

LETTERS FROM LACAN:
READING AND THE MATHEME

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

June 1998

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Department of INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date 30 JUNE 1998

ABSTRACT

This is a study of reading and how reading is complicated by an extraordinary letter delivered by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. That letter is the *matheme*, which is part ordinary language and part technical jargon, part literature and part science. For many readers, such a mongrel heritage means that the *matheme* becomes unreadable. I argue that the *matheme* can indeed be read, but only if the reader is willing to reconsider the nature, practice and limits of conventional reading. As a condensation of Lacanian theory, the *matheme* can only be read by wading into the densely intricate paradoxes of that theory. To cross the famous three registers of Lacan, the *imaginary* of the *matheme*—its image, line, and spatiality—reveals a *real* insufficiency and disruption of *symbolic* textuality. The *matheme* always frustrates and complicates reading, but from a Lacanian standpoint, this means that it illuminates the psychoanalytic politics of reading via its strategic opacity to the reader.

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Acknowledgements

An acknowledgements section of a dissertation is not ordinarily where an author congratulates her/himself, but, true to character, I will do exactly that. I commend myself for my choice of committee members, for I could not have made any finer selections. The wisdom and grace of Nancy Frelick demonstrated that it is possible to be a good Lacanian without being a sociopath. Richard Cavell was always the exemplary embodiment of "*le style est l'homme même*." Dawn Currie's pragmatic social conscience meant that she had reservations about some of my theoretical ambitions, but it also meant that she always provided the practical advice and support that every doctoral student needs but too often never receives. Tom Kemple provided happy proof that sociological theory can, at least in particular theorists, rise above its disciplinary doldrums. Above all, Valerie Raoul, through her scholarship, acuity, integrity, and generosity, defined an ideal of supervision to which I will always aspire in my own career.

I had the great fortune to study under some exceptional teachers, who fundamentally changed and informed how I think: Derek Gregory, Lorraine Weir, Kaja Silverman, John Forrester, Diana Fuss, and especially Judith Butler. I was also blessed with the support of some exceptional colleagues, who made my studies more productive and much more pleasurable: Sharon Fuller, Kevin Haggerty, Caroline Desbiens, Alan Segal, Gustavo Guerra, Jamie Lampidis and Erin Soros. I am particularly indebted to Chris Bracken, who was and continues to be one of my finest teachers and most cherished friends.

There were two heads of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of British Columbia during my program, Laurence Ricou and Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe, and both aided me immensely. Derek Sayer, Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta, hired me ABD and must now be relieved at not

having to fire me for still being so. I am very appreciative of the efforts he made on my behalf; I hope that he will not have cause to regret them in the years to come. The fellowship support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada was crucial, and it is gratefully acknowledged.

Finally, Ted and June Aoki never quailed under the burden of still parenting a middle-aged student, showing a steadfastness which I, as a new father, find terrifying and astounding. Thank you, Mom and Dad.

Dedication

Every work could be better than it is, but no matter how much better this one might be, if I were more talented or industrious, it would always pale beside what is best in my life: my wife and my son. This dissertation is therefore dedicated to Lucy and Alex, without whose love the world would be impossible.

Preface
An Invitation to an Esoteric Letter

My Écrits are unsuitable for a thesis, particularly an academic thesis.¹

—Jacques Lacan

This dissertation is an invitation to the esoteric of the letter. This particular letter is from Jacques Lacan, but because he rarely yields to any direct confrontation, an indirect salutation becomes necessary. Since the dissertation is written from my own perspective as a sociologist, I will turn to the elegant mediation of Pierre Bourdieu: "Sociology is an esoteric science—initiation into it is very slow and requires a real conversion in your whole vision of the world—but it always seems to be exoteric."² Bourdieu is not referring to Lacan, explicitly or implicitly, but his revelation of the seemingly exoteric as definitively and comprehensively esoteric is germane nonetheless. The specific object of this research project is the *matheme*, which is a "little letter," like *S* or *a*. It is a sociological commonplace that what makes us human is language, and if that is true, then nothing could be so exoteric to literate human experience as that fundamental unit of writing, the letter. Lacan's notion of the entry of the subject into the symbolic order is aptly figured by the ordinary marvel of a child learning her/his letters, her/his ABC's. In a way, this dissertation is an invitation to return to those homely basics.

¹ Jacques Lacan, preface to *Jacques Lacan*, by Anika Lemaire and trans. David Macey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), vii. "Mes *Écrits* sont impropres à la thèse, universitaire spécialement" (Jacques Lacan, preface to *Jacques Lacan*, 7th ed. (revised), by Anika Lemaire [Brussels: Pierre Mardaga, 1977], 6).

² Pierre Bourdieu, "Landmarks," in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), 53. "La sociologie est une science ésotérique — l'initiation est très lente et demande une véritable conversion de toute la vision du monde — mais qui a l'air exotérique" ("Repères," in *Choses dites* [Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1987], 68).

In our academic histories, the painstaking attention to such letters fades quickly, as we put aside our horn-books and other childish things.³ The marvelousness of literacy is rapidly effaced by the ordinariness of reading, so much so that the letter itself becomes eclipsed. Schooling and practice raises the fundamental unit of reading from the letter to the word and the phrase, even though we may still sound out new words phoneme by phoneme. Hence Saussure's concern for the structure of the verbal sign, in which the letter has already been subsumed by the signifier. In the practice of language in the academy, the concern for the letter is mostly reduced to a matter of spelling, which, while still crucial, may nonetheless be relegated to scrutiny by software.

The letter makes an often unwelcome pedagogical return in algebra, physics and other sciences, resulting in variable student stress over $s = s_0 + vt + \frac{1}{2}at^2$ and other formulæ, portending the potential horrors of calculus and differential equations. This return of the letter is therefore not a homecoming to any nostalgic childhood basics, but rather their defamiliarization by mathematical notation. X no longer represents "xylophone" or "x-ray," but instead "the unknown," which has both forbidding and seductive connotations (as any devotee of *The X-Files* can affirm). The chasm between C. P. Snow's "two cultures" opens up; the division between the sciences and humanities is pre-configured in the difference between their treatment of letters. At university, those for whom mathematics remains an alien tongue flee to the arts, and sometimes to the social sciences, like sociology.

Psychoanalysis has traditionally straddled this division, with its historically fraught relations to both science and literature. However, psychoanalysis in its Lacanian mode has been heretofore heavily on the literature side of that binary. In North America, Lacan has

³ A horn-book is a primer or battledore. Originally, it was an abecedarian tablet, often also inscribed with the Lord's Prayer.

been read mostly by those working in literary criticism, film studies, and women's studies. Lacan's *matheme* is distinct in its way of moving discourse back to some point closer to the sciences, at least in appearance. "a" is the first letter of the alphabet, and therefore a figure for the language of literature, but also a universal mathematical designation for a constant (in part because it is the first letter). Yet the *matheme* is not some congenial meeting of literature and science; it is not the place where they both overlap in what they give us to read. Instead, it is the opposite: the place where they give us nothing to read, at least in any accustomed sense. The mutual exclusion of Lacan's *matheme* in general from the fields of reading is incarnated in the specific *matheme* \S , which is the S of the word-signifier crossed out, as if made illegible. \S is esoteric to both literature and science and therefore invites us to a mode of language which cannot be easily accommodated to either.

I was not one of those who fled mathematics because of the strangeness of the mathematized letter. My academic turn went the other way, at least early on. In high school, I found physics to be the most straightforward of my studies. There was a satisfying sufficiency in the translation of "problems" into calculable formulation, so different from the personal inadequacy that ensued when I compared the elegance of the literature that I loved with the *gaucherie* of what I wrote. Motivated largely by that somewhat negative rationale, I became a physics major in university, following a carefully arranged program that would not demand a single essay. Four years later, I had earned a B.Sc. in physics and a conviction that the discipline was, for me, neither sufficient nor satisfying. Eventually I ended up shifting to sociology at a graduate level, reading Lacan and finally learning to write, after a fashion, despite and because of old and abiding qualms. Something of that story is told in Chapter Six, but for now, I mention it merely to explain how my own approach to

reading is situated by a passion for the letters of literature and a relative comfort with the letters of mathematics. My contention is that the necessary (but not sufficient) condition for reading the *matheme*, as a peculiar letter from Lacan, is such a passion and such a comfort, wedded to the recognition of the insufficiency of both. Chapter Five examines the resistance that results when competence in mathematics and science is held to be adequate for reading the *matheme*, as in the case of the recent attack on Lacan by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont. Chapter One examines the parallel resistance manifested by two positions distinguishable from that of those two physicists. First, the resistance to the *matheme* by those, like Jane Gallop, whose passion for literature has as its corollary a disinclination towards the formalism of mathematics. Second, and more pervasively, the resistance to the *matheme* by those whose passion is for neither literature nor mathematics, but rather clear writing and plain language.

The aim of this dissertation is to show that the *matheme* can indeed be read, but only if the reader is willing to reconsider the nature, practice and limits of conventional reading. Lacan says that “it is not the same thing to read a letter as it is to read.”⁴ The *matheme*, as a condensation of Lacanian theory, can only be read by wading into the densely intricate paradoxes of that theory. The premise is that the *matheme* always frustrates and complicates reading, but from the Lacanian standpoint, this means that the *matheme* illuminates reading via its strategic opacity. The first necessary additional caution is that this dissertation, like every reading of Lacan, goes “against” Lacan, inasmuch as he declares

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge: Book XX: Encore: 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 26. “Ce n’est justement pas la même chose de lire une lettre ou bien de lire” (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan : Livre XX : Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [Paris: Seuil, 1975], 29).

himself to be unreadable.⁵ The second caution is that when I refer to mathemes, I mean precisely the little letters and other letter-like symbols that are the elements of Lacanian algebra. Mathemes in this sense are distinguishable from Lacan's algorithms (such as those of metaphor and metonymy in "The Agency of the Letter"⁶), from his topology and knot theory (including the Borromean knot), and from his graphs (such as the Graph of Desire).⁷ These are all related to the matheme, and while they will be referred to in the dissertation, they are not its central concern. Likewise, reading the matheme entails at least a brief engagement with a whole range of Lacanian concepts whose complexity and depth cannot possibly be adequately addressed here. For instance, Chapter Two deals with \S , which turns out to be not merely the crossing out of the signifier, but also the matheme for the subject. Bruce Fink wrote an insightful book on the Lacanian subject, and in his afterword still noted that "everyone will think that I have not adequately dealt with the theoretical issues most important to them in their respective fields."⁸ My chapter will obviously be much less adequate. The goal is more modest: to read the matheme, within the limitations and exclusions that reading must always impose on itself, through tactics of Lacanian theory. No doubt some will dispute whether the tactics I employ are truly "Lacanian." The followers of

⁵ "I won't tell you to read Philippe Sollers, who is unreadable, like me as a matter of fact" (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 36). "Je ne vous dirai pas de lire Philippe Sollers, il est illisible, comme moi d'ailleurs" (*Séminaire XX*, 37).

⁶ Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977); "L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud," in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966). Throughout this dissertation, the English versions of passages from various papers in *Écrits* are taken, except for noted exceptions, from Sheridan's partial translation, *Écrits: A Selection*. Unfortunately, the new and complete translation of *Écrits* by Bruce Fink was not yet available at the time of this writing.

⁷ Algorithms and graphs have been discussed extensively elsewhere by others. Jane Gallop and Elizabeth Grosz, among others, have examined the algorithms for metaphor and metonymy (Jane Gallop, "Metaphor and Metonymy," in *Reading Lacan* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985]; Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 101-102). The Graph of Desire has been analyzed by Slavoj Žižek ("Che Vuoi?," in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* [London: Verso, 1989]). The graph known as SCHEMA L has been standard fare for Lacanian commentators.

Lacan can sometimes be vociferous about the correctness or orthodoxy of readings, although their convictions seem to run counter to Lacan's insistence on the slippage of signification and the idiosyncrasy of the psychoanalytic scene. Moreover, the ever-increasing factionalism of Lacanianism across the world⁹ undermines each and every claim to authenticity and correctness. Ultimately, I cannot assert the "right" meaning of the letter; I can only say that I have tried to read the letters from Lacan, despite his warning that what he wrote was not meant to be read or included in a university dissertation. Given that so many refuse to read it, I hope the attempt is what counts.

⁸ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 148).

⁹ The April 1998 public fissure of the dominant North American Lacanian organization, the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society, and the subsequent birth of the new American-Lacanian Link, is one manifestation of this fracture, which recapitulates the fractious tribulations of the Parisian scene after the death of Lacan.

Chapter One:

Reading, Language, and the Matheme

*I propose an exercise for you. Reflect a bit on what reading is.*¹

—Jacques Lacan

The Art of Clarity

Shortly after Diana Fuss published *Essentially Speaking*, she discovered that her family had invented its own parlor game: someone would open the book, read aloud a sentence like . . .

It is not Irigaray who erects the phallus as a single transcendental signifier but Lacan: Irigaray's production of an apparently essentializing notion of female sexuality functions strategically as a reversal and a displacement of Lacan's phallomorphism.²

. . . and everyone would burst into laughter.³ Of course, they were laughing at Fuss's writing. Or were they? The quoted passage shifts discursive responsibility from Irigaray to Lacan, and even invokes a trademark phrase of the latter, *transcendental signifier*. Is Lacan also to blame for Fuss's familial reception? It would hardly be surprising if this were so. Lacan is arguably most well known for being "impossible" to read or understand. His notoriety is so marked that the invocation of his name can ignite a furore.

An example of this actually occurred in late 1996, on the internet's *Teaching Sociology* list. I must confess to being the instigator. I posted a message citing Lacan's theorization of the difficulties of language in order to contest the transcendental virtues of clear writing. The response was immediate and mixed, although mostly strong and negative. Some members

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III: 1955–1956: The Psychoses*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), 207. "Je vous propose un exercice. Réfléchissez un petit peu à ce que c'est que la lecture" (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan : Livre III : Les Psychoses: 1955–1956* [Paris: Seuil, 1981], 234).

² Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 59.

appeared to be especially vexed at Lacan's troublesome intrusion because of the list's devotion to *teaching*.⁴ One professor of sociology posted this pedagogical creed:

The art of teaching is to translate complex materials into plain language that can be understood by others. If you are unable to do that, you need to go back to the drawing board. Given enough time, even the most complex ideas can be translated into plain language.⁵

On the list, many stood up on their virtual chairs and cheered; a few, like myself, were not so sanguine. Suppose that, like so many teaching sociologists, we accept this definition of the "art of teaching." The enthusiasm of its reception—reminiscent of the laughter of the Fusses—both reveals and obscures the enormous ambition beneath the modesty of its presentation. The set of "even the most complex ideas" casually encompasses not only the entirety of humanity's intellectual history (every subtle thought ever thought), but also the totality of all its possible futures (every subtle thought that might ever be thought). The infinitude of scope is even more troubling in its implication. It places the claim for universal translatability beyond any possible substantiation, for we can never anticipate the susceptibility of all imaginable ideas. Likewise, the qualification of that claim—"given enough time"—places it beyond any possible refutation, for we can never foreclose the prospect of translation in an utterly unlimited future. This version of the art of teaching,

³ Diana Fuss, personal communication 28 July 1995.

⁴ Some months later, an idea bruited about the *Teaching Sociology* list was that of a "Sociology Bowl": a *Jeopardy*-like game-show competition for undergraduate students. Various list members enthusiastically endorsed the idea and discussed its implementation, including how it could be organized into state and regional finals, culminating in the "Super Bowl of Sociology," to be staged at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association. The problem is that the Sociology Bowl presumes the value, and even the possibility, of completely true or false statements of and about sociology. I would argue that the idea of the Bowl actively works against the provocation to think that I believe is the best part of sociology. Could the Bowl ever have a question about, say, Foucault's critique of regimes of truth, so germane to the concept of the Bowl itself? Moreover, the possibility of the Bowl is grounded on the very communicability of language that Lacan puts into question.

⁵ Post to the *Teaching Sociology* e-mail list, 11 Dec 1996.

based on its absolutist and unfalsifiable claims, is ultimately upheld by no more than its appeal to self-evidence.

Yet such a radical lack of substantiation only makes the “art of teaching” more compelling, for it thereby partakes, as do so many creeds, of the vague but potent authority of common sense. The archetypal creed is the commonplace. It is only the obviousness of common sense and the putative radicality of its democracy—common sense belonging to everyone—that permits the immodesty of the “art of teaching” to be inverted as humility. This is accomplished in two steps: first, the unification of the entirety of teaching into a manageable, stable and reassuring *Gestalt*; second, the mass identification of teaching sociologists with the image of the teacher-as-artist consolidated by that *Gestalt*. This process can be figured as finding oneself—or at least one’s ideal self—in the mirror of the “art of teaching.”⁶ Lacan would call such a double movement *imaginary*, in his peculiar use of the term, and the criticality of this imaginariness will be explored below. For now, it is sufficient to note that the “art of teaching” is imaginary because the impossibility of its proof necessitates that it be sustained purely by a desire that common sense refuses to acknowledge.⁷

This, I propose, is dangerous ground on which to found pedagogy.⁸

The *Teaching Sociology* subscribers were anything but deviant in their collective anger at an attempt to introduce obscure writing into their classrooms. The call for papers for the

⁶ To be more precise, it is the ideal ego or *Idealich* in the mirror. The solidification of the ego as a *Gestalt* is a crucial element of Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage (“The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I,” in *Écrits: A Selection*; “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je,” in *Écrits*).

⁷ I am playing a little loose with Lacanian theory here, inasmuch as Lacan figures desire as metonymy, and therefore as more symbolic than imaginary. Nonetheless, desire and the imaginary have their own connection, as demonstrated in the mirror stage’s desire for the image of the self.

⁸ The crucial difference between this unacknowledged desire and the desire that is central to the Lacanian project will be discussed below.

1997 meeting of the American Education Research Association (AERA), the largest academic association for education on the continent, makes precisely the same claim on behalf of its membership. It opens with a warm invitation to create a “circle of *communication* among professional educators, researchers, and other publics vested in education.”⁹ That invitation turns explicitly away from any private or obscure language and implicitly towards a professional *lingua franca*, inasmuch as the general accessibility of language is presumed to be the condition of inclusiveness and communication. Likewise, when the call for papers unsurprisingly includes the “quality of writing” as a criterion for acceptance, the first measure of quality invoked is clarity. Plain language is thus not only an object of desire, but also an institutionally mandated demand—the same demand made by *Teaching Sociology* when it orders incompetent artists of teaching back to the drawing board. Implicit to that demand is a corresponding regime of legibility—a comprehensively institutionalized regulatory system, in part constitutive of and constituted by what Foucault calls *régimes of truth*¹⁰—which, by determining the nature of reading practices, performatively produces legibility. My argument is that Lacan is disruptive of the regime of reading now hegemonic across education and the social sciences, that he challenges that hegemony in a way that makes it visible.¹¹

There are other influential dissenters to that regime. Pierre Bourdieu, for one, who points out the hazards of the collating of clear writing and common sense:

⁹ American Educational Research Association, 1997 Annual Meeting Call for Proposals.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings: 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 133.

¹¹ It could be said that this regime *enjoys* hegemony. Enjoyment, in any Lacanian discourse, always invokes the notion of *jouissance*. “‘Enjoyment’ conveys the sense, contained in *jouissance*, of enjoyment of rights, or property, etc” (Alan Sheridan, translator’s note to *Écrits: A Selection*, by Jacques Lacan, x). However, other regimes of legibility obtain in other disciplines, as will be touched on below.

In any case, what is certain is that I am not out to make my writing clear and simple and that I consider the strategy of abandoning the rigour of technical vocabulary in favour of an easy and readable style to be dangerous. . . . I don't believe in the virtues of "common sense" and "clarity," those two ideals of the classical literary canon ("what is clearly understood can be clearly expressed," etc.). When it comes to objects of inquiry as overladen with passions, emotions and interests as those of social life, the "clearest," that is simplest discourses, are probably those which run the greatest risk of being misunderstood, because they work like projective tests into which each person imports his or her prejudices, unreflective opinions and fantasies.¹²

Bourdieu's comments are a prologue to an invitation to sociology as an esoteric science, as mentioned in the preface, but his linking of social discourse to passions, emotions and interests aligns such a sociology with two defining axes of Lacanian psychoanalysis: language and desire. While artful teaching sociologists and the AERA set out from a mutually shared position exactly polar to that of Bourdieu's, they end up even more emphatically in the same place—the language and desire of their rhetoric being supplemented by yet another Lacanian fundamental: demand. The creed of the "art of teaching" has its correlative in the contemporary reconfiguration of the university as a business whose customers are its students. In that case, consumer demand is regularly articulated as accessibility, in all its senses. Sometimes that demand is couched in the terms of "appealing" to students. As might be expected, the stark contrast is provided by Lacan, whose teaching was conducted in a sheer inaccessibility that, in its Parisian context, only heightened his popularity. This phenomenon is not as culturally specific as it may at first appear, for it has its parallel in the familiar attractiveness of what remains always beyond one's grasp. The *matheme* is a peculiar

¹² Bourdieu, "Landmarks," 52.

En tout cas, il est certain que je ne cherche pas à faire des discours simples et clairs et que je crois dangereuse la stratégie qui consiste à abandonner la rigueur du vocabulaire technique au profit d'un style lisible et facile. . . . Je ne crois pas aux vertus du « bon sens » et de la « clarté », ces deux idéaux du canon littéraire classique (« ce qui se conçoit bien » . . . , etc.). S'agissant d'objets aussi surchargés de passions, d'émotions, d'intérêts que les choses sociales, les discours les plus « clairs », c'est-à-dire les plus simples, sont sans doute ceux qui ont les plus grandes chances d'être mal compris, parce qu'ils

bridge between these versions of teaching. It takes the letter, as the fundamental condition of accessible written/read communication, and relocates it in the dire inaccessibility of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The matheme is therefore a letter which, through its demands on reading, moves teaching to a different, more difficult and, I maintain, more productive place.

Translations of Clarity

The issues of reading have been raised by many contemporary theorists for whom interpretation is a central concern—Jauss, Iser, Culler, Fish, Hirsch, and Derrida prominent among them.¹³ Norman Holland elaborated a psychoanalytic reader-response theory;¹⁴ Derrida, although by no means a reader-response theorist, made a critical book-length

fontionnent comme des tests projectifs où chacun apporte ses préjugés, ses prénotions, ses phantasmes. ("Repères," 67-68)

¹³ Some representative references:

Hans Robert Jauss:

Towards an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982).

Wolfgang Iser:

"Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," in *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971).

"Interaction Between Text and Reader," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980).

Jonathan Culler:

Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (London: Routledge, 1975).

"Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading," in *Reader in the Text*, ed. Suleiman and Crosman.

On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982).

Stanley Fish:

Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980).

E. D. Hirsch, Jr:

Validity in Interpretation (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967).

The Aims of Interpretation (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1976).

Jacques Derrida:

Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977).

Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978).

Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁴ Norman Holland, *Poems in Persons: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973).
Norman Holland, "Re-Covering 'The Purloined Letter': Reading as Personal Transaction," in *Reader in the Text*, ed. Suleiman and Crosman.

response to Lacan based on an analysis of his (un)readability.¹⁵ Reading specifically as a sociologist and as a teacher raises related but different issues. First, Lacan's approach to psychoanalysis is very much a teaching, in part because Freud deemed teaching an impossible profession.¹⁶ Lacan taught his famous *séminaire* for nearly thirty years, not only to analysts, but also to intellectuals and lay people of all types, who were his auditors, students, interlocutors, and hecklers. Among those who attended were Sartre, Beauvoir, Ricoeur, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Sollers, Irigaray, Deleuze, Guattari, de Certeau, Castoriadis, Hyppolite, Barthes, Bataille, Leiris, Merleau-Ponty, Jakobsen, Pontalis, and Laplanche. Second, as Shoshana Felman notes, Lacan "has shifted pedagogy by radically displacing our *very modes of intelligibility*":¹⁷ his teaching is centrally concerned with clear writing, plain language, and their difficulties. Third, that displacement is produced by Lacan through a *theory* of reading staged by a particular *practice* of reading and writing. Lacan's return to Freud is actually a provocation to a new way of reading.¹⁸ And fourth, as Lacan himself declares by his appropriation of Buffon's axiom, his psychoanalysis aspires through its stylized practice to the transformation of subjectivity itself: "*Le style est l'homme même.*"¹⁹

The style of Lacan, the man himself, is, to say the least, controversial. Even his supporters are at times bemused by it. John Muller and William Richardson, authors of a

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-1974), vol 19, 273.

¹⁷ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 75, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Felman, *Adventure of Insight*, 23.

¹⁹ "Style is the man himself." These words from the 17th century French rhetorician Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon open Lacan's *Écrits* in its original French form, although they do not appear in the abridged English translation by Alan Sheridan (quoted in Jacques Lacan, "Ouverture de ce recueil," in *Écrits*, 9). Gallop observes that the sentence could also be translated as "Style is the essence of [the] man" or "Style makes the man." She

widely praised and consulted guide to reading Lacan's infamously difficult *Écrits: A Selection*, aver that Lacan's texts are of crucial significance. Yet they are forced to qualify that conviction with the admission that an "extraordinarily painful ascesis" is necessary to read them and that their own painstaking exegesis is consequently "not exactly guesswork, but, nonetheless, a highly precarious business."²⁰ For them, Lacan's *écrits* only too fittingly comprise a rebus, demanding the same intense and uncertain decryption as the interpretation of dreams. Likewise, Juliet Mitchell, the co-editor of a partial English translation of Lacan's seminar *Encore*, bluntly notes "the preposterous difficulty of Lacan's style."²¹ Ellie Ragland, who went on to become a champion of Lacan in the United States, says that at first, Lacan's prose nauseated her.²²

Lacan's detractors are more curt. He is "the intellectual junk-bond king" for Pamela McCorduck, "the Pisser" for Andrew Gordon.²³ Raymond Tallis expands a little:

Future historians trying to account for the institutionalized fraud that goes under the name of "Theory" will surely accord a central place to the influence of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. He is one of the fattest spiders at the heart of the web of muddled not-quite-thinkable-thoughts and evidence-free assertions of limitless scope, which practitioners of theorrrhea have woven into their version of the humanities.²⁴

continues, "I can probably convey the spirit, but what gets lost in my translation is precisely the style" (*Reading Lacan*, 115, bracketed text in original).

²⁰ John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, *Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to Écrits* (New York: International Universities Press, 1982), 24, 415.

²¹ Juliet Mitchell, "Introduction—I," *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose. New York: Norton, 1983 (New York: Norton, 1983), 4.

²² Andrew M. Gordon, "Trouble in River City, or Lacan's 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,'" *Psy/Art*, on-line journal, article 970403 (1997), URL: <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/journal/articles/gordon01.htm>.

²³ "Sex, Lies and Avatars: Author Pamela McCorduck on Sherry Turkle," *Wired* 4.04, URL: <http://www.wired.com/wired/4.04/toc.html>; Gordon, "Trouble in River City."

²⁴ Raymond Tallis, "The Shrink from Hell," *The Times Higher Education Supplement* 31 Oct. 1997: 20. Quite independently, Gilbert Chaitin offers a parallel metaphor: "From the gaps of the real emerges a text, like the strands of a web from a spider's belly" (Gilbert D. Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996], 9). Yet Chaitin is being positive about Lacan. Like the Kleinian breast, spiders can apparently be good or bad.

Something in Lacan provokes comparisons binding the bestial and the French. Stanley Leavy is much more sympathetic towards Lacan, but he still maintains that "Lacan comes to us as an exotic, some great uncouth bear speaking a combination of Mallarmean verse and French intellectualse, that turns into an English never before heard on land or sea."²⁵ William Kerrigan, on the other hand, is not sympathetic at all: "Few readers of Lacan doubt that whatever else may be said of the imperial expositor enthroned in his texts he is for sure, to put the language of the street on it, a sonuvabitch." Kerrigan also joins the culture wars, accusing Lacan of being "caught up in insufferably nationalistic polemics."²⁶

Yet the problem is not just the usual anglophone suspicion of French letters, for the critics of Lacan include other formidable theorists, French and otherwise. Ricoeur calls Lacan's writing uselessly difficult and perverse;²⁷ Foucault admits that Lacan's impenetrable prose left him baffled.²⁸ Even Heidegger, whom Lacan translated, admired and befriended, disparages both *Écrits*—"I haven't so far been able to get anything at all out of this obviously outlandish text"—and its author—"It seems to me the psychiatrist needs a psychiatrist."²⁹ Noam Chomsky maintains that Lacan "was a conscious charlatan, and was simply playing games with the Paris intellectual community to see how much absurdity he could produce

²⁵ Stanley A. Leavy, "The Image and the Word: Further Reflections on Jacques Lacan," in *Interpreting Lacan*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), 5-6.

²⁶ William Kerrigan, "Terminating Lacan," *South Atlantic Quarterly: Rereadings in the Freudian Field* 88.4 (1989), 998-999, 997. Kerrigan is one of many psychoanalytic thinkers who embraced Lacan and then vociferously rejected him.

²⁷ Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), 392. This is an interesting translation of "Inutilement difficile et perversement suspensive" (Elisabeth Roudinesco, *La bataille de cent ans: Histoire de la psychanalyse en France. 2: 1925-1985*, (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 400), since *suspensive* is a perfectly good, albeit unusual, English word.

²⁸ James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 135. See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Michel Foucault et la psychanalyse," *Michel Foucault, philosophe: Rencontre internationale, Paris, 9, 10, 11 janvier 1988* (Paris: 1989).

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, quoted in Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), 231.

and still be taken seriously.”³⁰ The world is full of learned readers who find it hard to read Lacan, so the issue is patently not one of insufficient intelligence or perspicacity on the part of those he frustrates. Without a doubt, Lacan’s style fails hegemonic North American professional standards. He would never have had a proposal accepted by the AERA; its inclusiveness doesn’t extend nearly so far (Derrida, Heidegger, Foucault, Kant or Hegel, among others, would have had a hard time getting accepted as well). *Contra* the strictures of the AERA’s call for papers, Lacan says, “*La communication, ça me fait rire.*”³¹

However, Lacan’s significance to contemporary French thought cannot be denied. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen notes, despite his often sharp criticism of Lacan, “because of Lacan’s *philosophical* ‘return to Freud’, psychoanalysis has become the dominant theory in France; the fact is that you can hardly be a philosopher or an intellectual there without dealing somehow with things psychoanalytic.”³² Leavy concurs: “Before the challenge of Lacan, French psychoanalysis was hardly an indispensable resource, and worse still, it was not of much influence in France. That has all changed.”³³ Henry Sullivan is only partly joking when he compares the impact of Lacan in the France of the 1960s with that of his contemporaries, the Beatles, in Britain.³⁴ “In the French case this means the kindergarten teacher who takes a training course that includes a watered-down Lacanianism, the lycéen

³⁰ Noam Chomsky, “An Interview,” *Radical Philosophy* 53 (Autumn 1989): 32.

³¹ “Communication, that makes me laugh” (my translation). Jacques Lacan, quoted in Dennis Porter, “Psychoanalysis and the Translator,” in *Lacan & the Human Sciences*, ed. Alexandre Leupin (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991), 159.

³² Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “Basta Così! Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen on Psychoanalysis and Philosophy,” interview by Chris Oakley, *Returns of the “French Freud.” Freud, Lacan, and Beyond*, ed. Todd Dufresne (New York: Routledge, 1997), 213, emphasis in original.

³³ Leavy, “Image and Word,” 5.

³⁴ Henry W. Sullivan, *The Beatles With Lacan: Rock ‘n’ Roll as Requiem for the Modern Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 2.

who learns about Lacan when she prepares the new 'Freud question' for the baccalaureate, the reader of the newly psychologized advice columns."³⁵

Yet, as already noted, just reading Lacan is a forbidding labor. He doesn't deny the difficulty involved; he revels in it, proclaiming that he is determined "to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult."³⁶ This *caveat lector*, plain enough itself, seems to warn that the only way in or out of the text will be anything but plain, or at least it declares that such is Lacan's desire. The clarity of this promise of *unclarity* appears to rebut itself in its very articulation—or does it merely thwart Lacan's own desire? This question has a larger pertinence than it may at first appear, for despite all the fuss about the convolution of his writing, much of it is, like this warning, clear and orderly enough to satisfy any champion of the "art of teaching." As Malcolm Bowie notes, "One element of Lacan's writing . . . notably absent . . . from the indignant talk to which the dense verbal texture of his *Écrits* has given rise . . . is his capacity to be memorably simple."³⁷ The prior question, as Lacan points out elsewhere, is one of "knowing what clarity and order are. . . it still needs to be stated what this means." But he adds an ominous tag: "and this will by its very nature call into question the notions concerned."³⁸

Is it possible that understanding the nature of clarity and order can cast suspicion on the very ideas of clarity and order? There are those who would say yes, including Bourdieu,

³⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud's French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), xiv.

³⁶ Lacan, "Agency of the Letter," 146. "... ne doit laisser au lecteur d'autre sortie que son entrée, que je préfère difficile" ("L'instance de la lettre," 493).

³⁷ Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana, 1991), 3. Michael Clark adds that Lacan "repeatedly and painstakingly described the principal tenets of his approach to psychoanalysis for interviewers from magazines and newspapers, and the clarity of his remarks in many of these interviews belies the charges of deliberate obfuscation so often levied against him by reviewers and by rival figures such as Foucault, Derrida, and eventually Althusser" (Michael Clark, *Jacques Lacan: An Annotated Bibliography* [New York: Garland, 1988], lii).

given his conviction that clarity is too frequently a name for fantasy. Daniel Cottom makes a similar point about that other infamously writerly *Jacques*: "Those who complain that Derrida writes in a deliberately difficult way might do well to read the plain English of [others] and see if it does not turn on them, when it is read carefully, as much as Derrida's writing does."³⁹ Lacan, despite his well-known disputes with Derrida, agrees, at least in principle: "The closer one gets to the text the less one manages to understand it."⁴⁰ Even the champions of clear writing would surely admit that Cottom's and Lacan's convictions obtain at a plainly discerned level. *Teaching* itself is clear enough as a concept and plain enough as a word to enter reflexively into the discourse of the "art of teaching," but the meaning of teaching, carefully considered, turns into something—*translates* into something—very unsimple and unobvious. Indeed, in the nuanced relations between teacher and student, and classroom and curriculum, it translates into something much more than translation, no matter how adept or otherwise. The chasm between the teaching of Lacan and the "art of teaching" can be figured thus: plain language is valorized for the immediacy of its understanding, but it is that very velocity that Lacan finds suspect. For him, "it's always at the point where [readers] have understood, where they have rushed in to fill the case in with understanding, that they have missed the interpretation that it's appropriate to make or not to make."⁴¹ As Sherry Turkle notes, "in any psychoanalytic experience, there should be no expectation that things will happen quickly."⁴²

³⁸ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 18. "Mais il s'agit de savoir ce que sont clarté et ordre. . . . encore faut-il préciser ce qu'on entend par là, et cette interrogation est de nature à mettre en cause les notions dont il s'agit" (*Séminaire III*, 27).

³⁹ Daniel Cottom, *Text & Culture: The Politics of Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989), 66.

⁴⁰ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 149. "Plus on se rapproche du texte, et moins on arrive à le comprendre" (*Séminaire III*, 170).

⁴¹ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 22. "C'est toujours le moment où ils ont compris, où ils se sont précipités pour combler le cas avec une compréhension, qu'ils ont raté l'interprétation qu'il convenait de faire ou de ne pas faire"

The same painstaking discovery of difficulty applies no less to every other term by which the “art of teaching” is defined: *art, language, understanding, translation, time, idea, the other*. “Every symbolization is in the last resort contingent.”⁴³ The more one considers any of these familiar concepts, the more they slip into ever-increasing complexity and elusiveness. What is the categorical definition of art? Of language? Of understanding? To reinvoké Derrida, the slippage of terms—one incarnation of *différance*—is the general condition of language.⁴⁴ As Jane Gallop observes, “Not just *Écrits*, but all writings lead elsewhere.”⁴⁵ Lacan’s version is that the signified slides incessantly under the signifier.⁴⁶ In this glissade (*glissement*), the *other* is always becoming something else, just like every word and every instance of discourse. “The signifier in itself is nothing but what can be defined as a difference from another signifier. It is the introduction of difference as such into the field.”⁴⁷ Lacan claims that “language entirely operates within ambiguity, and most of the time you know absolutely nothing about what you are saying. In your most ordinary conversations language has a purely fictional character, you give the other the feeling that you are always there, that is to say, that you are capable of producing the expected response.”⁴⁸

(*Séminaire III*, 31). Actually, here Lacan is talking explicitly about analysts, but, as he himself points out, he believes that analysis is all about reading.

⁴² Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 232.

⁴³ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 97.

⁴⁴ This grafting of Derrida onto Lacan is admittedly perilous, and deserves more justification than can be afforded here. Briefly, I think that the dispute between the two thinkers and Žižek’s determination to oppose the two obscure strong agreements between them. I will continue to use *différance* here because its condensation of difference and deferral aptly captures Lacan’s renovations of both Saussure linguistics and Freud’s *nachträglich* temporality. That use is not meant to gloss the substantial differences between Derrida and Lacan.

⁴⁵ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 34.

⁴⁶ Lacan, “Agency of the Letter,” 154; “L’instance de la lettre,” 502.

⁴⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 142. “Le signifiant en lui-même n’est rien d’autre de définissable qu’une différence avec un autre signifiant. C’est l’introduction de la différence comme telle dans le champ.” (*Séminaire XX*, 129)

⁴⁸ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 115-116.

The clarity of the “art of teaching” is further smudged by its centering of translation (“... even the most complex *ideas* can be *translated* into plain *language* . . .”), for translation is conventionally a relation of one language to another language, not a relation of language to ideas, complex or otherwise. The “art of teaching” must therefore assume that complex ideas naturally map onto complex language; its art is actually the subsequent translation of that complex language into simple terms. This isomorphism of complexity across the registers of ideas and language paradoxically converges the defense of clarity to Bourdieu’s valorization of a rigorous vocabulary. Moreover, translation’s other meaning is that of displacement: a movement from one space to another, vividly embodied in the sliding of the signified with respect to the signifier. From this point of view, the problem with the absolute faith of the “art of teaching” in the translatability of ideas is not an excess of conviction but a poverty of application: it does not go nearly far enough. Lacan would say that translation never stops; the glissade of the signifying chain never ceases. Each slip of the signifier sparks a new slide or cascade of signifieds, as if related dictionary entries were to serially spill all their multiple definitions upon the slippery page. The “art of teaching” is right, in that translation can always be accomplished. However, the realization of translation can never be the guarantee of its goodness, in either a qualitative or ethical sense, for translation is never fully accomplished. It never ends. Even plain language must be translated; even *teaching* must be constantly re-read, re-written, re-interpreted, and re-located; even clear writing cannot avoid being further translated, which is why it cannot avoid leading elsewhere.

Le langage joue entièrement dans l’ambiguïté, et la plupart du temps, vous ne savez absolument rien de ce que vous dites. Dans votre interlocution la plus courante, le langage a une valeur purement fictive, vous prêtez à l’autre le sentiment que vous êtes bien toujours là, c’est-à-dire que vous êtes capable de donner la réponse qu’on attend. (*Séminaire III*, 131)

Jargon and Exclusion

Such complications of *teaching* and *understanding* and the rest in no way deny their quotidian and utilitarian clarity. Knowledge that can be handled and transmitted as objects can perhaps be best taught plainly and clearly. Such is the pragmatic advantage and profound attraction of the regime of legibility that underwrites the "art of teaching." We can teach well (we hope) even though we will never fully know what teaching is. The meaning of teaching is clear enough, for all practical purposes.⁴⁹ The caution that is being added here is that a fundamental and inescapable unclarity is nonetheless immanent to clarity. Even the ultimate expression of the "art of teaching," *plain language*, is itself ultimately not plain, even if it is familiar.⁵⁰ Lacan observes that "this is the reality of discourse. We are nevertheless well aware that the signified is sufficiently captured by our discourse for everyday purposes. It's when we want to do a bit better, to get to the truth, that we are in total disarray, and rightly so."⁵¹ The Lacanian point is that teaching should want to do better than such artfulness; the ethical point is that it has an obligation to do so.

Nevertheless, while the immanent unplainness of plain language troubles the boundary between clear and obscure writing, it obviously does not dissolve it, insofar as the form of unplain language is easily recognizable. The complexity of Lacan at his most hermetic is anything but subtle, as even the most careless of readers can discover. In its purposeful impenetrability, his texts seem quintessential exemplars of the private language abjured by the AERA. Accusations of the use of jargon are a standard measure of that

⁴⁹ On the other hand, Felman performs a virtuoso reading of Freud's contention that teaching is an impossible profession ("Psychoanalysis and Education").

⁵⁰ See the discussion below on Lacan's assertion that something makes sense when it integrates into the pre-existing order of things.

privacy, and Lacan flagrantly violates its prevailing limits. Not only does he fill his texts with the unfamiliar and the neologistic—*want-to-be*, *transcendental signifier*, *objet petit a*, *The-Name-of-the-Father*, *das Ding*, the *matheme* and its various species (\S , $\S \diamond a$, $S(\emptyset)$, Φ and the rest)—he refuses to define his terms; he demands that they *not* be translated from French; or, perhaps worst of all, he defines them in multiple and conflicting ways.⁵² And this is not all. He supplants the various Freudian topographies of the psyche with his own tripartite topology of the *symbolic*, the *imaginary*, and the *real*, and the first lesson of that fundamental is that none of these terms means what it seems to mean. Lacan is not content merely to produce and deploy jargon; he is bent on turning even familiar words into jargon.⁵³ There is nothing so unreal as the Lacanian real.⁵⁴

The reaction of Diana Fuss's family to her re-deployment of obscure Lacanianisms is not surprising, but many people read *Essentially Speaking* as something other than a joke—to start with, those feminist theorists who have bothered to read *Écrits*. Jane Gallop, for one, spends nearly two hundred fluent pages on *Reading Lacan*. Judith Butler, who is presumably read by more than a few teaching sociologists, explicitly situates herself between Foucault,

⁵¹ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 155. "C'est cela, la réalité du discours. Nous savons bien tout de même que le signifié est suffisamment pris dans notre discours pour nos usages de tous les jours. C'est quand nous voulons faire un peu mieux, aller à la vérité, que nous sommes en plein désarroi, et à juste titre" (*Séminaire III*, 176).

⁵² For instance, as Alan Sheridan notes, Lacan does not define *objet petit a* or the *grand Autre*, but leaves the reader "to develop an appreciation of the concepts in the course of their use" (Sheridan, translator's note, xi).

⁵³ Of course, defamiliarization is a familiar literary theoretical tactic, perhaps most associated with the Russian formalists.

⁵⁴ The Lacanian real is, in many ways, opposite to reality. For Lacan, reality, insofar as we can make sense of it—that is, structure it, understand it, articulate it—belongs to what he calls the symbolic, the register of language and culture. The real is precisely what is outside the symbolic, what is unassimilable to structured and named reality. In other words, the real is what is unreal in our familiar world—a characterization that does not suffice to define the Lacanian real. Some commentators, notably Anthony Wilden, attempt to clarify Lacan by sifting his sense of *symbolic*, *imaginary*, and *real* from their familiar meanings, and capitalize their references to Lacanian usages (Anthony Wilden, "Translator's Introduction," in *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, by Jacques Lacan [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981], xv). However, it is important to observe that this was not Lacan's own practice.

Derrida, and Lacan.⁵⁵ To frame jargon as constituting private or specialist language is to imply an extant, if limited, readership. This suggests that if someone doesn't understand *Essentially Speaking* or *Écrits*, s/he can always be *taught* to read them, which puts a twist on the "art of teaching." The translation of complex ideas necessitates engagement with those ideas. The "art of teaching" is thus definitionally linked with what is not immediately understandable, with exactly the opposite of its object. In order to exclude the complex (even if by translating it), the "art of teaching" is forced to include it, even if it never makes it to the classroom in that form.

However, while people certainly can learn to read jargon, by definition they are not eager to do so. Even if difficulty is admitted to be immanent to clarity, pejoration is still immanent to every accusation of jargon. *Webster's* first definition of jargon isn't "specialist vocabulary," it's "gibberish." Jargon is language that someone or some institution is satisfied to repudiate as unintelligible. The judgement of something as jargon is a kind of legitimized liberation from reading that something.

It's more than a little ironic to have academics complain about jargon and the inaccessibility of theoretical writing, when all they have to do is stroll a few blocks beyond their university gates to encounter intelligent people who will say exactly the same thing about academic texts praised for their lucidity. The Fuss family game repeats the time-honored extra-academic (dis)regard for the ivory tower and its presumed private languages. The AERA must be aware of people like a colleague of mine who once complained in general about Faculties of Education, "What's all this about *pedagogy*? Why can't they just say *teaching*?" (although that question makes the treacherous assumption that *teaching* is simpler than *pedagogy*). The practical project of eradicating jargon requires someone to decide *what* or

⁵⁵ Judith Butler, personal communication, 23 October 1995.

whose language is jargon, which immediately entails the juridical problem of deciding *who* the judge will be, especially when that decision will ostensibly be made on the behalf of many others. This makes manifest the pressing theoretical problem with the “art of teaching”: it implicitly levels all others (“... *plain language* that can be understood by *others*”). While any text is likely written for the other as an imaginary reader, such an other always remains *imaginary* and must be distinguished from *real* and heterogeneous others who read texts and sit in classrooms,⁵⁶ and who can only be reduced to some *symbolic* other through procedural violence.

The usual solution to the question of who decides what is jargon is one that merits scrutiny: assuming that the other is actually oneself, or that the representative of all others is oneself, so that an uncanny coincidence of self and other can be arrogated as the measure of the text. Hence, the explicit rhetoric or submerged logic of the rejection of jargon goes something like, “I have a pretty good vocabulary, and I don’t know what *objet petit a*, *The-Name-of-the-Father*, *matheme*, or [fill in the blank] means, *therefore* these are all jargon.” This repeats the imaginary identification by some *Teaching Sociology* subscribers with the infinite terms of the “art of teaching”. Moreover, by its self-defined logic, this measure for jargon remains always vulnerable to appropriation by anyone else’s standard, within or without the ivory tower. The implied and imaginary “intelligent reader” necessarily dissolves into the infinite non-standard of any possible reader who can make claim to intelligence, and on that basis anyone can dispute anyone else’s claims about the general intelligibility of any text.

The contradiction at work here is evident, once acknowledged. Plain language is championed for its populism—the AERA’s valorized *inclusivity*—and set explicitly against the posited elitism of private language, but the decision of what is jargon necessarily leads to

⁵⁶ Robert Con Davis, “Freud’s Resistance to Reading and Teaching,” *College English* 49.6 (1987), 624.

nothing other than the constitution of a new elite: those who are both intelligent enough to recognize what is jargon and what is not, and artful enough to write in the right way, free of that jargon. The call for clear writing is therefore a form of elitism presenting itself as democracy, positing its self-determined standard as the ideal for all writing and teaching, while presuming to be acting in the name of all people and all readers. This returns the elitism-concealed-by-modest-appearances that suffuses the definition of the “art of teaching,” with its nonchalant totalization of infinite human thought and infinite human history.

There is another and more fundamental problem with the repudiation of jargon. Presumably, at some past point in every reader’s and every student’s life, it was a good, even marvelous thing to learn a new term. A child learning a new word is an archetype—perhaps *the* archetype—for education. For parents, the first word spoken by an infant is nothing short of miraculous; for Lacan, the entry into language is the very accession to human being. But the repudiation of jargon is exactly the opposite, in practice and affect: it is the outraged refusal of the word made strange. The “art of teaching” is therefore a practice by which the miraculous, the definitively human, and the paradigmatically pedagogical are inverted as exemplary failures of writing and teaching. Each new word does not send a reader on to other books and other texts, but rather sends the writer and would-be teacher back to the drawing board.

Admittedly, this assertion is unfair, not only because it is tendentious, but primarily because it is false. It is *not* generally the case that academics don’t want to learn new words—although it surely is the case that they don’t want to learn too many new words. Rather, they just want to be able to integrate any new word efficiently into their own pretty good vocabularies. Lacan observes that “something makes sense when it fits into the pre-

existing chain [of discourse].”⁵⁷ Such a chain constitutes a specific symbolic order. Vocabularies and pedagogies, academies and academics live and work in their own symbolic orders, their pre-existing discursive regimes. Understanding itself can be understood as fitting into the symbolic order of things. In the artistic order of teaching, as in many orders that pride themselves on their pragmatism, goodness of fit is good because it is a measure of utility, just as the worth of a tool turns on its aptness to its purpose. The *practical* word functions smoothly and productively within the discursive machinery of the real world and the real classroom. Likewise, the plain text is valorized by social activists for its political efficacy. The real problem with Lacan is less his obscurity than his elusiveness. His great talent is in sliding out of each and every grasp, which seems a reasonable definition of a perfectly useless tool: a disdainfully Gallic peg who fits no whole.

Imaginary Meaning and All the Registers of Language

Lacan as a lack of fit is made manifest in his take on the virtue of meaning and understanding. He writes, “There’s no doubt that meaning is by nature imaginary. Meaning is, like the imaginary, always in the end evanescent, for it is tightly bound to what interests you, that is, to that in which you are ensnared.”⁵⁸ This seems doubly mysterious. First, how can meaning be imaginary, in the everyday sense of being fictional or fantastic? Meaning would seem to be the very opposite of imaginary; it would seem to be, well, meaningful. Second, how can meaning be imaginary, in the peculiar sense that Lacan gives to the word? In his analytic topology, the symbolic is the register of language, to which meaning presumably belongs. The imaginary is the register of the image, the imagined,

⁵⁷ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 71.

and identification—Laplanche and Pontalis's first definition of it is "the basically narcissistic relation of the subject to his [*sic*] ego." Moreover, they go on to note that "Lacan insists on the difference, and the opposition between the Imaginary and the Symbolic."⁵⁹

Nonetheless, it is a Lacanian truism that the three registers are always mutually intricately. Hence the emblem of the Borromean knot, a set of rings interlaced in such a way that if any one of the rings is removed, the other two fall apart as well, dissolving the entire formation. Despite strong affiliation of language to the symbolic, Lacan is emphatic that it comprises precisely such a knot of all the registers, which means that language must retain an

⁵⁸ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 54. "Que la signification soit de la nature de l'imaginaire n'est pas douteux. Elle est, comme l'imaginaire, toujours en fin de compte évanescence, car elle est strictement liée à ce qui vous intéresse, c'est-à-dire à ce en quoi vous êtes pris" (*Séminaire III*, 65).

⁵⁹ J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Nicholson-Smith (Karnac Books and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988), s.v. "imaginary." The capitalization of *Imaginary* and *Symbolic* is the translator's decision, and he explains that in this regard he is following Wilden's example.

The sex of the subject poses a problem for which I have been able to find no good solution. Various pronouns are used by different writers for the subject. For Lacan and many others, like Laplanche and Pontalis, the subject is generally and suspiciously masculine: *he*, *him* or *his* (of course, *sujet* is a masculine noun). Gallop deliberately alternates between *she* and *he* (see *Reading Lacan*, 21). For Felman and a few others, the subject is neutral/neutered, but not human: an *it*.

After much debate with myself, I decided to use *s/he*, *her/him*, and *her/his* here, despite its clumsiness and lack of parallelism with cited invocations of the subject. I am tempted to refer to the subject as *she/her*, to counter Lacan's sexing of the subject and to emphasize that the subject is always sexed, but because the Lacanian subject is often crossed-out, fading, lacking, incomplete, presumptuous, misconceived, deluded, or dying, specifying the subject as female would be very problematic. Lacan thwarts my naively good intentions.

One advantage of *s/he* and its variants is that they all include a diagonal bar. The significance of this will become apparent in Chapter Two. One drawback of *s/he* is that the Lacanian subject seems regularly either less than or more than human (or both at once), so that Felman's use of *it* would be more appropriate. Yet more often, that subject is not only definitively human, but also demands his/her/its symbolic inscription into either female or male positions. And all this only begins to sketch out the relevant complications of sex, gender and the subject. As will become apparent, this irresolvable difficulty with the relation between the subject and language is not just a technical one, but symptomatic of both Lacanian theory and this dissertation's engagement with that theory. The seeming substantiality of the subject is displaced by the very attempt to inscribe her/him as a signifier, every time that signifier clashes with another. The problem was foretold by Lacan: the subject is that which a signifier represents for another signifier (Jacques Lacan, "Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious," in *Écrits: A Selection*, 316; "Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l'inconscient freudien," in *Écrits*, 819).

imaginary aspect.⁶⁰ The question remains, what is this aspect, and how does it pertain to meaning?

Laplanche and Pontalis distinguish four different categories of the Lacanian imaginary: besides the narcissistic relation of the subject to the ego, there is the binary relation of intersubjectivity by which the ego is captured by its counterpart (and vice-versa), the “triggering” of behavior by an environmental *Gestalt*, and, finally, meaning. They write of the last, “the Imaginary implies a type of apprehension in which factors such as resemblance and homoeomorphism [*sic*] play a decisive role, as is borne out by a sort of coalescence of the signifier with the signified.”⁶¹ This characterization of meaning *qua* signification is a crucial move by Lacan. The paradigmatic moment of language as a symbolic order for the “art of teaching”, namely, the establishment of meaning and therefore of understanding, is considered by him as imaginary, where *imaginary*, despite its Lacanian renovation, retains its usual sense of the fantastic or illusory. In his neo-Saussurian terms, meaning must be imaginary *qua* fantastic because, as already noted, the signified ineluctably slides under and away from the signifier, making any “coalescence” of the two impossible, at least in the last instance.⁶² Not even the plainest of speakers can ever nail down all the subtle artfulness of

⁶⁰ “Language, to which the triple division of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real appropriately applies” (Lacan, *Seminar III*, 53). “Langage, à quoi la répartition triple du symbolique, de l’imaginaire et du réel s’applique justement” (*Séminaire III*, 65).

⁶¹ Laplanche and Pontalis, s.v. “imaginary.”

⁶² Despite his derogation of Lacan’s writing noted above, Foucault also says,

The turning point came [in the history of French structuralist/post-structuralist thought] when Lévi-Strauss, in the case of societies, and Lacan, in the case of the unconscious, showed us that “meaning” was probably no more than a superficial impression, a shimmer, a foam. (Michel Foucault, “Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal,” *La Quinzaine littéraire* 15 May 1966, trans. Barbara Bray, quoted in Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 296)

Le point de rupture, soulignait Foucault, s’est situé le jour où Lévi-Strauss pour les sociétés, et Lacan pour l’inconscient, nous ont montré que le ‘sens’ n’était probablement qu’un effet de surface, un miroitement, une écume. (“Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal,” *La Quinzaine littéraire* 15 May 1966, quoted in Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: Esquisse d’une vie, histoire d’un système de pensée* [Paris: Fayard, 1993], 387)

teaching or any word meaningful to teaching. Even that purported authority of meaning, the dictionary, does nothing more than lead from one signifier to another, *ad infinitum* (and dictionaries always change; they never stay the same).

If *différance* is thereby seen as the general condition of language, then the “capture” of the signified in everyday discourse has at least two implications. First, it must indeed be ultimately imaginary, in all the Lacanian senses of the word; and second, it must be accomplished by other than purely linguistic means.⁶³ With regards to the latter, Slavoj Žižek points out that such capture marks the discursive level of ideology. In Lacanese, the instantiation of a *point de capiton*, a quilting or nodal point, stitches the space of non-bound, floating signifiers into a unified and ideologized field of meaning.⁶⁴ In other words, meaning as such is not constituted through any artless communicative practice, but through specific and contingent ideological operations. If there is nothing outside the text, then there is nothing outside politics either—including the meaning of language, whether plain or abstruse. Despite *différance*, meaning is captured. It is precisely at when institutionalized regimes of legibility intervene that understanding is accomplished and the translation *qua* displacement of a text is putatively halted. Force must be applied for meaning to be mastered, and the obviousness of plain language testifies to the power of its mastery. Lacan’s contention is that meaning remains imaginary despite such regimes, because mastery is never total, regardless of the force applied. The *point de capiton* is ultimately mythical, and its stitching of the space of signifiers ultimately does not hold.⁶⁵

⁶³ This is a version of the structuralist and poststructuralist attention to the negativity of language.

⁶⁴ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 87.

⁶⁵ “L’épingleage dont je parle ou encore le point de capiton n’est qu’une affaire mythique” (Jacques Lacan, *Les formations de l’inconscient: Le séminaire: 57–58*, unpublished seminar, 3 vol. transcript, 181).

Felman makes a parallel argument by equating Hegel's absolute knowledge with mastery and bringing it explicitly together with teaching, or at least its artful form. She claims that "Western pedagogy can be said to culminate in Hegel's philosophical didacticism": absolute knowledge, which is "knowledge that has exhausted its own articulation."⁶⁶ Such exhaustion is an elegant formulation of the masterful translation definitive of the "art of teaching". By contrast, the reader is "never held responsible, by Lacan, for absolute knowledge."⁶⁷

The Sociology of Exclusion

This is where the sociology in the confrontation between Lacan and the "art of teaching" "clearly" emerges. The everyday utility of plain language is imbedded in the functionalist paradigm of its instrumentality, and sociology has long warned of the perils of that perspective. A practice is never functional *tout court*; it is always functional *for somebody* and functional *towards certain ends*. The inevitable sociological questions that ensue from any assertion of functionality are: functional for *whom*? functional for *what*? Bourdieu, as a sociologist, provides some answers with respect to plain language:

False clarity is often part and parcel of the dominant discourse, the discourse of those who think everything goes without saying, because everything is just fine as it is. Conservative language always falls back on the authority of common sense. . . . And common sense speaks the clear and simple language of what is plain to see. . . . Producing an over-simplified and over-simplifying discourse about the social world means inevitably that you are providing weapons that can be used to manipulate this world in dangerous ways.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education," 77.

⁶⁷ Juliet Flower MacCannell, *Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), xiii.

⁶⁸ Bourdieu, "Landmarks," 52.

La fausse clarté est souvent le fait du discours dominant, le discours de ceux qui trouvent que tout va de soi, parce que tout est bien ainsi. Le discours conservateur se tient toujours au nom du bon sens. Ce n'est pas par hasard que le théâtre bourgeois du XIX^e siècle était appelé « théâtre du bon sens ». Et le

The *Teaching Sociology* creed effaces precisely the sociology of language, for if the word *teaching* is clear enough for all practical purposes, what must always remain open for interrogation is precisely those purposes and practices which comprise the conditions for clarity.

