject, and is both constitutive and subversive of desire. It also bars the way to jouissance, that primordial union with the Mother whose recovery is prohibited by the paternal "No" and which signifies that completion of being which is forever inaccessible to the split subject. In this way, the relation of desire to its limit, upon which Lacan places so much emphasis, expresses an inescapable antinomy that is the final source of the dialectic of desire:

But we must insist that jouissance is forbidden to him who speaks as such, although it can only be said between the lines for whoever is subject of the Law, since the Law is grounded in this very prohibition [Écrits, p. 319]

It is for this reason that the phallus, the herm erected at the intersection of the natural and the signifying, comes to be conceived as the supreme signifier, the signifier of signifiers: "the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire" (Écrits, p. 287). For the phallus is

itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, when it is raised (aufgehoben) to the function of signifier. The phallus is the signifier of this Aufhebung itself, which it inaugurates (initiates) by its very disappearance. That is why the demon of Aidos (Scham, shame)
arises at the very moment when, in the ancient mysteries, the phallus is unveiled. [p. 288]

Or rather we should say that the phallus is the signifier of the bar that separates the signifier from the signified in Saussure’s formula for signification $\frac{\text{signifier}}{\text{signified}}$, which Lacan recasts as $\frac{S}{S}$ to emphasize the dominance of the signifier. There is no trespassing of this barre, which is ultimately that of Urverdrängung. The way is barred, even if the bar can be said to withdraw once it is revealed. The phallus signifies this bar in its simultaneously repressing and revealing role: “it then becomes the bar which, at the hands of this demon, strikes the signified, marking it as the bastard offspring of this signifying concatenation” (p. 288). Herein lies the origin of the split subject, barred from the urgent finalism of the desiring self.

To invoke the phallus is also, and necessarily, to raise the question of castration. Castration, or more exactly its threat, is the final undercutting of finality. It arises, first of all, in the undermining of oedipal triumph; but it remains potently present in the sequel to this first splitting of the subject from his or her own desire. For this sequel involves the establishment from within of the very same limit, Law, or Name of the Father which is the dyadic Other of desire. All of these belong under the heading of the phallus and together give “the ratio of desire” (Écrits, p. 288). But it is castration which enforces this ratio by barring jouissance:

What analytic experience shows is that, in any case, it is castration that governs desire, whether in the normal or the abnormal . . .

Castration means that jouissance must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire. [Écrits, pp. 323–24]

The dialectic of desire shows it to be the desire of the Other: which means that it is marked indelibly by the play of the signifier, the intervention of language. This signifying play is dialectical to start with by virtue of its intersubjective source in the oedipal conflict; it becomes a matter of internal dialectic when the dissolution of this conflict leads to the installation of the Law within. But, as we have seen earlier, it can become interpersonal again in and through the process of analysis, when the desire of my Other rejoin the desire of other Others as mediated by the analyst, who is Other to myself. In the end, then, the dialectic of desire is intersubjective, and Hegel is supported against Heidegger. Heidegger is in turn borne out, however, in his conception of the subject as subordinate to language, as a bespoken subject who is in the end more the creature than the creator of language. What Lacan hastens to add, though, is that being bespoken is being broken—broken apart by the signifiers whose proper locus is to be found in the Other. The
“eclipse of the subject” is in fact “closely bound up with the Spaltung or splitting that [the subject] suffers from its subordination to the signifier” (Écrits, p. 313).

But this splitting of the speaking subject is itself a reflection of “the division immanent in desire” (p. 289), a division which takes us back finally to Freud, the repressed influence in this essay. For it is Freud who proposed the leading hypotheses of primal repression and the castration complex, both of which are ultimately responsible for desire’s diremption and hence for the splitting of the subject understood psychoanalytically. If the bar between “S” and “s” is raised in partial revelation by the Hermetic phallus, it is reimposed in a decidedly downward direction by that Urverdrängung and threat of castration which keep death at the doorstep of desire, Thanatos at the threshold of Eros. And the subject? His being is split irremediably between demand and need, with desire as the quotient of their difference.

Freud, the long-since-dead father of psychoanalysis, had already reached the reluctant conclusion that civilization and discontent are inseparable, that the subjection of man to culture foredooms him to what Hegel called “the unhappy consciousness,” the “consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being” (p. 126). Lacan reinforces Freud’s grim conclusion that the contradiction is insuperable, that history can promise no final reconciliation, no splendid synthesis, not even an arena for the attainment of authenticity: cuttings and splittings, human lives in tatters, are all that remain in this darkened vision.

But Lacan’s own contribution is not to be subverted by the vicissitudes of his powerful influences. His claim to be the only orthodox interpreter of Freud in an age of heresy ironically disguises the originality which his conception of the dialectic of desire introduces into psychoanalytic theory. Nevertheless, his position is profoundly Freudian, and any assessment of Lacan’s significance must acknowledge the Name of the Father of psychoanalysis as the repressed signifier which returns as only the repressed can return: inscribed symbolically and symptomatically, written over and overwritten, in that uniquely vexing set of signifiers whose name is Écrits.

Notes

Although this essay is a collaborative effort, the primary responsibility for the section on Hegel belongs to J. M. Woody and that on Heidegger to E. S. Casey.


2 Lacan himself seemed to regard his shortened sessions as frankly experimental and perhaps a thing of the past: “I would not have much to say about [such a matter] if I had not been convinced that, in experimenting with what have been called my short sessions, at a stage in my experience that is now concluded” (Écrits, p. 100). It is also to be noted that Lacan experimented with lengthening sessions.
3 “The slave has given way in face of the risk of death in which mastery was being offered to him in a struggle of pure prestige. But since he knows that he is mortal, he also knows that the master can die. From this moment on he is able to accept his labouring for the master and his renunciation of pleasure in the meantime; and, in the uncertainty of the moment when the master will die, he waits” (Écrits, p. 99).
4 “Spirit is . . . this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which in their opposition enjoy perfect freedom and independence; ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” (The Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 110).

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Sketch of an unconscious linguistic structure

Lacan writes:

The symptom amenable to psychoanalysis is based upon a structure that is identical with the structure of language. And by this we don't mean a structure that's been situated in just some general semiology or other and then forced to fit it, but rather the structure of language itself—as it manifests itself in those languages that I call "positive" since they are effectively spoken by most men. (E, p. 444)

The linguistic structure of the unconscious is nothing other than the structure of language as it manifests itself in speaking. It is a language which Lacan calls "positive," insofar as it is spoken by the mass of human beings. Obviously, this statement should not be understood as implying a precise identity between conscious speaking in words and unconscious language. To understand Lacan's statement, language must be more exactly conceptualized. Here, it seems to me, the structuralist insight bears fruit. Because structuralism always reduces linguistic components to a structure of differentiated elements, the concept of language becomes so universalized that neither sentence nor word nor phoneme alone decisively constitutes it. However important the realization of these particular formal units may appear, what is decisive is the articulation of the system itself. Saussure's famous formulation runs: language is no substance but a form. In this formal structure belong not only words and phonemes but also images and those symbolic things to which ethnologists have access. Lacan calls the basic element of such a structure the signifiant ("signifier"). Language becomes the "order of the signifier" or the chaîne signifiant ("chain of signifiers," "signifying chain"). In Lacan's later terminology, the place of the symbolic is occupied
by *le signifiant*, a term that might also be translated by borrowing the term *Signans* ("signifier") from the Stoic-Scholastic tradition. In articulating the principles of differentiation and combination of phonemes in linguistics, Lacan makes the description of this chain of signifiers as general as possible: "rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings" (ES, p. 153). They are mere members of a structure, the chain of which joins onto a piece of another chain that, on its own, is constructed from such members.

The starting point for my observations must be the algorithm, S/s (E, p. 497). "S" symbolizes the *Signans*, or signifier, language in its literal structuration; Saussure defined the "s," the "signified," as the psychical reality of the concept which corresponds to the signifier as its "acoustic image." For the "structuralist" Lacan, this psychologizing is unacceptable as a way of understanding language, as it assumes from the beginning that a signifier, or "letter," is matched to a signified, or "meaning," adequate to it. What is decisive for Lacan is the slash, "the bar" (ES, pp. 149, 299) between signifier and signified. That line is the indicator for a possible resistance against the passage from one level to the other. All the same, it must be so constituted that it remains open to the *effets de sens* ("effects of meaning"). An illustrative example should draw us on. Let us observe the following sketch:

![Diagram of HOMMES and DAMES]

Obviously, two different signifiers and nevertheless the same matter, the same signified. The sketch illuminates that the relationship between signifier and signified is in no way univalent. To expand upon this, let us recall Lacan’s account: "A train arrives at a station. Across from each other in the window seats of one compartment sit a little boy and a little girl, brother and sister. ‘Look!’ says the brother. ‘We’re in *Dames*.’ ‘Idiot!’ calls out his sister. ‘Can’t you see that we’re in *Hommes*?’"

The fable not only underscores what we have just said, it serves also, despite its banality, as emblem for the behavior of the human being in relation to the signifier. Insofar as it is decisive for the person, the signifier appears to go over to the level of the signified, of sense. "But this whole signifier can only operate, it may be said, if it is present in the subject. It is this objection that I answer by supposing that it has passed over to the level of the signified" (ES, p. 155).

The human being always already moves within a horizon of meaning. This horizon is not the person’s own creation but is granted to him by the
structure signifiante. The mode of this grant offers an alternative to a mere linguistic code as a possibility for understanding the human being. The answer or the behavior of the person thus becomes an indicator of his place in the search for truth. This possibility offered by language—to say something completely different than the code seems to offer—has the name metonymy. The ground for the possibility of this is the metonymic structure of language itself. Lacan, building upon the work of the phonologist Jakobson, understands as contiguity the bond between the elements of language themselves. In the place of the traditional psychologizing concept of association, the structuralist notion of metonymy emerges.

As fundamental to the being of language, the metonymic structure is also, in a certain way, the condition for its other and second structural quality: metaphor. In Lacan's formula, metaphor is the substitution of one signifier for another. Using the example of Hugo's verse, "His sheaf was neither miserly, not spiteful" (ES, p. 156), Lacan explains how the creative spark doesn't spring from the presence of two similarly actualized signifiers but results instead from the substitution of one signifier by another, a substitution which takes the place of the first signifier in the text. On account of its metonymic binding to this text, the repressed signifier nonetheless remains present in its own fashion. When, therefore, "his sheaf" steps into the place of "Booz," something new about him surfaces, a meaning that didn't exist before. It is the signal of the old man's tardy, unforeseen and prophesied paternity. As metaphorically structured, the chaîne signifiante proves to be essentially meaning-creating.

What do metaphor and metonymy have to do with psychoanalysis? Let's listen to Lacan:

Verdichtung, or "condensation," is the structure of the superimposition of the signifiers, which metaphor takes as its field, and whose name, condensing in itself the word Dichtung, shows how the mechanism is connatural with poetry to the point that it envelops the traditional function proper to poetry. In the case of Verschiebung, "displacement," the German term is closer to the idea of that veering off of signification that we see in metonymy, and which from its first appearance in Freud is represented as the most appropriate means used by the unconscious to foil censorship. (ES, p. 160)

Verdichtung ("condensation") is the structure of the superimposition of signifieds, and, as such, is identical with the structure of metaphor. Verschiebung ("displacement") is that gliding of meaning to which metonymy points. Like displacement, which is the unconscious' primordial instrument for overcoming censorship, metonymy opens the equally original possibility of reading between the lines. If we remember that it's exactly these mechanisms of displacement and condensation that structure symptoms, dreams,
symptomatic mistakes, parapraxes, perversions, repressed memories and jokes; if we recall that they are the grounding and steering mechanisms of the so-called primary process, then the range and significance of Lacan's discovery becomes clear. There, in the apparent "chaos of needs, drives, affects and passions . . . of the unconscious" (AV&A, p. 170), Lacan recognizes two irreducibly fundamental categories of language. Primary process becomes language, its energy displacements the metonymic gliding of meaning.

It is only necessary to recall the example of *Hommes-Dames* to verify Lacan's following statement: "We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier . . ." (ES, p. 154). The experience which one can have with a dictionary seems to mirror this sliding of the signified under the signifier. Moving from definition to definition, every word points to another; multiplication of equivalences, the substitution of synonyms without end—experience of tautology without having to seize onto the least signified. Only on the grounds of these metonymic displacements does the fate that is allotted to the human being as desire become comprehensible. It suffices to say, "I am hungry," for a natural need to become desire—a desire whose permanence is obscured by language on account of its symbolic displacements productive of ever new objects. (I'm hungry for Caviar, I'm hungry for you, etc.) We are reminded also of the previously mentioned substitute-object for the maternal breast.

Nevertheless, this structural quality of a constant gliding is not yet language itself. To supply what is missing, Lacan introduced his so-called theory of the *points de capiton* ("upholstery points," "anchoring points") (ES, p. 154)—certain points where the stabilization of the orders of signifier and signified seems to occur, where the material of the signified seems almost to "upholster" the structure of the signifier: "In it is articulated what I have called the 'anchoring point' [*point de capiton*], by which the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement [*glissement*] of the signification" (ES, p. 303).
Let's recall the elementary characteristics of the so-called "Graph of Desire" that we called upon as illustration of the bond between *besoin, demande, désir.*

An intentionality that sets out from point Δ finds it necessary to fix its intentions in language in order to accomplish them. A row of signifiers, whose discontinuous differentiation is symbolized by the dotted line, is secured in the place of the large Other, "O," as the treasury of signifiers. This row of signifiers is articulated in succession, with the result that after the last signifier has come into play, a meaning ("signified") emerges at the point de capiton, "s(O)." When, therefore, a sentence arrives at a definitive meaning, when the last word is spoken—it could even annul everything that preceded it—it becomes clear that the signifiers used prepared this sense, that in retrospect they anticipated it. A meaning first appears almost as nachträglich ("deferred"), and works in a retroactive fashion. The expression Nachträglichkeit ("deferred action") can be found in Freud's case-history of the Wolfman and means a particular mode of historical understanding. For Lacan, the nachträglich becomes, in relationship to his insight about the priority of the signifier over the signified, the modality of diachronic understanding in language.

Once again, Lacan's insight emerges from a particular text of Freud. At the age of one and one-half years a patient (the "Wolfman") witnessed a traumatizing scene, a coitus *a tergo* between his parents. The "traces" of this scene were almost entirely buried, but, on account of the child's somatic/physical development in the interval since the original trauma, at the age of four that scene became comprehensible, so that its pathological effects could unfold. This case of deferred (nachträglich) causation, brought about by deferral of meaning-fulness, is effectively doubled, since it is not only the case that the time of this comprehension must be bound to the time of the original inscription but also that this later moment must fall into place in relationship to the event of the analysis. At the time of the analysis, the first "understanding" can become a moment of further inscription, thus giving another meaning to the first inscription. "At the age of one and a half the child receives an impression to which he is unable to respond adequately; he is only able to understand it and to be moved by it when the impression is revived in him at the age of four, and only twenty years later during the analysis is he able to grasp with his conscious mental processes what was then going on in him" (GW XII, p. 72, SE XVII, p. 45n).

In this example, the tight bond between language and historicity becomes apparent, now additionally mirrored in the micro-structure of the sentence itself. The meaning resulting from the movement of a sentence remains every bit as changeable as the sense made of a primal scene. For example, a "but" in the sentence following the one that we have just quoted suffices to put meaning once again into question.
It is possible to summarize here: "From [this] we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning 'insists' but that none of its elements 'consists' in the signification of which it is at the moment capable" (ES, p. 153).

At this point we can no longer take seriously Saussure's model, which allows language, the signifier, to congeal into the sign. He pictures the plain of the signifier and the signified as two parallel bundles of horizontal wavy lines, separated by a space between them. Vertical lines, passing through both sets of waves, then divide the horizontals into segments. In this way, language approximates a piece of paper, whose front side represents the signifier while its reverse corresponds to the signified (CLG, p. 156). The inextinguishable tendency to correspondence and unity of meaning seems to be a characteristic of human thought, which causes us to forget—what the current investigation tries to announce throughout—the fundamental polyphony of language. Consciousness always wants to be consciousness of something "determinant"; only in the field of singleness of meaning does it feel at home. Thus *capitonnage* becomes a mark of secondary process, a characteristic of conscious discourse. This stabilization of meaning allows consciousness to see the object in one or another fixed sense, while behind its back a symbolic displacement occurs that proves conscious opinion to be delusory. "Certainly there is a series of significations beneath the signifying chain; but the signification glides, the object is metonymical" (FI, p. 187).

It is easy to discern the ego at work in this tendency toward unification and fixation; in fact, such a disposition demonstrates the ego's essence. Thus we may recall yet another quotation that represents the problematic in a condensed fashion: "The sole homogeneous function of consciousness exists in the imaginary captation of the ego for specular reflection and in the function of *méconnaissance* entirely attached to the ego" (E, p. 832).

What surfaces here is the question of the bond between primary and secondary process, between conscious and unconscious. This relationship moves, so long as one begins from modes of conscious discourse, between the extremes of "full speech" and "empty speech." Doubtless many of the patient's words remain mere idle chatter, secondary rationalizations, sentences unworthy of interpretation and without an "unconscious respondent." In contrast, with "full speech,"

this is the coincidence of the subject's remarks with facts about which he cannot have information, but which are still at work in the connections of another experience in which the same psychoanalyst is the interlocutor—a coincidence moreover constituted most often by an entirely verbal, even homonymous, convergence . . . It is a case of resonance in the communicating networks of discourse . . . (ES, p. 56)
That event which since Freud we call "repression" (and its removal) moves between these extremes.

If we recall Lacan's description of metaphor as the substitution, for a signifier, $S'$, of another signifier, $S$ (E, pp. 557 & 515):

$$\frac{S}{S'} \cdot s \rightarrow S \left( \frac{1}{s} \right)$$

"$S$" becomes the signifier for the original signifier, "$S'$," which thereby becomes a member of the plane of the signified. What is missing, what disappears, is the original signifier, "$S'$." Let's recall Lacan's definition: "Metaphor must be defined as the implanting of another signifier into a chain of signifiers. Through that process the original signifier falls to the level of the signified and there, as latent signifier, eternalizes the interval wherein another "chaîne signifiante" can be planted" (E, p. 708).

In this way the space "between" signifier and signified becomes itself a part of an unconscious structure. What is here illustrated is nothing other than the schema of repression itself: the withdrawn conscious discourse reappears on another level, in which another, unconscious text is granted. Thereby, metaphor becomes the outstanding mode of relationship between conscious and unconscious discourse.

Freud further distinguishes between secondary repression and the primal repression that is precondition for it. In 1915, he writes: "An instinct can never become the object of consciousness—only the idea that represents the instinct can. Even in the unconscious, moreover, an instinct cannot be represented otherwise than by an idea. If the instinct did not attach itself to an idea . . . we could know nothing about it" (GW X, 275f, SE XIV, p. 177).

In the same year Freud finds a name for this, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* ("ideational representation"). ("It should be noted here that with the ideational representation nothing else is under discussion than our 'signifiers': It is the signifier that is repressed, for no other meaning could be given in this text to the word, *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz.*" [E, p. 714].)

Let's review the corresponding text in Freud:

We have reason to assume that there is a *primal repression*, a first phase of repression, which consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious. With this a *fixation* is established . . . The second stage of repression, *actual repression*, affects mental derivatives of the repressed representative, or such trains of thought as, originating elsewhere, have come into associative connection with it. On account of this association, these ideas experience the same fate as what was primally repressed. Actual repression, therefore, is really an after-pressure. Moreover, it is a mistake to emphasize only the repulsion which
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operates from the direction of the conscious upon what is to be repressed; quite as important is the attraction exercised by what was primally repressed upon everything with which it can establish a connection. Probably the trend toward repression would fail in its purpose if these two forces did not cooperate, if there were not something previously repressed ready to receive what is repelled by the conscious. (GW X p. 250f, SE XIV, p. 148, translation slightly altered)

Actual repression (= secondary repression) can therefore only exist when what is to be covered over creates a bond with unconscious elements anticipating it, with the system unconscious (ucs.). In Lacan’s words, in order for actual (eigentlich) repression to actualize itself (sich ereignen), a previous, unconscious “chain of signifiers” is needed—a linguistically structured system produced by condensation and displacement and identical with ideational representations. What is needed is a thoroughly worked out metaphorical/metonymic “organization of the signifier” (E, p. 689).

We have already recognized the “ego,” in its imaginary engulfment, as the protagonist of “secondary repression.” This raises the question of the subject of a repression—a subject that is prior to it and that makes it possible. If the “ego” in the sense of the moi can be counted within conscious discourse, then we must ask who it is who occupies the ego’s place in the unconscious structure of signifiers. We now turn to this problematic, which for the first time leads us to what Lacan’s psychoanalysis forces us to conceive as the almost transcendental logic of unconscious language.

**The question of subjectivity**

Let’s first look back and ask in what ways the problematic now to be thematized has already marked our inquiries. We want to limit ourselves to the most important clues. We saw that, in securing itself in the mirror and in the experiences accompanying that event, the human animal seizes upon a picture of itself as unified, a picture that seems to represent the answer to perceptions of primordial discord, attested by fantasies centered on the image of the fragmented body. Against the uncanny truth, human beings produce the illusion of unity, the masks of the “ego.” The subject or, je, alienates itself in a moi, made itself into an object, and, insofar as it seeks to answer the question about its existence and truth, fixes itself in an image. The beginning of every me connaitre is a méconnaître.

This méconnaissance then raised the question of the mode of existence of that je, or subject, before its self-objectification—about the mode which makes possible the manifest capability of psychoanalysis to destroy imaginary strongholds. We saw how this psychoanalytic event of the “realization of the subject” can only occur within language. Even though, in its capacity to
name and in its very purposes, language seems mostly to favor this alienation—even though it does open imaginary modes for the possibility of reification—we nonetheless also recognized in silence a decisive moment where language hindered the imaginary. Language there blocked the option of clutching at this world of images, and thus allowed authentic existence to once again become a problem. Thereafter it became clear that it would be necessary to go through the concealing projections of imaginary intersubjectivity to discover a primordial relationship of the subject to language.

Whenever Lacan here or anywhere speaks of the *sujet*, and we translate this word with “subject,” it must be remembered that in French usage this term has an anti-substantial accent: Thus ‘sujet’ in French means fundamentally, ‘exposed,’ ‘dependent,’ ‘subjected,’ or, more abstractly, something that ‘underlies’ a ‘determination,’ that ‘experiences’ a ‘formation’ and that first makes it possible. Only on the basis of this is it possible to understand that in French, *sujet* is the normal synonym for the patient. How much more than for the phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, must these characteristics of the concept of subjectivity count for the “structuralist,” Lacan? For example, one important essay for our investigation bears the title, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (ES, p. 292). There can be no question, by the way, but that Lacan’s usage forbids the more or less introspective knowledge which the subject has of itself as something “subjective.”

“But what, then, is this subject that you keep dinning into our ears?” some impatient listener finally protests. “Haven’t we already learned the lesson from Monsieur de la Palice that everything experienced by the individual is subjective?”

Naive lips, whose praise will occupy my final days, open yourselves again to hear me. No need to close your eyes. The subject goes well beyond what is experienced “subjectively” by the individual, exactly as far as the truth he is able to attain, and which perhaps will fall from those lips you have already closed again. (ES, p. 55)

“Subjective” in Lacan’s sense means to be “submitted to” the inertia of a structure which leaves the customary etiquette of the “subjective” far behind it. Does this subversion of the subject, in its relationship to language, an event from which it appears to operate almost as an *effet*, allow a closer approach, a more exact determination? Can a consequence of the discussion of the anecdote of the *Hommes/Dames* help us further here? Lacan answered the fictive question of how a signifier could work at all, if it were not present in a subject, by asserting that in the moment of its effectiveness it would have gone over to the level of the signified. Our further enquiries, in the meanwhile, have indicated that a subject whose measure was entirely taken within the field of meanings would regress to that *moi* for whom misrecognition is
essential. Moreover, the subject beats itself here as though the meanings that it finds before it were products of an act of consciousness. The perceived equivalence between meaning and meant seduces the subject into the belief that it could plumb its own depths as an object of knowledge. The level of the \textit{\^enonciation} thus loses it questionability beneath the overflowing level of the \textit{\^enonce}.

Such an answer to our questions is too hasty and only provokes a new question: How can a “subject of the signifier” be compared with the “subject of the signified”? How should the relationship between the two subjectivities be thought? As Lacan puts it: “Is the place that I occupy as the subject of a signifier concentric or eccentric, in relation to the place I occupy as subject of the signified—that is the question” (ES, p. 165).

Let’s begin by hearing an answer that doesn’t come from psychoanalysis but rather from linguistics.

In an essay published by Harvard in 1957, “Shifters, Verbal Categories and the Russian Verb,” Roman Jakobson distinguishes between the process of “speech” (in Jakobson’s own French version, \textit{\^enonciation}) itself and its object or result, the “narrated matter” (\textit{mati\`ere \^enonc\`ee}).\footnote{To answer the question of the corresponding protagonists, the “subjects” of these processes, the concept of the “shifter” becomes useful. The philosopher Peirce classified signs most generally as “icons,” “indexes,” and “symbols.” With symbols the bond with the represented object depends upon convention; with an index—for instance, the act of pointing the index finger—the relationship to the object is, quite the contrary, of an existential kind. In the concept of the shifter both functions now fall together. The most striking example of this is the personal pronoun, I. “I” indicates the person who says, “I.” At any one time, the sign, “I,” can only designate its object on the strength of a symbolic agreement. And, as a result, “I” can be replaced by \textit{ich}, \textit{je} or \textit{ego}, without any change of meaning. On the other hand, the sign, “I,” would not be capable of such representation if it didn’t stand in an existential relationship to its object. Thus the first person of the personal pronoun characterizes both a protagonist, as he appears in what is said, and a subject who is operative in the act of speaking itself. As Jakobson puts it: “Thus, first person signals the identity of a participant of the narrated event [\textit{proc\`es de l’\^enonc\`e}] with the performer of the speech event [\textit{proc\`es de l’\^enonciation}], and the second person, the identity with the actual or potential undergoer of the speech event” (WAL, p. 134).

Now, it is precisely this identity provided by the signifier, “I,” of the \textit{sujet de l’\^enonc\`e} and the \textit{sujet de l’\^enonciation}, upon which Lacan casts doubt. Can’t the representation of the \textit{sujet de l’\^enonciation} in the \textit{\^enonce} fail, and yet nonetheless be present? One need only think of the examples of the imperatives and interjections, “Help!” or “Fire!” Moreover, doesn’t the etymology of the word, “person” lead us to suspect that, in the concept of the “shifter,” we once again meet that objectifying self-mirroring of the
"masking" ego, the avoidance of which demanded that we finally turn from a conscious to an unconscious subject? Against these linguistic variants of the philosophical *Cogito*, Lacan asserts, “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (ES, p. 166).

Thinking tries to accomplish absolute self-certainty, at least relatively, by means of an endless striving for the maintenance of the certain, a striving that must exhaust my being. Still worse, as the *Regulae* show, Descartes places even this little gain from subjectivity into question, insofar as he rests the whole of certainty on the arbitrary willfulness of an unproven God. Against such modes of subjective evidence, whether they be of linguistic or philosophical provenance, Lacan leads the empiricism of the Freudian revolution onto the field, conjuring up that third outrage to the human race—the one which leaves those of Copernicus and Darwin far behind it in confronting man with the “repressed” truth that his ego is no longer the master in his own house. It testifies to a profound misunderstanding of both Freud and Heidegger when Binswanger, against a supposed *Homo natura*, erects the Heideggerian concept of Dasein for psychoanalysis and determines to exemplify it through the personal and possessive pronouns:

In all of these possessive pronouns (which Freud uses, for example, in such expressions as “our psychical apparatus,” “our thoughts,” etc.) the discourse concerns a Being that is assumed as obvious and just as obviously pushed to one side—namely, *Dasein is ours*. The same counts, naturally, for the personal pronouns as when we say, “I mean,” “I am inclined” . . . etc. Here also talk is of a Dasein as mine, theirs . . .” (AV&A, Vol. 1, p. 179ff)

Binswanger contrasts the “objective,” “impersonal” psychology of Freud to an anthropology that orients itself around “Dasein as self” and the word, “person.” If, now, Heidegger insists that we take the *Sein* (“Being”) of the *Da* (“there”) as nothing else than the clearing of Being itself, and that Being comes into presence as ecstatic emergence of truth, then a “self” that determined to occupy this place would obscure it in precisely its ecstasy. Thus it shouldn’t be surprising that Heidegger writes: “The personal fails and obstructs what is essential to ek-sistence in relationship to the history of Being no less than the objective” (BW, p. 207).

We must turn the accusation of onesidedness that Binswanger raises against Freud—that he seems to have made the single mode of human experience of the natural sciences absolute—against Binswanger himself; we must do this even though Binswanger’s theory radically surpasses a hermeneutics characterized by the metaphors of energetics. Recall, for example, Heine’s joke about the relationship of the poor Hirsch-Hyacinth to the rich Baron Rothschild. The “subject,” that means to express itself as “familiar” finds itself, after speaking, confronted, finds itself divided in two, split into a
sujet de l’énoncé and a sujet de l’énonciation, into this conscious and that unconscious discourse. Here the concept of the “splitting” of the subject, a term which, along with its synonyms clivage, division, refente (“cleavage,” “division,” “loss”), appears over and over in Lacan’s Oeuvre, becomes comprehensible. And it is the rhetoric of the unconscious, whose discovery and presentation we owe to Freud, that reveals this splitting.

Through this insight, Lacan’s work offers an interesting new access to our theme; in his comments on the concept of the id, as Lagache interpreted it, the problematic of negativity wins renewed importance. In our discussion “Language and Historicity,” we indicated how negation, or rather the judgment in which negation clothes itself, always demands a prior affirmation, an énonciation as Lacan could now say, which we understood as instauration of the symbolic structure itself. This representation of the bond between affirmation and negativity, which seems to hold the latter at the level of the énoncé, at the level of the conscious and present conversation, now produces a question. If it is doubtless right—there can be negation only where there has already been affirmation—then doesn’t this lead to the conclusion that negation is deducible as such from affirmation? Freud consciously characterized the id through its inability to say “no” in the usual sense. In the “Project,” at the same time that he projected “secondary judgment,” he also posited a “primary judgment” dependent upon primary process. Our earlier interpretations confronted affirmation as a first symbolization of “foreclosure” (Verwerfung), as a radical refusal of that primary judgment.

Now, the situation demands a more differentiated analysis. In a way, it actually calls for a limited foreclosure, not an annulment of the structure itself; what is demanded is a foreclosure that occurs within the structure, a foreclosure that doesn’t annihilate but reconstrues. If this structure is an ensemble of signifiers, then this limited foreclosure can only be conceived as the failure of the signer, as the ablation- or elision signifiante. In other, more paradoxical words, one particular signer is immanent to structure, to the storehouse of signifiers, to the grand Other, to language; it is a signer that indicates precisely through its absence—a Signans that, so to speak, lacks itself. Nothing other than this is meant by the symbol S(Ø). Lacan indicates it as follows: “signifier of a lack in the Other, inherent in its very function as the treasury of the signer” (ES, p. 316, translation slightly altered).

If we reintroduce the structuralist concept of language as a limited number of elements, as a “battery” of signifiers, which seems, as such, to be complete, then it must be pointed out about this signer that it is not possible to count it within that set. It functions as a kind of “—1” in the set of signifiers, and therefore remains inexpressible. If we were able to use the presence and absence structure of language as a way of summing up the investigations of the fourth chapter, if structural linguistics valorizes difference as the decisive structural moment, then here we can understand the
“meaning” of that absence and interval of difference. From this follows: “That is to say, in the absence of this signifier, all the other signifiers represent nothing” (ES, p. 316).

All other, all “positive” signifiers can only attain to their function on the basis of this signifier (S(O)), which they essentially constitute along with themselves. In the lack that this signifier indicates we have the structurally immanent matching piece to affirmation, we have the ground for the possibility of negativity.

In making negativity and its place in language a theme for discussion, we can’t avoid the particle that usually expresses it. When one observes its variety in different languages it shouldn’t be astonishing that formal logic, which by exact definition lesser seeks a univocal meaning and the exclusion of everything “subjective,” discards this plurality as an “oddfy.” For Lacan’s psychoanalytic philosophy of language, this kind of neglect must emerge as suspect. The grammarians don’t seem much less off base when, on account of the variability and contradictoriness of the rules for the French so-called extra ne, they find little interest in it. One grammarian explains the particle, which, for example, appears in “je crains qu’il ne vienne,” as an “expletive” that is entirely unnecessary. Another declares it to be “not expressive,” without being able to explain what it’s supposed to express in any case. For Lacan, on the other hand, “the task that we give to it [ne] could force them [the grammarians] to change their attitude before it became clear that they don’t understand anything about it” (“avant qui’il ne soit avéré qu’ils n’y comprennent rien”) (E, p. 800).

Had Lacan left out the ne from this sentence—which is, by the way, a characteristic of his diction that one meets not infrequently whenever he extends his thought while at the same time producing an illustrative example—had he suppressed this particle, then his very expression would have dulled the sharpness of his attack and would have lost any resonance. “Thus I fear that they don’t bring it up except to mock me . . .” (“Mais je crains ainsi qu’ils n’en viennent à me honnir . . .”) (E, p. 800). Were we to follow the demand of the linguists and simply pass over the “n’,” we would reduce the Lacanian non-willing, which here excuses a fear (“Thus I fear that . . .”), to an anxious securing; we would lose the accent on énonciation in favor of the fearful “I” (je) of the énoncé.

Such examples make clear that an intention emerges that is not captured by the je expressed in discourse, but which rather manifests itself in this ne. Insofar as je articulates exclusively the fear and its object and is also the index for a presence that expresses itself here and now, it doubtless takes the position of a “shifter.” On the other hand, however, it also shows that another “saying” is also in play, that another subject is implied than the one conceived by the expression “shifter.” Jakobson’s distinction between “what is narrated” (énoncé) and “speech” (énonciation)—met in the context of a classification of verbal categories and levelled off again in the synthesizing
je—reappears here in an entirely different dimension. The level of the énoncé becomes the plane of conscious discourse, ruled by the postulation of a univocal meaning, with the "shifter" as subject, while the realm of the énonciation is displaced to the level of unconscious deployment of language, a level whose subject comes to light in the ne. Thus a distance emerges between the Je de l'énoncé and the Sujet de l'énonciation, a gap which seems impossible to bridge, since, indeed, the unconscious subject appears to have its place exactly there, where "my" knowledge is denied access.

The task that we have set for ourselves has been to characterize this "place" more precisely. If, now, we have found the clue in the ne, then it is important to follow this up. Ne is a particle which negates. That leads to the conclusion that its original corollary is the subjectivity which we seek. We became familiar with this corollary as that place, S(Ø), that location of the unconscious "order of the signifier," which is indicated through an "elision of the signifier" and which thus constitutes itself as empty space. Thus we can say with Lacan: "The original mode of the elision of the signifier—which we attempt to conceive here as the matrix of Verneimung—places the subject under the aspect of the negative in organizing the emptiness where he finds his place" (E, p. 665f).