Lacan agrees, as shown by his linkage of clarity and order. If the “art of teaching” take on translation is correct, then translation is perfectible or completable. But Lacan notes that “completed discourse, the embodiment of absolute knowledge, is the instrument of power, the sceptre and the property of those who know.”⁶⁹ If he and Bourdieu are right, the AERA demand for clarity becomes something other and more ominous than a congenial invitation to communicate. It polices a politics of meaning for a conservative regime of legibility, in a manipulation bent on conserving precisely the pre-existing symbolic order of things. This conservatism surfaces especially in the lack of its recognition by its adherents. One of the list defenders of the “art of teaching” protested that she was in no way a conservative, even as she held fast to that most traditional of rhetorical standards, Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*.⁷⁰ The cover to that book’s paperback edition even sports a blurb from the *New York Times* hailing it as “timeless,” a declaration that, even allowing for promotional hyperbole, reiterates the infinitude of the creed of the “art of teaching”. It aspires to keep all (good) writing of all ideas always the same for all time. Such a demand for clarity allow readers to “read what [they] already know by heart. . . . What orients,

bon sens parle le langage simple et clair de l’évidence. Ensuite, parce que produire un discours simplifié et simplificateur sur le monde social, c’est inévitablement donner des armes à des manipulations dangereuses de ce monde. (“Repères,” 67)

⁶⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1988), 71. “Le discours achevé, incarnation du savoir absolu, est l’instrument de pouvoir, le sceptre et la propriété de ceux qui savent” (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan : Livre II : Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse : 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [Paris: Seuil, 1978], 92).

fundamentally, the point of a discourse is perhaps nothing other than to stay exactly within the limits of what has already been said.”⁷¹ The virtue of plain language is often touted as its effectiveness as a tool, and, if this is so, the profound political problem with plain language is precisely that virtue. It is only too good at policing the boundaries of discourse.

The particularities of these boundaries are another political emergence of sociology in discourse, although this time sociology as a discipline. The imaginariness of meaning and the *différance* of language resisted in much of sociology are by no means novel concepts in literary theory. As Dennis Porter notes,

[Lacan] is a saboteur of sense who decomposes and recomposes the different units of language from the level of the phoneme to that of the sentence and even beyond. It is no wonder that those of us with backgrounds in literature and literary theory have been drawn to his writings. It is also no wonder that those who were formed in the traditions of the social and behavioral sciences have found him unreadable.⁷²

In fact, the “art of teaching” cherishes a notion of language that is, as one literary theorist remarked to me, distinctly 17th century French.⁷³ Even Buffon knew better. Being more than three hundred years old doesn’t necessarily make something wrong, but in this case it does necessitate a vigilant patrolling of disciplinary boundaries in order to keep twentieth-century concepts of reading at bay so effectively—and in order to maintain a faith in the timelessness of its strictures on writing. The “art of teaching” depends upon a dentistry of the text, in which reading proceeds by the *extraction* of meaning and ideas, and dentistry is a time-

⁷⁰ Posts to the *Teaching Sociology* e-mail list, 15 and 17 December 1996; William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1979).

⁷¹ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 207. “Vous ne lisez que ce que vous savez déjà par cœur. . . . Ce qui dirige au plus profond l’intention du discours n’est peut-être rien d’autre que de rester exactement dans les limites de ce qui a déjà été dit” (*Séminaire III*, 235).

⁷² Porter, “Psychoanalysis and the Translator,” 157.

⁷³ Valerie Raoul, private communication, 15 March 1996.

honored practice. However, being a good teacher or analyst is something different from being a competent dentist.

There are obvious limits to Bourdieu's assertion. He isn't actually accusing everyone who writes clearly of being a fascist, and an object can be pedagogically functional without being socially oppressive. Still, it isn't difficult to discover the signs of the material politics of language which are unmistakable and constantly overlooked. In the "real" classroom, people often praise texts by saying things like, "It's a masterful exposition," "It's a forceful argument," "It's an authoritative analysis," "She has control of her material," "The author has secured his position as a dominant figure in the field." The terms by which they valorize the text are *mastery, force, authority, control, dominance*. If these same academics spoke of some more conventionally social phenomenon—say, gender relations in the workplace—instead of argument, in the same terms, they would be speaking anything but praise. When spoken in other situations, these terms are recognizable as the signs of suspect relations of power.⁷⁴

The difference seems like one between content and form, between substantive concerns and the discursive vehicles by which those concerns are articulated and thought through. But discursive forms, as operations in language, are themselves thoroughly social phenomena, just like marriage, or the state, or racism. They are also inseparable from their

⁷⁴ Lacan is legitimately indictable on these same grounds. That is, his discourse seems nothing other than a discourse of mastery and authority. Certainly Lacan often carried himself as the autocrat of psychoanalysis. While this problem with Lacan deserves more consideration than is possible here, especially since Lacan systematized an analysis of discourse that directly engages the issue of mastery, I will claim here that the Lacanian text need not be regarded as either masterful or authoritative, regardless of the intent or airs of its author. Even "faithful" Lacanians regularly disagree about readings of Lacan. The very textual characteristics in Lacan that radiate "master discourse"—the difficulty, the "abstraction," the hyper-theoretical bent, the ambiguity and paradox, the breadth and depth of external sources, the paradoxes, the *matheme* itself—generate a multiplicity of readings, which radically undercuts the mastery of any one of them, including this one. See the Roudinesco anecdote in Chapter Six, about Lacan at the Metropolitan Opera, for a different elaboration of Lacan and (non-)masterful discourse.

content. Sociologists know this very well. Yet whenever they valorize powerful argument, they act as if discursive forms are not social in the same way at all. Žižek observes that this kind of incoherence inverts the classical Marxist formulation of ideology as mystification, which runs something like, "They do it because they don't know what they're doing." Instead, the way sociologists bracket argument from social critique is an example of, "They know what they're doing, but they do it anyway."⁷⁵

This bracketing is a Lacanian split; that is, the sociological exemption of the fundamental form of discourse from political interrogation is a necessary and constitutive lack in that same discourse. In order for the sociological discourse to interrogate the world, it must act as if the form of argument is not part of the world, even as it explicitly knows and avers that it is. Without this split, sociologists could not believe, as many do, that *maximizing* mastery, force, authority, control and dominance in writing is the signal path to social activist goals of equality, emancipation and social justice. On the one hand, this split is utterly necessary for the wedding of rhetorical domination and social emancipation to appear as not only possible, but also as good and natural. On the other, it demands that teaching sociologists pass over precisely the sociologic of language—any regime of legibility depends upon something *not* being legible. For Lacan, such incoherence merely marks sociologists as being human. For him, "what characterizes a normal subject is precisely that he [*sic*] never takes seriously certain realities that he recognizes exist."⁷⁶

Of course, the same split is repeated in the endorsement of plain language when academics know very well that language, when read carefully, is never plain at all. The first

⁷⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 29. Žižek identifies this mode of ideology as *cynical*, following Peter Sloterdijk, in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (trans. Michael Eldred [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987]).

⁷⁶ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 74. "Ce qui caractérise un sujet normal, c'est précisément de ne jamais prendre tout à fait au sérieux un certain nombre de réalités dont il reconnaît qu'elles existent" (*Séminaire III*, 86-87).

effect of the politics of the advocacy of plain language and clear writing is very obvious: the exclusion of certain writing and texts. A deep political asymmetry becomes evident between the “art of teaching” and the teaching of Lacan. The former, in its claim to a transcendental standard for writing and despite its inclusionary rhetoric, seeks to *exclude*; the latter, in its claim for a legitimate place for difficult texts, seeks to *include*. Not even the worst of Lacan’s epigones—to invoke Catherine Clément’s resonant phrase, not even the weary sons of Freud⁷⁷—would suggest that everyone and every teacher should try to write and speak in the inimitable obscurity of Lacan’s style. For Lacan, there is a place for unquestioned difficulty and a place for presumed clarity, just as his own discourse includes both.⁷⁸ By contrast, the “art of teaching” has no place for any writing except that which conforms to its own standard; it seeks to exclude expressly those texts which it deems failing in their obligation to their readers. During the *Teaching Sociology* debate, one of the prime movers of the list felt compelled to inform everyone that while “some” of the members were obviously enjoying the discussion, others thought it such “a waste of valuable time” that they were threatening to unsubscribe.⁷⁹ Likewise, the AERA call for papers, by embracing the standard of clarity, presumes that inclusiveness is best achieved through exclusionary practices. The condition for this *limited type of inclusion* turns out to be exactly its opposite.

Such exclusion is yet another return of the politics of inversion. Just as the “art of teaching” presents grandiosity as modesty and elitism as democracy, it also offers exclusion in the guise of inclusion. And just like the other paradoxes, this presentation of inclusivity

⁷⁷ Catherine Clément, *The Weary Sons of Freud*, trans. Nicole Ball (London: Verso, 1987).

⁷⁸ John Forrester perceptively distinguishes that there are several aspects to Lacan as a writer: “quasi-epigramist, spinner of semantic spider’s webs, . . . tortuous and complex edifier of theories,” and “simple storyteller” (“Lacan’s Debt to Freud: How the Ratman Paid Off His Debt,” in *Returns of the “French Freud,”* ed. Dufresne, 71).

projects its own exclusivity onto texts and writers it rejects. Thus, the typical attack on that imaginary whole conjured under the pejorative umbrella of *post-modern* presents itself as a defense against those who would condemn clear writing—as if Lacan or anyone else would actually propose that the AERA exclude any proposal framed in plain language. I will attempt myself to be emphatically, impossibly clear: I am *not* arguing against clear writing, nor championing a ludicrous ejection of plain language from sociology, education, or the academy in general. Rather, I am supporting the contention that clarity cannot escape difficulty, and that texts like Lacan's, which do not disguise that immanent difficulty, but confront the reader directly with it, are crucial to thinking through the complexities of reading, writing, and teaching.

Another, subtler and more profound exclusion pervades the “art of teaching.” For Lacan, “the state of a language can be characterized as much by what is absent as by what is present.”⁸⁰ What, then, is absent from clear writing? First, let us ask, what is clear about clear writing? Just as *transparency* is associated with ideas and the readiness of their understanding, *clarity* is associated with writing that is transparent to the ideas. Language thus becomes clear when it makes itself *disappear*, so that the ideas that it represents can be grasped in themselves. Equivalently, the clarity of writing allows those ideas to be mastered. As argued above, while plain language deploys the rhetoric of democracy, the logic of that rhetoric is one of force and mastery. The “art of teaching” is mastery multiplied by itself, for it is mastery not only of concepts, but of language and of oneself, one's discipline, one's writing, and one's classroom. From this perspective, the good teacher is a master artist of teaching.

⁷⁹ Post to the *Teaching Sociology* e-mail list, 17 Dec 1996. To unsubscribe is a widely accepted internet neologism that denotes canceling one's subscription to a list.

⁸⁰ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 115. “L'état d'une langue se caractérise aussi bien par ses absences que par ses présences” (*Séminaire III*, 130).

Lacan himself avers that all teaching begins with the discourse of mastery.⁸¹ But the mastery of language is more total than these other dominations, and therefore more troubling than even the rhetorical politics it invokes, for it is not satisfied with the subordination of language. Clarity, as just noted, demands disappearance. Yet the disappearance of what, exactly? A disappearance of language, to be sure, but only of language divided, shorn of the meaning which clear writing is meant to preserve, not dissipate. Clarity aims at an impossible ideal of telepathy, where thoughts from one mind are communicated directly to another, in a perfect transmission, as if its medium is not there at all. The "art of teaching," in its appeal to self-evidence, "effaces language before the radiance of subjective 'truth.'"⁸² Language as such must disappear—that is, language in its materiality, language in its *literality*, language in its *letter*.⁸³ The demand for meaning *qua* signified compels the signifier to fade away.⁸⁴ The plainest of language is no language left at all.

The irony of this aspect of the *Teaching Sociology* creed is that when the letter disappears, the sociology of language is effaced and teaching itself fails. Patrick McGee points out that "the teacher who succeeds in reducing language to its cognitive function so that the student encounters knowledge as an intuition virtually erasing language in its material dimension—such a teacher teaches what is not true, at least in the psychoanalytic

⁸¹ Mark Bracher, *Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change: A Psychoanalytic Cultural Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 60.

⁸² Patrick McGee, "Truth and Resistance: Teaching as a Form of Analysis," *College English* 49.6 (1987), 672. This radiant truth is revealingly being situated outside of language by the "art of teaching."

⁸³ Lacan defines the letter as the material support of discourse ("Agency of the Letter," 147; "L'instance de la lettre," 495).

⁸⁴ "The signifier is to be taken in the sense of the material of language" (Lacan, *Seminar III*, 32). "Le signifiant est à prendre au sens du matériel du langage" (*Séminaire III*, 42). The crucial difference between the letter and the signifier will be taken up later. For now, note that language becomes plain when it is apparently voided of rhetoric. The art of teaching is all about the eviction of the art of letters.

sense of that word. He or she fails to teach the truth of the symbolic order, the cultural frame and linguistic conventions that make knowledge possible in the first place.”⁸⁵

The Terror of Language

Lacan has an explanation for how the normalcy of plain language leads to such a strange state of affairs: “All use of language incurs fright, which stops people and finds expression in the fear of intellectuality. *He intellectualizes too much*, people say. This serves as an alibi for the *fear of language*.”⁸⁶ Lacan sees that clear writing excludes language because there is something terrifying about it. The very intensity of the refusal of jargon recapitulates that affective investment, as does the heartfelt affirmation of the “art of teaching” by *Teaching Sociology*. In fact, Lacan founds his theory of human subjectivity on his conviction that the terror of language cannot be separated from language as the condition of human being. But what is so terrifying about language?

The answer can be divined by asking the opposite question: What is comforting about language? There is a clue in the celebratory reception that *Teaching Sociology* grants the “art of teaching.” Clear writing and plain language are comforting because they provide access to meaning and therefore to understanding. But understanding has been demonstrated to be a euphemism for the mastery of language. Clear writing maintains the orthodox and thoroughly instrumental conception of language—that is, language as purely a

⁸⁵ McGee, “Truth and Resistance,” 674. When this is compared to the earlier quotation from McGee (n82), truth seems to have unexpectedly recovered its customary glamour. There are standard rejoinders to such a conflict, such as the argument that any necessary (and in Lacanese, imaginary) instantiation of meaning must always imply a reference to truth, however contingent, but I think such responses are never quite satisfactory. With that caveat in mind, it should be noted that McGee at least makes the qualification, “the truth *of the symbolic order*,” which, given the Lacanian theorization of that order’s constitutive slippage, makes truth itself a slippery referent.

⁸⁶ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 227, first emphasis in original. “Tout usage du langage suscite un effroi, qui arrête les gens et se traduit par la peur de l’intellectualité. *Il intellectualise trop*, dit-on. Cela sert d’alibi à la peur du langage” (*Séminaire III*, 258, emphasis in original).

means of communication—and therefore maintains language as something masterable. The necessary correlate is that it maintains the speaking subject and the artful teacher *as the master*. What is at stake in the struggle over plain language is therefore the status of the subject. Every symbolic order, like the one defined by Strunk and White, underwrites specific identifications.⁸⁷ Hence, while the “art of teaching” is explicitly about practice, defining the “art of teaching” both implicitly assumes notions of *teacher* and *student* and reiterates those definitions. Even the instrumental view of language leads to the constitution of subject positions. The very trope of the instrument implies the masterful user. Lacan writes that “the symbolic provides a form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his [*sic*] being. It’s on the basis of the signifier that the subject recognizes himself as being this or that.”⁸⁸ So “Who am I?” is, first of all, a question in and of language, which means that those who would take the Delphic oracular injunction to “Know thyself” seriously must do so discursively. It is in this way that the symbolic orders its subjects. What is comforting about language is how we find ourselves written in it, how we are legible to ourselves. A particular symbolic order framed by a particular regime of legibility is “where the subject situates his [*sic*] sense so as to recognize himself.”⁸⁹

The problem is that the symbolic order of language cannot guarantee subjectification. Žižek notes, “It is a commonplace that the Lacanian subject is divided, crossed-out, identical to a lack in the signifying chain. However, the most radical dimension

⁸⁷ In Lacanese, the subject before the (symbolic) Law is the condition of the subject before the (imaginary) mirror (Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge), 80). “Before” should be understood in all its senses. The temporality in which the symbolic precedes the imaginary productively complicates simplistic developmental readings of the mirror stage, as a progression from the imaginary to the symbolic. Bringing the subject “before the Law” has the productive resonance of the Law’s coercive force. The spatiality of *before* nicely emphasizes the distance between the subject and its symbolic and imaginary identifications.

⁸⁸ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 179. “Le symbolique donne une forme dans laquelle s’insère le sujet au niveau de son être. C’est à partir du signifiant que le sujet se reconnaît comme étant ceci ou cela” (*Séminaire III*, 201-202).

of Lacanian theory lies not in recognizing this fact but in realizing that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*. . . . The Other 'hasn't got it', hasn't got the final answer."⁹⁰ Some questions cannot be answered, and those are the crucial ones: "There is, in effect, something radically unassimilable to the signifier. It's quite simply the subject's singular existence. Why is he [*sic*] here? Where has he come from? What is he doing here? Why is he going to disappear? The signifier is incapable of providing him with the answer."⁹¹ If language is what makes humans human, it still cannot ultimately support their being. In fact, if *différance* is the general condition of language, then language is what denies that support. *Différance* means that language cannot be mastered and that no human can be the master of it. We find ourselves in language, but we also lose ourselves in it. "The symbolic order is simultaneously non-being and insisting to be."⁹² This is the ambivalent power of the symbolic with respect to the contingency of subjectivity and meaning. The symbolic appears, paradoxically, in "what is beyond all understanding, which all understanding is inserted into, and which exercises such an obviously disruptive influence over human and interhuman relationships."⁹³ Hence the contested staging of the imaginary in the symbolic. "The ego is precisely a *méconnaissance* of the symbolic order," an imaginary object mistaken for the subject always already displaced by the vagaries of language.⁹⁴ If we recall how Laplanche and Pontalis's first definition of the imaginary referenced the ego in terms of narcissism, the

⁸⁹ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 175. "Où le sujet situe son sens pour se reconnaître" (*Séminaire III*, 197).

⁹⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 122.

⁹¹ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 179-80. "Il y a en effet quelque chose de radicalement inassimilable au signifiant. C'est tout simplement l'existence singulière du sujet. Pourquoi est-il là ? D'où sort-il ? Pourquoi va-t-il disparaître ? Le signifiant est incapable de lui donner la réponse" (*Séminaire III*, 202).

⁹² Lacan, *Seminar II*, 326. "L'ordre symbolique à la fois non-étant et insistant pour être" (*Séminaire II*, 375).

⁹³ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 8. "Par deux abords différents, à ce qui est au-delà de toute compréhension, à l'intérieur de quoi toute compréhension s'insère, et qui exerce une influence si manifestement perturbante sur les rapports humains et interhumains" (*Séminaire III*, 17).

unrestrained narcissism of ego-identification with the “art of teaching” that launched this paper fits only too well. To the extent that we misrecognize ourselves this way, and identify with the artifice of the “circle of certainties” of the self, we remain imaginary to ourselves.⁹⁵ This is why Lacan calls the ego “the human symptom *par excellence*, the mental illness of man.”⁹⁶

Here, then, is the terror of language. The symbolic, as the register of *différance*, is the venue for the inevitable failure of the imaginary, as the register of identity. Such failure marks the peculiar emergence of the third register of language for Lacan, the *real*. Insofar as meaning eludes us, insofar as language does not have the answer, the real appears. The Lacanian real is “that before which the imaginary faltered, that over which the symbolic stumbles, that which is refractory, resistant.”⁹⁷ The crucial point is that the real is immanent to the symbolic; the failure of language is built into the very nature of language and occurs precisely at that symbolic place where the subject strives and fails to achieve her or his imaginary substantiation. The Borromean knotting of language and the subject means that a real lack of the self dwells in every heart: “this sort of mortmain, of a necessary and unbearable enigmatic element, that is partially constituted by the discourse of the real man [*sic*] we are dealing with in our experience, this foreign discourse within everyone’s heart in so far as one thinks of oneself as an autonomous individual.”⁹⁸ This is one reason why Lacan

⁹⁴ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), s.v. “ego”; Lacan, *Seminar II*, 44; *Séminaire II*, 60.

⁹⁵ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 8. “Cercle de certitudes” (*Séminaire II*, 16).

⁹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique: 1953–1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1988), 16. “Le symptôme humain par excellence, c’est la maladie mentale de l’homme” (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan : Livre I : Les écrits techniques de Freud : 1952–1953*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [Paris: Seuil, 1975], 22).

⁹⁷ Sheridan, translator’s note, x.

⁹⁸ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 135. “Il est indissolublement lié à cette sorte de mainmorte, de partie énigmatique nécessaire et insoutenable, que constitue pour une part le discours de l’homme réel à qui nous avons affaire

writes the subject as the signifier *sous rature*: \S , “barring” the S of the signifier.⁹⁹ It is a sociological apothegm that language is what makes someone human, and Lacan can be understood as merely taking that apothegm very seriously. If it is true, and if language is a much trickier thing than an instrument of communication, there must be profound consequences for the human subject. Lacan is therefore extrapolating a very ordinary position when he theorizes the ways in which subjectivity is always intricately with the travails of the *letter*. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan is more specific: “The two faces of the subject [that which is determined within discourse and that which cannot be answered by discourse] are joined, I would say, by a materiality of the ‘letter’ Lacan argued against the apparent unity of Imaginary ego consistency . . . that blocks the *Autre* as a place of pure difference by working with minimal interpretations (his little letters or *mathemes* and his Borromean knots).”¹⁰⁰ The absolutely crucial paradox is that the real *qua* mutual failure of the imaginary and symbolic is made manifest by the *matheme qua* letter. It is this real, ineluctable and terrifying failure of language compounded with the subject, which the *matheme* incarnates in a paradigmatic manner, that clear writing seeks to evade.¹⁰¹ What the *matheme is* will become central to this argument.

If the general condition of language is *différance* (pure difference), if meaning is always slipping away, if even plain language, like the definition of the “art of teaching”, always

dans notre expérience, ce discours étranger au sein de chacun en tant qu’il se conçoit comme individu autonome” (*Séminaire III*, 152-153). *Mortmain* means, literally, “dead hand.”

⁹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1977), 141 (this book will henceforth be referenced as *Seminar XI*); *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan : Livre XI : Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse : 1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 129.

¹⁰⁰ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, “Stealing Material: The Materiality of Language According to Freud and Lacan,” in *Lacan & Human Sciences*, ed. Leupin, 72-3, emphasis in original.

¹⁰¹ Lacan’s theory of language and subjectivity is, of course, much deeper and subtler than this sketch. He argued it through the nearly thirty years of his *séminaire* and across the 8000+ pages of all his *écrits*.

discloses complexity and contradiction upon careful reading, then the Lacanian text is that kind of writing which, *through its form and letter*, exposes the difficulty which is immanent to itself and to every text. The “art of teaching” confirms this difficulty in spite of itself, for it relies upon the trope of translation, and what is most easily lost in any translation are the metaphoric and associative resonances of the original, which depend so much upon form and letter.¹⁰² Lacan says that truth “limps openly” in his writing.¹⁰³ It defies imaginary capture, and therefore does not permit the fantasy of mastery which is the condition of understanding. It could be said that Lacan restores the difficulty that the “art of teaching” is intent on effacing, that he counters the letter’s artful and artless simplicity. While one of the *Teaching Sociology* supporters applauds its creed with “It really isn’t too difficult, is it?”,¹⁰⁴ Bourdieu, once again, demurs: “If people at least come away with the feeling that it *is* complicated, that’s already a good lesson to have learned.”¹⁰⁵ Cottom and Lacan’s point is that complication will always arise from assiduous reading, even (or especially) the reading of texts which have been clearly written to circumvent that complication. Lacan says that the practice of exclusion, “in the hope that at least with the part things will hang together” is doomed, because “there are always things that don’t hang together.”¹⁰⁶ Exclusion can never succeed in the end, because the problem is not outside one’s writing; it is always already inside, because it is inside language itself. “The analytic reading is thus essentially the reading

¹⁰² Patrick Colm Hogan, “Structure and Ambiguity in the Symbolic Order: Some Prolegomena to the Understanding and Criticism of Lacan,” in Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit, *Criticism & Lacan: Essays and Dialogue* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1990), 8.

¹⁰³ Lacan, preface to Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, viii. “La vérité boite” (Lacan, preface to Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, 7th ed. [revised], 6).

¹⁰⁴ Post to the *Teaching Sociology* e-mail list, 11 Dec 1996.

¹⁰⁵ Bourdieu, “Landmarks,” 52, emphasis in original. “Si les gens retiennent au moins que c’est compliqué, c’est déjà un enseignement” (“Repères,” 67).

¹⁰⁶ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 82. “Il y a toujours des choses qui ne collent pas” (*Séminaire III*, 95).

of a difference that inhabits language, a kind of mapping of the subject's discourse of its points of disagreement with, or difference from, itself."¹⁰⁷

Lacan says, "It is quite clear that, in analytic discourse, what is involved is but that—that which is read."¹⁰⁸ It is impossible to read Lacan without confronting language itself.¹⁰⁹ Reading him demands undeniable invocations of the reader's strategies, presumptions, inclinations and ideologies, which cannot be imagined away as simple competence on the part of reader or writer. In place of the universality of understanding, such a text forces an engagement with the singularity of each reader and each instance of reading, in their non-generalizable specificities. "Analytic (textual) knowledge cannot be *exchanged* [which means it cannot be *translated*], it has to be *used*—and used in each case differently, according to the singularity of the case, according to the specificity of the text."¹¹⁰

In this respect, the creed of the "art of teaching" should be read against another pedagogical axiom: "*If everyone in a classroom thinks alike, only one person is thinking.*" The understanding sought by plain language is a universally shared one, whose success is measured by precisely how much everyone thinks alike. This can even be radicalized, for if what the artful teacher teaches was taught to him, then he too is thinking like someone else. In that case, according to this alternate creed, the "art of teaching" promotes a leveling of the classroom so that when everyone thinks alike, no one is thinking at all. This may read like an insult, but it is not necessarily so. The exact replication of an object of knowledge (for example, a fact or proposition or technique) can be both worthy and useful (teaching as

¹⁰⁷ Felman, *Adventure of Insight*, 21.

¹⁰⁸ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 26. "Il est bien évident que, dans le discours analytique, il ne s'agit que de ça, de ce qui se lit" (*Séminaire XX*, 29).

¹⁰⁹ I have adapted Patrick McGee's characterization of De Man here ("Truth and Resistance," 675).

¹¹⁰ Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education," 81, emphasis in original.

another simulation of ideal telepathy) without requiring any independent thinking at all. The teaching of psychoanalysis, however, is not about objects of knowledge. Nor is it about the closure of meaning. Rather, it is about the openness of being human.¹¹¹ It is about desire.

As Lacan observes, there is “the ever-present possibility of bringing desire, attachment, or even the most enduring meaning of human activity back into question, the constant possibility of a sign’s being reversed.”¹¹² The return of desire is therefore the admission of misunderstanding—but this is precisely the point. Lacan declares, “I pursue this discourse in such a way as to offer you the opportunity to not quite understand.”¹¹³ And more strongly: “Begin by thinking you don’t understand. Start from the idea of fundamental misunderstanding.”¹¹⁴ Such is the severity of the Lacanian difference from the “art of teaching.” This difference dissipates the charge of elitism so often leveled at Lacan. His texts are not written in a style that only a privileged few can understand (in this respect, he directly opposes Bourdieu’s assertion of the exactitude of a rigorous vocabulary). Rather, they are written so that *everyone* must start by not understanding, designed so that *everyone* will encounter resistance. The Lacanian text is neither a *lingua franca*, owned by everyone, nor a private language, owned by a select few. Instead, rejecting that binarism and the very logic of authority through ownership, it is owned by no one at all.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ “Man [*sic*], of all entities, is an open entity. The openness of being fascinates anyone who begins to think.” (Lacan, *Seminar III*, 295) “L’homme, entre tous les étants, est un étant ouvert. L’ouverture de l’être fascine tout un chacun qui se met à penser” (*Séminaire III*, 333).

¹¹² Lacan, *Seminar III*, 23. “La possibilité de la remise en question à chaque instant du désir, de l’attachement, voire de la signification la plus persévérante d’une activité humaine, la perpétuelle possibilité d’un renversement de signe” (*Séminaire III*, 32).

¹¹³ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 164. “Je poursuis ce discours de façon telle que je vous offre l’occasion de ne pas tout à fait le comprendre” (*Séminaire III*, 184).

¹¹⁴ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 20. “Commencez par ne pas croire que vous comprenez. Partez de l’idée du malentendu fondamental” (*Séminaire III*, 29).

¹¹⁵ I would go so far as to argue that this “no one” applies to Lacan himself. The Lacanian text is most productive when even Lacan is granted no special status as *le sujet supposé savoir*.

In this way, the Lacanian text engages exactly what the “art of teaching” excludes. If the “art of teaching” is all about the reach for mastery, Lacan’s discourse is about that which escapes mastery. In his terms, the symbolic attempt at totalization—one version of which is complete translation—always leaves a surplus or remainder, and it is that surplus which is the object of psychoanalysis.¹¹⁶ Lacan also retrieves the excluded materiality of language, which clear writing seeks to efface. These two recuperated exclusions cannot be separated. Just as the symbolic order of plain language strives to totalize meaning and subjectivity by making language disappear in an imaginary movement of capture and effacement, the Lacanian symbolic readmits the real through attention to the letter. Ironically, this opposition between Lacan and the “art of teaching” brings them together. The latter is about an impossible desire for the coincident capture of meaning and self; the former is about desire as such.¹¹⁷ I began with the claim that desire is a dangerous ground for pedagogy, and that obtains both for the “art of teaching” and the teaching of Lacan. The crucial difference is that Lacan both recognizes that danger and exploits it as the crucial opening for pedagogy. That is his truth of desire: “At least for a while, take my honey such as I offer it to you and try to put it to some use.”¹¹⁸ As he says, plainly and otherwise, “I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there’s no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds on to the real.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ In Lacan’s algebra of the discourse of the master, the representation of the subject, S_1 , by a master signifier S_1 , leaves the surplus of a , which is *objet a*.

¹¹⁷ Lacan is a radicalization of Jagger and Richards *avant la lettre*. It’s not just that you can’t always get what you want, it’s that you can *never* get what you really want.

¹¹⁸ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 150. “Au moins pour un temps, prenez mon miel tel que je vous l’offre, et tâchez d’en faire quelque chose” (*Séminaire III*, 170).

¹¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Television/ A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (Norton: New York, 1990), 3. “Je dis toujours la vérité : pas toute, parce que toute la dire, on n’y arrive pas. La dire toute, c’est impossible, matériellement : les mots y manquent. C’est même par cet impossible que la vérité tient au réel” (Jacques Lacan, *Télévision* [Paris: Seuil,

Letters from Lacan

While Lacan has been eschewed by teaching sociologists, he has been read with care by literary theorists.¹²⁰ Given his transgression of the imaginary capture of meaning characteristic of hegemonic disciplinary regimes of legibility, that readership is hardly surprising. Gallop explains that literary theorists have learned “how to read the letter of the text, how to interpret the style, the form, rather than just reading for content, for ideas.”¹²¹ In other words, they can read Lacan *because* they read against the terms of the “art of teaching.” Felman, who is, like Gallop, a professor of literature, describes her introduction to his texts this way: “Lacan’s writing read like Mallarmé’s—an obscure and enigmatic, yet powerful and effective, poetic prose. It appealed to me in the way literature appeals to me: *without my being able to make immediate sense of it or translate it*, I was made to take it in and absorb more than I knew.”¹²² Even Lacan’s critics resort to literary parallels: “The texts [of *Écrits*] themselves are notoriously difficult and opaque, giving the impression that one has strayed into the endless labyrinth of some Borgesian library.”¹²³ It is ironically, perfectly, clear that there are regimes of legibility extant and thriving in the academy (albeit outside *Teaching Sociology* and the AERA call for papers) in which Lacan’s texts appear as literature precisely because they cannot be reduced to plain language. Paradoxically, the claims for clear writing made by the “art of teaching” creed can only be sustained by the exclusion not only of Lacan and the letter, but also of the academic disciplines most specifically devoted to language, reading and writing: literary criticism and theory.

1974], 9). Editor Jacques-Alain Miller annotates this passage, the very first in *Télévision*, with a matheme in the margin: S(A).

¹²⁰ James Mellard, *Using Lacan: Reading Fiction* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), 56; Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 22.

¹²¹ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 22.

¹²² Felman, *Adventure of Insight*, 5, emphasis added.

Yet, surprisingly, not even Gallop will read *all* of Lacan. There remains an excluded surplus to her *Reading Lacan*: “As someone with a literary rather than a scientific education,” she says, “I find Lacan’s stories and poetry more sympathetic, more pleasurable, and easier than his graphs and later ‘mathemes.’”¹²⁴ So, through sympathy and pleasure, she rends Lacan in two, and renders him into two parts: one valorized and one othered. Here, the name of the other is *matheme*.¹²⁵

Lacan writes of the matheme (in French, *mathème*) that “mathematical formalization is our goal, our ideal. Why ? Because it alone is matheme, in other words, it alone is capable of being integrally transmitted.”¹²⁶ As Valerie Raoul observes, he is unexpectedly making a promise of a complete transparency he has already deemed impossible in language: the matheme as “something that does not need translation.”¹²⁷ And that promise appears to immediately and fatally falter, for the matheme delivers to Gallop and many others only varieties of the indecipherable:

$$\S$$

$$a$$

$$\S \diamond a$$

$$S(\emptyset)$$

¹²³ David Macey, *Lacan in Contexts* (London: Verso, 1988), 8.

¹²⁴ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 161.

¹²⁵ Gallop is quite properly distinguishing the matheme from Lacan’s graphs, but, as I will argue in subsequent chapters, the matheme is at least a good synecdoche for all of Lacan’s seeming mathematics, including the graphs and the “algorithms.”

¹²⁶ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 119. “La formalisation mathématique est notre but, notre idéal. Pourquoi? — parce que seule elle est mathème, c’est-à-dire capable de se transmettre intégralement” (Lacan, *Séminaire XX*, 108).

¹²⁷ Personal communication 26 January 1998.

These are *mathemes*, but taking them as genuine mathematics leads to either incoherence or triviality. For David Macey, “in practice [the matheme] means little more than ‘mathematical sign,’”¹²⁸ but for Clément, the linkage between the matheme and mathematics is more indirect and more profound: “The word harks back to the Greek root of mathematics, the verb *manthanein*, to learn. Matheme first of all meant study, knowledge.”¹²⁹ The matheme is from the beginning wedded to teaching. If we think of the AERA as a vast group striving in its call for papers to unite itself by the plainness of language, and also of the institutionalized religiosity of the faith which sustains the “art of teaching”, then Clément’s further observation takes on a special edge: “The mathemes were the result of a strong critique of religion, and not only of the Christian religion . . . but of *any institution producing ‘consolidated group effects’ to the detriment of genuine discourse.*”¹³⁰ Such consolidation pertains not only to the group, but also to the imaginary coherence of the ego that is welded to the capture of meaning. The matheme “was defined in the first issue of *Ornicar?* as the formulation of analytic experience as a structure, against the idea that such experience is ineffable. It appears [later] more as an examination of notions such as ‘form’ and ‘consistency’, which imply a presence or unity of the subject, and which Lacan opposes with concepts and figures from logic, topology and the formulae of written language, which cannot be cohered in the same

¹²⁸ Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, 170.

¹²⁹ Catherine Clément, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), 184. “Le terme reprend à la racine le mot « mathématiques », et retourne à l’élémentaire du verbe grec « *manthanein* », apprendre, dont il est dérivé. Mathème, c’est connaissance, étude, d’abord” (Catherine Clément, *Vies et légendes de Jacques Lacan* [Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1981], 213).

¹³⁰ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 183, emphasis added. “« *L’obstination dans la voie des mathèmes* » faisait suite à une violente critique des religions. Pas seulement la religion chrétienne . . . mais toute institution produisant des « *effets de groupe consolidé* » aux dépens de l’effet de discours attendu de l’expérience” (*Vies et légendes*, 212, emphasis added).

way.”¹³¹ The *matheme* is the exemplary letter that refuses to vanish into the clarity of writing, and through that refusal, affirms the world. Lacan says,

Let us put together objects of thought, as they are called, objects of the world, each of which counts as one. Let us assemble these absolutely heterogeneous things, and let us grant ourselves the right to designate the resulting assemblage by a letter.¹³²

Matheme appears to be Lacan's own invention, although some of his critics believe that Lacan was much more a borrower or plagiarist than an inventor. Yet if the *matheme* was actually “ripped off” from elsewhere, the name would only be more appropriate to its referents.¹³³ No evidence of its use previous to Lacan has surfaced yet, but even if the *matheme* was not pirated *in toto*, it is still possible that it was adapted from Lévi-Strauss's *mytheme*, or the linguistic/philological *phoneme*, *moneme*, or *morpheme*.¹³⁴ The suffix *-eme* means a “significantly distinctive unit of language structure,” so, in at least an etymological sense, the *matheme* brings together mathematics and language.¹³⁵ It is crucial to recognize that the *matheme* has both sides, because that recognition averts the error of trying to read the *matheme* purely as mathematics. For Lacan, the *matheme* introduces the “formal” language of mathematics to the incessant informalities of language in general.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Jacqueline Rose, Introduction to “Seminar of 21 January 1975,” in Mitchell and Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality*, 162. *Ornicar?* is a Lacanian journal.

¹³² Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 47. “Mettons ensemble des objets de pensée, comme on dit, des objets du monde, chacun compte pour un. Assemblons ces choses absolument hétéroclites, et donnons-nous le droit de désigner cet assemblage par une lettre” (*Séminaire XX*, 46).

¹³³ See Stephen Melville, below, on the “ripped off” *matheme*.

¹³⁴ Joël Dor points out that the phoneme and the moneme (or morpheme) are metonymically connected in the production of meaning. That is, phonemes are concatenated to produce monemes, which are further concatenated to produce words and sentences (Joël Dor, *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan: The Unconscious Structured Like a Language*, ed. Judith Feher Gurewich, in collaboration with Susan Fairfield [Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1997], 31; Joël Dor, *Introduction à la lecture de Lacan: 1. L'inconscient structuré comme un langage* [Paris: Denoël, 1985], 42).

¹³⁵ WWWebster Dictionary, on-line database. URL: <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>. s.v. “-eme.”

¹³⁶ A formal language is differentiated from a “natural” language like English, French, or Serbo-Croatian, by being “artificially” constructed—the exemplary formal language is that of computing science's artificial intelligence. Formal language is characteristically defined and regulated in a precise way with the intention of

Specific mathemes and their effects will be considered in the following chapters. What our discussion has led to here is the *status* of the matheme. That status is demonstrated by the way in which it stymies not only sophisticated readers of literature, but also scientists who are at ease with mathematical formalization. Some of Lacan's critics have seized upon this fact as another way of repudiating his texts, but in protesting that Lacan fails to produce a systematic formalization, they only confirm the efficacy of the matheme as the crucial letter in reading and teaching.¹³⁷ The mathematical *appearance* of the matheme manifests once more the imaginary aspect of the symbolic, for it is the *image* of the matheme which lures such critics into an *imaginary* reading of its symbolic formalization, and, ironically, into an oversight of its paradigmatically symbolic slippage of meaning. The instructive irony is that literary theorists make the same error when they presume that the matheme is mathematical (and therefore not literary) because of the way it *looks*. This specular *méconnaissance* formally repeats, from another angle, the error of the artists of teaching, for in both cases the condition of repudiation is the imaginary capture of meaning, and the tactic is to cut the Lacanian text for the purposes of exclusion. The mutual decision is to leave matheme as an unread letter. Bruce Fink demurs: "Lacan is saying, in 1972–73 . . . that the little letters are, precisely, letters that must be read. The claim seems then to be that such letters, being read, cannot but reach their destinations."¹³⁸ The rest of this chapter is an attempt to begin to think about that claim by Lacan.

avoiding the ambiguous problematics of natural language. We could thus say that clear writing is the attempt to denature (natural) language.

¹³⁷ For instance, see Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, 171.

¹³⁸ Stephen Melville, "Psychoanalysis and the Place of *Jouissance*," in Françoise Meltzer, ed., *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 177.

Reading the Matheme

The matheme refuses the dichotomy between mathematics and poetics, partaking of natural and formal language, but eluding both. "The image of the matheme is [to be] taken seriously, but taken seriously as a poetic device."¹³⁹ Stephen Melville provides the necessary elaboration:

Formalization matters to Lacan not because it offers a way for psychoanalysis to attain the condition of mathematics (or to attain the condition of a certain ideal of mathematics) but precisely because psychoanalysis is unable to do so: it inevitably falls back into, is dependent upon, mere language and voice, tangled in the circuits of desire and the particularities of the psychoanalytic object. The mathemes are a means of *making visible* the 'pure signifier' as that which organizes a 'science' the objectivity of which is disciplinary and hermeneutic, operating in a region apart from, untouched by, and proofed against traditional discussions of the scientific standing of psychoanalysis.¹⁴⁰

The matheme is there *because* it stymies sophisticated readers of literature and mathematics alike. Turkle remarks that Lacan "asserted the need for equational science among those he felt use poetic justifications to avoid the hard and rigorous work ahead and asserted the need for poetry among others who may be allowing scientific rigor to narrow their field of vision."¹⁴¹

Yet the matheme is more than the necessary resistance to literary theoretical reading. It is a condensation of the Lacanian thesis that language slips away from itself, that the symbolic order is inconsistent, because the imaginary and the real contest each other in it. The matheme is the letter, the simple letter that is both the condition of plain language and the ultimate resistance to it, the material way the symbolic resists itself:

If we look back at . . . the various little letters Lacan has sent us, it should be clear that they bear little relation to any normal project of scientific mathesis. Lacan rips off bits of this and that, giving us "notations" that have a certain

¹³⁹ Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 238.

¹⁴⁰ Melville, "Place of *Jouissance*," 177, emphasis added.

¹⁴¹ Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 238.

validity within a highly restricted region. The manipulations to which they are submitted appear radically unprincipled, and their relevant features vary from the highly formal to the crudely pictorial. There is no ground for suspecting a systematic Lacanian algebra of some kind behind the various mathemes and charts. He is not dreaming that dream. He is dreaming a more dreamerly dream, in *ein anderer Schauplatz*, in which it is important precisely that these letters are ripped off, displaced, borrowed, imitative.¹⁴²

Gallop concedes the place of the matheme, albeit reluctantly: "Sorely tempted, I do not, however, feel free simply to dismiss [the graphs and mathemes]. Even if...Lacan's science is a failure, his drive toward science is part of the work."¹⁴³ Yet, taking Melville to heart, the scientific "failure" of the matheme is what the matheme is all about. Elsewhere, Gallop asks the question that she is sometimes seemingly reluctant to confront: "What if the reader [of Lacan] did not 'terminate' when she realized it could go on forever?"¹⁴⁴

For the matheme is inarguably "part of the work." It pervades the Lacanian text. "Any reader who has even glanced through the *Écrits* will surely know that Lacan's work is studded with such 'formalization.'"¹⁴⁵ It configures the geometry of his notorious graphs and constantly punctuates his prose. It is there in Lacan's first seminar, in 1953, and inhabits his work for the remainder of his teaching life.¹⁴⁶ Admittedly, its proliferation is more evident in French than in English. For instance, Lacan's Graph of Desire, which is structured around the matheme, appears only in the final translated *écrit*, but the Graph is repeatedly referenced

¹⁴² Melville, "Place of *Jouissance*," 176.

¹⁴³ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 161. This is a wonderful sentence, with its apparently unconscious invocation of the drive, which Lacan figures as endlessly circling around its object—which Gallop identifies as science—while never reaching it (*Seminar XI*, 174-186; *Séminaire XI*, 159-169).

¹⁴⁴ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 53.

¹⁴⁵ Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 147.

¹⁴⁶ There are letters in the diagrams of the experiment of the inverted bouquet, which gets elaborated through *Seminar I* and to which Lacan returns in later years (Lacan, *Seminar I*, 124, 139, 165, 283; *Seminar XI*, 245; *Séminaire I*, 143, 160, 187, 312; *Séminaire XI*, 132). It should be noted that in *Seminar I*, Lacan uses Freud's own "matheme"—the "optical" apparatus of the psyche from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Lacan, *Seminar I*, 75; *Séminaire I*, 89; Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey [London: Penguin, 1976], 687)—as the jumping-off point for his own schemas. Even here, he is returning to Freud.

throughout *séminaires* that have yet to appear in English. While the significance of the matheme within Lacan's theory is still debated, its systematic inscription in the very heart of his text cannot be denied. The matheme cannot be escaped.

It *can* be circumvented, though, and such is the wont of most of Lacan's commentators. Unfortunately, most are much less conscientious than Gallop, and elide the matheme without any explicit rationale. Their occasional references to the matheme often lapse into suspect generalizations. Madan Sarup, for instance, claims that "many of the graphs and formulae are no more than mnemonics with a fairly basic pedagogic purpose."¹⁴⁷ Michael Payne says much the same thing: "Although Lacan had a long-standing interest in mathematics, his equations and other mathematical functions serve more to fix his ideas and to fulfill mnemonic and pedagogic purposes than to advance his theoretical project."¹⁴⁸ These assertions are more than a little odd, inasmuch as they denigrate the significance of the matheme by seeking to reduce it to an instrument of memory and teaching, as though the latter were not absolutely central to Lacanian theory.¹⁴⁹ These commentators recognize, in an unconsciously ironic characterization of the matheme as a device of pedagogical clarification, the intimate connection of the matheme to teaching. Yet none of them spells out how the matheme aids either memory or teaching. Instead, the mere attribution of such purposes apparently suffices to glide past the matheme without reading it any further.

More seriously, this kind of reduction in the name of clarity and understanding is a chronic academic syndrome, of which the "art of teaching" is symptomatic. The Lacanian text is engaged through strategic exclusion, where what is excluded—neither read nor taught

¹⁴⁷ Madan Sarup, *Jacques Lacan* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992), 115.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Payne, *Reading Theory: An Introduction to Lacan, Derrida, and Kristeva* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 82.

¹⁴⁹ With respect to memory, it is only necessary to consider the criticality of the *nachträglich*.

—is cut out, so that the remainder is understandable. Elided through any such cut is what Felman identifies as the pedagogical moment in Lacan:

The pedagogical question crucial to Lacan's own teaching will thus be: Where does it resist? Where does a text . . . precisely make no sense, that is, resist interpretation? Where is the ignorance—the resistance to knowledge—located? And what can I learn from the locus of that ignorance?¹⁵⁰

The matheme, by its resistance to the reader and the reader's resistance to it, draws attention to itself as a key moment to the teaching of Lacan. Readings which omit the matheme are therefore doomed to fall short—even shorter than the inevitable failings of every reading.

Of course, there is absolutely nothing wrong with any particular reader-writer preferring particular threads of Lacan over others. Given the massiveness and range and obduracy of his *oeuvre*, a strategically limited approach is eminently sensible, and likely the only feasible one. The exclusion of the matheme enacts the concept of lack that is central to Lacan, but because it is usually a blind and mute enactment, it works explicitly against the Lacanian ethos. This is not to deny a certain efficacy of the cut, for, as Gallop notes, it does make the Lacanian text easier. At the same time, we should appreciate the castrating implications. Gelding is a traditional practice of taming, whether we are speaking of horses or texts. Plain language is language that has been domesticated precisely by cutting out the wild and the ferocious, just as inclusiveness defined through communication is constantly figured through homey rhetoric. It must never be forgotten that Lacan himself urges the opposite condition of reading. Gallop is posing a contradiction along the axis of legibility between poetry and the matheme, one that is resolvable by eliding the latter. However, for Lacan, the subversion of that very division is the condition of psychoanalysis.¹⁵¹ Mark

¹⁵⁰ Felman, *Adventure of Insight*, 80.

¹⁵¹ Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 233.

Bracher articulates the more general imperative: "Anyone who reads Lacan carefully realizes that making generalizations about Lacan's teaching is a highly demanding task that requires facing—not ignoring—the contradictions in Lacan's conceptualizations."¹⁵² In Felman's terms, the resistance of and to the *matheme* situates a locus of ignorance, but the refusal to address that locus is a refusal to learn from it.

Matheme gives a kind of non-signifying name to Lacanian hermeticism, distilling it into a rebarbative little letter, but concomitantly stands for a boundary that can be and is drawn at many different sites, within and without the academy: between Lacan and other psychoanalysts, between psychoanalysis and other theory, between French and anglophone theory, between theory and whatever prides itself as being non-theoretical, between jargon and plain language, between Mallarmé and clear writing, between literature and the social sciences.

What makes Lacan different from his detractors is that he begins where they leave off; he enters the moment of not-reading precisely where the non-reader turns away. To put this more bluntly, when the non-reader decides that reading is impossible because her/his expectation of clarity is utterly frustrated, s/he gives up the possibility of further learning—and therefore of teaching, at least in its artful form. A Lacanian teaching begins when the "art of teaching" crashes. More precisely, Lacan teaches by forcing it to crash. If Lacan's writing works at all—and there are admittedly many dissenters on that account—it works not *in spite of* the difficulty of its apperception, but *because of* it. As Fink points out, "Lacan's writing itself overflows with extravagant, preposterous, and mixed metaphors,

¹⁵² Mark Bracher, "The Subject of Discourse," in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure and Society*, ed. Mark Bracher, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., Ronald J. Corthell, and Françoise Massardier-Kenney (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1994), 22.

precisely to jolt one out of the easy reductionism inherent in the very process of understanding.”¹⁵³

It is Gallop who grasps the pedagogical merit of Lacan’s mathemic writing and puts it into action, despite her explicit distaste for the matheme. She spends most of a chapter of *Reading Lacan* reading the “mathematical” algorithms for metaphor and metonymy from “Agency of the Letter.” As she points out, those algorithms are comprised mostly of *S* and *s*, the familiar mathemes for the signifier and the signified.¹⁵⁴ Despite her finding little pleasure in the matheme, she chose those algorithms as the operative center of the seminar on *literary studies* that she taught. She determinedly pushes on in that chapter, just as she pushed on in that course, despite her students coming to class “frustrated, disgruntled, feeling inadequate or outraged,” having failed to come to grips with Lacan. Meditating on style and Lacan, she ventures that “perhaps the block to reading Lacan is the reader herself.”¹⁵⁵ Still, it is some forty pages *later* that she confesses her abiding distaste for the matheme.

Lacan is staging a deliberate confrontation with the grounds of intelligibility for Gallop and her students, just as he is for every would-be reader of *Écrits* and his other texts. In a certain way, this is a most orthodox return to Freud, who is so concerned with slips of the tongue and other misfires. At that crash-site, in that dangerous and lurching place, something unfamiliar intrudes, something not so easily accommodated to what has gone before. What intrudes is not the artful lesson, nor the argument extracted from the text, nor the intent of the author, nor any *communication* per se, but instead the potential “creation of

¹⁵³ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 71.

¹⁵⁴ Gallop, “Metaphor and metonymy,” *Reading Lacan*.

¹⁵⁵ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 117.

an original learning disposition” only possible in the failure of the orderly symbolic.¹⁵⁶ Led, however willingly or unwillingly, to this place by Lacan, we still have a choice. We can simply reject the Lacanian text for its unplain language, its unclear writing, and its unartistic teaching. We can laugh at it, we can damn it, we can effect closure by simply closing the book on Lacan and looking elsewhere for more congenial reading and pedagogy. Or we can decide that the “art of teaching” is insufficient—which does not mean it is wrong in itself, but incomplete and therefore wrong by itself when it presumes to cover the entire field of teaching. If re-opening the books of Lacan makes us irremediably dissatisfied with the “art of teaching,” we are immediately faced by at least four pedagogical exigencies. First, we need to read forbidding texts—like those of Lacan—that seem impossible to read. To be more accurate, we need to engage with those texts in ways very different from what we usually recognize as reading. Hence the exemplarity of the *matheme*: its engagement demands a mode that is at once utterly unlike prosodic text and utterly unlike the formalization of mathematics or symbolic logic. Second, we need to think about the refusal to read, and about how it turns on particular presumptions about language and subjectivity. My contention is that it is exactly such presumptions that Lacan, who refuses to separate language from subjectivity, puts into question. The *matheme* is the key here as well, for, as Clément observes, it is “the logical analysis of the fundamental division of the subject.”¹⁵⁷ Third, we need to acknowledge that the refusal to read is a refusal to learn. That decisive recognition will allow us to inquire into the nature of these coupled refusals, and into the desires and seeming necessities that drive them. The *matheme* stands forth as the conspicuous hard kernel of illegibility and the frustration of knowledge and desire. Finally,

¹⁵⁶ Felman, *Lacan*, 81.

we need to think about the dangerous desires that drive the “art of teaching,” instead of wishing or assuming that either those desires or that art can be fulfilled.

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¹⁵⁷ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 184. “La mise en relation logique de la division fondamentale du sujet” (*Vies et légendes*, 213).

Chapter Two:

8: Rendering the Subject

Everything emerges from the structure of the signifier.¹

—Jacques Lacan

Take a line from *Écrits*. What do you have? A string of words, which Lacan calls a chain of signifiers. Such a chain is never merely a concatenation, for each signifier succeeds the previous one according to a certain order, obeying (or self-consciously defying) the laws of language. That order defines both a direction and a movement. A line from *Écrits* can therefore be schematized by the line *tout court*:

Simply a line, but not just a line, for it is *directed*—in all senses of the word, it has direction. Here, Lacan's terms are those of physics: that line is actually a *vector*.² Since this particular vector speaks psychoanalysis in its Parisian mode, it is propelled from left to right across the page by the symbolic order of French letters, and then down in serried ranks. Other scripts in other places may move differently, but every one of them moves in a likewise regulated way, according to its native order.³

To turn to the formalism of mathematics—a formalism which cannot be sustained for very long, as Melville noted—let this lateral vector be a first approximation to the

¹ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 206. "Tout surgit de la structure du signifiant" (*Séminaire XI*, 188).

² For example, Jacques Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 303. "Le vecteur" ("Subversion du sujet," 805).

³ Lacan notes, "We should approach things at the level of the history of each language. It is clear that the letters which upset us so much that we call them, God only knows why, by a different name, 'characters', to wit, Chinese letters, emerged from a very ancient Chinese discourse in a way that was very different from the way in which our letters emerged" (*Seminar XX*, 36). "Il faudrait prendre les choses au niveau de l'histoire de chaque langue. Il est clair que cette lettre qui nous affole tellement que nous appelons ça, Dieu sait pourquoi,

signifying chain, and let every line of every text likewise imply an ordered directedness. Such an approximation immediately fails, for, as we well know, the signifying chain—that is, discourse in its variously signed articulations—constantly defies its own grammatical well-orderedness. The paradigm is, in part, that of the Austinian speech-act, in which every constative statement turns out to be performative, but mostly it is the language of psychoanalysis, which never comes straight to the point.⁴ Instead, it slides and conceals and irrupts. It is unpredictable in trajectory and dodgy in calculation, prone to reversing or crossing itself. The line of signifiers is constituted through its nonlinearity.⁵ This is why, when Lacan plots the signifying chain, it never stays true, but instead constantly shifts direction; this is why, when he graphs desire, it never follows a straight line.⁶ And this is why Jean-Claude Milner characterizes the symbolic order as “*Il y a de lalangue*,” rather than “*Il y a de la langue*,” for *lalangue* is Lacan’s neologism for language as other than itself: “*lalanguage*.”⁷ What Lacan theorized was less linguistics than what he called *linguisterie*, a term which conjures the play of language.⁸ Our discredited first approximation of the line might then yet

d’un nom différent, *caractère*, la lettre chinoise nommément, est sortie du discours chinois très ancien d’une façon toute différente de celle dont sont sorties nos lettres” (*Séminaire XX*, 37).

⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 2nd ed., J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975).

⁵ The concept of the mobility and sinuousness of the signifying chain is Malcolm Bowie’s (*Lacan*, 66). Lacan elsewhere uses another metaphor: “One has only to listen to poetry, which Saussure was no doubt in the habit of doing, for a polyphony to be heard, for it to become clear that all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score” (“Agency of the letter,” 154). “Mais il suffit d’écouter la poésie, ce qui sans doute était le cas de F. de Saussure, pour que s’y fasse entendre une polyphonie et que tout discours s’avère s’aligner sur les plusieurs portées d’une partition” (“L’instance de la lettre,” 503).

⁶ For example, see “Subversion of the subject,” 303, 306, 313, 315; “Subversion du sujet,” 805, 808, 815, 817. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe note that the Lacanian signifier operates through a “perversion of the system of the sign” of Saussure (*The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992], 39). “Perversion du système du signe” (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le titre de la lettre: Une lecture de Lacan* [Paris: Galilée, 1990], 59).

⁷ Jean-Claude Milner, *Les noms indistincts* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 7.

⁸ Lacan, *Séminaire XX*, 20. Translator Fink notes, “The ending Lacan adds here, *linguisterie*, gives one the impression that it is a kind of specious or fake linguistics. François Raffoul suggested ‘linguistrickery,’ which I have shortened to ‘linguistricks.’ One could, of course, also see *linguisterie* as a condensation of various other

be readmitted, on the strict condition of its orthopaedic deformation, by twisting it first one way and then the other, in serpentine fashion. This is the shape of language against itself, the signifier, distilled down to the letter:⁹

S

Now add one more line, simpler and more vicious, and rend the S along the reverse bias:

§

This is the subject.

So we have the subject and the signifier, § and S, distinguished by the smallest possible difference. “The subject himself [*siç*] is marked off by the single stroke, and first he marks himself as a tatoo [*siç*], the first of signifiers.”¹⁰ The single stroke is the inscription of the upright bar, which is but the merest line, the one, the first of signifiers: |. To engage the

words: *tricherie*, *strie*, and even *hystérie*” (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 15 n3). Later in *Seminar XX* Lacan notes “the distance between linguistics and linguistricks” (16) (“La distance de la linguistique à la linguisterie” [*Séminaire XX*, 20]).

⁹ In this dissertation, mathemes, letters and other typographical characters are often isolated in space and enlarged in size, such as this S, to emphasize the *imaginary* aspects that get obscured when they appear as thoroughly *symbolic* text, in the Lacanian senses of the words. This tactic also surfaces a mild form of the regime of reading (and writing) enforced at the University of British Columbia, since it resists the “preference” of the Faculty of Graduate Studies for one size of type throughout dissertations. It also violates the parallel preference for one type face, because § and other mathemes have been imported from a special “EcritSym” font set, and some other characters are in various other fonts because of specific imaginary considerations, such as using an S that is more congruent with §.

I could have complied with the regime by turning all such instances of “irregular” characters into figures, but that would have greatly multiplied the number of figures and captions (“Figures *must* be numbered” (*Instructions for the Preparations of Graduate Theses*, 1995), in an already crowded text. Besides, the sense of the matheme that will be elaborated here is that of a material object which is both figure and text, both imaginary and symbolic (and, as we shall see, also *real*), so the quasi-figurative status of the uncaptioned matheme is much more fitting.

¹⁰ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 141, emphasis in original. Sheridan’s curious spelling of *tatoo* is an obsolete form, according to the *OED*. “Le trait unaire, le sujet lui-même s’en repère, et d’abord il se marque comme tatouage, premier des signifiants. Quand ce signifiant, cet un, est institué—le compte, c’est *un un*” (Lacan, *Séminaire XI*, 129, emphasis in original).

very line of the letter, we can turn to the mechanics and conventions of typography and other disciplines that are concerned with its images. In this way, the order of the symbolic order can be revealed in the technical aspects of the letter. For instance, in mathematics, the vertical bar is a sign of absolute value; in propositional calculus (where it is called Sheffer's stroke), it is the sign of nonconjunction.¹¹ However, in 8, the bar does not remain upright, but is instead skewed or rotated to produce, if standing alone, the character that typography calls the *virgule*:



For medieval scribes, the virgule was a form of comma, a usage that evolved into its modern deployment as a line break when verse is set as prose and as a sign of separation in dates, addresses, and other similar expressions.¹² In English, it is commonly called the *slash* (in French, *virgule* of course now means exactly the comma, while the slash is now called *la oblique*). Here, more exactitude gains us ambiguity. The angle between the virgule and the vertical orientation of the “first of signifiers” is smaller than the angle between the virgule and the horizontality implied by the signifying chain. However, if the virgule rotated even further, until it exactly bisects the vertical and the horizontal, the result is a completely different character, the solidus: /. As Robert Bringhurst puts it, the two slashes have different inclinations.¹³ When the virgule/solidus transects the Russian cross, it is sometimes held to embody the asymmetry of the after-fates of the thieves crucified on either side of

¹¹ Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Hartley & Marks, 1996), 272-273.

¹² Bringhurst, *Elements*, 286.

Christ, with the one on his right ascending to heaven and the other descending to hell. It is also held to symbolize St. Andrew, the patron saint of Russia, who was crucified on a diagonal cross.¹⁴ The solidus is also called the fraction bar, because it is conventionally used in fractions, such as $\frac{1}{2}$.¹⁵ The slash appears in both its versions in Lacanian texts, as in \S and \emptyset .¹⁶ But whatever its inclination, the stroke through the heart of the matheme for the subject, \S , is rotated from the stroke of one, $|$.

¹³ Bringhurst, *Elements*, 81.

¹⁴ Carl Ljungman, *Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Norton, 1991), 181.

¹⁵ Bringhurst, *Elements*, 284. The virgule is used for "level fractions," such as $2\pi/3$.

¹⁶ To be even more exact, a third variation is also employed, one in which the bar is rotated even further, to be more inclined towards the horizontal than the vertical. Thus, the infamous Lacanianism, "Woman does not exist" derives from the expression, *La Femme* (Lacan, *Séminaire XX*, 60-71).

The problematic intricacies of Lacan's work on sex in *Séminaire XX* are well beyond the scope of this dissertation, but a little relevant explanation can be sketched out. "*La Femme*" provides a serious problem in translation (and typesetting), insofar as "*La Femme*" is conventionally translated as "Woman." The problem is the barring of "*La*": should it result in a crossed-out "Woman," as Fink has it (*Lacanian Subject*, 115), or a crossed-out "The," as Rose has it (Jacques Lacan, "God and the *Jouissance* of *The Woman*," trans. Jacqueline Rose, in Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, 137-148)?

Lacan gives Rose some support, in the very piece that she is translating: "*The woman can only be written with *The* crossed through. There is no such thing as *The woman*, where the definite article stands for the universal" ("God and *Jouissance*," 144, emphasis in original). "*La femme, ça ne peut s'écrire qu'à barrer La. Il n'y a pas La femme, article défini pour désigner l'universel*" (*Séminaire XX*, 68, emphasis in original). Still, in another example of the vagaries of translation, Fink renders this passage as, "There's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital W indicating the universal" (*Seminar XX*, 68), with the explanatory note that "in English, saying '*the woman does not exist*' is virtually nonsensical" (*Seminar XX*, 7 n28).*

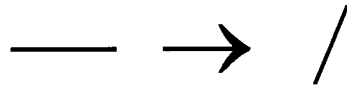
Crossing out, as a graphic function, suggests that the issue of *La Femme* pertains to the symbolic order. Thus, the universality that Lacan is referencing obtains vis-à-vis the linguistic function of the phallus. Hence, women "do not lend themselves to generalisation, even to phallogocentric generalisation" (Jacques Lacan, "Conférence à Genève sur le symptôme," in *Les Block-Notes de la psychanalyse* [Brussels: n.p., 1975], quoted and trans. in Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. "woman").

The barring in *La Femme* indicates that women are "not-all" ("*pas-tout*") with respect to the symbolic—that is, they are not wholly subject to the phallus *qua* its function as subjectification via alienation in language. It is the feminine structural position that articulates the limit of the symbolic reign over the subject. *The Woman* implies that the signifier isn't everything (Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 107), because there is no signifier that can capture any "essence" of Woman.

For Lacan, "existence" is a shorthand for symbolic existence. What exists is what can be written out, in the sense that the symbolic is compact of language, culture, law, and logic. "Woman does not exist" can thus be read as "Woman is not wholly subjected to the symbolic." Equivalently, it can be read as "Woman is not wholly dominated by the phallus."

The positions of "woman" and "man" are therefore themselves linguistic and structural ones, divided by an inscribed and phallic bar. "For Lacan, to say that difference is 'phallic' difference is to expose the symbolic and arbitrary nature of its division as such" (Rose, "Introduction," 56): the arbitrariness of the bar. One reason that the bar is arbitrary is that, in *Séminaire XX*, the positions "woman" and "man" do not designate everyday or

Slippage from the verticality of the mark is only one possible genesis of the virgule, generated through a clockwise rotation. An equally plausible constitution would be through an opposite, counterclockwise rotation from a horizontal bar:



This (retroactively) posited horizontal bar recapitulates our first line from *Écrits*, which means that the virgule/solidus is another kind of deformation of the signifier of the signifying chain, albeit one which distorts not conformation (twisting — to become **S**), but orientation (rotating — to become /). Whichever creation myth for the virgule is adopted, it remains an inflected bar which renders **§** from **S** by rending the latter. The subject is thus marked off by a stroke that both cuts and bars. Lacan writes the subject as “barred **S**,”¹⁷ and he says that “the subject designates his [*si*] being only by barring everything he signifies.”¹⁸

$$\mathbf{S} + / = \mathbf{\S}$$

This figuration immediately means two things: affinity and difference between the signifier and the subject. They are clearly intimates, very nearly mirrored in each other, but not quite. The subject comes to be through a certain looking awry of the signifier, an operation that

biological senses of the sexes. Any subject can take up a position under either of those signifiers (“God and *Jouissance*,” 143; *Séminaire XX*, 67; Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 105-108).

¹⁷ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 141; *Séminaire XI*, 129.

¹⁸ Lacan, “Signification of the Phallus,” 288. “Le sujet ne désigne son être qu’à barrer tout ce qu’il signifie” (“Signification du phallus,” 693).

Lacan calls an *anamorphosis*.¹⁹ From that point of view, there is a perfect logical consistency, for affinity necessarily implies both similarity and difference.

$$\S \cong S \rightarrow \S \neq S$$

The signifier is therefore the source for the subject, for S is the base which must be adulterated to superstructure \S , and \S is thus that figure which must bear the tattoo of its small, crucial difference.

$$S \rightarrow \S$$

This rendering of the subject by the line draws attention to the crucial and ineluctable materiality of the signifier, to its stroke and curve and other modes of presentation and production. In other words, the signifier is its own *image*. If Derrida is right about the priority of writing to speech in language, then the symbolic order is, from the very beginning, from its first instance and in its most basic and formal aspect, an imaginary enterprise. Chapter One discussed how language is imaginary with respect to meaning. Over and above meaning, however, the constitutive mutuality of the subject and the signifier is an imaginary mirroring, even to the extent of the ultimate discordance in their affinity. Consider how the imaginary is “the world, the register, the dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined. In this respect, ‘imaginary’ is not simply the opposite of ‘real’: the image certainly belongs to reality.”²⁰ In the signifier, not only “*il y a de la langue*,” but also, “*il y a du semblable*”:

¹⁹ Lacan, *Séminaire XI*, 79-104.

²⁰ Alan Sheridan, translator's note, ix.

there is similarity, which is the imprimatur of the imaginary register.²¹ Such a profound insinuation of the imaginary into the symbolic—it could be said the knotting together of them—is not merely a corruption of the defining *béance* between these registers. The imaginary “slope” of the symbolic (whose archetype is the slope of the virgule/solidus) unveils the implicit human geography of the signifier, and thereby re-maps the letter in terms of its own geometry.²² The too common overattention to the symbolic ordering of the Lacanian subject has chronically obscured how Lacanian *linguisterie*, and therefore the subject itself, is always spatialized by the very line that renders the letter.²³ Such an ineluctable immanence of the spatialized imaginary to the symbolic, together with its correlative introduction of the real (which will be discussed below), directly refutes William Kerrigan, who claims that “Lacan built as an idealist, keeping the parts as clean and precise as possible.”²⁴ In fact, not only does Lacan keep “the parts” enmeshed and equivocal, his very act of building is simultaneously a severe un-building. His analytic dictum is that “we must bring everything back to the function of the cut.”²⁵

To read a word, we must *look* at the letter, so the imaginary signifies a spatiality immanent to Lacan’s signifier, which provides the opening for this project’s partial reading of his mathemes. Lacan notes, “it is evident (‘a little *too* self-evident’) that between the *letter*

²¹ Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 7.

²² In their commentary on Lacan’s “Agency of the Letter,” Muller and Richardson translate “les deux versants de l’effet signifiant” as “the two *slopes* of the signifying effect.” They note that the figure of the slope is more congruous with Lacan’s image of the sliding of the signified under the signifier (*Lacan and Language*, 183).

²³ The spatiality of the letter is curiously overlooked by Henri Lefebvre in the severe critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis he conducts in his landmark study of space, *The Production of Space* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith [Oxford: Blackwell, 1991]).

²⁴ Kerrigan, “Terminating Lacan,” 1001. The context makes it explicit that the “parts” Kerrigan is referring to are the imaginary and symbolic registers.

²⁵ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 299. “Il nous faut tout ramener à la fonction de coupure dans le discours” (“Subversion du sujet,” 801). Elsewhere, Lacan says, “Our path, that of analytic discourse, progresses

and *place* exist relations for which no French word has quite the extension of the English adjective *odd*.”²⁶ His mathemes, as signifiers, are contiguous with his diagrams and graphs, and point towards his Borromean knots and Moebius strips and stranger objects. The odd place of the matheme—which, as Melville has already pointed out, is a letter which resonates with, but does not belong to, the formalism of mathematics—is the gap between *linguistique* and the marginalized mathematics of topology. S is thus exemplary: “the Lacanian ‘meaning’ of the signifier ‘subject’ is rather that of the topological [*topique*] and . . . topological [*tropique*] locus of the signifier.”²⁷

But this “imagarization” of the symbolic is more than imaginary. Consider how Lacan invokes an ancient citation for S: a messenger slave, the “subject who carries under his hair the codicil that condemns him to death [and yet] knows neither the meaning nor the text, nor in what language it is written, nor even that it had been tatooed on his shaven scalp as he slept.”²⁸ S is thus a letter carrier, a doomed retroactive successor to those postmen Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. And death is the unavoidable intrusion of the real, the third and most intransigent Lacanian register. The real is “that before which the imaginary faltered, that over which the symbolic stumbles, that which is refractory, resistant. Hence the

only due to this narrow limit, this cutting edge of the knife” (*Seminar XX*, 2). “Notre chemin, celui du discours analytique, ne progresse que de cette limite étroite, de ce tranchant du couteau” (*Séminaire XX*, 9-10).

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 38, emphasis in original. “Il est évident (*a little too self evident*) que la lettre a en effet avec le lieu, des rapports pour lesquels aucun mot français n’a toute la portée du qualificatif anglais : *odd*” (“Le séminaire sur « La lettre volée »,” in *Écrits*, 23, emphasis in original).

²⁷ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Title of the Letter*, 65, bracketed text in original. “Le « sens » lacanien du signifiant « sujet » est plutôt celui de : lieu – topique et . . . tropique – du signifiant” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Titre de la lettre*, 88).

²⁸ Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 302. “Le sujet qui en porte sous sa chevelure le codicille qui le condamne à mort, ne sait ni le sens ni le texte, ni en quelle langue il est écrit, ni même qu’on l’a tatoué sur son cuir rasé pendant qu’il dormait » (“Subversion du sujet,” 803).

formula: "the real is the impossible."²⁹ Milner provides the necessary complication, for his characterization of the real is simply, "*Il y a*."³⁰ Drawn upon the head of the oblivious messenger slave is the image of the signifier that will deliver him to the real of his own end. The generalization of this example will be elaborated below, but its applicability is immediately obvious: the direction of the living subject towards the universality of death. The reflexive paradox of the symbolic is that the imaginary and the real are not only external to it, but also and inevitably internal. The Borromean knot, which links the three Lacanian registers and so dominates the late Lacanian theory, is reflected by the imaginary back upon the symbolic. To put this more strongly, and in the specific terms of this project, it is the imaginary that unveils the real in the symbolic, and nowhere more so than in the subject. The cut in discourse, whose primary manifestation is the barring of \mathcal{S} , is a kind of imaginization of the real.

Lacan's insistence upon the cut is one reason why he should be read attentively, so attentively that Lacan's letter betrays its imaginariness. This is also one reason why readings that commonly evade the matheme and topology are radically insufficient.³¹ "The concept of the real implies the annihilation of the subject," but such annihilation, or at least its specter

²⁹ Sheridan, translator's note, x.

³⁰ Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 7.

³¹ This formulation can be further strengthened. Lacan's Borromean knots of the imaginary, symbolic, and the real are often held together by a fourth element, labeled Σ , the symptom (for example, Jacques Lacan, "Conferences et entretiens dans des universités nord-américaines," *Scilicet* 6/7 [1976]: 39, 57). The anglophone avoidance of the matheme can be understood as precisely a symptomatic reading, inasmuch as the Lacanian symptom implies the "binding of [*jouissance*] to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world" (Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 75). According to Stuart Schneiderman, Lacan believed that his thought could never be accepted in the United States (Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual Hero* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983], vii). This doesn't mean that Lacan had a much more sanguine opinion of his reception in France: "If they knew what I was saying, he offered, they would never have let me say it" (Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 11).

or promise, crosses the heart of every living subject, in the barring of \bar{S} .³² Perhaps more significantly, the antagonism to the matheme, its very illegibility within hegemonic regimes of reading, actualizes the matheme's peculiar efficacy. The matheme reiterates the real insistence of death in the Lacanian discourse, and, as Stuart Schneiderman observes, "relations between the living and the dead never take place in an atmosphere of communication leading to interpersonal and mutual understanding."³³ This folds back into the analytic scene itself, at least as posited by Lacan. His practice of the infamous short session was a clinical introduction of the break or cut into the discourse of the analysis.

Such realness does not deny the overwhelmingly symbolic determination of the subject, who is made secondary to the signifier in the very act of her/his *unconscious* inscription as subject, and s/he is forever marked by an insistent reference to that formative inequity. \bar{S} always remains prior to $\bar{\bar{S}}$. Lacan declares, "I symbolize the subject by the barred \bar{S} [$\bar{\bar{S}}$], in so far as it is constituted as secondary in relation to the signifier."³⁴ The signifier is the initial and ongoing condition of the subject, who is born into and lives within a symbolic order, compact of culture and language, that precedes and exceeds it. In this way, the symbolic is "the ordering function of culture,"³⁵ for the subject must be ordered to appear. "The sociality of the Lacanian subject blends with the radical primitiveness of the letter. Therein lies its literality."³⁶

³² Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 76.

³³ Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 60.

³⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 141, bracketed text in original. "Nous symbolisons par \bar{S} barré [$\bar{\bar{S}}$] le sujet, en tant que constitué comme second par rapport au signifiant" (Lacan, *Séminaire XI*, 129, bracketed text in original).

³⁵ Marcelle Marini, *Jacques Lacan: The French Context*, trans. Anne Tomiche (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992), 45.

³⁶ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Title of the Letter*, 31. "La socialité du sujet lacanien se confond avec la primitivité radicale de la lettre. C'est sa littéralité" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Titre de la lettre*, 48).

Such a primitiveness aligns with cause: "The effect of language is to introduce the cause into the subject. Through this effect, he [*si*] is not the cause of himself; he bears within himself the worm of the cause that splits him. For his cause is the signifier, without which there would be no subject in the real."³⁷ However, note that *cause* is used here in neither a scientific nor an everyday way, for "Lacan understands cause in a more radical sense, as that which disrupts the smooth functioning of lawlike interactions."³⁸ Cause, by his definition, evades structure, and structure defines the symbolic order. Then the introduction of the cause is one way of drawing the bar in the barred S, so that the bar reflects how in the subject the signifier paradoxically evades its own order. The rest of this chapter will be steered by the divagation of that bar.

The Passion of the Signifier

Barring the subject admits her/him to a "passion of the signifier."³⁹ Lacan begins with the subject, and launches her/him into a theoretical transport of desire. Over the several decades of *le Séminaire*, Lacan's elaborate desire is improvised and displaced through a compounding convolution of line and sign.⁴⁰ One of the most important and recurring

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, "The Position of the Unconscious," trans. Bruce Fink, in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, Maire Jaanus (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 265. "L'effet de langage, c'est la cause introduite dans le sujet. Par cet effet il n'est pas cause de lui-même, il porte en lui le ver de la cause qui le refend. Car sa cause, c'est le signifiant sans lequel il n'y aurait aucun sujet dans le réel" (Jacques Lacan, "Position de l'inconscient," in *Écrits*, 835).

³⁸ Bruce Fink, "Science and Psychoanalysis," in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, Maire Jaanus (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 64.

³⁹ Jacques Lacan, "Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits: A Selection*, 284. "Passion du signifiant" ("La signification du phallus," in *Écrits*, 688). Lacan is actually ambiguous as to whether there is a subject prior to its barring. As we will see later, S also designates a kind of subject. For the most part, though, Lacan is firm about subjectification being a function of the bar. "Barring the subject" is therefore another way of describing the inception of the subject.

⁴⁰ Besides the discussion in "Subversion of the Subject," the Graph is also worked carefully by Lacan in several seminars which have not yet been either published in French or translated into English: *Séminaire V: Les Formations de l'inconscient: 1957 – 1958* (see anonymous 3 volume transcript, vol 1: 10, 13, 19; vol 3: 389,

devices of desire, the Graph of Desire, demonstrates first of all that the subject is “defined in his [sic] articulation by the signifier.”⁴¹ Then $\$$ must be recognized as a shifting but insistent condensation of a great body of Lacanian theory, and desire is always written upon it.⁴² Lacan says, “Language is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but body it is”⁴³—a body that matters. $\$$ is both a passage to the “elementary cell” of desire and a synecdoche for it.⁴⁴ Žižek notes that “Lacan articulated [the Graph of Desire] in four successive forms; in explaining it we should not limit ourselves to the last, complete form, because the succession of the four forms cannot be reduced to a linear gradual completion; it implies the retroactive changing of preceding forms.”⁴⁵ Žižek’s acute reading of the whole sequence will not be reproduced here, although it will be referenced.⁴⁶ Instead, a slightly different interpretation of selected elements of just the first two stages of the Graph will be marked out.

460); *Séminaire XIII : L’objet de la psychanalyse* : 1965-1966; *Séminaire XVI : D’un Autre à l’autre* : 1968 – 1969 (see the anonymous version distributed as *Document de travail*, 43, 47, 48, 82, 83, 88); *Séminaire XVIII : D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* : 1970 – 1971 (see “Xanadu est encore loin/LDDCM” version, 49).

⁴¹ Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 303.

⁴² However, John Forrester writes that “Lacan’s theories changed drastically as time passed, as each seminar prompted him to develop and reflect. *There is no Lacanian theory*, but there was a unique and distinctive teaching” (*The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990], 125, emphasis added).

⁴³ Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, 87. “Le langage n’est pas immatériel. Il est corps subtil, mais il est corps” (“Le fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse,” in *Écrits*, 301).

⁴⁴ “Elementary cell” (“la cellule élémentaire”) is how Lacan describes the first stage of the Graph of Desire (Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 303; “Subversion du sujet,” 805). The next chapter will take up the formal homology between the barred S and Lacan’s SCHÉMAS L and R. The SCHÉMATA are certain quadratures of the subject, and Lacan comments on the Graph of Desire by suggesting its affinity to “the topology of a four-cornered game” (“Subversion of the subject,” 304; “La topologie d’un jeu à quatre coins” [“Subversion du sujet,” 806]).

⁴⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 100.

⁴⁶ Žižek, “Che Vuoi?”

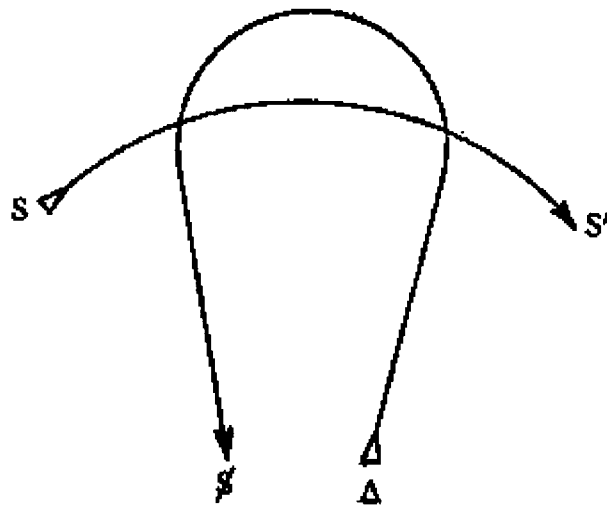


Figure 2.1: The elementary cell of the Graph of Desire

Graph I is the elementary cell (the zygote?) of desire, which spatializes the Lacanian theorization of signifier and signified. The signifying chain once more appears as a line, now manifest as the lateral arc $S \rightarrow S'$, from signifier to signifier. Lacan follows Saussure at least in this: language is a negative or differential system, which means that at least two signifiers are necessary for even one to make sense. Once more, the chain refuses to be level. Its vectoring points to the *glissement* within itself, from S to S' , in a defining deferral much akin to Derrida's *différance*. This ever-moving chain is doubly cut, roughly perpendicularly, by a second vector, $\Delta \rightarrow \mathcal{S}$, looping from right to left, which Lacan calls "retrograde."⁴⁷ The quasi-verticality of the retrograde vector suggests the semi-uprightness of the virgule in \mathcal{S} , for the elementary cell and its successors enact not only signification, but also the subject itself. The Graph of Desire is a certain expansion of \mathcal{S} , just as the barred S is a certain resolution of desire. But if the elementary cell is a representation of \mathcal{S} , it is an involuted one.

⁴⁷ Lacan, "Subversion of the subject," 306.

\S is explicitly there at the lower left, in a kind of reflexive synecdoche—tropology and topology redux. In fact, Lacan declares that the elementary cell introduces “the topology of the relation of the subject to the signifier.”⁴⁸ Moreover, \S is also present in the signifying chain, less clearly, perhaps, but just as emphatically. The first hint is the formal homology between the formula for the signifying chain and the one given above for the production of the subject:

$$S \rightarrow S' \qquad S \rightarrow \S$$

Note how the second term in each expression is marked with a kind of bar. And this is not all. \S is also present in S —that is, S is the signifier as a genus, and \S is one of its species. The *glissement* of the signifying chain thus bears upon all the meanings of the subject.⁴⁹ The subject is founded by the signifier, but *because* it is, \S keeps slipping away from every instance of S , and into the fleeting grasp of another.⁵⁰ This subjective slippage is one consequence of language being the condition of human being. The symbolic order is justly regarded as a

⁴⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire VI : Le Désir et son interprétation: 1959–1960*, unpublished, quoted and trans. in Martin Thom, “The Unconscious Structured as a Language,” in *The Talking Cure: Essays Psychoanalysis and Language*, ed. Colin MacCabe (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1981), 33.

⁴⁹ I take this pervasive and inevitable *glissement* as one non-authorial authorization for the attentive but sometimes unorthodox reading of Lacan’s mathemes done here. The point is to interpret, and in the psychoanalysis of Lacan, interpretation has only a sometime acquaintance with meaning or intent. The interpretation done here is more concerned with working the letter and discovering where it goes and whence it returns. The consequent emphasis here is more on recurrence and insistence than systematicity. The inspiration is, in part, John Forrester’s, who points out that Lacan is “an opportunistic thinker, in the best sense, responding to the moment and to the internal dialectic of his teaching. Consistency is a very low priority under such circumstances” (personal communication, 12 October 1995).

⁵⁰ Lacan defines the signifier as “that which represents the subject for another signifier” (“Subversion of the Subject,” 316). “Ce qui représente le sujet par un autre signifiant” (“Subversion du sujet,” 819).

“perpetual restructuring of the subject.”⁵¹ Examined closely, the chain turns out to complicate its own seeming simplicity. The figure in *Graph I* is a reduction of a much more complex “topological substratum,” for elsewhere the intrication of the signifying chain is compared by Lacan to the “rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings”.⁵²

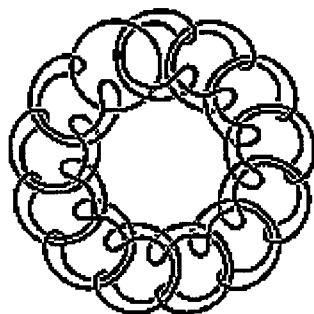


Figure 2.2: The signifying chain as a necklace of necklaces

A glance at this diagram reveals how far we have come from the linear concept of language that began this chapter, and suggests how far Lacan would take us from the vertical clarity which supposedly welds signifier to signified to referent. However, a more modest complication of the arc is instructive. Reiterating and complicating the bipartite structure of the Saussurean sign, the chain can be split into two, and rendered into one sub-chain of signifiers and another of signifieds.⁵³ This has the side benefit of expanding the line into a space or field of language—“*le champ de la parole et du langage*.”⁵⁴ Either or both of those chains can be considered as sliding past each other, like lanes of traffic on a highway, which are

⁵¹ Malcolm Bowie, “Jacques Lacan,” in *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 132.

⁵² “Agency of the letter,” 153. “. . . substrat topologique . . . anneaux dont le collier se scelle dans l’anneau d’un autre collier fait d’anneaux” (Jacques Lacan, “L’instance de la lettre,” in *Écrits*. The diagram shows a Borromean knot, the defining figure of the late Lacan’s preoccupation with the topology of knots (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 125; *Séminaire XX*, 113).

⁵³ Lacan, *Séminaire V*, 181.

sometimes in opposing directions, and sometimes in the same direction at different speeds, but at best only momentarily in complete unison.⁵⁵ While the signifying chain in the elementary cell shows a coursing of the *signifier*, Lacan declares that “we are forced . . . to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the *signified* under the signifier.”⁵⁶

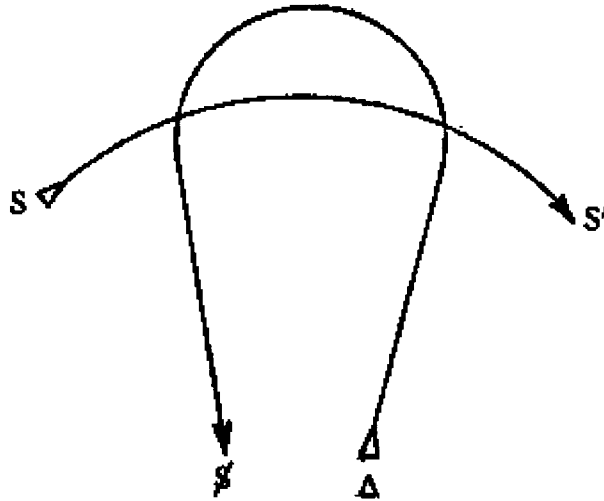


Figure 2.3: Capitonage

Something crucial happens when the retrograde vector, $\Delta \rightarrow S$, cuts vertically up through this now doubled chain and loops back down, just like a sewing needle. First, the signifying chains are basted together, through the installation of a special signifier, the *point de capiton*, or quilting point. In the elementary cell, this is the intersection on the right, where the retrograde vector, on its upward stroke, enters or cuts into the chain(s). It is only the consequent (and relative) stabilization of the whole field of language, in a *capitonage* or quilting, which permits any other signifier to become associated with a particular signified. That signification is figured as the other intersection of the retrograde vector with the

⁵⁴ This phrase is part of the title of Lacan's "*Discours de Rome*."

⁵⁵ See Grosz's diagram of the two chains in her *Jacques Lacan*, 95.

⁵⁶ Lacan, "Agency of the Letter," 154. "La notion d'un glissement incessant du signifié sous le signifiant s'impose donc" ("L'instance de la lettre," 502).

signifying chain, on its downward stroke. It is the instantiation of the particular signifier of the *point de capiton* that is the condition of signification. "The signifier doesn't just provide an envelope, a receptacle for meaning. It polarizes it, structures it, and brings it into existence. Without an exact knowledge of the order proper to the signifier and its properties, it's impossible to understand anything whatsoever."⁵⁷ It is therefore the signifier that makes the entirety of the symbolic order, and more, possible. For Lacan, "everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of material."⁵⁸ The special twist to his model of the production of meaning is that the *point de capiton* itself remains devoid of a signified. Its entire function is *capitonnage*—the installation of signification. According to Žižek,

[The *point de capiton*] is not a point of supreme density of Meaning, a kind of Guarantee which, by being itself excepted from the differential interplay of elements, would serve as a stable and fixed point of reference. On the contrary, it is the element which represents the agency of the signifier within the field of the signified. In itself it is nothing but a "pure difference," its role is purely structural, its nature is purely performative—its signification coincides with its own act of enunciation.⁵⁹

Žižek gives the example of signifiers like *freedom*, *state*, *justice*, and *peace*, which pre-exist a *point de capiton* like *America*, but which are nonetheless retroactively given meaning when *America* joins the chain of signifiers as a supplement. He points out that a different *point de capiton*, such as *Communism*, produces quite a different field of meaning for the same

⁵⁷ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 260. "Le signifiant ne fait pas que donner l'enveloppe, le récipient de la signification, il la polarise, il la structure, il l'installe dans l'existence. Sans une connaissance exacte de l'ordre propre du signifiant et de ses propriétés, il est impossible de comprendre quoi que ce soit" (*Séminaire III*, 295-296).

⁵⁸ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 268. "Autour de ce signifiant, tout s'irradie et tout s'organise, à la façon de ces petites lignes de force formées à la surface d'une trame par le point de capiton" (*Séminaire III*, 303). Lacan is here referring to a specific text, a passage from Racine's *Althalia*, so I am making a very large extrapolation. However, his next sentence is, "The scheme of the quilting point is essential in human experience" ("Le schéma du point de capiton est essentiel dans l'expérience humaine") so it may not be illegitimate hyperbole.

⁵⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 99.

signifiers, and that *America* and *Communism* thereby remain strictly differential terms.⁶⁰ As Judith Butler notes, *points de capiton* are “empty signs which come to bear phantasmatic investments of various kinds.”⁶¹

Correlative to the *point de capiton*'s status as the signifier-without-a-signified, *capitonnage* does *not* imply the sewing of every signifier onto a signified, despite the seeming symmetry of the upward and downward penetration of the signifying chain by the retrograde vector. Instead, quilting occurs solely at the *point de capiton*, so that the separate locus of signification situates a looser association of signifiers and signifieds, one that permits the ineluctable play of language. This relative looseness is shown by the graphic separation of the *point de capiton* from signification. These positions are not just different in their spatializations; they are asymmetrical in their natures. As a result, the holding of the chain of signification by the *point de capiton* to a fixed point still permits the variability of the point of reentry into that chain. In other words, the stabilization of a field of meaning does not imply that every word is definitively attached to a specific meaning. The strong version of this crucial spatialization of language can be expressed in an inverse form: the *point de capiton*'s lack of a signified is the very reason it can be fixed. Correlatively, anything with meaning is subject to losing its place. *Capitonnage* is a leaping up to seize the chain; signification is a contingent plunge, prey to the winds of time and circumstance.

Elsewhere, Lacan spatializes signification in another but not inconsistent way. “There is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended ‘vertically’, as it were,

⁶⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 101-102.

⁶¹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 191.

from that point.”⁶² The “horizontal” seizure of the chain does not constrain a “vertical” slide between those contexts—the denial of metonymy cannot confine metaphor. Language therefore does not stand still, even when it is pinned down, just as an upholstery button allows the fabric around it to give and shift. The function of the *point de capiton* is to contain a volume, rather than to fix a content.⁶³ In comparing the *point de capiton* to the signified, Lacan returns to metaphor and music, and urges us to “observe the dyssymetry [*sic*] of the one, which is a locus (a place, rather than a space), to the other, which is a moment (a rhythm, rather than a duration).”⁶⁴

There is another crucial aspect of signification entailed by the spatial separation of the *point de capiton* from the locus of the signified. That distancing opens up a lateral component to $\Delta \rightarrow \mathcal{S}$, whose direction is opposite to that of the signifying chain—which is why $\Delta \rightarrow \mathcal{S}$ is a *retrograde* vector.⁶⁵ Since time moves forward from signifier to signifier in the chain, or rather, since time requires “points or signposts, signifiers of difference, to move forward” at all,⁶⁶ this retrogradation indicates that desire moves *backward* in time to the subject. Signification is a retroactive operation; the *point de capiton* establishes meaning for any signifier only *after* that signifier has already been articulated.⁶⁷ “Lacan’s emphasis is precisely

⁶² Lacan, “Agency of the letter,” 154. “Nulle chaîne signifiante en effet qui ne soutienne comme appendu à la ponctuation de chacune de ses unités tout ce qui s’articule de contextes attestés, à la verticale, si l’on peut dire, de ce point” (“L’instance de la lettre,” 503).

⁶³ We could go even further, and say that the very function of the material *point de capiton* is to allow that movement, insofar as upholstered furniture only fits its purpose by giving way in its every usage.

⁶⁴ Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 304. “Observons la dissymétrie de l’un qui est un lieu (place plutôt qu’espace) à l’autre qui est un moment (scansion plutôt que durée)” (“Subversion du sujet,” 806).

⁶⁵ In physics and mathematics, every vector quantity, possessed of both magnitude and direction, may be resolved into two non-coincident components. Conventionally, these are along mutually perpendicular axes.

⁶⁶ Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 146.

⁶⁷ “The diachronic function of this anchoring point is to be found in the sentence, even if the sentence completes its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction of the others, and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect” (Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 303).

on this retroactive character of the effect of signification with respect to the signifier, on this staying behind of the signified with respect to the progression of the signifier's chain: the effect of meaning is always produced backwards, *après coup*.”⁶⁸ So the *passe-partout* to signification is *Nachträglichkeit*. “The time of reading is always late.”⁶⁹

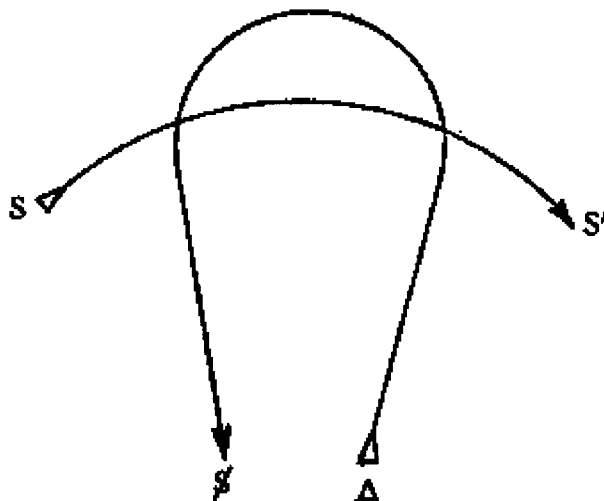


Figure 2.4: The birth of the subject

Capitonnage is so effective because it is doubly fecund: not only does it generate meaning, it gives birth to the subject itself. In the elementary cell, the vector $\Delta \rightarrow S$ continues directly on from the locus of the signified to arrive ultimately at S . This is the final movement of interpellation. At its beginning, “before the hail,” there is Δ , which Žižek identifies as “some mythical, pre-symbolic intention.” He likens it to the “individual” necessarily posited by Althusser in order to construe the interpellated subject. This individual

“Ce point de capiton, trouvez-en la fonction diachronique dans la phrase, pour autant qu’elle ne boucle sa signification qu’avec son dernier terme, chaque terme étant anticipé dans la construction des autres, et inversement scellant leur sens par son effet rétroactif” (“Subversion du sujet,” 805).

⁶⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 101.

⁶⁹ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Title of the Letter*, 5. “Le temps de la lecture est toujours tardif” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Le titre de la lettre*, 19).

“is not conceptually defined, [but] simply a hypothetical X which must be presupposed.”⁷⁰ In parallel fashion, the mythical Δ disappears for good in the second stage of the Graph of Desire, where it is displaced by a \S that gets suddenly transposed as its own origin. Time twists again; inasmuch as subjectification is structured through the same inscription as signification, it is likewise *nachträglich*. As Althusser writes, “*individuals are always-already subjects*.”⁷¹ Rather than naming anything, Δ re-performs the fletching of $\Delta \rightarrow \S$. It is a displaced and hollowed-out arrowhead, a direction claiming neither substantial origin nor metaphysical presence. Echoing the logic of the *point de capiton*, it is this very emptiness which allows Δ to stay in the picture and at its old position in *Graph II* and its successors, even though it has been erased. It remains to fletch the re-coordinated vector now rising from the subject itself.

Catherine Clément, however, does presume to give a definition of Δ : *desire*.⁷² Although, in good Lacanian fashion, she disdains to provide even a single word of explanation or justification, her position is not wholly incommensurable with Žižek’s. Desire has much to recommend itself. In the first place, Clément’s reading registers desire explicitly in the elementary cell, which is, after all, the first Graph of Desire. Furthermore, in the third and fourth stages of the graph, it emerges as *d*, so Δ as the Greek *delta* makes sense as a precursor.⁷³ Finally, as will be elaborated later, desire does indeed give rise to the subject. Even at the crudest level, s/he derives from the multiform and protean desire of her/his

⁷⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 101

⁷¹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 176, emphasis in original.

⁷² Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 176; *Vies et légendes*, 204. Clément comments on the Graph of Desire and the variants of SCHÉMA L in the chapter, “Hopscotch and the Four Corners” (“La marelle et les quatre coins”).

parents. The replacement of Δ by \S in *Graph II* can be understood as representing precisely the production of the subject, so that \S can be understood as an abbreviation:

$$\S = \Delta \rightarrow \S = d \rightarrow \S$$

The convergence of Clément's reading with Žižek's is enabled by the emptiness of Δ , for Lacanian desire, through its manifold and conflicting forms, is consistently an embrace of lack. The interpellation of the subject, its barring by the I of interpellation, canted by its always-alreadyness, is the production of a *subject of desire*.

$$S + I = S + / = \S$$

It could be said that the passage of the subject from *Graph I* to *II* does not so much *replace* Δ by \S as *cover it over*, so that the latter's undiminished lack/desire is absorbed into the subject. When the Lacanian subject is brought forth, s/he is brought forth with lack.⁷⁴

The schematics of the elementary cell tie the production of the subject to that of meaning, so while the subject is caused by the signifier, it is correlative to the signified. Lacan distinguishes the signified as s , the lowering of its case indicating its submission to the overcapitalized signifier.⁷⁵ In *Graph II*, the signified appears as a function, in the mathematical sense of the word, of the Other (language as a determinant order): $s(O)$,

⁷³ Lacan, "Subversion of the subject," 313, 315; "Subversion du sujet," 815, 817.

⁷⁴ Elsewhere, however, Žižek gives a positive notion of the subject prior to its interpellation. In another twist of time, that pre-subject is an "answer of the Real" to a symbolic question (*Sublime Object*, 178). The concept of the subject as answer must be put aside until later; for now, the crucial point is this positing of the subject-before-the-subject as real.

⁷⁵ Lacan, "Agency of the letter," 149; "L'instance de la lettre," 497.

located at the downward intersection of the retrograde vector with the signifying chain. While the subject is subjected to the signifier, it is correlated to the signified:

$$\bar{S} \sim s$$

So even though the vector $\Delta \rightarrow \bar{S}$ points to the subject, Joël Dor is quite justified in dubbing it “the vector of signifieds.”⁷⁶ This convergence confirms that the subject, like the signified, depends upon the signifier.⁷⁷ In part, the subject *is* the signified. Insofar as s/he depends upon the Other, s/he can be understood as the precipitation or constellation of meanings sedimented out by the Other.⁷⁸ We are what we mean. In a more active sense, we could even say that the subject becomes a subject of language, in the by now hoary cliché of her/him speaking language and being spoken by it, obtaining another sense of the priority of the signifier. And yet another: the signifier is there long before the subject emerges and long after s/he is gone, just as someone’s name most often precedes her/him, and will yet persist when s/he is dead. The bar of the barred \bar{S} marks “the worm of the cause” of existence *and* mortality. Lacan goes even further in the oft-quoted passage from the “*Discours de Rome*”:

Symbols in fact envelop the life of a man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him ‘by flesh and blood’; so total that they bring to this birth, along with the gift of the stars, if not with the gift of the fairies, the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade; the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he is not yet and even beyond his death; and so total that through them his end finds its

⁷⁶ “Le vecteur des signifiés” (Dor, *Introduction à la lecture*, 194).

⁷⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 205; *Séminaire XI*, 186.

⁷⁸ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 76. This formulation is highly suggestive of Freud’s description of the ego: “the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes” (*Standard Edition*, vol. 19, 29). However, Lacan insists that the subject must be strictly distinguished from the ego. Nevertheless, these two formulations are brought closer together in the succeeding versions of the graph, where the “precipitate” of signification is no longer the subject, \bar{S} , but the ego, e , and the ego-ideal (*Ich-Ideal*) $I(O)$.

meaning in the last judgement, where the Word absolves his being or condemns it—unless he attain the subjective bringing to realization of being-for-death.⁷⁹

Two things stand out in this passage:

1. The subject is massively determined by the symbol (the signifier).
2. That determination has a (possible) elusion in “being-for-death.”

If the signifying chain is understood as a directed linkage of one signifier, S_1 , to another, S_2 , the ascendance of the “symbolic network” over the subject can be written like this:

$$\frac{S_1}{S} \rightarrow S_2$$

The “signifying chain imposes itself, by itself, on the subject.”⁸⁰ The signifier always implicates the signifying chain, so this formulation can be collapsed or resolved into

$$\frac{S}{S}$$

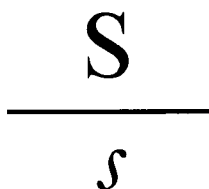
⁷⁹ Lacan, “Function and Field of Speech,” 68.

Les symboles enveloppent en effet la vie de l'homme d'un réseau si total qu'ils conjoignent avant qu'il vienne au monde ceux qui vont l'engendrer « par l'os et par la chair », qu'ils apportent à sa naissance avec les dons des astres, sinon avec les dons des fées, le dessin de sa destinée, qu'ils donnent les mots qui le feront fidèle ou renégat, la loi des actes qui le suivront jusque-là même où il n'est pas encore et au-delà de sa mort même, et que par eux sa fin trouve son sens dans le jugement dernier où le verbe absout son être ou le condamne—sauf à atteindre à la réalisation subjective de l'être-pour-la-mort. (“Fonction et champ de la parole,” 279)

According to the logic of the much later *Séminaire XX*, which followed “Fonction et champ de la parole” by twenty years, it is precisely man who is “enveloped by symbol,” inasmuch as woman has the possibility of escaping the phallic function of language.

⁸⁰ Jacques Lacan, “On a Question Preliminary to any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, 181. “[Le chaîne signifiante] s'impose par elle-même au sujet” (Jacques Lacan, “D'un question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose,” 533). This scheme of S_1 , S_2 , and S is comparable to the diagram in *Seminar XI* (198, *Séminaire XI*, 180).

The formula is to be read as *S over* barred-*S*: the signifier *over* the subject—the subject subjected to the signifier.⁸¹ Given the parallels made between the subject and the signified, it can be no surprise that this figure is a formal equivalent to Lacan's inversion of the Saussurean sign.⁸²



The correlation returns in that familiar of Lacan, death. Just as he chooses the slave marked by the mandate of his own execution as his exemplary subject, he indicts the signifier in the “murder of the thing.”⁸³ “Because it is in so far as the symbol allows this inversion, that is to say cancels the existing thing, that it opens up the world of negativity, which constitutes both the discourse of the human subject and the reality of his world in so far as it is human.”⁸⁴ If there is any residual biologism or naturalism in Lacan, it must be here, for what the birth of the subject marks above all is the surety of its own death.⁸⁵

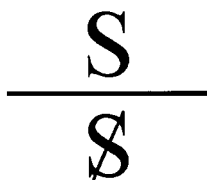
⁸¹ “Subversion of the Subject,” 304. “La soumission du sujet au signifiant” (“Subversion du sujet,” 806).

⁸² “The signifier over the signified, ‘over’ corresponding to the bar separating the two stages” (“Agency of the Letter,” 149). “Signifiant sur signifié, le sur répondant à la barre qui en sépare les deux étapes” (“L’instance de la lettre,” 497). Note how the structure of the elementary cell, in which the retrograde vector is perpendicular to and cuts through the signifying chain, is also a kind of rebuff of the Saussurean troping of the sign as a parallel structure, whether as one indistinct mass floating above another, or, more famously, as two sides of a sheet of paper.

⁸³ “Thus the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing” (“Function and Field,” 104). “Ainsi le symbole se manifeste d’abord comme meurtre de la chose” (“Fonction et champ,” 319).

⁸⁴ Lacan, *Seminar I*, 174. “Car c’est en tant que le symbole permet cette inversion, c’est-à-dire annule la chose existante, qu’il ouvre le monde de la négativité, lequel constitue à la fois le discours du sujet humain et la réalité de son monde en tant qu’humain” (*Séminaire I*, 196).

⁸⁵ In a characteristic move, Lacan illustrates the murder of the thing by comparing an elephant to the word *elephant* (Lacan, *Seminar I*, 178, 218, 225, 243, 264; *Séminaire I*, 201, 244, 250, 267, 290). In his psychoanalysis, death rides not a pale horse, but an elephant. At the end of the 1953–1954 seminar at l’Hôpital Sainte-Anne, Lacan had figurines of elephants distributed to the participants (Lacan, *Seminar I*, 287; *Séminaire I*, 316).



It is most appropriate that the heaviness of the bar hangs over the subject in the matheme of S over barred- S . Everyone is under a death sentence. The fated/fatal bar of the subject is so insistent that it doubles itself, generating a figure with two bars, one external and above the subject, and one internal to it. These two bars are not just closely related, but, in a strong sense, the very same. The internal is a translation or reflection of the external, by which the external bar is internalized. If we understand the bar as a mark of the subjection of the subject, then it represents the limit to that subject. In that case, the (re)appearance of the bar within the figure of the subject itself, as \S , denotes how that external limit becomes an internal one, in what Žižek calls a “formal conversion.”⁸⁶ So the bar not only marks the very emergence of the subject, it concomitantly marks its external/internal limit. While the subject is delivered by the agency of the letter, it is delivered to its own emphatic limitation. Lacan calls this seeming paradox *alienation*, the first movement of subjectification.

The nature of this alienating agency of the letter deserves some elaboration. “The Other with a big ‘O’ is the scene of the Word, insofar as the scene of the Word is always in third position between two subjects”:⁸⁷ the symbolic order comprising language,

⁸⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 222. Following the letter of Lacan’s text, “formal” should be understood as encompassing, but by no means restricted to, the sense of pertaining to the material *form* of the signifier—here, \S .

⁸⁷ Jacques Lacan, quoted in Anthony Wilden, “Lacan and the Discourse of the Other,” *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, by Jacques Lacan, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), 269.

law, and social relations. We can be more precise by distinguishing between the symbolic order as a register—that is, as an overarching category inclusive of everything linguistic or cultural or juridical—and the Other as some specific symbolic system or “socio-symbolic field” or “synchronous code”:⁸⁸ America, liberal democracy, fascism, the fractious Parisian psychoanalytic establishment, the university, sociology as a discipline. Hence, the issue at hand is what Lacan calls “the realization of the subject in his signifying dependence in the locus of the Other.”⁸⁹ If we designate the Other by O, we can write, in set theory notation,

$$S \in O$$

“S belongs to O”: the signifier is a term from the Other; it appears in the field of the Other.

* * *

A translation parenthesis: S designates the English *signifier* and the French *signifiant*, in a happy coincidence. However, in French, the Other is of course *Autre*, symbolized by A.⁹⁰ Similarly, there is the parallel term which slides between the *other* and the *object*, which appears as *a* in French, for *autre*, and, a little confusingly, as both *o* and *a* in English translations. One consequence of this difference has been the profusion in English Lacanian commentaries of the signifier (*m*)*other*, to decidedly mixed effect. To make things more complicated, over the decades-long course of Lacan’s theorization, the object *o/a* both transmutes into and is differentiated from that

⁸⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 110, 103.

⁸⁹ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 206. “La réalisation du sujet dans sa dépendance signifiante au lieu de l’Autre” (*Séminaire XI*, 188).

special object designated as *objet a* or *objet petit a*. Lacan explicitly requested that this term not be translated.⁹¹ Some of his commentators comply; some do not. The point is that the problematics of reading Lacan in English quickly make apparent the extent to which not just sentences and words, but even letters (and therefore mathemes) are subject to the vagaries of translation.

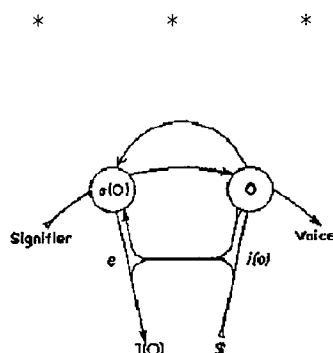


Figure 2.5: Graph II

In *Graph II*, O appears in three different places:

1. By itself, it marks the *point de capiton*. O is “the locus of the signifier’s treasure.”
2. Mirroring the *point de capiton*, the signified appears on the other side as $s(O)$ —in mathematical terms, as a function of the Other. $s(O)$ “is what may be called the punctuation in which the signification is constituted as a finished product.”⁹²
3. Likewise, in the final appearance of O , symbolic identification or the ego-ideal appears as $I(O)$, and therefore also as a function of O . $I(O)$ stands for “the

⁹⁰ Lacan says, “The Bible begins, by the way, only with the letter B—it left behind the letter A so that I could take charge of it” (*Seminar XX*, 46). “D’ailleurs la Bible ne commence qu’à la lettre B, elle a laissé la lettre A — pour que je m’en charge” (*Séminaire XX*, 45).

⁹¹ “Lacan insists the ‘*objet petit a*’ should remain untranslated, thus acquiring, as it were, the status of an algebraic sign” (Sheridan, translator’s note, xi).

identification of the subject with some signifying feature, trait (I), in the big Other, in the symbolic order.”⁹³

“The *point de capiton* fixes the meaning of the preceding elements: that is to say, it retroactively submits them to some code, it regulates their mutual relations according to this code We could say that the *point de capiton* represents, holds the place of, the big Other, the synchronous code, in the diachronous signifier’s chain.”⁹⁴ Hence the constitutive force of the Other as Law: it is at once the condition of signification and of subjectification, through the agency of *capitonnage*. This is one reason O is a capital “O”: *The Other*. Such domination of the Other, in concert with the above quotation from the “*Discours de Rome*,” is a major impetus for the common misapprehension of the symbolic order as being utterly determinative, in a rigid and high-structuralist way, of the subject.⁹⁵ The problem with this misreading is that it does not recognize that O is not really O. Instead, O always turns out to be Ø; the Other always turns out to be rendered in the same way as the subject. What does this mean? “The big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack.” The Other, in the last instance (to use a nostalgic turn of phrase), “hasn’t got

⁹² Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 304. “[*s(A)*] est ce qu’on peut appeler la ponctuation où la signification se constitue comme produit fini” (“Subversion du sujet,” 806).

⁹³ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 104. Lacan says,

Take just one signifier as an emblem of this omnipotence [of the word as law], that is to say of this wholly potential power (*ce pouvoir tout en puissance*), this birth of possibility, and you have the unbroken line (*trait unaire*) which, by filling in the invisible mark that the subject derives from the signifier, alienates this subject in the primary identification that forms the ego ideal. (“Subversion of the Subject,” 306)

Prenez seulement un signifiant pour insigne de cette toute-puissance, ce qui veut dire de ce pouvoir tout en puissance, de cette naissance de la possibilité, et vous avez le trait unaire qui, de combler la marque invisible que le sujet tient du signifiant, aliène ce sujet dans l’identification première qui forme l’idéal du moi. (“Subversion du sujet,” 808)

⁹⁴ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 103.

it', hasn't got the final answer,"⁹⁶ and therefore cannot suffice as the guarantor of either meaning or subjectivity. *Capitonnage*, ultimately, does not hold. According to Lacan,

Between the two chains . . . those of the signifiers as opposed to all the ambulatory signifieds that circulate because they are always in the process of sliding—the pinning-down or capping point I speak of is mythical, for never has anyone been able to pin a meaning to a signifier; but on the other hand, what one can do is pin a signifier to a signifier and see what happens. But in that case, something new always occurs . . . namely, the appearance of a new meaning.⁹⁷

There are critical and larger consequences: "This instability in all discursive fixing is the promise of a teleologically unconstrained futurity for the political signifier." This is Butler's refutation of the criticism that Lacanian theory is removed from political relevance. She later says, "That there can be no final or complete inclusivity is thus a function of the complexity

⁹⁵ For two particularly egregious examples, see Nancy Fraser, "The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics," *Theory, Culture & Society* 9 (1992): 51-71; and Dorothy Leland "Lacanian Psychoanalysis and French Feminism: Toward an Adequate Political Psychology," *Hypatia* 3.3 (1989): 81-103.

⁹⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 122.

⁹⁷ Lacan, seminar of 22 January 1958, quoted in Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, "The unconscious: A psychoanalytic study," trans. Patrick Coleman, *Yale French Studies: French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis* 48 (1972), 155. The transcript of the *Séminaire V* reads:

Que les deux chaînes . . . qui sont des signifiants par rapport à tout ce qui circule de signifiés ambulants parce qu'ils sont toujours en train de glisser; l'épinglage dont je parle ou encore le point de capiton n'est qu'une affaire mythique, car jamais personne n'a pu épingler une signification à un signifiant; mais, par contre, ce qu'on peut faire, c'est épingler un signifiant à un signifiant et voir que ça fait.

Mais, dans ce cas, il se produit toujours quelque chose de nouveau. . . à savoir le surgissement d'une nouvelle signification. (Lacan, *Séminaire V*, 181)

However, Laplanche and Leclaire cite a slightly different version:

Entre les deux chaînes . . . celle des signifiants par rapport à tout ce qui circule de signifiés ambulants parce qu'ils sont toujours en train de glisser; l'épinglage dont je parle ou encore le point de capiton est mythique, car jamais personne n'a pu épingler une signification à un signifiant; mais par contre, ce qu'on peut faire, c'est épingler un signifiant à un signifiant et voir ce que ça fait. Mais dans ce cas il se produit toujours quelque chose de nouveau . . . à savoir le surgissement d'une nouvelle signification. (Mimeographed copy of the seminar of 22 January 1958, from the archives of the *Société française de psychanalyse*, 33, quoted in Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, *L'inconscient, une étude psychanalytique, Actes du colloque* [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966], 118, quoted in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Titre de la lettre*, 76)

The mythicity of the *point de capiton* has far-reaching implications for Lacanian theory and for the critiques that attack it for its phallogentrism, inasmuch as one of its names is the phallus. Lacan says that "I designate Φ as the phallus insofar as I indicate that it is the signifier which has no signified" (*Seminar XX*, 81). " Φ , nous le désignons de ce phallus tel que je le précise d'être le signifiant qui n'a pas de signifié" (*Séminaire XX*, 75). This

and historicity of a social field that can never be summarized by any given description, and that, for democratic reasons, ought never to be.”⁹⁸

Returning to the Graph of Desire, if the signified slips away, the geometry of the elementary cell necessitates that the subject must also lose its ground. In this way, it is the very subjection of the subject to the signifier that causes the subject’s final lack of symbolic determination—which is why the signifier is the “worm of the cause” of the subject. Now the import of the rendering of the subject by the signifier becomes more apparent, in its convergence with the aforementioned internal limit. The signifier, in failing to fulfill the subject, releases a gap within her/him. The signifier delivers unto the subject, not only the demand of the letter, but also its definitive limitation. The barring of the barred \mathcal{S} is therefore precisely the “stumbling of the symbolic,” and therefore the irruption of the real, just as the bar of \mathcal{S} is the necessary reflection of the bar of \emptyset .

$$\mathcal{S} \sim \emptyset$$

The failure of *capitonnage* cuts both ways. On the one hand, this allows the subject its little bit of freedom. “This lack in the Other gives the subject—so to speak—a breathing space, it enables him [*sic*] to avoid the total alienation in the signifier not by filling out his lack but by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack, with the lack in the Other.”⁹⁹ In other words, if the subject arises from the signifier, that genesis also means that it likewise arises from the cut. Despite the totalizing envelopment of the subject by the signifier, the

issue is mostly beyond the scope of this study, although the problems with the phallus will be revisited at the beginning of Chapter Three.

⁹⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 195, 221.

relation between the subject and her/his symbolic order is always subject to possible failure.¹⁰⁰ If, in the Lacanian orthodoxy, the Other is anchored and legislated through the Name-of-The-Father, still “the paternal law ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler, preparing the ground for the insurrections against him.”¹⁰¹ In the barring of the barred S, what is manifested is “the power of the imaginary to release us from the symbolic.”¹⁰²

On the other hand, the subject concomitantly loses the substance of the letter, and therefore the sum of its substantiality. In being barred, *S* becomes an evanescence, escaping the utter mastery of the letter only to fade beneath it. The result is a subject that only *is* as it is *coming to be*, in “a sort of pulseline movement.”¹⁰³ The insistence of the form of the vector in the Graph of Desire is suggestive, as is the active sense of *coupure*—the Lacanian subject is not a static thing at all, but something constituted in the directed motion through the gap or lack in the Other. “Such is the incessant . . . *going* and *coming* that marks the history of the subject.”¹⁰⁴ The symbolic order indeed establishes a structured order; the subject is real only insofar as it evades that order. Lacan states, “this cut in the signifying chain alone verifies the

⁹⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 113.

¹⁰¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 28. Lacan says, “It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of law” (“Function and Field,” 67, emphasis in original). “C’est dans le *nom du père* qu’il nous faut reconnaître le support de la fonction symbolique qui, depuis l’orée des temps historiques, identifie sa personne à la figure de la loi” (“Fonction et champ,” 278).

¹⁰² Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 113. I am perverting Schneiderman somewhat for my own purposes, for he is actually referring to “a cult of the individual or a worship of the life force, of health, of youth” (113).

¹⁰³ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 46.

¹⁰⁴ Philippe Julien, *Jacques Lacan’s Return to Freud: The real, the symbolic, and the imaginary*, trans. Devra Beck Simiu (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1994), 50, emphasis in original. “Tel est le mouvement incessant d’aller et de retour qui scande l’histoire du sujet” (*Pour lire Jacques Lacan: Le retour à Freud* [Paris: E.P.E.L., 1990], 69, emphasis in original).

structure of the subject as discontinuity in the real.”¹⁰⁵ We must bring everything back to the function of the cut in discourse. That cut both crystallizes and opens up desire—and this leads directly on to the vexed and vectored question of the subject and its being.

Being Alienated

First, let us consider how, if the Other is understood as the massive and omnipresent *apparatus* of the socio-linguistic order, in an obvious resonance with the Althusserian ISA, the relation between signifier and subject can be rewritten as one between the Other and the subject:

$$\frac{O}{\$}$$

Of course, the fundamental psychoanalytic exemplification is that of parent and child, but the formation is generalizable to any instance of the gross inequity of hegemonic law to its dependent and vulnerable subject. Lacan characterizes it as the forced means by which “man [*sic*] enters into the way of slavery.”¹⁰⁶ Political subjection and submission is therefore built into the Lacanian subject.¹⁰⁷

Given that Althusser moves the ISA across the family (the traditional “home” of psychoanalysis), the academy, law, politics, and culture,¹⁰⁸ we can read ISA as a *matheme*, or rather, a *mathemic* concatenation: I is the *matheme* for symbolic identification, which is

¹⁰⁵ Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 299. “Cette coupure de la chaîne signifiante est seule à vérifier la structure du sujet comme discontinuité dans le réel” (“Subversion du sujet,” 801).