Naturally such a placement of the subject has consequences. To reflect upon these: if the subject finds a home precisely where language is punctured, where it suffers lack, then it lacks precisely that signifier which could name and indicate it. Thus the search for a determination of the subject ends with the conclusion that it is and remains essentially undeterminable. This single blow illuminates earlier postulates that lead to a witnessing of fundamental openness through a screen of imaginary entanglements of the ego. In the "place" that we have just discovered can be found the justification for earlier comments, whose intention was to allow the emergence of a challenging multiplicity. The discovery of this place challenges that "objectification" by which every overly hasty interpretation can only obscure an essential multiplicity, and instead encourages that multiplicity to appear from behind the unities of meaning crystallized in the insistent ego. Assuming that the subject, before which the analysis is to bring us, is in essence defined through its radical indeterminacy; assuming that it only is as "primally repressed" or "ec-centric," then any other search for a definition, any search that doesn't lead to this "negative" result, must necessarily falsify the case.

Let's interrupt the representation of consequences to be drawn from such a determination of subjectivity. Let's try instead to make the conception itself more precise.

Our new analysis of negation has shown us that every negation assumes more than a primordial affirmation. It also assumes that in this affirmation, which we can grasp as the enfolding of the unconscious order of signifiers, an initial negating must already have taken place so that "I" can negate at all. If affirmation subsists in the "position" of the signifier, its opposite can only
be sought in the “annihilation” of that position, an event that, assuming that it is not to result in the annulment of structure itself, can only occur in a limited, “ordered” fashion. We saw how a lacking signifier is inherent to the system of signifiers—a signifier, “− 1,” that, so to speak, can only function between signifiers as empty space, interval, or space of difference. Sausser’s formulation, that “in language there is nothing except differences,” when read in this light can be taken to mean: a signifier in relationship to another only represents a difference. This signifier, in turn, represents the same interval for the next, and so on. If we recall now that in this empty space the subject finds its home, so that we can almost identify this place of lack with subjectivity, then that formula that haunts Lacan’s later work like no other, and that delivers the definition of the signifier, of language itself, no longer seems so obscure. It runs: “A signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier” (ES, p. 316).

The simple model provided by a rudimentary logic can perhaps contribute here to a better understanding. To begin with, we imagine the subject as a completely undifferentiated surface which must be “differentiated” to be understood. If one imagines, for the purpose of such understanding, a dash, a signifier, then it will seem as though one has two elements—the dash and the ground from which the dash emerges. But, granted that I have thereby determined the ground, can I—and all scientific knowledge does this—really count it as a second element? Am I not forced much more to another marking in order to keep this element from disappearing? Have I now, with this second operation, exhausted the ground that surfaced with the first mark? The outcome is disappointing. I can’t capture the ground as such. What results is solely an interval between two marks, a ground which was not meant as such but rather is only represented by the distinction of a second dash from a first. It is evident that in this matter the production of further dashes can’t change anything. What is so produced is always only given through a difference from the prior marks. The ground itself remains unmarked; nevertheless, it is precisely this ground which makes it possible to distinguish a second dash from the first. While it is a second mark, the second dash marks the absence of a mark; or, better, just in that it is a mark, it marks that nothing can adequately mark this interval, which is nonetheless necessary marked.

Let’s now add the analogy that was introduced above and name the dashes “signifiers,” and call this interval the “subject of the signifier.” We understand it, thus, as a subject that stands in a determinate structural relationship to the order of signifiers, which we earlier reduced to a binary association—in this following Lacan’s own formula—rather than as some undifferentiated mythical “subject of being.” Earlier, following the structuralist insight, we conceived the signifier as differential; then, setting out from the problem of negation, we bound subjectivity up quite generally with an empty space, the space of difference itself. We then had to conclude—always in regard to
the differential character of the signifier—that without this lack of a signifier and, therewith, of a determination, language itself would be unthinkable. The "rudimentary" model then confirmed this conclusion. A signifier (a dash, a mark) exists only insofar as, in relation to another signifier (another mark), it represents a subject (an interval).

A further meditation can make this minimal logic more precise. Reflections on the sentence structure of Freud's notes, in his case history of the Wolfman, allowed us, in an earlier section, to conclude that meaning was constituted essentially retrospectively—through "deferred action." As Freud's very description allowed us to see, this way of finding meaning counts not only for a single prefigured meaning; it shows itself at work as well in the opposite, in radically undetermined meanings. The empty space which the subject absorbs was, then, first constituted as a second signifier associated with the first. In Lacan's formulation that means: "A signifier, 2, represents the subject for a signifier, 1." Every signifier represents a subject only insofar as such a "coming between" differentiates it from the prior one.

While we accentuate as subject the indispensability of a ground, this by no means implies that we have here to do with a quasi-metaphysical causa, which would become one ground among others for language. Quite the contrary, Lacan speaks of the "effect of the subject" and of language as "cause of the subject." If we refer to an intentionality at the level of animal needs, if we evoke a kind of tabula rasa, if we, finally, follow Lacan in offering a sketch of a fish swimming in the waters of the pre-linguistic (E, p. 816), then we operate with models, we move within myths. The needs with which we have to do are already already broken into units of articulation; the undifferentiated surface is always already differentiated, and the fish is always already caught in the net of language. Given that, insofar as he speaks, the only recourse remaining to the human being is to language, given that, in order to clarify the question of his existence, he makes signs, produces marks, and in so doing sees his self-conception elude him, sees it constituted at an undeterminable interval, sees it become the moment of a "fading" repeated in every new speaking act; given all of that—the signifier must already give him an answer for any of this to happen, for there to be a question at all. It must be a signifier that presents the human being precisely there, where it makes him disappear. Without such a signifier, in which we recognize once again our S(0), the differential character of the signifier itself, the real split would never become a problem; that is, lack as such would not exist, nor would the split Subject, S. Were a lack not inherent in language itself, it would never be constituted as question (what Lacan alludes to with the fishhook, suggestive of a question mark running from the position of the large Other, in his third graph of desire); and were the subject not thoroughly permeated in its existence by this question, there wouldn't remain a question at the end of this question mark—one whose provisional answer is found as the "barred subject, S." This again substantiates the old saw, "You wouldn't
have sought me, if you hadn't already found me." And it confirms, on an originary plane, our earlier postulations of a subject that takes the question it turns on the Other as its preliminary answer.

An alternation of presence and absence, such as manifests itself in the *Forti/Da* game, is unthinkable on a purely real, non-symbolic level. There could only be an exclusive *aut* but no inclusive *et* between terms. The metamorphosis of a real into a symbolic relationship which documents absence in every presence, demands an initial identification with our signifier, "—1." In every self-presencing, the subject must have experienced itself as absent in order for it to be possible that the *Forti/Da* of language be realized.

Lacan summarizes this point:

![Diagram](image)

The effect of language is the cause introduced into the subject. Because of this effect the subject is not cause of itself; language introduces the worm of the cause that splits it into the subject. For the cause of the subject is the signifier, without which there would be no subject in the real. But the subject is what the signifier represents, and it could never represent anything unless it is for another signifier . . . (E, p. 835)

The theme of this investigation is Jacques Lacan's foundation of psychoanalysis. It bears the title *Language and the Unconscious*. We confront the task of deepening our grasp of this thematic in the context of discussing subjectivity. We have already glimpsed a truly original point in Lacan's conception—that the unconscious is linguistically structured. In view of our present analyses, the central question of the book must now run: What kind
of subject must this unconscious be that, according to Freud, we may see as the essence of who we are, and that is linguistically structured? The central function of language—here in discussing subjectivity—has once again become clear. What is always obtruding is the fact that, whether it's the Oedipus Complex, the question of historicity or desire, the unconscious, or the subject, language always stands at the focal point.

Let's try now to force our way deeper into Lacan's conception of language. At present language is tied up with the question of subjectivity. Our interest in this relationship has to be affirmed at this point, for it doubtless delivers up our definition of the signifier. We underscored that the bond between subjectivity and language can't be conceived as though a subject that had already constituted itself succeeded to some order. It is only "subject" in the place of the Other, in the place of language. The difficulty that seems to lie in wait here, namely, that the constitution of this structure clearly demands the language of the subject just as, on the other hand, the subject demands language, proves to be a mere pseudo-problem; for the subject does not meet a purely self-sufficient system but rather an order that is already incarnated in "being-with." Thus the development of subjectivity may, from a psychoanalytic perspective, be represented as identification; it is an identification which, insofar as the other subject only subsists as withdrawal, can only occur as identification with a signifier, as symbolic identification, I(O).

Let's try again to attain a better understanding of the basic points on that graph of desire, which the meeting of a mythical sujet infans with language and its consequences suggests. In reference to this model we explained how the fulfillment of its needs in a human world forces a quasi-mythical intentionality to linguistic articulation, as a result of which its instincts are delivered over to the sophistications of meaning and thereby transformed into an endlessly speaking desire. The subject will seek to alter this condition of radical questionability. Since only signifiers confront it, it strives, through identification, to find its fixed determination. It reclaims for itself a determinate name out of the sea of names (and meanings) in order to fix itself through it. On the level of conscious discourse such a petrification emerges, for instance, in the immobility of one's own name. A specular i(o) - m overlays symbolic identification, and we accordingly enlarge our graph (ES, p. 306). We already know about the brittleness of such imaginary behavior, which not only believes itself to have grasped the adequate object in every fixed meaning but also, on account of its supposedly natural correlation, thinks that it has grasped the corresponding subject. Meanwhile, while consciousness hangs onto the belief that it has to do here with a univalent a priori correlation, a symbolic displacement takes place behind its back, an event that exposes such "belief" for illusion. For, "My definition of a signifier (there is no other) is as follows: a signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier" (ES, p. 316).
We have seen how all representation on the other side of what in being it seems to make present, re-presents an absence in all meaning, repeats a loss in the act of presentation itself, brings to light meaningless intervals—the spaces between signifier and signified—in everything meaningful. Before the signifier indicates a being, it has already confronted a lack. If I seek an answer to a question, if I seek to secure a meaning from it, I am necessarily referred to another signifier. To the extent that the signifier constitutes me as the questioner, it refers me, in order to obtain an answer, to another signifier, which in turn reconstitutes me as questioner and thus puts in play yet another signifier. The signifier re-presents me as someone looking for another signifier. If we reflect, further, that man is extraordinary among all beings because of a lack which endures (at the end of The Interpretation of Dreams Freud attached to desire the stigma of the indestructible), if we hold before our eyes the fact that man constitutes himself as a constant question and cannot be exhausted through specific meanings, then Lacan's definition, concerning the human essence, is no longer puzzling.

Thus we can see: in the effort to give itself meaning through identification with a signifier, the subject finds itself represented once again as empty space, as self-withdrawing "subject in fading, S." What is indicated is that, on account of the mode of understanding, the reference is not fundamentally from a signifier, 1, to another signifier, 2, but rather the reverse: "This is the retroversion effect by which the subject becomes at each stage what he was before and announces himself—he will have been—only in the future perfect tense" (ES, p. 306).

The subject is thrown back, from point I(O) to point S, as the last two diagrams indicate, and finds itself conceived through that process of knowing, set into motion by our access to language, which retrospectively defines him as undeterminable; that process determines that what is to be conceived is inconceivable. We spoke above of the points de capiton. On the basis of
Lacan's vocabulary, we thematized certain points at which meaning crystallizes, and were compelled on this basis to place them on the conscious level of the énoncé. The concept (of the "upholstery point") now needs to be extended. The originary realm of unconscious language also implies one such point de capiton. It is singular and "means" nothing further than the absolute lack of meaning. It is singular; it is our "barred subject, S."

Thus Lacan's conception peaks in an extreme subjectivism—and is, nonetheless, its radical opposite. We speak of nothing other than ourselves and yet speak of a nothing. If, upon first meeting the subject as the mythical intentionality of an undifferentiated "subject of being," as nothing that could be known, we had hoped that our access to language could help, then we must be disappointed. Our hopes once again come to nothing, to a nothing that now calls from one signifier to another.

What there was, was suited for speaking, and this in the two senses that the French imperfect gives to the "il y avait" ("there was")—the sense of the instant just past ("just a moment ago there was something there and now there no longer is"), but also the sense of the instant after ("were [was] there a little more, it would have been"). What "there was," here disappears to become nothing more than a signifier. (E, p. 840)

Just a little bit more, just a moment later, and the subject would have been verbalized, named, would have spoken as a self; but in the moment of grasping it in language, it finds itself already repressed, and not the subject but language speaks:

It speaks from him, and it is here that he (the subject) apprehends it; and all the more so as the subject was an absolute nothing—before the fact only that language addresses him, he has disappeared as subject beneath the signifier that he has become. But this "nothing" persists in its arrival, now produced in the appeal made in the Other to a second signifier. (E, p. 835)

Whenever I seek to identify myself through a signifier, I hit upon a place where the laws of the old reality no longer count and the new laws are still only awaited: "I' can come into being and disappear from what I say" (ES, p. 300). Being of non-being; wherever I try to identify myself, whatever picture I make of myself, I find myself already doubled. I hit upon my identity as non-identity; such is the "kernel" of the animal symbolicum, such "is" the subject of the unconscious, the subject of language.
Lacan, upon being asked what constants ran through his scintillatingly multifaceted oeuvre, replied that he had always favored those ideas which confirmed the Freudian notion that “the ego is no longer master in its own house.” He asserted that his permanent task had been to expose the reflexive focus of subjectivity as imaginary mirror-play. From this viewpoint, the fascination which Heidegger’s thought must have exercised upon Lacan becomes comprehensible, since it finds its real antipode precisely in transcendental subjectivity. Regrettably, we must pass up the temptation to examine this influence upon the French psychoanalyst more closely—an influence which not only transpired in Heidegger’s critique of the traditional conception of subjectivity but which also announces itself explicitly at various places in Lacan’s work. Above all, Lacan’s French translation of Heidegger’s “Logos” essay testifies to a paternity for the idea of a “gathering into language” beyond all egocentrism.

In the face of the numerous misunderstandings spawned by the popular notion of “structuralism,” we earlier found it more pressing to follow the relationship between Lacan and Lévi-Strauss since many critics commonly name both authors in the same breath and evaluate them accordingly. We have, therefore, presented in the first sections of the previous chapter the foundations of the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, and, with the additional sketch of the Oedipus Complex, shown its meaningfulness for Lacan’s own intellectual direction. In this exposition certain questions necessarily remained open, and it is to these that we now turn.

The present section of our investigation has subjectivity as its theme. Even the representation of Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist ideas necessarily brought the concept of the subject into view. It is only necessary here to recall Ricoeur’s remark that this anthropology amounts to a “Kantianism without transcendental subject.” We can only underscore here what the additional introduction of Cassirer into our earlier discussion showed—that, despite the accent on the fundamental universality of symbolic forms shared with Lacan, in Cassirer’s recourse to the constitutive performance of a transcendental consciousness, unbridgeable differences with Lacan emerged. While Kant and, in his wake, Cassirer gathered the conditions for the possibility of knowledge into the focal point of a synthesizing subjectivity, structuralism transfers these conditions into the universality of an unconscious code, in which subject as well as traditional object of knowledge become elements robbed of all independence.

Therefore, in the structuralist vision, the subject becomes the indifferently exchangeable object, “functioning” according to the rules of the system and thus leaving the structure itself undisturbed in its relational coherence and constancy. Urs Jaeggi is undoubtedly right when, in regard to Lévi-Straussian structural analysis, he speaks of a “system without subject that
eliminates the human being” (OUC, p. 41). But when, now, the same Jaeggi attempts to draw a universal characterization of Parisian structuralism from Beckett’s sentence, “I am made of words, of words of others,” when he asserts that the question of the subject, of the “who?” or “who speaks?” is no longer posed, then we must take pause. Does the substitution of the Cartesian “I speak” with an “I am spoken” mean, as Jaeggi makes plain, the complete exclusion of all subjectivity? Does it mean that subjectivity ceases to be a question?

Earlier we had the opportunity, on the pretext of responding to Politzer’s *Critique des fondements de la psychologie*, to point back to an alternative to the mere choice between the mechanism of the thingly and the “I think.” In other words, we can only concur so long as a critique like that of Jaeggi or Politzer turns only against Levi-Strauss’ conception of system; the structuralists, Foucault, Althusser, and Barthes, are not here in the debate at all. We can concur with a reading of Lévi-Straussian structuralism as the total elimination of subjectivity in favor of reification.

But can Lacan be included in such a critique? Isn’t one of our author’s fundamental questions, “Who speaks?” What was his definition of the signifier and of language? “A signifier is what represents the subject for another signifier.” Language and subject thus stand in an essential relationship. It’s impossible to think one without the other. We can point here to the previous pages of our inquiry. We must reemphasize that Lacan’s concept of subjectivity refers neither to a psychological subject nor to the transcendental consciousness of epistemology. Quite the contrary, Lacan sees language and subjectivity as so interwoven that the latter “finds itself” as “subjected.” The danger of reification emerges from language, insofar as the place of the subject in this structure becomes something essentially undeterminable, becomes a between and unsaid which accompanies all naming. If the place of human being, insofar as it is captured by language, is essentially the place of a primordial negation, then unavoidably every effort at self-reflection and objectifying conceptualization must distort. The “mirror stage” has offered an empirical paradigm for that. Lacan’s conception of subjectivity therefore can be wielded to answer not only traditional epistemology but also the opposite extreme of a positivistic oblivion of subjectivity. Where the one extreme believes that, through recourse to a transcendental *Cogito*, it can arrive at an invulnerable certainty, the other thinks that, by the exclusion of everything subjective, it can attain to an expression of mathematical exactitude.

Within this second tradition, Lévi-Strauss is of the opinion that structural analysis as he practices it makes possible the detection of systematic totalities. These totalities could be linked through an inner law of coherence that would allow calculation of random changes, even with their additional consequences. From this perspective, the symbol system—posed as universal—appears by definition as complete, since any references or gaps are enclosed
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within the system and are enveloped by the whole field of meaning. In this way the subject becomes, as it is for the game theory to which Lévi-Strauss refers, exhaustively accessible to a calculation of appearances. Insofar as the subject as such is excluded from this founding structure, it can nonetheless find complete determination through an objectifying calculus that is taken as exhaustive. Every lack and every indeterminacy appears in this light as a transient but redeemable "not yet." In his introduction to the complete edition of the works of Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss proposed the hypothesis that with the appearance of the symbolic the universal becomes meaningful in a single blow, without, however, being already known. Signifier and signified constituted themselves simultaneously, as two complementary blocks. Contrary to human knowledge, the intellectual processes which grant the identification of signifier with the signified within an \textit{a priori}, closed totality still limp along behind this pregiven plenitude of meaning. In magical behavior, for instance, we must see an overly hasty removal of this delay. It is a pre-scientific system of relations, expressing itself in the myth of the \textit{mana}, that too quickly levels contradictory facts and that therefore anticipates total identity at the cost of advances in knowledge. For Lévi-Strauss, we doubtless still remain distant from this identity. Nonetheless, thanks to the law of modern scientific advancement, and not least that means, thanks to the structuralist methodology that unifies systems, it no longer seems unreachable.

We can no longer hide the parallel with Hegel here. What Hegel, in the introduction to the \textit{Logic}, attributed to the eternal essence of a God that had pre-thought all determinations even before the creation of a finite soul, must be bound in Lévi-Strauss with the epiphany of the symbolic. What the dialectical method performs for Hegel is positivistically embellished in Lévi-Strauss under the name of structuralism. And, finally, what in Hegel is called "absolute knowledge" can be met in Lévi-Strauss as the total identity of signifier and signified. Thus it is not surprising that our anthropologist attributes to the opposition of nature and culture, which produced his thought, only a methodological value and that—here we have only a reversed positivist sign—he speaks of the reintegration of culture into nature, of a final assent of life into the totality of its physicochemical laws (PS, p. 327). The human spirit, to which Lévi-Strauss had on occasion so passionately sworn his alliance, recognizes itself once again in nature—but as a spirit constituted by \textit{nature}'s laws.

Cassirer seems to share such a faith in progress. He explains how, in regard to the relationship between science and language, science was initially bound to the divisions which language had already produced. When now, however, science uses language itself as its material and foundation, it necessarily steps out beyond it. In the light of this new \textit{logos}, "the articulations provided by language appear as only inhibitions and limitations which the strength and independence of the new principle must progressively overcome" (PSF I,
As the pages that follow the text just quoted confirm, Cassirer has not fundamentally given up the Hegelian claim to totality, but has only modified the medium in which it is to occur. The symbolic, which at first seems to bring a radical break for both Lévi-Strauss and Cassirer, is in the end negated with a negation that was already given in that moment when Lévi-Strauss spoke of a “formation of the signifier for accord with the signified” (IM, p. XLVIII).

We had the opportunity earlier to point out that structuralism, in its search for a mathematical formalization, approximates neo-positivism in seeking methodologically secured expressions of mathematical exactitude through logical systems formed by rigorous formal rules. An example from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* confirmed this comparison. Now that text can further clarify this parallel. While it is undoubtedly no longer the task of structuralism to produce an ontology which shall fit into language and which nonetheless is independent from semantics, while it thus cannot accept the model of the articulation of a sentence as a reflection of a pre-given state of affairs—Russell’s final recourse to sensory data is irrelevant to structuralism—we nonetheless find in two premises of the *Tractatus* decisive points of correspondence. We can catch sight of these in Wittgenstein’s theory of coordination and the postulate, tightly bound up with this, of the univalence of meaning. Wittgenstein thinks that, in the last analysis, one is able to return to simple objects, to an unconditioned existence, to objects, therefore, which are no longer delivered over to different modes of presentation and which thus are to be signified through simple signs. We must close in on a layer of sentences which no longer point back to other sentences; they must, rather, carry their meaning within themselves, for otherwise the meaning of the sentence would be undetermined and confused. Thus results “the demand for the determination of meaning” (TR, 3.23). Wittgenstein’s semantics thus exhausts itself in a simple coordination of the so-called primary signs to objects—a coordination which is not to be ascribed to a still-to-be-construed ideal language but which, as Wittgenstein explains in paragraph 5.5563, should result from the supposed determinacy of our language itself.

Now, we have seen that all the structuralist institutions that Lévi-Strauss introduces to us finally point to the same goal of univalent determination of meaning. What Wittgenstein names univalent coordination is met here as the equivalence of signifier and signified. And, every bit as little as Wittgenstein, will Lévi-Strauss ascribe this univalence to an ideal symbol system. Rather, he believes that he has discovered in this structure the actual reality of our world. The structural method only gleans what a *dieu calculateur*, a *sujet-supposésavoir*, to use an expression of Lacan’s, had already anticipated. The discontinuity which the symbolic *a priori* seemed to indicate is thus negated from the start and not, as it seemed earlier, only at the end. Structuralism, which behaves like positivism, attaches itself to the circle of a complete
presence in the unity of a mathematically whitewashed logos. For a "mystical" Wittgenstein, for whom "that about which one can't speak one must remain silent," no more room remains.

And what about Lacan? First of all, we saw early on—in the second chapter of our investigation—that in his perspective a word only has meaning insofar as it relates back to the whole of the discourse, insofar as it plays within a context. Lacan's understanding is thus not unlike that of the late Wittgenstein, the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. The scope of meaning of a word must vary according to context. We cannot put Lacan into the circle of those who swear alliance to a naive theory of coordination and who thus elicited our critical response to such figures as Lévi-Strauss and the early Wittgenstein. In many places in this book—for instance in the chapter "Rhetoric of the Unconscious"—it has become clear that a psychoanalytic conception of language which would not accentuate essential multivalence must be unthinkable. We noted how Freud's concept of "over-determination," which is only another name for this multivalence, alone provides the condition for the possibility of disentangling the central node of the symptom and thus of allowing it, as word, to enter again into our everyday linguistic play.

Doubtless, we must find what emerges from this ambiguity as soon as the analytic work of untangling has been performed and the "true" meaning is gleaned from the distorted sense. Doubtless, we must discover what appears as soon as a "constituting discourse" reveals itself behind the "constituted discourse." Doesn't psychoanalysis as a method offer the opportunity—even if on the level of multivalent, varying, individual historicity—of succeeding to univalent determinations? Doesn't the analytic dialogue climax in an ability to make conscious that allows the language of the unconscious to emerge through exact expressed truths? What remains here of the oft-underscored rift between signifier and signified? How stands the contrast with the linguistics of a Saussure (or a Lévi-Strauss) in their assertion of having grasped in the signifier the obverse of the same coin whose reverse is the signified? Where can the border be closed against a univalent concept of the sign—a border which we could previously maintain by finding the determinants of our dialogue precisely in "non-sense," in "holes in meaning"? Doesn't it seem here that psychoanalysis has the opportunity to weaken the traditional aspersions of insufficient scientificity, precisely insofar as it is now consciously obliged to the postulate of the univalence of meaning?

That such is not the case, and that the distance from an absolute perfection of the sign subsists, that the rift between signifier and signified remains, is indicated in all its clarity by the first two paragraphs of the present chapter. What we first attempted to show, in demonstrating the language of the unconscious to be structured through metaphor and metonymy—a characterization which contradicts the theory of univalent coordination—was reinforced by the impossibility of any reduction of repression. Behind all
repression we found something fundamentally unadressable, which makes repression in the normal sense possible. The subject thus emerges as essentially subject of a primal repression. We met this as the unsaid and unsayable which occupies the space of an empty position, the realm of a between, which robs the meaning-giving signifier. Every substitution of one signifier for another, every metaphor, must allow something unsaid to sound in its creation of meaning, and every metonymy, insofar as it represents the bond between the elements of language itself, implies as its essence a “between” of the meaningless. It is therefore quite right when the late Lacan contrasts Linguistics’ definition of the sign in language (Saussure’s “signifier”) to his own conception of the signifier. The linguist remains traditional when he explains, “it [the sign] represents . . . something for someone” (E. p. 840). Lacan’s definition points to a completely different dimension. It runs: “The register of the signifier institutes itself so that a signifier represents a subject for another signifier” (E. p. 840).

If we recall the interpretation of this that we have given in previous discussions, we understand now why Lacan so unswervingly insisted that every meaningful relation indicates a previous relationship between signifiers. For before language presents beings, and before it can be instrumentalized as a bearer of communication, it has formed the context for the subject. It has placed the subject, whom we must observe as the psychoanalytic essence of the human being, into a relationship—one evading all reification—that we have called the negating “between.” When Heidegger characterizes language as that emerging realm which first appropriates man to being, and when, following a further suggestion, we are forced to think this in relation to an essential difference, then we must see Heidegger and the “structuralist” Lacan standing shoulder to shoulder. Earlier we explained that a system of kinship relations, before it can be retroactively compared as a structure to language, already needs language as condition of its possibility. Lévi-Strauss’ thematization of language in its communicative function thus goes hand in hand with his forgetting of the subject. And only as a result of this was it possible for him to take language as merely one symbolic form among others. Neither he nor Cassirer have been able to listen to the “more” that announces itself when—before they decisively limit the breadth of their analyses—they are forced to grant language a methodological priority. We must firmly beg to differ with the squaring of the circle which game theory thinks itself to have achieved, insofar as it claims to fix the subject through a calculation of appearances. For, “Yet such a squaring is impossible, but only by virtue of the fact that the subject is constituted only by subtracting himself from it and by decompleting it essentially in order, at one and the same time, to have to depend on it and to make it function as a lack” (ES, p. 304).

If primal repression thus occurs in a radical withdrawal of the subject, and if in the process a not-further-reducible “unconscious” is constituted, then we may now ask whether the word “unconscious,” in Lévi-Strauss and
Lacan, can really have the same meaning. From the most divergent forms of kinship and marriage rules, Lévi-Strauss had concluded that, just as in the field of language, structurally understood, also in the realm of kinship the observed phenomena result from the play of general, hidden laws, which are summarized by the universal commandment against incest.

The commandment against incest itself then found its explication, as we saw earlier, in the symbolic law of exchange. Since the general form of such reciprocity remained unknown to the members of a culture, Lévi-Strauss felt forced to treat the law of exchange and the symbolic function that it realized as "unconscious." As a consequence, Lévi-Strauss found it necessary to conceive of this law as an axiom of the natural sciences. Now, the goal of delineating such a characteristic also transforms the use of the expression "unconscious," since an axiom is nothing other than a ground, which once known and thereby made present constitutes the keystone of a system that is entirely accessible to calculation. Only a properly scientific conceptualization is needed in order to raise the "unconscious" rule to consciousness, and thus to resolve the previous discontinuity between a manifestation and something hidden in a univocal expression of truth which acknowledges no exterior.

We noted earlier that Lévi-Strauss mentions Freud's psychoanalysis as having made an impression on his own intellectual development. It is no longer possible to put much store in such an influence. For one thing, concepts like repression and displacement—indeed the whole rhetoric of the unconscious—are unthinkable without their corresponding implications for subjectivity. For another, we have learned from Freud of a primal repression, a self-perpetuating withdrawal in all presence, which mocks all scientific objectification. The structuralist systematization accomplished by a Lévi-Strauss contradicts the most authentic psychoanalytic research, insofar as such research inevitably concerns an unconscious irreducible to anything else. And since one can no longer speak here of a filiation with Freud, we can now put to rest the illusion that this kind of structuralism is responsible for Lacan's understanding of language.

In this chapter we have sought, using the problematic of subjectivity, to indicate that character of withdrawal which, in opposition to linguistic and ethnological systematic concepts, is essential for a psychoanalytic conception of structure. But an earlier section tried to make these same indications visible through the concept of the father. The myth of the primordial murder of the father appeared to us as a phantasy from the origin of human history, a phantasy which attempted to express something that essentially evades conceptualization. Discourse emerged as endless repetition of this act; something plays itself out in all our speaking that withdraws and escapes us as dead, murdered. We later gave this empty place of a dead father a name, "name of the father." Our most recent, more logically oriented reflections accentuated a signifier, $S$, that in the place of language, $O$, marked an empty place, $\emptyset$. The murdered father thus represents the mythical explication of
this signifier, \( S(\emptyset) \). The coming to be of the human being, its essential constitution as barred subject, \( S \), emerges as identification with this signifier of lack. Our analyses thus confirm Freud's talk of a primordial identification with the father and confirm that the foundations for the logic of language emerge from reports of the so-called totemic meal, the mythical consumption of the body. This completes a bridge between our most recent and our earlier discussions. And, in the meanwhile, our characterization of Lacan's conception of language as the constant effort to think a self-perpetuating withdrawal wins an ever clearer outline. Lacan shows himself to be a radical critic of any thought of fulfillment, no matter how much he may also follow the law of modern scientific advancement.

And yet, does this critique stand upon sufficiently solid ground insofar as it depends upon the arguments we have developed in this chapter? Doesn't structural analysis, even as we have now conceived it—and thereby also the judgments we have rendered of the anthropological structuralism of a Lévi-Strauss—remain fundamentally lifeless? Doesn't every merely logical discussion, even when it is able to accentuate a constitutive empty place, exist only on the ground of an abstract rationalization, so that it only helps to wipe out the decisive experience? Moreover, despite all implicit differentiation from the ideology of the modern religion of science, *Lacan himself* still depends upon a scientific legitimation of psychoanalysis. He wants his interpretive viewpoint, especially attuned to linguisticality, taken as a decisive contribution to science. We might ask: Can the Oedipal myth really expand its meaning from the specificity of the primal father-murder, can this myth provide more scientificity than, for instance, the myth of the expulsion from paradise? Lacan does provide an answer: "But what is not a myth, and which Freud nevertheless formulated soon after the Oedipus complex, is the castration complex" (ES, p. 318).

Just as earlier we foreswore understanding psychoanalysis and its picture of the human being from the level of a pre- or (as that really means) extra-linguistic "immediate experience," so also now we may not rest the critique of such a way of being on its opposite, a logical formalism. Both positions remain inappropriate to the authentic contribution of psychoanalysis; both remain abstract. Rather, the distance between experience and "structure" should disappear, and an integration of "life" and "logos" should occur. Put more precisely, in opposition to the formalist conception of system taken from linguistic and anthropological structuralism stands the structure of this integration itself as it is seen from a psychoanalytic perspective. While it is also doubtless possible to conceive of a constitutive empty place on a purely logical level, psychoanalysis has the additional and decisive distinction of having to embody such a *case vide*. It is even possible, insofar as one follows Lacan's interpretation in "La science et la vérité" (E, p. 855–877), to grasp the emergence of science as "foreclosure" of the fundamental dimension of embodiment. Our task is essentially to circumvent such a progressive
de-somatization and to correlate the definition of the unconscious as "discourse of the Other" to that experience of Freud's that determined the unconscious as gendered reality and as the actuality of desire.

Let us recall that the transformation of the natural intentionality of needs into the spoken request creates a lack, since it results from a subjugation of the subject (which completes itself in this very act of creation) to the universality of the symbolic. And the desire to avoid this lack will never again allow this subject to rest. Such unrest we called "desire"—a desiring that really has to do with the fact that language shows itself to be incapable of any conceptualization which would name everything in its totality. Lacan summarizes, in the following paradox, the manner of this mutual imbrication of language and desire, desire in language is release but distinguishes itself both from the absolute systematic immanence of the logos and from the innocence of language in instinctive impulse:

Far from ceding to a logicizing reduction where it is a question of desire, I find in its irreducibility to demand the very source of that which also prevents it from being reduced to need. To put it elliptically: it is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable. (ES, p. 302)

In the Symposium, Plato has Aristophanes characterize eros as a striving for unification that seeks to restore an original unity lost due to the jealousy of Zeus. If we now observe the generative life of an animal, we see its "history" marked by a series of un-healable separations. These begin with fertilization, continue with the egg or placenta, and find a further accent in the loss of the maternal breast which the young creature perceives as an extended part of itself. And we must recall that in becoming aware of itself in the mirror and in correlative experiences of an intersubjective nature, the human animal, thanks to the intervention of its body, wins a unified picture of itself. This picture, experienced as a "jubilant assumption," appears against a background of primordial need, against that "primordial discord," that déhisance de l'harmonie naturelle, to which the imago of the "fragmented body" bears witness and which is only an external sign of organic destitution.

In the face of this uncanny truth, human beings become the illusion of unity, the mask of the ego. The numerous phantasies of the fragmented body which accumulate around this image now appear to have their ground in the series of losses which befall the animal insofar as it is gendered. We can evaluate the imaginary behavior which plays itself out here between the subject and its body or the extended substitute for itself, the mother, as an attempt to patch up its damaged unity. To be sure, exactly those points where it finds itself afflicted, are marked in the mirror image, thereby allowing an "object" to emerge that in its essence evades mirroring. Insofar as what is
being spoken of here is an other which denies all imaginary integration, the phallus now functions as a further "thing" in the series of these *objets a*, as Lacan expresses it. The narcissistic relationship between the mother and the child or, respectively, between the child and its own body is, from a psychoanalytic perspective, interrupted, since the child believes the mother to be castrated, thus piercing through its mirror image. This negates the penis and removes it from its place in the mirror image. That place can then be occupied by the symbol, φ.

Furthermore, with this step into the problematic of castration—to quote Cassirer—"a new day of the world" dawns. While the moments of loss which lead to castration allow verification on a purely biological level, with castration itself such a treatment is no longer possible. What one meets here is a paradoxical event, a process producing the negativity which marks the real organ even before it attains function as real organ. We initiate the entrance into a completely different reality, a reality of the symbolic. On a merely "actual" level this thesis of the primacy of the phallus would be unthinkable. The object, penis, becomes a symbol of itself as something lacking, indeed, it becomes, in an act of retroactive symbolization (and here our previous comments about the deferred discovery of meaning are further advanced), the signifier, Φ, the object which is lost prior to castration. Thus we recognize in the signifier of the phallus the sign for a lack. It is a lack which provokes desire through the ever-new incarnations of that *objet a*—an object that defeats all speculation. This desire wants nothing other than to find again what has been lost. If we say that it is withdrawal that rules in language, which puts language in gear, and when we further specify this place of absence with a signifier, – 1 or Φ(Ø), then we find this "logical" empty space *embodied* in the phallus. We may thus conceive the castration complex as the completed coalescence of real embodiment and the symbolic order. "The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire" (ES, p. 287).

Desire found its fulfillment in the rediscovery of a primordially lost unity or in the objects which incarnated that unity. Here the discordant nature of language and of the phallus, its most vital element, comes to light. The phallus is at once the signifier of a fundamental lack and, insofar as it inspires the highest passion in the desiring subject, also signifier of the horizon of the genus itself. Let's summarize these last points: "The passage from the (–φ) (small phi) of the phallic image from one side to the other of the equation, from the imaginary to the symbolic, renders it positive in any case, even if it fulfills a lack. Although a support of the (–1), it becomes Φ (capital phi), the symbolic phallus that cannot be negated, the signifier of jouissance" (ES, p. 320).

The phallus indicates plenitude in the place of an emptiness, and thus indicates enjoyment as the possibility of an essential impossibility. The phallus—and, with it, language, the law of human being—presents itself as
the play of an advancing concealment in unconcealment: "But we must insist that jouissance is forbidden to him who speaks as such, although it can only be said between the lines for whoever is subject of the Law, since the Law is grounded in this very prohibition" (ES, p. 319).

Given, then, that the symbolic projects this horizon of enjoyment but at the same time forbids access to it, we could say that it represents a lack in every presence, that it repeats a loss in every fulfillment. Man, insofar as he speaks, is delivered over to this negating repetition-compulsion.

As is well known, the conception of the repetition-compulsion, as it first appears in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, marks a decisive turning point in Freud's drive theory. The dream-life of the neurotic accident victim, which leads him back to a terrifying situation over and over again, the facts of the transference relationship where, without any possibility of pleasure, the patient relives experiences of frustration, and finally the general phenomena which give the impression of a seductive fate when, despite variations in the events of intersubjective relationships, the outcome always turns out to be the same shipwreck—all of these suggest the conclusion that a "demonic force" is at work in human existence, a force which leads to a compulsive "return of the same," without regard to the pleasure principle. Freud understood this repetition-compulsion, above all through biological reflections, as a drive resident in everything organic. He viewed it as a drive always pressing for the restoration of an earlier inorganic state. Beyond repetition as a function of the circle which brings forth life, beyond the cycles of need and of satisfaction—the pleasure associated with need—emerges a repetition which implies the disappearance of this life itself, emerges the death drive aiming at the removal of all tension in an absolute satisfaction. The enjoyment after which all life strives is death. Anxiety, which the life of the neurotic (as well of the "normal" person) so accentuates, and which dictates a repulsion at the possibility of fulfillment, thus becomes comprehensible. What produces anxiety is not lack but the possibility of its failure. The desire of our hysteric, the desire for the sake of desire itself, here has its motive. At the same time, the universality of the commandment against incest now appears in its proper light, thus exposing ethnological explanations as insufficient. Such explanations, insofar as they are based in the function of incest in communication, reveal only secondary motivations. In the myths and phantasies of men, a deep knowledge of the bond between incest and enjoyment seems to lie buried. The commandment against incest thus provides a limit to an horizon of death. In the structuralism of a Lévi-Strauss such a dimension falls under the table. Thus it is no wonder that, in the anthropologist's work, the most real form of incest—that between mother and son—remains entirely unilluminated. The phantasy of a return to the maternal womb proves itself to be a euphemism.

Someone who lives with his mother is punished by castration. Thus, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the real law is not the commandment against
incest but rather, as a symbolic law, the law of castration. In the castration complex and in the dialectic of presence and absence belonging to it, we have come to recognize the place that allows the embodiment of language and the linguistification of the body. Thus we are justified in speaking of the law of humanity at one time as castration and at another time as language.

In the signifier of the phallus, absolute enjoyment meets both an intimation and a limitation. Incapable of confrontation with pure emptiness, this signifying act is “darkened” and occurs as *aphanisis*:

> It can play its role only when veiled, that is to say, as itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, when it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of signifier. The phallus is the signifier of this *Aufhebung* itself, which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance. That is why the demon of *Aidos* (*Scham*, shame) arises at the very moment when, in the ancient mysteries, the phallus is unveiled (cf the famous painting in the Villa di Pompei). (ES, p. 288)

If the phallus momentarily rips open the horizon of enjoyment in the organism, then it shuts it immediately due to its unavoidable detumescence. Freud could equate life with a tension, could see it as a mere “detour,” which maintains a vital difference in every pleasure of release and which, thus, in the pleasure principle, erects a quasi-natural boundary against the transcendence of absolute enjoyment. Just so, we can see a principle of a “little difference” at work in language, as the specific characteristic of being human. Absolute emptiness (or, as in human phantasy, absolute fulfillment) is broken in language in the endless repetition of intervals.

If I try, as we already essayed at an earlier point, to mark a ground that’s now an abyss, what results is solely intervals between the individual marks. The decisive marking, the marking which would exhaust the ground as such, will always be lacking. Every new positing of signifiers thus presents this withdrawal in the presences of all beings and thereby repeats a negation of *jouissance* as “impossible.” What Freud grounded primarily through biology can be met with in Lacan on the level of language: “Our research has led us to the point where we recognize that the “repetition compulsion” (*Wiederholungszwang*) derives its principle from what we have called the *insistence* of the chain of signifiers” (E, p. 287).

It is here that the *Fort/Da* game wins its full paradigmatic content. In our discussion of the Oedipus Complex, we met with the patterns of subjective linguistic symbolization. Now, Freud treats these—in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—as further evidence for the existence of a repetition-compulsion, as evidence for the death drive. What Freud, without knowledge of the real state of affairs, describes as a linguistic presentation of the negativity of the death drive Lacan can explicitly embrace for what it is. Death becomes the human horizon, insofar as it is already appropriated to language. Language
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creates meanings, names beings. Thus it becomes the mask of death. While death as absence produces a linguistic sign, it also represses itself in the event of primal repression. The fixing of death in language thus produces the unconscious. Nevertheless, this concealment is also an unconcealment. Language always leaves something open and, in this manner, presents a "nothing" on the basis of which alone a being can first announce itself as a being. Because language, in its self-perpetuating character as withdrawal, has delivered humanity over to death, human beings have a world. Because the "nothing" belongs so essentially to language, language always springs open the illusionary unity of the ego and the objects in which it attempts to solidify itself in mirroring.

But this is also, to give it another name, the paternal principle. The primal father reveals himself as "gap," as representative of the death drive, as "dead father." He becomes the mythical explication of a fundamental "Law of absence," and a "key-signifier, S(Ø)," which, through the fact that it means nothing as such, allows language to mean at all. In the light of psychoanalytic experience, we see this dead father represented in the phallic symbol, we see the signifier S(Ø) incarnated in the phallus. It is only a consequence of this idea when death is concretized psychoanalytically in the concept of jouissance ("enjoyment").

The phallic signifier and the concept of an absolute pleasure both gain their real structural relevance late in Lacan's work. That doesn't mean, of course, that the problematic of death hadn’t concerned Lacan earlier. We will briefly examine this early understanding in order to bring the inception of Lacan's idea of language into clearer view. We know, meanwhile, that our author had already seen through the problematic of the imaginary before he attained his original theory of language or before he hit upon the embodiment of his theory in the dialectic of phallus and enjoyment. Thus it is hardly astonishing that Lacan first of all projects the experience of death into the play of the images of whole and fragmented bodies. The manifold phantasies which circle around the imago of the "fragmented body" allow one, according to Lacan, to close in on a primordial experience of death and of one's own existence as finite. The answer to this imago is the obscuring, self-deceiving passion imaginaire of the ego. Let's listen to Lacan himself:

But if these (imaginary) experiences—which may also be observed in animals at certain moments of their instinctual cycles and especially in courtship behavior—with all of their seductions and their aberrations, effectively open the durable structure of the human subject, then they also derive from the impotence resulting from the prematurity of human birth. In the fact of this prematurity, that natural science recognizes as characteristic of human anatomy, one apprehends that dehiscence in natural harmony in which man, distinguishing himself in his essence, discovers his existence. There is, in effect,
no other reality than that which touches upon death, from which it receives its birthmark behind the back of the new prestige which the imaginary function produces in man. (E, p. 345)

The realm of animals also knows the imaginary. Harrison was able to show in 1939 how the ovulation of the female dove has as its condition the visual perception of the specific form of one of its own species. What is interesting here is that just seeing a mirror-image of itself has the same effect. In exactly the same way, the progress from solitary to herding stage in the migratory locust occurs only through the visual confrontation of the questionable individual with a picture similar to it—although this picture must be enlivened by movements which are unique to the species. Here the subject never distinguishes itself from the spellbinding picture. The individual appears only as the momentary representative of such an image, “as the passage of this representational image into life” (E, p. 346).

For the human being alone, does this game of images uncover the mortal meaning of its existence, does it unveil “that he exists” (E, p. 346)? Let’s listen to Lacan’s words again and take note of the overtones of a bond between death and language at which they already hint:

The first symbol in which we recognize humanity in its vestigial traces is the sepulcher, and the intermediary of death can be recognized in every relation in which man comes to the life of his history.

This is the only life that endures and is true, since it is transmitted without being lost in the perpetuated tradition of subject to subject. How is it possible not to see how loftily this life transcends that inherited by the animal, in which the individual disappears into the species, since no memorial distinguishes his ephemeral apparition from that which will reproduce it again in the invariability of the type. In fact, apart from those hypothetical mutations of the phylum that must be integrated by a subjectivity that man is still only approaching from the outside—nothing, except the experiments to which man associates it, distinguishes a rat from the rat, a horse from the horse, nothing except this inconsistent passage from life to death—whereas Empedocles, by throwing himself into Mount Etna, leaves forever present in the memory of men this symbolic act of his being-for-death. (ES, p. 104)

Since “On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” (ES, pp. 179–225), Lacan consistently places this experience of finitude in the most essential realm of psychoanalytic research—in the castration complex and its bridge to language, to the “key signifier” of the phallus. We may now, indeed, observe castration as that “complex” where those fragmenting primal fantasies we have discussed before find their center. The
phallus signifies, as we have already demonstrated, this puncturing of the body itself, insofar as the signifier represents those "lost objects" which withdraw from bodily mirroring. At the same time, the suppression of the "nothing"—even the phallic signifier "is" in a context—accompanies this disappearance, since a metaphorical/metonymic conténation signifiante extends from it, a chain which always relates back to beings. And, such being the case, the body itself becomes the place of language.

As is well known, Freud represented the body as an ensemble of erogenous zones. Thus he writes, for example, in the "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," that "after further reflection . . . I have been led to ascribe the quality of erotogenicity to all parts of the body and to all the internal organs" (GW, V, p. 85, SE VII, p. 184n). His metaphors from energetics define the erogenous zones as places of building excitement and the subsequent release of tension, which is experienced as pleasure. Doubtless the concept of the phallus here has its origin. Its universality can be discerned in Freud's "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Child," when little Hans measures the persons and things in his environment by whether or not they possess a "wee-wee maker."

Let us recall once again Lacan's determination of the phallus as the linguistic symbol for an impossible enjoyment, and recall at the same time the nature of the erogenous zone—a place of bodily pleasure seeking absolute satisfaction but never finding it. Absolute satisfaction is never found because the location of pleasure only exists as partial. In all experience of pleasure, as the pleasure of the erogenous zones underscores, a new difference, which must only be again removed, always pops up, a renewed desire, which refers to other erogenous zones, erects itself. More precisely, once desire is seen as the difference between greater and lesser tension, and the erogenous zone is determined as the seat of the experience of pleasure, then difference as such defines the erogenous zone; such a zone only exists insofar as the empty location of an interval, a place of irredeemable loss, emerges within it. We also know this place of fundamental absence to be signified by the phallus. If the phallus may be taken—as we have shown it to be above, in our discussion of the problematic of castration—as a signifier, then we can see that the erogenous zone becomes what it is through the inscription of the phallus.

And if language can be conceived as an ensemble of differences, if the phallus becomes the constitutive moment in that it signifies these intervals as such, and in that it, on the other hand, distinguishes the essence of every erogenous zone of which the body appears as a composite, then we might speak of the body as an ensemble of signifiers or, as Lacan's student, Leclaire, expresses it, a "collection of letters." It's no wonder, then, that Lacan speaks of the body as the Grand Autre.

When, now, language is projected precisely at the position of the thing, o, that it can't grasp, at that position which demands an excess of pleasure up to the ultimate pleasure, when language thus seeks to cancel itself insofar as
continuous lack is its essence, then this enjoyment appears as the rediscovery of the body as a unified totality. Put differently, as long as the human being finds itself appropriated to language, his body exists only as fragmented, broken into the partiality of the erogenous zones. Humanity knows death as a goal which always leaves it waiting. Since we have previously characterized language as structure of differences, we may now note, in summarizing, that the word, *differe* means, besides “distinguishing,” “deferring” and “delaying.” Thus, we meet language as that mode of detouring specific to human beings.

If at first Lacan could only interpret the experience of death in the play of the images of whole and splintered body, now, thanks to the implication of body and life that we have just seen, he can understand this experience to be produced through language. We have had to recognize the finitude of the animal insofar, as gendered, it is exposed to an ongoing process of loss which the libido vainly seeks to make up as a release. The introduction of such a gender-specific embodiment into language bears witness to a specific knowledge of this mortality:

The speaking subject has the privilege of revealing the deathly meaning of that organ (of the libido) and, with it, its correspondence with sexuality. For the signifier as such, in barring the subject from its original intention, has introduced into it the sense of death (“The letter killeth,” but we learn that from the letter itself). That’s why every drive is effectively a death-drive. (E, p. 848)

In a previous section, the place of the subject emerged as a continuous, self-repeating empty position in language. The primordial identification with the father described by Freud, which appeared as originary marker of this place, deepened this interpretation. Now, we understand the phallus to signify this same empty location—the phallus as the signifier of bodily annihilation. Thereby we understand the subject, insofar as it strikes up against itself as *objet a*,\(^\text{20}\) to be marked with the stigma of a radical finitude: “‘I’ am in the place from which a voice is heard clamoring ‘the universe is a defect in the purity of Non-Being’” (ES, p. 317).

Since, moreover, the place of the signifier thus thematized lacks what could exhaust its meaning, and that means, since it is symbolized through a signifier that presents fulfillment as impossibility, it is also the place of instinctual defense. And this means that human knowledge of death is also an ignorance. It is like the knowledge of that ancient messenger, who without knowing either the meaning or the text bore a codicil condemning him to death. The form which Aeschylus gave to his version of the Prometheus story bears witness to this truth; for here the real sacrilege is seen to lie less in the mythology about fire than in Prometheus’ gift of unknowing at the hour of death. Our characterization of human existence as finite culminates in the
insight that in the knowledge of finitude itself an essential ignorance still rules.

How does the postulate of an absolute knowledge appear from this perspective? On numerous occasions in this investigation we have had to acknowledge the debt Lacan's foundation of psychoanalysis owes to Hegel. We need only recall the dialectic of recognition in the Phenomenology and the concept of desire implied in it to become aware of this indebtedness. The merely natural was negated in the specificity of a desire for desire. This negation created the precondition for the launching of desire as self-consciousness and as a moment of culture. From such a perspective we also find desire as the desire for knowledge. The French expression, désir de reconnaissance, clarifies what we have in mind. In the section of our discussion entitled "Language and Desire," the object-related desire for recognition was in the end extinguished by a characterization whose genitive demanded a subjective accent. Desire determined itself as "desire of the Other" (désir de l'Autre). But if we can, following Lacan, identify the Other with language itself, then the desire which results from the transformation of the natural need into the spoken request also becomes a question, becomes the désir de savoir, "desire to know": "Desire becomes bound up with the desire of the Other, but . . . in this loop lies the desire to know" (ES, p. 301).

In the same way as for Hegel, desire is enfolded in another, more complex field than the stimulus-response mechanism of need and satisfaction. The mysterious and the problematic, which desire has always signified for human existence, are grounded here. In this context, there seem to have been two points in the Phenomenology of Spirit which were particularly vital; first of all, there is the renunciation of all philosophy of interiority, a renunciation accomplished by the "labor of the Concept." Hegel's rational insight finds a parallel in the preference which Freud claims for the dialogue, over and against the commonly used suggestive method of therapy as well as in Lacan's disagreements with those who champion a merely lived experience. Secondly, the history of the ego, as it was represented in the earlier discussions of the present inquiry, is not dissimilar to consciousness' "path of despair" in the Phenomenology. In the process of knowing it, the object again and again proves itself to be different from that upon which consciousness was fixated. As a result of consciousness' negative experience of the object—as a result, that is, of the dissimilarity between the ego and its representation, on the one hand, and its object, on the other—it is driven again and again out of itself and beyond its images of itself, driven from one level to another. This other level corresponds to another experience of the object.

If the whole Phenomenology is thus built upon "knowledge of the self in another," then psychoanalysis sketches an analogous course in relation to the ego. In all its meetings and object relations, the ego seeks to mirror itself, to find an adequate object in order to attain self-certainty. And it finds itself
repeatedly forced to experience this, its knowledge, as mistaken. It is forced
to admit over and over how a new truth emerges, even while it still thinks
itself secure in the old one. Thus the following phrase from the Phenomenology
can also articulate a psychoanalytic experience: “the origination of the
new object, that presents itself to consciousness without its understanding
how this happens, which proceeds for us, as it were, behind the back of
consciousness” (PS, p. 56). The event of a psychoanalysis, insofar as it has
the destruction of these “imagined” certainties as its goal, could be indicated
with the Hegelian expression of a “self-completing skepticism.” This parallel
also steps to the fore as soon as we bring together Hegel’s analysis of the
“speculative sentence” and the concept of the subject—as we last articulated
it—determined by the structure of language. We are in agreement with Hegel
in the critique of a tradition which takes as fundamental “the subject (as that
which is) fixed as the object itself” (PS, p. 37, translation altered), in order
then to affix predicates to it. In psychoanalysis, too, we saw the crumbling of
a subject resting upon such principles, and we saw thinking lose the solid
ground which it had in the subject.

On the other hand, we know that for Hegel, on account of the dialectical
movement of the sentence itself, the indeterminacy emerging here leads to a
higher synthesis. We know that the negative, which we met as the subject—
the dissimilarity which appears between consciousness and its object—is
itself immanent to the unfolding of a universal self-consciousness and thus
finds itself raised, at the end of its path, to the science of experience which
the Phenomenology represents, finds itself raised into the concept of spirit
which knows itself to be absolute in a concrete, total explication of every­
thing implicit. We know, furthermore, that such a result could only arise
insofar as the beginning of the path was already determined as a recollection
from the completion of the dialectical movement itself: “It [the true] is the
process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal,
having its end also as its beginning” (PS, p. 10).

What came into sight in the discussion of the circularity of Lévi-Strauss’
ideas now emerges in its full articulation—the limit of any further parallel
between Hegel and Lacan’s psychoanalysis. In Hegel or Lévi-Strauss, lan­
guage is a universal concept of a totally self-objectifying thinking; in Lacan,
language remains something to which, at the deepest level, a primal repres­
sion remains inherent—a primal repression demanding that an eloquent
unspoken is spoken with every utterance no matter how much that utterance
postulates the equation of meaning and meant. Here, a subject that knows
absolutely, thanks to a complete transparency; there, the persistence of an
empty space which condemns every effort at objectifying subjectivization to
the status of imaginary illusion; here, absolute answer; there, a question pre­
liminary to any dialectic of affirmation and negation, a question to which we
don’t know the answer but which demands that we remain in “error.” Here, a
science of “re-membering”; there, a history of loss. Here, a development by
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*Geist* into the rational, *logical*, transformation of all history; there a radically limiting repetition-compulsion to the entropy of the “nothing.”

“Lack” or “forgetting” don’t appear in Lacan’s perspective as deficient modalities which can be left aside for once and for all at the end of an analysis. When Freud spoke after 14 years with “little Hans,” who had since his analysis grown into an “impressive youth of 19,” and asked him for his recollection of his completed and successful analysis, the young man had forgotten everything. Within lack and forgetting we meet only renewed lack, renewed forgetting. When we asserted that what was important in analysis was not really a becoming conscious but rather a verbalization within an actual conversation, and when we spoke at all of a “full speech,” we didn’t do so because psychoanalysis could somehow hope radically to expel every unconscious content from human historicity. Analysis has rather to do with allowing those fixed signifiers which are “repressed” as a result of fixed imaginary narcissism once again to take part in actual conversation—in a conversation which, by the way, must put into question every will to such fixation. If in this fashion an answer must be foreseen, if what is important is to maintain the question as such, then discourse can never succeed to absolute faultlessness. Quite the contrary, removal of the previously foregrounded faults—the avoidance of which Freud indicates as secondary repression—can aim at only one goal, namely, to bring the analysand before the fault as such, before lack as such in its unrequested repetition. In regard to this radical boundary of human historicity Lacan has the following to say:

Indeed, this limit is at every instant present in what this history possesses as achieved. This limit represents the past in its real form, that is to say, not the physical past whose existence is abolished, not the historic past in which man finds the guarantor of his future, but the past which reveals itself reversed in repetition. (ES, p. 103)

The chasm which opens between Hegel and Lacan culminates in a different understanding of death. In characterizing his understanding, Hegel describes death as the monstrous power of the negative. He writes:

Death . . . is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast to what is dead requires the greatest strength . . . But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative . . . on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. (PS, p. 19)
Just as the faculty of the understanding is raised to the higher rationality of the Spirit after it has fulfilled its dialectical task, death assumes the positivity of being itself. At the beginning of Hegel's Logic, being and nothing appear to be the same insofar as both are characterized by a privation of determinacy. Does that mean that being comes to presence as the nothing itself, as we have heard from Heidegger? For Hegel such is not the case. For him every privation points to a fulfillment. With Hegel the nothing is thematized from the start in its relationship to determinacy and therefore sees itself raised, at the last, into the omnipresence of total transparency to reason.

This levelling of death to a pure dialectical moment becomes completely transparent if we recall its function in the event of recognition between master and slave. The conflict resulting from the coexistence of two self-consciousnesses, when each is recognized but does not itself wish to recognize, seems to find a solution only in the death of the other. But the dead victim of conquest is no longer capable of recognizing the conqueror, and the self-certainty which is supposed to result from the struggle has no truth. Thus, in order that he be able—as slave—to fulfill his task, the conquered one cannot simply perish. In other words, the pact sealed by the cunning of reason is dependent upon power to eternalize itself.

Thus it was possible for Lacan to speak of death as "death . . . only in jest" (ES, p. 309). There is nothing, not even death, that escapes the complete immanence of the thinkable. Moreover, "it still remains to be decided which death, that which is brought by life or that which brings life" (ES, p. 308). Wasn't the initial experience which created the human being that of fragmentation; the initial experience which comes to us through language that of a reference to a fundamental lack, on the ground of which alone anything first emerges as thinkable at all and which can enfold the entire errancy of imaginary Dasein? Mustn't we understand, in the concept of Geist, insofar as it demands the overcoming of all withdrawal, the antithesis of this errancy itself? Isn't it vain to wish to deduce human Dasein from this complete by-itself of the logos, when that Dasein "ex-ists" (E, p. 11) in an essential absence prior to all reflection? Don't we—and here we recall the use of this word in Lévi-Strauss and Cassirer—meet in the concept of Geist an already imaginary answer to that "dialectic" of "presence" and "absence" which language plays out in its uncontainable transcendence?

Earlier, in the section entitled "The False and the True Conversation," we indicated that the ground of proof for a "discourse of conviction" can only appear within the horizon of a preliminary agreement, that every discourse, whether explicitly or not, puts into effect a pact preliminary to any battle of words, a pact which has always already determined the importance of any intervention. These assertions now demand correction or, at least, extension. Just as a desire grounded in the relationship of the human being to language itself emerged from behind the desire for recognition, so also now a relation of the human being to language is instantiated, allied with a radical finitude
prior to all communication, no matter how originary that may be. What our first and last court of reference, language, can thematize beyond any created meaning is a "thing" that is there where the word isn’t. It is a thing which withdraws from the very clutches of those who intend to possess it. To the shallow observer, language only represents objects which *either are or are not* in their place. On the contrary, in relationship to the “being of non-being” that we now discuss, language “means” an “object” that is simultaneously in its place and not there. Correspondingly, in the seminar on Poe’s “Purloined Letter,” the situation is illustrated as follows:

For the signifier is a unity in its very uniqueness, being by nature symbol only of an absence. Which is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be *and* not be where it is, wherever it goes.23

What here, in 1956, still produces only a literary manifestation, finds its vital expression a few years later in the idea of the phallus as signifier of the “thing.” Because a purely logical argumentation is always hard-pressed to avoid the spell of an Hegelian universal synthesis (because the opposite of the purely natural individual seems to be the immortality of the species), the boundaries of the unrepresentability and finitude of human Dasein are written on its body, in the intertwining of language and corporeality. Thus Lacan writes, distinguishing himself from Hegel: “Our notion of *Aufhebung* transforms Hegel’s, for it strips from it its delusions by bringing forth, in precisely the place and position of the stride toward an ideal progress, the avatars of a lack” (E, p. 837).

Didn’t we already experience the way that human existence, insofar as it is cast into a horizon of absolute enjoyment, follows the cunning not of reason but rather of a “demonic” death drive? Perhaps we must glimpse the real contribution of psychoanalysis to a philosophy of finitude in the fact that it is able to point out that desire, which is also the desire for knowledge, only exists insofar as it drives toward fulfillment, but also that it flees from nothing so much as the possibility of this enjoyment. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the concept of an absolute knowledge appears as a further euphemism for death. When asked, at the end of a life devoted to unmasking, about the completion of an analysis, Freud replied that he saw all possible fulfillment shipwrecked on the rocks of the Oedipus Complex. What he struck on there was lack as such. The only answer that the signifier of the phallus, that language, can give here runs, “eat your *Dasein*” (E, p. 40). Applied to the myth of the primordial father, this means, “Moses’s tomb is as empty for Freud as that of Christ was for Hegel” (ES, p. 316). And, as a consequence, all that remains is to state that, “Any statement of authority has no other guarantee than its very enunciation . . . Which is
what I mean when I say that no metalanguage can be spoken . . .” (ES, p. 311).

There is no language beyond that to which we are appropriated—no Other of the Other. Behind the Other as the place of the “symbolic order” we can only meet emptiness, nothingness, or death. And it is the reference to death in language itself that condemns human existence to the finite. It is this, too, that creates an openness both productive of the world and at the same time hindering of every effort to close a circle, whether through dialectical or mathematical means. At the end of the our discussion of Lévi-Straussian structuralism we raised the question of what contribution modern logic might be able to make to understanding the work of a Lacan. Let’s listen now to Lacan’s own answer:

I am so anxious to guide my students over the places where logic is disconcerted by the disjunction that breaks through from the imaginary to the symbolic, not in order to enjoy the paradoxes that are produced in such a disjunction, nor to point out some “crisis” in thought, but, on the contrary, to bring their false brilliance back to the gap that they designate, and above all to try to work out the method of a sort of calculation, the inappropriation of which as such would spoil the secret. (ES, p. 318)

The detours into mathematical logic that Lacan has made over and over have had the sole purpose, as he here states in retrospect, of bringing into this realm as well—through the medium of paradox—that abyss of radical questionability which is our present theme.

We could now add something to the conclusion we reached in the section entitled, “Rhetoric of the Unconscious,” that the unconscious is the “dis­course of the Other”—and to our exemplification of this principle by means of the conversation Freud had while on a journey to Herzegovina; the theme of the conversation was sexuality and death. Signorelli, whose name Freud labored in vain to recall, created a famous fresco of the Apocalypse. It was the appearance of the absolute master, it was death, which led the conversa­tion onto the rocks. The unconscious, language, is indeed the discourse of the Other, the logos of finitude.

Notes

1 Signifiè would correspondingly be translated by Signatum (Latin), “signified”. To translate signifiant with Signifikant (German), “signifier,” seems to me to miss the point that Lacan wants to make here. The end of a Signifikant is determined from the outset to be Signifikation—for which the common use of the German adjective signifikant (significant, meaningful) is responsible. One also thinks of the use that this concept has found in statistics (to indicate a “significant” sample [translator]). If, so long as one translates signifiant by Signifikant, one moves within the horizon
of meaning, meaningfulness, and evidence, it is not only the word’s connotation of something opposed to the entire plane of meaningfulness and ideality that is lost; what weighs even more heavily is the smoothing over of the barrier between signifiant and signifié—for example, in “signification”—upon which everything essential in a psychoanalytic conception of language depends. When all of these aspects of the question were described and I had the opportunity to discuss them with Lacan, he agreed with me, with the result that in his 1958 lecture to the Munich Max-Planck Institute, “The Meaning of the Phallus,” he translated signifiant with Signans and signifié with Signatum.

2 It can be found in ES, p. 151.

3 Freud recognizes two fundamental paths for psychical events—primary and secondary processes. From the viewpoint of Freud’s topological model, primary process characterizes the unconscious while secondary process characterizes the pre-conscious/conscious system. The model of economic-dynamic censorship differentiates further: in primary process, psychical energy flows unbound; through the mechanisms of displacement and condensation it flows from representation to representation. Thereby it tends to “occupy” those representations which stand for primal experiences of satisfaction and are thus constitutive for desire. In secondary process, on the other hand, energy is bound, the representation is “occupied” in a different and less variable way, and satisfaction is held back in relation to the “reality principle.”

4 But it doesn’t belong exclusively to it. We will have to return to this point.

5 Lang here uses the German Gerede, which is the technical term in Heidegger’s Being and Time for an “idle chatter” standing in the way of an authentic relationship to language (Translator).

6 Merleau-Ponty, Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966), p. 7 (note by the translator, R. Boehm).


8 See, p. 70 of the present inquiry.

9 The symbol I(Ø) and its bond with § is explained thus on the following pages: what is important here is not a detailed commentary on Lacan’s graphs. We take from them only those points which help us to illuminate our area of investigation.

10 If one applies this process of understanding to the analytic situation, which is itself now a further “Case of Deferred Action” (GW XII, p. 72, SE XVII, p. 45n), then it reflects in nuce the event of the psychoanalytic cure.

11 Thus, for example, Urs Jaeggi, in trying to uncritically appropriate the opinions of Lefebvre and Sebag, writes: “A world of rules’ (Lévi-Strauss), ‘an order of symbols’ (Lacan) is defined as constitutive. Every problem of historical genesis is thus emptied of a great part of its substance and interest in favor of a law which can alone be taken as an absolute a priori” (Ordnung und Chaos, Strukturalismus als Methode und Mode [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968], p. 45 [hereafter, OUC]).

It is only necessary to recall our discussion “Language and Historicity” to have the questionability of such a levelling to an undocumented commonality clearly before our eyes.
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12 "All sentences of our daily language are in fact, as they are, logically completely ordered. That simplest element that we are speaking of here is no likeness of truth but the complete truth itself. (Our problems are not abstract by perhaps the most concrete that exist.)"

13 "Cum Deus calculat fit mundus" Leibniz notes in a handwritten marginal note to his Dialogue about the Lingua rationalis, where he undertakes to expose the entirety of being to the calculability of relationships between word, sign, and thing.

14 With complete consciousness, Lévi-Strauss thus writes, "To search in language for a logical model which can help us—since it is both more perfect and less familiar—to comprehend the structures of other forms of communication is in no sense to treat language as the origin of those other forms." AS, p. 96.

15 Lacan seems to have detected the rift that opens here between psychoanalysis and anthropological structuralism. In 1953 he still thought that in the structuralist thought of Lévi-Strauss one could glimpse the objective ground for the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious: "Introducing the researches of a Lévi-Strauss to demonstrate the structural relationships between language and social law means nothing less than showing the objective foundations of the theory of the unconscious." La Psychanalyse, I, p. 130.

In this text’s reappearance in the Écrits of 1966, this passage is entirely transformed, levelled to a more or less rhetorical question: "Is it not apparent that a Lévi-Strauss already arrives in that region where Freud settled the unconscious in suggesting the implications of the structures of language and of that part of the social law which rules the parental alliance?" (E, p. 285).

16 For more on the concept of the phallus see also, p. 121 ff. of the present inquiry.

The possibility of thinking through one’s own castration is relevant in the same way to both genders. "The main characteristic of this ‘infantile genital organization’ is its difference from the final genital organization of the adult. This consists in the fact that, for both sexes, only one genital, namely the male one, comes into account. What is present, therefore, is not a primacy of the genitals, but a primacy of the phallus." Freud, "The Infantile Genital Organization" (GW XIII, p. 294, SE XIX, p. 142): "But it seems to me that the significance of the castration complex can only be rightly appreciated if its origin in the phase of phallic primacy is also taken into account" (GW p. 296, SE XIX, p. 144).

17 In relation to the maternal breast, for instance, Lacan says, "Il s’agit du sein spécifié dans la fonction du sevrage qui préfigure la castration" (E, p. 848).

It is possible here to counter a potential misunderstanding, insofar as our reflections could seem to imply that what was at stake here was a strictly chronological sequence of events. Obviously, in weaning, which prefigures castration as symbolic, anticipating the signifier, "phallus," the symbolic is already there. The temporal moment of castration alone indicates its own anticipation as a symbolic center for integration for what we could call the experience of corporeal loss. The Ick bin all hier of language is not contradicted.


19 Since the mother is obligated to another order than the merely natural, that is to a symbolic or linguistic order, her caress, the marks of her erogenous zones, inscribe something fundamentally different on the child’s body than merely the satisfaction of a vital need. Her caress, rather, inaugurates a dialogue between body and body, and thus opens a dimension of experience which no longer has anything to do with the automatism of the instincts. This caress instantiates a kind of fundamental perversity—as we meet it on every page of Freud’s oeuvre—which only becomes comprehensible through an ordinary eruption of such a symbolic order into our embodiment.
Psychoanalysis is unique in its ability to detect a relationship back to embodiment in every appeal to language and, just the opposite, to allow an experience of embodiment that already bears the stigma of symbolic structuration.

To me this seems to offer entirely new perspectives for the foundation of psychosomatic medicine—perspectives which no longer suffer the difficulty which was bound up with the old concept of conversion, insofar as from the points of view of both natural science and philosophy a transformation of spiritual into physical energy seems impossible.

20 The mode of relationship, *sujet barré S*—*objet a*, is represented as more complex than may here be discussed. Since this relationship has been clarified in works which have still not been made publicly available, we will not, on the grounds of verification, pursue its nature.

21 We think here, for example, of the dialectic of the independence and dependence of self-consciousness and the corresponding concretization which such a dialectic can experience through psychoanalysis.