¹⁰⁶ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 212. “L’homme entre dans la voie de l’esclavage” (*Séminaire XI*, 193).

¹⁰⁷ Butler sharply comments, “Lacanian theory must be understood as a kind of ‘slave morality’” (*Gender Trouble*, 57).

identification with a specific place in a social, institutional, political, cultural, and/or linguistic structure. In *Graph II*, I is a function of O, the Other, as that agency which, by hailing the subject, constitutes her/him as subject. Žižek is more specific, and says that symbolic identification is “identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed [by the Other], *from where* we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love.”¹⁰⁹ S is the matheme for the subject, unbarred because s/he is under the *méconnaissance* that s/he is whole—that is, that s/he is what s/he thinks she is, or what s/he takes as her/his name: S is also the matheme for the signifier. Of course, S, according to Althusser, is the State, so S can be read as the Subject of State. Alternatively, S is Subjectivization as Subjection or Submission.¹¹⁰ A is the matheme for *l'Autre*, the Other (as Apparatus), including the Apparatus of the Academy and the Apparatus of Althusser.

Obviously, this reading of “ISA” is not a reading of Ideological State Apparatuses, in any substantial sense. Still, even a superficial Lacanian reading has some justification, given the fraught and intricate relationship of Althusser to Lacan.¹¹¹ Althusser arranged for Lacan to resume his *séminaire* at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1964, after Lacan had left the Hôpital Sainte-Anne, and Althusser was present when a frail and aging Lacan dissolved his school in 1980, the year before he died.

¹⁰⁸ Althusser, “Ideology and the State,” 143.

¹⁰⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 105, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Kemple, private communication, 7 April 1998.

¹¹¹ See Louis Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996; originally published as *Écrits sur la psychanalyse: Freud et Lacan* [Paris: Stock/INEC, 1993]) and Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir*, ed. Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang, trans. Richard Veasey (New York: The New Press, 1993; originally published as *L'avenir dure longtemps* [Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1992]). Oddly, while Althusser had conversation and correspondence with Lacan, he says he never attended the *séminaire* (Althusser, *Future*, 186).

To return to the preceding figure of S and O: if it is rotated ninety degrees clockwise, the result is:

§ / O

This compound symbol can be expanded into the set-theoretical Venn diagram drawn by Lacan in *Séminaire XI*, which schematizes the founding of the subject as the “vel” of alienation.¹¹²

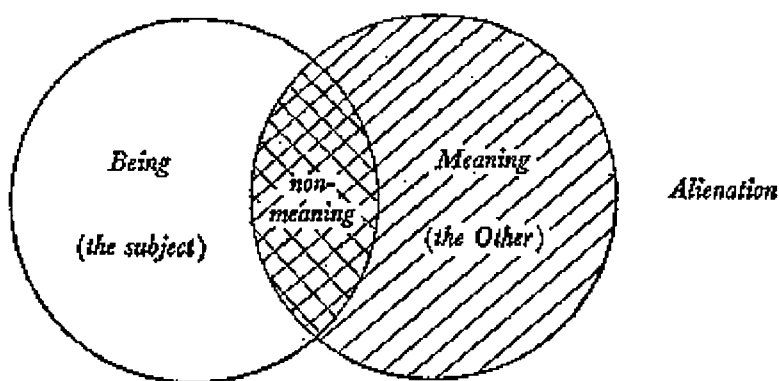


Figure 2.6: The *vel* of alienation

In the *Seminar XI* diagram, the subject on the left is associated with being—the blank circular area. On the right side, the Other is associated with meaning—the hatched circular area. Between them, the bar of §/O has transmuted into the intersection of the fields of the subject and the Other—the cross-hatched area—labelled “non-meaning.” The subject arises with its entry into the symbolic order—the Other—which means that the subject gains access to meaning, in the sense of both language and social identity. In a fundamental way,

¹¹² Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 211; *Séminaire XI*, 192.

the subject becomes human through language. To be talked or written about is to attain a palpable existence—but it is also to become susceptible to all the slippages and displacements and substitutions of the signifier. Language, at least as conceived by structuralism, is a system of differences, an order of negativity, a regime of lack as well as a regime of truth. The lesson of the *vel* of alienation is that the accession to meaning comes only at a price: the necessary loss of being. This can come as no surprise; the basic lesson of the barring of the subject is that it is subordinated to the letter. Nevertheless, that lesson can be profitably relearned by (very) partially unpacking the vagaries of Lacanian being.

In its first and simplest sense, being is an uncompromised and unified plenitude, which could be figured as the blissful and fabulous oneness of the fetus and the mother, or as the unity between the not-yet-subject and the as-yet-unnamable universe. This is “the lost paradise of complete fusion with [the] All.”¹¹³ A traditional symbol for such fullness is the perfect circle, **O**. Yet **O** is also 0, zero, the signifier of absence or nothingness. Put these signifiers together, and being as perfect plenitude is assessed as utterly unreal. “Zero is the presence of the subject who, at this level, totalizes.”¹¹⁴ Such fullness cannot be an experience of the subject, since the subject at that point does not even exist as such. Instead, **O** can only be a retroactive fantasy of what has been irrevocably lost. In characteristic fashion, the Lacanian name for what is so definitively unreal is the *real*.¹¹⁵ Of course, **O** is also the symbol for the Other, that quintessentially *symbolic* locus of the signifier, and the real is by definition

¹¹³ Muller and Richardson, *Lacan and Language*, 22.

¹¹⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 226. “Or, le zéro, c’est la présence du sujet, qui, à ce niveau-là, totalise” (*Séminaire XI*, 205).

¹¹⁵ To be more precise, this is but one of the manifestations of the real. Jacques-Alain Miller schematizes the real as consisting of R_1 and R_2 , where R_1 refers to the “pre-symbolic” real referenced here, and R_2 refers to a remainder leftover from symbolization (Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 26-7).

exclusive of the symbolic.¹¹⁶ So O designates both that which is real, and that which is not real; that which is symbolizable, and that which is beyond all symbolization.¹¹⁷ Admittedly, in the Lacanian algebra, O consistently designates the symbolic Other, rather than its real opposite—and yet the real in precisely this sense returns to mark the Other, as we shall see.

The crucial point about such “being” as phantasmatic plenitude is that it is always already lost to the subject. It is this “impossibility” of being that makes it real. The condition of the existence of the subject is its differentiation from the non-subject, so that the loss of unified being is constitutive of the subject. It is the barring of the S that generates $\$$. This loss installs lack in the subject, and lack is the onset of desire. Thenceforth, desire will be subject to continual transformation and displacement, but it will always remain in some way traceable to the desire to fill this originary loss, even if desire in general will never be reducible to it.

Being also crosses registers and relocates as the solidity of the ego, the comfortably stable everyday self, which Lacan limns as monstrous and inhuman, even while admitting its necessity. For him, the self as the ego is a statue, a phantom, an automaton, a suit of armour, a fabricated thing, the very antithesis of the pulsatory subject that courses along the vectors of desire.¹¹⁸ The ego is the spectacular and deluded self of the famous mirror stage, which

¹¹⁶ Given that the real and the symbolic are supplemented by the imaginary, they do not, however, comprise a binary opposition.

¹¹⁷ Compare Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zak's reading of 0 as possessing aspects of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary: “The zero thus comprises three logical moments: (i) the zero as lack: the non-concept, the Real, the blank; (ii) the zero as a number: as a stand-in concept of the impossible which evokes and annuls the lack; (iii) the zero number as 1: that is, as unity and as identity” (Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zak, “Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics,” in *The Making of Political Identities*, ed. Ernesto Laclau [London: Verso, 1994], 33).

¹¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, 2, 3, 4. “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je,” in *Écrits*, 95, 97.

Lacan dubs *imaginary* in the full sense of the word. In a contemporary sense, this is the being which is invoked by New Ageist discourses of the centered or grounded self and certain readings of Eastern philosophies. This is the personal edition of the metaphysics of presence, the self as identical to itself qua ego, what Lacan calls the *moi*. This is *me*. And this is the satisfaction of raising consciousness to the dignity of being, the election of the thinking subject to being that is accomplished by *cogito ergo sum*. That motto centers the subject in a manner that can be figured in another and different Venn diagram:¹¹⁹

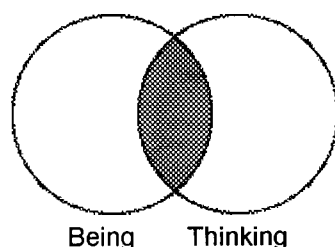


Figure 2.7: The Cartesian subject

The certainty about the identity of being and thinking is what darkens the crossing of the circles above. Naturally, Lacan refuses Descartes, and counters that the Cartesian *cogito* is “participating, in its striving towards certainty, in a sort of abortion.”¹²⁰ He inverts the *cogito* to articulate instead the disjunction he has already rendered in the veil of alienation: “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think. . . . I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think.”¹²¹ Yet there is an unlikely congruence within this opposition. The Cartesian superposition of being with thinking is a kind of desubstantialization of the subject, who must “repeat to himself [*sic*] the

¹¹⁹ After the diagram in Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 43.

¹²⁰ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 141. “Participer, dans son effort de certitude, d’une sorte d’avortement” (*Séminaire XI*, 129).

words 'I am thinking' in order to be able to convince himself that he exists. And as soon as he stops repeating those words, his conviction inevitably evaporates."¹²² Descartes himself remedies this predicament with a literal *deus ex machina*. However, if the introduction of the God term is rejected as just bad writing, the Cartesian subject remains exposed as insubstantial and evanescent, despite its pretensions.¹²³ In other words, that subject lacks being, in the sense of consistency, permanence, or independence. What is left is only pretension—that is, what remains to the subject is only a linguistic claim to being. To put it another and more familiar way, the Cartesian subject seems to both appear and disappear under the letter. Descartes seems to be calling upon divine intervention to evade precisely the vel of alienation. This reinterpretation of the *cogito* manifests the slide that Lacan makes between meaning and thinking as the other side of being. In *Séminaire XIV : Logique du fantasme* and *Séminaire XV : L'acte psychanalytique* he refigures the vel of alienation like this:¹²⁴

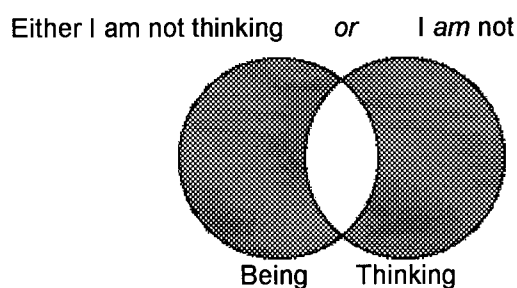


Figure 2.7: The Lacanian subject

¹²¹ Lacan, "Agency of the Letter," 166. "Je pense où je ne suis pas, donc je suis où je ne pense pas. . . . Je ne suis pas, là où je suis le jouet de ma pensée; je pense à ce que je suis, là où je ne pense pas penser" ("L'instance de la lettre," 517).

¹²² Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 42-3.

¹²³ Lacan says, "You know that Descartes could not help reintroducing the presence of God. But in what a strange way!" (*Seminar XI*, 224). "Vous savez que Descartes n'a pu qu'en réintroduire la présence [de Dieu]. Mais quelle singulière façon!" (*Séminaire XI*, 204).

¹²⁴ See Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 44; Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XIV : Logique du fantasme : 1966–1967*, unpublished seminar, 67-140; Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XV : L'acte psychanalytique : 1967–1968 : Notes de cours*, unpublished seminar, 76-102.

Finally, being also indicates some obscure but inestimable something else, a special object of the subject, which has already been encountered: *objet a*. For now, this third aspect of being must simply be characterized as precious, like the *agalma* of Socrates, and as something precious that is lost. It is an avatar of the real, aligned with both the excess/residue of the symbolic, and “that which interrupts the smooth functioning of law and the automatic functioning of the signifying chain.”¹²⁵ In its most famous, and perhaps most elusive, definition, it is the *object-cause of desire* (recalling that cause is that which evades structure). I will elaborate a little on *objet a* in Chapter Four.

Because the subject loses being in all these senses (and more), it begins to fade away. Because it loses being to meaning, it fades away beneath the signifier—once more, \S falls under the bar of S. This is *aphanisis*, the “eclipse of the subject” by the letter.¹²⁶ Hence, the signature of the subject (\S) is this concomitant founding and fading by the letter, the simultaneity of its appearance and disappearance. “The subject is never more than fleeting (*ponctuel*) and vanishing.”¹²⁷ To put it differently, the subject appears with the introduction of its own lack, where lack qua *aphanisis* is figured by the bar within itself. In both senses of the word, the signifier *renders* the subject. This is the Law of language: “‘your meaning or your life’ . . . the unavoidable castration which every subject must experience upon entering the

¹²⁵ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 83.

¹²⁶ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 313. “Éclipse du sujet” (“Subversion du sujet,” 816). *Aphanisis* is a Greek word that means “disappearance.” Ernest Jones introduced it to psychoanalysis, by using it to refer to the disappearance of sexual desire (Ernest Jones, “Early Development of Female Sexuality,” in *Papers on Psychoanalysis*, 5th ed. [Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1948]). Lacan refashions the term when he appropriates it—in his discourse, it becomes equivalent to what calls the “fading” (in English, even in the French text) of the subject (“Subversion of the Subject,” 313; “Subversion du sujet,” 816). The bar in \S is an inscription of fading or *aphanisis*.

¹²⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XX*. “Le sujet n’est jamais que ponctuel et évanouissant” (*Séminaire XX*, 130).

order of language or signification, its inauguration into a regime of lack.”¹²⁸ In this way, castration and alienation are the very conditions of desire.

Lacan states, “Alienation consists in this *vel*, which—if you do not object to the word *condemned*, I will use it—condemns the subject to appearing only in that division, it seems to me, I have just articulated sufficiently by saying that, if it appears on one side as meaning, produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as *aphanisis*.”¹²⁹ So despite the stark separation of the diagram, the subject is not held to the other side of meaning. Instead, meaning and being are held to be different sides of the subject.

However, these are not merely *different* aspects, for the *vel* of alienation is a *forced choice* between meaning and being. They are radically incompatible or opposed aspects of the subject. They are also unbalanced, for one type of loss entails another: being loses out to meaning; the subject loses out to the Other. Instead of having being, the subject can only be a being-of-language, a *parlêtre*, in Lacan’s coinage. “The signifier plays and wins, if I may say so, before the subject is aware of it.”¹³⁰ And if the subject does indeed retain an aspect of being, it is the aspect of its loss or fading, which is precisely the significance of *aphanisis*.

The triumph of the signifier in alienation means the institution of the symbolic order, “which must be realized anew for each new subject.”¹³¹ What the subject receives in return

¹²⁸ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 35.

¹²⁹ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 210.

L’aliénation consiste dans ce *vel*, qui — si le mot *condamné* n’appelle pas d’objections de votre part, je le reprends — condamne le sujet à n’apparaître que dans cette division que je viens, me semble-t-il, d’articuler suffisamment en disant que, s’il apparaît d’un côté comme sens, produit par le signifiant, de l’autre il apparaît comme *aphanisis*. (*Séminaire XI*, 191)

¹³⁰ Lacan, “Position of the Unconscious,” 269. “Le signifiant joue et gagne, si nous pouvons dire, avant que le sujet s’en avise” (“Position de l’inconscient,” 840). On the other hand, the subject *can* refuse to make this forced choice of meaning, and retain being. But in that case, the subject does not gain a place in the symbolic order, and sacrifices language and social relations. This is the psychotic state.

¹³¹ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 52.

for its sacrifice of being is a place in that order. However, insofar as alienation is but the first stage of subjectification, that place is still empty. Jacques-Alain Miller suggests that alienation yields the subject as $\{\emptyset\}$, an empty set (a set with zero elements), which may be equally regarded as pure lack or the “pure possibility of being.”¹³² So alienation results in

$$\S = \{\emptyset\}$$

Note how \emptyset is the void of the zero, crossed by the primordial signifying mark, in a retroactive echo of the founding inscription of \S . But, recalling that O is a polyvalent signifier, \emptyset is also a crossing out of both the Other as language and the plenitude of being, even as it is a less emphatic version of the Other *barré*, \emptyset . Either way, the subject, as the empty set, is simultaneously grounded in the void and in the letter, and then bracketed: $\{\emptyset\}$. It should be noted, however, that in set theory, the empty set is *not* designated by $\{\emptyset\}$, but by \emptyset —the two are not the same.

$$\{\emptyset\} \neq \emptyset$$

In fact, despite their formal likeness, $\{\emptyset\}$ and \emptyset function as certain opposites. Once again, the criticality of the small difference. While \emptyset is the empty set of zero elements, $\{\emptyset\}$ is the set that has exactly one element: the empty set, \emptyset . In other words,

$$\emptyset : 0 \quad :: \quad \{\emptyset\} : 1$$

¹³² Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 52.

If $\mathcal{S} = \{\emptyset\}$, the subject is the one which is comprised only of the present absence of zero.

The empty set—or rather, the non-empty set comprised of only the empty set—is the empty placeholder for the subject in the symbolic order, literalized in a name chosen for a baby before s/he is born.¹³³ If $\mathcal{S} = \{\emptyset\}$, then $\{\emptyset\}$ is the name-of-the-subject. But, in a now familiar way, \emptyset designates exactly the opposite: the empty set is the empty tomb. If $\mathcal{S} = \{\emptyset\}$, the subject both brackets and carries death. “The empty grave is also a subject; so the human subject is always split between a mark and a void.”¹³⁴

With that in mind, just as we expanded the formula \mathcal{S}/O into the Venn diagram, we can collapse the diagram, in a slightly different way, back into \mathcal{S} . The subject is both meaning,

\mathcal{S}

and *aphanisis* or lack,

/

yielding

\mathcal{S}

¹³³ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 53.

¹³⁴ Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 7.

which designates the subject as a lacking subject. Alternatively, we could say that in alienation, the subject is subordinated by the letter, S , as part of its production as $\$$, and thereby enters into the symbolic, O , but only as $\{\emptyset\}$. Any attempt at thorough systematicity in reading Lacan must ultimately founder—although, as Marcelle Marini acutely asks, “What was Lacan’s goal, if not that of an always purer signifier?”¹³⁵ There exists, nonetheless, a clear semblance (*il y a du semblable*) in this figuration of alienation that should be remarked. There is a proportionality of relationships, in a (very) loosely mathematical sense, that brings together the beginning, middle, and now end of this chapter:

$$S : \$:: O : \emptyset :: O : \{\emptyset\}$$

This formula is but one example (or perhaps three) of the repetitions, shifts, proliferations, inversions, and twists, in which formal conversions move from outside to inside and back again, and similarities slide into differences that return as homologies. These moves are definitive of the Lacanian algebra, operating in the bi-directional passage from *la tropique* to *la topique*, from rhetoric to topological mathematics. Lacanian linguistics is marked by signifiers sliding endlessly over signifieds, which must entail that the notions and inscriptions of subject as $\$$ continually slip and fold over upon each other. The matheme is distinguished by its dependence upon, and facilitation of, its own repeated expansion into graphs, text, theory, and practice, and irregular resolution back into the signifier. It is precisely that double movement, that out-and-back-in, which will be traced out in this project’s reading of the matheme.

¹³⁵ Marini, *Jacques Lacan*, 69.

One of the definitions of the real is “that which always returns to the same place,” which aligns the real with the psychoanalytic preoccupation with repetition. In that light, what is apparent in the above “proportionality” is the insistent return of the cut, across each of \mathbb{S} , \emptyset , and $\{\emptyset\}$. And this is by no means a complete inventory. The cut/virgule/solidus/bar returns prominently in the defining diagonals of Lacan’s schemata.¹³⁶ We must bring everything back to the function of the cut in discourse. Heeding Lacan’s injunction, the next chapter will consider how those schemata function around the cut.

¹³⁶ Lacan, “Possible Treatment,” 193, 197. “Traitement possible,” 548, 553.

Chapter Three:

The Phallus, the Schemata and the Object

At best, the circuit contradicts itself, cuts itself off, grinds itself up.¹

—Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire II*

Lacan Is a Prick²

Lacan's name for the loss of being inflicted in alienation is symbolic castration.³ This castration is as deliberate in its phallocentrism as it is flagrant, for the phallus is the first of Lacanian signifiers. That is, the phallus is first in *priority*: it is "the privileged signifier" which designates "as a whole the effects of the signified," and therefore covers the entire field of meaning.⁴ The phallus, so elevated, reintroduces spatiality to the symbolic.⁵ The phallus is the ultimate *point de capiton*. "It's the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively."⁶ The firstness of the phallus is reasserted in every repetition of "everything."

That firstness is inscribed in the verticality of the primordial mark and the linearity of force: |. Lacan inscribed it himself, magicking the phallus into yet another return of the bar, this time as a whip wielded by the demon of Shame ("le démon de la Pudeur"⁷). If there remains any doubt about the thoroughness of Lacan's attack on meaning, it must surely

¹ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 323. "Au mieux, le circuit se contrarie, se stoppe, se coupe, se hache soi-même" (*Séminaire II*, 372).

² Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), 36.

³ That is, castration *proper*, to be distinguished from the castration/privation of the phallic mother.

⁴ "The signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits: A Selection*, 287, 285. "Le signifiant privilégié," "dans leur ensemble les effets de signifié" ("La signification du phallus / Die Bedeutung des Phallus," in *Écrits*, 692, 690).

⁵ Inasmuch as meaning is imaginary, the phallus is a symbolic intervention which has crucial imaginary effects. Once again, the imaginary and the symbolic are intertwined.

⁶ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 267. "C'est le point de convergence qui permet de situer rétroactivement et prospectivement tout ce qui se passe dans ce discours" (*Séminaire III*, 303-304). The *point de capiton* has a formal equivalence with the symbolic phallus, inasmuch as both are signifiers that lack signifieds.

evaporate before his teaching fable, in which that demon flogs the signified for the crime of its bastardy.⁸ Jacques-Alain Miller elaborates this scene into a typical Lacanian paradox. Commenting on a different figure in the fresco which inspires Lacan's fable, Miller writes that a painted woman of Pompeii has just thrown down a copy of Lacan's *Télévision*, and is now simultaneously backing away in horror and fending it off.⁹ Miller explains that the fresco "tells a story which no one has ever really been able to decipher." However, he also adds that it "clearly" involves an initiation into a ritual whose ultimate truth is the phallus.¹⁰

The phallus becomes ultimate, not just because it is the first of signifiers, but also because it is the last. It is the signifier without a signified,¹¹ the signifier of signifiers, the signifier remaining when all meaning has been exhausted. The phallus lays claim to the dignity of Alpha and Omega; it incarnates the letter as Beginning and End. The matheme for the phallus as signifier, Φ , conflates the one of unity and the zero of the void. Such phallocentrism is a natural target for anyone with feminist inclinations—it is no coincidence that it is a woman who is rejecting *Télévision* in Miller's scenario—but also Derrida, who

⁷ "Signification du phallus," 692 n1.

⁸ "Signification of the Phallus," 288; "Signification du phallus," 692.

⁹ Jacques-Alain Miller, "Microscopia: An Introduction to the Reading of *Television*," trans. Bruce Fink, in *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, by Jacques Lacan, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Norton, 1990), xi. Ironically, "Microscopia" is included in the English translation of *Télévision*, but the cover of that version does not show the painting in question, as the French edition does. Instead, in moving between languages and publishers, the *Villa of Mysteries* gets translated into a head shot of Lacan. In fact, "Microscopia" does not appear in *Télévision* at all.

¹⁰ Miller, "Microscopia," xii.

¹¹ "I designate Φ as the phallus insofar as I indicate that it is the signifier that has no signified" (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 81). " Φ , nous le désignons de ce phallus tel que je le précise d'être le signifiant qui n'a pas de signifié" (Lacan, *Séminaire XX*, 75). Φ is the matheme for but one of the incarnations of the phallus, the symbolic phallus. There is also φ , the imaginary phallus, and Π , the real phallus. The latter two, especially φ , will be discussed later in this chapter.

argues that Lacan never utterly gave up his early faith in the fullness of speech.¹² Certainly the Lacanian phallus fulfills Lacan's own criterion for the *sublime* object.¹³ Yet such grandiosity inverts itself by its outrageousness, for the transcendence of the phallus is so total that it cannot even be negated.¹⁴ In the symbolic order, which is the order structured by the phallus *qua* transcendental signifier, "an absence is just as much a positive entity as a presence."¹⁵ Not having is then a form of having, so "the 'identity' of the phallus resides in its own displacement."¹⁶ We could say that Φ "means" that one is zero. With these qualifications, the phallus brings the signifier to sex in a peculiar way. On the side of the signifier, the absent presence recalls the familiar Saussurean view of language as a negative system, with no positive terms. On the side of sex, being male or female cannot be unproblematically mapped onto a presence or absence of the phallus. Having or not having it becomes undecisive when the very presence of the phallus functions to institute lack.¹⁷ Both positions "are, in Lacan's terms, finally to be understood as comedic failures."¹⁸

For him, the condition of having the phallus is the prior assumption of one's own castration.¹⁹ The phallus, while lacking a signified, nonetheless possesses an identity, as Žižek notes, and that identity is castration: the loss of the phallus. Nonetheless, the two concepts can be written out differently: castration designates the loss necessitated by the entry into the

¹² Jacques Derrida, "Le facteur de la vérité," in *Post Card*, 465. See Lacan, "Function and Field"; "Fonction et champ."

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959–1960*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 112; Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan : Livre VII : L'éthique de la psychanalyse : 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 133.

¹⁴ Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 320. "Le phallus symbolique impossible à négativer" ("Subversion du sujet," 823).

¹⁵ Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. "phallus."

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), 202.

¹⁷ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 103.

¹⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 46.

symbolic order of language, while the phallus, being the signifier of signifiers, designates the form of symbolization as such.²⁰ Thus the phallus, by becoming one with its own sacrifice, becomes the cut that defines the subject as such, \S .

The castration of the subject is correlative to the ineluctability of the subject's representation. Men and women are both split by language (and hence are both castrated); they are differentiated because they are split differently.²¹ So sex, rather than being reducible to either a biological or custodial category, instead is always a paradox knotted with the immanent difficulty of language.²² Again, this is imaginable even in imaginary biology, for if | is the figure of the phallus and the cut of its loss, it is equally the icon of the vulvar slash. The primordial mark therefore figures how the predicament of sex and the subject devolves from "the *imperative of inscription*, the structural inevitability of representation which characterizes human sexuality in all its diversity."²³ It is only because of this complication of the phallus through language that Butler is able to convincingly invoke the lesbian phallus, as both an endorsement of Lacan and a rebuke to him.²⁴

¹⁹ Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. "phallus."

²⁰ Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 202. Commenting on Lacan's contention that the phallus is the signifier of *Aufhebung*, Žižek writes that "'Phallus' is not what remains of penis after penis is submitted to the process of mediation-sublation; rather it stands for the very process of mediation-sublation," the process of symbolization (*Metastases*, 202).

²¹ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 73, 106.

²² "We know that the unconscious castration complex has the function of a knot." This is the declaration that opens "The Signification of the Phallus" (280). "On sait que le complexe de castration inconscient a une fonction de noeud" ("Signification du phallus," 685).

²³ Charles Shepherdson, "The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex," in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1994), 159, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Judith Butler, "The Lesbian Phallus," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

This in no way makes the Lacanian privileging of the phallus unproblematic, despite Žižek's arguments to the contrary.²⁵ While Miller turns to the women of Pompeii to rehabilitate the Lacanian phallus, Silverman uses the same recourse to damn it once again.²⁶ Lacan insists on displacing the phallus—it is not a fantasy; it is not an object of any sort, part- or otherwise; it is not an organ²⁷—but even an infinite series of negating displacements still connects its terms in the very gesture that dislocates them. Any discursive chain can be followed back, link by link, its continual glissade and torsion notwithstanding.²⁸ The condition of this possibility is not the imputation of a singular originary term, but the metonymy of each and every term.²⁹ Then the very differentiation of the phallus from an organ brings them together; the very distantiation of the phallus from the penis always returns to the penis (this is part of Silverman's acute criticism³⁰). Freud provides precedent, for he claims that in the discourse of dreams something can manifest as its own negation.³¹ Besides, when Lacan so strongly denies that the phallus is the same as the penis, he denies himself. Sometimes he does appear to equate the penis with the "real phallus."³²

²⁵ Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 201-203.

²⁶ Kaja Silverman, "The Lacanian Phallus," *differences: The Phallus Issue* 4.1 (1992), 84-115.

²⁷ "Signification of the Phallus," 285; "Signification du phallus," 690.

²⁸ The possibility of tracking along the chain of signifiers does not imply that there is a privileged "track"; neither does it imply that such a track is necessarily any simpler or more straightforward than the winding chain itself. The constitution of a chain by links permits a happy correlation with the complex and variable hyper-textuality of the internet.

²⁹ However, Lacan is not averse to conferring singularity. The phallus is just the most familiar example.

³⁰ Silverman, "Lacanian Phallus," 89.

³¹ "Dreams feel themselves at liberty, moreover, to represent any element by its wishful contrary, so that there is no way of deciding at first glance whether any element that admits of a contrary is present in the dream-thoughts as a positive or as a negative," Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 429-430. Tellingly, Freud footnotes this sentence with "I was astonished to learn . . . that the most ancient of languages behave exactly like dreams in this respect" (430 n1).

³² For instance, in *Séminaire IV*: "Il ne s'agit point d'un phallus réel en tant que, comme réel, il existe ou n'existe pas, il s'agit d'un phallus symbolique" (Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan : Livre IV : La relation d'objet : 1956-1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [Paris: Seuil, 1994], 152-153).

This particular problem with the phallus figures a more general problem with Lacan. On the one hand, what Lacan calls his "return to Freud"³³ is such a radical reading/displacement of the latter that orthodox Freudians often can hardly recognize the Freud in Lacan's texts.³⁴ On the other hand, the "return to Freud" is very apt in how the problems with Freud still persist in Lacan, however they are shifted or transformed. As just one obvious example, the family romance of the Oedipus complex is transmuted into imaginary and symbolic triangulations by the phallus *qua* signifier, but the mostly unquestioned presumption of universality, and the projection of specifically situated sexism into a generalized human condition, still remain. The continued privileging of the phallus—regardless of its multiple identifications with castration and the signifier—furnishes abiding testimony.

Lacan is not unaware of the problem, and some of the infamous convolution of *Seminar XX: Encore*—the seminar in which Lacan addresses women, feminism, and love—and other related texts can be attributed, at least in part, to his attempts to answer to the phallus. The adequacy of his answers must remain largely unaddressed here, for its scope and complications exceed the adequacies of this dissertation.³⁵ The phallus may indeed be a signifier, and therefore something symbolic, but with respect to this particular engagement

³³ See Jacques Lacan, "The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection*; Jacques Lacan, "La chose freudienne ou Sens du retour à Freud en psychanalyse," in *Écrits*.

³⁴ Another instance of this paradigm of displacement and return, one that we have already encountered repeatedly, is Lacan's re-signification of the terms *imaginary*, *symbolic*, and *real*. Those words have "technical" definitions that are not only slippery enough in themselves, but also come back, in odd ways, to the everyday words to which they are counterpoised.

³⁵ There is no simple solution to the dilemma. Any championing of a female equivalent—for example, Irigaray's valorization of the labia (*This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985], 205-218)—must face a true equivalent to the Lacanian phallus to embody its own parallel to castration, and there has been a long-standing feminist opposition to figuring the female body through lack. Probably the most famous example of the latter is Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" (trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 [1976]: 875-893). However, Silverman takes exactly the opposite position, and chides

with Lacan, it is also a leftover—and therefore, in Lacanian terms, something real. But then, everything in Lacan leads to something else that is both absolutely crucial to the discussion and absolutely beyond adequate engagement by that discussion.³⁶ Every reading of Lacan, if it is scrupulous enough, must admit its radical insufficiency. To that end, Muller and Richardson frame the problem in terms that cannot be surprising by now: “*Understanding [Écrits]* is not exactly guesswork but, nonetheless, a highly precarious business, and sharing our impressions with the reading public may be utter folly.”³⁷ Muller and Richardson thereby admit their own fears of castration, in the form that castration threatens every academic reader and writer. The Lacanian twist to his engendering of castration is that “the fear of possible castration is castration itself.”³⁸ With respect to the clarity of language, this twist affirms Harold Bloom’s proposition that if one hasn’t misread a text, one hasn’t read it at all.³⁹ My mis/reading of Lacan is that reading is always castrating. Any subject’s imaginary wholeness with respect to the text (such as a teacher artful enough to conceive of her/himself as a master of translation) is therefore definitively fantastic. Muller and Richardson’s hesitation in the face of Lacan’s writing is then a “positive” version of the violently “negative” rejection of that writing. The irony is that the critics of the *matheme* would expunge it from the body of “healthy” discourse, as if the remedy for castration

Lacan for not placing women as fully within lack as men (Lecture, 6 October 1995, University of California at Berkeley).

³⁶ Compare Spivak’s contention that post-structuralism demands “a mind-set which allows one not to be nervous about the fact that what one is saying is undermined by the way one says it, radically” (“The Post-Modern Condition: The End of Politics?”, in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 20). The Lacanian position would be that that fact does indeed obtain, but also that no one cannot be nervous about that fact.

³⁷ Muller and Richardson, *Lacan and Language*, 415, emphasis added.

³⁸ Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 202.

³⁹ The corollary to Bloom is that one must read in the first place in order to misread. The problem with “artists of teaching” is not one of misreading, but of the determination to not read texts like Lacan’s at all. The difference is crucial.

would be a further excision. Every time that a champion of clear language strives to clear Lacan from the discursive field, s/he is striving to reclaim her or his own phallus by wielding the knife anew.

Is the Lacanian phallus Lacan's phallus? Does Lacan "truly" claim to have the phallus? Does he really have it? Gallop concedes the phallus to him in an acute and splendidly Lacanian way. She scolds Derrida as too polite in calling Lacan phallogocentric—in reality, she says, he is a prick.⁴⁰ Even more than that, "at the very moment in Lacan's text when phallic privilege is asserted, the cunt clamours for recognition, makes a big stink."⁴¹ Gallop is supported by the very words which skeptics are wont to cite as proof of the disingenuousness of Lacan's studious separation of the phallus from the penis: the "turgidity" and "vital flow"⁴² he associates with the image of the phallus. Yet these aspects are as characteristic of the vulva as they are of the penis—and they apply equally as well to language, especially language as conceived through the sliding of the signifying chain. Gallop should be given credit for recognizing what so many of Lacan's commentators and critics miss: the obscenity that pervades his theory. Psychoanalysis has traditionally offended its critics by its purported discovery of sex everywhere in social and psychic life. Lacan, in his linguistic turn, manages to be even more offensive, for that very attention to language recovers the difference and identity between sex and fucking, between the phallus and the prick.⁴³

⁴⁰ Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction*, 36. This slides into another morass, that of the distinction between having the phallus and being it.

⁴¹ Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction*, 32.

⁴² "Signification of the Phallus," 287. "Turgidité" and "flux vital," "Signification du phallus," 692.

⁴³ "We speak in analytic discourse about what the verb 'to fuck' (*foutre*) enunciates perfectly well. We speak therein of fucking, and we say that it's not working out (*ça ne va pas*)" (*Seminar XX*, 32). "On y parle de foutre — verbe, en anglais, *to fuck* — et on y dit que *ça ne va pas*" (*Séminaire XX*, 33).

Gallop, to her immense credit, articulates with style exactly what many of his critics seem to sense dimly or unconsciously, but cannot bring themselves to say: Lacan is insisting that obscenity is pervasive in language, which means it pervades every human subject made human through language. Certainly the rejections of Lacanian writing are distinguished by their phobic intensity, radiating their sense that the reader is being fucked over. Yet, as has already been observed, even the affirmations of Lacan still carry the trace of the same sense; they still manage to be obscene in ways that cannot be utterly co-opted by celebration or brazenness. There is too much sex and shit, too much of Lacan “edifying” the reader with the erotic distinction between eating the excrement of a rugby forward and eating the excrement of a beautiful girl.⁴⁴ The germane aspect here is how Lacan manages to conjure such obscenity out of the impenetrable abstraction of theory and the seemingly pristine formalism of the *matheme*.

The Names of the Schemata

We have already seen how Lacan imagines the loss of castration, in a Venn diagram of the *vel* between being and meaning. It shows how castration is a condemnation to existence divided by the letter.⁴⁵ To return to the *matheme*, the slash that turns *S* into *§* is at once both a literal and figurative cut (*coupure*). Just as *O* signifies both impossible plenitude and the regime of lack (that is, *O* is identical with its opposite, \emptyset), *S* signifies both the signifier as the instance of language and the subject as her/his own supposed predecessor, in

⁴⁴ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 188; *Séminaire VII*, 221.

⁴⁵ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 210; *Séminaire XI*, 191.

her/his “stupid, ineffable existence” prior to her/his constitution in language.⁴⁶ So the subject $\$$ is formed by S *qua* signifier cutting into S *qua* pre-linguistic existence. This peculiar and contradictory status of $\$$ appears explicitly in the graphic expansion of $\$$ as SCHEMA L, which is not only a characteristically mathemic conflation of text and image, but also coordinated by the mathemes of its vertices. Muller and Richardson call SCHEMA L “the most fundamental of all Lacan’s schemata.”⁴⁷

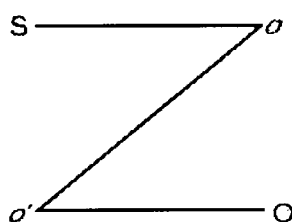


Figure 3.1: SCHEMA L⁴⁸

We know that SCHEMA L is another way to write out the subject because Lacan says as much: the subject “is stretched over the four corners of the schema.”⁴⁹ SCHEMA L therefore draws out a refutation of the familiar punctiform subject, the self as situated at and defined by a special point, whether that be the eye, the heart, or the mind or brain. The schema demonstrates the spatiality that distinguishes the Lacanian subject from the familiarly localized and situated individual, exemplified by the subject of the West Edmonton Mall, reduced to an \times in its interpellation by the Other: “You are here.” In particular, the subject

⁴⁶ Lacan, “Possible treatment,” 194; “Son ineffable et stupide existence” (“Traitement possible,” 549). The history of $\$$ within Lacanian theory plays out a parallel tale. Before 1957, $\$$ simply designated the subject; after that date, it designated the signifier; and in “Kant avec Sade,” it designates the “raw subject of pleasure” (“sujet brut de plaisir (sujet « pathologique »),” in *Écrits*, 775). Whether the subject is truly a “her” or “him” prior to her/his/its inscription into the symbolic is highly questionable.

⁴⁷ John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, “Lacan’s Seminar on the ‘Purloined Letter’: Overview,” in *Purloined Poe*, ed. Muller and Richardson, 71.

⁴⁸ Lacan, “Possible treatment,” 193. “Traitement possible,” 548.

of the schema includes S, which is itself a sometime designation of the subject in Lacanian theory. SCHEMA L then illustrates how the particularity of the subject as S is subsumed by the generality of the subject as $\$$.⁵⁰ To put this another way, SCHEMA L is an image/text of $\$$ *because* $\$$ does not appear anywhere in it—not even in the title. It is the absence of $\$$ that makes it present. So $\$$, even though already barred as a matheme, becomes effaced anew when it is mapped as the schema. The subject, when considered closely, fades away beneath the letter, so the schema is another *vel*, because any schema of the subject must be a schema of *aphanisis*. This image of the subject as at once there and not there fulfills Lacan's mysterious injunction that "the subject is never more than supposed."⁵¹ You really *are not* here and you really are not *here*. Instead, you are supposed to be there.⁵² What remains is structure: four positions, a skeletal zigzag, and some little letters, including that remnant of what the subject never was: S.

The remaining three mathemes in SCHEMA L are:

- o* the generalized object or set of objects for the subject.
- o'* the subject's ego.
- O the Other.⁵³

⁴⁹ Lacan, "Possible treatment," 194. "[Le sujet] l'est, en effet, en tant que tiré aux quatre coins du schéma" ("Traitement possible," 549).

⁵⁰ It could be said that S as a whole is contained within S as lacking: $\$$.

⁵¹ Lacan, *Séminaire XIII*, quoted and trans. in Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 35.

⁵² "Supposed" should be read in all its senses, anticipating the concept of the subject supposed to know (*sujet supposé savoir*), whose matheme is S.s.S., a concatenation of the signifier with the signified.

⁵³ "*o*, [the subject's] objects, *o'*, his ego, that is, that which is reflected of his form in his objects, and O, the locus from which the question of his existence may be presented to him" (Lacan, "Possible treatment," 194).

All of these variations on the letter *o* inscribe variations of the *other*, happily represented in English by the mark of the void and fullness. In the French version, which is called SCHÉMA \mathcal{L} ,⁵⁴ these vertices are parallel performances of *l'autre*: *a*, *a'*, and A:⁵⁵

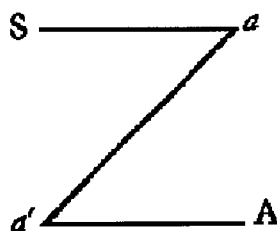


Figure 3.2: SCHÉMA \mathcal{L} ⁵⁶

Inasmuch as this schema is a simplified version of an earlier one, the relation of these four mathemes to the subject may be illuminated by considering SCHEMA L alongside its more elaborate predecessor, whose name in French is almost, but not quite, the same: SCHÉMA L.

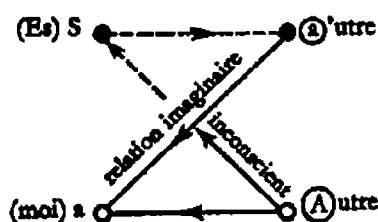


Figure 3.3: SCHÉMA L⁵⁷

⁵⁴ \mathcal{L} is actually incorrect, but it is as close as my word-processor can get to the character type-set in the "Traitement possible" version of the schema, which looks like this:



Three comments: first, the "L"s of the schemata are type-set differently in the same volume, *Écrits*; second, it is sometimes literally impossible to even *copy* a letter from language to language; third, rendering L as \mathcal{L} recalls the imaginary relation of \mathcal{S} to \mathcal{S} .

⁵⁵ "*a*, ses objets, *a'*, son moi, à savoir ce qui se reflète de sa forme dans ses objets, et A le lieu d'où peut se poser à lui la question de son existence" ("Traitement possible," 549).

⁵⁶ "Traitement possible," 548.

⁵⁷ Jacques Lacan, "Le Séminaire sur « La Lettre volée »,» in *Écrits*, 53.

The small difference between the signifiers, L and \mathcal{L} —which map onto the large differences between the images of their respective signifieds—is leveled in the English translation, which denotes both schemata by SCHEMA L:

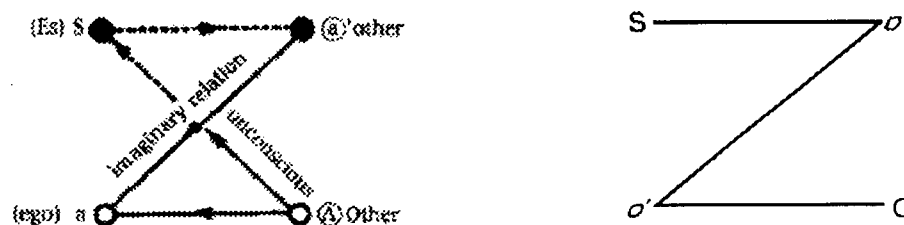


Figure 3.4 SCHEMATA L

Once again, the translation of the letter is found to be wanting. In English, L is substituted for \mathcal{L} , as if the former were the “meaning” of the latter, as if the “L-ness” of \mathcal{L} was some essential substance, so that the material signifier itself is disposable.⁵⁸ Even the naming of letters does not escape the drive to look past the signifier for the “real thing.” But for Lacan, naming is crucial. “Everything begins with the possibility of naming,” he says (which is not to say that everything ends there).⁵⁹ The consequences of naming are evident in the translation of SCHÉMA as SCHEMA.⁶⁰ The very justice and clarity of the rendition obscures how the small difference between the French and the English embodies a crucial Lacanianism. SCHÉMA is distinguished from SCHEMA only by the *accent aigu* over the E. In the theatre of the signifier, that accent is less than a little letter, although it is no small matter in French grammar. It is a diacritical mark, a literal object that gets lost in translation—in other

⁵⁸ The translation of SCHÉMA L is historically problematic. No direct English translation to date of any of Lacan’s own texts includes a “translated” SCHÉMA L as SCHEMA L. The schema shown comes from *Seminar II*, in which it bears a different name, as will be discussed shortly (Lacan, *Seminar II*, 109; *Séminaire II*, 134). Nevertheless, as shown below, Lacan’s commentators conventionally refer to various versions of the schemata as “L.”

⁵⁹ Lacan, *Seminar I*, 219. “Tout part de la possibilité de nommer” (*Séminaire I*, 244).

⁶⁰ Muller and Richardson’s translation is “scheme L” (“Overview,” 71).

words, it appropriately mimics what will be discussed later in this chapter as *objet a*. Ordinary letters and everyday language can embody the matheme, just as much as psychoanalytic jargon. The small difference between the L-names of this schema of the absent/present subject thus figure the relation of *objet a* to that self-same subject. What is re-lost in the translation to English is not just the difference between \mathcal{L} and L, but also the literal object as the object that is already lost.

Nonetheless, the English presumption of meaning nicely subverts itself, inasmuch as it gives the same name to two different schemata. SCHEMA L is thus a signifier that cannot be fixed to any particular signified. Of course, the justification for this duplicity is that the two SCHEMA Ls are actually the same one, despite their apparent differences. This is a paradigmatically imaginary logic. Yet given that there are two distinctly different formations of SCHEMA L, this imaginary coalescence begs the question as to which is the real one. Is it the earlier, more detailed, and therefore possibly more complete schema? Does that one, owing to its priority, gain the status of original, making the other merely derivative? Or does the later, simplified version display the essence of SCHEMA L, like an elegantly pared down final draft? Or is the real SCHEMA L something else again, something inhabiting both versions but consummated in neither? Does SCHEMA L, like the real, escape any imaginary or symbolic, even though a schema is defined as an imaginary or symbolic representation? Or is the real SCHEMA L to be found somehow in the transit between its iterations?

While Lacan's texts show two versions of SCHEMA L, those two have spawned a multitude of others.⁶¹ Commentaries on Lacan habitually show some rendition of the schema, because Muller and Richardson's confidence in its significance is widely shared. But

⁶¹ SCHEMA R and SCHEMA I, discussed below, are two more versions of SCHEMA L, albeit ones with different faces and names.

those commentaries usually present diagrams that are different from the ones in *Écrits*. The notable exception is the very first major translation of Lacan into English, by Anthony Wilden. *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* is an annotated English version of “Fonction et champ de la parole.” SCHEMA L and SCHEMA \mathcal{L} both appear in it, with no translation of any of their mathemes or terms.⁶²

For the moment, let the earlier of *Écrits*’ versions be denoted by L, and let the simplified version be denoted by \mathcal{L} . Evans shows an immediately recognizable, if markedly anorexic, version of \mathcal{L} , but he calls it “Schema L (simplified form)”⁶³ (even keeping the names of L and \mathcal{L} the same necessitates making them different). Overleaf from that schema is an utterly bizarre version of L. Some of the terms at the corners are in English (other, ego, and Other), but their corresponding mathemes remain French letters (a' , a , and \mathcal{A}). Still, this part-translation is not the strange aspect of Evan’s schema, for that move is actually the rule in renderings of L in commentaries (\mathcal{L} , by contrast, almost always has its mathemes turned into o' , o , and O). What is bizarre is how the solid lines of L are missing, presumably through a printer’s error (but there are no inconsequential slips in psychoanalysis; it is never good enough to simply blame the other), leaving termini, labels, and even arrowheads floating like ghosts in empty space:

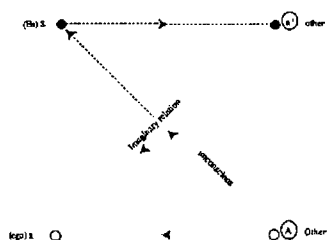


Figure 3.5: SCHEMA L according to Dylan Evans⁶⁴

⁶² Lacan, *Speech and Language*, 107 n49.

⁶³ Evans, *Dictionary*, 170.

⁶⁴ Evans, *Dictionary*, 169-170.

Borch-Jacobsen is rather faithful to *Écrits*, but notably selective, for he is only faithful to L. \mathcal{L} vanishes from his consideration, without a word.⁶⁵ He—or his translator, Douglas Brick—also leaves the mathemes in French, while translating the parallel terms.⁶⁶ Robert Samuels repeatedly deploys SCHEMA L as a framework for variations he plays on it, but his “original” schema is a distorted hybrid of L and \mathcal{L} that replaces some of the solid lines of the latter with broken lines:

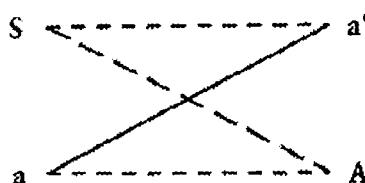


Figure 3.6: SCHEMA L according to Robert Samuels⁶⁷

Ragland-Sullivan squashes the square of L into a rectangle shorter than it is wide,⁶⁸ does another part-translation, and eliminates the empty/solid circular termini at two corners:

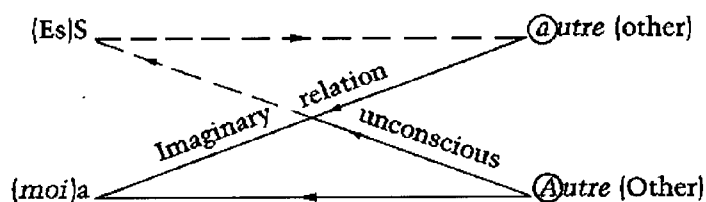


Figure 3.7: SCHEMA L according to Ellie Ragland Sullivan⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan*, 136.

⁶⁶ The schema in the original French text of the book appears to be an exact reproduction of the *Écrits* version (Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: Le maître absolu* [Paris: Flammarion, 1990], 166).

⁶⁷ Robert Samuels, *Between Philosophy & Psychoanalysis: Lacan's Reconstruction of Freud* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 7.

⁶⁸ Lacan calls SCHEMA L “our little magic square” (*Seminar III*, 87). “Notre petit carré magique” (*Séminaire III*, 100).

structure shows the very openness of the literary text that is so often held up as its more congenial opposite.

Given our project of paying close attention to the letter of Lacan, the question arises of the significance of this bifurcated title, L/£. Actually, neither appears to be the schema's first name. SCHÉMA L appears first in *Seminar II* (which was in 1955–1956, published in French in 1978, and translated into English a decade later), but there it appears above yet another name for itself, "the imaginary function of the ego and the discourse of the unconscious."⁷² And still the names keep dividing/proliferating. Miller, the seminar's editor, slides from L to a more explicitly iconic letter, and calls SCHÉMA L, "Le schéma en Z" (which is translated as "the Z-shaped schema")⁷³ in the chapter headings he inserts into the book, even though the later SCHÉMA £ is decidedly more Z-shaped. Similarly, Clément describes SCHÉMA £ as a "Z, as in Zorro or Zarathustra."⁷⁴ In Miller's recovery of a Z effaced by L, what becomes apparent is how Z effaces S. That is, Z is an imaginary reversal of S, so that S fades, in a literal way, beneath both the structure and the sometimes name of SCHÉMA L/Z.⁷⁵ So there are two movements here. The name of the schema keeps sliding from one signifier to another, and the signified keeps sliding from one schema to another.

By the time "On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis" was written, in 1956-57, SCHÉMA £ had assumed its own name, although the others inevitably

⁷² This earlier SCHÉMA L was presented in 1955 in Lacan's second official seminar. The schema also appears later in *Seminar II* (243; *Séminaire II*, 284), but this time without any label at all. As noted above, the simplified version, SCHÉMA £, appears in "D'une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose," which derives from Lacan's seminar of 1955-56, was written 1956-57 and published in *La Psychanalyse*, vol. 4, before being collected in 1966 in *Écrits*.

⁷³ *Séminaire II*, 275; Lacan, *Seminar II*, 235.

⁷⁴ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 166. "Lacan dessine un « Z » (comme le Z de Zorro ou de Zarathoustra)" (*Vies et légendes*, 192).

⁷⁵ S/Z is also the title of Barthes's retelling of a story of a castrato. Nancy Frelick, personal communication 9 April 1998.

persisted.⁷⁶ Still, we need to leap ahead ten more years to really engage its naming. In “*Parenthèse des parenthèses*,” written in 1966 as a postface to “*Le séminaire sur « La lettre volée »*,” and untranslated in the English version of *Écrits*, Lacan links SCHÉMA L to something he calls “*la chaîne L*”:

(10 . . . (00 . . . 0) 0101 . . . 0 (00 . . . 0) . . . 01) 11111 . . . (1010 . . . 1) 111 . . . etc.⁷⁷

This is a highly mediated transcription of a coding of coin tosses, although one should not make the easy mistake of thinking 0 and 1 refer directly to heads and tails. Its simple obscurity is more complicated and surprising than that, as Fink demonstrates in his careful (and often grueling) reading of the passages of the seminar and its postfaces.⁷⁸ Its relevance here is that Lacan develops the simplicity of heads-or-tails into a complex model of the determinant structure of language. The very randomness of the coin toss is shown to entail certain rules and prohibitions governing what may occur over the course of its repetition. Structural constraints therefore arise strictly from the “language”—here reduced to a model of transcription—in which the coin tosses are inscribed and communicated. The argument by analogy is that language in general—as exemplified by the signifier S and the Other O—has similar determinant powers over the subject. Those are immanent to language itself, rather than deriving from any “external” or “real” politics, although the efficacy of the latter is by no means thereby denied. Lacan says that SCHÉMA L is a variant of *la chaîne L*,⁷⁹ so

⁷⁶ The Z, for instance, appears in the text of the seminar, published in French in 1978 (*Séminaire II*).

⁷⁷ “Nous pourrions écrire la chaîne L sous une forme qui nous semble plus « parlante »” (Jacques Lacan, “*Parenthèse des parenthèses*,” in *Écrits*, 55).

⁷⁸ In *The Lacanian Subject*. “The Nature of Unconscious Thought, or How the Other Half Thinks” (14-23), “Appendix 1: The Language of the Unconscious” (153-164), “Appendix 2: Stalking the Cause” (164-172).

⁷⁹ Lacan, “*Parenthèse*,” 55.

SCHÉMA L is an expansion of it as well. Then L can be read as pointing to the deceptive linearity of the signifying chain, as modeled by *la chaîne L* (which could be described as *la chaîne Linéaire*) and exemplified above by $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$.⁸⁰ Lacan does say that “My definition of a signifier (there is no other) is as follows: a signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier.”⁸¹ So we would expect that the subject drawn out in SCHÉMA L must appear, if only obliquely, in his model of the signifying chain. It is a typical Lacanian didacticism to maintain the signifier of linearity for the deliberate spatialization of SCHÉMA L.

Or perhaps Elizabeth Grosz is right, and L just means *Lacan*.⁸² Perhaps it's the name of the father.

The Subject and All Its Others

To return to the schema itself, the relation between *o* and *o'*, between the other and the ego, is the imaginary process whose archetype is the mirror stage. This return follows Lacan's own example, thereby offering yet another name for the schema.⁸³ In the Lacanian fable of the looking-glass—and it should not be mistaken for anything but a fable—the infant *qua* not-yet-a-subject is held up to a mirror by its parent, and with great joy seizes upon its suddenly discovered image as the originating crystallization of its own self: its ego. “This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in

⁸⁰ As Jean-Paul Gilson writes, “Voici schéma « L », homonyme de la chaîne pour l'inscrire dans un autre espace que celui de la lecture linéaire” (*La topologie de Lacan: Une articulation de la cure psychanalytique* [Montreal: Balzac, 1994], 38).

⁸¹ Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 316. “Notre définition du signifiant (il n'y en a pas d'autre) est: un signifiant, c'est ce qui représente le sujet pour un autre signifiant” (“Subversion du sujet,” 819).

⁸² Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 73.

⁸³ “The two middle terms represent the coupled reciprocal Imaginary objectification which I have emphasized in the *stade du miroir*” (Jacques Lacan, cited and trans. Anthony Wilden, in *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, 107 n49). “Les deux termes moyens représentent le couple de réciproque objectivation imaginaire que nous avons dégagé dans le *stade du miroir*” (“Séminaire sur « La lettre volée »,” 53, emphasis in original).

his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form.”⁸⁴ That jubilation is therefore the symptom of a founding and doubled *méconnaissance* of the visual field.

First, the infant mistakes its unified and upright *Gestalt* image for itself, even though its lived reality is uncoordination, turbulence, and dependence.⁸⁵ Secondly, it mistakes the *external* image for its *internal* self. This latter misapprehension may be clarified by recognizing that the mirror of the mirror stage is just a propaedeutic device. The image that the infant takes for itself is more likely that of the parent, its first other, whose seeming omnipotence is impressed upon the infant as an anticipation of what it will become. The self is made from the other; the object is introjected as the ego. So the ego is the translation of the object, and therefore another object itself.⁸⁶ This is the imaginary relation that binds *o* to *o'*, the constitutive diagonal that wants to exchange the solidity of the other for the emptiness of the ego. The difference between *o* and *o'*, or *a* and *a'*, is too slight a measure of this

⁸⁴ Lacan, “Mirror Stage,” 2, emphasis in original.

L’assomption jubilatoire de son image spéculaire par l’être encore plongé dans l’impuissance motrice et la dépendance du nourissage qu’est le petit homme à ce stade *infans*, nous paraîtra dès lors manifester en une situation exemplaire la matrice symbolique où le *je* se précipite en une forme primordiale. (“Stade du miroir,” 94, emphasis in original)

Here, “symbolic” should be taken in its most general sense, rather than as pertaining to the symbolic order, for Lacan goes on to say that this “precipitation” of the *I* is prior to subjectification through language.

⁸⁵ Lacan, “Mirror Stage,” 2; “Stade du miroir,” 92-93.

“Lived reality” is a most un-Lacanian concept. It would be better to follow Gallop, who reads the mirror-stage as a peculiar and peculiarly retroactive narrative, and say that “lived reality” is a specific kind of narrative retrospectively produced by the subject after s/he has entered into language, subsequent to the mirror-stage.

⁸⁶ “Literally, the ego is an object—an object which fills a certain function which we here call the imaginary function” (*Seminar II*, 44). “Littéralement, le moi est un objet—un objet qui remplit une certaine fonction que nous appelons ici fonction imaginaire” (*Séminaire II*, 60).

méconnaissance, whose scale is better given in the unsimplified version of SCHEMA L by the mistake of ● for ○, the void apprehended as substance:⁸⁷

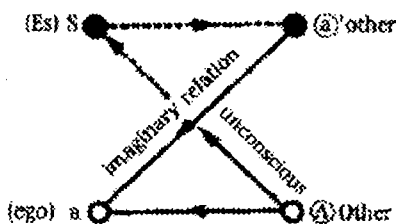


Figure 3.9: The *méconnaissance* of ● for ○

The delusion of the ego is that it is just like the (imagined) other—hence, what the imaginary relation is charting is imaginary identification, which Lacan designates in the Graph of Desire as *i(o)*.⁸⁸ Schematically, the imaginary process is a strict binary, a fantastic reduction of the world sanctified as I and Thou. Of necessity, the imaginary must deny the quadrature of the subject; it must refuse to acknowledge how *S* is spread across the field of SCHEMA L and not narrowly embodied through the ego's circumscription. *o* marks and locates the reincarnation of the punctiform subject. The ego mistakes itself for the subject; *o* pretends to a phantasmatically recuperated *S*.⁸⁹ In particular, the ego denies the distance of language and society that must be traversed between itself and its framing other. The other is claimed as the ego's own, so that the other becomes the *Idealich*, the ideal ego.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Of course, both ● and ○ can stand for either void or substance.