22 "Certes la lettre rue, dit-on, quand l'esprit vivifie. Nous n'en disconvenons pas, ayant cru à saluer quelque part ici une noble victime de l'erreur de chercher l'esprit dans la lettre, mais nous demand on aussi comment sans la lettre l'esprit vivrait. Les prétentions de l'esprit pourtant demeureraient irréductibles, si la lettre n'avait fait la preuve qu'elle produit tous ses effets de vérité dans l'homme, sans que l'esprit ait le moins du monde à s'en mêler" (E, p. 509).

Sense is never only one of the two terms of the duality which contrasts things and propositions, substantives and verbs, denotations and expressions; it is also the frontier, the cutting edge, or the articulation of the difference between the two terms, since it has at its disposal an impenetrability which is its own and within which it is reflected. For these reasons, sense must be developed for its own sake in a new series of paradoxes, which are now internal.

The paradox of regress, or of indefinite proliferation

When I designate something, I always suppose that the sense is understood, that it is already there. As Bergson said, one does not proceed from sounds to images and from images to sense; rather, one is established “from the outset” within sense. Sense is like the sphere in which I am already established in order to enact possible denotations, and even to think their conditions. Sense is always presupposed as soon as I begin to speak; I would not be able to begin without this presupposition. In other words, I never state the sense of what I am saying. But on the other hand, I can always take the sense of what I say as the object of another proposition whose sense, in turn, I cannot state. I thus enter into the infinite regress of that which is presupposed. This regress testifies both to the great impotence of the speaker and to the highest power of language: my impotence to state the sense of what I say, to say at the same time something and its meaning; but also the infinite power of language to speak about words. In short, given a proposition which denotes a state of affairs, one may always take its sense as that which another proposition denotes. If we agree to think of a proposition as a name, it would
then appear that every name which denotes an object may itself become the 
object of a new name which denotes its sense: \( n_1 \) refers to \( n_2 \), which denotes 
the sense of \( n_1 \); \( n_2 \) refers to \( n_3 \); etc. For each one of its names, language must 
contain a name for the sense of this name. This infinite proliferation of 
verbal entities is known as Frege’s paradox. But it is also Carroll’s paradox. 
It appears in rigorous form on the other side of the looking-glass, in the 
meeting of Alice and the Knight. The Knight announces the title of the song 
he is going to sing:

“The name of the song is called ‘Haddock’s Eyes’”—“Oh, that’s the 
name of the song, is it?” Alice said, trying to feel interested.—“No, 
you don’t understand,” the Knight said, looking a little vexed. 
“That’s what the name of the song is called. The name really is ‘The 
Aged Aged Man.’”—“Then I ought to have said ‘That’s what the 
song is called’?” Alice corrected herself.—“No, you oughtn’t: that’s 
quite another thing! The song is called ‘Ways and Means’: but that’s 
only what it’s called, you know!”—“Well, what is the song then?” 
said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.—“I was 
coming to that,” the Knight said. “The song really is ‘A-sitting on a 
Gate’! . . .”

This passage distinguishes a series of nominal entities. It does not generate 
an infinite regress but, precisely in order to limit itself, proceeds according to 
a conventionally finite progression. We must therefore start at the end in 
order to restore the natural regress. 1) Carroll says: the song really is “A-
sitting on a Gate.” The song itself is a proposition, a name (\( n_1 \)). “A-sitting on 
a Gate” is this name, the name which is the song and which appears as far 
back as the first stanza. 2) But it is not the name of the song. Being itself a 
name, the song is designated by another name. The second name (\( n_2 \)) is 
“Ways and Means,” which forms the theme of the second, third, fourth, and 
fifth stanzas. “Ways and Means” is thus the name which designates the song, 
or what the song is called. 3) But the real name, Carroll adds, is “The Aged 
Aged Man,” who in fact appears in the entire song. The denoting name itself 
has a meaning which forms a new name (\( n_3 \)). 4) This third name in its turn, 
however, must be designated by a fourth. That is to say, the meaning of \( n_2 \), 
namely \( n_3 \), must be designated by \( n_4 \). The fourth name is what the name of the 
song is called, namely, “Haddock’s Eyes,” which appears in the sixth stanza.

There are indeed in Carroll’s classification four names: there is the name 
of what the song really is; the name denoting this reality, which thus denotes 
the song or represents what the song is called; the sense of this name, which 
forms a new name or a new reality; and the name which denotes this reality, 
which thus denotes the sense of the name of the song, or represents what the 
name of the song is called. At this point, several remarks are necessary. First, 
Carroll has voluntarily limited himself, since he does not take into account
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each particular stanza, and since his progressive presentation of the series permits him to give himself an arbitrary point of departure: “Haddock’s Eyes.” But it goes without saying that the series, taken in its regressive sense, may be extended to infinity in the alternation of a real name and a name which designates this reality. It will be noted, however, that Carroll’s series is much more complex than what we have just indicated. Hitherto, in fact, the question was only about a name which, in denoting something, sends us over to another name which denotes the previous name’s sense, and on to infinity. In Carroll’s classification, this precise situation is represented only by \( n_2 \) and \( n_4 \): \( n_4 \) is the name which denotes the sense of \( n_2 \). But Carroll added two other names: a first name, because it treats the originally denoted thing as being itself a name (the song); and a third name, because it treats the sense of the denoting name itself as a name, independently of the name which is going to denote it in turn. Carroll forms therefore the regress with four nominal entities which are displaced ad infinitum. That is to say, he decomposes each couplet and freezes it, in order to draw from it a supplementary couplet. We shall see why. But we can be satisfied with a regress of two alternating terms: the name which denotes something and the name which denotes the sense of this name. This two-term regress is the minimal condition of indefinite proliferation.

This simpler expression appears in a passage from Alice in which the Duchess is always discovering the moral or the morality which must be drawn from everything—at least from everything on the condition that it be a proposition. For when Alice does not speak, the Duchess is disarmed: “You’re thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk. I can’t tell you just what the moral of that is, but I shall remember in a bit.” But as soon as Alice does speak, the Duchess is busy finding morals:

“The game’s going on rather better now,” she (Alice) said, by way of keeping up the conversation a little.—“’Tis so,” said the Duchess: “and the moral of that is, ‘Oh, ’tis love, ’tis love that makes the world go round!’”—“Somebody said,” Alice whispered, “that it’s done by everybody minding their own business!”—“Ah well! It means much the same thing,” said the Duchess, . . . “and the moral of that is, ‘Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.’”

In this passage, it is not a question of association of ideas, from one sentence to another; rather, the moral of each proposition consists of another proposition which denotes the sense of the first. Making sense the object of the new proposition amounts to “taking care of the sense,” in such conditions that propositions proliferate and “the sounds take care of themselves.” Thus, the possibility of a profound link between the logic of sense and ethics, morals or morality, is confirmed.
EXTRACTS FROM THE LOGIC OF SENSE

The paradox of sterile division, or of dry reiteration

There is indeed a way of avoiding this infinite regress. It is to fix the proposition, to immobilize it, just long enough to extract from it its sense—the thin film at the limit of things and words. (Hence the doubling up which we just observed in Carroll’s work at each stage of the regress.) But is it the destiny of sense that this dimension be indispensable, or that we do not know what to do with it as soon as we attain it? What have we done, indeed, aside from disengaging a neutralized double of the proposition, a phantom, and a phantasm without thickness? Is it because the sense is expressed by a verb in the proposition that the verb is expressed in its infinitive, participial, or interrogative form: God-to be; or the being-blue of the sky, or is the sky blue? Sense brings about the suspension of both affirmation and negation. Is this the meaning of the propositions “God is,” “the sky is blue”? As an attribute of states of affairs, sense is extra-being. It is not of being; it is an aliquid which is appropriate to non-being. As that which is expressed by the proposition, sense does not exist, but inheres or subsists in the proposition. One of the most remarkable points of Stoic logic is the sterility of sense-event: only bodies act and suffer, not the incorporeal entities, which are the mere results of actions and passions. This paradox may be called the Stoics’ paradox. All the way down to Husserl, there resounds the declaration of a splendid sterility of the expressed, coming to confirm the status of the noema: “The stratum of expression—and this constitutes its peculiarity—apart from the fact that it lends expression to all other intentionalities, is not productive. Or if one prefers: its productivity, its noematic service, exhausts itself in expressing.”

Extracted from the proposition, sense is independent of it, since it suspends its affirmation and negation, and is nevertheless only its evanescent double: Carroll’s smile without the cat or flame without a candle. The two paradoxes, that of infinite regress and that of sterile division, form the two terms of an alternative: one or the other. If the first forces us to combine the greatest power with the greatest impotence, the second imposes upon us a similar task, which we must later on fulfill: the task is to combine the sterility of sense in relation to the proposition from which it was extracted with its power of genesis in relation to the dimensions of the proposition. In any case, it seems that Carroll had been acutely aware of the fact that the two paradoxes form an alternative. In Alice, the characters have only two possible means of drying themselves after falling into the pool of tears: either to listen to the Mouse’s story, the “dryest” story one could be acquainted with, since it isolates the sense of a proposition in a ghostly “it”; or to be launched into a Caucus Race, running around from one proposition to another, stopping when one wishes, without winners or losers, in the circuit of infinite proliferation. At any rate, dryness is what shall later on be named impenetrability. And the two paradoxes represent the essential forms of stuttering,
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the choreic or clonic form of a convulsive circular proliferation, and the
tetanic or tonic form of a fitful immobilization. As is said in "Poeta Fit, non
Nascitur," spasm or whiz—these are the two rules of the poem.

The paradox of neutrality, or of essence's third estate

The second paradox necessarily catapults us into a third. For if sense as the
double of the proposition is indifferent to affirmation and negation, if it is
no more passive than active, then no mode of the proposition is able to affect
it. Sense is strictly the same for propositions which are opposed from the
point of view of quality, quantity, relation, or modality. For all of these
points of view affect denotation and the diverse aspects of its actualization
or fulfillment in a state of affairs. But they do not affect either sense or
expression. Let us take first quality, affirmation and negation: "God is" and
"God is not" must have the same sense, by virtue of the autonomy of sense
in relation to the existence of the denotatum. This was, in fact, in the four­
teenth century, the fantastic paradox of Nicolas d'Autrecourt, the object of
reprobation: contradictoria ad invicem idem significant.

Let us take quantity: all men are white, no man is white, some men are not
white . . . ; or relation: sense must be the same in the case of inverse relations,
since the relation with regard to sense is always established in both directions
at once, insofar as it causes all the paradoxes of becoming-mad to appear yet
again. Sense is always a double sense and excludes the possibility that there
may be a "good sense" in the relation. Events are never causes of one
another, but rather enter the relations of quasi-causality, an unreal and
ghostly causality, endlessly reappearing in the two senses. It is neither at the
same time, nor in relation to the same thing, that I am younger and older, but
it is at the same time and by the same relation that I become so. Hence the
innumerable examples dotting Carroll's work, where one finds that "cats
eat bats" and "bats eat cats," "I say what I mean" and "I mean what I say,"
"I like what I get" and "I get what I like," and "I breathe when I sleep" and "I
sleep when I breathe," have one and the same sense. This includes the final
example of Sylvie and Bruno, in which the red jewel carrying the proposition
"All will love Sylvie" and the blue jewel carrying the proposition "Sylvie will
love all" are two sides of one and the same jewel, so that one can never be
preferred except to itself, following the law of becoming (to choose a thing
from itself).

Let us finally examine modality: how would the possibility, the reality, or
the necessity of the denoted object affect sense? The event, for its part, must
have one and the same modality, in both future and past, in line with which it
divides its presence ad infinitum. If the event is possible in the future and real
in the past, it is necessary that it be both at once, since it is divided in them at
the same time. Is this to say that it is necessary? One is here reminded of the
paradox of contingent futures and its importance in Stoic thought. The
hypothesis of necessity, however, rests on the application of the principle of contradiction to the proposition which announces a future. In this perspective, the Stoics went to astonishing lengths in order to escape necessity and to affirm the "fated" without affirming the necessary. We must rather leave this perspective, even if it means rediscovering the Stoic thesis from another point of view. For the principle of contradiction concerns the impossibility of the realization of denotation and, also, the minimal condition of signification. But perhaps it does not concern sense: neither possible, nor real, nor necessary, yet fated. . . . The event subsists in the proposition which expresses it and also happens to things at the surface and outside of being; this is, as we shall see, the "fated." It behooves therefore the event to be cited by the proposition as future, but it behooves the proposition no less to cite the event as past. One of Carroll's general techniques consists of presenting the event twice, precisely because everything occurs by way of, and within, language. It is presented once in the proposition in which it subsists, and again in the state of affairs where it crops up at the surface. It is presented once in the verse of a song which relates it to the proposition, and again in the surface effect which relates it to beings, to things, and states of affairs. (Thus the battle between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, or that between the lion and the unicorn. The same occurs in Sylvie and Bruno, where Carroll asks the reader to guess whether he composed the verses of the gardener's song in accordance with the events, or the events in accordance with the verses.) But is it necessary to relate the event twice, since both are always at the same time, since they are two simultaneous faces of one and the same surface, whose inside and outside, their "insistence" and "extra-being," past and future, are in an always reversible continuity?

How could we summarize these paradoxes of neutrality, all of which display sense as unaffected by the modes of the proposition? The philosopher Avicenna distinguished three states of essence: universal in relation to the intellect which thinks it in general; and singular in relation to the particular things in which it is embodies. But neither of these two states is essence itself. An animal is nothing other than an animal ("animal non est nisi animal tantrum") being indifferent to the universal and to the singular, to the particular and to the general. The first state of essence is essence as signified by the proposition, in the order of the concept and of conceptual implications. The second state of essence is essence as designated by the proposition in the particular things in which it is involved. But the third state of essence is essence as sense, essence as expressed—always in this dryness (animal tantrum) and this splendid sterility or neutrality. It is indifferent to the universal and to the singular, to the general and to the particular, to the personal and to the collective; it is also indifferent to affirmation and negation, etc. In short, it is indifferent to all opposites. This is so because all of these opposites are but modes of the proposition considered in its relations of denotation and signification, and not the traits of the sense which it expresses. Is it,
then, the status of the pure event, or of the fatum which accompanies it, to surmount all the oppositions in this way? Neither private nor public, neither collective nor individual . . . , it is more terrible and powerful in this neutrality, to the extent that it is all of these things at once?

The paradox of the absurd, or of the impossible objects

From this paradox is derived yet another: the propositions which designate contradictory objects themselves have a sense. Their denotation, however, cannot at all be fulfilled; nor do they have a signification, which would define the type of possibility for such a fulfillment. They are without signification, that is, they are absurd. Nevertheless, they have a sense, and the two notions of absurdity and nonsense must not be confused. Impossible objects—square circles, matter without extension, perpetuum mobile, mountain without valley, etc.—are objects “without a home,” outside of being, but they have a precise and distinct position within this outside: they are of “extra being”—pure, ideational events, unable to be realized in a state of affairs. We are obliged to call this paradox “Meinong’s paradox,” for Meinong knew how to draw from it the most beautiful and brilliant effects. If we distinguish two sorts of beings, the being of the real as the matter of denotations and the being of the possible as the form of significations, we must yet add this extra-being which defines a minimum common to the real, the possible and the impossible. For the principle of contradiction is applied to the possible and to the real, but not to the impossible: impossible entities are “extra-existents,” reduced to this minimum, and insisting as such in the proposition.

Sixth series on serialization

The paradox of indefinite regress is the one from which all the other paradoxes are derived. Now, regress has, necessarily, a serial form: each denoting name has a sense which must be denoted by another name: \( n_1 \rightarrow n_2 \rightarrow n_3 \rightarrow n_4 \). . . If we consider only the succession of names, the series brings about a synthesis of the homogeneous, whereby each name is distinguished from the one preceding it only by its rank, degree, or type. In fact, in compliance with the theory of “types,” each name denoting the sense of the one preceding it is superior in degree to that name and to that which it denotes. But if, instead of considering the simple succession of names, we consider that which alternates in this succession, we see that each name is taken first in the denotation which it brings about, and then in the sense which it expresses, because it is this sense which serves as the denotation of the other name. The advantage of Carroll’s procedure lies precisely in making apparent this difference in nature. This time we are confronted with a synthesis of the heterogeneous; the serial form is necessarily realized in the simultaneity of at least two series. Every unique series, whose homogeneous terms are distinguished only
according to type or degree, necessarily subsumes under it two heterogeneous series, each one of which is constituted by terms of the same type or degree, although these terms differ in nature from those of the other series (they can of course differ also in degree). The serial form is thus essentially multi-serial. This is indeed the case in mathematics, where a series constructed in the vicinity of a point is significant only in relation to another series, constructed around another point, and converging with, or diverging from, the first. Alice is the story of an oral regress, but "regress" must be understood first in a logical sense, as the synthesis of names. The homogeneous form of this synthesis subsumes under it two heterogeneous series of orality: to eat/to speak, consumable things/expressible senses. The serial form itself therefore refers us to the already described paradoxes of duality and forces us to address them again from this new point of view.

These two heterogeneous series can, in fact, be determined in various ways. We can consider a series of events and a series of things in which these events are or are not realized; or we can consider a series of denoting propositions and a series of denoted things; or a series of verbs and a series of adjectives and substantives; or a series of expressions and senses and a series of denotations and denotata. These variations are unimportant, since they represent solely degrees of freedom in the organization of heterogeneous series. The same duality, we have seen, occurs outside, between events and states of affairs; at the surface, between propositions and denoted objects; and inside the proposition between expressions and denotations. What is more important is that we can construct the two series under an apparently homogeneous form: in this case, we can consider two series of things or states of affairs, two series of events, two series of propositions or denotations, and two series of senses or expressions. Is this to say that the constitution of series is surrendered to the arbitrary?

The law governing two simultaneous series is that they are never equal. One represents the signifier, the other the signified. But thanks to our terminology, these two terms acquire a particular meaning. We call "signifier" any sign which presents in itself an aspect of sense; we call "signified," on the contrary, that which serves as the correlative to this aspect of sense, that is, that which is defined in a duality relative to this aspect. What is signified therefore is never sense itself. In a restrained sense, signified is the concept; in an extended sense, signified is any thing which may be defined on the basis of the distinction that a certain aspect of sense establishes with this thing. Thus, the signifier is primarily the event as the ideal logical attribute of a state of affairs, and the signified is the state of affairs together with its qualities and real relations. The signifier is also the entire proposition, insofar as it includes dimensions of denotation, manifestation, and signification in the strict sense. And the signified is the independent term which corresponds to these dimensions, that is, the concept, and also the denoted thing or manifested subject. Finally, the signifier is the sole dimension of expression, which
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in fact has the privilege of not being relative to an independent term, since
sense as expressed does not exist outside of the expression; and the signified,
in this case, is the denotation, the manifestation, or even the signification in
the strict sense. In other words, the signified is the proposition insofar as
sense, or that which is expressed, is distinguished from it. However, when we
extend the serial method—in order to consider two series of events, two
series of things, two series of propositions, or two series of expressions—
homogeneity is only apparent: it is always the case that one series has the role
of the signifier, and the other the role of the signified, even if these roles are
interchanged as we change points of view.

Jacques Lacan has brought to light the existence of two series in one of
Edgar Allan Poe's stories. First series: the king who does not see the com­
promising letter received by his wife; the queen who is relieved to have hidden
it so cleverly by leaving it out in the open; the minister who sees everything
and takes possession of the letter. Second series: the police who find nothing
at the minister's hotel; the minister who thought of leaving the letter in the
open in order better to hide it; Dupin who sees everything and takes back
possession of the letter. It is obvious that differences between series may be
more or less great—very great with certain authors, or very small with those
others who introduce only infinitesimal, and yet equally efficacious, vari­
ations. It is also obvious that series relations—that which relates the signify­
ing series to the signified and the signified to the signifying—may be assured
in the simplest fashion by the continuation of a story, the resemblance of
situations, or the identity of the characters. But nothing in all this is essen­
tial. On the contrary, the essential appears when small or great differences
predominate over resemblances and become primary; in other words, when
two quite distinct stories are developed simultaneously, or when the char­
acters have a vacillating and ill-determined identity.

It is easy to cite various authors, who have known how to create serial
techniques of an exemplary formalism. Joyce, for example, secured the rela­
tion between the signifying series "Bloom" and the signified series "Ulysses,"
thanks to multiple forms which included an archeology of narrative modes,
a system of correspondence between numbers, a prodigious employment of
esoteric words, a method of question and answer and the establishment
of currents of thought or multiple trains of thought (Carroll's double think­
ing?). Raymond Roussel based the communication of series on a phonematic
relation ("les bandes du vieux pillard," "les bandes du vieux billard" = b/p),
and filled up the difference with a marvelous story in which the signifying
series p links up with the signified series b: the enigmatic nature of the story
is emphasized in this general procedure, to the extent that the signified series
may remain hidden. Robbe-Grillet established his series of descriptions of
states of affairs and rigorous designations with small differences. He did it by
having them revolve around themes which, although fixed, are nevertheless
suited to almost imperceptible modification and displacement in each series.

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Pierre Klossowski relies on the proper name “Roberte,” certainly not in order to designate a character and manifest its identity, but on the contrary, in order to express a “primary intensity,” to distribute difference and to obtain the doubling up of two series: the first, signifying, which refers to “the husband being unable to imagine his wife otherwise than as surprising herself as she would allow herself to be surprised”; the second, signified, which refers to the wife “rushing into initiatives which ought to convince her of her freedom, when these initiatives confirm only the vision of her spouse.” Witold Gombrowicz established a signifying series of hanged animals (what do they signify?), and a signified series of feminine mouths (what is signifying them?); each series develops a system of signs, sometimes by excess, sometimes by default, and communicates with another by means of strange interfering objects and by means of the esoteric words pronounced by Léon.

Three characteristics, therefore, permit the specification of the relation and distribution of series in general. First, the terms of each series are in perpetual relative displacement in relation to those of the other (thus, for example, the position occupied by the minister in Poe’s two series). There is an essential lack of correspondence. This shift or displacement is not a disguise covering up or hiding the resemblances of series through the introduction of secondary variations in them. This relative displacement is, on the contrary, the primary variation without which neither series would open up onto the other. Without it, the series would not constitute themselves through this doubling up, nor would they refer to one another through this variation alone. There is thus a double sliding of one series over or under the other, which constitutes both, in a perpetual disequilibrium vis-à-vis each other. Second, this disequilibrium must itself be oriented: one of the two series—the one determined as signifying, to be precise, presents an excess over the other. For there is always a blurred excess of signifier. Finally, we reach the most important point, a very special and paradoxical case, which ensures the relative displacement of the two series, the excess of the one over the other, without being reducible to any of the terms of the series or to any relation between these terms. The letter in Lacan’s commentary on Edgar Allan Poe’s story, for example, is one such case. Another example is given by Lacan in his commentary on the Freudian case study of the Wolf Man in which the existence of series in the unconscious is made evident. Here Lacan describes the signified paternal series and the signifying filial series, and shows in both the particular role of a special element: the debt. In Finnegans Wake, once again a letter causes an entire world of series to communicate in a chaos-cosmos. In Robbe-Grillet’s writing, the series of designations, the more rigorous or rigorously descriptive they become, the more they converge on the expression of indetermined or overdetermined objects such as the eraser, the fine cord, or the insect bite. According to Klossowski, the name “Roberte” expresses an “intensity,” that is, a difference of intensity, before designating or manifesting any person.

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What are the characteristics of this paradoxical entity? It circulates without end in both series and, for this reason, assures their communication. It is a two-sided entity, equally present in the signifying and the signified series. It is the mirror. Thus, it is at once word and thing, name and object, sense and denotatum, expression and designation, etc. It guarantees, therefore, the convergence of the two series which it traverses, but precisely on the condition that it makes them endlessly diverge. It has the property of being always displaced in relation to itself. If the terms of each series are relatively displaced, *in relation to one another*, it is primarily because they have in themselves an *absolute* place; but this absolute place is always determined by the terms’ distance from this element which is always displaced, in the two series, *in relation to itself*. We must say that the paradoxical entity is never where we look for it, and conversely that we never find it where it is. As Lacan says, *it fails to observe its place (elle manque à sa place)*. It also fails to observe its own identity, resemblance, equilibrium, and origin. We will not say, therefore, of the two series it animates, that the one is originary and the other derived, though they certainly may be originary or derived in relation to one another. They can also be successive in relation to one another. But they are strictly simultaneous in relation to the entity by means of which they communicate. They are simultaneous without ever being equal, since the entity has two sides, one of which is always absent from the other. It behooves it, therefore, to be in excess in the one series which it constitutes as signifying, and lacking in the other which it constitutes as signified: split apart, incomplete by nature or in relation to itself. Its excess always refers to its own lack, and conversely, its lack always refers to its excess. But even these determinations are still relative. For that which is in excess in one case is nothing but an extremely mobile *empty place*; and that which is lacking in another case is a rapidly moving object, an *occupant without a place*, always supernumerary and displaced.

In fact, there is no stranger element than this double-headed thing with two unequal or uneven “halves.” As in a game, we participate in the combination of the empty place and the perpetual displacement of a piece. Or rather, it is as in the Sheep’s shop, where Alice discovers the complementarity of “the empty shelf” and of the “bright thing always in the shelf next above,” that is, of the place without an occupant and of the occupant without a place. “The most provoking of all” (oddest: the most incomplete, the most disjoined) was that “whenever Alice looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.” How things disappear here, says she finally in a plaintive tone, after having spent about a minute in a vain pursuit of a “large bright thing that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at . . . I’ll follow it up to the very top shelf of all. It’ll puzzle it to go through the ceiling, I expect!” But even this plan failed: “the
thing went through the ceiling as quietly as possible, as if it were quite used to it.”

**Seventh series of esoteric words**

Lewis Carroll explored and established a serial method in literature. We find in his work several methods for developing series. *We find first two series of events with slight internal differences being regulated by a strange object.* In *Sylvie and Bruno*, for example, the accident of a young cyclist is displaced from one series to the other (chapter 23). Undoubtedly, these two series are successive in relation to each other, yet simultaneous in relation to the strange object—in this case, an eight-handed watch with reversing pin which never follows time. On the contrary, time follows it. It makes events return in two ways, either in a becoming-mad which reverses their sequential order, or with slight variations according to the Stoic fatum. The young cyclist, who falls over a box in the first series of events, now proceeds uninjured. But when the hands of the watch return to their original position, the cyclist lies once again wounded on the wagon which takes him to the hospital. It is as if the watch knew how to conjure up the accident, that is, the temporal occurrence of the event, but not the Event itself, the result, the wound as an eternal truth. . . . The same thing again happens in the second part of *Sylvie and Bruno* (chapter 2). We find in it a scene which reproduces, albeit with slight differences, a scene of the first part (the variable position of the old man which is determined by the “purse.” The latter is a strange object, displaced in relation to itself, since the heroine is forced to run with a fairy’s swiftness in order to return it to him).

Second, we find also in Carroll’s work *two series of events with great internal and accelerated differences being regulated by propositions, or at least by sounds and onomatopoeias.* This is the law of the mirror as Carroll describes it: “. . . what could be seen from the old room was quite uninteresting, but . . . all the rest was as different as possible.” The dream-reality series of *Sylvie and Bruno* are constructed in accordance with this law of divergence, with the splitting of characters from one series to another and their further splitting in each one of them. In the preface to the second part, Carroll presents a detailed table of *states*, both human and fairy, which guarantees the correspondence of the two series in each passage of the book. The transitions from one series to another, and the communication between series, are generally secured through a proposition which begins in one series and ends in another, or through onomatopoeia, that is, a sound which partakes of both. (We do not understand why the best of Carroll’s commentators, above all the French, have so many reservations and trifling criticisms with respect to *Sylvie and Bruno*, a masterpiece which, in comparison with *Alice* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, displays a set of entirely new techniques.)
Third, we find two series of propositions (or rather, one series of propositions and one series of "consumptions," or one series of pure expressions and one series of denotations). These series are characterized by great disparity, and are regulated by means of an esoteric word. We must first, however, acknowledge that Carroll's esoteric words belong to very different types. One type is formed by contracting the syllabic elements of one proposition, or of many propositions which follow one another. For example, in Sylvie and Bruno (chapter 1), "y'reince" takes the place of "Your royal Highness." This contraction aims at the extraction of the global sense of the entire proposition in order to name it with a single syllable—or an "Unpronounceable Monosyllable," as Carroll says. We know of different procedures in Rabelais and Swift: for example, the syllabic elongation with an overload of consonants; or the simple devocalization, where only consonants are preserved (as if they were suited to express the sense and as if vowels were merely elements of denotation). In any case, esoteric words of this first type form a connection, a synthesis of succession which bears upon a single series.

The esoteric words which are characteristic of Carroll, however, belong to another type. They belong to a synthesis of coexistence intended to guarantee the conjunction of two series of heterogeneous propositions, or of dimensions of propositions. (This of course amounts to the same thing, since it is always possible to construct the propositions of one series by making them embody a particular dimension.) We have seen that the best example of this was the word "Snark": it circulates throughout the two series of alimentary and semiological orality, or throughout the two dimensions of the proposition—the denotative and the expressive. Sylvie and Bruno offers other examples as well: the Phlizz, a fruit without taste, or the Azzigoom Pudding. This variety of names can easily be explained: not one of them is the word which circulates; rather, they are names which denote this word ("what the word is called"). The circulating word is of a different nature: in principle, it is the empty square, the empty shelf, the blank word (Lewis Carroll occasionally advised timid people to leave certain words blank in their letters). This word therefore is "called" by names which indicate evanescences and displacements: the Snark is invisible, and the Phlizz is almost an onomatopoeia for something vanishing. Or again, the word is called by names which are quite indeterminate: aliquid, it, that, thing, gadget, or "whachamacallit." (See, for example, the it in the Mouse's story or the thing in the Sheep's shop.) Finally, the word has no name at all; it is rather named by the entire refrain of a song, which circulates throughout the stanzas and causes them to communicate. Or, as it is the case with the Gardener's song, the word is named by the conclusion of each stanza which brings about the communication between premises of two different genres.

Fourth, we find greatly ramified series being regulated by portmanteau words and constituted if necessary through esoteric words of the previous kind. In fact, these portmanteau words are themselves esoteric words of a new kind.
They are defined by their function of contracting several words and of enveloping several senses (“frumious” = fuming + furious). The problem, however, is to know when portmanteau words become necessary; for one can always find portmanteau words, and, given good will or arbitrariness, almost all esoteric words may be thus interpreted. But, in fact, the portmanteau word is grounded or formed only if it coincides with a particular function of an esoteric word which it supposedly denotes. For example, an esoteric word with the simple function of contraction within a single series (y’reince) is not a portmanteau word. A further example may be found in the famous “Jabberwocky,” where a great number of words sketch out a fantastic zoology but do not necessarily form portmanteau words: thus, for example, “toves” (badgers-lizards-corkscrews), “borogoves” (birds-buoys), “raths” (green pigs) and the verb “outgribe” (bellowing-whistling-sneezing). In one final example, we must point out that an esoteric word subsuming two heterogeneous series is not necessarily a portmanteau word. We have just seen that this dual function of subsumption was adequately fulfilled by words like “Phlizz,” “thing,” and “it.”

Nevertheless, portmanteau words may appear even on these levels. “Snark” is a portmanteau word which designates a fantastic or composite animal, shark + snake. But it is a secondary or accessory portmanteau word, since its content (teneur) does not coincide as such with its function as an esoteric word. By its content, it refers to a composite animal, whereas, by its function, it connotes two heterogeneous series, only one of which is about an animal, albeit composite; the other is about an incorporeal sense. It is not therefore in its “portmanteau” aspect that the word fulfills its function. On the other hand, Jabberwock is undoubtedly a fantastic animal; but it is also a portmanteau word, whose content, this time, coincides with its function. In fact, Carroll suggests that it is formed from “wocer” or “wocor,” which means offspring or fruit, and “jabber,” which expresses a voluble, animated, or chattering discussion. It is thus as a portmanteau word that “Jabberwock” connotes two series analogous to those of “Snark.” It connotes a series of the animal or vegetable provenance of edible and denotable objects and a series of verbal proliferation of expressible senses. It is of course the case that these two series may be connoted otherwise, and that the portmanteau word does not find in them the foundation of its necessity. The definition of the portmanteau word, as contracting several words and encompassing several senses, is therefore a nominal definition only.

Commenting on the first stanza of “Jabberwocky,” Humpty Dumpty offers as portmanteau words the words “slithy” (= lithe-slimy-active) “mimsy” (= flimsy-miserable), etc. Here our discomfort increases. We see clearly in each case that there are several contracted words and senses; but these elements are easily organized into a single series in order to compose a global sense. We do not therefore see how the portmanteau word can be distinguished from a simple contraction or from a synthesis of connective
succession. We can, of course, introduce a second series; Carroll himself explains that the interpretive possibilities are infinite. For example, we may bring “Jabberwocky” back into the schema of the Gardener’s song, with the two series of denotable objects (edible animals), and of objects bearing sense (symbolic or functional beings of the “bank employee,” “stamp,” or “diligence” types, or even the “action of the railway” type, as in the Snark). Thus, on one hand, it is possible to interpret the end of the first stanza in the manner of Humpty Dumpty: green pigs (raths), far from home (mome = from home), bellowing-whistling-sneezing (outgribing); but it is also possible to interpret as follows: taxes, preferential rates (rath = rate + rather), far from their point of departure, were prohibitive (outgrabe). But, along this route, any serial interpretation may be accepted, and it is not therefore clear how the portmanteau word is distinguished from a conjunctive synthesis of coexistence, or from any esoteric word whatsoever assuring the coordination of two or more heterogeneous series.

The solution to this problem is given by Carroll in the preface to The Hunting of the Snark:

Supposing that, when Pistol uttered the well-known words—“Under which king, Bezonian? Speak or die!” Justice Shallow had felt certain that it was either William or Richard, but had not been able to settle which, so that he could not possibly say either name before the other, can it be doubted that, rather than die, he would have gasped out “Rilchiam!”

It seems then that the portmanteau word is grounded upon a strict disjunctive synthesis. Far from being confronted with a particular case, we discover the law of the portmanteau word in general, provided that we disengage each time the disjunction which may have been hidden. Thus, for “frumious” (fuming + furious): “If your thoughts incline ever so little towards ‘fuming,’ you will say ‘fuming-furious’; if they turn, even by a hair’s breadth, towards ‘furious,’ you will say ‘furious-fuming’; but if you have that rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say ‘frumious.’” Thus, the necessary disjunction is not between fuming and furious, for one may indeed be both at once; rather, it is between fuming-and-furious on one hand and furious-and-fuming on the other. In this sense, the function of the portmanteau word always consists in the ramification of the series into which it is inserted. This is the reason why it never exists alone. It beckons to other portmanteau words which precede or follow it, and which show that every series is already ramified in principle and still further ramifiable. Michel Butor said it very well: “each of these words can act as a switch, and we can move from one to another by means of many passages; hence the idea of a book which does not simply narrate one story, but a whole ocean of stories.” Thus we may now answer the question posed at the outset. When the esoteric
word functions not only to connote or coordinate two heterogeneous series but to introduce disjunctions in the series, then the portmanteau word is necessary or necessarily founded. In this case, the esoteric word itself is “named” or denoted by a portmanteau word. The esoteric word in general refers at once to the *empty square* and to the occupant without place. But, in Carroll’s work, we must distinguish three sorts of esoteric words: *contracting words*, which perform a synthesis of succession over a single series and bear upon the syllabic elements of a proposition or a succession of propositions in order to extract from them their composite sense (“connection”); *circuiting words*, which perform a synthesis of coexistence and coordination between two heterogeneous series and which directly and at once bear upon the respective senses of these series (“conjunction”); and *disjunctive or portmanteau words*, which perform an infinite ramification of coexisting series and bear at once upon words and senses, or syllabic and semiological elements (“disjunction”). The ramifying function or the disjunctive synthesis offers the real definition of the portmanteau word.
1. The purloined preface

A literary text which both analyzes itself and shows that it actually has neither a self nor any neutral metalanguage with which to do the analyzing, calls out irresistibly for analysis. And when that call is answered by two eminent French thinkers whose readings emit an equally paradoxical call-to-analysis of their own, the resulting triptych, in the context of the question of the act-of-reading (-literature), places its would-be reader in a vertiginously insecure position.

The three texts in question are Edgar A. Poe's short story The Purloined Letter, Jacques Lacan's Seminar on The Purloined Letter, and Jacques Derrida's reading of Lacan's reading of Poe, The Purveyor of Truth [Le Facteur de la Vérité]. In all three texts, it is the act of analysis which seems to occupy the center of the discursive stage, and the act of analysis of the act of analysis which in some way disrupts that centrality. In the resulting asymmetrical, abyssal structure, no analysis—including this one—can intervene without transforming and repeating other elements in the sequence, which is thus not a stable sequence, but which nevertheless produces certain regular effects. It is the functioning of this regularity, and the structure of these effects, which will provide the basis for the present study.

The subversion of any possibility of a position of analytical mastery occurs in many ways. Here, the very fact that we are dealing with three texts is in no way certain. Poe's story not only fits into a triptych of its own, but is riddled with a constant, peculiar kind of intertextuality (the epigraph from Seneca which is not from Seneca, the lines from Crébillon's Atrée which...
serve as Dupin's signature, etc.). Lacan's text not only presents itself backwards (its introduction following its conclusion), but it never finishes presenting itself ("Ouverture de ce recueil," "Présentation de la suite," "Présentation" to the Points edition). And Derrida's text is not only preceded by several years of announcatory marginalia and footnotes, but it is itself structured precisely by its own deferment, its différence (cf. the repetition of such expressions as "Mais nous n'en sommes pas encore là," "But we are getting ahead of ourselves," etc.). In addition, all of these texts are characterized by an unusually high degree of apparent digressiveness, to the point of making the reader wonder whether there is really any true subject matter there at all. It is as though any attempt to follow the path of the purloined letter is automatically purloined from itself. Which is, as we shall see, just what the letter has always already been saying.

Any attempt to do "justice" to three such complex texts is obviously out of the question. But it is precisely the nature of such "justice" that is the question in each of these readings of the act of analysis. The fact that the debate proliferates around a crime story—a robbery and its undoing—can hardly be an accident. Somewhere in each of these texts, the economy of justice cannot be avoided. For in spite of the absence of mastery, there is no lack of effects of power.

As the reader goes on with this series of prefatory remarks, he may begin to see how contagious the deferment of the subject of the purloined letter can be. But the problem of how to present these three texts is all the more redoubtable since each of them both presents itself and the others, and clearly shows the fallacies inherent in any type of "presentation" of a text. The fact that such fallacies are not only inevitable but also constitutive of any act of reading—also demonstrated by each of the texts—is small comfort, since the resulting injustices, however unavoidable in general, always appear corrigible in detail. Which is why the sequence continues.

The question of how to present to the reader a text too extensive to quote in its entirety has in fact long been one of the underlying problems of literary criticism. Since a shorter version of the text must somehow be produced, two solutions constantly recur: paraphrase and quotation. Although these tactics are seldom if ever used in isolation, the specific configuration of their combinations and permutations determines to a large extent the "plot" of the critical narrative to which they give rise. The first act of our own narrative, then, will consist of an analysis of the strategic effects of the use of paraphrase vs. quotation in each of the three texts in question.

2. Round robbin'

Round robin: 1) A tournament in which each contestant is matched against every other contestant. 2) A petition or protest on which the signatures are arranged in the form of a circle in order to conceal the
In 1845, Edgar A. Poe published the third of his three detective stories, "The Purloined Letter," in a collective volume entitled—ironically enough, considering all the robberies in the story—*The Gift: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present*. "The Purloined Letter" is a first-person narration of two scenes in which dialogues occur among the narrator, his friend C. Auguste Dupin, and, initially, the Prefect of the Parisian police. The two scenes are separated by an indication of the passage of a month's time. In each of the two dialogues, reported to us verbatim by the narrator, one of the other two characters tells the story of a robbery: in the first scene, it is the Prefect of Police who repeats the Queen's eyewitness account of the Minister's theft of a letter addressed to her; in the second scene, it is Dupin who narrates his own theft of the same letter from the Minister, who had meanwhile readdressed it to himself. In a paragraph placed between these two "crime" stories, the narrator himself narrates a wordless scene in which the letter changes hands again before his eyes, passing from Dupin—not without the latter's having addressed not the letter but a check to himself—to the Prefect (who will pocket the remainder of the reward) and thence, presumably, back to the Queen.

By thus appearing to repeat to us faithfully every word in both dialogues, the narrator would seem to have resorted exclusively to direct quotation in presenting his story. Even when paraphrase could have been expected—in the description of the exact procedures employed by the police in searching unsuccessfully for the letter, for example,—we are spared none of the details. Thus it is all the more surprising to find that there is one little point at which direct quotation of the Prefect's words gives way to paraphrase. This point, however brief, is of no small importance, as we shall see. It occurs in the concluding paragraph of the first scene:

"I have no better advice to give you," said Dupin. "You have, of course, an accurate description of the letter?"

"Oh, yes!"—And here the Prefect, producing a memorandum-book, proceeded to read aloud a minute account of the internal, and especially of the external, appearance of the missing document. Soon after finishing the perusal of this description, he took his departure, more entirely depressed in spirits than I had ever known the good gentleman before. (Poe, pp. 206–207.)

What is paraphrased is thus the description of the letter the story is about. And, whereas it is generally supposed that the function of paraphrase is to
strip off the *form* of a speech in order to give us only its *contents*, here the use of paraphrase does the very opposite: it *withholds* the contents of the Prefect's remarks, giving us *only* their form. And what is swallowed up in this ellipsis is nothing less than the contents of the letter itself. The *fact* that the letter's message is never revealed, which will serve as the basis for Lacan's reading of the story, is thus negatively made explicit by the functioning of Poe's *text* itself, through what Derrida might have called a repression of the written word (a suppression of what is written in the memorandum-book—and in the letter). And the question of the strategic use of paraphrase versus quotation begins to invade not only the critical narrative, but the literary text as well.

Lacan's presentation of Poe's text involves the paraphrase, or plot summary, of the two thefts as they are told to the narrator by the Prefect and by Dupin. Since Derrida, in his critique of Lacan, chooses to *quote* Lacan's paraphrase, we can combine all the tactics involved by, in our turn, *quoting* Derrida's quotation of Lacan's paraphrase of Poe's quoted narrations.  

There are two scenes, the first of which we shall straightway designate the primal scene, and by no means inadvertently, since the second may be considered its repetition in the very sense we are considering today.

The primal scene is thus performed, we are told [by neither Poe, nor the scriptor, nor the narrator, but by G, the Prefect of Police who is *mis en scène* by all those involved in the dialogues—J. D.5] in the royal boudoir, so that we suspect that the person of the highest rank, called the "exalted personage," who is alone there when she receives a letter, is the Queen. This feeling is confirmed by the embarrassment into which she is plunged by the entry of the other exalted personage, of whom we have already been told [again by G—J. D.] prior to this account that the knowledge he might have of the letter in question would jeopardize for the lady nothing less than her honor and safety. Any doubt that he is in fact the King is promptly dissipated in the course of the scene which begins with the entry of the Minister D. At that moment, in fact, the Queen can do no better than to play on the King's inattentiveness by leaving the letter on the table "face down, address uppermost." It does not, however, escape the Minister's lynx eye, nor does he fail to notice the Queen's distress and thus to fathom her secret. From then on everything transpires like clockwork. After dealing in his customary manner with the business of the day, the Minister draws from his pocket a letter similar in appearance to the one in his view, and, having pretended to read it, places it next to the other. A bit more conversation to amuse the royal company, whereupon, without flinching once, he seizes the embarrassing letter, making off with it, as the Queen, on whom none
of his maneuver has been lost, remains unable to intervene for fear of attracting the attention of her royal spouse, close at her side at that very moment.

Everything might then have transpired unseen by a hypothetical spectator of an operation in which nobody falters, and whose quotient is that the Minister has filched from the Queen her letter and that—an even more important result than the first—the Queen knows that he now has it, and by no means innocently.

A remainder that no analyst will neglect, trained as he is to retain whatever is significant, without always knowing what to do with it: the letter, abandoned by the Minister, and which the Queen's hand is now free to roll into a ball.

Second scene: in the Minister's office. It is in his hotel, and we know—from the account the Prefect of Police has given Dupin, whose specific genius for solving enigmas Poe introduces here for the second time—that the police, returning there as soon as the Minister's habitual, nightly absences allow them to, have searched the hotel and its surroundings from top to bottom for the last eighteen months. In vain,—although everyone can deduce from the situation that the Minister keeps the letter within reach.

Dupin calls on the Minister. The latter receives him with studied nonchalance, affecting in his conversation romantic ennui. Meanwhile Dupin, whom this pretence does not deceive, his eyes protected by green glasses, proceeds to inspect the premises. When his glance catches a rather crumbled piece of paper—apparently thrust carelessly in a division of an ugly pasteboard card-rack, hanging gaudily from the middle of the mantelpiece—he already knows that he's found what he's looking for. His conviction is reinforced by the very details which seem to contradict the description he has of the stolen letter, with the exception of the format, which remains the same.

Whereupon he has but to withdraw, after "forgetting" his snuff-box on the table, in order to return the following day to reclaim it—armed with a facsimile of the letter in its present state. As an incident in the street, prepared for the proper moment, draws the Minister to the window, Dupin in turn seizes the opportunity to seize the letter while substituting the imitation, and has only to maintain the appearance of a normal exit.

Here as well all has transpired, if not without noise, at least without all commotion. The quotient of the operation is that the Minister no longer has the letter, but, far from suspecting that Dupin is the culprit who has ravished it from him, knows nothing of it. Moreover, what he is left with is far from insignificant for what follows. We shall return to what brought Dupin to inscribe a message on his counterfeit letter. Whatever the case, the Minister, when he tries to make use
of it, will be able to read these words, written so that he may recognize Dupin's hand: "... Un dessein si funeste / S'il n'est digne d'Atrée est digne de Thyeste," whose source, Dupin tells us, is Crébillon's Atrée.

Need we emphasize the similarity of these two sequences? Yes, for the resemblance we have in mind is not a simple collection of traits chosen only in order to delete their difference. And it would not be enough to retain those common traits at the expense of the others for the slightest truth to result. It is rather the intersubjectivity in which the two actions are motivated that we wish to bring into relief, as well as the three terms through which it structures them.

The special status of these terms results from their corresponding simultaneously to the three logical moments through which the decision is precipitated and the three places it assigns to the subjects among whom it constitutes a choice.

That decision is reached in a glance's time. For the maneuvers which follow, however stealthily they prolong it, add nothing to that glance, nor does the deferring of the deed in the second scene break the unity of that moment.

This glance presupposes two others, which it embraces in its vision of the breach left in their fallacious complementarity, anticipating in it the occasion for larceny afforded by that exposure. Thus three moments, structuring three glances, borne by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters.

The first is a glance that sees nothing: the King and the police.

The second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister.

The third sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it: the Minister and finally Dupin.

In order to grasp in its unity the intersubjective complex thus described, we would willingly seek a model in the techniquelegendarily attributed to the ostrich attempting to shield itself from danger; for that technique might ultimately be qualified as political, divided as it here is among three partners: the second believing itself invisible because the first has its head stuck in the ground, and all the while letting the third calmly pluck its rear; we need only enrich its proverbial denomination by a letter, producing la politique de l'autruche, for the ostrich itself to take on forever a new meaning.

Given the intersubjective modulus of the repetitive action, it remains to recognize in it a repetition automatism in the sense that interests us in Freud's text. (SPL, pp. 41–44.)
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Thus, it is neither the character of the individual subjects, nor the contents of the letter, but the position of the letter within the group, which decides what each person will do next. It is the fact that the letter does not function as a unit of meaning (a signified) but as that which produces certain effects (a signifier), which leads Lacan to read the story as an illustration of "the truth which may be drawn from that moment in Freud's thought under study—namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating (...) the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier" (SPL, p. 40). The letter acts like a signifier precisely to the extent that its function in the story does not require that its meaning be revealed: "the letter was able to produce its effects within the story: on the actors in the tale, including the narrator, as well as outside the story: on us, the readers, and also on its author, without anyone's ever bothering to worry about what it meant" (not translated in SPL; Écrits, p. 57, translation and emphasis mine). "The Purloined Letter" thus becomes for Lacan a kind of allegory of the signifier.


1) What Lacan puts into the letter. While asserting that the letter's meaning is lacking, Lacan, according to Derrida, makes this lack into the meaning of the letter. But Derrida does not stop there: he goes on to assert that what Lacan means by that lack is the truth of lack-as-castration-as-truth: "The truth of the purloined letter is the truth itself (...) What is veiled/unveiled in this case is a hole, a non-being [non-étant]; the truth of being [l'être], as non-being. Truth is 'woman' as veiled/unveiled castration" (PT, pp. 60-61). Lacan himself, however, never uses the word "castration" in the text of the original Seminar. That it is suggested is indisputable, but Derrida, by filling in what Lacan left blank, is repeating precisely the gesture of blank-filling for which he is criticizing Lacan.

2) What Lacan leaves out of the text. This objection is itself double: on the one hand, Derrida criticizes Lacan for neglecting to consider "The Purloined Letter" in connection with the other two stories in what Derrida calls Poe's "Dupin Trilogy." And on the other hand, according to Derrida, at the very moment Lacan is reading the story as an allegory of the signifier, he is being blind to the disseminating power of the signifier in the text of the allegory, in what Derrida calls the "scene of writing." To cut out part of a text's frame of reference as though it did not exist, and to reduce a complex textual functioning to a single meaning, are serious blots indeed in the annals of literary criticism. Therefore it is all the more noticeable that Derrida's own reading of Lacan's text repeats precisely the crimes of which he accuses it: on the one hand, Derrida makes no mention of Lacan's long development on the
relation between symbolic determination and random series. And on the other hand, Derrida dismisses Lacan's "style" as a mere ornament, veiling, for a time, an unequivocal message: "Lacan's 'style', moreover, was such that for a long time it would hinder and delay all access to a *unique* content or a single unequivocal meaning determinable beyond the writing itself" (PT, p. 40). The fact that Derrida repeats the very gestures he is criticizing does not in itself invalidate his criticism of their *effects*, but it does problematize his statement condemning their *existence*.

What kind of logic is it that thus seems to turn one-upmanship into inevitable one-downmanship?

It is precisely the logic of the purloined letter.

### 3. Odd couples

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**Jean tiens la reine!**

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**O sur châtiment...**

—Mallarmé, "L'après-midi d'un faune"

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**L'ascendant que le ministre tire de la situation ne tient donc pas à la lettre, mais, qu'il le sache ou non, au personnage qu'elle lui constitue.**

—Lacan, "Séminaire sur 'la Lettre volée'"

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We have just seen how Derrida, in his effort to right (write) Lacan's wrongs, can, on a certain level, only repeat them. And how the rectification of a previous injustice somehow irresistibly dictates the *filling in of a blank*, which then becomes the new injustice. In fact, the act of clinching one's triumph by filling in a blank is already prescribed in all its details within Poe's story, in Dupin's unwillingness to "leave the interior blank" (Poe, p. 219) in the facsimile he has left for the Minister, in place of the purloined letter he, Dupin, has just repossessed by means of a *precise* repetition of the act of robbery he is undoing. What is written in the blank is a quotation-as-signature, which curiously resembles Derrida's initialed interventions in the passages he quotes from Lacan, a resemblance on which Derrida is undoubtedly playing. And the *text* of the quotation transcribed by Dupin says precisely the structure of rectification-as-repetition-of-the-crime which has led to its being transcribed in the first place:

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**—Un dessein si funeste,**

**S'il n'est digne d'Atreè, est digne de Thyeste.**

---

Atreus, whose wife was long ago seduced by Thyestes, is about to make Thyestes eat (literally) the fruit of that illicit union, his son Plisthenes. The avenger's plot may not be worthy of *him*, says Atreus, but his brother Thyestes deserves it. What the addressee of the violence is going to get is
simply his own message backwards. It is this vengeful anger which, as both Lacan and Derrida show, places Dupin as one of the "ostriches" in the "triad." Not content simply to return the letter to its "rightful" destination, Dupin jumps into the fray as the wronged victim himself, by recalling an "evil turn" the Minister once did him in Vienna, and for which he is now, personally, taking his revenge.

Correction must thus posit a previous pretextual, pre-textual crime which will justify its excesses. Any degree of violence is permissible in the act of getting even ("To be even with him," says Dupin, "I complained of my weak eyes . . ." [Poe, p. 216]). And Dupin's backwards revision of the story repeats itself in his readers as well. The existence of the same kind of prior aggression on Lacan's part is posited by Derrida in a long footnote in his book Positions, in which he outlines what will later develop into Le Facteur de la Vérité: "In the texts I have published up to now, the absence of reference to Lacan is indeed almost total. That is justified not only by the acts of aggression in the form of, or with the intention of, reappropriation which, ever since De la grammatologie appeared in Critique (1965) (and even earlier, I am told) Lacan has multiplied . . ." The priority of aggression is doubled by the aggressiveness of priority: "At the time of my first publications, Lacan's Écrits had not yet been collected and published . . ." And Lacan, in turn, mentions in his Presentation to the Points edition of his Écrits: "what I properly call the instance of the letter before any grammatology." The rivalry over something neither man will credit the other with possessing, the retrospective revision of the origins of both their resemblances and their differences, thus spirals backward and forward in an indeterminable pattern of cancellation and duplication. If it thus becomes impossible to determine "who started it" (or even whether "it" was started by either one of them), it is also impossible to know who is ahead, or even whose "turn" it is. This is what makes the business of "getting even" so odd.

This type of oscillation between two terms, considered as totalities in a binary opposition, is studied by Lacan in connection with Poe's story of the eight-year-old prodigy who succeeded in winning, far beyond his due, at the game of—even and odd. The game consists of guessing whether the number of marbles an opponent is holding is even or odd. The schoolboy explains his success by his identification with the physical characteristics of his opponent, from which he deduces the opponent's degree of intelligence and its corresponding line of reasoning. What Lacan shows, in the part of his seminar which Derrida neglects, is that the mere identification with the opponent as an image of totality is not sufficient to insure success—and in no way explains Dupin's actual strategy—since, from the moment the opponent becomes aware of it, he can then play on his own appearance, and dissociate it from the reasoning that is presumed to go with it. (This is, indeed, what occurs in the encounter between Dupin and the Minister: the Minister's feigned nonchalance is a true vigilance but a blinded vision, whereas Dupin's
feigned blindness ("weak eyes") is a vigilant act of lucidity, later to succumb to its own form of blindness.) From then on, says Lacan, the reasoning "can only repeat itself in an indefinite oscillation" (Écrits, p. 58: translation mine). And Lacan reports that, in his own classroom tests of the schoolboy’s technique, it was almost inevitable that each player begin to feel he was losing his marbles . . . 11

But if the complexities of these texts could be reduced to a mere combat between ostriches, a mere game of heads and tails played out in order to determine a “winner,” they would have very little theoretical interest. It is, on the contrary, the way in which each mastermind avoids simply becoming the butt of his own joke that displaces the opposition in unpredictable ways, and transforms the textual encounter into a source of insight. For if the very possibility of meeting the opponent on a common ground, without which no contact is possible, implies a certain symmetry, a sameness, a repetition of the error which the encounter is designed to correct, any true avoidance of that error entails a non-meeting or incompatibility between the two forces. If to hit the target is in a way to become the target, then to miss the target is perhaps to hit it elsewhere. It is not the way in which Lacan and Derrida meet each other, but rather the way in which they miss each other, which opens up a space for interpretation.

Clearly, what is at stake here has something to do with the status of the number 2. If the face-off between two opponents or polar opposites always simultaneously backfires and misfires, it can only be because 2 is an extremely odd number. On the one hand, as a specular illusion of symmetry or metaphor, it can either be narcissistically reassuring (the image of the other as a reinforcement of my identity) or absolutely devastating (the other whose existence can totally cancel me out). This is what Lacan calls the imaginary duality. It is characterized by its absoluteness, its independence from any accident or contingency which might subvert the unity of the terms in question, whether in their opposition or in their fusion. To this, Lacan opposes the symbolic, which is the entrance of difference or otherness or temporality into the idea of identity—it is not something which befalls the imaginary duality, but something which has always already inhabited it, something which subverts not the symmetry of the imaginary couple, but the possibility of the independent unity of any one term whatsoever. It is the impossibility not of the number 2 but of the number 1. Which, paradoxically enough, turns out to lead to the number 3.

If 3 is what makes 2 into the impossibility of 1, is there any inherent increase in lucidity in passing from a couple to a triangle? Is a triangle in any way more “true” than a couple?

It is Derrida’s contention that, for psychoanalysis, the answer to that question is “yes.” The triangle becomes the magical, Oedipal figure that explains the functioning of human desire. The child’s original imaginary dual unity with the mother is subverted by the law of the father as that which prohibits
incest under threat of castration, and the child has “simply” to “assume castration” as the necessity of substitution in the object of his desire (the object of desire becoming the locus of substitution and the focus of repetition), after which the child’s desire becomes “normalized.” Derrida’s criticism of the “triangles” or “triads” in Lacan’s reading of Poe is based on the assumption that Lacan’s use of triangularity stems from this psychoanalytical myth.

Derrida’s criticism takes two routes, both of them numerical:

1) The structure of “The Purloined Letter” cannot be reduced to a triangle unless the narrator is eliminated. The elimination of the narrator is a blatant and highly revealing result of the way “psychoanalysis” does violence to literature in order to find its own schemes. What psychoanalysis sees as a triangle is therefore really a quadrangle, and that fourth side is the point from which literature problematizes the very possibility of a triangle. Therefore: 3 = 4.

2) Duality as such cannot be dismissed or simply absorbed into a triangular structure. “The Purloined Letter” is traversed by an uncanny capacity for doubling and subdividing. The narrator and Dupin are doubles of each other, and Dupin himself is first introduced as a “Bi-Part Soul” (Poe, p. 107), a sort of Dupin Duplex, “the creative and the resolvent.” The Minister, D—, has a brother for whom it is possible to mistake him, and from whom he is to be distinguished because of his doubleness (poet and mathematician). Thus the Minister and Dupin become doubles of each other through the fact of their both being already double, in addition to their other points of resemblance, including their names. “The Seminar,” writes Derrida, “mercilessly forecloses this problematic of the double and of Unheimlichkeit—no doubt considering that it is confined to the imaginary, to the dual relationship which must be kept rigorously separate from the symbolic and the triangular. (. . .) All the ‘uncanny’ relations of duplicity, limitlessly deployed in a dual structure, find themselves omitted or marginalized [in the Seminar]. (. . .) What is thus kept under surveillance and control is the Uncanny itself, and the frantic anxiety which can be provoked, with no hope of reappropriation, enclosure, or truth, by the infinite play from simulacrum to simulacrum, from double to double” (omitted in PT; FV, p. 124, translation mine).

Thus the triangle’s angles are always already bisected, and 3 = (a factor of) 2.

In the game of odd versus even, then, it would seem that Derrida is playing evens (4 or 2) against Lacan’s odds (3). But somehow the numbers 2 and 4 have become uncannily odd, while the number 3 has been evened off into a reassuring symmetry. How did this happen, and what are the consequences for an interpretation of “The Purloined Letter”?

Before any answer to this question can be envisaged, several remarks should be made here to problematize the terms of Derrida’s critique:
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1) If the narrator and Dupin are a strictly dual pair whose relationship is in no way mediated by a third term in any Oedipal sense, how is one to explain the fact that their original meeting was brought about by their potential rivalry over the same object: "the accident of our both being in search of the same very rare and very remarkable volume." Whether or not they ever found it, or can share it, is this not a triangular relationship?

2) Although Lacan's reading of "The Purloined Letter" divides the story into triadic structures, his model for (inter-)subjectivity, the so-called "schema L," which is developed in that part of the Seminar's introduction which Derrida glosses over, is indisputably quadrangular. In order to read Lacan's repeating triads as a triangular, Oedipal model of the subject instead of as a mere structure of repetition, Derrida must therefore lop off one corner of the "schema L" in the same way as he accuses Lacan of lopping off a corner of Poe's text—and Derrida does this precisely by lopping off that corner of Lacan's text in which the quadrangular "schema L" is developed.

But can what is at stake here really be reduced to a mere numbers game?

Let us approach the problem from another angle, by asking two more questions:

1) What is the relation between a divided unity and a duality? Are the two two's synonymous? Is a "Bi-Part Soul," for example, actually composed of two wholes? Or is it possible to conceive of a division which would not lead to two separable parts, but only to a problematization of the idea of unity? This would class what Derrida calls "duality" not in Lacan's "imaginary," but in Lacan's "symbolic."

2) If the doubles are forever redividing or multiplying, does the number "2" really apply? If 1 = 2, how can 2 = 1 + 1? If what is uncanny about the doubles is that they never stop doubling up, would the number 2 still be uncanny if it did stop at a truly dual symmetry? Isn't it the very limitlessness of the process of the dissemination of unity, rather than the existence of any one duality, which Derrida is talking about here?

Clearly, in these questions, it is the very notion of a number which becomes problematic, and the argument on the basis of numbers can no longer be read literally. If Derrida opposes doubled quadrangles to Lacan's triangles, it is not because he wants to turn Oedipus into an octopus.

To what, then, does the critique of triangularity apply?

The problem with psychoanalytical triangularity, in Derrida's eyes, is not that it contains the wrong number of terms, but that it presupposes the possibility of a successful dialectical mediation and harmonious normalization or Aufhebung of desire. The three terms in the Oedipal triad enter into an opposition whose resolution resembles the synthetic moment of a Hegelian dialectic. The process centers on the phallus as the locus of the question of sexual difference: it is when the observation of the mother's lack of a penis is joined with the father's threat of castration as the punishment for
incest that the child passes from the alternative (thesis vs. antithesis; presence vs. absence of penis) to the synthesis (the phallus as a sign of the fact that the child can only enter into the circuit of desire by assuming castration as the phallus’ simultaneous presence and absence; that is, by assuming the fact that both the subject and the object of desire will always be substitutes for something that was never really present). In Lacan’s article on “La signification du phallus,” which Derrida quotes, this process is evoked in precisely Hegelian terms:

All these remarks still do nothing but veil the fact that it [the phallus] cannot play its role except veiled, that is to say as itself sign of the latency with which anything signifiable is stricken as soon as it is raised (aufgehoben) to the function of signifier.

The phallus is the signifier of this Aufhebung itself which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance. (Écrits, p. 692; PT, p. 98.)

“It would appear,” comments Derrida, “that the Hegelian movement of Aufhebung is here reversed since the latter sublates [relève] the sensory signifier in the ideal signified” (PT, p. 98). But then, according to Derrida, Lacan’s privileging of the spoken over the written word annulls this reversal, reappropriates all possibility of uncontainable otherness, and brings the whole thing back within the bounds of the type of “logocentrism” which has been the focus of Derrida’s entire deconstructive enterprise over the past ten years.

The question of whether or not Lacan’s “privileging” of the voice is strictly logocentric in Derrida’s sense is an extremely complex one with which we cannot hope to deal adequately here. But what does all this have to do with “The Purloined Letter”?

In an attempt to answer this question, let us examine the way in which Derrida deduces from Lacan’s text the fact that, for Lacan, the “letter” is a symbol of the (mother’s) phallus. Since Lacan never uses the word “phallus” in the Seminar, this is already an interpretation on Derrida’s part, and quite an astute one at that, with which Lacan, as a later reader of his own Seminar, implicitly agrees by placing the word “castrated”—which had not been used in the original text—in his “Points” Presentation. The disagreement between Derrida and Lacan thus arises not over the validity of the equation “letter = phallus,” but over its meaning.

How, then, does Derrida derive this equation from Lacan’s text? The deduction follows four basic lines of reasoning, all of which will be dealt with in greater detail later in the present essay:

1) The letter “belongs” to the Queen as a substitute for the phallus she does not have. It feminizes (castrates) each of its successive holders and is eventually returned to her as its rightful owner.

2) Poe’s description of the position of the letter in the Minister’s apartment, expanded upon by the figurative dimensions of Lacan’s text, suggests
an analogy between the shape of the fireplace from the center of whose mantelpiece the letter is found hanging, and that point on a woman's anatomy from which the phallus is missing.

3) The letter, says Lacan, cannot be divided: "But if it is first of all on the materiality of the signifier that we have insisted, that materiality is odd [sin-gulière] in many ways, the first of which is not to admit partition" (SPL, p. 53). This indivisibility, says Derrida, is odd indeed, but becomes comprehensible if it is seen as an idealization of the phallus, whose integrity is necessary for the edification of the entire psychoanalytical system. With the phallus safely idealized and located in the voice, the so-called "signifier" acquires the "unique, living, non-mutilable integrity" of the self-present spoken word, unequivocally pinned down to and by the signified. "Had the phallus been per(mal)chance divisible or reduced to the status of a partial object, the whole edification would have crumbled down, and this is what has to be avoided at all cost" (PT, pp. 96-97).

4) And finally, if Poe's story "illustrates" the "truth," the last words of the Seminar proper seem to reaffirm that truth in no uncertain terms: "Thus it is that what the 'purloined letter', nay, the 'letter in sufferance' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination" (SPL, p. 72, emphasis mine). Now, since it is unlikely that Lacan is talking about the efficiency of the postal service, he must, according to Derrida, be affirming the possibility of unequivocal meaning, the eventual reappropriation of the message, its total equivalence with itself. And since the "truth" Poe's story illustrates is, in Derrida's eyes, the truth of veiled/unveiled castration and of the transcendental identity of the phallus as the lack that makes the system work, this final sentence in Lacan's Seminar seems to affirm both the absolute truth of psychoanalytical theories and the absolute decipherability of the literary text. Poe's message will have been totally, unequivocally understood and explained by the psychoanalytical myth. "The hermeneutic discovery of meaning (truth), the deciphering (that of Dupin and that of the Seminar), arrives itself at its destination" (PT, p. 66).

Thus, the law of the phallus seems to imply a reappropriating return to the place of true ownership, an indivisible identity functioning beyond the possibility of disintegration or unrecoverable loss, and a totally self-present, unequivocal meaning or truth.

The problem with this type of system, counters Derrida, is that it cannot account for the possibility of sheer accident, irreversible loss, unreappropriable residues, and infinite divisibility, which are in fact necessary and inevitable in the system's very elaboration. In order for the circuit of the letter to end up confirming the law of the phallus, it must begin by transgressing it: the letter is a sign of high treason. Phallogocentrism mercilessly represses the uncontrollable multiplicity of ambiguities, the disseminating play of writing, which irrevocably transgresses any unequivocal meaning. "Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but part of its structure is that it is always
capable of not arriving there. (...) Here dissemination threatens the law of the signifier and of castration as a contract of truth. Dissemination mutilates the unity of the signifier, that is, of the phallus” (PT, p. 66).

In contrast to Lacan’s Seminar, then, Derrida’s text would seem to be setting itself up as a Disseminar.

From the foregoing remarks, it can easily be seen that the dissemal criticism of Lacan’s apparent reduction of the literary text to an unequivocal message depends for its force upon the presupposition of unambiguousness in Lacan’s text. And indeed, the statement that a letter always reaches its destination seems straightforward enough. But when that statement is reinserted into its context, things become palpably less certain:

Is that all, and shall we believe we have deciphered Dupin’s real strategy above and beyond the imaginary tricks with which he was obliged to deceive us? No doubt, yes, for if “any point requiring reflection,” as Dupin states at the start, is “examined to best purpose in the dark,” we may now easily read its solution in broad daylight. It was already implicit and easy to derive from the title of our tale, according to the very formula we have long submitted to your discretion: in which the sender, we tell you, receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form. Thus it is that what the “purloined letter,” nay, the “letter in sufferance” means is that a letter always arrives at its destination. (SPL, p. 72.)

The meaning of this last sentence is problematized not so much by its own ambiguity as by a series of reversals in the preceding sentences. If the best examination takes place in darkness, what does “reading in broad daylight” imply? Could it not be taken as an affirmation not of actual lucidity but of delusions of lucidity? Could it not then move the “yes, no doubt” as an answer not to the question “have we deciphered?” but to the question “shall we believe we have deciphered?” And if this is possible, does it not empty the final affirmation of all unequivocality, leaving it to stand with the force of an assertion, without any definite content? And if the sender receives from the receiver his own message backwards, who is the sender here, who the receiver, and what is the message? It is in fact not even clear what the expression “the purloined letter” refers to: Poe’s text? the letter it talks about? or simply the expression “the purloined letter”?

We will take another look at this passage later, but for the moment its ambiguities seem sufficient to problematize, if not subvert, the presupposition of univocality which is the very foundation on which Derrida has edified his interpretation.

But surely such an oversimplification on Derrida’s part does not result from mere blindness, oversight, or error. As P. de Man says of Derrida’s similar treatment of Rousseau, “the pattern is too interesting not to be
deliberate."13 Being the sharp-eyed reader that he is, Derrida’s consistent forcing of Lacan’s statements into systems and patterns from which they are actually trying to escape must correspond to some strategic necessity different from the attentiveness to the letter of the text which characterizes Derrida’s way of reading Poe. And in fact, the more one works with Derrida’s analysis, the more convinced one becomes that although the critique of what Derrida calls psychoanalysis is entirely justified, it does not quite apply to what Lacan’s text is actually saying. What Derrida is in fact arguing against is therefore not Lacan’s text but Lacan’s power—or rather, “Lacan” as the apparent cause of certain effects of power in French discourse today. Whatever Lacan’s text may say, it functions, according to Derrida, as if it said what he says it says. The statement that a letter always reaches its destination may be totally undecipherable, but its assertive force is taken all the more seriously as a sign that Lacan himself has everything all figured out. Such an assertion, in fact, gives him an appearance of mastery like that of the Minister in the eyes of the letterless Queen. “The ascendancy which the Minister derives from the situation,” explains Lacan, “is attached not to the letter but to the character it makes him into.”

Thus Derrida’s seemingly “blind” reading, whose vagaries we shall be following here, is not a mistake, but the positioning of what can be called the “average reading” of Lacan’s text, which is the true object of Derrida’s deconstruction. Since Lacan’s text is read as if it said what Derrida says it says, its actual textual functioning is irrelevant to the agonistic arena in which Derrida’s analysis takes place, and which is, in fact, suggested by the very first word of the epigraph: ils, “they”:

They thank him for the grand truths he has just proclaimed,—for they have discovered (o verifier of what cannot be verified!) that everything he said was absolutely true; even though, at first, these honest souls admit, they might have suspected that it could have been a simple fiction . . . (PT, p. 31; translation mine.)