⁸⁸ In the "Graph of Desire," Lacan diagrams this as a vector of imaginary identification directed from *i(o)* (the specular image as a function of the other) to *e* (the ego) ("Subversion of the subject," 306-307). In French, from *i(a)* (l'image spéculaire) to *m* (le moi) ("Subversion du sujet," 808-809).

⁸⁹ It might be better to say that *o* pretends to the subject as *S*, as *S* impossibly healed of its cut. Of course, such a pretension must also deny how that very cut is constitutive of the subject.

⁹⁰ The ideal ego is a narcissistic and imaginary projection. "Though formed in primary identification, the ideal ego continues to play a role as the source of all secondary identifications" (Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. "ego-ideal").

"The *ego* is always an *alter-ego*."⁹¹ However, this freshly minted *ego* will hereafter ever be plagued by the discordance between its illusion of wholeness and the contrary experience of its body.⁹² The body is always a refutation of the ideality of vision, the will to reduce the self to the looking self, and even to the mere eye. Think of those old line diagrams in which the violently exorbitated eyeball casually passes for the human subject, in a lovely example of the scopic aggrandizement of the imaginary. What will return again and again to the subject, in its dreams and fantasies and other signs of aggressive disintegration, is the image of the *corps morcelé*, the fragmented body, as given in nightmarish visions of Bosch.⁹³ The twinned obscenity/horror of language and the subject thus reappear in the body and its image. Hence, the imaginary mirror-production of the *ego*, postulated as prior to the symbolic castration of the subject, nonetheless recapitulates the latter by being an emergence that is likewise immediately crossed by discordance. The coalescence of the *ego* is haunted by its dismemberment from the beginning. Lacan even writes that what the exemplary Boschian paintings depict is precisely castration.⁹⁴ Hence the *o'* of the *ego*, just like the \S of the subject, bears within itself the mark of the cut: the prime, '.

⁹¹ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 321, emphasis in original. "L'*ego* est toujours un *alter-ego*" (*Séminaire II*, 370), emphasis in original.

⁹² The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt* . . . in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. (Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 2)

C'est que la forme totale du corps par quoi le sujet devance dans un mirage la maturation de sa puissance, ne lui est donnée que comme *Gestalt*, c'est-à-dire dans une extériorité où certes cette forme est-elle plus constituante que constituée, mais où surtout elle lui apparaît dans un relief de stature qui la fige et sous une symétrie qui l'inverse, en opposition à la turbulence de mouvements dont il s'éprouve l'animer. ("Le stade du miroir," 94-95)

⁹³ Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 4-5; "Le stade du miroir," 97.

⁹⁴ Lacan writes of the imaginary of the *corps morcelé*.

These are the images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body, in short, the *imagos* that I have grouped together under the apparently

$$o' \sim \$$$

In moving forward and/or back from SCHÉMA \mathcal{L} to SCHÉMA L, this mark, a literal object so much like the *accent aigu*, curiously migrates from the other/object (upper right) to the ego/self (lower left):

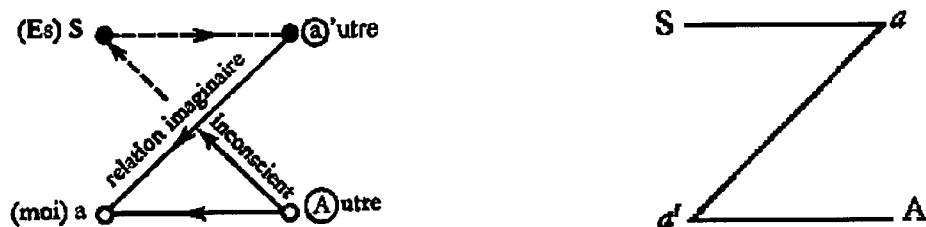


Figure 3.10: The migration of the mark

The association becomes even stronger in French, where the *objet* (the object-mark) is introduced to *a* (the ego or *moi*), allowing a happy literal coincidence in *objet a*. Moreover, through that translation, the void or lack of *o* is metonymized with the literal firstness of *a*. Then we have, in the always already doubling and redoubling of translation,

structural term of *imagos of the fragmented body*. (Jacques Lacan, "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, 11, emphasis in original).

The English translation by Sheridan curiously completely drops the second term in the French list, *d'éviration*:

Ce sont les images de castration, d'éviration, de mutilation, de démembrement, de dislocation, d'éventrement, de dévoration, d'éclatement du corps, bref, les *imagos* que personnellement j'ai groupées sous la rubrique qui paraît bien être structurale, d'*imagos du corps morcelé*. ("L'agressivité en psychanalyse," in *Écrits*, 104, emphasis in original)

Perhaps this is because *éviration* is a rare term for castration or the state of a eunuch, and therefore was deemed redundant by Sheridan, but its inclusion in the French text emphasizes the importance of castration as an image of the *corps morcelé*. Or perhaps it distinguishes between castration as an act (which invokes the Boschean imaginary) and castration as a state (which invokes the symbolic as the effect of having been castrated) (Raoul, personal communication, 30 January 1998).

$$o' \sim a' \sim S$$

The migration of the mark even implies a direction for the *méconnaissance* of image for the self that defines the mirror-stage. SCHEMA L helpfully points the direction down the diagonal of *la relation imaginaire* that the prime must journey to align with its position in its successor, SCHÉMA \mathcal{L} .

But the cut has a much larger representative in the schema. The strong diagonal of the backbone of the Z-shaped schema reproduces the rending bar of the barred S:

$$Z \rightarrow / \rightarrow S$$

Despite the *symbolic* nature of its founding castration, the subject is also riven by an *imaginary* stroke. Insofar as the mirroring identification of the imaginary is for Lacan always a failed identification, the subject is barred by imaginary identification, just as it is by the signifier. This dependence of the subject upon the imaginary is a necessary corrective to the ubiquitous reading of the Lacanian subject as a purely symbolic entity. The submission of the subject to the signifier does not imply its utter subsumption. Indeed, the barring of the signifier's S in the matheme for the subject can also be understood as specifically asserting that the subject is never wholly under the signifier, that the signifier, at some as yet undefined point and in some as yet undefined way, *fails* with respect to the subject, just as the imaginary process ultimately fails before a symbolic intervention. Hence, even though Lacan defines the male position, in one of his formulæ of sexuation, as being wholly under the sway of the signifier, he immediately pairs that formula with another that declares there

must be an exception to that universalism. Likewise, the formulæ for the female position neither subsume her under the signifier nor utterly free her from it.⁹⁵ In either case, something goes awry in the subject with her or his entry into the Other. "What happens between [O] and S in itself has a conflictual character."⁹⁶ I suggest that this obtains for S *qua* signifier as much as it does for S *qua* subject. If this is so, the esoteric matheme figures a general condition of language—and of being.

In SCHÉMA \mathcal{L} , the subject is not located within the Other (and thereby reduced to its narrowly circumscribed locus there), although the Other does indeed have a *place* for the subject. S is instead stretched across a much wider field, which both includes and is divided by the *non*-symbolic imaginary, as figured by the backbone of the Z. The subject is cut by the imaginary in another way, whose immanent productivity more closely parallels that of symbolic castration. The fable of the mirror stage relates how the infant, in misrecognizing an image of the other for itself, forms its first differentiated sense of itself, *qua* imaginary ego. Prior to the mirror-stage, this proto-subject has no separation from the other, traditionally and still most often the mother or the mother figure. Hence S appears as the subject's "stupid, ineffable existence," sunken in the other. S is serving, unexpectedly, as the signifier of that third register of the subject—the real, in its primordial form, as that which is prior to the symbolic or the imaginary (a species of the real R that Miller calls R₁, to be distinguished from the Real as a residue of the symbolic, which he labels R₂⁹⁷). S, rather than being a reaffirmation of the signifier in the subject, is an even firmer rejection of the

⁹⁵ Lacan, "Love Letter"; "Lettre d'amour."

⁹⁶ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 323. "Ce qui se passe entre A et S a un caractère à soi-même conflictuel" (*Séminaire II*, 372).

⁹⁷ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 26-27, 182 n11.

purported pan-symbolicism of the subject. It is no accident that, in SCHEMA \mathcal{L} , \mathcal{S} coincides with its homonym E_s , which is German for the id. The imaginary relation is that first cut which severs the infant from the mother and thereby produces the infant ego. In Lacan's words, "the I is precipitated in a primordial form . . . before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject."⁹⁸ That is, subjectivity *qua* \mathcal{S} is lost with the mirror-establishment of the ego, but subjectivity *qua* \mathcal{S} is "restored" with the entry into the symbolic. The catch—with Lacan, there is always a catch—is that this restoration is not really a restoration, because \mathcal{S} can never be \mathcal{S} .⁹⁹

SCHEMA R: The Fantasy Circus

The emergence of the subject is demonstrated more explicitly by the third version of the schema, SCHEMA R, which Miller, in his commentary in *Écrits*, identifies as giving "the structure of the subject."¹⁰⁰ Thus we are again dealing with a rendition of \mathcal{S} .

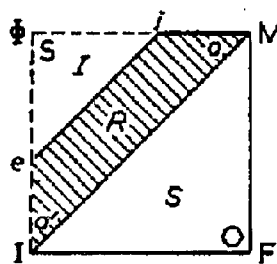


Figure 3.11: SCHEMA R¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 2, emphasis in original. "Le *je* se précipite en une forme primordiale, avant . . . que le langage ne lui restitue dans l'universel sa fonction de sujet" ("Stade du miroir," 94, emphasis in original).

⁹⁹ This exegesis of SCHEMA L is far from complete. If its reputed significance for Lacanian theory is justified, then completeness is impossible in any case. Some further elaboration can be found in Appendix 1, whose material is not included in this chapter so that the closely related SCHEMA R can have some needed space.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, "Commentary on the Graphs," in *Écrits: A Selection*, 333. "Table commentée des représentations graphiques," in *Écrits*, 905-907.

¹⁰¹ Lacan, "Possible Treatment," 197.

Despite the fact that this schema appears in the same *écrit* as SCHEMA L, and follows the latter by just a few pages, it has generally been ignored by Lacan's commentators, at least in English, who prefer to linger over the apparently simpler SCHEMA L. Muller and Richardson are among the very few who explicitly recognize that SCHEMA R is an expansion of SCHEMA L.¹⁰² Wilden is another, who pointedly writes that SCHEMA L is incomplete without its elaboration as SCHEMA R.¹⁰³ His position is supported by the schemata's respective structures, for even under the freight of all the additional letters, the **Z** frame of SCHEMA L is easily discernible in SCHEMA R, although it is both supplemented and partially dissolved.¹⁰⁴ SCHEMA R is even coordinated by identical termini. Thus it would be expected that the further intricacies of the Lacanian subject can be found here, and that is precisely what Miller affirms. According to his commentary on the graphs, which is included in *Écrits*, SCHEMA R is, first, a "representation of the statics of the subject," and second, a plotting of its history.¹⁰⁵ In short, SCHEMA R gives us nothing less than "the structure of the subject,"¹⁰⁶ synchronic and diachronic, once more distributed across a field, albeit one markedly more populated than that of SCHEMA L.

¹⁰² Muller and Richardson, *Lacan and Language*, 209.

¹⁰³ Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," in Lacan, *Speech and Language*, 293.

¹⁰⁴ A similar dissolve of the top line of the **Z** is depicted in the earlier SCHEMA L.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, "Commentary," 333. "Représentation de la statique du sujet" ("Table commentée," 906).

¹⁰⁶ Miller, "Commentary," 333; "Table commentée," 905.

The implications of the structural dependence of SCHEMA R on SCHEMA L is more easily apprehended in the French version:

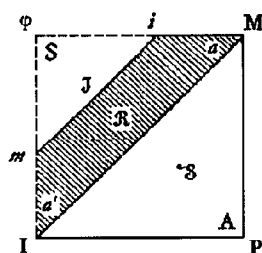


Figure 3.12: SCHÉMA R¹⁰⁷

The familiar Z bisects the square of R into mirrored halves. The upper is an imaginary one, as signified by the stylized \mathfrak{J} (as opposed to the simpler I marking its lower vertex):¹⁰⁸

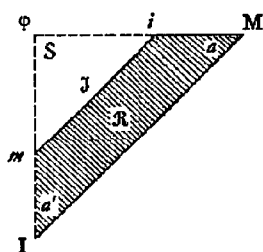


Figure 3.13: The imaginary half of SCHÉMA R

What is crucial to note is that the imaginary triangle includes not only the smaller white triangle, but also the hatched rhomboid marked by an ornate \mathfrak{R} . The lower triangle is a symbolic one.¹⁰⁹ It is named by the \mathfrak{S} at its center, an \mathfrak{S} that must be distinguished from the \mathfrak{S} belonging the imaginary triangle, even though the two are related.

¹⁰⁷ Lacan, "Traitement possible," 553.

¹⁰⁸ In geometric notation, the imaginary triangle is ϕMI . By the same convention, it could also be called Sad' .

¹⁰⁹ In geometric notation, this triangle is IMP —in English, IMF .

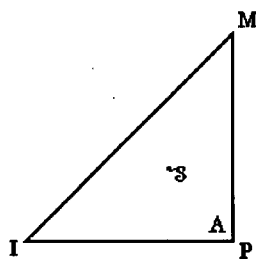


Figure 3.14: The symbolic half of SCHÉMA R

The latter, “imaginary” S reinscribes the subject/signifier of SCHEMA L into the order of language referenced by the former, “symbolic” \mathcal{S} . Just like its imaginary counterpart, the symbolic triangle bears a “name” which troubles the translation of signifiers, in the sense of translation from place to place. Another problem of the naming by letters is the identity of the hatched rhomboid included in the imaginary triangle. While one might expect \Re to mean the real, thereby completing the triumvirate of Lacanian registers, it designates instead the “field of reality,” *la réalité* as opposed to *le réel*.¹¹⁰

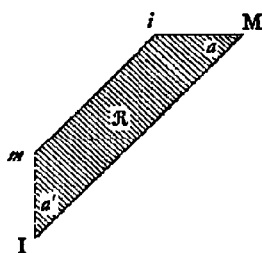


Figure 3.15: The field of reality

“Reality” can be read in its ordinary sense of what we take as real in our quotidian world, with the proviso that Lacan, in characteristic fashion, is here locating reality wholly within the imaginary, suggesting the close narcissistic and illusory connections between the two.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Lacan, “Possible treatment,” 197. “Le champ de la réalité” (“Traitement possible,” 552).

¹¹¹ Muller and Richardson, *Language and Lacan*, 210. Boothby reads the field defined by R as the Lacanian real (*Death and Desire*, 117). This seems wrong. Lacan says that “the field of reality . . . is sustained only by the extraction of the object, *o*,” where *o* is already the *objet a* of fantasy (“Possible treatment,” 223 n18). “Le champ de la réalité . . . ne se soutient que de l’extraction de l’objet *a* qui pourtant lui donne son cadre” (“Traitement

Reality may also give the name for the diagram, for its \Re is the only one in SCHÉMA R. The schema is introduced by Lacan this way: “. . . que la relation symbolique puisse en quelque sorte recouvrir. (Voir le schéma R),”¹¹² suggesting that \Re may be inspired by *recouvrir*. That word is curiously translated as “correspond” by Sheridan,¹¹³ but a more Lacanian sense would be the conflation of “cover” and “hide.”

This schema leads onto another, named SCHÉMA I. In \Re and \Im we have the initials of two-thirds of the Lacanian topology,¹¹⁴ but that symmetry is thwarted by the preceding SCHÉMA L. The topology might be recovered by letting *L* stand for Logos, as the embodiment of the symbolic (which would bring the phallus to SCHÉMA L, inasmuch as Lacan explicitly aligns the phallic function with *Λογος*).¹¹⁵ But all this is very speculative, and mostly counterproductive— \Re does indeed cover over itself, and any attempt to excavate its “meaning” must founder in either the obdurateness of its bar to signification or the continual dissemination of its signified. \Re is, before any signification of a field or geometry, a letter and a signifier.¹¹⁶

In SCHEMA R, the domination of the signifier is given by its subvention of the fields of reality and the imaginary and by its larger area. The symbolic supports reality and the imaginary; it *underwrites* them both. Now if the condition of reality itself is the symbolic, then

possible,” 554 n1). The *extraction* of *objet a*, which partakes of the real, is the defining moment of the production of reality as the opposite of the real.

¹¹² Lacan, “Traitement possible de la psychose,” 552.

¹¹³ Lacan, “Possible Treatment,” 196.

¹¹⁴ Lacan’s *Séminaire XXII*, delivered 1974–1975 and as yet unpublished, is entitled, *RSI* (which is, among other things, a pun on *hérésie*).

¹¹⁵ Lacan, “Signification of the Phallus,” 291; “Signification du phallus,” 695.

¹¹⁶ The intimacy between SCHEMA L and SCHEMA R is intuitive for the son of a father whose first language was Japanese, and whose phonetic L’s are so close to his R’s.

the fullness of the threat of Lacan's obscene language becomes more apparent. For Lacan, it seems there is a certain geometry of the subject, in which the unceasing transit of the signifying chain runs beneath the imaginary stability of her/his world. However, SCHEMA R can also be read as not binary, but ternary (Lacan having a constitutive aversion to binaries). The schema insists on the distinction between *three* fields. The first is the small white triangle at the top left, which is the field of the imaginary.

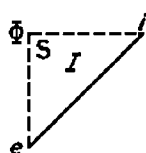


Figure 3.16: The field of the imaginary

Contrary to SCHEMA L, the ego is here identified as *e*, rather than *o'*. SCHEMA R does have an *o'*, but it is not even located in the imaginary triangle. Instead, it is in the field of reality. Likewise, something called *i* has been sifted from the other *qua o*. If SCHEMA R does indeed elaborate SCHEMA L, it does so through a literal opening up of the latter. Once again, we have a translation—a movement—that necessarily transforms. These literal separations can be clarified by reading two graphical Lacans with each other: SCHEMA R and the second stage of the Graph of Desire.

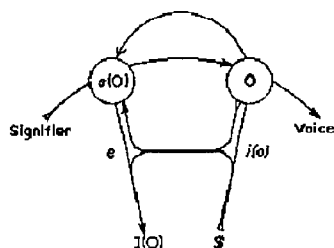


Figure 3.17: The second Graph of Desire¹¹⁷

In the graph, as in the schema, *e* designates the ego. The lowest horizontal line/vector shows the ego deriving from *i(o)*. This is the imaginary process, in which the ego both arises and is maintained through an identification with the image of the other. Thus, *i(o)* designates imaginary identification *qua* generative process. However, in SCHEMA R, *i* is perhaps better read as image rather than as process. This imaginary *i* is a very particular image: the *Idealich*, the ideal ego, “an ideal of narcissistic omnipotence constructed on the model of infantile narcissism.”¹¹⁸ This being so, the narcissistic presumption of clear writing, and its illusion of mastery over language, whether in reading or writing, is schematized as a problem of the ego. According to Lacan, “The ego is structured exactly like a symptom. At the heart of the subject, it is only a privileged symptom, the human symptom *par excellence*, the mental illness of man.”¹¹⁹ The privilege of certain forms of writing is therefore a particular symptom of the general sickness of subjective identification with a *méconnaissance* of an object. In the case of the “art of teaching,” that object is the *image* of the text: meaning in all its full-blown and fatally seductive imaginariness.

¹¹⁷ Lacan, “Subversion of the subject,” 306; “Subversion du sujet,” 808.

¹¹⁸ Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psycho-Analysis*, s.v. “ideal ego.”

¹¹⁹ Lacan, *Seminar I*, 16. “Le moi est structuré exactement comme un symptôme. A l’intérieur du sujet, il n’est qu’un symptôme privilégié. C’est le symptôme humain par excellence, c’est la maladie mentale de l’homme” (*Séminaire I*, 22).

The graphical separation of o from i is a measure of the difference between the object and its psychical image. It distinguishes the object from the narcissistic formation it engenders, such as a text and its imaginary meaning. This is why i participates in the imaginary triangle of SCHEMA R. As Lacan observes, i also designates $\sqrt{-1}$, the fundamental imaginary number.¹²⁰ A first reading of the imaginary field of SCHEMA R would be a semi-historical one, a part-story of the developmental tale told by SCHEMA L. The imaginary field stages the mirror stage, in which the proto-subject infant S achieves her/his/its first psychical coalescence as an ego, e , through the captation of the image, i .¹²¹

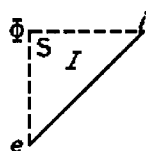


Figure 3.18: The mirror stage

The imaginary triangle delineates the process by which e , the ego-as-an-image, succeeds S , the not-yet-subject, en route to the symbolic subject, the as-yet-missing $\$$.¹²² This is the founding Lacanian myth. However, just as the imaginary process is irreducible to the mirror stage, its derivative narrative is not restricted to that archetype. That quintessential imaginary product, the ego, obviously persists past the dissolution of the mirror stage in the subjectivizing entry into language. The ego is sustained through the performative iteration of

¹²⁰ Lacan, "Subversion of the subject," 318-9; "Subversion du sujet," 821. In mathematics, an imaginary number is sometimes called an *impossible* quantity, and is explicitly distinguished from the *real*. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

¹²¹ Generally, *captation* means "a catching at." Lacan adopts the word from the French analysts Édouard Pichon and Odile Codet, and implies both captivation and capture by the image.

the imaginary process, through the successive and ongoing identification with succeeding objects. Given that the subject becomes such through language, it is both fitting and ironic that among the range of possible new objects is the objectification of language itself. The misrecognition of the text as meaning becomes the new Mother object for the champions of clarity (the Mother being the ultimate impossible object).

As Miller states, any diachronic account must be complemented by a synchronic one. Just as the mirror stage is the template for an ongoing imaginary process of narcissism, projection, and captation, SCHEMA R depicts not only the mythicized formation of the ego, but its ongoing relation to the image and the impossible conviction of its own being, as a whole and undivided S. *Graph II* has more overlap with SCHEMA R than has been noted so far—both include the term I (that is, the I marking SCHEMA R's lower left corner).

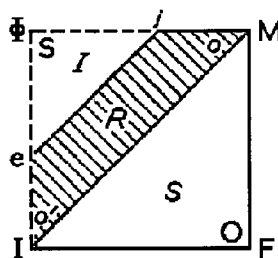


Figure 3.19: I and *i*

The homology between *i* and I reflects the concordance of their associated functions: they imply two kinds of identification. While *i(o)* is imaginary identification—identification by the subject with an *image* of the other, *o*; I(O) is *symbolic* identification—identification by the subject with a *place* in the symbolic/cultural Other, O. “The I of the ideal can be in a

¹²² Since S coincides with *Es* in SCHÉMA L, we could also say that *e*, the ego, succeeds *Es*, the id. However, Lacan has strong feelings about that particular succession. See Appendix 1 for a brief discussion of this issue.

superior and legitimate way constructed as a social and ideological function.”¹²³ Correspondingly, *i* is the *Idealich* or ideal ego and *I* is the *Ich-Ideal* or ego-ideal.¹²⁴ Žižek observes, “the fact that should not be overlooked . . . is that *i(o)* is always already subordinated to *I(O)*: it is the symbolic identification . . . which dominates and determines the image, the imaginary form in which we appear to ourselves likable.”¹²⁵ In SCHEMA R, *I* coincides with *o'*, which we have known previously as the ego. So *o'* may now be considered as that part of the ego that is bound up with the ego-ideal, which justifies its distancing from the ego as such, now designated by *e*.¹²⁶

At the apex of the imaginary triangle, we find *S* identified with ϕ . This marks the return of the phallus. In another troubling translation of the letter, the lower-case ϕ of the French graph becomes amplified into a capital Φ in English:

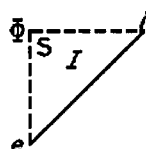


Figure 3.20: The return of the phallus

What may seem an inconsequential slippage is actually a matter of great import, for the case change signifies the leap between different registers. While ϕ is the imaginary phallus, Φ is its

¹²³ Jacques-Alain Miller, “Les réponses du réel,” in *Aspects du malaise dans la civilisation* (Paris: np, 1987), 21, quoted in Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 110.

¹²⁴ Lacan, “Possible Treatment,” 197; “Traitement possible,” 553.

¹²⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 108. This always-already domination of *I(O)* over *i(o)* recapitulates Gallop’s analysis of the mirror stage as a retroactive production of the symbolic order (in “Where to Begin?”, in *Reading Lacan*).

¹²⁶ Without getting lost in the technicalities which Lacan’s fluid terminology constantly undermines, “the ego-ideal is a symbolic introjection, whereas the ideal ego is the source of imaginary projection. The ego-ideal is the signifier operating as ideal, an internalised plan of the law. . . . The ideal ego, on the other hand, . . . is a promise

symbolic parallel.¹²⁷ So when Lacan declares that the phallus is a signifier,¹²⁸ he is referring only to Φ . What then becomes necessary is to make a little headway into the differences between the imaginary and symbolic phalli, despite Butler's contention that the phallus is a breakdown of the "very distinction between the symbolic and the imaginary."¹²⁹ Lacan himself insists on distinguishing "between the principle of sacrifice, which is symbolic, and the imaginary function that is devoted to that principle of sacrifice, but which, at the same time, masks the fact that it gives it its instrument."¹³⁰ Thus the phallus, across its symbolic and imaginary incarnations, is all about its own sacrifice, which is a way of repeating that the identity of the phallus is castration. The alignment of S and ϕ is a clue, on the condition that we take S in the sense of ineffable existence, that is, in the sense of being which must be sacrificed to meaning. Then ϕ , the imaginary phallus, is the name of the mythical fullness of being that is both fantasized and fantasized as being lost. In that immanence of loss, in its always-alreadyness, there is a threatened slide between ϕ and $-\phi$.¹³¹ The phallus "is negativity in its place in the specular image."¹³² The imaginary process, symbolized in SCHEMA R by the triangular imaginary field, is then a hopeless attempt to recapture lost being through imaginary identification, and thereby to re-find an ego of plenty.¹³³

of future synthesis towards which the ego tends, the illusion of unity on which the ego is built." (Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. "ego-ideal"). The ego is a constructed object dually oriented by the ego-ideal and the ideal ego.

¹²⁷ Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 320; "Subversion du sujet," 823.

¹²⁸ Lacan, "Signification of the Phallus," 285. "Le phallus est un signifiant" ("Signification du phallus," 690).

¹²⁹ Butler, "Lesbian Phallus," 79.

¹³⁰ Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 319. "Il faut donc distinguer du principe du sacrifice, qui est symbolique, la fonction imaginaire qui s'y dévoue, mais qui le voile du même coup qu'elle lui donne son instrument" ("Subversion du sujet," 822).

¹³¹ Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 320; "Subversion du sujet," 823.

¹³² Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 319. "[Le phallus] est négativé à sa place dans l'image spéculaire" ("Subversion du sujet," 822).

¹³³ That is, a "complete" ego, unalienated and unlacking.

This is why the quest for meaning, insofar as it is an imaginary enterprise, is dogged by the hopelessness of the lost. That quest is caught between its fervor for the phallus as the ultimate *point de capiton* (the impossible fixing of the field of meaning), and its denial of castration (the ineluctable lack constituent of language itself). "The phallus as imaginary is (on the psychic level) the bond with the Source of All, which, like the umbilical cord, must be severed in order to enter into human existence in the symbolic order."¹³⁴ Hence, the entry into the symbolic—the birth of the subject—is precisely a castration. Thus, just as **S** and ϕ are aligned, so are **\$** and Φ . The bar of barred **S** signifies that the subject is lacking, and Φ is the signifier of precisely that lack. In that sense, Φ is the necessary condition of the subject; Φ even bears the bar within itself. The replacement of ϕ by Φ in the English rendition of SCHÉMA R is therefore an altogether appropriate slip. Behind any presence of imaginary being, ϕ , there is the looming absence/presence of symbolic lack, Φ . The imaginary phallus always anticipates the loss of itself in its symbolic counterpart. Nonetheless, the imaginary triangle *I* is better defined by the French Greek of ϕ to complete the vertices.

¹³⁴ Muller and Richardson, *Language and Lacan*, 372.

The Name of the Father Is the Phallus

The symbolic triangle \mathcal{S} is configured by the triumvirate of I, M, and F (in French, I, M, and P). These assignments align, at least geometrically, with corresponding signifiers in SCHEMA L:



Figure 3.21: The symbolic triangle and three vertices of SCHEMA L

Insofar as Lacan recasts the Oedipal passage as a symbolic one, the simplest rendering of the symbolic field is a schematization of the triangulated family romance, mapped onto SCHEMA L's triangulation of the variations of the other:

I	=	<i>infans</i> , the child	o' = form of the ego
M	=	mother	o = other as object
F (P)	=	father	O = the Other as the figure of cultural order

However, this simplicity is unsustainable. The symbolic triangle must be situated in the larger "magic square," which means the inclusion of the missing position situated by the *matheme* \mathcal{S} . And even when \mathcal{S} is included, it is still missing: Lacan figures SCHEMA R as a kind of card game, in which \mathcal{S} as the subject enters as the dummy, which means that it enters as the dead.¹³⁵ Clément characterizes SCHEMA R in a slightly different way:

There we have our little fellow [*sic*], then, standing on his own two feet, wearing his identity as a suit of armor, with a Z for a backbone, equipped with an illusory but

¹³⁵ Lacan, "Possible Treatment," 196. "Le sujet d'autre part entre dans le jeu en tant que mort" ("Traitement possible," 552).

necessary imagination, and presiding over a card-game in which the players are always the same: his father, his mother, and his self-image. An inevitable fantasy-circus.¹³⁶

Either way, the subject is anything but an independent player in the game, but rather one divided and playing against her/himself.

I has already been identified as the ego-ideal. However, in the latter stages of the Graph of Desire, it is consistently the end-point of the reconfigured vector of the subject, whose transformed origin is now \mathcal{S} . This schematizes how the subject, in its passage through the machinery of desire, arrives at the ego-ideal. In the Graph of Desire, I is expanded as the matheme $I(O)$, which indicates that the ego-ideal is a function of the Other. $I(O)$ was defined above as symbolic identification, so the ego-ideal can be read as the subjective achievement of a recognized place in the symbolic order.

F is not the father, but rather the Name-of-the-Father, *le nom-du-père*. This the very embodiment of the imperative that everything turns on naming. The Name-of-the-Father is a symbolic father, with no necessary connection to any empirical father or any image of one. It is strictly a signifier. Nonetheless, Lacan's recourse to such a gendered signifier is more than a little troubling, especially as it is invoked in a nostalgic recollection of the social order of the past implicit in the figure of the father: "It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has

¹³⁶ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 167.

Voici donc notre bonhomme, sur ses pieds, armé de son armure d'identité, avec son Z dans le dos, doté d'un imaginaire illusoire mais nécessaire, et titulaire de ce petit jeu de cartes qui seront toujours les mêmes : son père, sa mère, et l'image qu'il a de lui-même. Un petit cirque fantasmatique inévitable. (*Vies et légendes*, 194)

Given the implied movement between the vertices of the schema, it might be called, with equal justification, a fantasy circuit (*circuit fantasmatique*). Actually, the above re-anthropomorphization of the charted subject is not Clément's description of SCHEMA R. Rather, it refers to her own intermediate between SCHEMA L and SCHEMA R, which re-labels the former with the mathemes from the latter. Nevertheless, given the intimacy between these schemata, her description is still appropriate for SCHEMA R.

identified his person with the figure of law.”¹³⁷ The problem with the Name-of-the-Father is that it is too much like the symbolic phallus. In fact, the ultimate distinction between the two is doubtful.¹³⁸ Once again, there is a slide between signifiers, although in this case, one can state the equivalence in a particularly fortuitous way: the Name-of-the-Father *is* the symbolic phallus. Regardless, the function of F / Φ is relatively apparent: it is a third term, which, as a signifier, disrupts the imaginary unity figured by the child and the mother, and reincarnated in the will to meaning. At least three interrelated consequences are entailed. First, the child acquires a place in the Other via a symbolic identity, exemplified by the patronym, the *nom du père*. Second, the child is barred access to the mother—the enforcement of the incest prohibition, the *non du père*. Third, the child both gains participation in an ordered cultural system, and becomes subject to it. Then the symbolic triad I, M, and F relates the history of the resolution of the Oedipal passage through the entry into the symbolic order, correlative to the history of the mirror stage recorded in the imaginary triangle.

The symbolic history of the symbolic triangle implies that it must have a synchronic parallel. To elaborate that synchronic “slope” of the symbolic, it is necessary to recall that the symbolic phallus is another name for the *point de capiton*, which means the latter has a fluid equivalence with the Name-of-the-Father. Miller reconfigures the elementary cell of the Graph of Desire in a revealing—and revealingly confusing—way.

¹³⁷ Lacan, “Function and Field,” 67, emphasis in original. “C’est dans le *nom du père* qu’il nous faut reconnaître le support de la fonction symbolique qui, depuis l’orée des temps historiques, identifie sa personne à la figure de la loi” (“Fonction et champ,” 277, emphasis in original).

¹³⁸ “While in the 1950s, Lacan spoke of the S_2 . . . as the Name-of-the-Father, and in the 1960s as the phallus, we can understand it most generally as $[S(\emptyset)]$ ” (Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 58).

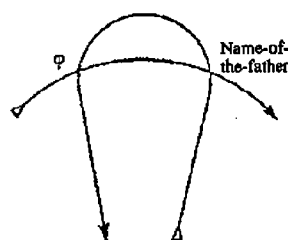


Figure 3.22: Miller's paternal metaphor as *point de capiton*¹³⁹

At the position of the signified, Miller places nothing other than ϕ . Locating ϕ within the signifying chain appears to directly contradict the neat distinction already made between symbolic and imaginary phalli. Nevertheless, there is a partial continuity, inasmuch as Miller's ϕ is what he calls the positive phi of phallic signification.¹⁴⁰ We have already established that there is an imaginary presence in the symbolic, that of the *signified*—meaning being the imaginary slope of language. Yet this further qualification seems to only make things worse, since the symbolic rendition of phi, Φ *qua point de capiton*, is defined as lacking any signified. “Phallic signification” must therefore refer to something other than the impossible fulfillment of a phallic sign. Accordingly, ϕ *qua* phallic signification is a way to emphasize that *all* signification is produced via the signifier Φ , through the latter's stabilization of the symbolic order, not sign by individuated sign, but in a whole field of signification. In other words, at any point in the life of the subject, all meaning depends upon the upholding of the Name-of-the-Father as the symbolic phallus. F, the Name-of-the-Father, in its implied coincidence with Φ (the symbolic phallus), is located at the same position as O (the Other).

¹³⁹ This graph is credited to Miller, but appears in Diana Rabinovich, “Psychosis according to Bion: Or the limits of Kleinianism,” *Analysis* 1 (1989), 47.

¹⁴⁰ Rabinovich, “Psychosis,” 44.

Hence the baseline binding I to F in SCHEMA R, which shows that the condition of the symbolic identity of the subject is the Name-of-the-Father.¹⁴¹

M is located in the field of reality of the schema. Lacan says that M is “the signifier of the primordial object.”¹⁴² It is the signifier of that particular object of desire that must be irrevocably sacrificed with the instantiation of the *non-du-père*. He goes on, “one may thus situate from i to M, that is in o , the extremities of the segments Si , So^1 , So^2 , So^n , SM, in which are placed the figures of the imaginary other in the relations of erotic aggression where they are realized.”¹⁴³ So^n , according to mathematical convention, represents a general case of the object of desire, and implies that there exist some indeterminate number of segments lying between S and M:

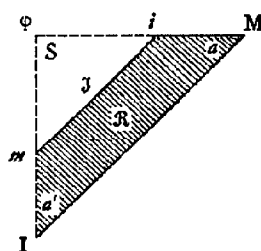


Figure 3.23: The objects of desire

To be more rigorous, in a mathematical way, about that convention, Lacan's sequence can be rewritten as Si , So^1 , So^2 , ..., So^n , ..., SM. So there are many objects of desire, each corresponding to a segment So^n , many objects of “erotic aggression,” many objects that the subject wants to *have* and introject as part of itself (including the image i , for the moment, as

¹⁴¹ The fact that F can be replaced by Φ in Schema R underscores the seriousness of the problem of translation. When ϕ is translated as Φ in the English version, Φ is relocated at the point furthest away from its proper position.

¹⁴² Lacan, “Possible Treatment,” 197. “le signifiant de l’objet primordial” (“Traitement possible,” 553).

another object of the subject).¹⁴⁴ The sequence of segments thus implies a different *chaîne linéaire* of objects: $i, o^1, o^2, \dots o^n, \dots M$. Lacan's implication is that this is an ordered chain that proceeds from the image mistaken as oneself, i , to a primordial or ultimate object, M . One reason that the line between i and M is included in the field of reality is the because reality is where objects—the “stuff” of the world—can be found. M is the terminus of this set of objects, which indicates its special status. Unlike the rest of those objects, it is not, strictly speaking, included in that set. Instead, it is the limit to the set or chain; it is an asymptote. This means that there is no “real” object, o^n , that can correspond to M , not even the mother as origin. In this way, M is an analogue of F *qua* Name-of-the-Father. M is an impossible object, one that is “primordial” in the sense of always-already lost, and therefore always-already lost to the chain of objects. The Lacanian name for such an object is, of course, *objet a*—which is why M and a coincide in the French version of SCHEMA R.

This chain of objects situates M as a limit for the imaginary, inasmuch as it is a vertex for the imaginary triangle. But M is simultaneously a vertex of the symbolic triangle, so it inscribes a limit to the symbolic as well. More precisely, it represents two limits. M is what is sacrificed with the installation of the symbolic order via the Name-of-the-Father, so M marks, in a negative way, the inception of the symbolic. However, M *qua* *objet a* marks precisely that which is outside the symbolic, that which escapes it. M is thereby aligned with the chronological doubling of the Lacanian real as proposed by Miller, as that which

¹⁴³ Lacan, “Possible Treatment,” 197. “On peut ainsi situer de i à M , soit en a , les extrémités des segments S_i , Sa^1 , Sa^2 , Sa^p , SM , où placer les figures de l'autre imaginaire dans les relations d'agression érotique où elles se réalisent” (“Traitement possible,” 553).

¹⁴⁴ *Having* thus becomes a form of *being*.

preceded subjectification via entry into the symbolic and that which escapes that same structuring subjectification:¹⁴⁵

$$M (\text{REAL}_1) \rightarrow \text{SYMBOLIC} \rightarrow M (\text{REAL}_2)$$

The subject thus depends on *both* F, the Name-of-the-Father as the *point de capiton* of the symbolic universe, *and* M, the impossible figure of the mother as the primordial object that is the limit or outside of that universe. The phallogentrism of Lacan does not deny the strong dependence of Lacanian theory on the figure of the impossible real mother as the incarnation of *objet a*. This doubleness is crucial to the nature of \mathcal{S} . It is easy to read the subordination of the subject to the signifier in Lacan—it is easy to arrive at the symbolic from the real and/or the imaginary—but it is too easy to stop there. The barring of the \mathcal{S} in the barred \mathcal{S} is also a barring *of* the signifier. The subject only obtains in its excess of the signifier—in the insistence of the object in the subject, *objet a*. And so it is to *objet a* that we must turn.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 27.

¹⁴⁶ In turning to *objet a*, I admittedly leave the exegesis of SCHEMA L substantially incomplete. As mentioned above, the *écrit* which elaborates SCHEMA L as SCHEMA R continues with another version, SCHEMA I ("Possible Treatment," 212; "Traitement possible," 571):

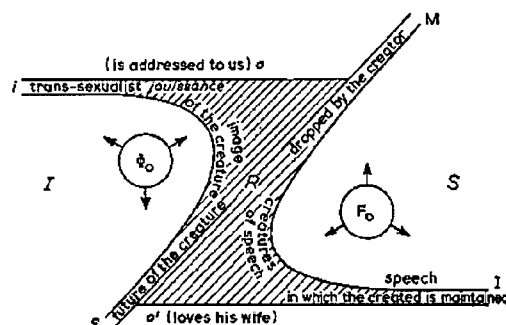


Figure 3.24: SCHEMA I

Lacan produces SCHEMA I from SCHEMA R through a particular geometrical distortion, which is intended to image a psychotic disorganization/reorganization (Lacan, "Possible Treatment," 212). The very notion of distortion, however, implies some structural mutuality, and the three fields of SCHEMA R are still evident, as in

objet a: Desire Must Be Taken Literally

For Lacan, the subject is constituted through its alienation. Hence $\$$ is barred by the signifier, S: the subject emerges through the letter via its disappearance beneath that letter. Lacan says that this “moment of a ‘fading’ or eclipse of the subject . . . is closely bound up with the *Spaltung* or splitting that it suffers from its subordination to the signifier.”¹⁴⁷ To consider the specifics of this *Spaltung*, if the subject is split, what is it split into? One part of the answer is that insofar as being is sacrificed to meaning in alienation, it is meaning that must survive, in the guise of the part-subject we have already met: S. And if S denotes the part of the subject that is within the symbolic, the other part must be in excess of it. Lacan holds that the exorbitant part of the subject is object. Or rather, that special object, *objet a*. To extend Derrida’s argument, perhaps *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, but outside language itself is

the Z backbone of SCHEMA L. This schema is one version of Lacan’s revisiting of Freud’s Schreber case, and suffers familiar problems in its translation from French to English (see Muller and Richardson, *Lacan and Language*, 257).

This schema will not be addressed substantially here. It could be argued that it does not have the general implications of the others, inasmuch as it is particular to psychosis. Yet because of that particularity, SCHEMA I manifests certain broad theoretical concepts—notably, the function of the Name-of-the-Father—just as every theoretical generalization of orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis devolves from specific cases of neurosis or psychosis (Dora, the Wolf-Man, the Rat-man, Schreber, etc.). Lacan often claims a similar clinical grounding for his theorization, although the significance of his appropriation and transformation of academic sources (notably Saussure), makes that declaration moot at best. Nonetheless, the extrapolation from “pathology” to generality still obtains. As a relevant example, one of the psychoses is paranoia, and Lacan sees knowledge as being itself paranoid (“Mirror Stage,” 2, 3; “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, 17; “Stade du miroir,” 94, 95; “L’aggressivité en psychanalyse,” in *Écrits*, 111).

This dissertation is structured around the significance of detail, especially graphic detail. Ultimately, then, this elision of SCHEMA I is both an arbitrary limitation and one more confession of inadequacy: SCHEMA I leads directly onto much more than this project can directly engage. Lacan’s *Seminar III*, a book-length analysis of psychosis, gives marked testimony to that fact. It should be noted, though, that SCHEMA I turns the diagonal between the ego and the object into an “asymptote” between the delusional ego, *e*, and the divine other, M, which bears on the gravity of the self-aggrandizement evident in any presumption to the possession of a text through understanding.

¹⁴⁷ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 313. “Le moment d’un *fading* ou éclipse du sujet, étroitement lié à la *Spaltung* ou refente qu’il subit de sa subordination au signifiant” (“Subversion du sujet,” 816, emphasis in original).

objet a: “We encounter [*objet a*] where the word fails.”¹⁴⁸ So $\$$ is split into the signifier and *objet a*.

$$\S = S + a$$

Žižek maintains that *objet a* is not merely outside of the symbolic, but rather a “leftover of the signifying representation.”¹⁴⁹ In other words, *objet a* is at once the outside of the symbolic and its direct consequence. Yet the paradox of *objet a* is the general paradox of the matheme: even as an object, it remains a letter.¹⁵⁰ Žižek clarifies this assertion by casting the subject as being, at least in part, a real answer to a symbolic question—actually, *the* symbolic question: *Che vuoi?* “What do you want?” This question names the third stage of the Graph of Desire.¹⁵¹

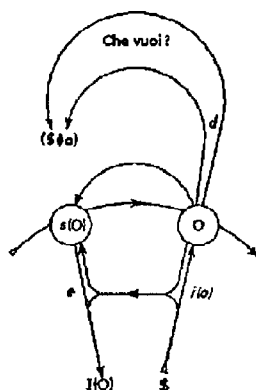


Figure 3.25: *Che Vuoi?*

¹⁴⁸ Žižek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 178.

¹⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 154.

¹⁵⁰ “*a*, which I call ‘object,’ but which, nevertheless, is but a letter” (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 28). “Le *a*, que j’appelle *objet*, mais qui n’est quand même rien qu’une lettre” (*Séminaire XX*, 30).

¹⁵¹ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 313; “Subversion du sujet,” 815. “*Che vuoi?*” is taken from *Diable amoureux* (1772), a novel by Jacques Cazotte (1719–1792) (Muller and Richardson, *Lacan and Language*, 405), which is a tale of the phantasms engendered by imaginary desire (Frelick, personal communication, 9 April 1998).

This third graph grows out of the second one by sprouting a great question mark, which then dilates to loom over all. *Che vuoi?* Lacan says that this question is a question of the Other; hence it is eminently symbolic.¹⁵² At the same time, the question aims outside of itself. “*Che vuoi?*” can be translated as, “What is your desire?” Which immediately means that the prior question must be posed: “What is desire?” Lacan writes much on desire, but, as Bowie notes, he always writes it in “the purest quicksilver . . . presented in its full volatility, in a shimmer of inconsequential semi-definitions.”¹⁵³ If Bowie is right—and he is one of the best of Lacan’s commentators—then the question of desire is answered so many times by Lacan that no answer can possibly suffice:

Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*).¹⁵⁴

Desire is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows within itself, inasmuch as the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the want-to-be, together with the appeal to receive the complement from the Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want.¹⁵⁵

Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn’t the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists.¹⁵⁶

Man’s desire is the desire of the Other.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 312; “Subversion du sujet,” 815.

¹⁵³ Bowie, *Lacan*, 130-131.

¹⁵⁴ Lacan, “Signification of the Phallus,” 287. “Le désir n’est ni l’appétit de la satisfaction, ni la demande d’amour, mais la différence qui résulte de la soustraction du premier à la seconde, le phénomène même de leur refente (*Spaltung*)” (“Signification du phallus,” 691).

¹⁵⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Direction of Treatment and the Principles of its Power,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, 263.

Le désir est ce qui se manifeste dans l’intervalle que creuse la demande en deçà d’elle-même, pour autant que le sujet en articulant la chaîne signifiante, amène au jour le manque à être avec l’appel d’en recevoir le complément de l’Autre, si l’Autre, lieu de la parole, est aussi le lieu de ce manque. (“La direction de la cure et les principes de son pouvoir,” in *Écrits*, 627)

And on and on through the Lacanian corpus, each definition of desire, delivered with characteristic decisiveness, generating yet another different one, in an unending metonymy of desire begetting further desire, with no discoverable end and no determinate meaning. The fact that desire's intractable resistance to discourse derives precisely from its excessive accommodation to discourse is no accident. "Desire is lack and cannot in any way be weighed or placed in the balance."¹⁵⁸ Lacan's articulation of desire *enacts* an answer to the question of desire. After all, he does insist that "desire must be taken literally."¹⁵⁹ The iteration of desire, which occurs wholly within the symbolic order, thus articulates a certain failure of that order. The sum of these symbolic locutions is a real, non-symbolic illocutionary force. Despite the myriad definitions of desire—or rather, *because* of their being myriad—something of desire escapes symbolization. That something is *objet a*.

Given the recognition of desire as itself being a kind of remainder of signification, Lacan's definitions of desire retroactively reacquire meaning—of a sort. In the terms of the previous discussion of the *point de capiton*, the very emptiness of the signifier *desire* permits Lacan's texts to signify. For instance, we have just seen that the demand of the question, "What is desire?", when confronted assiduously by the need for an answer, yields desire as its leftover. Since Lacan frames desire explicitly as a subtraction, it can be formulated as an algebraic expression of words.

¹⁵⁶ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 223. "Le désir est un rapport d'être à manque. Ce manque est manque d'être à proprement parler. Ce n'est pas manque de ceci ou de cela, mais manque d'être par quoi l'être existe" (*Séminaire II*, 261).

¹⁵⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 38, in italics in original. "Le désir de l'homme, c'est le désir de l'Autre" (*Séminaire XI*, 38, in original in italics).

¹⁵⁸ Jacques Lacan, "Jeunesse de Gide ou La lettre du désir," *Critique* (1958), cited and trans. in Marini, *Jacques Lacan*, 58.

¹⁵⁹ Lacan, "Direction of Treatment," 256. "Il faut prendre le désir à la lettre" ("Direction de la cure," 620).

$$\text{Demand} - \text{Need} = \text{Desire}$$

Meaning itself can be read into the equation:

$$\text{Demand for meaning} - \text{Need for meaning} = \text{Desire for meaning}$$

The demand for meaning resounds through the halls of the academy, and proliferates across the pages of its books and journals. Some need pulls irresistibly at each subject who makes that demand, who assiduously configures her/himself to fulfill that need, through her/his reading, writing, teaching, presenting, and publishing. Of course, the desire for meaning is never completely satisfied; it always goes on. There is always imaginary gratification, just as there is always imaginary meaning. But the fragility of that gratification is voiced in the outrage of every condemnation of Lacanian impenetrability—which is one reason why “Voice” is to be found as the leftover of signification in the second stage of the Graph of Desire.

This voice stands in striking contrast to the phonocentric voice of plenitude and self-presence that is the famous target of Derrida. For Lacan, this is voice “as a meaningless *object*, as an objectal remnant, leftover of the signifying operation, of the *capitonnage*: the voice is what is left over after we subtract from the signifier the retroactive operation of ‘quilting’, which produces meaning.”¹⁶⁰ Voice is one name of *objet a*, as is “the nothing.”¹⁶¹ This is the voice that is left out of any Habermasian communicative action, the voice that exceeds that action, just as it exceeds any meaning in signification.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 104, emphasis in original.

¹⁶¹ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 315; “Subversion du sujet,” 817.

¹⁶² To crudely abbreviate Habermas’s complex theory, the “ideal speech situation” of communicative action is based on three conditions: (1) “unrestricted discussion” aimed at “unconstrained” consensus, (2) the “mutuality

From the Lacanian perspective, every objection to the Lacanian text is charged with the voice against itself, the doubled voice of desire. First, there is the voice desiring meaning, the voice of clear authority, the voice of the Logos, the *tone* of the presumption to self-presence. The question mark of *Che vuoi?* points to exactly $s(O)$: the matheme for meaning. Second, there is the voice of desire as lacking, the edge-in-the-voice of denunciation, the voice recoiling at the obscenity oozing out of Lacan.¹⁶³ Desire is explicit in the graphical *Che vuoi?*, in the matheme d . In that place, desire is on the way from the symbolic *qua* Other to the union of the subject with the lost object: $\$ \diamond a$. This union is the matheme for fantasy, with which we began. And this is the subject of the next chapter: fantasy, hanging on the question of desire and reaching towards meaning.

of unimpaired self-representation," (3) "universal understanding" (Jürgen Habermas, "Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence," in *Recent Sociology No. 2: Patterns of Communicative Behavior*, ed. Hans Peter Dreitzil [New York: Macmillan, 1970], 143-144). Given the reading of Lacan in this dissertation, the impediments to the fulfillment of these criteria are more pragmatically serious than the mere impossibility of ideality.

¹⁶³ Once again the voice in Lacanian theory involves complexities which can only be gestured at here. There is the Derridean voice of self-presence and mastery. There is the voice of the Other, as an intractable imposition on the subject. There is the voice of the Law, often deemed the voice of the superego. There is the hypnotic voice of repetition. There is the hysterical loss of voice in aphonia. There is the voice of the mother, "the first presentification of a dimension of the Other," and the intimation of the gendering of voice (Mladen Dolar, "The Object Voice," in Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1996], 14-15).

Chapter Four:

§ ◇ *a*: Fantasy

*Phantasy is that by which the subject sustains himself at the level of his vanishing desire.*¹

—Jacques Lacan

Clarity is fantasy, *un fantasme*. Lacan says as much. He writes of fantasy in many places and in many ways, but in *Écrits* it is defined as “an image set to work in the signifying structure.”² So fantasy is about a particular engagement of the imaginary with the symbolic. It is also and crucially about the real, for its critical object is *objet a*, which, across its many conflicting forms, always partakes of the real. All three registers are therefore knotted together in the *scene* that fantasy always connotes. Lacan’s definition reiterates the general strategy of this study: reading the matheme through its imaginary traces in the symbolic. Fantasy is especially pertinent because it emphasizes the crucial visual aspect of both that strategy and the issue of clear writing which that strategy engages. The esoterics of the matheme are revelatory of the exoterics of clarity because it is exactly the everyday imaginariness of clarity that makes it fantastic.

Clarity is a scopic figure, by which the relation of writing to reading is translated into the terms of seeing. We could say that clarity is a kind of unveiling which dissolves the impediment of obscurity. Or we might turn to personal computing applications, in which the imaginariness of clarity can be translated as a kind of human version of optical character

¹ Lacan, “Direction of Treatment,” 272. “Le fantasme . . . est ce par quoi le sujet se soutient au niveau de son désir évanouissant” (“La direction de la cure,” 637). Sheridan chooses to translate *fantasme* as “phantasy,” which moves the word both closer to orthodox Freudianism—*phantasy* is also Strachey’s translation in the *Standard Edition*—and the deathly specter of the phantasm. However, *fantasy* will be used here, except in direct quotations from Sheridan’s translation, because it is more faithful to Lacan’s inclination to defamiliarize ordinary language and because it sharpens the very Lacanian paradox to come, in which the condition of mundane reality is always fantastic.

recognition (OCR). In OCR, the image of the letter is separated from meaning so that meaning can be recognized as such. To be more precise, OCR depends on the capacity to recognize a letter as a letter, in order to enable legibility. But for Lacan, recognition is always a misrecognition. More precisely, it is a *méconnaissance*, which is simultaneously a misrecognition of knowledge (*connaissance*) and self-knowledge (*me-connaissance*).³ For Lacan, the imaginary is the register of the definitively illusory and subjective, just as a phantasm is always something of a mirage and something not quite human. What, then, is so deceptive in the *image* of clarity?

To be sure, there is something duplicitous in the very notion of clarity as an image, for, as has already been noted, clarity implies a kind of vanishing. So the image of clarity is simultaneously a non-image, the picture of something that isn't there: an image of nothing.⁴ This scopic paradox has likewise been suggested earlier, for clear language always pretends to the vanishing of language as such. In this way, clarity directly invokes fantasy. Lacan says the fantasy is "that by which the subject sustains himself at the level of his vanishing desire."⁵ The clarity of language, as we have seen, is sustained fundamentally by desire. What Lacan is therefore suggesting is that the subject, by sustaining the desire for clarity, sustains her/himself. Fantasy is the scene where this constitutive tragicomedy of the subject is staged.

The image of clarity is illuminated by the matheme for fantasy:



² Lacan, "Direction of Treatment," 272. "[Une] image mise en fonction dans la structure signifiante" ("Direction de la cure," 637).

³ Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. "*méconnaissance*."

⁴ "Nothing" is one of Lacan's names for *objet a* ("Subversion of the Subject," 315; "Le rien" ["Subversion du sujet," 817]).

⁵ Lacan, "Direction of Treatment," 272. "Le fantasme . . . est ce par quoi le sujet se soutient au niveau de son désir évanouissant" ("Direction de la cure," 637).

How is that conflicted image to be read here? Lacan provides the necessary caution: this matheme was “created to allow a hundred and one different readings, a multiplicity that is admissible as long as the spoken remains caught in its algebra.”⁶ The reading of $\$ \diamond a$ that follows therefore manifestly cannot be an exhaustive one; even while it strives to constantly acknowledge the consequences of the polysemy of $\$ \diamond a$, it will necessarily fall well short of recognizing one hundred and one of them.⁷ However, Lacan’s gesture towards his own algebra will be taken very seriously.

The matheme $\$ \diamond a$ can be decomposed into three elements:

1. $\$$ The barred S.
2. \diamond The *poinçon*.⁸
3. a *objet a*—not the *autre* of the schemata of Chapter Three.

The barred S must be familiar by now—although, I hope, it has also been made irrevocably strange. This chapter will therefore concentrate on the remaining elements, although their consideration will constantly refer back to $\$$ —just as Lacan maintains that all meaning is a function of a reference “back.”

The Heart of Fantasy: *Le poinçon*

Fink writes $\$ \diamond a$ out as “the subject in relation to the object, or the subject’s desire for the object,” and hence defines \diamond as meaning “in relation to” or “desire for.”⁹ Likewise,

⁶ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 313. “Car il est fait pour permettre vingt et cent lectures différentes, multiplicité admissible aussi loin que le parlé en reste pris à son algèbre” (“Subversion du sujet,” 816).

⁷ On the other hand, this chapter could have been entitled, “Fantasy 101: An Introduction to the Matheme of Fantasy in the Academy.”

Kaja Silverman states that the *poinçon* “designates the phrase ‘desire for or of.’”¹⁰ Following such interpretations a little too rapidly, readers less astute than Fink or Silverman—and their numbers are legion—often take \mathcal{S} and a as the true substantives of fantasy, relegating \diamond to the status of signifying the “mere” relation between them.¹¹

This would be a mistake, which is always the danger of the velocity of understanding. The *poinçon* is the literal center of the matheme; it is no coincidence that it is found at the very heart of fantasy. In algebraic terms, it occupies the position of operator, while \mathcal{S} and a take the parts of operands.¹² The significance of \diamond is thus imagined by the fundamental difference between $\mathcal{S} + a$ and $\mathcal{S} - a$. To read the matheme of fantasy is to read the *poinçon* as embodying the specificity of the fantastic relation between the subject-as-barred and the object-as-lost. Lacan himself writes that he uses the *poinçon* “precisely because it is necessary in integrating some of the finished products” of the relations which dis/locate the subject.¹³ Then let us consider \diamond more carefully, in order to discover its necessity.

In \diamond , we can learn to count with Lacan. We begin, as usual, with one: \diamond in itself. The first peculiarity of \diamond is that it is not, despite the characterization of mathemes as “little letters,” a letter at all. In typography, it is an alphabetic character. Yet this seeming

⁸ Lacan, *Séminaire XI*, 190.

⁹ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 174.

¹⁰ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 4.

¹¹ This relegation of relationality is all the more strange, given that Lacan performs a famous renovation of Saussurean linguistics, in which signs only gain their value through their differential relations with other signs.