The fact that this quotation from Baudelaire refers to Poe and not Lacan does not completely erase the impression that the unidentified “him” in its first sentence is the “Purveyor of Truth” of the title. The evils of Lacan’s analysis of Poe are thus located less in the letter of the text than in the gullible readers, the “braves gens” who are taken in by it. Lacan’s ill are really ils.

If Derrida’s reading of Lacan’s reading of Poe is thus actually the deconstruction of a reading whose status is difficult to determine, does this mean that Lacan’s text is completely innocent of the misdemeanors of which it is accused? If Lacan can be shown to be opposed to the same kind of logocentric error that Derrida is opposed to, does not mean that they are both really saying the same thing? These are questions which must be left, at least for the moment, hanging.
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But the structure of Derrida’s transference of guilt from a certain reading of Lacan onto Lacan’s text is not indifferent in itself, in the context of what, after all, started out as a relatively simple crime story. For what it amounts to is nothing less than . . . a frame.

4. The frame of reference

Elle, défunte nue en le miroir, encor
Que, dans l’oubli fermé par le cadre, se fixe
De scintillations sitôt le septuor.
—Mallarmé, “Sonnet en X”

If Derrida is thus framing Lacan for an interpretative malpractice of which he himself is, at least in part, the author, what can this frame teach us about the nature of the act of reading, in the context of the question of literature and psychoanalysis?

Interestingly enough, one of the major crimes for which Lacan is being framed by Derrida is precisely the psychoanalytical reading’s elimination of the literary text’s frame. That frame here consists not only of the two stories which precede “The Purloined Letter,” but of the stratum of narration through which the stories are told, and, “beyond” it, of the text’s entire functioning as écriture:

Without breathing a word about it, Lacan excludes the textual fiction within which he isolates the so-called “general narration.” Such an operation is facilitated, too obviously facilitated, by the fact that the narration covers the entire surface of the fiction entitled “The Purloined Letter.” But that is the fiction. There is an invisible but structurally irreducible frame around the narration. Where does it begin? With the first letter of the title? With the epigraph from Seneca? With the words, “At Paris, just after dark . . .”? It is more complicated than that and will require reconsideration. Such complication suffices to point out everything that is misunderstood about the structure of the text once the frame is ignored. Within this invisible or neutralized frame, Lacan takes the borderless narration and makes another subdivision, once again leaving aside the frame. He cuts out two dialogues from within the frame of the narration itself, which form the narrated history, i.e. the content of the representation, the internal meaning of a story, the all-enframed which demands our complete attention, mobilizes all the psychoanalytical schemes—Oedipal, as it happens—and draws all the effort of decipherment towards its center. What is missing here is an elaboration of the problem of the frame, the signature and the parergon. This lack allows us to reconstruct the scene of the signifier as a
signified (an ever inevitable process in the logic of the sign), writing as the written, the text as discourse or more precisely as an "intersubjective" dialogue (there is nothing fortuitous in the fact that the Seminar discusses only the two dialogues in "The Purloined Letter"). (PT, pp. 52–53, translation modified.)

It is well known that "The Purloined Letter" belongs to what Baudelaire called a "kind of trilogy," along with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Roget." About this Dupin trilogy, the Seminar does not breathe a word; not only does Lacan lift out the narrated triangles (the "real drama") in order to center the narration around them and make them carry the weight of the interpretation (the letter's destination), but he also lifts one third of the Dupin cycle out of an ensemble discarded as if it were a natural, invisible frame. (Not translated in PT; FV p. 123; translation mine.)

In framing with such violence, in cutting a fourth side out of the narrated figure itself in order to see only triangles, a certain complication, perhaps a complication of the Oedipal structure, is eluded, a complication which makes itself felt in the scene of writing. (PT, p. 54; translation entirely modified.)

It would seem, then, that Lacan is here guilty of several sins of omission: the omission of the narrator, of the non-dialogue parts of the story, of the other stories in the trilogy. But does this criticism amount to a mere plea for the inclusion of what has been excluded? No: the problem is not simply quantitative. What has been excluded is not homogeneous to what has been included. Lacan, says Derrida, misses the specifically literary dimension of Poe's text by treating it as a "real drama," a story like the stories a psychoanalyst hears every day from his patients. What has been left out is precisely literature itself.

Does this mean that the "frame" is what makes a text literary? Interestingly enough, in a recent issue of New Literary History devoted to the question "What is Literature?" and totally unrelated to the debate concerning the purloined letter, this is precisely the conclusion to which one of the contributors comes: "Literature is language (...), but it is language around which we have drawn a frame, a frame that indicates a decision to regard with a particular self-consciousness the resources language has always possessed."¹⁴

Such a view of literature, however, implies that a text is literary because it remains inside certain definite borders: it is a many-faceted object, perhaps, but still, it is an object. That this is not quite what Derrida has in mind becomes clear from the following remarks:

By overlooking the narrator's position, the narrator's involvement in the content of what he seems to be recounting, one omits from
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the scene of writing anything going beyond the two triangular scenes.

And first of all one omits that what is in question—with no possible access route or border—is a scene of writing whose boundaries crumble off into an abyss. From the simulacrum of an overture, of a “first word,” the narrator, in narrating himself, advances a few propositions which carry the unity of the “tale” into an endless drifting-off course: a textual drifting not at all taken into account in the Seminar. (PT, pp. 100–101; translation modified.)

These reminders, of which countless other examples could be given, alert us to the effects of the frame, and of the paradoxes in the parergonal logic. Our purpose is not to prove that “The Purloined Letter” functions within a frame (omitted by the Seminar, which can thus be assured of its triangular interior by an active, surreptitious limitation starting from a metalinguistic overview), but to prove that the structure of the framing effects is such that no totalization of the border is even possible. Frames are always framed: thus, by part of their content. Pieces without a whole, “divisions” without a totality—this is what thwarts the dream of a letter without division, allergic to division. (PT, p. 99; translation slightly modified.)

Here the argument seems to reverse the previous objection: Lacan has eliminated not the frame but the unframability of the literary text. But what Derrida calls “parergonal logic” is paradoxical precisely because both of these incompatible (but not totally contradictory) arguments are equally valid. The total inclusion of the “frame” is both mandatory and impossible. The “frame” thus becomes not the borderline between the inside and the outside, but precisely what subverts the applicability of the inside/outside polarity to the act of interpretation.

The “frame” is, in fact, one of a series of paradoxical “borderline cases”—along with the tympanum and the hymen—through which Derrida has recently been studying the limits of spatial logic as it relates to intelligibility. Lacan, too, has been seeking to displace the Euclidean model of understanding (comprehension, for example, means spatial inclusion) by inventing a “new geometry” by means of the logic of knots. The relation between these two attempts to break out of spatial logic has yet to be articulated, but some measure of the difficulties involved may be derived from the fact that “to break out of” is still a spatial metaphor. The urgency of these undertakings cannot, however, be overestimated, since the logic of metaphysics, of politics, of belief, and of knowledge itself is based on the imposition of definable objective frontiers and outlines whose possibility and/or justifiability are precisely what is here being put in question. If “comprehension” is the framing of something whose limits are undeterminable, how can we know what we
are comprehending? The play on the spatial and the criminal senses of the word "frame" with which we began this section may thus not be as gratuitous as it seemed. And indeed, the question of the fallacies inherent in a Euclidean model of intelligibility, far from being a tangential theoretical consideration here, is in fact central to the very plot of "The Purloined Letter" itself. For it is precisely the notion of space as finite and homogeneous which underlies the Prefect's method of investigation: "I presume you know," he explains, "that, to a properly trained police-agent, such a thing as a 'secret' drawer is impossible. Any man is a dolt who permits a 'secret' drawer to escape him in a search of this kind. The thing is so plain. There is a certain amount of bulk—of space—to be accounted for in every cabinet. Then we have accurate rules. The fiftieth part of a line could not escape us" (Poe, p. 204). The assumption that what is not seen must be hidden—an assumption Lacan calls the "realist's imbecillity"—is based on a falsely objective notion of the act of seeing. The polarity "hidden/exposed" cannot alone account for the fact that the police did not find the letter—which was entirely exposed, inside out—let alone the fact that Dupin did. A "subjective" element must be added, which subverts the geometrical model of understanding through the interference of the polarity "blindness/sight" with the polarity "hidden/exposed." The same problematic is raised by the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes," which Derrida cites as an example of psychoanalysis' failure to go beyond the polarity "hidden/exposed" (in Freud's account). We will return to the letter's "place" later on in this essay, but it is already clear that the "range" of any investigation is located not in geometrical space, but in its implicit notion of what "seeing" is.

What enables Derrida to problematize the literary text's frame is, as we have seen, what he calls "the scene of writing." By this he means two things:

1) The textual signifier's resistance to being totally transformed into a signified. In spite of Lacan's attentiveness to the path of the letter in Poe's story as an illustration of the functioning of a signifier, says Derrida, the psychoanalytical reading is still blind to the functioning of the signifier in the narration itself. In reading "The Purloined Letter" as an allegory of the signifier, Lacan, according to Derrida, has made the "signifier" into the story's truth: "The displacement of the signifier is analyzed as a signified, as the recounted object in a short story" (PT, p. 48). Whereas, counters Derrida, it is precisely the textual signifier which resists being thus totalized into meaning, leaving an irreducible residue: "The rest, the remnant, would be 'The Purloined Letter', the text that bears this title, and whose place, like the once more invisible large letters on the map, is not where one was expecting to find it, in the enclosed content of the 'real drama' or in the hidden and sealed interior of Poe's story, but in and as the open letter, the very open letter which fiction is" (PT, p. 64).

2) The actual writings—the books, libraries, quotations, and previous tales which surround "The Purloined Letter" with a frame of (literary) references.
The story begins in "a little back library, or book-closet" (Poe, p. 199) where the narrator is mulling over a previous conversation on the subject of the two previous instances of Dupin’s detective work as told in Poe’s two previous tales, the first of which recounted the original meeting between Dupin and the narrator—in a library, of course, where both were in search of the same rare book. The story’s beginning is thus an infinitely regressing reference to previous writings. And therefore, says Derrida, “nothing begins. Simply a drifting or a disorientation from which one never moves away” (PT, p. 101).

Dupin himself is in fact a walking library: books are his “sole luxuries,” and the narrator is “astonished” at “the vast extent of his reading” (Poe, p. 106). Even Dupin’s last, most seemingly personal words—the venomous lines he leaves in his substitute letter to the Minister—are a quotation. A quotation whose transcription and proper authorship are the last things the story tells us. “But,” concludes Derrida, “beyond the quotation marks that surround the entire story, Dupin is obliged to quote this last word in quotation marks, to recount his signature: that is what I wrote to him and how I signed it. What is a signature within quotation marks? Then, within these quotation marks, the seal itself is a quotation within quotation marks. This remnant is still literature” (PT, pp. 112-113).

It is by means of these two extra dimensions that Derrida intends to show the crumbling, abyssal, non-totalizable edges of the story’s frame. Both of these objections, however, are in themselves more problematic and double-edged than they appear. Let us begin with the second. “Literature,” in Derrida’s demonstration, is indeed clearly the beginning, middle, and end—and even the interior—of the purloined letter. But how was this conclusion reached? To a large extent, by listing the books, libraries, and other writings recounted in the story. That is, by following the theme—and not the functioning—of “writing” within “the content of a representation.” But if the fact that Dupin signs with a quotation, for example, is for Derrida a sign that “this remnant is still literature,” does this not indicate that “literature” has become not the signifier but the signified in the story? If the play of the signifier is really to be followed, doesn’t it play beyond the range of the seme “writing”? And if Derrida criticizes Lacan for making the “signifier” into the story’s signified, is Derrida not here transforming “writing” into “the written” in much the same way? What Derrida calls “the reconstruction of the scene of the signifier as a signified” seems indeed to be “an inevitable process” in the logic of reading the purloined letter.

Derrida, of course, implicitly counters this objection by protesting—twice—that the textual drifting for which Lacan does not account should not be considered “the real subject of the tale,” but rather the “remarkable ellipsis” of any subject. But the question of the seemingly inevitable slipping from the signifier to the signified still remains. And it remains not as an objection to the logic of the frame, but as its fundamental question. For if the “paradoxes of parergonal logic” are such that the frame is always being
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framed by part of its contents, it is precisely this slippage between signifier and signified—which is acted out by both Derrida and Lacan against their intentions—which best illustrates those paradoxes. Derrida’s justification of his framing of the “Lacan” he is reading as neither being limited to the “Seminar” nor as including Lacan’s later work, itself obeys the contradictory logic of the frame: on the one hand, Derrida will study that part of Lacan’s work which seems to embody a system of truth even though other writings might put that system in question, and on the other hand this same part of Lacan’s work, says Derrida, will probably some day be called the work of the “young Lacan” by “university types eager to divide up what cannot be divided.” Whatever Derrida actually thinks he is doing here, his contradictory way of explaining it obeys the paradoxes of parergonal logic so perfectly that this self-subversion may have even been deliberate.

If the question of the frame thus problematizes the object of any interpretation by setting it at an angle or fold [pli] with itself, then Derrida’s analysis errs not in opposing this paradoxical functioning to Lacan’s allegorical reading, but in not following the consequences of its own insight far enough. If the frame is that which makes it impossible for us to know where to begin and when to stop, for example, why does Derrida stop within the limits of the Dupin trilogy? And if the purpose of studying “writing” is to sow an uncanny uncertainty about our position in the abyss, isn’t the disseminal library Derrida describes still in a way just a bit too comfortable?

“The Purloined Letter,” says Derrida, is signed “literature.” What does this mean, if not that the letter’s contents—the only ones we are allowed to see—are in another text? That the locus of the letter’s meaning is not in the letter, but somewhere else? That the context of that meaning is precisely the way in which its context is lacking, both through the explicit designation of a proper origin (Crébillon’s Atreé) outside the text and through a substitutive structure from letter to letter, from text to text, and from brother to brother, within the text, such that the expressions “outside” and “within” have ceased to be clearly definable? But until we have actually opened that other text, we cannot know the modality of the precise otherness of the abyss to itself, the way in which the story’s edges do not simply crumble away.

In order to escape the reduction of the “library” to its thematic presence as a sign of writing, let us therefore pull some of the books off the shelves and see what they contain. This is a track neither Lacan nor Derrida has taken, but we will soon see how it in some way enfolds them both.

First of all, the name “Dupin” itself, according to Poe scholars, comes out of Poe’s interior library: from the pages of a volume called Sketches of Conspicuous Living Characters of France (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1841), which Poe reviewed for Graham’s Magazine during the same month his first Dupin story appeared. André-Marie-Jean-Jacques Dupin, a minor French statesman, is there described as precisely himself a walking library: “To judge from his writings, Dupin must be a perfect living encyclopedia. From
Homer to Rousseau, from the Bible to the civil code, from the laws of the twelve tables to the Koran, he has read every thing, retained every thing . . ." (p. 224). Detective Dupin’s "origin" is thus multiply bookish: he is a reader whose writer read his name in a book describing a writer as a reader—a reader whose nature can only be described in writing, in fact, as irreducibly double: "He is the personage for whom the painters of political portraits, make the most enormous consumption of antithesis. In the same picture, he will be drawn as both great and little, courageous and timid, trivial and dignified, disinterested and mercenary, restive and pliable, obstinate and fickle, white and black; there is no understanding it" (p. 210). And the writing which serves as the vehicle of this description of written descriptions of double Dupin, is itself double: a translation, by a Mr. Walsh, of a series of articles by a Frenchman whose name is not even known to the translator, but who is said to call himself "an homme de rien, a nobody" (p. 2). "Nobody" thus becomes the proper name of the original author in the series.15

But the author of the last word in "The Purloined Letter" is clearly not nobody. It is not even Poe; it is Crébillon. What is remarkable about Crébillon's Atrée, when read as the context from which Dupin's letter to the Minister has been purloined, is not simply that it tells the story of revenge as a symmetrical repetition of the original crime, but that it does so precisely by means of . . . a purloined letter. It is a letter which informs King Atreus of the extent of his betrayal, and serves as an instrument of his revenge; it is the King himself who has purloined the letter—written by the Queen to her lover Thyestes just before her death. The letter reveals that Plisthenes, whom everyone believes to be Atreus' son, is really the son of his brother Thyestes. Having kept the letter and its message secret for twenty years, Atreus plans to force Plisthenes, unaware of his true parentage, to commit patricide. Thwarted in this plan by Plisthenes' refusal to kill the father of his beloved, Theodamia, who is, unknown to him, his sister, Atreus is forced to produce the letter, reunite the illicit family, and transfer his revenge from Plisthenes' patricide to Thyestes' infantophagy. A Queen betraying a King, a letter representing that betrayal being purloined for purposes of power, an eventual return of that letter to its addressee, accompanied by an act of revenge which duplicates the original crime—"The Purloined Letter" as a story of repetition is itself a repetition of the story from which it purloins its last words. The Freudian "truth" of the repetition compulsion is not simply illustrated in the story; it is illustrated by the story. The story obeys the very law it conveys; it is framed by its own content. And thus "The Purloined Letter" no longer simply repeats its own "primal scene": what it repeats is nothing less than a previous story of repetition. The "last word" names the place where the non-firstness of the "first word" repeats itself.

This is not the only instance of the folding-in of the frame of references upon the purloined letter's interior. Another allusion, somewhat more hidden, is contained in the description of the Minister as someone "who dares
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all things, those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man” (Poe, p. 201). These words echo Macbeth’s protestation to his ambitious wife: “I dare do all that may become a man. / Who dares do more is none” (I, vii). The reference to Macbeth substantiates Lacan’s reading of the description of the Minister as pointing toward femininity: it is indeed Lady Macbeth who dares to do what is unbecoming a man. And what is Lady Macbeth doing when we first catch sight of her? She is reading a letter. Not a purloined letter, perhaps, but one which contains the ambiguous letter of destiny, committing Macbeth to the murder of the King, whose place Macbeth will take, and whose fate he will inevitably share. The King seems to be precisely that which cannot remain intact in the face of a letter: Atreus betrayed by his wife’s letter to his brother; Duncan betrayed by Macbeth’s letter to Lady Macbeth; Macbeth himself betrayed by his own confidence in his ability to read the letter of his Fate. And of course, the King in the “Purloined Letter,” whose power is betrayed precisely by his not even knowing about the existence of the letter that betrays him.

The questions raised by all these texts together are legion. What is a man? Who is the child’s father? What is the relation between incest, murder, and the death of a child? What is a king? How can we read the letter of our Destiny? What is seeing? . . . The crossroads where these stories come together seems to point to the story of what occurred at another crossroads: the tragedy of Oedipus Rex. We seem to have returned to our starting point, then, except for one thing: it is no longer “The Purloined Letter” which repeats the story of Oedipus, but the story of Oedipus which repeats all the letters purloined from “The Purloined Letter”’s abyssal interior.

But that is not where the letter stops. For the very Oedipal reading which Derrida attributes to Lacan is itself, according to Derrida, a purloined letter—purloined by Lacan from Marie Bonaparte’s psycho-biographical study of the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe: “At the moment when the Seminar, like Dupin, finds the letter where it is to be found, between the legs of the woman, the deciphering of the enigma is anchored in truth (...) Why then does it find, at the same time that it finds truth, the same meaning and the same topos as Bonaparte when, leaping over the text, she proposes a psycho-biographical analysis of ‘The Purloined Letter’?” (PT, p. 66). In that analysis, Bonaparte sees Dupin’s restitution of the letter to the Queen as the return of the missing maternal penis to the mother. The letter’s hiding place in the Minister’s apartment, moreover, is “almost an anatomical chart” of the female body—which leads Bonaparte to note that Baudelaire’s translation of “hung from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantelpiece” as “suspendu à un petit bouton de cuivre au dessus du manteau de la cheminée” [“above the mantelpiece”] is “completely wrong” (quoted in PT, p. 68). Bonaparte’s frame of reference—the female body—cannot tolerate this error of translation.

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It is by means of a note which Lacan drops on the subject of the letter’s position that Derrida is here able to frame Lacan for neglecting to mention his references: “The question of deciding,” says Lacan, “whether he [Dupin] seize[s] it [the letter] above the mantelpiece as Baudelaire translates, or beneath it, as in the original text, may be abandoned without harm to the inferences of those whose profession is grilling [aux inferences de la cuisine].”

♦ Lacan’s note: “And even to the cook herself” (SPL, pp. 66–67). In this cavalier treatment of Bonaparte as the “cook,” Lacan thus “makes clear” to Derrida “that Lacan had read Bonaparte, although the Seminar never alludes to her. As an author so careful about debts and priorities, he could have acknowledged an irruption that orients his entire interpretation, namely the process of rephallization as the proper course of the letter, the ‘return of the letter’ restored to its ‘destination’ after having been found between the legs of the mantelpiece” (PT, p. 68). The interpretation of the letter (as the phallus which must be returned to the mother) must itself be returned to the “mother” from whom it has been purloined—Marie Bonaparte. Derrida himself thus follows precisely the logic he objects to in Lacan, the logic of rectification and correction: “to return the letter to its proper course, supposing that its trajectory is a line, is to correct a deviation, to rectify a divergence, to recall a direction, an authentic line” (PT, p. 65). But the mere fact that Derrida’s critique repeats the same logic he denounces is in itself less interesting than the fact that this rectification itself presupposes another, which puts its very foundations in question. For when Lacan says that the question of the exact position of the letter “may be abandoned without harm” to the grillers, Derrida protests, “Without harm? On the contrary, the harm would be decisive, within the Seminar itself: on the mantelpiece, the letter could not have been ‘between the cheeks of the fireplace’, ‘between the legs of the fireplace’” (PT, p. 69). Derrida must thus correct Lacan’s text, eliminate its apparent contradiction, in order to return the letter of the interpretation to its rightful owner. And all this in order to criticize Lacan’s enterprise as one of rectification and circular return. If “rectification” as such is to be criticized, it is thus difficult to determine where it begins and where it ends. In rectifying Lacan’s text in order to make it fit into the logic of rectification, Derrida thus problematizes the very status of the object of his criticism.

But if the correction of Lacan’s text is thus itself a mutilation which requires correction, how are we to interpret the contradiction between Lacan’s description of the Minister’s apartment as “an immense female body” (SPL, p. 66) and his statement that the letter’s exact location does not matter? This, it seems to me, is the crux of the divergence between Derrida’s and Lacan’s interpretation of what the equation “letter = phallus” means.

For Bonaparte, it was precisely the analogy between the fireplace and the female body which led to the letter’s phallic function. The phallus was
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considered as a real, anatomical referent serving as the model for a figurative representation. Bonaparte's frame of reference was thus its own referent.

For Derrida, on the other hand, the phallus' frame of reference is precisely "psychoanalytical theory"'s way of preserving the phallus' referential status in the act of negating it. In commenting on Lacan's discussion of "The Meaning of the Phallus," Derrida writes:

Phallogocentrism is one thing. And what is called man and what is called woman might be subject to it. The more so, we are reminded, since the phallus is neither a phantasy ("imaginary effect") nor an object ("partial, internal, good, bad"), even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolizes [Écrits, p. 690]. Androcentrism ought therefore to be something else.

Yet what is going on? The entire phallogocentrism is articulated from the starting-point of a determinate situation (let us give this word its full impact) in which the phallus is the mother's desire inasmuch as she does not have it. An (individual, perceptual, local, cultural, historical, etc.) situation on the basis of which is developed something called a "sexual theory": in it the phallus is not the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolizes; but it does to a larger extent and in the first place symbolize the penis. (... This consequence had to be traced in order to recognize the meaning [the direction, sens] of the purloined letter in the "course which is proper to it." (PT, pp. 98–99.)

Thus, says Derrida, it is the very non-referentiality of the phallus which, in the final analysis, insures that the penis is its referent.

Before trying to determine the applicability of this summary to Lacan's actual statements in "The Meaning of the Phallus"—not to mention in the "Seminar"—let us follow its consequences further in Derrida's critique. From the very first words of "The Purveyor of Truth," psychoanalysis is implicitly being criticized for being capable of finding only itself wherever it looks: "Psychoanalysis, supposing, finds itself" (PT, p. 31, translation mine). In whatever it turns its attention to, psychoanalysis seems to recognize nothing but its own (Oedipal) schemes. Dupin finds the letter because "he knows that the letter finally finds itself where it must be found in order to return circularly and adequately to its proper place. This proper place, known to Dupin and to the psychoanalyst who intermittently takes his place, is the place of castration" (PT, p. 60; translation modified). The psychoanalyst's act, then, is one of mere recognition of the expected, a recognition which Derrida finds explicitly stated as such by Lacan in the underlined words he quotes from the Seminar: "Just so does the purloined letter, like an immense female body, stretch out across the Minister's office when Dupin enters. But just so does he already expect to find it [emphasis mine—J. D.] and has
only, with his eyes veiled by green lenses, to undress that huge body” (PT, pp. 61–62; emphasis and brackets restored).

But if recognition is a form of blindness, a form of violence to the otherness of the object, it would seem that, by eliminating Lacan’s suggestion of a possible complication of the phallic scheme, and by lying in wait between the brackets of the fireplace to catch the psychoanalyst at his own game, Derrida, too, is “recognizing” rather than reading. And what he recognizes is, as he himself states it, a certain classical conception of psychoanalysis: “From the beginning,” writes Derrida early in his study, “we recognize the classical landscape of applied psychoanalysis” (PT, p. 45; emphasis mine). It would seem that the theoretical frame of reference which governs recognition is a constitutive element in the blindness of any interpretative insight. And it is precisely that frame of reference which allows the analyst to frame the author of the text he is reading for practices whose locus is simultaneously beyond the letter of the text and behind the vision of its reader. The reader is framed by his own frame, but he is not even in possession of his own guilt, since it is that which prevents his vision from coinciding with itself. Just as the author of a criminal frame transfers guilt from himself to another by leaving signs which he hopes will be read as insufficiently erased traces or referents left by the other, the author of any critique is himself framed by his own frame of the other, no matter how guilty or innocent the other may be.

What is at stake here is thus the question of the relation between referentiality and interpretation. And here we find an interesting twist: while criticizing Lacan’s notion of the phallus as being too referential, Derrida goes on to use referential logic against it. This comes up in connection with the letter’s famous “materiality” which Derrida finds so odd. “It would be hard to exaggerate here the scope of this proposition on the indivisibility of the letter, or rather on its identity to itself inaccessible to dismemberment (...), as well as on the so-called materiality of the signifier (the letter) intolerant to partition. But where does this idea come from? A torn-up letter may be purely and simply destroyed, it happens ...” (PT, pp. 86–87; translation modified). The so-called materiality of the signifier, says Derrida, is nothing but an idealization.

But what if the signifier were precisely what puts the polarity “materiality/ideality” in question? Has it not become obvious that neither Lacan’s description (“Tear a letter into little pieces, it remains the letter that it is”) nor Derrida’s description (“A torn-up letter may be purely and simply destroyed, it happens ...”) can be read literally? Somehow, a rhetorical fold [pli] in the text is there to trip us up whichever way we turn. Especially since the expression “it happens” [ça arrive] uses the very word on which the controversy over the letter’s arrival at its destination turns.

Our study of the readings of “The Purloined Letter” has thus brought us to the point where the word “letter” no longer has any literality.

But what is a letter which has no literality?
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5. A “pli” for understanding

I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt the equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth.

—Macbeth

“Why do you lie to me saying you’re going to Cracow so I should believe you’re going to Lemberg, when in reality you are going to Cracow?”

—Joke quoted by Lacan after Freud

The letter, then, is that which poses the question of its own rhetorical status. It moves rhetorically through the two long, minute studies in which it is presumed to be the literal object of analysis, without having any literality. Instead of simply being explained by those analyses, the rhetoric of the letter problematizes the very rhetorical mode of analytical discourse itself. And if “literal” means “to the letter,” the literal becomes the most problematically figurative mode of all.

As the locus of rhetorical displacement, in fact, the letter made its very entrance into Poe’s story by “traumatizing” the Prefect’s discourse about it. After a series of paradoxes and pleas for absolute secrecy, the Prefect describes the problem created by the letter with a proliferation of periphrases which the narrator dubs “the cant of diplomacy”:

“Well, then; I have received personal information, from a very high quarter, that a certain document of the last importance has been purloined from the royal apartments. The individual who purloined it is known; this beyond a doubt; he was seen to take it. It is known, also, that it still remains in his possession.”

“How is this known?” asked Dupin.

“It is clearly inferred,” replied the Prefect, “from the nature of the document, and from the non-appearance of certain results which would at once arise from its passing out of the robber’s possession—that is to say, from his employing it as he must design in the end to employ it.”

“Be a little more explicit,” I said.

“Well, I may venture so far as to say that the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable.” The Prefect was fond of the cant of diplomacy. (Poe, p. 200.)

The letter thus enters the discourse of Poe’s story as a rhetorical fold which actually hides nothing, since, although we never find out what was written in the letter, it is presumable that the Queen, the Minister, Dupin, the
Prefect—who all held the letter in their hands—and even the narrator, who heard what the Prefect read from his memorandum-book, *did*. The way in which the letter dictates a series of *circumlocutions*, then, resembles the way in which the *path* of the letter dictates the characters' *circumvolutions*—not that the letter's contents *must* remain hidden, but that the *question* of whether or not they are revealed is immaterial to the displacement the letter governs. The character and actions of each of the letter's holders are determined by the rhetorical spot it puts them in *whether or not* that spot can be read by the subjects it displaces.

The letter, then, acts as a signifier *not* because its contents are lacking, but because its function is not dependent on the knowledge or nonknowledge of those contents. What Lacan means by saying that the letter cannot be divided is thus not that the phallus must remain intact, but that the phallus, the letter, and the signifier are *not* substances. The letter cannot be divided because it only functions *as a division*. It is not something with "an identity to itself inaccessible to dismemberment" as Derrida interprets it; it is a *difference*. It is known only in its effects. The signifier is an articulation in a chain, not an identifiable unit. It cannot be known in itself because it is capable of "sustaining itself *only* in a displacement" (SPL, p. 59; emphasis mine). It is localized, but only as the non-generalizable locus of a differential relationship. Derrida, in fact, *enacts* this law of the signifier in the very act of opposing it:

Perhaps only one letter need be changed, maybe even less than a letter in the expression: "missing from its place" [*manque à sa place*]. Perhaps we need only introduce a written "*a*," i.e. without accent, in order to bring out that if the lack *has* its place [*le manque à sa place*] in this atomistic topology of the signifier, that is, if it occupies therein a specific place of definite contours, the order would remain undisturbed. (PT, p. 45.)

While thus criticizing the *hypostasis* of a lack—the letter as the *substance* of an absence—(which is not what Lacan is saying), Derrida is *illustrating* what Lacan *is* saying about both the materiality and the localizability of the signifier *as the mark of difference* by operating on the letter as a material locus of differentiation: by removing the little signifier ",," an accent mark which has *no* meaning in itself.16

The question of the nature of the "lack," however, brings us back to the complexities of the meaning and place of the "phallus." For while it is quite easy to show the *signifier* as a "difference" rather than a "lack," the question becomes much more tricky in relation to the phallus. There would seem to be no ambiguity in Lacan's statement that "Clinical observation shows us that this test through the desire of the Other is not decisive insofar as the subject thereby learns whether or not he himself has a real phallus, but insofar as he
learns that the mother doesn't" (Écrits, p. 693; translation and emphasis mine). The theory seems to imply that at some point in human sexuality, a referential moment is unbypassable: the observation that the mother does not have a penis is necessary. And therefore it would seem that the "lack" is localizable as the substance of an absence or a hole. To borrow a joke from Geoffrey Hartman's discussion of certain solutionless detective stories, if the purloined letter is the mother's phallus, "instead of a whodunit we get a whodonut, a story with a hole in it."

But even on this referential level, is the object of observation really a lack? Is it not rather not an observation at all but already an interpretation—an interpretation ("castration") not of a lack but precisely of a difference? If what is observed is irreducibly anatomical, what is anatomy here but the irreducibility of difference? Even on the most elementary level, the phallus is a sign of sexuality as difference, and not as the presence or absence of this or that organ.

But Lacan defines the phallus in a much more complicated way than this. For if the woman is defined as "giving in a love-relation that which she does not have," the definition of what the woman does not have is not limited to the penis. At another point in the discussion, Lacan refers to "the gift of what one does not have" as "love" (Écrits, p. 691). Is "love" here a mere synonym of the phallus? Perhaps. But only if we modify the definition of the phallus. "Love" is, in Lacan's terminology, what is in question in the "request for love" [demande d'amour], which is "unconditional," the "demand for a presence or an absence" (Écrits, p. 691). This demande is not only a reference to "what the Other doesn't have," however. It is also language. And language is what alienates human desire such that "it is from the place of the Other that the subject's message is emitted" (Écrits, p. 690). The "demand" is thus a request for the unconditional presence or absence not of an organ but of the Other in answer to the question asked by the subject from the place of the Other. But this demande is not yet the definition of "desire." Desire is what is left of the demande when all possible satisfaction of "real" needs has been subtracted from it. "Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference which results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their split [Spaltung]" (Écrits, p. 691). And if the phallus as a signifier, according to Lacan, "gives the ratio of desire," the definition of the phallus can no longer bear a simple relation either to the body or to language, because it is that which prevents both the body and language from being simple: "The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark where logos is joined together with the advent of desire" (Écrits, p. 692; all translations in this paragraph mine).

The important word in this definition is "joined." For if language (alienation of needs through the place of the Other) and desire (the remainder which is left from the subtraction of the satisfaction of real needs from
absolute demand) are neither totally separable from each other nor related in the same way to their own division, the phallus is the signifier of the articulation between two very problematic chains. But what is a signifier in this context? “A signifier,” says Lacan, “is what represents a subject for another signifier.” A signifier represents, then, and what it represents is a subject. But it only does so for another signifier. What does the expression “for another signifier” mean, if not that the distinction between subject and signifier posed in the first part of the definition is being subverted in the second? “Subject” and “signifier” are co-implicated in a definition which is unable either to separate them totally or to fuse them completely. There are three positions in the definition, two of which are occupied by the same word, but that word is differentiated from itself in the course of the definition—because it begins to take the place of the other word. The signifier for which the other signifier represents a subject thus acts like a subject because it is the place where the representation is “understood.” The signifier, then, situates the place of something like a reader. And the reader becomes the place where the representation would be understood if there were any such thing as a place beyond representation; the place where representation is inscribed as an infinite chain of substitutions whether or not there is any place from which it can be understood.

The letter as a signifier is thus not a thing or the absence of a thing, nor a word or the absence of a word, nor an organ or the absence of an organ, but a knot in a structure where words, things and organs can neither be definably separated nor compatibly combined. This is why the exact representational position of the letter in the Minister’s apartment both matters and does not matter. It matters to the extent that sexual anatomical difference creates an irreducible dissymmetry to be accounted for in every human subject. But it does not matter to the extent that the letter is not hidden in geometrical space, where the police are looking for it, or in anatomical space, where a literal understanding of psychoanalysis might look for it. It is located “in” a symbolic structure, a structure which can only be perceived in its effects, and whose effects are perceived as repetition. Dupin finds the letter “in” the symbolic order not because he knows where to look, but because he knows what to repeat. Dupin’s “analysis” is the repetition of the scene which led to the necessity of analysis. It is not an interpretation or an insight, but an act. An act of untying the knot in the structure by means of the repetition of the act of tying it. The word “analyze,” in fact, etymologically means “untie,” a meaning on which Poe plays in his prefatory remarks on the nature of analysis as “that moral activity which disentangles” (Poe, p. 102). The analyst does not intervene by giving meaning, but by effecting a dénouement.

But if the act of (psycho)analysis has no identity apart from its status as a repetition of the structure it seeks to analyze (to untie), then Derrida’s remarks against psychoanalysis as being always already mise en abyme in the text it studies and as being only capable of finding itself, are not objections to
psychoanalysis but in fact a profound insight into its very essence. Psychoanalysis is in fact itself the primal scene it is seeking: it is the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself in the patient without ever having occurred. Psychoanalysis is not itself the interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a trauma of interpretation—called "castration" or "parental coitus" or "the Oedipus complex" or even "sexuality"—the traumatic deferred interpretation not of an event, but as an event which never took place as such. The "primal scene" is not a scene but an interpretative infelicity whose result was to situate the interpreter in an intolerable position. And psychoanalysis is the reconstruction of that interpretative infelicity not as its interpretation, but as its first and last act. Psychoanalysis has content only insofar as it repeats the dis-content of what never took place.

But, as Dupin reminds us, "there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial" (Poe, p. 119). Have we not here been looking beyond Lacan's signifier instead of at it? When Lacan insists on the "materiality of the signifier" which does not "admit partition," what is his way of explaining it? Simply that the word "letter" is never used with a partitive article: you can have "some mail" but not "some letter":

Language delivers its judgment to whomever knows how to hear it: through the usage of the article as partitive particle. It is there that the spirit—if spirit be living meaning—appears, no less oddly, as more available for quantification than the letter. To begin with meaning itself, which bears our saying: a speech rich with meaning ["plein de signification"], just as we recognize a measure of intention ["de l'intention"] in an act, or deplore that there is no more love ["plus d'amour"]; or store up hatred ["de la haine"] and expend devotion ["du dévouement"], and so much infatuation ["tant d'infatuation"] is easily reconciled to the fact that there will always be ass ["de la cuisse"] for sale and brawling ["du rififi"] among men.

But as for the letter—be it taken as typographical character, epistle, or what makes a man of letters—we will say that what is said is to be understood to the letter [à la lettre], that a letter [une lettre] awaits you at the post office, or even that you are acquainted with letters [que vous avez des lettres]—never that there is letter [de la lettre] anywhere, whatever the context, even to designate overdue mail. (SPL, pp. 53–54.)

If this passage is particularly resistant to translation, that in itself is a result of the fact that its message is in the "superficial" play of the signifier. Like the large letters on the map which are so obvious as to be invisible, Lacan's textual signifier has gone unnoticed in the search for the signified, "signifier."
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But the question of translation in connection with a message which is so obvious that it goes unseen is not an accident here. For in his discussion of Dupin’s statement that “‘analysis’ conveys ‘algebra’ about as much as, in Latin, ‘ambitus’ implies ‘ambition’, ‘religio’, religion, or ‘homines honesti’ a set of ‘honorable men’” (Poe, p. 212), Lacan asks:

Might not this parade of erudition be destined to reveal to us the key words of our drama? Is not the magician repeating his trick before our eyes, without deceiving us this time about divulging his secret, but pressing his wager to the point of really explaining it to us without us seeing a thing. That would be the summit of the illusionist’s art: through one of his fictive creations to truly delude us. (SPL, pp. 50-51.)

But the trick does not end there. For has Lacan himself not slipped into the paragraph on the quantification of the letter a parade of “key words” for his reading of the situation? “Full of meaning,” “intention,” “hatred,” “love,” “infatuation,” “devotion,” “ass for sale,” and “brawling among men”—all of these words occur as the possible signifieds of “The Purloined Letter” in the Seminar. But if the key words of a reading of the story thus occur only in the mode of a play of the signifier, the difference between “signifier” and “signified” in Lacan’s text, as well as in Poe’s, has been effectively subverted. What the reader finally reads when he deciphers the signifying surface of the map of his misreading is: “You have been fooled.” And it is precisely in this discussion of “being fooled” that Lacan, far from excluding the narrator, situates him in the dynamic functioning of the text, as a reader en abyme duped by Dupin’s trick explanations of his technique, a reader who, however, unconscious of the nonsequiturs he is repeating, is so much in awe of his subject that his admiration blinds us to the tricky functioning of what he so faithfully transmits.

To be fooled by a text implies that the text is not constative but performative, and that the reader is in fact one of its effects. The text’s “truth” is what puts the status of the reader in question, what performs him as its “address.” Thus “truth” is not what the fiction reveals as a nudity hidden behind a veil. When Derrida calls Lacan’s statement that “truth inhabits fiction” an unequivocal expression or revelation of the truth of truth (PT, p. 46), he is simply not seeing the performative perversity of the rest of the sentence in which that “statement” occurs: “It is up to the reader to give the letter (...) what he will find as its last word: its destination. That is, Poe’s message deciphered and coming back from him, the reader, from the fact that, in reading it, he is able to say of himself that he is not more feigned than truth when it inhabits fiction” (Écrits, p. 10; translation mine). The play between truth and fiction, reader and text, message and feint, has become impossible to unravel into an “unequivocal” meaning.
We have thus come back to the question of the letter’s destination and of the meaning of the enigmatic “last words” of Lacan’s Seminar. “The sender,” writes Lacan, “receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form. Thus it is that what the ‘purloined letter’, nay, the ‘letter in sufferance’ means is that a letter always arrives at its destination” (SPL, p. 72). What the reversibility of the direction of the letter’s movement between sender and receiver has now come to stand for is precisely the fact, underlined by Derrida as if it were an objection to Lacan, that there is no position from which the letter’s message can be read as an object: “no neutralization is possible, no general point of view” (PT, p. 106). This is also precisely the “discovery” of psychoanalysis—that the analyst is involved (through transference) in the very “object” of his analysis.

Everyone who has held the letter—or even beheld it—including the narrator, has ended up having the letter addressed to him as its destination. The reader is comprehended by the letter: there is no place from which he can stand back and observe it. Not that the letter’s meaning is subjective rather than objective, but that the letter is precisely that which subverts the polarity subjective/objective, that which makes subjectivity into something whose position in a structure is situated by the passage through it of an object. The letter’s destination is thus wherever it is read: the place it assigns to its reader as his own partiality. Its destination is not a place, decided a priori by the sender, because the receiver is the sender, and the receiver is whoever receives the letter, including nobody. When Derrida says that a letter can miss its destination and be disseminated, he reads “destination” as a place which preexists the letter’s movement. But if, as Lacan shows, the letter’s destination is not its literal addressee, nor even whoever possesses it, but whoever is possessed by it, then the very disagreement over the meaning of “reaching the destination” is an illustration of the non-objective nature of that “destination.” The very rhetoric of Derrida’s differentiation of his own point of view from Lacan’s enacts that law:

Thanks to castration, the phallus always stays in its place in the transcendental topology we spoke of earlier. It is indivisible and indestructible there, like the letter which takes its place. And that is why the interested presupposition, never proved, of the letter’s materiality as indivisibility was indispensable to this restricted economy, this circulation of propriety.

The difference I am interested in here is that, a formula to be read however one wishes, the lack has no place of its own in dissemination. (PT, p. 63; translation modified, emphasis mine.)

The play of interest in this expression of difference is too interesting not to be deliberate. The opposition between the “phallus” and “dissemination” is not between two theoretical objects but between two interested positions.
And if sender and receiver are merely the two poles of a reversible message, then Lacan’s very *substitution* of “destin” for “dessein” in the Crebillon quotation—a misquotation which Derrida finds revealing enough to end his analysis upon—is in fact the quotation’s message. The sender (“dessein”) and the receiver (“destin”) of the violence which passes between Atreus and Thyestes are *equally* subject to the violence the letter is.

The reflexivity between receiver and sender is, however, not an expression of symmetry in itself, but only an evocation of the interdependence of the two terms, of the *question* of symmetry as a *problem* in the transferential structure of all reading. As soon as accident or exteriority or time or repetition enters into that reflexivity—that is to say, *from the beginning*—, Otherness itself becomes in a way the letter’s sender. The message I am reading may be either my own (narcissistic) message backwards or the way in which that message is always already traversed by its own otherness to itself or by the narcissistic message of the other. In any case the letter is in a way the materialization of my death. And once these various possibilities are granted, none of them can function in isolation. The question of the letter’s origin and destination can no longer be asked as such. And whether this is because it involves 2, 3 or 4 terms must remain undecidable.

The *sentence* “a letter always arrives at its destination” can thus either be simply pleonastic or variously paradoxical: it can mean “the only message I can read is the one I send,” “wherever the letter is, is its destination,” “when a letter is read, it reads the reader,” “the repressed always returns,” “I exist only as a reader of the other,” “the letter has no destination,” and “we all die.” It is not any one of these readings, but all of them and others in their very incompatibility, which *repeat* the letter in its way of reading the act of reading. Far from giving us the Seminar’s final truth, these last words *enact* the impossibility of any ultimate analytical metalanguage.

If it at first seemed possible to say that Derrida was opposing the unsystematizable to the systematized, “chance” to psychoanalytical “determinism,” or the “undecidable” to the “destination,” the positions of these oppositions seem now to be reversed: Lacan’s apparently unequivocal ending says only its own dissemination, while “dissemination” has erected itself into a kind of “last word.” But these oppositions are themselves misreadings of the dynamic functioning of what is at stake here. For if the letter is precisely that which dictates the rhetorical indetermination of any theoretical discourse about it, then the oscillation between unequivocal statements of undecidability and ambiguous assertions of decidability is precisely one of the letter’s inevitable effects. Thus it is, for example, that the “indestructibility of desire,” which could be considered a psychoanalytical belief in the return of the *same*, turns out to name repetition as the repetition not of sameness but of *otherness*, which results in the dissemination of the subject. And “symbolic determination” is not opposed to “chance”: it is precisely what emerges as the *syntax* of chance.19 But “chance,” out of which what repeats springs, cannot
in any way be “known,” since “knowing” is precisely one of its effects. We
can therefore never be sure whether or not “chance itself” exists at all.
“Undecidability” can no more be used as a last word than “destination.”
“Car,” said Mallarmé, “il y a et il n’y a pas de hasard.” The “undetermin-
able” is not opposed to the determinable; “dissemination” is not opposed
to repetition. If we could be sure of the difference between the determinable
and the undeterminable, the undeterminable would be comprehended within
the determinable. What is undecidable is precisely whether a thing is decid-
able or not.

As a final fold in the letter’s performance of its reader, it should perhaps
be noted that, in this discussion of the letter as what prevents me from know-
ing whether Lacan and Derrida are really saying the same thing or only
enacting their own differences from themselves, my own theoretical “frame
of reference” is precisely, to a very large extent, the writings of Lacan and
Derrida. The frame is thus framed again by part of its content; the sender
again receives his own message backwards from the receiver. And the true
otherness of the purloined letter of literature has perhaps still in no way been
accounted for.

Notes
1 In Great Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, The Pocket Library, New York,
1951, hereafter designated as “Poe.”
2 In Écrits (Paris: Seuil, 1966). Quotations in English are taken, unless otherwise
indicated, from the partial translation in Yale French Studies 48, French Freud,
1973, hereafter designated as “SPL.”
3 This article was published in French in Poétique 21 (1975) and, somewhat reduced,
in Yale French Studies 52, Graphesis, 1975. Unless otherwise indicated, references
are to the English version, hereafter designated as “PT.”
4 Such a concatenation could jokingly be called, after the nursery rhyme, “This is
the text that Jacques built.” But in fact, it is precisely this kind of sequence or
chain that is in question here.
5 We will speak about this bracketed signature later; for the time being it stands as a
sign that Derrida’s signature has indeed been added to our round robin.
6 “So infamous a scheme / If not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes.”
7 La politique de l’autruche combines the policy of the ostrich (autruche), others
(autrui) and Austria (Autriche).
8 J. Derrida, Positions, Minuit, 1972, pp. 112–113 (translation and emphasis mine).
9 Ibid., p. 113.
11 Cf. Lacan’s description of the “effect of disorientation, or even of great anxiety,”
provoked by these exercises (Écrits, p. 60).
12 Some idea of the possibilities for misunderstanding inherent in this question can
be gathered from the following: In order to show that psychoanalysis represses
“writing” in a logocentric way, Derrida quotes Lacan’s statement against tape
recorders: “But precisely because it comes to him through an alienated form, even
a retransmission of his own recorded discourse, be it from the mouth of his own
doctor, cannot have the same effects as psychoanalytical interlocution.” This
Derrida regards as a condemnation of the “simulacrum,” a “disqualification of
recording or of repetition in the name of the living and present word.” But what does Lacan actually say? Simply that a tape recording does not have the same effects as psychoanalytical interlocution. Does the fact that psychoanalysis is a technique based on verbal interlocution automatically reduce it to a logocentric error? Is it not equally possible to regard what Lacan calls “full speech” as being full of precisely what Derrida calls writing?


15 In a final twist to this *mise en abyme* of writing, the words “by L. L. de Loménie” have been penciled into the Yale library’s copy of this book under the title in a meticulous nineteenth-century hand, as the book’s “supplément d’origine”...

16 It is perhaps not by chance that the question here arises of whether or not to put the accent on the letter “a.” The letter “a” is perhaps the purloined letter *par excellence* in the writings of all three authors: Lacan’s “objet a,” Derrida’s “différence,” and Edgar Poe’s middle initial, A, taken from his foster father, John Allan.


18 *Ambitus* means “detour”; *religio*, “sacred bond”; *hominis honesti*, “decent men.” Lacan expands upon these words as the “key words” of the story by saying: “All of this (…) does not imply that because the letter’s secrecy is indefensible, the betrayal of that secret would in any sense be honorable. The *honesti homines*, decent people, will not get off so easily. There is more than one *religio*, and it is not slated for tomorrow that sacred ties shall cease to rend us in two. As for *ambitus*: a detour, we see, is not always inspired by ambition” (SPL, p. 58).

19 This is what the mathematical model in the Seminar’s “Introduction” clearly shows: beginning with a totally arbitrary binary series, a syntax of regularity emerges from the simple application of a law of combination to the series. When it is objected that that syntax is *not*, unless the subject remembers the series, Lacan responds, “That is just what is in question here: it is less out of anything real (…), than precisely out of *what never was*, that what repeats itself springs” (*Écrits*, p. 43; translation mine). Memory could thus be considered not as a *condition* of repetition, but as one of its syntactic effects. What we call a random series is, in fact, already an *interpretation*, not a given: it is not a materialization of chance itself, but only of something which obeys our conception of the laws of probability.
‘Not all can be said’ can be understood in many ways; essentially, it is the proposition which gives shape to the real exactly as linguists encounter it, and which they venture to translate: ‘some grammatical construction, marked as incorrect, is excluded’. But that all may not be said is also what designates another real, which the linguist as such has nothing to do with: there is something for which words are always wanting, or, there is something impossible to say. Putting them together, as does the French language itself, these two readings get knotted in a difficulty – what for the speaking being is the site of the impossible is also the site of a prohibition.

Not that language furnishes the only evidence for it; on the contrary, in this it only repeats the sexual. Impossible, the sexual relation is for that very reason encased in defences. Whence arises a question: is the prohibition in general connected to the impossible? And is the prohibition which weighs upon grammatical constructions and from which linguists derive their authority related to the loss for words?

But this all which in more than one sense cannot be said we name nevertheless; language proposes with this end in mind signifiers which we do not hesitate to use. It is indeed in this way that we obtain those universalising propositions which, by displaying a mark of the signifier of the All in a point of their course, set themselves off and become valid for some all via some indirect route. But, on the basis of what do we maintain that, for these signifiers of the All, the interpretation must be univocal? on the basis of what are we assured that the universalising propositions are always legitimate, with no other condition than their wellformedness?

It is thus in every sense that the connection of the all to the spoken is of interest to linguistics – insofar as linguistics specifies its object out of the fact
that all may not be said – insofar as, out of this very point, it constitutes an all, a whole, moving logically from the fact that everything may not be said to the all of what is said – in so far, finally, as from this all, it intends to say all, by universalising propositions. Linguistics, in short, in its relationship with the spoken, demands the All, in every sense, that is to say, in contradictory senses and by twists and turns. From this, its antinomies are born, and its sophistry, which only become one with its subtlety and its subterfuges. No hope of unravelling them except by confronting the all that one is aiming for in what one says of what is said, with the all of which one says that it is not said.

Grammar and linguistics produce universalising propositions about language. Not that all are universal in the usual sense; it is not difficult to cite ones which are particular or even singular. But even those which enunciate some irreducible exception are meant to hold for every regular case, for every speaking subject defined according to the accepted criteria. In fact, it is really this which is authorised by the operation which delineates language against the backdrop of *lalangue* and isolates the former from the latter – a continuously legitimate usage of the universal operator at some point in the propositions produced about language.

In this way, it can be seen how closely related the operation of language, of *langue*, is to that of Language, of *langage*, the only difference separating them being that of the collective with respect to the distributive: the point of view of Language readily accommodates the universal by the extension and the positioning of the properties common to the various languages, grouping them collectively together into one all – language with a small *l*, on the contrary, presupposes the universal distributed over each, in such a way that the universalising propositions are possible for one language among others, even if it is the only one in existence. One and the other points of view, if their respective provinces can even be distinguished, consist then in continuously conjoining to the bits and pieces of the real which present themselves an operator of the All – whether this be the all of classes of words, that of the rule, or at the very least that of the supposed universalisable support of language – the speaking subject.

It is this All, undoubtedly which, in the general opinion, authorises linguistics to its claim to be a science because, since Aristotle, science is connected to the All – is not the *episteme* a set of propositions such that, for an object itself well defined as a whole, an all, they say all, in terms valid for all in all circumstances? For which Galileo seems to change little, the science he founds identifying itself as modern in giving to its object the form of the Universe, and in validating only an all-powerful technique. After all, does not what is essential to any methodology consist simply in delineating the possible modes of constructing a universalising proposition – that is, in showing how the All comes to the bits and pieces. Opinions diverge here, but this is insignificant compared to the concern which unites them. Yet, it is
apparent enough that they cannot fail not to arrive at what is essential in science. For, despite appearances, science, in and of itself, has nothing to do with the All. It is achieved only through the constructions of a writing, and the Universe that it is meant to describe or govern is its imaginary recompense – the vain hope that the writings will combine and finally take on a meaning for someone – universal subject or Humanity. But epistemologists do not give up, and each of them is bent on delineating in various ways the recoveries of an All that is held to be the only acceptable guarantee of scientificity.

It would, however, be more profitable to raise questions about foundations and to ask what conditions are necessary for this All, always required and therefore always assumed to be legitimate to be actually legitimate in the order of the signifier – whence, in other words, a proposition is uttered which, universal or particular, is universalised in positing at some point, in its object or in its type of validation, an All. There does not seem to have been much questioning on this point, everyone being too preoccupied with verifying the ways which give entry to the universal, to suspect this universal itself, and to entertain the possibility that this point which it was the goal to arrive at may not always be constructible. It does not seem, in other words, to have been perceived that, whether universal or particular, certain propositions are grouped together on the basis of assuming precisely this: ‘some All can be said’. Still less has it been recognised that this assumption itself requires a support which may not be forthcoming.

This is on the contrary what has not escaped Lacan, bringing to light as he did in l’Etourdit the cardinal hypothesis of the All – in order for any All to be said, a limit is needed which, in suspending it, would guarantee it as an All constructible in a predeterminate way. This limit is most classically proposed as an existence – at least one – itself constructible, such that it ‘says no’ to the property defining the All. Supposing then that every use of the All is symbolized under the canonical from $\forall x. \varphi x$, this scrap of writing is only sustained by another, the continuous possibility of which it calls forth: $\exists x. \neg \varphi x$, an $x$ exists such that for it the All is suspended – limit or exception, that is to say, confirmation.

This, then, is the real of writing. Whether or not for the existence thereby constructed there corresponds a reality is not then essential; the important thing is that it can be constructed. Suppose, on the other hand, not that one deny that a reality answers to this existence constructed as a limit, but indeed that this existence may not be constructible – which is written $\exists x. \neg \varphi x$, ‘there does not exist an $x$ which may say no to $\varphi x$’ – then, the All is no longer in its turn constructible. No limit suspends it from then on out, nor establishes its domain. From the all of the universe, it seeps out into the all beyond the universe, which cannot be said entirely, and the operator which sets it down, indicated by a bar of negation, can just as well be called the not-all: $\forall x. \neg \varphi x$. 

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OF THIS TWISTING AND TURNING OF THE ALL – MASKED BY THE USAGE OF THE FRENCH SIGNIFIER ‘TOUT’ (ALL), WHICH APPLIES EQUALLY TO THE ALL OF THE UNIVERSE AND TO THE OTHER ALL – THE EXERCISE IS ITSELF LIMITLESS. EVERY STRUCTURE IN WHICH THE INSCRIPTION OF AN ALL IS CONCERNED IS SUBJECT TO IT, INCLUDING THE UNIVERSAL BY MEANS OF WHICH THE TWISTING AND TURNING IS SET FORTH.¹ WE KNOW THAT LACAN DEFINES ITS MODES OF INSCRIPTION FOR THE SEXES. TO BRING THIS ABOUT, IT SUFFICES FOR $\varphi x$ TO BE UNDERSTOOD AS THE PHALIC FUNCTION – EVERYTHING THEN FOLLOWS: MAN, WOMAN, CASTRATION AND THE FACT THAT THERE ARE TWO SEXES. FOR THE WRITINGS OF THE ALL HOLD ALSO FOR EACH SPEAKING BEING TAKEN DISTRIBUTIVELY, AND FROM THE FACT THAT THEY ARE CONSTRUCTED AS AN ALL WITH RESPECT TO A $\Phi x$, ONE CAN CONCLUDE THAT EACH ONE AMONG THEM MUST BE INSCRIBED AS SUBJECT EITHER ON ONE SIDE OR ON THE OTHER.

BUT LET US CONSIDER LANGUAGE, AND PUT FORWARD THE FOLLOWING PROPOSITIONS: NOTHING EXISTS EXCEPT INsofar AS IT IS NAMEABLE IN ITS BEING, AND NOTHING IS NAMEABLE EXCEPT THROUGH AN ARTICULATION OF $\text{lalangue}$. THE SECOND PROPOSITION CAN ALWAYS BE GIVEN SOME MEANING WHICH WILL MAKE IT UNDENIABLE FOR ANYONE; AS FOR THE FIRST, IT IS NOTHING MORE THAN AN AXIOM WHOSE REFUTATION IS NEVERTHELESS IMPOSSIBLE, FOR IF SOME ELEMENT EXISTED WHICH MIGHT CONSTITUTE AN OBJECTION TO IT, IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO NAME IT. A GAME OF LOGIC, NO DOUBT, BUT FROM WHICH A CONSEQUENCE FOLLOWS – IF IN FACT THERE EXISTS NO NAMEABLE LIMIT TO $\text{lalangue}$, IT CANNOT BE INSCRIBED IN ANY WAY ON THE SIDE OF THE ALL. THE COLLECTION OF THE ELEMENTS OUT OF WHICH IT IS COMPOSED WILL NOT TAKE ON THE FORM OF THE UNIVERSE, NOR WILL THE CLAIMS MADE ABOUT IT BE UNIVERSALISABLE. BY CONTRAST, BOTH LANGUAGE WITH A SMALL l AND LANGUAGE WITH A CAPITAL L APPEAR AS INSCRIPTIONS OF THE ALL, SUSCEPTIBLE OF DELINEATION AS SITES IN $\text{lalangue}$ OF THE UNIVERSAL. WHENCE IT FOLLOWS, RECIPROCALLY, THAT EVERY UNIVERSALISING PROPOSITION BEARING ON $\text{lalangue}$ IS ONLY PRODUCED OUT OF $\text{languge}$ OR $\text{langage}$; WHENCE IT FOLLOWS ALSO THAT $\text{languge}$ AND $\text{langage}$ CANNOT BE SUSTAINED EXCEPT BY A POINT $\exists x. \varphi x$ WHICH GUARANTEES THEM AS ALL.

THIS POINT HAS VARIOUS NAMES, BUT IT CAN ALWAYS BE LOCATED. IN THE CASE OF GRAMMAR, IT IS BY THE DIFFERENCES OF CATEGORY, BY THE STRATIFICATION OF THE ELEMENT WITHIN THE GROUP WHICH INCLUDES IT, BY THE DIVISION FINALLY BETWEEN SOUND AND SENSE, THAT IT PLACES LANGUAGE ON A GRID AND PLUNGES IT INTO THE SPACE OF THE ALLS; EACH CATEGORY, EACH STRATA, LIMITS THE OTHER, THE SOUND SUSPENDS THE SENSE AND VICE-VERSA. THIS NO CONSTANTLY REFERRED BACK FROM ONE POINT TO ANOTHER IS WHAT SAUSSURE CALLED ‘DIFFERENCE’. IN LANGUAGE AS SAUSSURE DEFINES IT, JUST AS (ALTHOUGH LESS OPENLY) IN EVERY GRAMMAR, EACH ELEMENT IS THE LIMIT AND POINT OF SUSPENSION FOR THE OTHER. LANGUAGE, IN WHICH, AS WE KNOW, THERE ARE ONLY DIFFERENCES, IS THUS MADE UP ONLY OF WHOLSES, OF ALLS. TO WHICH IS ADDDED THE ALL THAT IT IS ITSELF FOR ITSELF – SAUSSURE CONSTRUCTS IT BY MEANS OF A DUALISM. LANGUAGE BEING A SET OF SIGNS, IN OTHER WORDS $\varphi x$ BEING HENCEFORTH UNDERSTOOD AS A SIGN, THE THING IS THAT WHICH, NOT BEING THE SIGN, MAKES POSSIBLE THE SIMULTANEOUS WRITING OF $\exists x. \varphi x$ AND $\forall x. \varphi x$. TODAY, LINGUISTS, HAVING BY AND LARGE ABANDONED ANY RECOURSE TO THE SIGN, ARE CONTENT TO POSIT
an extra-linguistic, whose nature and name are of little importance, since
it is a matter of a pure limit, to which perhaps no reality corresponds and
for which one must limit oneself to the demand that it be completely
constructible.

Moreover, the division between sound and sense, stratification and dual-
ism, these functions which guarantee the All by the suspension they assure,
are themselves inscribable in the sphere of universality – in language, in fact,
there are categories which suspend it. For it is easy to show that certain
singular elements – let us take, as brief examples, the personal pronouns –
deny at once stratification (the definition in mention of the pronoun requires
its use), the division into sound and sense (the meaning of I is the utterance
of the signifier ‘I’) and dualism (the thing designated by I consists only in a
particular usage of the word which is itself a word). In order for the func-
tions denied to be in this way by the same stroke guaranteed as All, one must
no doubt allow the singular elements to be inscribed in the position of limit –
this is the role of the concept of shifter. That in the operation something
of the real is lost can hardly be doubted, but such is the price demanded by
the All.

Logicians must obviously proceed by other routes; no doubt, they give
themselves over to saving the All of each logical Language, but unlike lin-
guists, they do not have at their disposal a universe of realities in which to
delve to their heart’s content for a $\exists x.\overline{\alpha}x$; the required limit can come for
them only from the structure of logical Languages themselves. This is what
the concept of a metalanguage lends itself to, which is nothing more than the
fact that whatever might be the interpretation or the power of a logical Lan-
guage, there exists at least one entity which escapes it, which is this Language
itself. To force this point of suspension, to want Language to take itself for
its object is thus necessarily to reinscribe it on the side of the not-all, whose
palpable form is the paradox. It becomes apparent by contrast that the Lacan-
ian proposition, ‘there is no metalanguage’, is immediately translatable as
‘there is something in language which is inscribed as the not-all’, and consists
in nothing other than an affirmation of the existence in Language of lalangue.

From the perspective of lalangue, these operations equally productive of
the All are nonetheless non-equivalent. For it is out of lalangue itself, once
its existence is attested to, that logicians – the subtlest make no secret of it –
construct the limit totalising logical Languages; all that is needed is for a
name to be found for it – Tarski’s everyday language, Curry’s language $U^k$ –
which puts it in its place. But linguists cannot be satisfied with this, for it is
over everyday language itself that they must consolidate their hold. Far from
this latter being able to function as limit, it must itself, in its own unfolding,
present an inner limit, one from within. It is this which permits, to all
appearances, the division between the correct and the incorrect.

But here there is an additional twist, for this partitioning sets up no limit.
The no that it articulates is not a point of suspension, but a prohibition.
Whence it follows that language, inscribed as an All, is realised in a network of obligations and interdictions. The impossible in language, which establishes it as a real, is written in the symbolism of prohibition. This is the enigma, for who will deny that the interdicted construction does not also come from language? If it were not so, it would simply be that limit where language is suspended and confirmed as the All. No need, then, for a rule stipulating that it is excluded; rightly conceived, the function of language should here suffice. Yet an explicit judgement is always required, for otherwise nothing in the incorrect construction would announce it as such. It is by being in certain respects in language that the incorrect construction demands to be dismissed from it. Yet care is needed here; such is indeed the structure of every prohibition, and the prohibition of language does not differ from this point of view from that which weighs upon the sexual.

But this cannot be grasped except in underscoring the influence of the writings of the All on the sexual. Let us assume of a speaking being that it is inscribed as subject in one of the two writing systems. Provided that φ is understood as the phallic function, the real of its desire insofar as it is sexual is found articulated for this being in the order of the symbolic. But it is no less true to say that, from this, the family of the speaking being's imaginary identifications is generated, and in particular the system of sexed naming – 'man', 'woman' – in which is to be found captured, in reality, the real which marks speaking beings – a continuous failure to be conjoined. Thus the absolute Heteros which imposes itself in the real is written in the disparity of the writings of the All, and is imaged in the apportionment by halves of the representations issuing from the bodies: being inscribed as subject on one side or the other of φ, the speaking being will apprehend itself as ego, as I, either in the man half or the woman half.

No doubt, that to such and such a branch of writings such and such a name for the half is paired will be readily seen as contingent; but this matters little here. For us in the West, the imaginary refractions of the All and the not-all can be summed up in the respective names of man and woman. At the very most, we have learned, in modern times, that nothing in the body compels the speaking being to be inscribed, either as subject or as ego, as I, on one divide or other of the disparities – All or not-all, man or woman.

Let us assume for the moment of a speaking being that it is inscribed as an All – on the other hand, this being does not for an instant cease to know that some speaking beings are inscribed as the not-all. However, as for this being itself, it cannot apprehend them save from the All, which determines its position and its space. Whence it results that speaking beings, insofar as they are all, never cease to meet certain among them that they attribute to the same All and who, nevertheless, attest for it to the inscription of the not-all. Yet, this inscription is presented to them in the guise of a prohibition – for if the limit cannot be constructed, the All can no longer be said, and this impossible is converted for every speaking being into a commandment: 'Thou shalt
not say all’. Through the knot of mention and use enters with these words a prohibition – the very one by which Reason ever since Kant has been guaranteed: ‘Thou shalt not speak of the All’. At the same time, the negation which, in Lacanian writing, affects the operator $\forall$, allows itself with good reason to be deciphered as the $\mu$ of prohibition by which Aristotle prohibited negation from applying to the universal. To posit that the All may not be constructible has the following then as its synonym: with respect to the not-all, there is a prohibition.

Now what holds for writings holds also for their supports. Consequently, for the supports of the All, the supports of the not-all will appear also in the guise of a prohibition. Thus, for each speaking being who is inscribed as the All – which Lacanian doctrine specifies as the man’s position – the not-all will be attested to in the proposition: ‘there is some speaking being who is prohibited’. The support of this proposition will be a speaking being inscribed as not-all, say some woman – in general specified as the mother. The domain of the prohibition will be that in which the two inscriptions confront one another – the relation of the sexes insofar as is the case that it gives rise to writing. From which follows Oedipus – for the man, one woman – his mother – is forbidden with respect to the sexual relation.

A woman is forbidden, not insofar as she would mark the limit point of the human species (Jocasta is not the sphinx), but on the contrary insofar as she belongs to it; and by belonging to it, she supports what there is of the impossible to say about the All of the speaking being. Herein is knotted the paradox whereby what is impossible for the speaking being – the sexual relation, say – must, in addition, give rise to a prohibition.\(^{6}\) It is in an exactly comparable way that what is involved in language is articulated: as All, it never ceases to come up against the possibility that it is made to deny, the not-all of \textit{lalangue}, which comes down basically to the fact that of the extra-linguistic by which the All of language must be guaranteed, nothing remains except the names which are uttered for it. The impossibility which exists of saying everything about \textit{lalangue} in language will be distributed over the All in the guise of something prohibited, which is statable also by the following: ‘some construction of \textit{lalangue} is prohibited’. The domain of this prohibition will be that in which language and \textit{lalangue} confront one another: the utterance. Whence a proposition – one which is only a linguistic Oedipus: ‘from the point of view of language, there is some construction which is prohibited, insofar as it could be uttered’.

Once more, it is not a question of a limit point. The forbidden construction contains nothing which suspends the features of language, to the point that even a few subterfuges from time to time suffice to include it within language.\(^{7}\) Despite the derisory quality of its makeup, it attests distributively in language, delineated as locus of the universal, to the not-all, namely \textit{lalangue}, which, insofar as nothing exists to set a limit to it, cannot all be said. One thus sees why the assertion of the real of language is a homonym

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of the axiom by which Lacan proposes that the saying is of the order of the not-all – 'all cannot be said'. The borderline of the real that linguistics is bent on representing as the partitioning between the correct and the incorrect is made of no other substance than *lalangue* itself; it supports in its form as borderline the unlimited which undoes all universality. It is nevertheless upon this that by an astonishing effort linguistics must build in order to credit once more to the account of the universal the very thing which attests to that which is impossible to say.

**A desiring linguist**

What is essential to linguistics may or may not be introduced under the form of the sign. This is not to say that the choice would be inconsequential, at least when it is thought out. Quite the contrary, a lot rests on the fact that in Saussure the sign is made the support of so much that is essential, and not only in the *Course*, but everywhere else: in the studies of myth, in the analysis of anagrams, and so on. To the point that one begins to suspect it involves a more considerable investment – not only the foundations of a science, but the circumscription of a mode of being, until then unprecedented.

For one must not be afraid of exaggerating the stakes: the Saussurean texts attest to the absolutely desperate character of the aporias in which the sign is inscribed. It all comes down to a single question: from whence derives the fact that there exists the discernible? Which is equivalent to the following: how does it happen that one may think of repetition and non-repetition?

Saussure could not have been ignorant of the common answer: in order to discern, one has only to name; but this only underscored the aporia, when it was for him precisely a question of introducing discernment into that by means of which one names – let us say, to put it simply, into Language. Whence the celebrated queries – variations on Jeannot's knife\(^8\) – what is the identity of a chess piece, of a train, when all their material elements can be modified? Or, to take up a less well known text:

> 'the rune Y is a symbol.
> 'Its IDENTITY (…) consists in this: that it has the form Y; that it is read Z; that it is the letter numbered eighth in the alphabet, that it is mystically called *zann*, at least when it is cited as the first in the word.
> 'After a short interval: … it is 10th in the alphabet … but already here IT begins to assume a unity (…).
> ‘Where is its identity now?’\(^9\)

In other words, each of the predicates analysing the substance can change independently of the others, in such a manner that the identity, if one wishes to circumscribe it, will have to be found elsewhere – not in the substance, but
in the form; that is to say, as we have seen, in the system of differences. It is here that the concept of the sign intervenes in a crucial manner; unlike the sign of the philosophers, the Saussurean sign does not represent — it represents for the other signs. But unlike Lacan’s signifier, no one has ever been able to say what it represented. In fact, it represents only itself — that is to say, a pure intersection, a nothing, of which one cannot even say that it is one.