¹² \diamond holds the position of operator in $\mathcal{S} \diamond a$ only in the familiar infix notation. Other notations are used in mathematics and the sciences. In prefix or Polish notation, fantasy would be $\diamond \mathcal{S} a$; in postfix or reverse Polish notation, it would be $\mathcal{S} a \diamond$. Hewlett-Packard, a prime player in scientific instrumentation, uses reverse Polish notation for its calculators, a practice which consistently baffles non-scientists.

specificity should alert us to a general condition, for the relation of the matheme to the letter is not straightforward. Thus \mathcal{S} , with which we began, is actually not a letter either, at least in any earthly language outside the Lacanian salon. In fact, \mathcal{S} is a kind of opposite to the letter, inasmuch as it arises from the latter's very negation. \mathcal{S} is the letter; \mathcal{S} is the letter crossed-out.¹⁴ \mathcal{A} is directly correlative, and is therefore a non-letter as well. However, when \mathcal{A} is "translated" into English as \emptyset , its status becomes more vexed. While \emptyset is not a letter in English, it is basic to Danish and Norwegian. So \emptyset is at once a letter, a non-letter, and, just like \mathcal{S} , the negation of the letter. By contrast, the final element of fantasy, a , is the definitive letter: the modern derivative of α , *alpha*, the beginning of all Western letters. \diamond is the bridge or relation between the letter and its erasure.¹⁵

If \diamond is not a letter, then what is it? Geometrically, is a vertical rhombus or a diagonally placed square, depending on its proportions. If the vertical and horizontal axes are equal in length, with all the angles equal, it is a square, rotated 45° about its center: \diamond . If the vertical axis is longer than the horizontal, with two acute and two obtuse angles, it is a rhombus—popularly called a diamond: \diamond . The French and English versions of *Écrits* use both forms: the rotated square in the text proper and the vertical rhombus in the graphs.¹⁶ So \diamond both changes and stays the same as it is translated from place to place.

¹³ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 209. "Précisément parce qu'il est nécessaire à intégrer à quelques-uns des produits finis de cette dialectique" (*Séminaire XI*, 190).

¹⁴ \mathcal{S} is a letter, but it stands for the signifier, which is not exactly the same as the letter, although the early Lacan often appears to make them equivalent.

¹⁵ Or, to follow the conventional order from left to right, \diamond is the relation between the erasure of the letter and its inception. Of course, in a characteristic Lacanian paradox, a in $\mathcal{S} \diamond a$ designates *objet a*, which is precisely what gets excluded from the system of letters.

¹⁶ Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 313-315; Lacan, "Subversion du sujet," 815-817.

One unobvious reason that \diamond is not a letter is that it comes *before* the letter. It was engraved in the cave of Marsoulas in prehistoric times, long before writing of any sort existed, much less the Roman script of S and *a* and the rest. Moreover, from our perspective, millennia later, the \diamond of Marsoulas comes before meaning itself, for there are no clues in the cave as to what \diamond might have meant.¹⁷ Only the signifier is left, still full of its positive materiality, but now quite empty of its signified (\diamond can be read as the empty rhombus, the graphic opposite of \blacklozenge). History is often cited as that which gives meaning, but history, as the simple passage of human existence, has also always been that which erodes meaning—in this case, totally. The cave of Marsoulas gives mute testimony to Lacan's contention that the signified is barred to the signifier.

However, in the eons since its inscription in the cave, \diamond has re-gathered unto itself many meanings. In the discourse of hobos, or at least in the discourse of English ones, \diamond means "here live generous people, but behave well, show them respect, and take nothing for granted." So \diamond turns back upon the subject, $\$$, and, by its according of respect, marks it as a subject—but take nothing for granted. In the discourse of meteorologists, \diamond actually signifies a kind of clarity: clear air. In the discourse of biologists, \diamond means an individual of unknown or unclear sex.¹⁸ \diamond moves across or around ♀ and ♂ , leading leads to the mathemes of sexuation, $\exists x\overline{\Phi}x$ and $\forall x\Phi x$ and the rest. These will not be examined here, although they have been carefully considered elsewhere by Lacan and his exegetes.¹⁹ At one

¹⁷ Liungman, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 310.

¹⁸ Liungman, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 310.

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, "Une lettre d'amour," in *Séminaire XX*; "A Love Letter," in *Feminine Sexuality*, Lacan, "A Love Letter (*une lettre d'amour*)," in *Seminar XX*; Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 98-125.

time, \diamond was also another signifier of sex—or rather, the gendering of sex—for it was the shape of a woman's coat of arms when noble ladies were allowed to have their own, at the end of the Middle Ages.²⁰ In the discourse of early music, the rhombus was a form of the note sign, recalling Lacan's invocation of musical notation and polyphony: "all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score."

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list—among other things, the cave of Marsoulas should teach us that exhaustiveness is an impossible chimera—but its diversity does emphasize how separate \diamond is from any signified that might be contingently linked to it. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that \diamond is likewise separated from its own name. Geometry calls \diamond a rhombus and popular discourse calls it a *diamond*, but Lacan calls it a *poinçon* (although sometimes also a *losange*).²¹

This variability of naming raises, once again, the problem of translation, although this time, ironically, with regards to an object which is not even linguistic. Sheridan translates *poinçon* as *punch*, producing a rather strange reading of $\S \diamond a$ —"barred S, punch, petit d"—in which \S appears to become a boxer.²² Curiously, he decides to leave *losange* as is, instead of using the obvious English equivalent, *lozenge*.²³ Now, *losange* is one of several obsolete versions of *lozenge* in English, but in the face of all the other difficulties that Lacan's French raises, the necessity to retain the spelling of *losange* is mysterious, and Sheridan himself provides no explanation. Fink, who is preparing a new translation of *Écrits* and is very critical

²⁰ Liungman, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 310.

²¹ Lacan, *Séminaire XI*, 190.

²² Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 209, emphasis in original.

²³ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 209.

of Sheridan's, simply uses *lozenge*. He also refers to \Diamond as a diamond.²⁴ Arthur Goldhammer takes a different tack, and translates *losange* as "diamond" and *poinçon* as "chisel."²⁵

We should consider more carefully these Lacanian names of \Diamond . *Losange* seems relatively straightforward, being defined by *Larousse* in exactly the same terms as *rhombus*.²⁶ *Poinçon* is more complicated and has several distinguishable meanings. First, *poinçon* can mean either an awl or a bodkin (a dagger or stiletto). These are both cutting implements, so \Diamond incarnates the fundamental Lacanian cut. Second, *poinçon* can mean a stamp or a hallmark, or the instruments which produce either (which relates this definition to the previous one). Clément comments that the "chisel" is "used in France to mark silver items and guarantee their authenticity," and therefore established and sustains the priority of ownership. A *poinçon* is also a device for punching tickets, and therefore delivers a mark of legitimacy. $\S \Diamond a$ is thus itself marked by \Diamond to show that each subject has her/his own fantasy, authentic to her/himself only.²⁷ Third, *poinçon* can mean a style of engraving, evoking the Lacanian slogan, "Style is the man himself." Fourth, *poinçon* can mean a vertical section of a triangular roof truss. This may seem far removed from either language or psychoanalysis, but the pertinence of this structural sense will be demonstrated later.

We can return to counting with these four senses of *poinçon*, for, according to Lacan, after one comes four:

The sign \Diamond registers the relations envelopment–development–conjunction–disjunction. The links that it signifies in these two parentheses enable us to

²⁴ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 174.

²⁵ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 179; *Vies et légendes*, 207.

²⁶ *Larousse*, s.v. "losange."

²⁷ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 179. "Le losange, \Diamond , que Lacan nomme le « poinçon », comme il y a un poinçon sur l'argent, qui en garantit l'authenticité en France. Si le fantasme a un « poinçon », c'est que chacun a le sien, authentique, et qui lui appartient en propre" (*Vies et légendes*, 207).

read the barred S—the ‘S’ fading in the cutting of the demand, that is to say, drive and phantasy.²⁸

After all Lacan’s determined effort to loose the signifier from the signified, it is strange to see him nonchalantly reunite them in the *sign* to describe \Diamond . To be sure, the stability of that sign is immediately undercut by his list of four conflicting “relations” that \Diamond “registers”: envelopment, development, conjunction and disjunction. We have already embarked on a particular development of \Diamond , one that has shown how that non-letter envelops a multitude of significances and opacities. The senses of conjunction and disjunction are more easily surfaced through a formal consideration of \Diamond .

²⁸ Lacan, “Direction of Treatment,” 280 n26. “Le signe \Diamond consigne les relations : enveloppement-développement-conjonction-disjonction. Les liaisons qu’il signifie en ces deux parenthèses, permettent de lire l’S barré : S en *fading* dans la coupure de la demande ; S en *fading* devant l’objet du désir. Soit nommément la pulsion et le fantasme” (“Direction de la cure,” 634 n1, emphasis in original).

The Discourse of the University

The four relations of \Diamond just cited reiterate the quaternary structure that Lacan favors in his analysis of discourse.²⁹ We have already seen the four mathemes that define SCHEMA L. There are also his four formulaic discourses, introduced in *Séminaire XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*.³⁰

$$\frac{S_1}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$$

THE DISCOURSE OF THE UNIVERSITY

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

THE DISCOURSE OF THE MASTER

$$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

THE DISCOURSE OF THE HYSTERIC

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$$

THE DISCOURSE OF THE ANALYST

Again, these have been analysed extensively elsewhere, and will not be comprehensively developed seriously here.³¹ However, given our concern with the texts of the academy, a brief look at the discourse of the university is in order, especially as it is an opposite to the kind of psychoanalytic discourse that I am attempting to write out here. Bracher observes,

We begin our academic careers as students, in the position of a , receivers of the system of knowledge (S_2). Subjected in this position to a dominating totalized system of knowledge/belief (S_1), we are made to produce ourselves as (alienated) subjects ($\$$) of this system.³²

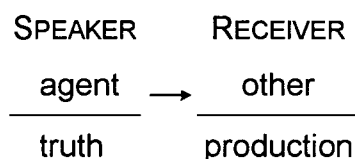
Bracher is making reference to the four positions common to all four discourses:

²⁹ I suspect that the four discourses betrays how Lacan is a little too fond of that quaternary structure. The cyclic symmetry of the discursive formulæ is as high-structuralist as anything else in Lacanian theory, and while Lacan is adept in wringing ambiguity and corruption from structure, the necessity of that symmetry escapes me.

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan: Livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse: 1969-1970*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991). The four discourses appear in the first chapter of this seminar, "Production des quatre discours," and are engaged throughout much of the rest of the text. Evans translates "l'envers de la psychanalyse" as "the reverse of psychoanalysis" (*Dictionary*, s.v. "seminar"), while Anne Tomiche renders it as "the netherside of psychoanalysis" (Marini, *Jacques Lacan*, 218).

³¹ For instance, see Bracher, *Lacan and Social Change*, 53-80.

³² Bracher, *Lacan and Social Change*, 55.



The left-hand positions designate factors active in the subject who speaks; the right-hand positions designate factors active in the subject who receives the message. Note how the four-fold structure re-inscribes the bar, for the positions above the bar (the agent and the other) designate overt or manifest factors, and those below the bar (truth and production) designate covert, latent, implicit or repressed factors.³³

In the discourse of the university, what “speaks”—that is, what occupies the position of agency or dominance—is S_2 , the system of knowledge, as determined by a set of master signifiers, S_1 , such as *teaching*, *translation*, *clarity* (if it is recognized that it is S_2 that speaks, then the art of teaching is revealed as reducing both teacher and student to the status of dummy, ventriloquized by S_2 , exactly to the extent that the teaching is reduced to translation). S_1 occupies the position of “hidden truth—that is, of the factor that supports, grounds, underwrites, and gives rise to the dominant factor (here S_2).”³⁴ Bracher identifies the S_1 of science as “Keep on knowing more and more,” although surely that particular S_1 holds sway over most other disciplines and pursuits, whether academic or non-academic.³⁵ That imperative converges to the fantasy of clarity through its immanent contradiction. On the one hand, there is the eternal insufficiency of knowledge admitted by the desire to know more and more. On the other hand, there is the valorization of and pretension to the

³³ Bracher, *Lacan and Social Change*, 54.

³⁴ Bracher, *Lacan and Social Change*, 54.

comprehensiveness of knowledge. The art of teaching turns on this same comprehensiveness, *vis-à-vis* the fullness of translation. This version of S_1 therefore implies that S_2 is both complete and incomplete, both consistent and inconsistent. So S_2 oscillates between a status as O and one as \emptyset , between being unbarred and being barred. As for the imperative directing the subject, it should be noted that “Keep on knowing more and more” implies both “You can never know sufficiently” and “You must know sufficiently.” This is the quandary of the student.

In the matheme for the discourse of the university, the overt aspect of the student is that of *objet a*. Bracher explains that in order to understand the discourse of systematic knowledge, students “must (for the moment, at least) be receptive to a preconstituted knowledge, which means emptying themselves of any knowledge that might interfere with the knowledge in the discourse and becoming amorphous, nonarticulated substance (*a*) to be articulated by the discourse.”³⁵ The result of the articulation is the subject as barred, $\$$.

On the receiver side of the discourse of the university we have fantasy in disguise:

$$\$ \diamond a \rightarrow \frac{a}{\$}$$

Two crucial formal transformations thereby take place. First, the matheme is rotated by 90°, putting *objet a* in the dominant position and $\$$ in the subordinate position. This ascendance of *a* over $\$$ implies a directionality as well, inasmuch as the lower position of the receiver is that of what is produced—here, the subject as barred. Second, \diamond is distilled down to the bar.

³⁵ Bracher, *Lacan and Social Change*, 58.

³⁶ Bracher, *Lacan and Social Change*, 54.

Lacan says that the dilemma facing students is that they have only one option: weaving themselves into the system S_2 to serve as both its means of production and its surplus value. Any dissertation, he maintains, by adding to society's knowledge—a function mandated by the university's demands for and of a dissertation—simply reinforces the factor, S_2 by which they themselves are exploited and alienated.³⁷ $\$$ is the subject insofar as s/he becomes integrated into S_2 . The paradoxical consequence is that the subject is thereby sustained as *objet a*—as that which is not integrated. This contradiction is a version of the variable status of S_2 , as unbarred and barred. At the same time, the persistence of the student as *objet a*—note that *objet a* is not just one aspect of the student, but her/his most manifest or defining aspect—means that the student remains unintegrated into S_2 in some essential way. Taking into account $\$$ in the position of production, it can be said that the student *qua objet a* resists complete integration into the system of the university. In other words, the student, while articulated as $\$$, as a subject structured into the discourse of the university, nonetheless endures as a remainder, *a*, to that discourse. In this sense, *objet a*, as the “hard” remainder outside of S_2 , is an opposite to S_1 , for the collectivity of S_1 are those signifiers which underwrite the system of knowledge, S_2 . So the student *qua a* is “unreadable,” at least in any complete sense, by S_2 .

This status is at once merely common-sensical and utterly strange. Insofar as any subject holds arduously to the belief of her/himself as a subject—often articulated, at least in the West, as keeping faith with one's individuality and uniqueness—s/he is maintaining

³⁷ Lacan, *Séminaire XVII*, 234-235, 176, 220.

her/his substantiality as irreducible to any set of symbolic representations. In Žižekian terms, s/he is a subject because s/he is constituted as a sublime object; s/he is defined by her/his indefinable and infinitely personal Thing. However, this means that the most general characteristic of subjectivity is its convergence to the discursive status of the unreadable object: the obscure text. The ordinary preciousness of the subject, to her/himself and others, is precisely how s/he is isomorphic to the exemplary Lacanian textual object. At the very heart of the subject, what we unexpectedly discover is the *matheme*.³⁸

If this contention seems too outrageous, consider an equivalent form. The sociological/anthropological commonplace is that what makes us human is language. Now if language ultimately hinges on its own ineluctable difficulty—which is the (here oversimplified) contention of not only Lacan, but also Derrida and Deleuze and a host of others—then the definition of humanity must be, at least formally, *mathemic*.

The dual status of the student as *a* and *Œ* returns us to the reconfiguration of fantasy in the discourse of the university. The second principal move in that operation is the transformation of \Diamond into the bar. If the hegemony of *S*₂ depends upon *S*₁ remaining in force, then a strict separation must be maintained between the “acceptable” subject, *Œ*, and her/his “unacceptable” counterpart, *a*. The scene of fantasy is where they are kept functionally apart. Hence, the relation between *Œ* and *a* must become one of a barring.

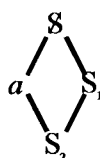
³⁸ This situation of the *matheme* at the heart of the subject is one possible reading of part of the notoriously obscure “formulae of sexuation” from *Séminaire XX: Encore*. In the diagram of those formulae, *Œ* points towards *objet a* (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 78; *Séminaire XX*, 73). Provocatively, *Œ* is on the male side and *objet a* on the female.

From Four to Two: The Formal Structure of \Diamond

Note the overdetermining formal quaternary of the Four Discourses:

1. There are four discourses.
2. There are four letters: \mathcal{S} , S_1 , S_2 , and a .
3. The discourses derive from each other by a four-part sequential cycling. Each discourse derives from the previous one by a clockwise rotation of each unit through one position. The Discourse of the University derives from the Discourse of the Analyst in the same way.

Each of the discourses can then be derived from this structure:³⁹



So \Diamond is the deep structure or geography of Lacanian discourse—it is the *shape* and *space* of discourse, a four-fold image set to work in a signifying structure. Elsewhere, Lacan implicates the sign itself in another tetrad: *jouissance*, the Other, the sign, and love.⁴⁰

The succession of 1 by 4 is even more direct than this recourse to the Four Discourses might suggest, for the quaternary structure of \Diamond can be derived in another and more immediate way. “One,” when figured as “1,” inscribes the first of all marks, as discussed in Chapter Two: |. And hence we come back, as should be expected, to the bar. In terms of this bar, \Diamond orchestrates a score in four movements. If we start with | deflected, in customary fashion, from the vertical, as the virgule / or the solidus / we already have one-

³⁹ After Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, footnote to Lacan, “Love Letter,” in *Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Mitchell and Rose, 160 n6.

quarter of \diamond —the upper left, or “northwest” side. Now Lacan instructs that \diamond has a counter-clockwise orientation.⁴¹ Taking that direction, we can rotate the virgule counter-clockwise 90° about its center:⁴²



The result is a kind of inversion: the backslash, \backslash . The typographer Robert Bringhurst acidly notes that the backslash is “an unsolicited gift of the computer keyboard,” with “no accepted function in typography.”⁴³ So the backslash is opposite to the solidus/virgule not only in orientation, but also in its very legitimacy. \backslash constitutes another side of \diamond , the lower left or “southwest” side, the one next encountered if we follow Lacan anti-clockwise along the perimeter of \diamond . Note that, in moving from $/$ to \backslash , we therefore perform not only a rotation, but also a vertical translation, downwards from one quadrant to another. Note also that in the iconography of road signs, it is the backslash rather than the virgule or the solidus that is used to cross out images, as in “making forbidden.”

If we repeat this process, rotating the backslash 90° anti-clockwise again, we reconstitute the virgule, and generate the third, lower right or “southeast” side. However, keeping in mind Lacan’s dictum of the directionality of \diamond , this second solidus may appear the

⁴⁰ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 39; *Séminaire XX*, 40.

⁴¹ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 209; *Séminaire XI*, 190.

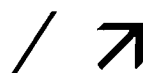
⁴² To be precise, since the solidus is not rotated 45° from the vertical, but somewhat less, the rotation necessary to produce the backslash will be correspondingly smaller. This difference relates to how the top and bottom vertices of \diamond are acute angles. If \diamond is constituted as a rotated square, then each side will indeed be a bar, which is rotated 90° from the orientation of each adjoining side.

⁴³ Bringhurst, *Typographic Style*, 272.

same as the first, but its implicit vectorality is actually opposite. If the anti-clockwise direction is maintained, the first side points down and to the left:

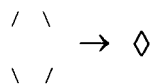


while the second points up and to the right:



Moreover, we once again translate as we rotate, this time laterally, from left to right (as Lacan notes, in the direction of Western reading⁴⁴). Finally, a last 90° rotation gives another backslash, again identical in image but polar in direction, and through a concomitant upwards translation, produces the fourth and last side, in the upper right or “northeast.”

Putting it all together yields \Diamond :



In this way, \Diamond is the multiplication, inversion and translation of the Lacanian bar. Admittedly, every written letter and symbol can be constructed from the bar, the arc, and the dot, so this production of \Diamond from the bar is by no means any special case, but is merely a species of the general condition of letters. If we define the arc as a curved line segment and the dot as an abbreviated or punctuated line, every letter (as well as every alphabetic character) can be said to derive in similar fashion from the bar. Yet such generality is precisely the point: immanent to every letter *qua* elaboration of line is the negation of the letter *qua* Lacanian bar. In other words, the gesture that creates the letter is the very same gesture that crosses it out. The singularity of \Diamond therefore lies not in its genesis in the bar, but

in the particularity of its structured elaboration of that bar and of its situation between \S and a in the matheme for fantasy.

Of course, the bar, as we have seen, is the mark of the cut—which means that \Diamond marks a certain formal complication of castration, and indeed, Lacan defines the fantasy scene as “a defence which veils castration.”⁴⁵ In other words, \Diamond translates castration—it moves castration to another place, *ein anderer Schauplatz*, from one place to another, which implies *two* spaces. Then after 4 comes 2. This is the way many of Lacan’s commentators count, for they typically write out \Diamond not in four parts, but two. Hence, Clément says that \Diamond is a concatenation of the mathematical symbols for “less than” and “greater than”:

$$< + > = \Diamond$$

According to her, this “absurd” combination is “well chosen to signify the essence of fantasy, namely, its impossibility.”⁴⁶ At one time, in algebra, $<$ and $>$ were called the “signs of inequivalence.”⁴⁷ However, other significations are also made, many of which retain the same impossibility in their pairings. Perhaps most basically, $<$ and $>$ are reductions of arrowheads, and therefore indicate opposing directions. Likewise, they are indicative of opposite ordering—increasing and decreasing. In some notations, they mean “derived from”

⁴⁴ “At least in our writing, you read things from left to right” (Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 209). “Au moins dans nos écritures, vous lisez les chose de gauche à droite” (*Séminaire XI*, 190).

⁴⁵ Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. “fantasy.”

⁴⁶ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 179. “La conjonction de $<$ et de $>$, « plus petit que » et « plus grand que », conjonction tout à fait absurde, bien faite pour signifier l’essentiel du fantasme ; son *impossibilité*” (*Vies et légendes*, 208, emphasis in original).

⁴⁷ Alexander MacFarlane, *Principles of the Algebra of Logic, With Examples* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1879), 53.

and “changes to,” asymmetrical relations dependent upon the values taking the positions on either side of the symbol.⁴⁸

A formal symmetry always obtains between $<$ and $>$. Even their very opposition and oppositeness, exemplified in the binary of “less than” and “greater than,” returns in inverted form as a kind of likeness. $<$ and $>$ are mirror images, and, even in the letter, imaginary mirroring is the basis of identification. Hence, $<$ and $>$ are often paired as symbols. In French and other languages, including those using Cyrillic and Greek scripts, $<$ and $>$ are suggestive of single *guillemets*, quotation marks, and are therefore paired not through impossibility, but through logical and grammatical necessity:

$< \quad >$

Still, there remains the familiar ambiguity of single quotation marks, whose usage is so much more plastic, variable, and abused than their doubled equivalents. Typographers who typeset in English have other names for guillemets: *chevrons*, *duck feet* or *angle quotes*.⁴⁹

Correlative to the last, $<$ and $>$ are sometimes deployed as *angle brackets*, especially in situations where various different kinds of bracketing are used to differentiate classes of statements. Lacan’s definition of \Diamond in fact makes reference to parentheses. One textbook of symbolic logic—a discipline whose pertinence will soon become apparent—uses four levels of bracketing: parentheses, square brackets, angle brackets, and “braces” or “curly brackets”: (x) , $[x]$, $\langle x \rangle$, and $\{x\}$. The author comments that angle brackets

⁴⁸ Liungman, *Dictionary*, 103.

⁴⁹ Bringhurst, *Elements*, 279.

designate elements that are “straightforward, but quite difficult,”⁵⁰ which nicely captures the peculiarity of \Diamond in its situation in fantasy.

Perhaps more familiarly, at least now in the plugged-in nineties, long after Lacan’s death, < and > conventionally indicate addresses in e-mail headers. For instance, my own e-mail is sent out with this identifying tag:

Douglas Sadao Aoki <daoki@gpu.srv.ualberta.ca>

The angle bracketing performs a curious shift in realities, for it declares that, to the symbolic network of the Internet, “daoki@gpu.srv.ualberta.ca” is my “real” name. Within the mysterious electronic workings of e-mail, only that designation will identify and locate me. Now, the University of Alberta system, which has more flexibility than some, makes it possible for me to define a user-friendlier alternative, such as “Douglas.Aoki@UAlberta.CA,” which is called an “alias.” Regardless, the angle bracketing makes the system utterly indifferent to the tag sequence, “Douglas Sadao Aoki.” As far as the internet is concerned, that tag sequence could be anything at all, including “Definitely Not Douglas Sadao Aoki” without affecting the operational effectiveness of e-mail in the slightest. For e-mail, angle bracketing defines the only pertinent truth of the subject.

To draw on a very different context and location, in Anglo-Saxon runes, < is called *kaun* or *kaen*, and is associated with *opening up*.⁵¹ Note that even as < and > signify directional opposition, their concatenation suggests the space that moving apart generates between them, a space that is both positive and negative. Positive, because of the substance of distance produced, with all the positivity that measurement, itself perhaps most

⁵⁰ Gerald Massey, *Understanding Symbolic Logic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), xix.

⁵¹ Liungman, *Dictionary*, 102.

fundamentally figured as distance, implies. Negative, because space also always signifies a gap or *béance*. $<$ and $>$ even point to such a spatiality much more graphically. Somewhere indeterminate between their individuated separation and their integration in \Diamond , there is the possibility of $<$ and $>$ being together, but not quite. This conformation constitutes a particular element in the language of computing: $<>$. This means “separate from,”⁵² which here repeats, and therefore emphasizes, the separation of \mathcal{S} and a in fantasy. $\mathcal{S} \Diamond a$, after all, is not $\mathcal{S}a$. The *poinçon* unites \mathcal{S} and a by relating them, but it also keeps them apart. That is, it keeps them at a certain distance. In some commentators’ texts, \Diamond is in fact type-set as $<>$.⁵³ We could take the sense of separation to an even more basic level, and consider how the very spatiality of $<$ and $>$ is a figuration of “simple” difference. This generates questions that can only be partially answered later: What is the difference between \mathcal{S} and a that is so emphatically figured in $\mathcal{S} \Diamond a$? And what is the significance of the difference?

Despite the inclinations of writers like Clément, Lacan himself suggests a different dual genesis than that of $<$ melded with $>$, for he diagrams \Diamond as a pair of “vectors,”



Figure 4.1: The vectors of the *poinçon*⁵⁴

and proceeds to discuss “the small \mathbf{V} of the lower half of the losange.”⁵⁵ Then instead of the pair, $<$ and $>$, we have \wedge and \vee . Both of these are standard signs in symbolic logic, which

⁵² Liungman, *Dictionary*, 150.

⁵³ For example, Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 4.

⁵⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 209; *Séminaire XI*, 190. These are not really vectors as physics defines the term, because each one of them has more than one direction.

Lacan explicitly invokes in his discussion of \Diamond .⁵⁶ \wedge signifies “*all that lacks existence, nothing, or the zero class.*” So \wedge summons up the spirit of \emptyset . More basically, it also denotes “and” in logic.⁵⁷ Parallel to the usages of $<$ and $>$, \wedge designates an upward direction. It is also common in military and heraldic contexts, where it is called a *chevron*. The French car manufacturer Citroën uses a doubled chevron as its emblem. In typography, \wedge is the *caret*. The caret is one of the most common editorial signs, used to indicate the position for a missing letter, word or phrase to be added.⁵⁸ It is also used to indicate “make subscript.” Bringhurst calls \wedge “a stray, like the backslash, inherited from the standard ASCII keyboard.”⁵⁹ However, shrunken and crowning a letter, \wedge regains full typographic status as the circumflex accent, necessary not only to French, but also to Portuguese, Rumanian, Turkish, Vietnamese, Welsh and many other languages. The case of French is doubly pertinent here, for the circumflex also marks something missing (that is, something lost in etymological history)—and what is missing is nothing other than *s*.

In symbolic logic, \vee signifies “the whole universe, all that in one way or another exists.” There, \vee is called *wedge* or *vee* and is meant to invoke the Latin *vel*, meaning “or.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 209. “Le petit \vee de la moitié inférieure du losange” (*Séminaire XI*, 190).

⁵⁶ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 210; *Séminaire XI*, 191.

⁵⁷ \wedge and \vee are opposites of a kind, with \wedge denoting “and” while \vee signifies “or.” However, their usage is not commensurably parallel in symbolic logic. \vee appears to be universally used for the inclusive “or,” while many notations replace \wedge by \bullet , the dot, for “and.”

⁵⁸ *The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers*, 14th ed. (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1993), 66.

⁵⁹ Bringhurst, *Elements*, 274.

⁶⁰ Massey, *Symbolic Logic*, 9; E. J. Lemmon, *Beginning Logic* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 19; Irving M. Copi, *Symbolic Logic*, 4th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 10.

Lacan takes up this convention himself, but elaborates a psychoanalytic *vel*, which has been discussed earlier with respect to alienation.⁶¹ It denotes “or” in logic, and indicates a downward direction.⁶² In Sweden, \vee as a hobo sign means “they give only if you are ill,” which makes \vee a most curious “half” to the hobos’ \Diamond .⁶³ Editorially, \vee is correlative to \wedge , and therefore called an inverted caret. It locates the position of other elements to be added: quotation marks, an apostrophe, or a missing note reference.⁶⁴ It also indicates, “make superscript.” Reduced to an inverted circumflex, \vee becomes the *caron*, an accent in Croatian, Slovene, and other scripts. Hence, Žižek. The *caron* is often referred to by its Czech name, *háček*.

Paired together, there is the same expression of impossibility that Clément noted for $<$ and $>$: *up and down, and and or, nothing and the universe, all that exists and all that lacks existence*.

But consider \vee by itself again, for Lacan pays special attention to it:

You know, from your earliest lessons in logic, that there is the exclusive *vel*—I go *either* there *or* there—if I go there, I do not go there, I have to choose. There is another way of using *vel*—I go to one side or the other, I don’t care, one’s as good as the other. These two *vels* are not alike. Well, there is a third. . . . *Neither one, nor the other*.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 209-215; *Séminaire XI*, 190-195.

⁶² Liungman, *Dictionary*, 102-103.

⁶³ Liungman, *Dictionary*, 59.

⁶⁴ *Chicago Manual*, 68.

⁶⁵ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 210, emphasis in original.

Vous savez, de votre minimum d’éducation logicienne, qu’il y a le *vel* exhaustif — je vais *ou* là *ou* là — si je vais là, je ne vais pas là, il faut choisir. Il y a aussi une autre façon d’employer *vel* — je vais d’un côté ou de l’autre, on s’en fout, c’est équivalent. Ce sont deux *vel* qui ne son pas pareils. Eh bien, il y en a un troisième *ni l’un, ni l’autre*. (*Séminaire XI*, 191, emphasis in original)

Lacan is playing a little loose with his Latin here. *Vel* generally refers to the inclusive *or*, which does not deny the possibility of both disjuncts of the *vel* being possible or true. What Lacan calls the “exclusive *vel*” is actually the Latin *aut*. For logicians, the inclusive *vel* is much more fundamental, and the \vee is a kind of graphic ascension of *vel* over *aut* (Lemmon, *Beginning Logic*, 19).

It is this third kind of *vel* that Lacan calls the “*vel* of alienation,” which we have already encountered. Alienation, then, is immanent to \diamond , which means that alienation is at the center of $\$ \diamond a$. It is at the heart of fantasy. This third *vel* brings us to 3 in our counting of \diamond .

Three: Fantasy and the Schemata of the Visual Field

In the same seminar that Lacan relates \diamond to alienation, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, he also draws out a triad of similar shapes:

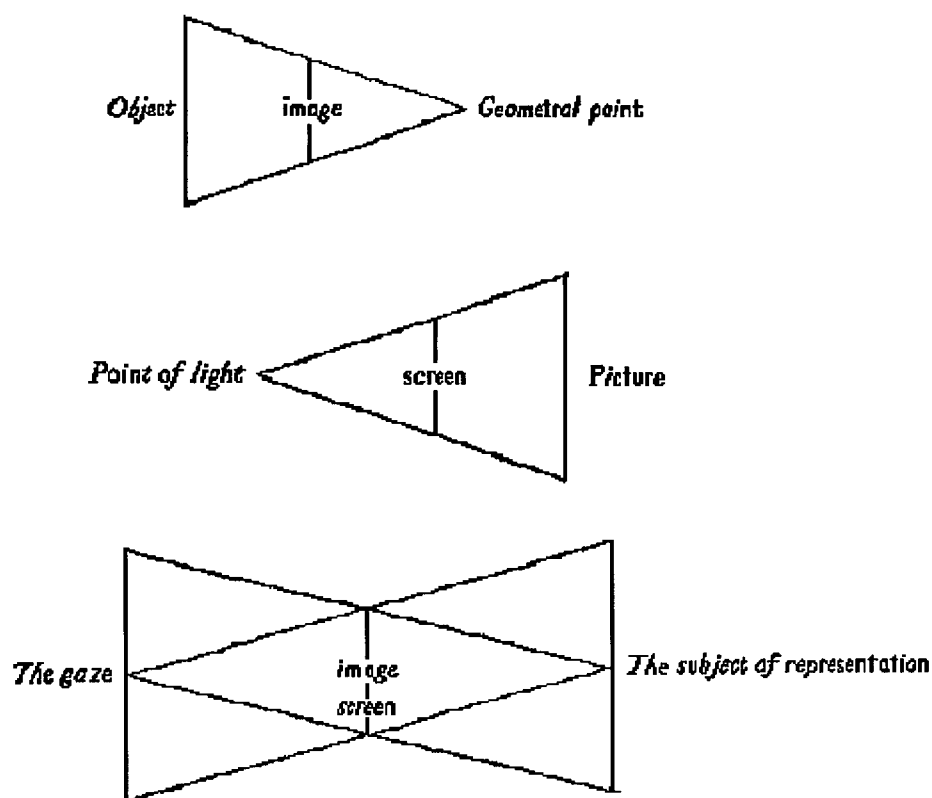


Figure 4.2: The schemata of the visual field⁶⁶

Lacan calls these diagrams *schemata*, echoing the SCHEMATA L, R, and I (with one triad of diagrams and another triad of registers, three slides back into two . . .). He intends these

⁶⁶ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 91, 106; *Séminaire XI*, 85, 97.

schemata to show “how the subject who concerns us is caught, manipulated, captured in the field of vision.”⁶⁷ In order to relate these diagrams to the function of \Diamond in fantasy, they will need to be elaborated. But first, we need to consider their formal relation to \Diamond .

Lacan states that Diagram 3 is obtained by a superimposition of Diagram 1 and Diagram 2.⁶⁸ How do they get superimposed? Given Lacan’s partiality to the metonymic and the implicit horizontality of vision, especially as presumed in the diagrams,⁶⁹ then the most fitting superimposition of the diagrams is a horizontal translation. That is, if Diagram 1 is positioned on the left—again, following the order of Western letters—and Diagram 2 is positioned on the right, moving them towards each other until they exactly overlap produces Diagram 3.

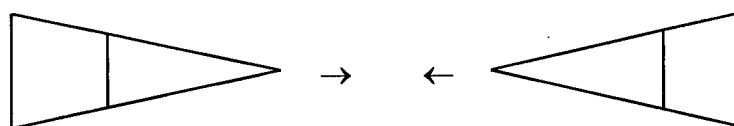


Figure 4.3: Translating the schemata

Now, if we restart the same operation and continue the mutual translation, sliding each schema yet further in their respective and opposite lateral directions until their bases coincide, what is generated is the following stretched/rotated version of \Diamond :

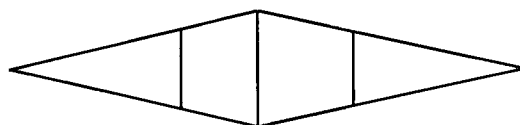


Figure 4.4: The translated schemata

⁶⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 92. “Comment le sujet qui nous intéresse est pris, manœuvré, capté, dans le champ de la vision” (*Séminaire XI*, 86).

⁶⁸ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 106; *Séminaire XI*, 97.

⁶⁹ The chapter in *Seminar XI* that introduces the schemata is entitled, “The Line and Light.” We could say that the line of light here is the same as the line of vision: a horizontal vector bisecting the acute angle of each triangle.

This figure looks very much like a pair of triangular trusses, evoking the fourth meaning of *poinçon*. The formal or structural relation between \diamond and the schemata of the visual field portends a substantive relation between them, insofar as Lacan defines fantasy as an *image* set to work in a signifying structure. Since the schemata comprise one of Lacan's most serious elaborations of the scopic, they have crucial implications for fantasy. But in order to work those out, the unsimple relations of the schemata must first be opened up. Kaja Silverman's acute reading of the structure of Lacanian optics is followed here, for the most part.⁷⁰

Diagram 1: The Look and the Subject-as-Look

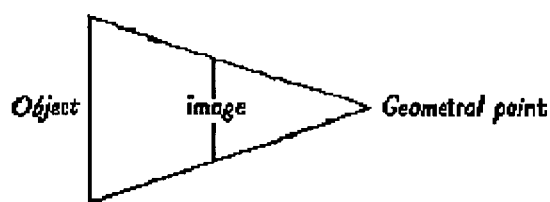


Figure 4.5: Diagram 1: The look and the subject-as-look

The looking subject—or more precisely, the organic human eye as the familiar synecdoche for that subject—occupies the position of the *geometral point* on the right, while the *object* that the subject sees spreads across the base of the triangle at the left, like the vista of a traditional landscape. However, between the subject and the object, exactly at that point where Alberti imagines the enabling perspectival transparency of a pane of glass, Lacan introduces the opacity of an *image* that interrupts and reconstitutes the look.⁷¹ In Lacan's eyes, the subject “can only see the object in the guise of the ‘image’,” a certain representation

⁷⁰ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 145-57; Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), especially 131-223.

of the object.⁷² Given this radical dependence of the subject-as-look upon the image, the familiar presumption of the seeing as mastery over the object is revealed as a profound *méconnaissance*, an imaginary conflation of the human look with the inhuman gaze at the seemingly transcendental geometral point. "The relationship between eye and gaze is thus analogous in certain ways to that which links penis and phallus; the former can stand in for the latter, but can never approximate it."⁷³ The magnitude of the misrecognition of the look/eye for the gaze is literally reflected in Albertian perspective, which reverses the triangle of Diagram 1 in order to look *towards* the geometral point. The constitution of depth of field "requires that linear planes which are widely separated in the foreground [the pane of glass at the position of the image] converge at a seemingly distant vanishing point."⁷⁴ The geometral position of the subject in the original Diagram 1 is revealed as anything but the seat of transcendental mastery. Instead, it is precisely the place where all things, including and especially the subject, vanish or fade away. From this perspective, Diagram 1 is the schematization of the *aphanisis* of the looking-subject, at the very moment s/he pretends to the transcendence of the gaze.⁷⁵

The disassociation of the look from the gaze has other crucial and more positive consequences. While Lacan does not deign to expand upon the look, which remains rather obscure as a result in *Seminar XI*, Silverman recognizes that the identification of the look with the organic eye places the former "within spectacle, the body, temporality, and desire."

⁷¹ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 96, 86. Leone Battista Alberti (1404-1472) was a playwright, musician, painter, mathematician, scientist, athlete, architect and architectural theorist. His *De re aedificatoria* (1452) was the first architectural treatise of the Renaissance.

⁷² Silverman, *Threshold*, 132.

⁷³ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 130.

⁷⁴ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 146.

⁷⁵ Such a depiction of *aphanisis*, which is more usually the "fading" of the subject under the signifier, deepens the homology between this schematization of the visual field and subjectivization through symbolic castration.

The look—and thus the subject-as-look—is not fixed, even in its subjugation; while the look is subject to desire, desire is always mobile. Silverman thereby introduces into the visual field that critical little bit of freedom that Lacan allows the subject within the general field of subjection. While Lacan labors to demonstrate the authority of the constitutive inhuman gaze, Silverman enables a certain scopic resistance: the possibility of seeing “something inapprehensible by the camera/gaze,” something that “photographs themselves cannot show.”⁷⁶

Diagram 2: The Gaze and the Subject-as-Spectacle

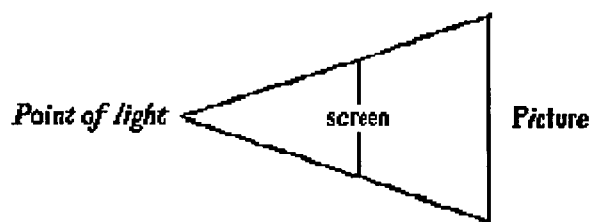


Figure 4.6: Diagram 2: The gaze and the subject-as-spectacle

The seeing subject remains on the right, but is renamed as *picture*, signifying that the subject has become spectacle. The gaze now appears on the left, identified with “the radically disembodied and de-anthropo-morphizing phrase ‘point of light’.”⁷⁷ The gaze resembles the human look only in the loosest of metaphors; it is, in fact, radically inhuman. So in this diagram a particular inversion has occurred, in which the triangle has been flipped over and the subject shifted to a position structurally opposite to the one s/he occupied before. Hence the subject is now schematized as a particular kind of object—not the object of some other subjective look, but rather the object of the subjectifying gaze. Diagram 2 therefore

⁷⁶ Silverman, *Threshold*, 163, 159.

depicts the gaze as it was discussed above, as that which photo-graphs the subject. That is, the gaze “graphs” the subject with light (*photo*) in a specular affirmation. It *illuminates* the subject. However, now the power of the gaze is qualified.⁷⁸ Correlative to the third term of the image in the diagram of the subject-as-look, the *screen* intervenes between the gaze and the subject-as-spectacle. While it is the gaze that subjectifies, it is the screen that is the prime determinant of what form that subjectification will take: “the subject is never ‘photographed’ as ‘himself’ or ‘herself,’ but always in the shape of what is now designated the ‘screen’.”⁷⁹ The gaze frames the subject; the screen fills her/him in.

Diagram 3: The Subject and the Gaze

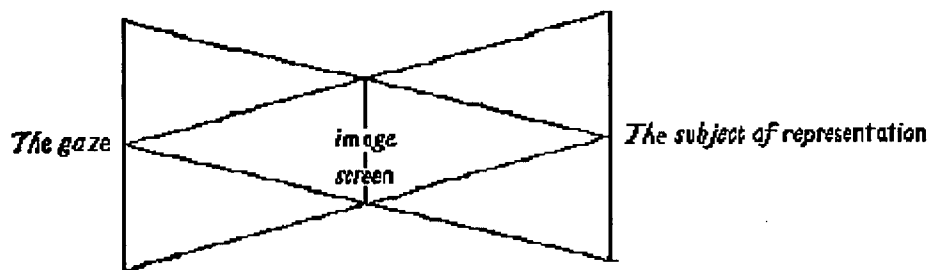


Figure 4.7: Diagram 3: The subject and the gaze

“The last diagram superimposes the second over the first, suggesting that diagram 1 is always circumscribed by diagram 2; even as we look, we are in the ‘picture,’ and, so, a ‘subject of representation’.” The subject as the coincidence of subject-as-look and subject-as-spectacle, remains on the right, but the gaze replaces both object and point of light on the left. Silverman notes: “In this double capacity, [the gaze] is now at an even more emphatic

⁷⁷ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 147.

⁷⁸ The qualification of the gaze further deepens the *méconnaissance* committed by the subject-as-look when s/he mistakes her/himself as the possessor of the gaze *qua* mastering transcendence.

⁷⁹ Silverman, *Threshold*, 133.

remove from the eye. Indeed, *it would seem to 'look' back at us* from precisely the site of those others whom we attempt to subordinate to our visual scrutiny—to always be where we are not.”⁸⁰ Mediating between the subject and the gaze, and distinct from both, is once again a third term, which Lacan designates by the compound *image screen*, and which Silverman simply calls the *screen*. Joan Copjec points out that the interpenetration of the two triangles represents both simple “lines of light” *and* their refraction and diffusion, a condensation which Lacan tropes as “the ambiguity of the jewel.”⁸¹ The symmetry of Diagram 3 is deceptive, inasmuch as what is structured there is not just the difference between the look (of the subject) and the gaze (of the Other), but their radical inequality.”⁸² Insofar as the gaze subjectifies the subject through subjection, the gradient of power is heavily canted to the side of the gaze and the Other—as we might expect, if we recall that the gaze operates under the aegis of that “absolute master,” death.⁸³ Within the visual field, power is (mis)attributed to the subject exactly insofar as the subject-as-look becomes aligned with the gaze.

⁸⁰ Silverman, *Threshold*, 133, emphasis added.

⁸¹ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 33; Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 96. It should be noted that Copjec is quite hostile towards what she calls the “film theory” reading of Lacan, which she surely intends to include Silverman’s (see “The Orthopsychic Subject,” in *Read My Desire*). On the other hand, Copjec’s rendition of film theory’s version of Lacan often deeply conflicts with Silverman’s own texts. For example, “In film theory, the gaze is located ‘in front of’ the image, as its signified, the point of maximal meaning” (*Read My Desire*, 36).

⁸² Silverman discriminates the look from the gaze even more strongly. She writes that the diagram “distinguish[es] rigorously between the look and the gaze, situating the former on the side of desire and the disposition of lack, and the latter on the side of Otherness and iridescence” (*Male Subjectivity*, 9). The separation of look and gaze is her rendering of Lacan’s split between the eye and the gaze (*Seminar XI*, 67-73; *Séminaire XI*, 65-70). Silverman notes, “The French language does not, of course, sustain my distinction, offering only one word—*le regard*—in place of the two primary English signifiers of vision: look and gaze” (*Male Subjectivity*, 129). While her discrimination of the look from the gaze is an illuminating analytical move, it is not unproblematic, inasmuch as Lacan insists that desire is the desire of the Other. Further, the Other is often affiliated with the Symbolic, whose structure and operations hinge on lack, although it is also true that the Other functions as such through its misapprehension as not lacking.

⁸³ “La seule figure . . . celle du maître absolu, la mort” (Jacques Lacan, “Variantes de la cure-type,” in *Écrits*, 348). “The lone figure . . . that of the absolute master, death” (my translation).

Silverman both lauds Lacan's apparatus for its analytical force and criticizes it for its structuralist ahistoricism. Her strategic move—which is nonetheless not so much a refutation of Lacan's system as it is an elaboration of it—is to “propose that the screen is the site at which social and historical difference enters the field of vision,”⁸⁴ the place where cultural and diachronic specificity is introduced to a synchronic system. In the terms of Diagram 3, the screen mediates, historicizes, and particularizes three structural relations:

1. Gaze and subject-as-spectacle.
2. Gaze and subject-as-look.
3. Object and subject-as-look.

“The screen . . . gives shape and significance to how we are seen by ‘others as such,’ how we define and interact with the agency to which we attribute our visibility, and how we perceive the world.”⁸⁵ However, even as the screen is in this way constitutive of the reality of our social world, it also binds the visual field to *fantasy*.⁸⁶ Lacan says that fantasy “is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of repetition.”⁸⁷ He also compares “the fantasy scene to a frozen image on a cinema screen.”⁸⁸ Thus, in the diagram of the scopic register, the image, which is definitive of fantasy, coincides with the screen.

We can be even more precise, for across all three schemata of the visual field, the image/screen both mediates and separates the subject from something else (respectively, the

⁸⁴ Silverman, *Threshold*, 134, emphasis added.

⁸⁵ Silverman, *Threshold*, 173.

⁸⁶ See the discussion below on $s(O)$.

⁸⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 60. “Le fantasme n’est jamais que l’écran qui dissimule quelque chose de tout à fait premier, de déterminant dans la fonction de la répétition” (*Séminaire XI*, 58-59).

⁸⁸ Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. “fantasy.”

object, the point of light, the gaze). In other words, the image/screen in the final schema of the visual field is isomorphic to the *poinçon* in the matheme for fantasy:

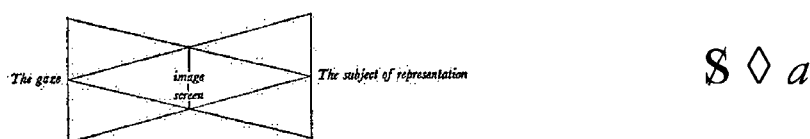


Figure 4.8: The isomorphism of the screen and the *poinçon*

\Diamond is even the very image of a conventionally rectangular movie screen, seen from a decidedly non-audience perspective, above and from the side—so the screen is revealed *as a screen* when it is seen from an unintended (anamorphic) angle.

The Place of Fantasy: Between Meaning and the Lack of the Other

Thus far, this reading of the matheme for fantasy has focused on its literal configuration, especially the *poinçon* within it. The inwardness of this approach has been deliberate, a tactical inversion of the dangerous conventionality of reading as contextualization (which, in Lacanese, must fail insofar as it presumes the impossible consistency of context, that is, the consistency of the big Other *qua* the language of meaning). But there is another and more productive kind of “externalized” complement to the internal topology of $S \Diamond a$: the mapping of the Lacanian field of fantasy. What results from such a cartography is a kind of geography of desire—and so, we are returned to the Graph of Desire.

The “*graphe complet*” schematizes the relations between no less than ten mathemes, and it is not possible to trace out all the nuances of their interconnections here. Instead, the last part of this chapter will concentrate on the specific situation of fantasy.

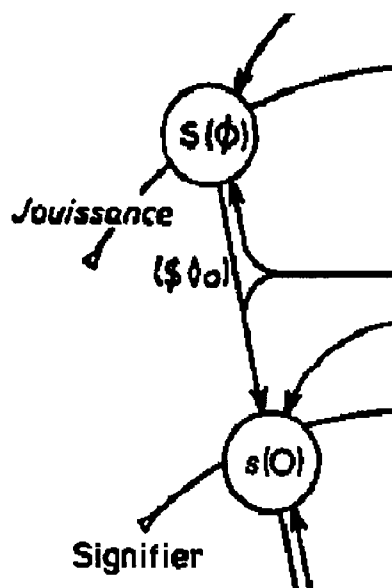


Figure 4.9: The place of fantasy in the Graph of Desire⁸⁹

In this quadrant, the upper left portion of the Graph, the matheme for fantasy, $S \diamond a$, is located just below $S(\emptyset)$ and just above $s(O)$. According to Žižek, these mathemes define the upper half of the *descending* vector in the graph, which means that fantasy comes *after* $S(\emptyset)$ and *before* $s(O)$, although this ordering is more logical than temporal. This description is, at best, incomplete, for another vector simultaneously ascends from $S \diamond a$ to $S(\emptyset)$, so the relation between these two is by no means uni-directional. Žižek appears to be oversimplifying the valence of fantasy. Nonetheless, his subsequent conclusion still obtains: all three mathemes can be “conceived in view of the logic that regulates their succession”⁹⁰—it’s just that such a succession goes both ways. Once again, the spatialization of the imaginary is revelatory of symbolic ordering.

⁸⁹ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 315.

⁹⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 122-123.

"First," Žižek says, "we have $S(\emptyset)$: the mark of the lack of the Other, of the inconsistency of the symbolic order when it is penetrated by *jouissance*."⁹¹ Here, *mark* is a name for the signifier, so $S(\emptyset)$ is a species of S .⁹² But this is a very special signifier, for it marks the operational failure of the Other. The matheme \emptyset , by its being barred, declares that the Other as a communicative linguistic system ultimately misfires. The matheme $S(\emptyset)$ designates the signifier, the word or the concatenation of words which embodies or unveils that misfiring. It is the signifier that bares the barring of the Other. $S(\emptyset)$ is thus that instance of the text that trips up transparent understanding; it is the decisive irruption of un-clarity. The signifier *par excellence* of the lack of the Other is therefore nothing other than the Lacanian text. The exemplar of this text is the matheme itself—which means that $S(\emptyset)$ is also a species of itself. The matheme is the negativity of the lack (of the Other) made manifest as the positive substance of the letter. To translate this to the scene of reading, the matheme is the opacity of the letter that blocks the transparency of the text. For the same reasons, $\$ \diamond a$, $s(\emptyset)$ and every other matheme are also specimens of $S(\emptyset)$, which means that all mathemes are logically subsumed by $S(\emptyset)$. The general is, in this, way given body by the particular.⁹³

What of the second half of Žižek's description of $S(\emptyset)$, that is, the linkage of the inconsistency of the symbolic order to *jouissance*? In his discussion of voice as *objet a*, Žižek identifies the equivalence of the two as "the eclipse of meaning, the point at which meaning slides into *jouis-sense*."⁹⁴ That is, *objet a* is where meaning slides into the interpenetration of

⁹¹ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 123.

⁹² Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 316.

⁹³ This move recalls the logic of the formulae of sexuation in "Love Letter."

⁹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 102.

play and sense, what Žižek calls “enjoyment-in-sense (enjoy-meant).”⁹⁵ When he translates *jouissance* as “enjoyment,” he is not invoking the everyday sense of the word. Or rather, his “enjoyment” is more than enjoyment. Enjoyment as *jouissance* implies a most violent cathexis, which is by no means necessarily positive. In Žižek’s reading, *jouissance* condenses fascination, terror, ecstasy, revulsion. His classic example is from the first *Alien* movie: the “face-hugger,” which attaches to John Hurt’s face in order to force itself down his throat and into his body. There it incubates/festers, until that fatal, gory moment when it erupts out of him.⁹⁶ The director of *Alien*, Ridley Scott, calls that transformation of the face-hugger the “chest-burster.”⁹⁷ Žižek calls it the “sprout of enjoyment”—where enjoyment is a name compact of horror, maternity, flesh, death, sex, perversion, agony, interiority, exteriority, intimacy, ineffability and, of course, the alien.⁹⁸

The disputes over clear writing may pale against Hollywood FX, but at least a touch (a little prick?) of the same *jouissance* courses through each. The passion of the critique of writing like Lacan’s is generally attached to the contention that such writing threatens something precious—such as the art of teaching. Žižek uses precisely the terms of a threat to the precious for a Lacanian analysis of culture,⁹⁹ but his problematic is also apt to the issue of clear writing. When he takes up the notion of the Lacanian Thing (which is *objet a* by another name and in other circumstances), he writes, “the whole meaning of the Thing turns

⁹⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 44.

⁹⁶ H. R. Giger, *Giger’s Alien* (London: Big O Publishing, 1979), 52.

⁹⁷ Giger, *Alien*, 56.

⁹⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 79. To be exact, Žižek uses “sprout of enjoyment” to refer to the face-hugger stage of the monster. However, the face-hugger metamorphosizes to the chest-burster, through the good, albeit unconscious and unwilling, offices of Hurt’s nurturing body, so the “sprout of enjoyment” is at least a metonym for the latter. Besides, there is too much resonance between *sprout* and *burster* for the term not to be even more apt—not to mention the *jouissance* of ejaculation as a *spout* of enjoyment.

on the fact that 'it means something' to people."¹⁰⁰ And so we are returned to the desire for imaginary meaning in the symbolic order of texts. Betsy Wing even notes that *jouissance* is a homonym for *j'ouïs sens*: I hear meaning.¹⁰¹ Jacques-Alain Miller makes the connection between *jouissance* and intolerance: "The question of tolerance or intolerance . . . is located on the level of tolerance or intolerance toward the enjoyment of the Other; the Other as he who essentially steals my own enjoyment."¹⁰² There is an unmistakable pleasure in the invective of intolerance, a signature thrill that is, in spite of itself, definitively Lacanian. Such a "paradoxical pleasure procured by displeasure itself" is exactly *jouissance*.¹⁰³

Lacan's matheme (as a stand-in for typical Lacanian obscurity and other difficult texts) is so highly cathected for its critics, not just because it defies their purportedly transcendental standards, but also because, in doing so, it seems to rob those critics of pleasure in their own treasured texts. In the *Teaching Sociology* debate, one sociologist demanded to know if reading C. Wright Mills, who is a lovely stylist, made Lacanians and their ilk feel like throwing up.¹⁰⁴ In Žižekian terms, there is the rage that one's own *agalma*, one's most precious treasure, is being turned to shit.¹⁰⁵ This phenomenon of King-Midas-more-than-in-reverse comes forth in particularized incoherence, such as the common complaint that post-structuralists or post-modernists deny the existence of meaning. This claim is as revealing as it is bizarre. Whether language is figured through *différance* or the

⁹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative* (Durham: Duke Univ Press, 1993). Culture and nation are the subjects of the chapter, "Enjoy Your Nation as Yourself"

¹⁰⁰ Žižek, *Tarrying*, 202, emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ Betsy Wing, "Glossary," in *The Newly Born Woman*, by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 1986), 165.

¹⁰² Jacques-Alain Miller, "Extimité," unpublished lecture, Paris, 27 November 1985, quoted and trans. in Žižek, *Tarrying*, 203.

¹⁰³ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 202.

¹⁰⁴ Post to *TeachSoc* list, 11 December 1996.

glissade of the signifying chain, the “problem” with meaning is not its extinction but its proliferation. To rail against the disappearance of meaning is to invert proliferation as annihilation. In this sense, the policing of texts urges the extermination of something that never existed. The excess of this desire is a metonymy for how the passion for clear writing is always a passion for absolute and impossible control—in Lacanese, it is always a grab for the ultimate and impossible phallus.

To return to the *matheme* and the Graph of Desire, the kinship between $S(\emptyset)$ and *objet a* may appear paradoxical, inasmuch as it implies an equivalence between the signifier—as the paradigmatic element of the symbolic—and the object—as the definitive point of the real. This is only a seeming paradox, for $S(\emptyset)$, like *objet a*, is a kind of object.¹⁰⁶ It is objectal because by definition it is a leftover that does not integrate into the symbolic system. While the *matheme*, as a kind of letter, is the definitive symbolic entity, its defiance of general reading practices means that it is also something qualitatively other than normal text. We can characterize the nature of this “something” by returning to the rhetoric of clarity.

As discussed in Chapter One, in the reduction of reading to understanding, the text vanishes through the mediation of its own transparency. The violence of such mundane reading usually goes unremarked. Not only is this mode of reading a kind of annihilation, it is also a kind of ingestion, just as the mode of understanding it underwrites is a kind of incorporation into a subjective body of knowledge. To read a text is to kill it *and* eat it. Given that the measure of such reading is the thoroughness of consumption (what else is tested on

¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, see below, where it is Lacan himself who becomes shit.

¹⁰⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 182-187.

most university examinations?¹⁰⁷), only what cannot be assimilated remains behind. It is no coincidence that the Lacanian text is so often vilified as “indigestible,” as if it were bone, gristle, or offal rejected by a diner. One cannot swallow Lacan. Alternatively, eating a text also leaves a remnant, one which is taken in but not absorbed into the system. Hence the other popular characterization: Lacan as that redoubtable psychoanalytic object, shit.

Shit is one incarnation of *objet a*.¹⁰⁸ In parallel fashion, *objet a* is intimate to the symbolic, for it is the object which “cannot be symbolized, which is produced as a residue, a remnant, a leftover of every signifying operation, a hard core embodying horrifying *jouissance*.” Žižek notes that *objet a* is an object which cannot be dominated—an apt description of the matheme that resurfaces the politics of the hegemonic regime of reading which cannot accommodate it.¹⁰⁹

The matheme therefore stages a convergence of $S(\emptyset)$ to *objet a*. Besides the equivalences already noted, the matheme is, in Žižek’s terms, a real or “sublime” object, for, as observed above, “in its positivity” it is “nothing but an embodiment of a pure negativity.”¹¹⁰ Further, Lacan states that the appearance of *objet a* is always accompanied by anxiety (and vice-versa), and anxiety surely captures the popular response to the matheme.¹¹¹ The contention here is that $S(\emptyset)$ and *objet a* are different but highly intricately aspects of the matheme. $S(\emptyset)$ points towards the matheme as letter and the symbolic as ultimately lacking; *objet a* points towards the object and the intrusion of the real via *jouissance*.

¹⁰⁷ Thoroughness of knowledge is also one explicit measure on the teaching evaluations used at the University of British Columbia.

¹⁰⁸ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 315; “Subversion du sujet,” 817.

¹⁰⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 180.

¹¹⁰ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 170.

¹¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire X : L’angoisse : 1962–1963*. Unpublished, quoted from an anonymous transcript in Marini, *Jacques Lacan*, 188.

While $S(\emptyset)$ is the mark of the inconsistency of the Other, fantasy is a screen veiling this inconsistency.¹¹² In more familiarly psychoanalytic terms, fantasy is a defense that veils castration, although for Lacan, castration covers a more general lack than traditional readings of Freud permit. In Lacanian theory, the castration of the subject both repeats and devolves from the castration or lack of the Other. $\$$ is thus always correlated to \emptyset . Then fantasy is a screen for the castration of the subject and the Other. Here, *screen* must be read as a condensation of the divers senses of its popular usage:

1. As that which hides or veils, thereby screening something from being seen.
2. As the cinema screen, which is the condition of the image being seen.
3. As the place where an imaginary scene is played out.
4. As the place where an image can be frozen in order to *stop* the scene.

It is because the screen is definitive of fantasy that the schemata of the visual field are so pertinent. The screen does not merely veil. In addition, by that veiling, it permits reality as such to be constituted. The world is only apprehensible to the subject through the intercession of the screen; the world is figured by the imaginary universe constituting the scene of fantasy. So for Lacan, fantasy is not opposed to reality; fantasy is the condition of reality and fantasy is reality.

The coincidence of reality and fantasy can be read in $\$ \diamond a$. Fantasy's manifestation as a screen means that fantasy reiterates the structure of its own matheme. Just as the *poinçon* intercedes between the barred subject and *objet a* in $\$ \diamond a$, fantasy itself intercedes between the subject and the failure of the big Other, in another example of formal conversion or externalization:

¹¹² Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 123.

$$\S \diamond a$$

$$\S \S \diamond a \emptyset$$

According to Silverman, the fantasy scene is where the social enters the visual field.

Such an equivalence of fantasy and reality is what Žižek invokes as he follows the vector in the Graph of Desire down from the matheme of fantasy to $s(O)$, meaning: “ $s(O)$, the effect of the signification as dominated by fantasy: fantasy functions as ‘absolute signification’ (Lacan); it constitutes the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful—the a priori space within which the particular effects of signification take place.”¹¹³ This is to say that signification *qua* meaning frames the world as we experience it; this is meaning as the meaning of life.

To recall Chapter Two, s is the matheme for the signified, whose expansion as $s(O)$ shows that the signified is a function of the big Other. Yet after all the careful emphasis on the big Other as barred (\emptyset), it suddenly reappears, on the other side of fantasy, as whole again (O). This curious restoration figures fantasy as that which veils the lack or barring of the big Other. Hence, it is $\S \diamond a$ that makes \emptyset appear as O , and it is that particular representation of the Other which permits signification (and the world) to take hold. The condition of the signified—and therefore of meaning—is the impossible consistency of language. This sense of the Other as re-made whole is the other face of *capitonnage*, which stabilizes the field of language as a field of meaning. Signification is not individuated to the particularity of the sign (the verticality of signifier and signified); it depends on the systematicity of the Other as the synchronous code (as figured in the horizontality of the

¹¹³ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 123.

signifying chain).¹¹⁴ However, as noted before, the *point de capiton* is ultimately mythical, which is why fantasy is necessary to make *capitonnage* appear possible. Fantasy is the recuperation of the inevitable failure of the symbolic. Lacan says that $s(O)$ constitutes signification “as a finished product.”¹¹⁵ “Fantasy is thus characterised by a fixed and immobile quality”:¹¹⁶ the immobilization of *capitonnage*, versus the sliding of the signifying chain, or timelessness as frozen time (the death of the vitality of language).

The contingency of meaning explains, in part, the intolerance of Lacan by the champions of plain language. They seem to understand, if unconsciously, that the entire system of language must work as a whole in order for their position to remain tenable. As noted in Chapter One, they are not declaring their mere preference for a certain kind of writing. Nor are they simply championing the superiority of the same. Rather, they are bent on eradicating the kind of writing that Lacan has come to figure. An international graduate student listserv for sociology recently had a thread whose subject was a “bad writing competition.” This annual contest highlighted examples of academic writing which were judged as laughably bad—and the consistent measure of “badness” was the obscurity and density of style. As several of the list members noted, so-called “post-modernists” were vastly over-represented on the list of “winners.” One respondent succinctly summed up the collective opinion: such writing has *no place* in the sociological literature.¹¹⁷ It seems that that entire body of writing would be tainted and made unacceptable by the disciplinary existence of such texts. This is a much stronger stance than even the most forceful disagreement,

¹¹⁴ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 103.

¹¹⁵ Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject,” 304. “Produit fini” (“Subversion du sujet,” 806).

¹¹⁶ Evans, *Dictionary*, s.v. “fantasy.”

¹¹⁷ Post to the *Socgrad* list, 9 June 1997. The invocation of “the sociological literature” is symptomatic of the privilege, and therefore politics, of clear writing.

which must allow an opposing position to be articulated within the disciplinary literature, in order for the argument against it to be made. For such vigilant guardians against bad writing, the big Other of sociology had to remain pure—the big Other had to remain unbarred. Of course, the *foreclosure* of Lacan and his ilk can never completely succeed. Instead, their righteous purging must be performatively repeated over and over again. Hence, the bad writing competition pops up year after year. There is an eternal return to $S(\emptyset)$.

This return must be linked with the penetration of the big Other by *jouissance*, as indicated in the Graph of Desire. “The trouble with *jouissance* is not that it is unattainable, that it always eludes our grasp, but rather that *one can never get rid of it*, that is, a stain drags along for ever—therein resides the point of Lacan’s notion of surplus-enjoyment: the very renunciation of *jouissance* brings about a remainder/surplus of *jouissance*.”¹¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, that return can also be read in the Graph of Desire. Specifically, it appears in the vector that Žižek ignored: the line that points from fantasy *back* to $S(\emptyset)$. This return provides the necessary complication of fantasy, for it indicates that fantasy leads both to meaning and to the ultimate disruption of meaning. This reiterates the paradoxical status of the letter, which is both the condition of communication (for signification depends upon the signifier) and the ultimate obstacle to it (the desire for clarity being the desire for the erasure of the letter). It can be said that the fantasy scene stages a convergence of the signifier to *objet a* in the letter. The letter moves between its status as S and its status as *a*. Or, more precisely, it is the *image* of the letter that oscillates between them. Suppose the concept of *letter* is flipped to its other sense, in a way that Lacan certainly did, from time to time. Then the image of a letter could be the rectangular page: □. One kind of letter is therefore the “scene” of the other. Note that this is a reflexive relation. A letter of correspondence is

where letters of the alphabet are written out, but those same letters also comprise the “space” of correspondence. Again, the letter stages the spatiality of language. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan designates “the function of ‘place’ as such” by the square: \square .¹¹⁹ Then the letter between the signifier and *objet a* can be written out as:

$$S \square a$$

This is a formal homologue to the matheme for fantasy:

$$\S \diamond a$$

Such a structural kinship brings back the relation of the subject to the signifier. Lacan is explicit about how that relation is played out in fantasy: language allows the subject “to regard himself as the scene-shifter, or even the director of the entire imaginary capture of which he would otherwise be nothing more than the living marionette.”¹²⁰ As noted at the beginning of this chapter, for Lacan, the fantasy of language is the means by which the subject sustains her/himself as subject. But language keeps getting out of hand: “the subject sustains himself [sic] as desiring in relation to an ever more complex signifying ensemble.”¹²¹ The final chapter of this dissertation considers how this fantasy plays out, both in the case of

¹¹⁸ Žižek, *Indivisible Remainder*, 93, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 28; *Séminaire XX*, 31.

¹²⁰ Lacan, “Direction of Treatment,” 272. “Le langage . . . permet [le sujet] de se considérer comme le machiniste, voire le metteur en scène de toute la capture imaginaire dont il ne serait autrement que la marionnette vivante” (“Direction de la cure,” 637).

¹²¹ *Seminar XI*, 185; “Le sujet se soutient comme désirant par rapport à un ensemble signifiant toujours beaucoup plus complexe” (*Séminaire XI*, 168).

two critics of Lacan, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, and that of one student of Lacan, myself.

Chapter Five:

Imposing the Matheme

If few linguists take the linguisterie seriously, there must be even fewer mathematicians or logicians who view the matheme with anything but extreme suspicion or savage amusement.¹

—David Macey

This dissertation began by claiming that the matheme condenses general issues of language and teaching, especially through its literal defiance of the hegemonic presumptions of teaching sociology. Because of that defiance—a defiance of reading, a defiance of meaning, a defiance of understanding—the matheme is typically cast, even by those sympathetic to Lacan, as both abstract and hyper-theoretical. What is missed by that characterization is that it is the very esotericism of the matheme that gives it exoteric consequence. The matheme is not language reduced or formalized, despite its imaginary perception as such, but rather language distilled to encounter its strangeness to itself. Any time we read or write—which, in the inevitable metonymy of writing to language and language to conception itself, means any time we think or think our selves—the mathemic emerges *in the letter*, in every doomed presumption to meaning and every unexpected disruption of it, in every not-quite-felicitous speech act and every slip of the tongue, in every mundane shift of identity from I to he to she to me.² Judith Butler's insight about the mattering of human bodies applies to the matheme:³ it matters—that is, it has significance.

¹ Macey, *Lacan In Contexts*, 171.

² A key concern of Lacan's theory of language is the status of "shifters," pronouns like *I* or *she*. These have a curious negativity, in that they cannot identify anyone except in the moment of their articulation. See "Possible Treatment," 186; "Traitement possible," 540; *Seminar XI*, 139; *Séminaire XI*, 127.

³ Butler, "Introduction," *Bodies That Matter*.

and it materializes that significance—because it is the strange body of human language.⁴ It is the *antibody* of language. Given that the letter is the material embodiment of language, the matheme is a letter from Lacan.

This dissertation will near its end by reiterating its primal claim differently. The matheme matters because it is at the heart—albeit not exactly the center—of current and furious debates about the very status of theory. The center, at least according to Raymond Tallis, is none other than Lacan himself, that fattest spider of theorrhea. Nonetheless, the matheme is close to the center of the web spun by Lacan—even Tallis implies as much. In order to damn Lacan, he invokes the matheme by another but immediately recognizable name:

In his last few years, [Lacan] . . . became obsessed by a particular mathematical figure called a Borromean knot, in which he saw the key to the ontological situation of mankind. His *quasi-mathematical, pseudo-logical fantasies*—the culmination of the cargo cult science of his school—propounded in interminable seminars, were agonised over by his congregation who suffered appallingly from their inability to make sense of them.⁵

Even if Tallis had not conveniently and accurately labelled the matheme as not-quite-mathematics, the matheme would betray its identity by how it confounds sense. If the principal agent of Theory *qua* institutionalized imposture is, as Tallis claims, Lacan, the

⁴ Christopher Bracken observes that “one of Heidegger’s goals in ‘The Nature of Language’ is to break with the metaphysical tradition that understands language primarily in terms of the bodies that utter it” (*The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997], 52; Martin Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz [New York: Harper and Row, 1971]). Lacan, who made the first translation of Heidegger into French, extends Heidegger by simultaneously disembodiment and embodying language: “Language is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but body it is” (Lacan, “Function and field,” 87; “Fonction et champ,” 301). See Chapter Two.

⁵ Tallis, “Shrink From Hell,” 20, emphasis added.

special object elevated (or lowered) by Tallis to the status of its crystallization *as* imposture is the *matheme*.⁶

Tallis is by no means idiosyncratic in his sentiments. They are notably shared by the most conspicuous of Lacan's recent critics, Alan Sokal. Until a few years ago, Sokal was a physicist at New York University with an academic's customary low profile outside of his discipline. In 1996, however, he became a sudden celebrity right across the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. This transformation followed the publication of his article, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," in a special issue of *Social Text* called *Science Wars*—which consequently gave its name to the revived dispute between the humanities and the sciences.⁷ Shortly thereafter, Sokal revealed that his paper was a hoax,⁸ an imposture deliberately constructed to expose what he characterized as the fraudulence of the "currently fashionable postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse."⁹ This disclosure launched what the editors of *Lingua Franca* called "an avalanche of discussion about academic jargon, postmodern theory, and the propriety of hoaxes."¹⁰ Lacing up their gloves for that debate were not just Sokal¹¹ and the editors of *Social Text*, Bruce Robbins and Andrew Ross,¹² but also such

⁶ Admittedly, the *matheme* is but one instance of Lacan's formulations open to denigration as "quasi-mathematical, pseudo-logical fantasy." Topology and knot theory are obvious others. However, as will be pursued below, the *matheme* *implies* topology and the knot (which is not to say that it subsumes them).

⁷ *Social Text* 46/47 (Spring/Summer 1996): 217-252. This issue deals with the treatment of the "hard" sciences in the humanities and social sciences.

⁸ Alan Sokal, "A Physicist Experiments With Cultural Studies," *Lingua Franca*, May/June 1996, 62-64.

⁹ Alan Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterword," *Dissent* 43.4 (Fall 1996), 93.

¹⁰ "Mystery Science Theater," *Lingua Franca*, July/August 1996.

¹¹ Sokal has continued his argument in "Sokal's Reply to the *Social Text* Editors," *Lingua Franca*, July/August 1996; "Transgressing the Boundaries," in slightly altered form, in *Philosophy and Literature* 20.2 (1996): 338-346; "Truth or Consequences: A Brief Response to Bruce Robbins" (*Tikkun*, November/December 1996, p. 58); "A Plea for Reason, Evidence and Logic" (*New Politics* 6.2 (1997): 126-129); "Alan Sokal Replies," *Dissent* 44.1 (Winter 1997); "Les mystifications philosophiques du professeur Latour" (*Le Monde*, 31 January 1997, 15); "What the *Social Text* Affair Does and Does Not Prove" (in *A House Built on Sand: Exposing Postmodernist Myths*

"names" as Steven Weinberg, Stanley Fish, Evelyn Fox Keller, Bruno Latour, and Franco Moretti,¹³ as well as lesser-known academics,¹⁴ and many commentators in the international mass media,¹⁵ including Rush Limbaugh.¹⁶

The debate still continues, for Sokal's provocativeness has proven far more enduring than any quotidian Warholian stardom. A few weeks before Tallis's phillipic, Sokal and French scientist Jean Bricmont published a book in French¹⁷ continuing and elaborating the argument of the *Social Text* affair, in what *The Economist* has called a "campaign of deflation by ridicule."¹⁸ *Impostures Intellectuelles* was an immediate sensation, at least in the cafés of the

About Science, ed. Noretta Koertge [Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, forthcoming], on-line at <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/noretta.html>); "Robert Siegel talks with Alan Sokal," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 15 May 1996; as well as other texts, as noted below.

¹² Bruce Robbins and Andrew Ross (*Lingua Franca*, July/August 1996), 38; Bruce Robbins, "Anatomy of a Hoax" (*Tikkun*, September/October 1996, p 58-59).

¹³ Steven Weinberg, "Sokal's Hoax," *New York Review of Books*, 8 August 1996, 11-15; Stanley Fish, "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke," *The New York Times*, 21 May 1996; Franco Moretti, letter to the editors, *Lingua Franca*, July/August 1996; Evelyn Fox Keller, letter to the editors, *Lingua Franca*, July/August 1996; Bruno Latour, "Y a-t-il une science après la guerre froide?" *Le Monde*, 18 January 1997.

¹⁴ Stanley Aronowitz, "Alan Sokal's 'Transgression,'" *Dissent* 44.1 (Winter 1997); Jay Rosen, "Swallow Hard: What *Social Text* Should Have Done," *Tikkun*, September/October 1996, 59-61; Paul A. Boghossian, "What the Sokal Hoax Ought to Teach Us: The Pernicious Consequences and Internal Contradictions of 'Postmodernist' Relativism," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 December 1996, 14-15.

¹⁵ A few examples among many: Linda Seebach, "Scientist Takes Academia for a Ride With Parody," *The Valley Times* (Pleasanton, California), 12 May 1996; Gary Kamiya, "Transgressing the Transgressors: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Total Bullshit," *Salon Daily Clicks: Media Circus*, Internet Website, URL: <http://www.salon1999.com/media/media960517.html>; Kathy Pollit, "Pomolotov Cocktail," *The Nation*, 10 June 1996; M.G., "De l'intello engagé à l'intello piègeur," *Le Soir* (Brussels) 1 October 1997; Normand Baillargeon, "L'affaire Sokal: Genèse," *Le Devoir* (Montréal) 17 March 1997; Normand Baillargeon, "L'affaire Sokal: Leçon," *Le Devoir* (Montréal), 24 March 1997.

¹⁶ *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, 22 May 1996.

¹⁷ Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Impostures intellectuelles* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1997), 13-14. Jean Bricmont is a professor of theoretical physics at the University of Louvain. For the rest of this chapter, references to this book will be by page number alone, both in the text and in the notes. *Impostures intellectuelles* is being translated into English and is scheduled for a September 1998 release in North America.

The writing of this chapter was aided enormously by the graciousness of Prof. Sokal, who sent me the chapter on Lacan from *Impostures* in manuscript, before the book was available on this side of the Atlantic. Would that every intellectual argument could be conducted with such civility.

¹⁸ "You can't follow the science wars without a battle map," *The Economist*, 13 December 1997. On-line archive: <http://magazines.eneews.com/magazines/economist/archive/971213-005.html>. Once more, the critique of Lacan is conducted in the tones of ridicule.

Latin Quarter.¹⁹ The front page of *Le Nouvel Observateur* asked, "Are our philosophers imposters?"²⁰ *Le Figaro* was even more direct: "This Is War."²¹ Over thirty other responses to the book have already appeared in Paris,²² with the book less than two months old, and Sokal and Bricmont have in turn responded to those responses.²³ *Impostures* is so provocative because it indicts not only Lacan, but a veritable Who's Who of French theory: Kristeva, Irigaray, Latour, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Virilio.²⁴ While these figures hardly comprise the whole of "French theory," they are significant enough to that nebulously aggregated whole that Kristeva furiously (and dubiously) accuses Sokal of being Francophobic.²⁵ Yet Sokal and Bricmont's critique is aimed less at thinkers than it is at a particular mode of their writing (21). In this matter, *Impostures* revealingly narrows and refines the two broad classes of criticisms that Sokal made earlier of postmodernism:

¹⁹ Joe Henley, "Is Modern French Philosophy Just a Load of Pseudo-Scientific Claptrap?", *The Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 12 October 1997, 29.

²⁰ My translation of "nos philosophes sont-ils des imposteurs ?" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 25 September – 1 October 1997.

²¹ Quoted in Henley, "Modern French Philosophy," 29.

²² As of November 1997.

²³ Examples of other Parisian readings of *Impostures*: Robert Maggiori, "Fumée sans feu," *Libération*, 30 September 1997, URL: <http://www.liberation.fr/sokal/eur3009c.html>; Vincent Fleury and Yun Sun Limet, "L'escroquerie Sokal-Bricmont," *Libération*, 6 October 1997, 5; Didier Eribon, "Salutaire, mais . . ." *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 25 September – 1 October 1997, 120.

Examples of the authors' responses to their critics: Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, "What is the fuss all about?" Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 October 1997, 17, which was translated and published in slightly modified form as "Que se passe-t-il ?" *Libération*, 18-19 October 1997, along with a supplement, "Réponse à Vincent Fleury et Yun Sun Limet"; Alan Sokal, "Du bon usage des métaphores," *La Recherche*, November 1997, 8.

²⁴ It should be noted that Sokal and Bricmont's attack on "French theory" is not an indiscriminate one. While they find a particular citation from Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978]) amusing, they explicitly exempt him from their general critique. They explain that that passage appears to be an isolated instance in Derrida's work (*Impostures*, 17). See the following note.

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, "Une désinformation," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 25 September – 1 October 1997, 122. Sokal and Bricmont define the project of *Impostures* against what they call "la nébuleuse postmoderne" (14). While *Imposture's* targeting of only French theorists is obviously deliberate and strategic, elsewhere Sokal is at pains to deny that he is conducting a culturalist or nationalist campaign (*Impostures*, 22; "What the *Social Text* Affair Does and Does Not Prove"; "What Is All the Fuss About," 7). Certainly Sokal has harsh words for some of his

First of all, one has *meaningless or absurd statements, name dropping*, and the display of *false erudition*. Secondly, one has *sloppy thinking* and *poor philosophy*, which come together notably (though not always) in the form of *glib relativism*.²⁶

Impostures, in its focus on writing and the abuses of language, is oriented more to the first of those critical categories, although the second still pertains, somewhat subordinated. For example, the “glib relativism” of one of the best-known sociologists of science, Bruno Latour, is covered in a subsection of an “*intermezzo*” on “*le relativisme cognitif en philosophie des sciences*,” but the chapter devoted to him concerns itself with what is presented as his serious misreading of Einstein’s theory of relativity.

As might be expected, for the very reasons already elaborated in this dissertation, Lacan turns out to be the perpetrator *par excellence* of the writing so problematic for *Impostures*. Sokal comments that “the ultimate validity of our criticism [in *Impostures*] has to be judged author by author, case by case.”²⁷ Then let us take him at his word, and consider the case of Lacan, as one accepted measure of the critique in *Impostures*. The chapter on Lacan is the very first, following the introduction, and it takes explicit aim at his citation of mathematics. The authors explain their “privileging” of Lacan this way: “We content ourselves with analyzing certain of his numerous references to mathematics, which show that Lacan perfectly illustrates, in different parts of his *oeuvre*, the abuses enumerated [below].”²⁸ The presentation of Lacan as a kind of perfection of abuse recapitulates Lacan’s presentation of the *matheme* as a kind of purity. Moreover, the *matheme* condenses several

fellow Americans, including Sandra Harding and Stanley Aronowitz (“What Is All the Fuss About,” “Alan Sokal Replies [to Stanley Aronowitz]”).

²⁶ Sokal, “What the *Social Text* Affair Does and Does Not Prove,” emphasis in original.

²⁷ Quoted in Craig R. Whitney, “Physicists Take Philosophers to Task in Paris,” *New York Times*, 4 October 1997.

²⁸ My translation of “nous nous contenterons d’analyser certaines de ses nombreuses références aux mathématiques, afin de montrer que Lacan illustre parfaitement, dans différentes parties de son oeuvre, les abus énumérés dans notre introduction” (25).

more general complaints that Sokal and Bricmont make about Lacan's texts. In a paradigmatically mathemic way, *Impostures* brings mathematics together with meaning and Sokal and Bricmont's list of the latter's abuses:

1. The deployment of scientific terminology without careful regard to its meaning. Sokal and Bricmont complain that "in most cases, these authors only use scientific (or apparently scientific) terminology without worrying too much about what it means."²⁹
2. The use of scientific ideas without empirical or conceptual justification (14).
3. The use of scientific terms in contexts unrelated to their disciplinary provenance, in order to give a superficial impression of erudition and to intimidate the non-scientific reader (14-15).
4. The use of sentences "denuded" of meaning and given over to "*language games*," in "*a veritable intoxication with words*," combined with a supreme indifference to their signification."³⁰

Given this critical move towards language, Alan Parker makes the necessary connection: "When [Sokal] says that the debate is not about science, I take him to mean that it is really about *clarity of expression*, whether scientific or non-scientific."³¹ Once again, the problem with Lacan turns out to be one of clarity.

The abuse of language, in Sokal and Bricmont's terms, is infectious in a most virulent way, for these criteria implicate themselves as abuse. To begin with, they are playing their

²⁹ My translation of "dans la plupart des cas, ces auteurs ne font qu'utiliser une terminologie scientifique (ou apparemment scientifique) sans trop se soucier de ce qu'elle signifie" (14).

³⁰ My translation of "*une véritable intoxication par les mots*, combinées à une superbe indifférence pour leur signification" (15, emphasis added). Abuses #1, #3 and #4 are directly about language; abuse #2 is implicitly so, given the pervasion of ideas by language.

own language game.³² They declare that “the emperor has no clothes.”³³ This rhetoricism is not, to redeploy Sokal and Bricmont’s own terms, a marginal citation or *une petite bête* (16). Rather, it is the explicit synecdoche for their whole project: “our goal is simply to say that the emperor has no clothes.”³⁴ This cannot be surprising, for, as Derrida notes, undressing and unveiling are “the familiar acrobatics of the metaphor of truth,” and sorting science from fiction ultimately appeals to the criterion of truth.³⁵ The naked emperor as a figure of the argument of *Impostures* actually precedes the book itself. Sokal invoked the image in his published revelation that “Transgressing the Boundaries” was a hoax.³⁶ Partly for that reason—but, I think, only partly so—the naked emperor has a seemingly irresistible attraction to those persuaded by Sokal and Bricmont.³⁷ Nonetheless, despite Sokal and Bricmont’s

³¹ Alan Parker, in “Responses to the Sokal Affair: Toward a Dialog,” 10 November 1997, emphasis added. Archived at URL: <http://node9.phil3.uni-freiburg.de/Response.html>.

³² Tallis is also gaming, rather ostentatiously so. For example, he writes of Lacan as “the fattest spider” in the web of postmodernism, rewrites theory as “theorrhea,” and refers to “the cargo cult science of [Lacan’s] school” (“Shrink From Hell,” 20).

³³ Curiously, on one page Sokal and Bricmont write “D’un *empereur* qui, comme dans le conte, est nu” (12), while on another they twice write, “Le *roi* est nu” (15).

³⁴ My translation of “Notre but est justement de dire que le roi est nu” (15). “Le roi est nu” is also the final sentence of the blurb on the back cover of *Impostures*.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Le facteur de la vérité,” in *The Post Card*, 415, 419.

³⁶ Sokal, “Physicist Experiments With Cultural Studies,” 63.

³⁷ For instance, Linda Seebach:

Many scientists believe that the emperors of cultural studies have no clothes. But Sokal captured the whole royal court parading around in naked ignorance and persuaded the palace chroniclers to publish the portrait as a centerfold. (“Scientists Take Academia”)

Ruth Rosen:

When I was a child, my favorite story was ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes.’ A chorus of adults praises the Emperor’s new wardrobe, but a child blurts out the truth: The Emperor is in fact stark naked. From this tale, I learned that adults could be intimidated into endorsing all kinds of flummery. The longer I teach at the university, the more I return to this story for consolation. (“A Physics Prof Drops a Bomb on the Faux Left,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 May 1996)

George Andrews, Evan Pugh Professor of Mathematics at Pennsylvania State University:

Almost all the postmodernist-feminist-deconstructionist writing exudes strident concern about equity issues. Their chip-on-the-shoulder attitude has scared away numerous critics that if they shout

“simplicity” of saying, it remains ambiguous as to whether the deprecated emperor is the theorist, the theory, the theoretical discourse, or that discourse’s misappropriation of the terms and concepts of science (35). What Sokal and Bricmont declare to be straightforward thus becomes, at that moment of its declaration, ambiguous. “L’empereur” certainly figures a subject, but whether this is a metaphor for Lacan and his ilk, or instead a personification of some unsavoury aspect of their texts, is moot. *L’imposteur ou l’imposture ?*

This slippery nudity slips even more, for Sokal and Bricmont keep insisting that the texts they critique are devoid of meaning.³⁸ Their favored way of saying this is to declare that a term, sentence or text fragment is “*dénué de sens*.” *Dénué* means “devoid of,” “lacking” or “wanting.”³⁹ But *dénué* is also metonymy for *dénudé*, “denuded,” and not merely in the imaginary near-coincidence of their signifiers. The root of both is the Latin *denudare*.⁴⁰ *Denudare* means “to make naked,”⁴¹ which means the relation of *dénué* to *dénudé* is asymmetrical: “devoid of” is derivative of “denuded.” The word that is *dénué de sens* is, first of

“The emperor has no clothes!” they will be accused of discriminating against the sartorially challenged [sic]. (“Piltown Man Wanders Halls,” *The Centre Daily Times*, State College, Pennsylvania, 14 May 1996)

R. H. Wheatley:

He has no clothes and no shame.

In the fable, it was a child who pointed out that the Emperor was naked. In real life, it took a New York University physicist to expose the fraud of postmodern academia. (“The Postmodern Emperor,” in *What I Think*, on-line journal, 31 May 1996, URL: <http://www.pookas.com/cols/col.05-31-96B.shtml>)

³⁸ Examples from just the introduction to the book and the chapter on Lacan:

“Les propos cités sont absurdes ou dénués de sens” (13).

“On trouve de nombreux textes dénués de sens” (15).

“Sa « définition » . . . est dépourvue de sens” (29).

“Même les énoncés mathématiques sont dénués de sens” (30).

“Même le contenu prétendument « mathématique » n’a aucun sens” (36).

“Des phrases dénuées de sens” (38).

³⁹ This sense of lack or want is also carried by a sister term used by the authors, *dépourvu (de sens)*. See previous note.

⁴⁰ *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française de Paul Robert*, 2 éd., s.v., “Dénuer,” “Dénuder.”

all, a naked word. The emperor with no clothes is thus re-articulated in the nudity of language, constituted by Sokal and Bricmont as language's prototypical imposture. Even Lacan's severest critics make the linkage—recall how William Kerrigan characterizes Lacan as a “sonuvabitch” enthroned in his texts. Yet from the Lacanian perspective, the ambiguity between the word stripped of meaning and the would-be imperial subject in her/his laughable nakedness is the very opposite of abuse. It is the defining moment of language. Or better, as observed in Chapter Two, it is exactly abuse and imposture which are definitive of the language of psychoanalysis. For Lacan, it is not only womanliness which is a masquerade, but also the reader *qua* the master of meaning, not to mention meaning itself.⁴² It is this crucial paradox that makes Sokal and Bricmont's chapter on Lacan so ironic and so fascinating, for what they believe are criticisms are, *malgré eux*, performances of Lacanian theory.

Sokal and Bricmont's wedding of the naked emperor to the naked word recalls the scopoc consequences of clarity, as discussed in Chapter One, with a twist. If clear writing aspires to the vanishing of the signifier, in its embodiment of language as such, then the abuse of scientific language and concepts, according to Sokal and Bricmont, consists in the vanishing of the signified. Nude language is therefore the signifier divested of the garb of the signified.⁴³ This has the interesting consequence of retroactively figuring the signifier as the

⁴¹ Cassell's *Latin Dictionary* (London: Cassell, 1968), s.v. “nudo.”

⁴² See Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* 10 (1929): 303-313. Apropos clothing and the subject, Lacan tells a tale of the parakeet that loved Picasso: “The parakeet was in love with what is essential to man, namely his attire (*accoutrement*). The parakeet was like Descartes, to whom men were merely clothes (*habits*) . . . walking about (*en . . . pro-ménade*)” (*Seminar XX*, 6, ellipsis in original). “Cette perruche était en effet amoureuse de ce qui est essentiel à l'homme, à savoir son accoutrement. Cette perruche était comme Descartes, pour qui des hommes, c'était des habit en . . . *pro-ménade* (*Séminaire XX*, 12, ellipsis and emphasis in original).

⁴³ On the other hand, elsewhere Sokal and Bricmont figure the *signifier* as clothing: “Ne s'agit-il pas plutôt de faire passer pour profonde une affirmation philosophique ou sociologique banale *en l'habillant d'une terminologie savante?*” (19, emphasis added). This slip between signified and signifier reveals that the language game that

body of language—which is barely removed from the above contention of the *mathème* itself as the strange/anti- body of language. “The signifier stuffs (*vient truffer*) the signified.”⁴⁴ There is an echo of psychoanalysis before Lacan here. Freud cites “The Emperor’s New Clothes” to work through the interpretation of dreams of nudity.⁴⁵ Derrida observes that Freud’s analysis is “a scene of writing that unclothes, without seeming to, the master meaning, the master of meaning.”⁴⁶ For Sokal and Bricmont, the nude body of language is strange because it is self-evidently ridiculous—which plays a provocative variation on the figure of clarity, for here, being able to see everything is the quintessential absurdity. Their book was born in the savage amusement that Macey so correctly anticipated: the inspiration for *Impostures* was the derisive, incredulous responses Sokal elicited from his scientific colleagues by asking them to read texts like Lacan’s. Echoing the laughter of Fuss’s family, “they could scarcely believe that someone could write what they had before their eyes.”⁴⁷ Even the nakedness of the word is arresting.

One of the reasons that nudity is compelling is the ease and inevitability with which its comedy slides into other theatrics. The ridiculousness of the emperor without clothes cannot be held apart from the scandal and obscenity of the nude body. The emperor is ambiguous because he goes by many names: Noah, his drunken nakedness covered by his good sons, cursing Ham, the one who did not avert his eyes;⁴⁸ Kronos, serially cannibalizing

sustains their argument is not nearly as restricted as that argument would suggest. In fact, it reiterates Lacan’s contention that the signified is merely another signifier.

⁴⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 37; “Le signifiant vient truffer le signifié” (*Séminaire XX*, 37).

⁴⁵ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 341–342.

⁴⁶ Derrida, “Le facteur de la vérité,” 419.

⁴⁷ My translation of “ils pouvaient à peine croire qu’on puisse écrire ce qu’ils avaient sous les yeux” (13).

⁴⁸ Genesis 9.23–25.

his divine children, in the vain attempt to hold his throne;⁴⁹ The-Name-of-the-Father, the Lacanian bearer of symbolic Law, and his obverse, the anal father, “the third element which disturbs the familiar narrative of the gradual prevalence of the paternal over the maternal in history as well as in the subject’s ontogenesis”;⁵⁰ transsexed as the mother, *qua* primordial object of desire and *qua* archetypal lost/forbidden object; the picture of Dorian Gray, the image as more “real” than the subject; Ozymandias, obliterated in almost all but the inscription of his name; the Lacanian subject, $\$$, in denial of her/his self-division;⁵¹ Freud, lionized and vilified for his seminal status in psychoanalysis; Lacan himself.⁵²

Sokal and Bricmont would undoubtedly reject the citation of all these other emperors—except, of course, the last—as yet more postmodern intoxication with words. Yet this catalog merely continues one of the several games that they began. Their real dissatisfaction must therefore not lie with language games as such—which is just as well, for could language gaming ever be avoided?—but with the drunkenness of those games. Despite the hilarity of scientists mystified by Lacan and the frequent jocularities of *Impostures*, the book is dedicated to sobriety. Sober language gaming means, first of all, the determination of meaning through at least three distinguishable lacks: first, the lack of a lack of meaning—the clothing of the signifier by the signified; second, the lack of ambiguity—the propriety of sense; third, the lack of “confusion between the technical and everyday senses of English

⁴⁹ Kronos himself has many names, including Cronus and Saturn. Goya’s ferocious painting, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, is the cover illustration for Lacan’s *Séminaire IV: La relation d’objet*. Chapter Six will come back to Goya.

⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 127.

⁵¹ If the naked emperor is $\$$, then perhaps Sokal and Bricmont find her/his body strange because that body is *objet a*. “What lies under the habit [of the nun/monk], what we call the body, is perhaps but the remainder (*reste*) I call object *a*” (*Seminar XX*, 6). “Ce qu’il y a sous l’habit et que nous appelons le corps, ce n’est peut-être que ce reste que j’appelle l’objet *a*” (*Séminaire XX*, 12).

words”⁵³—the propriety of domain. But sobriety also means intellectual conservatism: rigor, defined as the stalwart defence of Enlightenment ideals of rationality.⁵⁴ While Sokal and Bricmont say that their mission is to articulate imperial nudity, they also write that “their goal . . . is to defend the canons of rationality and intellectual honesty”: the canons of naked truth.⁵⁵

Yet even this canonicity is restricted. Sokal and Bricmont explicitly remove themselves from matters “properly psychoanalytic” in Lacan, and “content” themselves with analyzing the properly scientific and mathematical:⁵⁶ “We limit ourselves to scientific fields in which we can pretend to have a certain competence, to know physics and mathematics.”⁵⁷ Their assumption that physics, mathematics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, or any discipline can be “properly” sectioned and bounded in this way has the implicit correlate that Sokal and Bricmont can also “pretend” to authority in matters of *language* drawn from those fields. The whole of their critique of Lacan rests on their conviction of both the possibility and the virtue of keeping technical language unadulterated by the everyday. They name this sustenance of purity as “precision,” and if we grant them their purity, they are precisely right. The Lacanian errors of mathematics that Sokal and Bricmont are errors *within* mathematics as *read by* mathematicians (and physicists). But even matters regarding the language of

⁵² Sokal and Bricmont can be read as identifying themselves as the emperors. As Raoul points out, the shifter *nous* that names them in *Impostures* becomes *nu* by the extraction of *os*, bone (personal communication, 20 January 1998).

⁵³ Sokal, “Transgressing the Boundaries,” 93.

⁵⁴ Sokal, well aware of accusations of conservatism, is at pains to declare his support of the *political* left. For instance, see “A Physicist Experiments,” 63; “Transgressing the Boundaries,” 93; “A Plea for Reason.”

⁵⁵ My translation of “notre but [est] de défendre les canons de la rationalité et de l’honnêteté intellectuelle” (16).

⁵⁶ “We do not enter into the debate on the properly psychoanalytic part of the works of Lacan” (25), my translation of “nous n’entrerons pas dans le débat sur la partie proprement psychanalytique [des] travaux [de Lacan].” See also page 50 in *Impostures*.

mathematics remain matters of language, and therefore remain as much outside of mathematics as inside of it. Lacan himself notes, in the first paper that *Impostures* criticizes, "You cannot teach a course in mathematics using only letters on the board. It is always necessary to speak an ordinary language"—which invokes the *matheme* in order to return to language.⁵⁸

Sokal and Bricmont regard themselves as merely toeing the canonical line in their opposition of "serious" philosophical, psychoanalytic and semiotic work to the literary and the poetic (18-19). Lacanian theory, however, puts poetics and the literary at the very center of its philosophical and semiotic psychoanalysis. More disturbing, however, is how Sokal and Bricmont implicitly marshal the sectioning and reinforcement of disciplinary lines to misconstrue disciplinary practices of reading for reading as such. That is, their whole case against Lacan rests upon the assumption that scientists "own" their language, and therefore are qualified to judge its use, misuse and abuse, both within and without their professional domain. This directly follows from the assertion of the properness of disciplinary section, for the condition of property is proper division. The assumption is that the displacement of a term from mathematics to psychoanalysis can and should be the very same kind of absolute translation that the teaching sociologists of Chapter One valorized as the measure of teaching. The presumption to knowledge of "proper" meanings is a presumption to the ownership of modes of reading and of language itself. That is, the identification of "mathematical" formulations in Lacan as "mathematical" is used to justify nothing other

⁵⁷ 22, my translation of "nous nous limiterons aux champs scientifiques dans lesquels nous pouvons prétendre avoir une certaine compétence, à savoir la physique et les mathématiques."

⁵⁸ Jacques Lacan, "Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism & the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugene Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1972), 188.

than their decontextualization from psychoanalysis and subsequent recontextualization in "proper" mathematics.

Consequently, Sokal and Bricmont make very odd statements about language. In anticipating possible objections to their critique, they list the various pertinent modes of language. Besides the valorized fixing of the signified to the signifier, it is a startlingly short catalog: metaphor, analogy, and "poetic license" (18-20). Perhaps a reduction of all of rhetoric to a vague liberty and a brace of tropes should not be surprising in a text which concatenates the play of language with the intoxication with words, although that drastic oversimplification does undermine the authors' contention of the rigor of their analyses.⁵⁹ Lacan is more exacting (although hardly exhaustive), for his parallel list includes such traditional ones as ellipsis, pleonasm, hyperbaton, syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition, metaphor, catachresis, autonomasia, allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche.⁶⁰ The violent

⁵⁹ "It is necessary to analyse [the texts of Lacan and other authors] with the greatest rigor," my translation of "il faut analyser [les textes de Lacan et des autres auteurs] avec la plus grande rigueur" (22).

⁶⁰ Lacan, "Function and Field," 58. "Fonction et champ," 268. Note that Lacan assembles a somewhat different list of tropes in "Agency of the Letter," 169 ("L'instance de lettre," 521).

Ellipsis is the omission of a word or words to achieve a more compact expression (J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd ed. [London: Penguin, 1992], s.v. "ellipsis").

Pleonasm is redundancy (Cuddon, *Dictionary*, s.v. "pleonasm").

Hyperbaton is the transposition of words from their usual order (Cuddon, *Dictionary*, s.v. "hyperbaton").

Syllepsis is the application of the same verb or proposition to two other words in different senses (Cuddon, *Dictionary*, s.v. "syllepsis").

Regression is the repetition of words from the beginning of a sentence (Bernard Dupriez, *A Dictionary of Literary Devices: Gradus, A-Z*, trans. and adapted by Albert W. Halsall [Toronto: Univ of Toronto Press, 1991], s.v. "regression").

Repetition is what would be expected: using the same terms or other elements (for example, syllables, phrases, stanzas, metrical patterns, ideas, allusions, shapes) several times. Repetition thus includes refrain, assonance, rhyme, internal rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia (Dupriez, *Dictionary*, s.v. "repetition"; Cuddon, *Dictionary*, s.v. "repetition").

Apposition is the "characterization of one substantive or pronoun by another which follows it" (Dupriez, *Dictionary*, s.v. "apposition").

Lacan's conceptions of *metaphor* and *metonymy* are adapted from Jakobson's linguistics, which posits the constitution of language through a vertical axis of substitution—the axis of metaphor—and a horizontal axis of displacement—the axis of metonymy. For Lacan, metonymy is the trope of the spatiality of language, extrapolating the sense of metonymy as the figure of contiguity. In psychoanalytic terms, he maps metaphor to condensation, and metonymy to displacement (although in "Function and field" (which is relatively early in his corpus), both are categorized as "semantic condensations" [58]).

truncation of the tropical canon is revealingly necessary to the project of *Impostures*, in at least one sense. The elided trope of metonymy, so privileged by Lacan, figures the sliding of the signified, and therefore figures the sliding between the “technical” and the everyday that distresses Sokal and Bricmont so much.

More significantly, Sokal and Bricmont further restrict even the function of metaphor, in familiarly parlous terms. They write, “The role of a metaphor is generally to *clarify* a relatively unfamiliar concept by relating it to a more familiar concept—not the reverse.”⁶¹ This is profoundly anti-canonical, at least to anyone for whom poetics remains a serious business. The vast literature on metaphor is written explicitly against any reduction of metaphor to clarification. This “most elaborate of the tropes”⁶² is instead “a condensed verbal relation in which an idea, image, or symbol may, by the presence of one or more ideas, images, or symbols, *be enhanced in vividness, complexity, or breadth of implication.*”⁶³ In particular, Sokal and Bricmont, by making such a “general” declaration—which is never qualified by the exception such a generality implies—obscure the possibility of defamiliarization, a technique venerable to literature and pervasive in Lacanian theory.⁶⁴ That possibility is covered over by their contention that writers like Lacan rely on scientific and

Catachresis is conventionally defined as a misapplication of a word (Cuddon, *Dictionary*, s.v. “catachresis”), but Spivak uses it to mean “a metaphor without an adequate literal referent, in the last instance a model for all metaphors, all names” (Gayatri Spivak, “The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic,” in *Post-Colonial Critic*, 154).

Autonomasia “substitutes an epithet, such as a proper title for a proper name, or vice-versa” (Muller and Richardson, *Lacan and Language*, 112). Sheridan’s translation has a misprint here, with “autonomasis” as a translation of “autonomase,” instead of “autonomasia.”

Allegory, which comes from the Greek, *allēgoria*, “speaking otherwise,” is a story with a double meaning (Cuddon, *Dictionary*, s.v. “allegory”).

Synecdoche is the metonymy of the part standing in for the whole.

⁶¹ My translation of “Le rôle d’une métaphore est généralement d’éclairer un concept peu familier en le reliant à un concept qui l’est plus—pas l’inverse” (19, emphasis added.).

⁶² Dupriez, *Dictionary*, s.v. “metaphor.”

⁶³ *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, 136, s.v. “metaphor,” emphasis added.

mathematical metaphors to obscure the superficiality of their knowledge and to impress and intimidate readers (14-15, 36, 19). That is, Sokal and Bricmont obscure the issue by accusing Lacan of being obscure.

Defamiliarization (or “making strange”), even in its technical literary form, is wholly germane to the issues of *Impostures*. “Through defamiliarization the writer modifies the reader’s habitual perceptions by drawing attention to *the artifice of the text*. . . . *What the reader notices is not the picture of reality that is being presented but the peculiarities of the writing itself*.”⁶⁵ The Lacanian radicalization draws attention to the general artifice of text and the general peculiarities of writing—such as how obscuration is achieved through the profession of clarity, how “rigor” is rhetorically sustained by elision, how nudity becomes a slip of the tongue/pen/word-processor, from the emperor to the denuded word. To be more specific, Lacanian theory is a critique of the sweeping and suspect presumptions about language that ground Sokal and Bricmont’s critique of Lacan. As Christopher Bracken notes, “We rely on language to give voice to our concerns but do not concern ourselves with language. We take it for granted without asking how it has granted itself to us.”⁶⁶ In *Impostures*, Sokal and Bricmont are concerned with Lacan’s language without being concerned with their own. Or rather, the very concern that they show for their own language—such as a scrupulous accuracy and contextualization of citations, and the restriction of analysis to terminology over which they can claim expertise—are built upon an absence of concern for how that language and those concerns have been granted to them. Sokal and Bricmont’s misprison of metaphor can thus be engaged through a defamiliarization of their text: attention to the

⁶⁴ Defamiliarization is often associated with the Russian Formalists of the early 20th century, who call it *ostranenie* (Cuddon, *Dictionary*, s.v. “defamiliarization”).

⁶⁵ Cuddon, *Dictionary*, s.v. “defamiliarization,” emphasis added.

artifice of *Impostures* discloses the peculiarities of writing by which the pretension to clarity is sustained. To put this another way, because Lacan is the acknowledged villain of the fable told by Sokal and Bricmont, he can be recruited to demonstrate that *Impostures* is itself imposture.⁶⁷

Following the strategies of this dissertation, we can read Sokal and Bricmont's chapter on Lacan, not for its meaning *per se*, but for the specific forms of language that it recruits to secure that meaning. The chapter is ordered into critiques of three particular instances of Lacanian "abuse," and each is revelatory of those language forms.

Topological Deformations

Sokal and Bricmont's critique of Lacan begins with topology, and their critique of his topology begins even before their text does: the scare quotes in their heading, "*La « topologie psychoanalytique »*" (26), foreshadow their argument that Lacan's topology isn't really topology at all. The very first sentence of the text itself takes the next step, by giving the "proper" significance to this improper appropriation: "Lacan's interest in mathematics is above all centered on topology."⁶⁸ This claim appears to rebuff this entire dissertation, inasmuch as it

⁶⁶ Bracken, *Potlatch Papers*, 50-51. Once again, Bracken is reading Heidegger's "The Nature of Language."

⁶⁷ As we will see, the difference between Lacan and Sokal and Bricmont is that, for Lacan, such imposture is not *per se* something negative.

⁶⁸ My translation of "l'intérêt de Lacan pour les mathématiques s'est centré surtout sur la topologie" (26). Many texts, including this dissertation, designate the intrication of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real orders as a topology.

Yet again, Sokal and Bricmont's critique turns on itself, for they confer this primacy of topology "without giving the least empirical or conceptual justification," to quote their own definition of abuse (14). Topology is certainly crucial to Lacanian theory, but their declaration that topology is the "center" of its oblique engagement with mathematics is at best moot. As they themselves note, Lacan's "writings were full of graphs, formulæ, and so-called 'algorithms'" (30), "mathematical" elements which are not subsumed, at least directly, by topology. Sokal and Bricmont's subsequent implication that this pervasion is restricted to the 1950s is demonstrably incorrect. These elements occur throughout many of the seminars which constituted the core of Lacan's teaching, such as *Séminaire IX : L'identification : 1961-1962* (unpublished), *Séminaire X : L'Angoisse : 1962-1963*, *Séminaire XI : The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), *Séminaire XII : Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse : 1964-1965* (unpublished), *Séminaire XIV : Logique du fantasme 1966-1967*, *Séminaire XV : L'acte psychanalytique : 1967-1968*, *Séminaire XVI : D'un Autre à autre : 1968-1969*, *Séminaire XVII : L'envers de la*

necessarily demotes the matheme to, at best, secondary status vis-à-vis mathematics in the Lacanian corpus. However, topology, as Sokal and Bricmont write it out, opens the way to the matheme through the same gesture that displaces it. They define topology as the branch of mathematics “concerned with properties of surfaces that remain the same when [those surfaces] are deformed without being torn.”⁶⁹ They add in a casual footnote, “According to the classic pleasantry, a topologist does not know how to distinguish a ring from a cup.”⁷⁰

In other words, topology is about *deformation that preserves*.

Sokal and Bricmont’s definition thus undermines, in advance, their subsequent accusation that Lacan abuses topology, for that definition suddenly elevates the standards of “abuse,” or at least moves them to a radically different place. “Abuse” must now be something more or other than deformation, for topology allows that deformation can still be faithful. “Abuse” must be something worse than mistaking a ring for a cup. Any topology practiced by Lacan must seriously engage language, which means that it must be a topology pertinent to the articulation of itself. Lacan calls this “topologizing language’s status.”⁷¹ Psychoanalysis is a topology of its own linguistic deformation, which is another way of saying it is all about abuse and imposture.⁷² It is precisely the meaning of topology given in *Impostures* which enables the subversion of the meanings of topological terms; Lacan gets his more-than-poetic license from none other than Sokal and Bricmont. The deformation of the terms of mathematics, rather than being sufficient to the criteria of “abuse,” is rather

psychanalyse : 1969-1970 (unpublished), *Séminaire XVIII : D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* : 1970-1971, *Séminaire XIX: Le savoir du psychanalyste* : 1971-1972 (unpublished), *Séminaire XIX : ... Ou Pire* : 1971-1972 (unpublished), *Séminaire XX : Encore* : 1972-1973, *Séminaire XXI: Les non-dupes errent* : 1973-1974 (unpublished).

⁶⁹ My translation of “concerne les propriétés des surfaces qui restent inchangées lorsqu’on déforme celles-ci sans les déchirer” (26).

⁷⁰ My translation of “selon la plaisanterie classique, un topologiste ne sait pas distinguer un anneau d’une tasse” (26 n14).

⁷¹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 18. “Topologiser ce qu’il en est langage” (*Séminaire XX*, 22).

definitive of a psychoanalytic/linguistic reading of the mathematics of topology (distinguishable from a mathematical reading). Nothing could be truer to a psychoanalytic appropriation of topology than its contortion into "topology." That reconfiguration unsurprisingly recapitulates the Lacanian rewriting/re-reading of "mathematical" formulæ as mathemes. Even Macey, in his unrelenting assault on Lacan, concedes the parallel.⁷³ Bearing this in mind, Joël Dor has a different and more circumspect point of departure than Sokal and Bricmont:

First, it would be wise not [to] speak too hastily about a *Lacanian topology*, as some recent works have done. Just as Lacan insisted that what he was doing was not linguistics but "linguistery" [*linguisterie*], so should one make the same qualification in regard to his use of these topological objects. According to Nasio, "one would have, as in the case of linguistics, to invent a term, for example *topologery* [topologerie]." ⁷⁴

Sokal and Bricmont have already provided another such term, by qualifying topology as *psychoanalytic*—and therefore not mathematical, or at least not completely so—and then by enclosing the whole term in scare quotes.⁷⁵ While they are right in contending that Lacan uses signifiers from topology's symbolic order differently from the way topologists do, they themselves efficiently give legitimation for doing so. Their ultimate complaint is that "psychoanalytic topology" is not topology, and in this, they are absolutely correct: the former is an undoubted imposture of the latter. Where they go wrong is in their conviction

⁷² We could say that this topology is a surface turned back upon itself.

⁷³ Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, 171.

⁷⁴ Joël Dor, "The Epistemological Status of Lacan's Mathematical Paradigms," in *Disseminating Lacan*, ed. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul, trans. Pablo Nagel (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 110, emphasis and final two sets of brackets in original. Interior citation from Juan-David Nasio, *Les yeux de Laure. Le concept d'objet a dans la théorie de J. Lacan* (Paris: Aubier, 1987), 152. Note that in the first sentence of the quotation, Dor is criticizing the same works by J. Granon-Lafont (*Topologie lacanienne et clinique analytique* [Paris: Point Hors Ligne, 1990]) and M. Darmon (*Essais sur la topologie lacanienne* [Paris: Editions de l'Association freudienne, 1990]) that Sokal and Bricmont cite as giving "complete accounts" of Lacan's topology (30).

⁷⁵ Later in the chapter, Sokal and Bricmont perform their own deformation of topology, at the level of the signifier, by transmuting the scare quotes around "topologie psychanalytique" into the italicization of the same (30).

that such an imposture is self-evidently fraudulent. Instead, this crucial difference between these topologies implies that topologists cannot “pretend” to authority over a topology that exceeds mathematics. Sokal and Bricmont are therefore making a literal *méconnaissance*.⁷⁶ They misrecognize their indisputable expertise with respect to mathematics as authority over all citations of mathematical language, when the latter has as much to do with language—and therefore writing, reading, the signifier, the signified, the motility of the signifying chain, the aporia of language, *linguisterie*—as it does with mathematics.

The result, in *Impostures*, is itself a topological deformation of the text, a twisting-back-upon-itself within the still flat surface of the page. Only the authors’ passionate *méconnaissance* allows them to unselfconsciously lay claim to *space*, *limited*, and *closed* as mathematical terms in the same sentence which revokes the generality of that claim by acknowledging that they speak only from the point of view of mathematics.⁷⁷ This twist is repeated again and again in *Impostures*: the very declaration that they are looking at psychoanalytic language from *outside* psychoanalysis is presented as obvious evidence of the authority of their judgement. This is a perfect example of what Lacan would call the pretension of the imaginary.

⁷⁶ “*Méconnaissance* precisely implies the subject in its meaning” (Lacan, “Of Structure,” 187).

⁷⁷ Sokal and Bricmont state, “In [a cited] sentence Lacan uses four mathematical terms (“space,” “limited,” “closed,” “topology”), but without taking account of their *meaning*, this sentence means nothing from the point of view of mathematics.” My translation of “Dans cette phrase Lacan utilise quatre termes mathématiques (« espace », « borné », « fermé », « topologie ») mais sans tenir compte de leur *signification* ; cette phrase ne veut rien dire d’un point de vue mathématique” (26, emphasis in original).

The Logics of the Language of Mathematics

In the spirit of topological distortion, we will skip to the third section of Sokal and Bricmont's chapter on Lacan, dedicated to the logic of mathematics, before finishing with a return to the middle. In parallel with the topology of the first section, the third can be read for the logic of the language of mathematics, at least as presented by Sokal and Bricmont. Formally, the most striking aspects of this section are the lengthy citations from Lacan. In fact, it is almost all citation. The authors explain that the quotations are so long "to convince [the reader] that we have not deformed the meaning by taking sentences out of their contexts."⁷⁸ This, despite the literary maxim that every quote is a quote out of context. But suppose that it is possible to keep citations in their contexts. How are we to judge the adequacy of any particular contextualization? Sokal and Bricmont believe that locating a sentence within several paragraphs is sufficient, while Clément claims that years of attending Lacan's seminar were necessary for a certain familiarity even to *begin* to form.⁷⁹ Yet the quantification of the measure of contextualization is suspect. A better sense can be derived by returning to Sokal and Bricmont, who match decontextualization with the deformation of meaning.

For them, meaning is an unquestioned good, but for Lacan, things are different: "Words . . . are the object through which one seeks for a way to handle the unconscious. *Not even the meaning of words, but words in their flesh*, in their material aspect" ("words in their flesh"

⁷⁸ My translation of "Nous citerons des extraits plus longs, au risque d'ennuyer le lecteur, afin de le convaincre que nous n'en avons pas déformé le sens en prenant des phrases hors de leur contexte" (22).

⁷⁹ Cathérine Clément, "Un numéro," *L'Arc* 58 (1974): 2. Quoted and trans. in Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction*: 37, emphasis added.

being another way of marking the nakedness of the signifier).⁸⁰ The previous chapters of this dissertation have considered the complications of meaning in Lacanian theory at length. Lacan's position is merely reiterated here to establish that he is writing in a very different context from that of Sokal and Bricmont. To be admittedly reductionist, language is a central concern for Lacan's psychoanalysis, but language concerns Sokal and Bricmont only insofar as it remains instrumental for mathematics and science, and therefore peripheral to their disciplinary agenda. It is only because language is peripheral to their discipline that those authors can maintain the self-evident imperialism of meaning. Again, the argument between these two perspectives will not be reprised here. It is sufficient to recognize that the severe difference in their respective theoretical contexts implies that Sokal and Bricmont are *always* quoting Lacan out of context—not because their positions are different, as any antagonists' are, but because Sokal and Bricmont are always presuming as self-evident the very propositions of language that Lacan is critiquing.

In the middle of the longest citation in the chapter, Lacan gives a crucial and seemingly unmistakable warning about what is going on. Commenting on one of his mathemic "formulæ of sexuation," he says that "their inscription is not mathematical usage."⁸¹ Sokal and Bricmont footnote this with a sarcastic but sincere, "Exactly," and point out the ways in which Lacan departs from mathematical convention (37 n30). Yet they still present this citation as the chapter's most prominent example of Lacan's abuse of mathematics.⁸² Likewise, earlier in the chapter, they unconcernedly quote Lacan as writing,

⁸⁰ Lacan, "Of Structure," 187, emphasis added.

⁸¹ My translation of "Leur inscription n'est pas d'usage en mathématique," (37). Cited from Jacques Lacan, "L'Etourdit," *Silicet* 4 (1973), 22.

⁸² The quote is introduced with, "In other texts, even the supposedly 'mathematical' contents make no sense at all." My translation of "Dans d'autres textes, même le contenu prétendument « mathématique » n'a aucun sens" (36).

"At the risk of incurring a certain amount of opprobrium, I have indicated to what point I have pushed the distortion of the mathematical algorithm in my use of it,"⁸³ directly before mocking Lacan's use of that "algorithm." The logic is self-contradictory—not the logic of Sokal and Bricmont's mathematics, which we can be certain is rigorous—but the logic of their reading of what they and Lacan all agree is *not* mathematics. Sokal contends that if "all is rhetoric and 'language games,' then internal logical consistency is superfluous too,"⁸⁴ but that very same superfluity marks the mathematical critique of rhetoricized language gaming. Elsewhere, Sokal and Bricmont complain that "from the moment Lacan pretends to express himself 'in simple terms,' everything becomes obscure."⁸⁵ Yet their footnoted "Exactly" precisely marks the moment when their own logic becomes obscure, just as their "simply saying" precisely marks their slide into ambiguity. It is as if their attachment to the point of view of mathematics is so strong that they cannot help being drawn back to it, despite accepting that it is inappropriate. In Lacanian terms, the imaginary fixation—a fixation at the level of the scopic—overpowers any possible symbolic displacement. It is crucial to recognize that the matheme is exactly this conundrum of language, reading, and imaginary mathematics. The matheme only works because it is an imposture of mathematics, rather than an immaculate, "art-of-teaching" translation of it. Lacan admits that "psychoanalysis is not a science. It has no scientific status." Instead, "it is a scientific delirium."⁸⁶

⁸³ 32, citing Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 318. "Nous avons indiqué, quitte à encourir quelque disgrâce, jusqu'où nous avons poussé le détournement de l'algorithme mathématique à notre usage" ("Subversion du sujet," 821).