For this is the paradox: the very element which should ensure discernment is crisscrossed by the multiplicity of oppositions in which it is caught; it lacks the wherewithal to insure the agency of the One. For the sign accommodates itself to a silence — it is constructed so as to foreclose the subject, whose insistence and repeated lapses circumscribe the One of each of the signifiers as it relates to another, and confer on all of them the One-by-One which structures them like a chain. Among the properties of the sign, the differential ensures the desired suture — identity is sustained only by the absence of any Self for the sign.

Thenceforth is constructed, as if a priori, the figure of a return of the foreclosed — for Saussure, this could only be accomplished by the reappearance of a Self out of the units of language, and which would be referable to a subject of desire. It suffices to point to the work on anagrams.

The available texts have been gathered together by J. Starobinski, to whom I refer the reader here for all relevant points. They have been widely commented upon, and certain of them have already been invoked as the basis of a practical poetics. Nonetheless their implications have never been precisely determined. For this reason I will concentrate briefly on reestablishing the issues at stake.

It all begins, it seems, with a philological problem: in what does the Saturnian verse consist?

Saussure, applying the classic method for the examination of texts, discovers a first principle, that can be called the principle of the pair:

[I]n a Saturnian verse, the phonemes of each type are always paired.

With this principle, hence, only the number of phonemes is constrained, but not their nature. A more careful examination reveals that a principle governing the choice of the paired phonemes must be added to it; this is the principle of the anagram.

In a Saturnian verse, the phonemes are chosen on the basis of a noun, which is linked in a crucial way to the narrative meaning of the verse.

As these principles, once established, cannot be ascribed to the aleatory, and as furthermore they are non-necessary, they must be assumed to have a specific cause — a knowledge, explicit and conscious, of which the absence of any trace must be attributed to a secret.

Thus formulated, the hypothesis is in no way improbable from the point of view of the philological method. All that can be said is that it is
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undemonstrated; the demonstration would have to take the following form: establishing (1) that there are texts without anagrams; (2) that all confirmed anagrams are the result of a specific technique. Yet, this is what Saussure failed to do. Once defined, anagrams appeared, undeniably, everywhere – besides in Saturnian verse, in every type of Latin verse, no matter its period, even including modern verse, whose authors, consulted on the subject, neglected to answer. From that moment on, Saussure found himself in the presence of an unavoidable real, but one which philology could not deal with. There were no longer any non-necessary principles, but a property always discoverable in texts – no longer the obliterated knowledge of specialists who had themselves vanished, but the unconscious knowledge of language itself.

Nothing in all of this has any longer to do with foreclosure, and actually, it is more difficult than it would seem to establish what really rides on the anagrams.

The first thing to observe is that properly speaking the anagram denies the Saussurian sign.

— The anagram is not differential – each anagram is based on a certain noun, whose phonemes it redistributes. But it is clear that this noun (proper or common), even though it is a linguistic unit, is not treated together with what is differential. It has an identity proper to it, a Self, which it does not draw from the system of oppositions in which it would be apprehended by linguistics.

— The anagram is neither contingent nor arbitrary; its function consists in imposing a necessity on the phonemes of the verse, shielding them from the chance which marks the lexical units.

— The noun-in-anagram functions as a ‘sense’ and not as a signified; it is as a thing in the world – and not as the element of a language – that it is the global designation of the whole. In this sense, the anagram contravenes dualism – the order of signs and that of things are merged, and the second functions as a cause with respect to the first.

— More generally still, the anagram undermines the very principle of all linguistic or grammatical descriptions – whatever may be their methods, these assume the law of excluded middle; two units are either totally distinct, or totally collapsed; one unit is either present in a sequence, or absent. Now, let us consider the sequence *Cicuresque*, anagram of *Circe* (an example of Saussure’s in Starobinski, p. 150; English translation, p. 119) or *despotique*, anagram of *désespoir* (an example of Jakobson’s): to ask if the paired forms are distinct one from the other simply has no longer any meaning, since the anagram is supposed really still to exist in its explicit form; likewise, *Circe* or *désespoir* cannot be said to be univocally present or absent. The anagram as such determines an area where such questions, essential nonetheless to a description, are no longer relevant.

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The place in the verse where the phonemes of the crucial noun are found concentrated Saussure calls the locus princeps (Starobinski, p. 50; English translation, p. 33): the sovereign place. Its essential attribute is that it weaves into the phonemes of the line a discrepancy which governs them. It is insofar as it differs from the elements of the explicit text that the anagrammaticised noun can be its principle of organisation. In other words: (1) insofar as it embodies a difference and (2) insofar as it is one. To which the locus princeps adds that this principle is included in the verse as one of its parts.

One could easily maintain that the anagrammaticised noun is nothing other than the verse itself, considered as a succession of phonemes, concentrated in a single point: the One of the noun embodying the One which governs the verse, insofar as one verse and as divisible into discernible elements, one by one. In this sense, the locus princeps, or sovereign place, is an appropriate enough image of the master signifier - the signifier One of the 'there exists some One in the signifying chain', included in the signifying chain.

The distance from the Course could thus not be greater. There, everything was governed by differentiation, so that it was impossible to establish any imaginary representative whatsoever, grouping within itself the set of the intervals and differences governing language; here, by contrast, differentiality is undone and what remains of it takes the entirely positive figure of a sovereign place, of a place by rights locatable in every verse.

In the second place, it should be said outright that the anagrams are in no way illusory. On the contrary, they touch upon a real: that of homophony. Everything rests, in Saussure's arguments, on the fact that one sequence of phonemes can always echo another, and through this signify it cryptogrammatically. Now, the fact that this is necessarily the case goes without saying, requiring only a little careful attention. Open randomly any text whatsoever - Meillet tried the experiment - and anagrams abound, impossible to stamp out.

Only, with this real of homophony, condition for the slip of the tongue and the pun, linguistics has nothing to do. It sets it aside, ascribing it to the contingent. This the Saussurian sign easily accommodates: if it is contingent that a particular phonic signifier is attached to a particular signified, a fortiori the same will hold if two phonic signifiers attached to different signifieds should happen to be grouped together. These are accidents in the order of things, which cannot affect the order of signs.

This is not to say that linguistics always forgoes treating the real of homophony, but it will do so in reducing it to its core of contingency and in subjecting it to the excluded middle of distinctiveness. Comparative grammar is thus entirely based on the observation that, in a given language and especially from language to language, there are echoes, but it is well known that their cause is statable as a linguistic set whose status is regular - for example, Indo-European - governed in this case by the usual principles. In
the same way, and by a natural extension Saussure, confronted with another homophony, attempts to integrate it into the field of philology, in ascribing it to an entirely contingent cause: a noun, an ordinary lexical unit, chosen by a technician for the purpose of coding, and continuing to exist, distinct, as a cryptographic key.

The anagram is thereby revealed to be ambiguous. On the one hand, it bespeaks the fact that homophony belongs to language, as the object of linguistics; but on the other hand, it bespeaks the fact that it is not assimilable to language. For this reason, the anagram can restore the required contingency only in denying the standard properties of the sign. It represents, in a philological system of language, what in it marks its dependence with respect to a real against which it cannot be measured.

The anagram thus represents, within the system of the impossible of language an 'in addition' which is distinguished from it. On the one hand, it is entirely formulable in terms of phonemes and presupposes an analysis based, in this case, on the principle which makes homophony contingent — so that the latter acquires its status only through a system which devalues it. On the other hand, it denominates a real which exceeds every possible phonology. In this way, through the intractability of its real it places language in excess, whether considered in itself or in its calculable representation. This function of excess we will call *lalangue*.

Nevertheless, the essential is perhaps not yet reached, for the ambiguity of the anagram very readily lends itself to any human science whatsoever, and through it the real of homophony can give rise, just like anything else, to deduction and notation. This is, moreover, what one observes since, thanks to Jakobson, what was a failure from the point of view of philology, is turned into a success measurable from the point of view of structural linguistics through the intermediary of poetics. By the same token, language as a system of the impossible regains its territory and extends its frontiers. What might seem to exceed it is no longer attributable to an effect of the real, but to an imaginary figure: poetic genius. As often happens, what cannot be assimilated to calculable representations is credited to humanist culture. The Saussurian anagram becomes the modern figure of the trope, means of commentary, through a compromise which reconciles to one another poetry and the science of language.

But it should be clear that Saussure had something quite different in mind. Unlike Jakobson, poetry scarcely interested him and he would not have been satisfied to come up with a plausible way of talking about it; as he understood it, he was dealing with truth, in the guise which alone counted for him — speculation on Indo-European. And it was of little importance to him if, via this speculation, he found yet another approach to the cultural forms of the humanist tradition. What he was searching for was a knowledge.

The anagrams must spell out the initiatory knowledge, secret and forgotten, of the Indo-European poets, and if it is impossible to treat them as such,
better to ignore them, because in this case they are without value — so, lack-
ing the conclusive evidence, Saussure would grow silent on the subject. It is
because of this that he became a scandal, as much for the sympathisers,
Jakobson or Starobinski (a knowledge? by no means), as for the orthodox
scholars, the latter perhaps coming closer to the heart of the matter when
they speak of madness. For this is indeed what is rumoured, and no doubt
explains the embargo placed on the manuscripts in Geneva.

What makes the knowledge in this case so shocking? The reason is
simple: it is impossible to come to terms with the real of the anagrams,
completely intertwined with language, in acting as if linguistics did not
exist. And as we know, linguistics wants to know nothing of what it is that
underlies the anagrams. But what this implies is not that it wants to remain
ignorant; but rather it wishes for no knowledge to be statable in this area.
Which one can of course comply with in two ways: one consists in acting
as if there was nothing to remark — this is the current practice. The other is
to confine oneself to the love of the poets. But Saussure holds out; he is
bent on articulating a knowledge and, being able to conceive of it only
under a single form, exhausts himself by supposing a subject for this
knowledge.

Such is no doubt the locus of the madness, in which Saussure overtakes
what one could imagine to be Cantor’s madness: that, from the heart of
science, a subject should recognise, in the real that he finds, the lineaments
of a knowledge and that he devote himself to subjectivising it. This subject
supposed for the knowledge of sets Cantor named God,12 making mathemat-
ics the servant of theology; Saussure named it vates, making linguistics the
servant of legend.13

What is fundamental then is that Saussure should have posited in terms of
a subjectivisable knowledge the point where lalangue is tied to language. An
imaginary knowledge no doubt, since it scarcely does anything but fill in the
untraversable space separating one from the other — but at least Saussure did
not give in to making the latter bearable through recourse to the cultural. On
the contrary, by not letting go of it, he had a brush with madness — in this
regard the descriptions should be reread (Starobinski, pp. 38–40; English
translation, pp. 26–8) in which Saussure conjures up the scene of the vates
counting with the aid of sticks the relevant phonemes, thereby carrying out
exactly what the philologist turns out retroactively to have to repeat. Saus-
sure thus becomes in fact the point of subjectivity that he supposed in this
knowledge, and the research on the anagrams turns into the exhausting and
vain reenactment of a primal scene, in which, in the unfolding of a story and
the subjectivisation of the locus princeps, the distance from language to what
exceeds it is bridged.

As for what gives substance to the function of excess, that it should be
homophony and not something else, is a direct result of the concept of the
sign. By means of it, language is thought of as calculable in what it possesses
of differentiability. The foreclosed could thus return only under the form of that which undoes differentiability: the contingent echo.

In this respect, Chomsky constitutes what amounts to a counter-demonstration. For him, unlike Saussure, the discernible in language causes no problems and requires no notion peculiar to it. It is simply given and observed. From this point on, the differential and the sign play no distinctive role in the establishment of a grammatical notation. By way of consequence, homophony can no longer exert a deconstructive effect. It is simply out of the picture, the existence or non-existence of anagrams or of poetry having no relevance for the form of grammatical theory. This is not to say, however, that the foreclosed subject will not return, but only that it will not spring up in the same places.

As could have been expected, to the very extent that the integration of linguistics into the domain of the sciences is with Chomsky more completely attained, this returned operates, as with all scientists, under the form of an ethic of equality and liberty. Thus he who has reduced speaking beings to the status of a calculable point dedicates himself to making their condition bearable for them, in militating for their political liberation. But here, it can be seen, nothing any longer distinguishes the linguist from any other subject of science. Saussure’s singularity fades as the extraction of language from lalangue can be considered more completely accomplished.

### On language

To be is to be nameable. Now there is no name that is not speakable — but does this not presuppose that a being has spoken? This is to say that from the being to the speaking the circle is without end. A being does not come to be qualified as speaking without a certain uneasiness: it cannot be that the being is here a bare substratum, to which the property ‘speaking’ comes to be attached, even if as an essential attribute. Rather, the speaking being is one whose being itself does not fail to be affected by the fact that it speaks — since the speakable name which raises it up to being presupposes that, somewhere at least there has been speaking.

Whether or not a single speaking being — God or otherwise — exists, this being is a parlêtre. The being in it and the speaking are not disconnected and corrupt one another. But finally what does this speaking being speak? What must it be to enable and to require its being to be inscribed there in suspension?

It very clearly could not be the language of linguists that is involved: a mathematisable representation cannot in any case affect the being which sustains it, and furthermore as the object of science language is precisely maintained as not being spoken by anyone whose being is specifiable. Nor could Language with a capital L be involved. An essential attribute of the human species, it presupposes a previous being, which it contributes to specifying as
Man. Like philosophy itself, from which it derives, it repeats the disjunction of the being and its properties.

The speaking being presupposes a name, but the name presupposes the speaking being. The statement of the circle gives rise by itself alone to the semblance of its resolution: the name which calls to being the parlêtre – in fact, the very name 'parlêtre' – can continue to exist only as a lack since, during the time which precedes the utterance of the name, the parlêtre which utters it is missing. The set of grammatical constructions in which the name parlêtre should occur will thus be, structurally, always failing, the operator all will never be legitimate, if applied to it. In short this set is not all. The parlêtre can be specified only by that which names the not-all of namings – lalangue.

It is in this register moreover that the Witz 'parlêtre' itself reverberates, sufficient indication of the relation: lalangue is that by which a being can be said to be speaking. The two concepts are merely one and the same concept and are distinguished only by their point of view. Hereafter, every question about lalangue can be translated into a question about the speaking being, and is found to depend in the final analysis upon the following question: what is a speaking being?

To introduce the possibility of one, Lacan deliberately adopts a classical style. It is, he says, because two beings cannot be joined together that they speak. A thesis entirely philosophical in appearance, whose most undisguised formulation can be found in Géraud de Cordemoy's Discours Physique de la Parole, but the tradition goes a good deal farther back. The thesis generally takes on its meaning via the construction of the contrary hypothetical case: take that of pure spirits – angels, for example; nothing comes to raise an obstacle to their union. Knowing immediately everything about one another, they have no need for Language. By which the following is implied: (1) that the crucial relation between two beings is the knowledge, the acquaintance, they can come to have of one another; (2) that the place of this knowledge being the mind, the body constitutes the crucial obstacle.

It is easy to guess that this is not what interests Lacan. What, however, confers its value on the classical thesis is that it links the possibility of Language to the existence of a particular impossible, marking a particular relation. For the philosopher, the terms of the relation are subjects of representation, endowed with a mind and a body, the second representing the first; the relation is one of knowledge via the intermediary of a representation, otherwise known as a communication;¹⁵ the impossible is sustained by the body. Of this account nothing remains in Lacan except the model – the terms are desiring subjects, the relation is the sexual relation, what sustains it are the bodies, not insofar as they represent the movement of the mind, but insofar as they are cut up, fretted by desire. In the same way, then, as the Language of philosophy is the site of the impossible of mutual knowledge, so likewise lalangue is the site of the impossible of the sexual relation.
One can see from whence the communication model draws its force when it comes to representing Language; it is that it is cut exactly to the dimensions of the real of which Language is the phantasy. The pair of interlocuters that the model unites is the faithful image, and thereby the most appropriate mask, of the impossible conjoining of two desiring subjects. Now, we have seen, all linguistics is based on a communication model (or its equivalent).\(^\text{16}\)

In this sense, it takes its internal coherence from the phantasmatic: the representation of the act of Language with a capital \(L\), supposedly the condition for language with a small \(l\), is turned into a grimacing mimicry of the real in which \(lalangue\) is established.

Two subjects which cannot be joined together — such is the knot of \(lalangue\). In other words, two speaking beings are necessarily and really distinct, and from no point of view can their difference be overcome — not even conceptually. They never cease to be written as discernible, and no real can exist where they are made symmetrical. It is in this way that the communication model — that of Saussure, for example — functioning as a representation, functions also as a mask. Its essential property consists in effect in applying to the impossible relation of conjunction the principle of symmetry and of indiscernibles, two speaking subjects in the sense of linguistics being by definition considered only under the features which make them equivalent one to the other. In this way, the non-conjunction is maintained in the framework, but in such a way that it is always possible to deny it and to compensate for it by the equality and symmetry of the terms. In truth, Language, as a concept, and language, as the underpinning of a real, are nothing other than this compensation itself. They fill in the chasm of non-conjunction, magically converting its effects into so many indications to the contrary. The topology of non-conjunction becomes the space of communication; the heterogeneous collection of the \(parlêtres\) is counted as the homogeneous one of partners in an exchange, the snatches of grammatical constructions are made into a message.

What is thus revealed is a singular relation of language to love. For love must also compensate for an impossible conjunction: the very one captured by Lacan in the formula, ‘there is no sexual relation’. Moreover, one should try the following experiment: take any schema of communication whatsoever and introduce into it, instead of speaking subjects, entirely calculable, subjects barred by desire, and one obtains the form of a love. The difference, of course, erupts in the manner of the desire’s insistence, but this counts perhaps less than the homology — in love as in language, it is a matter of eliminating the discernible, of making it so that it ceases to be written, so that the two become one, by a phantasmatic bridging of the unconjoinable. In addition, the operation borrows the same means, those of the sign. Cordemoy said it well enough: the language-dependent relation is erected upon the fact that a speaking subject surmises that the being it is face to face with is not only a like being, but a self-same one, that is to say, a speaking subject
the same as it; it need only in this case recognise in certain physical move­ments signs and as a consequence assume for them a transmitting subject. It is in the same fashion, Lacan says, that for a gesture, for a word, in short for a spoken sentence, a desiring subject presupposes another subject, that it would love insofar as one was the same as the other with respect to desire.

Why should it be surprising then if from love to language one moves by making them reversible, as all the varieties of préciosité attest, if one joins them one to the other, to the point that the love of language and the lies of love, far from counting as alliances of words, attest to the oneness of a common concern: the ‘self-sameness’ compensating for the impossible con­junction? Both are rooted then in lalangue, insofar as it is the site of this impossibility.

There is one difference, however: wherever love is interlaced with desire and denies the necessity of lalangue, it is out of desire that language acts as if love did not exist, and it is out of lalangue that it constructs its material. Consequently, it is from language alone that one can hope for access to lalangue; but the homology of love can be of help here. The fact that lalangue exists in effect comes down to saying, as we have seen, that love is possible, that the sign of a subject can cause desire, that a subject of desire can give a sign in a chain: it is in this way that lalangue exceeds language and imprints on it the mark by which it can be recognised.

Given a sequence of language, it is enough for a subject of desire to give a sign in it at one point, for everything by one and the same stroke to founder – the calculability of syntax ceases, grammatical representation caves in and the articulated elements turn into signifiers. This process, which, following J. A. Miller, taking up a term of Lacan’s, I will call subjectivisation, can operate anywhere; all that it requires is a chain and a point that is distinguished within it. The subject, in this sense, has the freedom of indifference and all places can be occupied by its desire.

Let us assume that language, as the system of the impossible and as the object of a knowledge, is subject to this process – at once the function of excess – which is lalangue – takes shape within it. This is the set of all poss­ible chains – those that science represents: etymology, various paradigms, derivations, transformations, and so on, and those that it refuses to recog­nise: homophonies, homosemies, palindromes, anagrams, tropes, and all imaginable figures of association. Lalangue is thus a throng of proliferating arborescences, to which the subject fastens its desire, any node or knot capable of being selected by it in order there to give a sign. The point of subjectivisation is always one among many, and the chain in which it is dis­tinguished is no sooner delineated than a thousand analogous chains spring up: swarming, as Lacan says. Any chain of any language whatever, insofar as a subject can give a sign in it – such could then be a definition of lalangue. But it really goes into operation only from the moment when a subject of desire has, in the chain, subjectivised a point, in other words, when it has
spoken its desire. In this sense, _lalangue_ is equally as well, in the proliferation of its associations, the virtual set of the statements of desire. To this statement, _lalangue_ offers its resources, and they are borrowed for whatever they are worth – including in its unconscious dimension.

In this respect, the characteristic step of linguistics and of grammar boils down to constructing a representation of the chains of association. The fundamental notion becomes then that of the paradigm, by means of which the chains are converted into stateable and regular tables. One can understand the peculiar status that the theory of the paradigmatic occupies in Saussure – it is the critical point where language is extracted from _lalangue_, only certain associations being retained, the others being henceforward condemned to exceed the representation and to continue to exist as repressed in the form of an unconscious knowledge.

But the speaking being is not generally satisfied with this enumerative approach – it requires something which represents _lalangue_ without adulterating it, an image of that which exceeds representation. The itinerary is necessarily imaginary, if only because it is reflexive – it is a matter of the speaking being going back to what makes it a speaking being and stabilizing this with an imaginable totality and permanence. Here opens up a gallery of well known figures, of which the principal is the mother tongue, which is not _lalangue_ but a received image of its function of excess with respect to grammars and theories. One must add here all ideal languages – that of Brisset, but also the basic language of Schreber, and the language of Wolfson, obtained by addition from all non-maternal languages. Here it is a matter of totalities definable in extension; elsewhere, the definition is intensional – thus the surplus-purity of Mallarmé. In every case one obtains, included among the possible languages, a term which exceeds them all, as if standing in for the representation of the function of excess itself.

The function of the anagrams is easily enough seen in this way; but perhaps the analysis should be pushed further. On several occasions we have, among the chains of association, invoked etymology, and notably those which make Indo-European possible. Up till now, the latter has been apprehended only as an object of science, and as the figure of a knowledge in which Saussure hoped to write the anagrams out in an integral fashion. Yet a suspicion arises, in light of the rumor which Indo-Europeanists repeat among themselves – namely, that their discipline time and again brushes up against madness. This suspicion is reinforced again when the entirely peculiar type of linguistic science to which comparative grammar aspires is recognised, as well as the type of data which engenders it.

In fact, let us take things from the beginning – phonic echoes from language to language had been observed from time immemorial, and in particular between Greek and Latin. Was this fact to be ascribed to contingency or to a general necessity of phonetic articulation, or finally, in the case of homophonies, was it necessary to infer a specific cause? The problem was able to
receive a precise formulation, and as a matter of fact, which makes it a rare case, it has been entirely resolved – from 1880 on, exactly what was involved had become clear.

The homophonies considered are neither absolutely contingent nor absolutely necessary; they have a specific cause which is describable as a community of origins. This is the concept of Indo-European: as can be seen, it is analysed into two parts: (a) the phonetic resemblances have a cause; (b) this cause is a language. In other words, Indo-European is the language which causes the homophonies from language to language. To be an Indo-Europeanist then is (a) to construct a language, the language of the cause, (b) to link each form of the observed languages to a form of the language-cause (this is what is called etymology). One immediately sees the strangeness of the notion of Indo-European – it is a language in the full sense of the word, at every point comparable to every known language, but it will never be attested to as spoken by subjects. In effect, if by chance one were to describe observable traces, they could be held to be only the elements of a language-effect, the sought for language-cause still eluding the description.  

In short, Indo-European is not simply a dead language, like Latin, which is no longer spoken, but which it is always possible to ascribe to subjects. Indo-European is itself never in the position of being considered a mother tongue for subjects, even ones who have disappeared. At first sight, we have here a language which is entirely the elucubration of knowledge.

Is this to say that it must be treated as some sort of Esperanto, concocted for rational ends, with a view to eliminating all traces of an excess in which a subject might have given a sign? It is the contrary which is true – each Indo-European form is in itself a knot of associations, at once the origin and the echo of a set of observed forms, which are found thus grouped together in a series of indefinite crisscrossings. The etymological dictionary is presented in fact as an arborescence with endless branchings, offered for a subject to be inscribed in it. No doubt, unlike, for example, what one finds in Bloch-Wartburg, the law of the series is not supported by a single document: everything is a matter of the reconstruction of knowledge. But this knowledge itself is completely infected by a desire, that of the Indo-Europeanist for, after all, what can become attached to the reconstruction of a language of which no one will ever perceive a single element, if not a desire? Whence, moreover, the ludicrous side which, for the reasonable mind, characterises comparative grammar; every form that it produces presents this mélange of passion and futility which gives evidence of a surplus-of-thrills.

For Indo-Europeanists – but one must be one at least an instant in order to perceive it – Indo-European is the set of all the arborescences of particular languages, the matrix and the writing of all equivocations, flattened out into the form of a language. In this sense, it concentrates within itself and embodies those points that, in each particular language, would betray an agency which exceeds it. It is these very points which constitute a cause for
Indo-Europeanists, and arouse their desire so far as language is concerned. This desire can be stated thus: to write the excess itself, to write *lalangue*.

In the process, a node, a knot, is described where knowledge, writing and *lalangue* as the place of equivocations intersect and blend. For Indo-European notes the arborescences in a regulated and constrained writing via phonetic laws – and in return permits the re-introduction of the discernible into each language. Still more, it is Indo-European which supposedly maintains what there is of the One in each Indo-European language. What we encounter once again then is the concept of the master-signifier, signifying what there is of the One in every signifying order, and for each signifier of this order. In this sense, Indo-European is the master-signifier incarnate for each particular language.

But here this is a general fact, true of all ideal languages, and one which touches upon the very essence of languages. After all, even if one can disclose in all grammars and all linguistics a core of misconception, this perhaps counts for less than the simple fact that grammar and linguistics are possible. Now this presupposes one thing, which is in no way trivial: languages are transcribable in such a way that everything in them is discernible from everything else, in other words they reveal that the One exists. So the question arises: where does the One in the various languages come from? From the master-signifier, it will be answered, but this implies at the same time the continuous possibility that the existence of the discernible must be ascribed to a signifier placed in the position of agent: the agent of the discernible, that is to say none other but the Master.

Here is the explanation of what we had previously observed – that the Language of mastery is literally obsessive when it comes to grounding the discernible in language; the law, the rule, the arbitrary, all these various names converge towards a unique centre: the signifier of the One, put in the position of acting upon language. No doubt, linguists and grammarians can come to terms with this in various ways. There are those who speak openly to the Master, and no one since Richelieu can ignore the intimate connection established between the regulation of language and the maintenance of order among peoples (that the comparativists had more taste for Nazism than for parliamentary democracies, that formalist linguists are generally liberal and modernist introduces only anecdotal variations). There are those who close off entirely the question of the origin of the One – as does Chomsky, only to pay for the operation of a return of the figure of the Master under the explicit form of political militancy. There are finally those, rarer still, who, having recognised the question, take upon themselves the weight of its solution. They subjectivise within themselves the position of the agent of the One, making themselves the support of that which introduces the discernible into language. Such is, I believe, the key to Saussure, qua subject – the madness, in fact, does not begin in him with the anagrams; it is already in the *Course*. It is one and the same move which leads him to wish to maintain the
One in the midst of the sonorous equivocations of Latin verse and in the midst of every possible language, by the differential. The Course, recognised by academics, and the pages of a poetics, unknown to them, repeat the same line, the one which without a doubt articulated Saussure’s desire: the One which marks languages comes to them from outside.

For this is indeed what is at stake – nothing, in languages, lead one to think that they are transcribable as signifiers. This is a power which exceeds them. What other than a legislator, divine or not, individuated or not, subjectivised or not, but in any case a Master, could account for it? But this is precisely what Lacan would not accept. If the master-signifier is incarnated, it is not in an agent, it is in lalangue, insofar as all the forms of agents are its effects. At this point once again is found the proposition: if there is a One in languages – if then linguistics is possible – this is because lalangue exists, because speaking beings, as such, cannot be joined together.

Notes

1 The twistings and turnings of the All are very much in evidence in those names which tradition hands down: the World, the Universe and God. As far as the World is concerned, we know that it is unambiguously inscribed on the side of the All, since God – if only as creator – is precisely the limit which suspends it. However, should the Universe be substituted for the World, everything becomes increasingly knotted, for it is not logically excluded that God would be included within the Universe. From its now being infinite, there is nothing to prevent this from happening. Just as the Universe splits off from the world, God thus comes to be divided up.

It would be easy to demonstrate that the God of the philosophers and scientists is this x which sets a limit to the Universe, and by this fact constitutes it as an All, within the scope of Universalising propositions. Whether this x is a reality or not is of little importance, so long as its existence is constructible; consequently, deism and atheism can be taken as equivalent to one another (and it can be seen parenthetically that Freud’s atheism is necessarily linked to what Lacan calls his *touthommie* or ‘allmanhood’. In return, it suffices that, through an Almighty Power, no x may be constructed which escapes the px or that, through the Incarnation, God should be made Himself a value of the function. In that case, the All is no longer constructible. The support of this not-all is the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, and just as equally the Mystery of Jesus – an all-powerful God, because He is capable of miracles, incarnate and hidden as well, insofar as He cannot be wholly said. Pascal should be read on this subject, but Newton as well.

If God is no longer in the role of limit, it is up to another signifier to save the All of the Universe – hence this pre-emptive moment which would be its origin; or again, the insertion, in the series of phenomena, of that which denies it: liberty. One recognises what animates the Kantian antinomies and the resolution of them which practical reason proposes – but no less the detours of modern cosmologies.


2 See J.-C. Milner, ‘Réflexions sur l’arbitraire du signe’, *Ornicar*, 5 (1975), pp. 73–85, where the argument is worked out for the personal pronouns as well as for performatics and delocutives – which in no way exhausts the list.
3 The central claim of hermeneutics – ‘there is something which always escapes Language’ – is of a comparable order; it consists in positing a limit – God or Meaning – which confirms Language as All. One can in this way understand how hermeneutics is from its conception in part linked to philology.

4 See J.-A. Miller, ‘Théorie de lalangue’, Ornica, 1 (January 1975) pp. 27–9, and ‘U’, Ornica, 5 (1975), pp. 61–72. Tarski’s article is from 1933: ‘The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages’, in A. Tarski and J. H. Woodger (trans.), Logic, Semantics, and Metamathematics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956). H. B. Curry has returned several times to his analysis of language U; the clearest presentation is perhaps to be read in A Theory of Formal Deducibility, Notre Dame Mathematical Lectures, 6 (1957), where we read the following: ‘The point is that everything we do depends on the U-language . . . Moreover, we can significantly-make statements about the U-language within the U-language. It follows from the foregoing that there is no such thing as meta-U-language’.

The last propositions of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus are, negatively, equivalent: ‘what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’ evidently states a limit which retroactively constitutes the Tractatus as All, homologous to the All of the World introduced in the text’s first proposition; but in turn, the fact that an impossible should give rise to an explicit prohibition proves that there exists at least one place where one can speak about what cannot be spoken about – this place is lalangue.


6 That for the speaking being what is impossible should also be forbidden is then a structure which never ceases to hold when the laws of speech are at stake. Critical philosophy legislates against seeking to know the Thing in itself, because to know it is precisely impossible. There are things which it is impossible to speak of, says Wittgenstein; by this very fact, it is also forbidden to do so. If we follow Leo Strauss, Maimonides maintains at one and the same time that the disclosure of the secrets of the Torah is by nature impossible and that it is forbidden by the law (L. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, New York: The Free Press, 1952, p. 59). Abelard forbids himself Heloise all the more severely because he is castrated – a matter of vows and of logic.

7 The most usual type is quotation; if the sentence P is incorrect, it is always permissible to write the sentence $P'$: ‘it is incorrect to say that $P'$. There are other less crude procedures. Cf. Chomsky, Aspects, p. 157.

8 Martha Robert’s introduction to her French translation of Lichtenberg’s aphorisms begins: The name of Lichtenberg scarcely invokes anything more for the French reader than the famous “Knife without a blade whose handle is missing”, even though the paternity of this unusual object may not invariably be attributed to him without hesitation’. ‘Introduction’ to Georg Christophe Lichtenberg, Aphorisms, Preface by André Breton, Martha Robert (trans.), (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1966) p. 21. [Translator’s note.]
13 See Starobinski, *Les Mots*, p. 36; English translation, pp. 22–3, as well as the equation on p. 38; English translation, p. 24: ‘to satisfy either the god, or poetic law’.

14 I indicate in passing that the givenness of the discernible comes down to constituting the speaking subject as a text to be deciphered. Through the concept of competence, it is stated that grammatical theory is already written in subjects by the mere fact that they can speak the language (cf. *Aspects*, p. 25). It is thus not immaterial that some of the most prominent representatives of transformational grammar are Jewish by origin, trained in Talmudic exegesis.

15 By communication, obviously the mathematical concept should not be understood, but the concept of the philosophers: the relation of mutual knowledge between two subjects, taken in the space of representation — that is to say, endowed with a mind and a body.

16 For example, Chomsky explicitly denies any importance to the function of communication for the theory of Language. But he rediscovers its equivalent, in projecting this theory onto a unique subject; instead of mutual knowledge, Language has for its function the disentanglement for the subject of its own representations. Here one encounters again the move by which Chomsky projects the speaker-hearer pair onto a unique speaking subject. These are only variations of style.

17 This is not the place to distinguish the various types of etymology possible. Let us simply say that Indo-European etymology has little relation to the etymology illustrated in Bloch-Wartburg, the first having to do with relative temporal ordering and structural proofs, the second with absolute datings and documentary proofs. Finally these two disciplines, within the framework of science, are to be distinguished from ancient etymology — that of Varron or of Isidore of Seville — which is properly a part of rhetoric.

18 The history of comparative grammar is on this point exemplary: by turn several real languages were able to play the role of the language-cause incarnate — thus Sanskrit, and much later, Hittite. Each time, the discipline developed in treating them each in turn as language-effects.

19 In this respect, Indo-European is not unrelated to the deep structure of the transformationalists. There are, however, two differences: (1) deep structure is defined by not being able on its own to represent a language, while the set of Indo-European forms is a language in the full sense of the word; (2) the writing of Indo-European does not belong to logic.

20 We can add here the atypical heroes — Pierre Guiraud, for instance, who, linguist in the full sense of the term, nonetheless keeps open that fissure that we all devote ourselves to filling in — should one read his *Structures étymologiques du lexique français* (Paris: Larousse, 1967) and his two *Villons, Le Gay Savoir de la Coquille*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) and *Le Testament de Villon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) one would see there the gay science of homophony at work, decked out, at the appropriate moment, with Carnival finery. As for the figure of the signifier One, it is plainly outlined there: does not Guiraud have a treatise on the sexual vocabulary? See his *Dictionnaire Erotique* (Paris: Payot, 1982).