⁸⁴ Sokal, "Physicist Experiments," 45.

⁸⁵ My translation of "Qu'à partir du moment où Lacan prétend s'exprimer « en termes simples », tout devient obscur" (35).

⁸⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Ornicar?* 14, quoted in François Roustang, *The Lacanian Delusion*, trans. Greg Sims (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990, originally published 1986 as *Lacan, de l'équivoque à l'impasse* [Paris: Minuet]), 107.

Imaginary Numbers and Imaginary Words

In the second section of their chapter, Sokal and Bricmont take issue with Lacan's use of imaginary numbers, and in particular, the imaginary unit, $\sqrt{-1}$. They open by noting that Lacan confuses imaginary numbers with their irrational counterparts.⁸⁷ Once again, they are surely right, from the point of view of mathematics. Yet something curious happens at that very moment of their correctness. That assessment leads onto an explanatory addendum invested with an oddly overstated emphasis, given the straightforwardness of the difference between the imaginary and the irrational. Sokal and Bricmont say that "*it must be underlined* that these terms, *irrational* and *imaginary* have nothing to do with their ordinary or philosophical meaning."⁸⁸ The authors are trying to sever mathematical language from language as such, an utterly necessary move, given all the other "ordinary and philosophical" meanings of *irrational* and *imaginary*. But Lacan insists that we must bring everything back to the function of the cut in discourse. Then how is this particular cut between mathematics and the rest of the world sustained?

In the first place, it actually isn't, at least not completely. As William Dunham writes, "to label a mathematical concept as imaginary—as a gnome is imaginary or the Mad Hatter is imaginary—is to suggest that it is somehow hypothetical, paradoxical, or hallucinatory."⁸⁹ In other words, the imaginary is opposed exactly to the real, a division that is carried over to the "technical" vocabulary of mathematics. Yet Dunham's assessment does not represent mainstream mathematics. Perhaps the subtitle of his book gives a hint why: "An

⁸⁷ "Lacan confond les nombres irrationnels et les nombres imaginaires" (31).

⁸⁸ My translation of "Il faut souligner, aussi, que ces termes « irrational » et « imaginaire » n'ont rien à voir avec leur signification ordinaire ou philosophique" (31), emphasis added.

⁸⁹ William Dunham, *The Mathematical Universe: An Alphabetical Journey Through the Great Proofs, Problems and Personalities* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 291.

Alphabetical Journey Through the Great Proofs, Problems and Personalities.” The word “Alphabetical” moves his title and its text toward the language side of the language of mathematics. The other and hegemonic side of mathematics goes like this: “the names ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ are *historical accidents*; since a complex number is a pair of real numbers, it is exactly as ‘real’ as they are, and, in fact, complex numbers are often useful for the representation of phenomena in the ‘real’ world”⁹⁰ (a complex number consists of a real number matched with an imaginary number). But to anyone not satisfied with definitions, regardless of how authoritative, this explanation begs the question of the circumstances of those “historical accidents.” What is necessary is a re-contextualization of the context that Sokal and Bricmont provide.

The perpetrator of the first accident was Descartes, back in 1637. He wrote in *La géométrie*, “Neither the true nor the false roots are always real; sometimes they are imaginary.”⁹¹ This is the origin of record for the mathematical usage of *imaginary*. But if the term derives exactly from its “non-technical” double, then was its mathematical application really an accident at all? Not according to Isaac Newton, “who rendered a verdict of sorts when he referred to [imaginary numbers] as ‘impossible’,”⁹² or according to Leibniz, who referred to “that amphibian between being and non-being, which we call the imaginary root

⁹⁰ W.F. Freiberger, ed., *The International Dictionary of Applied Mathematics* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1960), s.v. “complex number,” emphasis added.

⁹¹ René Descartes, *The Geometry of René Descartes*, trans. David Eugene Smith and Marcia L. Latham (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1925; originally published 1637), 175. “Au reste tant les vraies racines que les fausses, ne sont pas toujours réelles ; mais quelquefois seulement imaginaires” (174; in 1637 manuscript, 380). Here, in another example of the historical reformulation of terms, “true” roots are positive and “false” ones negative.

⁹² Dunham, *Mathematical Universe*, 291. Interior citation from *The Mathematical Papers of Isaac Newton*, ed. Derek Whiteside, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1968), 411.

of negative unity.”⁹³ If we trust these three moderately well regarded figures of mathematics, the meaning of an imaginary number, and not just its signifier, was appropriated from general or philosophical discourses.

How can Sokal and Bricmont then be so casually emphatic in “underlining” that imaginary numbers have “nothing to do with their general or philosophical meanings”? For the answer, let us reconsider how the master trope for their critical project is invoked against Lacan: his “mathematical” citations are denuded of meaning. The flip side of Lacan theorizing about the fixing of the field of signification is Sokal and Bricmont’s fixation with signification. For them, to be void of meaning is to make no sense, and is therefore self-evidently bad. The corollary is that meaning is enough for them. And if meaning is enough, history is consigned, if not to utter irrelevance, at least to the accidental and therefore ignorable. When Sokal and Bricmont make the castrating cut that ostensibly severs the “technical” language of mathematics from the rest of language, they seek to also sever that “technical” language from its history—which means that it is disconnected from its own genesis. Despite their assurances that context has been scrupulously preserved, their mode of defending their vocabulary is to extract it completely from its context. The recourse to “technical” language is always a radical decontextualization; it is language *dénudée d’histoire*. Sokal and Bricmont can only complain about Lacan’s appropriation of mathematical terms⁹⁴ because of the prior appropriation of those terms from general and philosophical discourse, an appropriation so violent and so abstract that it simultaneously denies its origin, its history, and its very status as appropriative.

⁹³ Morris Kline, *Mathematical Thought from Ancient to Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 1972), 254. Leibniz: “Beinahe ein Amphibium zwischen Sein und Nichtsein” (Quoted in Vera Sanford, *A Short History of Mathematics* [London: George G. Harrap & Company, c. 1930], 187).

This multiform denial is hegemonic across the disciplinary treatment of words. The difference between *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *Le Grand Robert*, and Raymond Williams's *Keywords*,⁹⁵ on the one hand, and mathematical dictionaries, on the other, is that the latter consistently provide no etymologies.⁹⁶ History is thereby relegated to a leftover or a remainder to the sufficiency of meaning. History is that "extra" which, although constitutive of the very meaning championed by Sokal and Bricmont as all-important, is nonetheless implicitly rejected by them as superfluous. In Lacanian terms, history is real. Sokal and Bricmont unwittingly align themselves with one of their antagonists, Fredric Jameson, who defines the Lacanian real *as* history.⁹⁷ The mathematics dictionary's grudging admission of *imaginary* as an historical accident supports that identity, for the real is the "shock of a contingent encounter which disrupts the automatic circulation of the symbolic mechanism."⁹⁸ The crucial point is that the real manifests a radical limit to meaning, so radical that Sokal and Bricmont's supremacy of meaning is only sustained through a topological coincidence with its own erasure.

⁹⁴ "The repeated abuse of concepts and terms from the physical-mathematical sciences." My translation of "L'abus réitéré de concepts et de termes provenant des sciences physico-mathématiques" (14).

⁹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1988).

⁹⁶ For example, Freiburger, ed., *International Dictionary of Applied Mathematics*, Sybil P. Parker, ed., *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Mathematics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997); Christopher Clapham, ed., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Mathematics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); John Daintith and R. D. Nelson, eds., *Penguin Dictionary of Mathematics* (London: Penguin, 1989); Michael Upshall, ed., *Hutchinson Pocket Dictionary of Maths* (Oxford: Helicon, 1993); Glenn James and Robert C. James, eds., *Mathematics Dictionary: Multilingual Edition* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1959); Carol Gibson, ed., *The Facts on File Dictionary of Mathematics* (New York: Facts On File, 1981); C. C. T. Baker, *Dictionary of Mathematics* (London: George Newnes, 1961).

This characterization of the case in mathematics is not meant to imply that specialized dictionaries in other disciplines give etymologies consistently, for they often do not. Regardless of disciplinary affiliation, however, the absence of the history of words bespeaks the attitude of any discipline towards its vocabulary.

⁹⁷ Fredric Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), 384.

⁹⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 171.

Denuding *imaginary* of its history never stops at history. Given that the “technical” derives directly from the “general,” “technical” precision of meaning is accomplished precisely by denuding *imaginary* of its extant “general” and “philosophical” meanings. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, imaginary numbers came to be labelled as such because they “were considered to be quite meaningless.”⁹⁹ So it must be “underlined” that Sokal and Bricmont’s *imaginary* only emerges by being itself *dénuée de sens*, that is, by being denuded of ordinary and philosophical meaning. Sokal and Bricmont’s complaint that Lacan doesn’t care enough about the “technical” meaning of *imaginary* can only be sustained by their valorization of the disregard for its other meanings. It must therefore also be “underlined” that the “technical” sense of *imaginary* is nothing other than an intellectual imposture. While mathematics works very well, as a systematic discipline, in its presumption to such “technical” precision, no person and no disciplinary practice can purify the “technical” *imaginary* of its more general connotations. The latter, rather than being erased, are “under erasure”: despite their explicit denial, they abide still, obscured but never annihilated. The persistence of this signifying trace is very evident to Sokal and Bricmont and the authors of dictionaries of mathematics. Otherwise, none of them would feel compelled to warn, as they consistently do, against the inevitable impulse to read all the meanings of *imaginary* into that place from which they have been ostensibly expunged. When the “ordinary and philosophical” senses are read back into *imaginary*, the result is not a denudation, but a restoration of meaning.

The critical attention to imaginary numbers literally returns to the *matheme*, for the mathematical notation for the primordial imaginary number, the square root of -1, is *i*. As was discussed in Chapter Three, this is the *matheme* for imaginary identification. Then what

⁹⁹ *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “arithmetic.”

is the nature of the identification occurring in this section of *Impostures*? Imaginary identification is modelled by the mirror stage, in which the other is mistaken for the self. One of the principal axes of this dissertation has been the imaginary aspect of language, as related to and differentiated from the symbolic and the real. *Impostures*' critique of the "abuses" of the meaning of *imaginary* is made without the least reference to the extensive Lacanian theorization of meaning *as* imaginary. This is one more dangerous consequence of the presumptions of disciplinary sectioning and propriety. Sokal and Bricmont mistake elements of the Lacanian text as their own. That is, because certain signifiers look like mathematics, Sokal and Bricmont want to read them as such. Ironically, this is the same confusion of the imaginary and the symbolic committed by the same "literary" academics whom Sokal and Bricmont berate as Lacan's co-conspirators.¹⁰⁰ In examining a passage from "The Subversion of the Subject," Sokal and Bricmont look at the bar between the signifier and the signified and they see division. Or rather, they see the *form* of division, but recognize that the formula is not division at all.¹⁰¹ Because that imaginary fixation with the mirage of algebra still holds them, despite the failure of symbolic interpretation as algebra, they decide that the whole passage is fraudulent: "Consequently, [Lacan's] 'calculus' is pure fantasy."¹⁰²

Sokal and Bricmont are once more wrong because they are right. Lacan is writing out not algebra but, exactly as they say, "algebra." It moves back and forth between the conventions of mathematics, such as $i = \sqrt{-1}$, and the subtleties of *i qua* matheme. *i* is a

¹⁰⁰ Sokal writes that his target is "the intellectual arrogance of Theory—meaning postmodern *literary* theory" ("Physicist Experiments," 63, emphasis in original).

¹⁰¹ "Even if [Lacan's] 'algebra' has a meaning, manifestly the 'signifier', the 'signified', and the 'enunciated' which figure there are not numbers, and his horizontal bar (an arbitrarily chosen symbol) does not denote the division of two numbers." My translation of "Même si son « algèbre » avait un sens, manifestement le « signifiant », le « signifié » et l'« énoncé » qui y figurent ne sont pas des nombres, et sa barre horizontale (symbole arbitrairement choisi) ne dénote pas la division de deux nombres »" (32).

¹⁰² My translation of "Par conséquent, ses « calculs » sont de la pure fantaisie" (32).

purloined letter, and any larceny is defined through its flaunting of disciplinary law. Sokal and Bricmont have selected as their critical target exactly the passage that targets their critique. They complain about the denuding of meaning, but the passage addresses the imaginarieness of meaning *per se*. The formula, which they denigrate as “pure fantasy”, is exactly that: a description of the scene of fantasy that produces the desire for meaning. It can easily be read, by a judicious appropriation of mathematics:

$$\frac{S \text{ (signifier)}}{S \text{ (signified)}} = s \text{ (the statement), with } S = (-1), \text{ we have: } s = \sqrt{-1}^{103}$$

If the root is replaced by its mathematical notation *i*, the formula can be simplified to¹⁰⁴

$$\frac{S \text{ (signifier)}}{s \text{ (signified)}} = s \text{ (the statement)} = i$$

On the left, we have the Lacanian sign. *Pace* Sokal and Bricmont, the bar between the signifier and signified is anything but arbitrary. As discussed in previous chapters, it designates the ultimate untenability of the unified sign.¹⁰⁵ On the right, we have exactly Sokal

¹⁰³ My translation of the algorithm in “Subversion du sujet,” 819. Sheridan’s translation replaces “-1” by “-I,” which is a serious error in Lacanian notation (“Subversion of the Subject,” 317), *I* being symbolic identification.

¹⁰⁴ This simplification does not deal with the equivalence of the signifier *S* and -1 . That identity draws on the relation of the signifier as the mark, as discussed in Chapter Two, with 1 being a certain inscription of that mark. The negativity pertains, in one sense, to the Saussurean conception of language as a negative system. Lacan develops this negativity into the idea of a primordial signifier that must be excluded from a system in order for that system to be constituted as a whole. The nuances of the latter are beyond the scope of this dissertation. See Fink, *Lacanian Subject*. However, negativity is supremely relevant to the special status of the phallus, which must be “negated” in the sense of only functioning as veiled, and whose possession is, as discussed before, a quintessential imposture.

¹⁰⁵ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (*Title of the Letter*) even posit the bar as the renewed and denied center of the Lacanian theoretical system, but Sokal and Bricmont are unimpressed. They reject Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s commentary as “almost as ridiculous as the original [text]” (my translation of “presque aussi ridicule que l’original” [32 n24]). In contrast, Lacan praises how Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe read him, even though they ultimately argue against him (*Seminar XX*, 65; *Séminaire XX*, 62).

and Bricmont's treasured meaning: the signified *qua* statement. Its identity with *i* designates meaning as imaginary, but this is not all. In mathematics, *i* is not merely imaginary, it is a *pure imaginary*.¹⁰⁶ More than that, it is the *imaginary unity*. In other words, the formula does not signify mathematics, but instead re-deploys the language of mathematics for its own purposes: to state that meaning is imaginary because it is constituted through the imaginary unity of the sign.

Still, this is not all. To make the Žižekian turn, *i* appears in this particular passage from Lacan because he wrote it, nearly forty years ago, in response to Sokal and Bricmont. *i* is the matheme condensing meaning and imaginary identification, a letter from Lacan that has finally and inevitably arrived at its destination: the first chapter of *Impostures*. If we open their mail and read the text by Lacan cited by *Impostures*, we discover that he has written a commentary in advance on the chapter devoted to himself. "It is always the unifying unity which is in the foreground," he says, the unity of meaning which is inextricable from the unity of the subject.¹⁰⁷ This particular fantasy is not really an intoxicated one, for again it follows Sokal and Bricmont's cue. They close their section this way:

We realize that Lacan is preoccupied with seeing our erectile organ identified as $\sqrt{-1}$. That makes us think of Woody Allen, who, in *Sleeper*, opposes a brain transplant: "You can't touch my brain, it's my second favorite organ!"¹⁰⁸

The imaginary discussion ends in laughter, or at least the anticipation of laughter, in the slide from one matheme for the phallus, Φ , to another, *i*. But such a laughter; such a way to end. Lacan, peeping at Sokal and Bricmont's uncannily common penis, meets Woody Allen,

¹⁰⁶ Daintith and Nelson, eds., *Penguin Dictionary of Mathematics*, s.v. "complex number."

¹⁰⁷ Lacan, "Of Structure," 190.

¹⁰⁸ My translation of "Nous reconnaissons [que Lacan] est préoccupant de voir notre organe érectile identifié à $\sqrt{-1}$. Cela nous fait penser à Woody Allen, qui, dans *Woody et les robots*, s'oppose à une transplantation crânienne: « Vous ne pouvez pas toucher à mon cerveau, c'est mon deuxième organe préféré ! »" (32). Sokal and Bricmont

terrified of an exchange of brains. *Quel corps morcelé !* What manner of transfigurations are happening here? An imaginary economy of impossibilities is busily traded back and forth. Sokal and Bricmont, those sober scientists, identify with the image of the consummate *nebbish*, in order to rejoin all the laughter of those gleefully mocking Lacan. Yet this time, the laughter is not one-sided. When Butler writes about Lacan, she notes that the phallus marks its own kind of impossibility, a comedic failure that is nevertheless compelled to articulate and repeat itself.¹⁰⁹ Then let us pursue the laughing game just one step more.

The identity of Sokal and Bricmont's emperor is ambiguous, but we can, for the moment, let him be Lacan. They would certainly not oppose his assumption of that particular throne. The question then becomes, who is on the other side of the Emperor? Who is the innocent little boy who reveals that the Emperor has no clothes? Of course, the authors have already supplied the answer: it is *they* who keenly want to make that declaration. The matheme *i* of *Impostures* comes forth therefore, not only as the imaginary unity of meaning, not only as the repeated failure of the impossible phallus which secures that unity, but most importantly as a final intellectual imposture, in the form of a most Lacanian imaginary identification: Sokal and Bricmont wanting nothing more than to collectively be that little boy.¹¹⁰

Lacan enthroned/dethroned as the Emperor; Sokal and Bricmont weirdly fused into one clear-eyed boy. It is as if the Emperor were to be denounced by a pair of grotesquely

are not the first to bring Allen and Lacan together. Žižek did a Lacanian reading of Allen's *Play It Again, Sam* in *Sublime Object* (109-110).

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 46.

¹¹⁰ This identification is an established one in anti-psychoanalytic discourse. "Freud's modern critics, his enemies in the Freud Wars, can find no story more allegorically fitting for their labors than that of the Emperor's New Clothes, in which Freud is seduced into admiring his attire (his theories), and the Freudian critics, who see clearly what is plain for all to see, if only the look, adopt the position of the small child who points out that the Emperor has no clothes" (John Forrester, "Dream Readers," in *Dispatches from the Freud Wars: Psychoanalysis and Its Passions* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997], 149).

Siamesed twins, distinguished in their minds, names and identities, but sharing a single penis, a single physics, and a single voice (or at least a single writing hand). The palpable strangeness in this doubling fusion is exactly what gets glossed over or deflected by Sokal and Bricmont's introduction of a third, Woody Allen, as yet another double for . . . who? Lacan? Sokal and Bricmont? The strangeness, the uncanniness of the scene of revelation, rather than being diffused by the Sokal and Bricmont's little joke, gets propagated by it. Such is the inevitable peril of any joke in the context of psychoanalysis. And the joke goes even further: it continues with how Sokal and Bricmont's imposture of the little boy has as its condition Sokal's previous imposture of Lacan himself.

Impostures refers to Sokal's article in *Social Text* as a hoax (*un canular*) (11), but every hoax is an imposture, and "Transgressions" is an imposture in every sense of the word. It pretended to be what it was not, and it was meant to pass unrecognized (at least by the editors of *Social Text*) as an imposture. Regardless of the subsequent and ongoing furor, surely no one can dispute that it succeeded splendidly in its deception. At the same time, it was a parody and a satire, a willful fraud immediately recognizable (at least by physicists) as nonsensical. Sokal's case rests on how these opposing aspects of imposture are intimate with each other. That is, nothing would have been accomplished towards his purpose had he published a "postmodern" article whose argument and rhetoric he sincerely believed. The second genesis of the Affair, after Sokal's writing, came when the editors of *Social Text* could not recognize that the paper in question was, from the perspective of Sokal's physics, utterly ludicrous. He calls it "liberally salted with nonsense," full of "scientific and mathematical concepts . . . that few scientists or mathematicians could possibly take seriously,"¹¹¹

¹¹¹ "Physicist Experiments," 62-63.

“hilarious,” and “screamingly funny.”¹¹² Yet Sokal says, “The most hilarious parts of my article were not written by me. Rather they’re direct quotes from the postmodern Masters,”¹¹³ including, of course, Lacan. In other words, in “Transgressions” Sokal is performing an imposture of Lacan and others (an obsolete meaning of *imposture*—a meaning out of history—is “imposter”¹¹⁴). Something goes a little awry here with the project of *Impostures*, because Sokal and Bricmont say, “We simply want to denounce intellectual imposture, *wherever it comes*,”¹¹⁵ and it certainly came under the authorial hand of Alan Sokal. Something must exempt the crucial imposture that was the first shot in the Science Wars.

Admittedly, Sokal’s imposture *was* special. Since Lacan performs an imposture of science/mathematics himself—on this score, Sokal and Bricmont and I are all in accord—then Sokal was performing an imposture of an imposture. If that is so, then the screamingly funny performance in “Transgressions” is Sokal vamping as a naked emperor. More importantly, if it is precisely by taking on the raiment of a naked Lacan that Sokal reveals the impostures of Lacan, then any success in that revelation demonstrates the logic by which Lacan’s naked emperor can reveal the impostures of language. Given the isomorphism of their respective impostures, is it not possible that, just like Sokal, Lacan can get it right when he gets it wrong? Sokal’s joke and laughter do have their crucial, uncanny doubles in Lacan, in the joke constitutive of psychoanalysis and the laughter in the order of things. A laughter that might shatter all the familiar landmarks of impossible thought—

¹¹² “What the *Social Text* Affair Does and Does Not Prove.”

¹¹³ “What the *Social Text* Affair Does and Does Not Prove.”

¹¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “imposture.”

even those of the cherished canonicity of Sokal's scientific language—a laughter with an edge. Sokal and Bricmont valorize the Enlightenment's pursuit of knowledge, but they might think about Gallop's retelling of Genesis: "When Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge, they anticipate mastery. But what they actually gain is a horrified recognition of their nakedness."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Emphasis added, my translation of "Nous voulons, tout simplement, dénoncer l'imposture intellectuelle, d'où qu'elle vienne" (22).

¹¹⁶ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 85.

Chapter Six:

Translations of Love

If I said that they hate me it is because they "desuppose" that I have knowledge.

*And why not? Why not, if it turns out that that must be the condition for what I call reading?*¹

—Jacques Lacan

God Is Clearly Love

If Sokal and Bricmont are yearning to be clear-eyed young boys, then it is only fair to inquire into my own yearnings. What are my own identifications? To conjugate the diagrammatic Lacanianism, "*Che voglio?*" What do I want? What do I want with Lacan? And could the regard I have for Lacan be given the name of love? Is this dissertation, in the end, a love letter to Lacan?

Those who study Lacan are regularly accused of being in love with him, the implication being that they are therefore incapable of being objective or critical about him or his theory. One consequence is the amusing haste with which so many academics dissociate themselves from him: "I read Lacan, *but I'm not a Lacanian*"—as if *Lacanian* must relegate one to some othered and self-evidently suspect category, such as Tallis's cargo cult of Lacan. While similar accusations and similar denials have been made about other writers, including Freud, I submit, in the stark absence of rigorous empirical research, that Lacan is more charged in this regard than most. He conjures a special fear of contagion. Scholars who study Althusser, the Frankfurt School, Irigaray, Haraway or Wittgenstein, to give just a few

¹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 67.

Si j'ai dit qu'ils me haïssent, c'est qu'ils me dé-supposent le savoir.

Et pourquoi pas? Pourquoi pas, s'il s'avère que ce doit être là la condition de ce que j'ai appelé la lecture? (*Séminaire XX*, 64).

examples, do not immediately and consistently disavow the thinkers who provoke them. In this respect, Lacan is cathected in an exemplarily psychoanalytic way.

Admittedly, the general rule about disavowing Lacan has its prominent exceptions. Clément confesses, "Yes, I loved him. Like most of my generation I was in love with an idea."² *Reading Lacan* ends with Lacan appearing to Gallop in a dream and blessing her book, and Lacan says that to love is to wish to be loved.³ Žižek is notorious for being unapologetically uncritical of Lacan.⁴ And while Lacan was alive, transference with him, even by those who were not officially his analysands, was a definitive experience of Paris.⁵ "The whole Lacan phenomenon was a truly Parisian affair, a fashion, a folly, a kind of snobbery."⁶ But 1990s North America is not 1960s Paris; my generation and the generation after that are

² "Idea" is translator Arthur Goldhammer's rendering of "*pensée*," which is here closer to "thought" or "thinking" (*Lives and Legends*, 15). "— Oui, je l'aimais. J'étais, comme presque toute ma génération, amoureuse d'une pensée" (*Vies et légendes*, 26).

³ Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 187; Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 253; *Séminaire XI*, 228. The dream is unabashedly a classical wish fulfillment. Early in her book, Gallop confesses that she "made a trip to Paris with the sole intent of meeting Lacan, of having some sort of personal interview. My unavowed purpose, my unspeakable wish was for him to approve me, tell me I was right, that I had it" (35). But Gallop was to be denied. Lacan was already dying and hospitalized, and she eventually returned to America having never met him in person.

⁴ Žižek can be brazen, in an oblique way, about his approach to Lacan. Using Hitchcock as a stand-in for the latter, Žižek says,

It should be clear how one should answer those who reproach Hitchcockian *aficionados* with the "divinization" of their interpretive object—with the elevation of Hitchcock into a God-like demiurge who masters even the smallest of details of his work: such an attitude is simply a sign of transference relationship where Hitchcock functions as the "subject supposed to know [*sujet supposé savoir*]"—and is it necessary to add that there is more truth in it, that it is theoretically far more productive, than the attitude of those who lay stress on Hitchcock's fallibility, inconsistencies, etc.? In short, here, more than ever, the Lacanian motto *les non-dupes errent* is in force: the only way to produce something real in theory is to pursue the transference fiction to the end. (Slavoj Žižek, "Alfred Hitchcock, or, The Form and its Historical Mediation," in *Everything You Wanted to Know About Hitchcock (But Were Afraid to Ask Lacan)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek [London: Verso, 1992], 10).

To moderate this somewhat, I do think that the supposed critical/objective stance that many academics assume to demonstrate their intellectual independence negates itself precisely to the degree of its conviction. That is, no one is less objective or critical than the person who is certain that s/he is objective or critical.

⁵ See J. B. Pontalis, "The Big Other," in *Love of Beginnings*, trans. James Grieve with Marie-Christine Régus (London: Free Association, 1993), originally published 1986 as *L'amour des commencements* (Paris: Gallimard); François Roustang, "Why Did We Follow Him So Long?", in *Lacanian Delusion*.

⁶ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 15. "C'était un phénomène bien parisien, une mode, une folie, un snobisme" (*Vies et légendes*, 27).

in love with neither Lacan nor his ideas.⁷ They certainly are not in love with the idea of the matheme. Nonetheless, love Lacanian style—*le style est l'amour-même*—is about the letter and the matheme. In his own love letter, Lacan writes about meaning and the matheme.⁸ That letter even opens with another schema of mathemes, spread across a forbidding imaginary field.⁹ Love is a serious business, and if we wish to take the matheme seriously—more seriously than it has generally been regarded heretofore, at least in the anglophone academy—we must deal with Lacan's assertion that "the only thing one can write that is a bit serious [is] a love letter."¹⁰ But because the matheme is definitively about imposture, taking it seriously means taking it, not just as a poetic device, as Turkle suggests, but also as a joke and as a joke about love. Lacan insists, "What I say of love is assuredly that one cannot speak about it," even though "people have done nothing but speak of love in analytic discourse."¹¹ Seriously then, what do I want from Lacan? The answer is that I want something like the divagation Lacan steers between love and the signifier, when he vows to "stay this difficult ground-breaking course, whose horizon is strange."¹² In that spirit, the answer is also that there is no answer.

There is no answer because the question of desire or motivation must always fail to produce an answer, for the same reason that the question of standpoint must likewise fail:

⁷ However, the last decade has seen an efflorescence of books published in English on Lacan, as well as the establishment of several English-language Lacanian specialist journals: *Umbra*, *ANaMORPHOSIS*, *The Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, *Analysis*, *lacanian ink*, and *The Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*.

⁸ Lacan, "Love Letter"; "Lettre d'amour."

⁹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 78; *Séminaire XX*, 73.

¹⁰ Lacan, *Seminar XX* 84. "La seule chose qu'on puisse faire d'un peu sérieux, la lettre d'amour" (*Séminaire XX*, 78).

¹¹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 12, 83. "Ce que je dis de l'amour, c'est assurément qu'on ne peut en parler," "Parler d'amour . . . on ne fait que ça dans le discours analytique" (*Séminaire XX*, 17, 77).

¹² Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 38. "De maintenir ce difficile frayage puisque nous avons un horizon étrange" (*Séminaire XX*, 39).

because language, as *S*, is radically insufficient to the subject, as *Œ*; because the subject is constitutively barred to him/herself. For Lacan, the injunction to "Know thyself" is an impossible demand, and for that reason, it is a fitting figure for the articulation of desire. Desire, Lacan says, is a metonymy.¹³ Desire and language are always dance-away lovers, so no one can really say where s/he is "coming from." We can only say that we are coming, in a condensation of sex reduced to banal crudity and the always deferred "arrival" of the subject in her/his alienation. Alternatively, we can only say we are coming insofar as we are concomitantly going, in a condensation of life reduced to shitting (and its requisites) and the evanescence of the subject in what s/he has already lost.¹⁴ We cannot say where we are, nor can we say what we really want or what we really love. When we claim that we can, when we think we can identify our own motives and foibles, we re-enact the ecstatic capture of ourselves in the mirror: nothing is clearer to us than the *méconnaissance* of the image-other for our own self. Every articulation of one's own standpoint or motive, even motivated by the best of academic/political intentions, is thus too cleanly imaginary, purified of the slippery corruption of both sociological ideology and the psychoanalytic unconscious. So when we feel compelled to honestly say where we are coming from, to be open about our loves and hates and desires, we mistake our pretension for our ethics, just as artists of teaching mistake hubris for humility.

But such an answer of unanswerability is a little too easy, and therefore just as evasive and false as the apparent ease of the interpretation of clear writing. We can turn to a

¹³ Sheridan's English translation is provocatively different from the French: "Man's desire is a metonymy" ("Agency of the Letter," 175), versus "Le désir *est* une métonymie" ("L'instance de la lettre," 528, emphasis in original).

¹⁴ This recalls Fink's characterization of the being of the subject as a "pulse-like movement" (*Lacanian Subject*, 46).

reflexive parallel in writing for elaboration of the problematic of “too easy.”¹⁵ When the editor of *Educational Researcher*, one of the principal journals of the AERA, accepted an abridged version of Chapter One of this dissertation, he did so on the condition of the addition of a disciplinary example of clear writing that could be shown to fail in the ways that I was suggesting clear writing always does. I immediately thought about the discussant who responded to an oral presentation of a version of the same text at the 1997 AERA meeting. He violently rejected the paper, and, to buttress his counter-case, invoked St. Paul for his exemplary clarity: “God is love,” claiming that we all knew what Paul meant by this.

Well, yes and no. The phrase “God is love” actually occurs in 1 John, the first letter of John,¹⁶ which is traditionally attributed to the eponymous apostle. While that authorship is still in some dispute, Paul is not generally considered to be an alternative possibility.¹⁷ In noting this misattribution, I do not mean to discredit the discussant, but merely to recognize that through it Paul becomes a phantom author, even more fantastic than he appears in the Bible, and thus much more Lacanian.¹⁸ Lacan himself recommends Paul as good vacation reading, although the particular text he suggests is the Epistle to the Romans—which is, among other things, a letter about (God’s) love.¹⁹ Perhaps the discussant is merely metonymizing, in good Lacanian fashion, for Paul’s Epistle states that “love is the fulfilling

¹⁵ Žižek runs a similar argument against Derrida, claiming that the “post-structuralist” critique of Lacan “runs a little too smoothly” and is “just a little too convenient” (*Sublime Object*, 153-155). Aside from his interesting and, to some, perhaps unexpected, discrimination of Lacanian psychoanalysis from poststructuralism, Žižek’s ongoing determination to oppose Lacan to Derrida often appears overemphatic. In *Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek revisits the relation between the two Jacques, and there, the too-smoothness of deconstruction metamorphizes into the traumatic “apple of discord” (193) between the corresponding theorizations.

¹⁶ 1 John 4:16 and 1 John 4:18.

¹⁷ Paul was executed around A.D. 69, while 1 John is dated about A.D. 90.

¹⁸ See below for how Lacan may be likewise conjuring Freud into a phantom author of the famous quote about the plague coming to America.

¹⁹ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 83; *Séminaire VII*, 101.

of the law,"²⁰ which neatly brings together two prime concerns for Lacan. Or three, since the law of the Epistle—the law of the Letter—is the Law of God, and God is regularly on Lacan's mind.

Certainly the discussant is right about our ability to talk to each other about God, at least as a suspect stand-in for the Christian god. Lacan would agree. He says, "God (*Dieu*) is the locus where, if you will allow me this wordplay, the *dieu*—the *dieur*—the *dire* is produced. . . . And as long as things are said, the God hypothesis will persist."²¹ Certainly we can feel confident that when we speak of God, we share some notion of what is meant, as long as we share the same ethnocentric assumptions, such as making him male and making him "Him." But God is the prototypical transcendental signified, the *logos* of infinite and self-legitimizing meaning that centers the symbolic system and universe of Christianity: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."²² Only God could justly declaim, "I AM WHAT I AM."²³ The infinity and transcendence of God makes Him self-legitimizing, but in doing so, it also makes Him fundamentally unknowable and ineffable—that is, not in just some exotic, academic, deconstructionist, Lacanian or rarefied sense, but constitutively and thoroughly so. God is beyond mere human comprehension, and that is what makes God what He is. As Lacan puts it, God "introduces

²⁰ Romans 13:10. When the topic returns to love in *Seminar XX*, Lacan invokes Paul's name again (12; *Séminaire XX*, 17).

²¹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 45, emphasis in original. "Dieu est proprement le lieu où, si vous m'en permettez le jeu, se produit le *dieu* — le *dieur* — le *dire*. . . . Et aussi longtemps que se dira quelque chose, l'hypothèse Dieu sera là" (*Séminaire XX*, 44).

²² John 1.1.

²³ Exodus 3:14, Bible in Basic English. To revisit the issue of translation, the King James Bible gives, "I AM THAT I AM," which is the version that Lacan gives as the English translation in *Seminar VII* (81). But he also chooses to discuss the translation given above (*Seminar VII*, 81, 173) ("Je suis ce que je suis," *Séminaire VII*, 98, 204). The New Revised Standard Version reads, "I am who I am," and Young's Literal Translation Bible gives, "I am that which I am."

himself as an essentially hidden God.”²⁴ If He were substantially apprehensible, He would not be God. Our common understanding of God, our communicative and instrumental invocation of His name among ourselves, depends on God being simultaneously beyond our grasp. This paradox also attends on the transcendental of God, for His elevation as the Being of infinite meaning must, in parallel fashion, coincide with Him being the failure of merely human meaning: God is the ultimate Mystery, and must necessarily remain so.

Unsurprisingly, *love* presents the same quandary. Lacan keeps moving between God and love in *Encore*. Cottom notes that in our time and culture love aspires to a transcendence similar to that of God, for there is “the assumption that love, in a sense, explains itself: that love is love.”²⁵ The tautologicalness is revealing: again, although *love* is such a part of our everyday discourse, love would not be love if it were explainable in any other terms. Love is both integral to our symbolic—that is, “real”—existences and fundamentally unknowable. That proposition notwithstanding, every few years newsmagazines rerun what is fundamentally the same story: scientists have discovered the biological/genetic/olfactory/pharmacological/evolutionary basis of love. There is evidently a popular desire to understand love, to nail it down, and in these times, the preeminent hammer of understanding is science. At the very same time, there is a popular desire to elevate love above expert knowledge, as exemplified by science, so that, like the “art of teaching,” the impossibility of the logical determination of love can authorize every subject in her or his wisdom about it. Who would be denied her/his own subjective convictions as to the nature of love? Complementing and complicating this amatory paradox is a third kind of popular conviction: one of general bafflement—that the nature of love continually eludes us, so that

²⁴ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 173. “Un Dieu qui se présente comme essentiellement caché” (*Séminaire VII*, 204).

²⁵ Cottom, *Text & Culture*, 115.

neither science nor our personal experience is sufficient to its secrets. Žižek provides a relevant variation on this theme:

If I am directly ordered to love a woman, it is clear that this does not work: in a way, love must be free. But on the other hand, if I proceed as if I really have a choice, if I start to look around and say to myself, "Let's choose which of these women I will fall in love with," it is clear that this also does not work, that it is not "real love." The paradox of love is that it is a free choice, but a choice which never arrives in the present—it is always already made. At a certain moment, I can only state retroactively that *I've already chosen*.²⁶

Love is therefore an aporia of knowledge-in-discourse. Lacan is more precise. According to him, "transference involves three passions—love, hate and knowledge."²⁷ Chapters One and Five considered the latter two, apropos of the abhorrence of the matheme. This chapter began with love, and will keep coming back to it, in order to bring it to matheme and transference. But first, we need to complete the triad of the discussant's rebuff of Lacan.

The final element of John's/Paul's clear statement is the simplest form of the copula *to be*, the foundational verb of English. That simplicity is both utterly quotidian and immediately confounding. Lacan says that "ontology is what highlighted in language the use of the copula, isolating it as a signifier."²⁸ The quality of *being* and representation has engaged the subtlest minds of human philosophy and thinking, including Lacan. Heidegger wrote a book about being which is not renowned for its ease of reading. Despite a few millennia of philosophizing, little about being has been settled—which, of course, does not prevent the various conjugations of *to be* from being fundamental to our everyday conversations. Yet Lacan does venture a most relevant proposition about being: "Love aims at being, namely, at

²⁶ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 166, emphasis in original.

²⁷ John Forrester, "Casualties of Truth," in *Dispatches from the Freud Wars*, 47.

²⁸ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 31. "L'ontologie est ce qui a mis en valeur dans le langage l'usage de la copule, l'isolant comme signifiant" (*Séminaire XX*, 33).

what slips away most in language.”²⁹ So “God is love” is both immediately transparent and deeply opaque.

The editor of *Educational Researcher* rejected this example as too easy and too pat. This is perfectly true—but it is precisely its easiness and patness which make it more Lacanian, for neither can be sustained for long. The example may be dismissable as simple, but the AERA discussant who presented it surely is not. He was eloquent, intelligent, well read, and highly motivated. He made a point of demonstrating his familiarity with “post-modern texts” (although he derogated that category much more in terms of Derrida’s name than Lacan’s). His response—which was almost completely directed towards my paper and one other that he condemned as post-modern—was read from a prepared text too well crafted to have been thrown together on the flight to the conference. Neither could his patness be attributed to a lack of attention, since he was passionate about his position. It is too easy to dismiss him and his example as being off base—which was the editor’s characterization.³⁰ To put this in the opposite way, he can be no more easily dismissed as stupid, ignorant, wild, irrelevant, incompetent or *de mauvaise foi* than, say, any reader who rejects the obscurity of Lacan. Why, then, would he reach for such an “easily” dismissable example, given all the infinite possibilities available to him?

I have no real answer, although I am tempted to declare that any example the discussant could have invoked would likewise be susceptible to the discovery of un-clarity. Chapter One implied as much, with its rhetorical question about the complete definition of teaching, art, etc. Yet to make that declaration would simply repeat the infinite claim made

²⁹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 39. “L’amour vise l’être, à savoir ce qui, dans le langage, se dérobe le plus” (*Séminaire XX*, 40).

³⁰ To be more exact, the editor wrote that the readership of the journal would find the example off-base.

by the artists of teaching. Instead of doing that, I will assert something other and slightly less grand: I doubt any consistent answer to the issue of the discussant can be discovered if we proceed only by diligently “rational” means. As we have just seen, this kind of logic leads directly to the discussant being simultaneously dismissable and undismissable. The presumption of a systematic rationality to discourse directly impedes any answer that can satisfy the criteria of that same rationality. Of course, satisfactory and systematic discursive rationality has a less cumbersome and more familiar name: clarity. And clarity has its own other, one that operates exactly through the reality of paradox: Lacanian psychoanalysis. Seeking a straightforward answer to the articulation of the anti-Lacanian runs head-on into the never-straightness of Lacan. This not-quite-eternal return comes back to “*Che voglio?*” The troublingly simple answer to that question is that I want to be able to think about, if not understand, why I cannot seem to avoid Lacanian perplexities. For me, there seems to be no cure for Lacan.³¹ And since that noted Canadian psychoanalyst, Leonard Cohen, argues that “there ain’t no cure for love,” I must return to the knotting of love, knowledge and the matheme.³²

³¹ The logic of “too easy” is also evident in the problem not resolved in Chapter One: that of sexing the subject. The academy of the late nineties often advocates the use of non-sexist language for its faculty and students alike. There are pamphlets and even books that outline how to write in a non-sexist way. This is too easy, because the historical existence of patriarchy implies that language is itself sexist (which is not to say that language as such *must* be sexist—this is a wholly contingent condition, but we have to grapple with the conditions that we have been born into), in the sense that men have had grossly unequal access to and influence over its constitution, reproduction and regulation. Of course, the pervasiveness of the sexism of language does not mean that we have to surrender to it. We should still strive to write in an anti-sexist way. But using *s/he* or *they* and other “neutral” terms hardly suffices to erase the sexism of language.

Likewise, there is no easy solution to the problem of naming children. In this culture, giving a child the surname of her/his mother almost always means giving her/him the name of the mother’s father. Hyphenating surnames not only creates the new problem of deciding which name should precede the other, but also passes the problem down to succeeding generations, who cannot keep re-hyphenating indefinitely. Giving a girl the surname of her mother and giving a boy the surname of his father, if the names are different, sets up a nominal alignment which denies the opposite-sex parent and carries a sense of inequality for families with children who are all the same sex, etc. The difficulty of language, sex, and naming will not vanish into the clarity of enlightenment, fairness, equality, ethics, and liberation. There is no cure for language, either.

³² Leonard Cohen, “Ain’t No Cure For Love,” from *I’m Your Man*, CBS LP WCK 44191, 1988.

Coming Home With Lacan

In late 1991, as I was completing my Master's degree in sociology at the University of British Columbia, I had only the vaguest aspirations to enter a doctoral program. Driven to look for something, although I didn't know what, I took my customary comfort in the stacks of the University Bookstore. One of the new titles in the Literary Criticism section was a slickly black volume by someone I had never hear of before: Slavoj Žižek. The book was entitled, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*.³³ My desultory reading of social theory had regularly run aground on baffling references to Lacan, so a primer seemed exactly what I needed. Besides, the jacket blurb credited Žižek as a Slovenian sociologist, and I was intrigued to find a sociologist among the literary theorists. I flipped through a few pages and was at once fascinated and perplexed. Žižek summoned George Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead* to decrypt an unpronounceable Lacanianism, $\$ \diamond a$, and declared that it was this uncanny—in a suitably psychoanalytic sense—passage which gave the answer of something he called “the real,” although it was obvious this real was stranger than even the rarest of realities. If this was sociology, it was sociology unlike any I had ever known; if this was social theory, it was theory utterly different than the standard readings of Durkheim, Marx and Weber that I found vaguely unsatisfying. I didn't understand everything that Žižek said—and, more than seven years on, I still don't, but at least I now know I never will—but I did understand enough to realize that his preoccupation with the dead, Lacan, and B-movies disturbed more than standard academic sensibilities. It sublated the orthodox psychoanalytic attention to the *unheimlich* into a psychoanalytic practice of

³³ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

social criticism: an uncanny psychoanalysis of culture.³⁴ In even that first brush with such a practice, forced to wrestle with ideas and language that continuously slipped out of my grasp, only to ambush me again from behind, I felt at home, for the first time in a very, very long time.

Is this a love story? If so, who is the love object? Lacan or his mediator Žižek? Or is it something of both, a Žižek melded with a fantastic Lacan translated into Slovenian English? Is this homecoming a belated arrival of the heart? Before things get too sweet, a little consideration of the nature of home is in order.

In Lacanian terms, to feel at home is to make a symbolic identification, which is an identification with a place, as opposed to an imaginary identification, which is an identification with the other as an image (the *locus classicus* of imaginary identification being the identification with the other as one's own mirror image). This place is a place in language, a locus of the signifier in all its Lacanian complications.³⁵ Yet, surprisingly, it is also a place in reality, whether mundane, exotic, or both at once. An ordinary human life, even the pedestrian life of an academic, is a very slippery and elusive thing, full of the contradictory, the unexplained, and the inexplicable. Hence love, in the very banality of its generality, retains its seductive mystery and paradox. Hence one's own self, despite and because of its deadly familiarity, defies definition by oneself. What book of the self could ever be complete? Which book will leave nothing out? Which one is reducible to any set of facts, no matter how large? The "lived reality" of the subject is just as elusive in language as

³⁴ Freud's paper, "Das Unheimliche" ("The Uncanny"), dates from 1919 (*Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey [London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-74], vol. 17, 217-52).

³⁵ For Lacan, symbolic identification is also an identification with a "unary trait" (*trait unaire*), "a primordial symbolic term which is introjected to produce the ego-ideal" (Evans, s.v. "identification"), but the discussion of that concept is, once more, beyond the scope of this dissertation. The "locus of the signifier's treasure,"

any term of the “art of teaching.” Any discursive clarity about the “lived reality” of oneself or the social world is achievable only through a violent abstraction of that reality.

For me, the great comfort of *Looking Awry* was Žižek’s dogged refusal to surrender to that abstraction. I could identify with the text symbolically precisely because I could not find myself there—that is, I could not abstract myself from its terms. I could not be seduced into imaginary identification with something in the text when that text regularly demonstrated the imaginariness of meaning. My initial real appreciation of Žižek came when I realized several things at once: first, that I was identifying precisely with the impossibility of identification; second, that I slipped into imaginary identification at exactly the moment when I recognized its impossibility; third, that in psychoanalysis, impossibility always implies the horror of trauma. Such is the manner of home that Lacanian psychoanalysis provides—but then, in even the most traditional of psychoanalysis, home is where you want to kill, screw or eat mommy and daddy. Turning psychoanalysis back upon its own discourse, nothing could be more Lacanian than sheltering murder, incest/rape, sin and cannibalism beneath the discursive prettiness of *family romance*. Gracing the cover of *Séminaire IV* is a painting of Kronos eating his son alive.³⁶

according to Lacan, is the Other (“Subversion of the Subject,” 304). “Le lieu du trésor du signifiant” (“Subversion du sujet,” 806).

³⁶ Since *Séminaire IV* was published 13 years after Lacan’s death, it is safe to assume that the cover illustration was Jacques-Alain Miller’s editorial choice, rather than Lacan’s. However, Lacan did refer to Goya at least three times, so the decision is not outlandish:

“The grotesques of a Leonardo or of a Goya” (“Function and Field,” 56). “Des grotesques d’un Léonard ou d’un Goya” (“Fonction et champ,” 266).

“The deep sleep that feeds on the dream monsters it produces (to use Goya’s lapidary expression),” my translation of “Le sommeil de la raison s’entretient, selon la formule lapidaire de Goya, des monstres qu’il engendre” (“Séminaire sur « La lettre volée »,” 46).

“Goya tells us, ‘The sleep of reason breeds monsters,’” my translation of “Goya nous dit : « Le sommeil de la raison engendre les monstres »” (*Séminaire IX*, 231-232).

If this is the home of psychoanalysis, if this is *chez* Lacan, then coming home is not exactly *Lassie*, but it is nonetheless a consummate story of identification and transference. A colleague of mine is not so fond of Lacan, but she is a thorough Derridaphile. She is seduced by his theory, his writing, his politics, his ethics, his activism, his voice, and not a little by his dashing good looks. By contrast, I find Lacan eminently resistible. There is no end to the unflattering accounts of his egoism, his grandiosity, his capriciousness, his churlishness, his dandyism, his greed, his self-absorption, and on and on. Even his acolytes often are explicit about his lack of saintliness. Most non-acolytes agree that he eventually lost his mind. Raymond Tallis, a specialist in geriatric medicine at the University of Manchester, makes a long-distance diagnosis of Lacan—so long distance that it is posthumous: “multi-infarct dementia.”³⁷ Still, there is little agreement, even among Lacan’s critics, about exactly when Lacan lost his mind, although they typically take comfort in the image of the faltering Lacan of the late seventies, staring silently for hours at painstaking drawings of knots on the blackboard, seemingly oblivious to the hundreds in the audience waiting for him to speak. Even much earlier, when Lacan was more lucid (if never very clear) Clément notes that students would regularly greet his appearance with hoots and stink bombs.³⁸ Lacan was not a very loveable man, despite the passions of Clément and others. Even if I am in love with Lacan, even if I still believe that he was doing serious and important work with his blackboard knots, my love is not the love that Clément confesses. So what kind of love could it be?

When we speak of identifying with someone, we tend to think of that identification in positive terms. That is, we tend to identify with our heroes and with the traits that make

³⁷ Tallis, “Shrink From Hell,” 20.

³⁸ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 12; “Les boules puantes et les cacophonies,” *Vies et légendes*, 22.

them heroic. Lacan is Clément's hero. She repeats the widely circulated story that Lacan defied the Gestapo in their own headquarters to retrieve documents identifying his eventual second wife, Sylvia Bataille, as Jewish.³⁹ Schneiderman takes the tale from Clément, and adds that "we should recognize Lacan as a man whose personal ethical conduct was unimpeachable."⁴⁰ Clément redeploys the story as a metaphor for what she calls Lacan's heroic battle with the psychoanalytic establishment.⁴¹ However, Macey has demonstrated that there are enough problems with the details of the Sylvia story to cast doubts about its veracity (for instance, Gestapo involvement was impossible), although he does concede the accuracy of Roudinesco's version of the events, in which Lacan and Sylvia Bataille *together* retrieved family papers from a police station.⁴² And despite Schneiderman's imperative, Lacan's personal ethical conduct has been regularly and compellingly impeached. Close to home, one of Lacan's daughters from his first marriage, Sibylle, has written a sad, sometimes self-pitying, but still damning memoir of her father's personal failings.⁴³ Even Clément tells of how her own love died, noting that "heroism can become tiresome."⁴⁴

Yet we sometimes identify with the very failings of the unheroic. Žižek cites the case of Kurt Waldheim, the former Secretary General of the United Nations who ran in 1986 for the presidency of Austria. Waldheim was suspected of wartime collaboration with the Nazis, and in the election, his opponents depicted him as a man with a dubious past, possibly guilty

³⁹ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 19; *Vies et légendes*, 30-31. Clément curiously says that Lacan's heroism was a secret and remains so, though her published act of saying so definitively dissolves its secrecy.

⁴⁰ Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan*, 164.

⁴¹ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 19; *Vies et légendes*, 31.

⁴² Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, 3. Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.*, 147; *Bataille de cent ans*, 161; Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 158; *Jacques Lacan: Esquisse*, 213.

⁴³ Sibylle Lacan, *Un père: Puzzle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

⁴⁴ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 20; "Mais l'héroïsme peut lasser," *Vies et légendes*, 32. But she also says, "the hard core of my original love for Lacan is something I still carry with me" (*Lives and Legends*, 16). This is a markedly un-literal translation of "Lacan garde pour moi certains de ses noyaux durs" (*Vies et légendes*, 27).

of war crimes, who was “not prepared to confront his past, a man who evade[d] crucial questions concerning it—in short, a man whose basic feature [was] a refusal to ‘work through’ the traumatic past.”⁴⁵ Waldheim was elected nonetheless. Žižek hypothesizes that many Austrians identified with exactly the evasion of the past that Waldheim embodied. If Lacan was less than the anti-Nazi hero that Clément and Schneiderman depict, he was nevertheless much better than any Nazi collaborator.

Lacan can still be an object of identification, and, indeed, he demonstrably was, over and over again. Even the resistibility of Lacan can be the very basis of identification with him. As far as I can engage my own fascination with Lacan, it revolves around a rhetoric that enacts the theory to which it gives body and animation: literariness, pervasive obscenity, difficulty, paradoxicality. This may be a form of love after all, Lacanian style: “love aims at being, namely, at what slips away most in language”; “love is the sign that one is changing discourses.”⁴⁶ My love/fascination revolves around the manifest fallibility of language.

Teaching as the Excess of Translation

Perhaps I thereby imitate, in a small and partial way, Lacan’s own original attraction to psychoanalysis:

In a dialogue with an analyst who claimed that she had chosen her profession out of her sense of being the sort of strong person whom others could turn to for help, Lacan admitted that he had come to analysis “in just the opposite way,” drawn to the way Freud had emphasized not man’s [*sic*] strength but his vulnerability.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 105.

⁴⁶ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 39, 16; “L’amour vise l’être, à savoir ce qui, dans le langage, se dérobe le plus,” “L’amour, c’est le signe qu’on change de discours” (*Séminaire XX*, 40, 21).

⁴⁷ Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 234.

The obvious vulnerability that Lacan reveals in me as a subject and a man returns to the “art of teaching” and its center of translation. One of my prominent failings is my native lack of talent in foreign languages—including French. While I have worked over the past few years to surmount that shortcoming, it still remains, and glaringly so. I can laboriously read “straightforward” texts, and I do puzzle out parts of the Lacanian corpus in French, well enough to be able to compare official translations in English to the French, and to engage, on at least a limited scale, with untranslated pieces. Still, I rely on translations that are sometimes seriously wanting. Until recently, Alan Sheridan was the major translator of Lacan in English, having done both *Écrits: A Selection* and *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Richard Wollheim is less than pleased with the results. His assessment is that Sheridan “has got Lacan’s prose out of French but barely into English.”⁴⁸ Fink is also critical of Sheridan’s work, although he adds that, “having translated five of his *Écrits* now, I find him an unbearable writer to translate.”⁴⁹ Such problems with translation bode ill for anyone like myself, who is reading Lacan largely in English.

That said, any fantasy I have of reading Lacan fluently in French is easily exposed as wishful. If Ricoeur and Foucault find Lacan too difficult to read, then fluency in French as a language or a culture can in no way ensure fluency in Lacan. He may be quintessentially French, but “the French man or woman in the street understands nothing of Lacan and cannot explain a single one of his formulations.”⁵⁰ When Felman went as a student to a Paris

⁴⁸ Richard Wollheim, “The Cabinet of Dr. Lacan,” *New York Review of Books*, 25 January 1979, 36.

⁴⁹ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 150. Fink has since translated *Seminar XX: Encore*, and is currently translating both a full version of *Écrits* and *Séminaire VIII: Le transfert*.

⁵⁰ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 151.

university bookstore for a copy of *Écrits*, the bookseller urged her to reconsider. "I promise you," he said, "It is unreadable, totally incomprehensible. Don't buy it."⁵¹

Even if perfect translation between languages was possible, the translation of Lacan would still falter, for reasons beyond and before any translation into English. Fink claims that "virtually no one in France comes to understand Lacan by reading the *Écrits*." He makes an even stronger claim: "You cannot read his *writings* (in particular the *Écrits*) unless you already know more or less what he means."⁵² Suppose that we make this negative imperative a little less forbidding, and replace it with a more conventional hermeneutic circle: you have to make some sense of the whole in order to make sense of the part, and vice-versa. The problem is the defiantly unwieldy "whole" of Lacan. The largest part of his teaching is constituted by the seminars, and only nine of the 26, 27, 28, or 29 total seminars—their ultimate number depends on who is doing the counting⁵³—have been published in French so far. Fewer have been translated into English. The seminar is thus mostly inaccessible to most people, although expensive samizdat versions of unpublished seminars are available, at least in Parisian psychoanalytic bookstores. Likewise, there are many other Lacanian texts that are relatively unattainable. According to Marini, "Lacan's work, in official or clandestine circulation, adds up to over eight thousand pages." Having established this open-ended estimate, she immediately adds, in a very Lacanian move, that there are even more: "This includes neither the scientific publications signed collectively before 1932, nor the countless addresses in the different psychiatric, psychoanalytic, or philosophical

⁵¹ Felman, *Adventure of Insight*, 4.

⁵² Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 151, 150, emphasis in original.

⁵³ Part of the problem is that there were two seminars "before" the seminar. In 1953 and 1954, Lacan led seminars of the Wolf Man and the Rat Man, at the Hôpital Sainte-Anne, before the seminar was constituted officially as such, with *Freud's Papers on Technique* (1953–1954) being the "first." Roudinesco counts the Wolf Man and the Rat Man seminars as Seminar -1 and Seminar 0, respectively (*Jacques Lacan*, 529).

associations in which he participated, nor the lectures that have not been published, nor the summaries of seminars that he approved! Less than three thousand pages constitute volumes sold in bookstores, about one thousand pages are disseminated in journals or collective works. One must be an initiate to discover them.”⁵⁴ Even the gentler hermeneutic circle must fail badly in the face of this daunting profusion. For almost all of us, the whole of Lacan, or even most of Lacan, will remain out of reach, regardless of our fluency in French or English or any other tongue. The condition of translating Lacan into English is translating him into some attainable place, and only the “initiates” can even get their hands on the requisite map (and there is no guarantee that the initiates can read the map).

This is not all. Most writings by Lacan were never written by Lacan. Instead, they were, like the seminars, delivered orally and recorded by others. Even the *Écrits* were spoken. All of the seminars that have been published bear the editorial imprimatur of Miller. Lacan thus forms a francophone triumvirate with Saussure and Kojève, all of whom “wrote” major works that were actually produced by others from lecture notes and transcripts. Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* was assembled from the notebooks of no less than eight different people, attending three different courses.⁵⁵ The editors, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, openly declare that they chose a path of “bold” assimilation and reconstruction in producing the *Cours*.⁵⁶ Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* was “assembled” by Raymond Queneau from the lectures that Kojève delivered at the *École des Hautes Études* over six years, from

⁵⁴ Marini, *Jacques Lacan*, 4.

⁵⁵ Louis Caille, Léopold Gautier, Paul Regard, Albert Reidlinger, Mme. Albert Sechehaye, George Dégallier, Francis Joseph and Louis Brütsch (Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, preface to *Course in General Linguistics*, by Ferdinand de Saussure, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966], xvii-xviii).

⁵⁶ Bally and Sechehaye, preface, xviii-xix.

1933 to 1939.⁵⁷ Assimilation, reconstruction and assembly are all issues that obtain for the publication of Lacan's seminars. The title pages of the French versions give authorship to Lacan, but they also advertise that Miller has "established" the text.⁵⁸ The numbered sectioning of each seminar-chapter, along with their subtitles, attests to Miller's intervening hand. Moreover, few of the seminars had appeared in print, even in French, before the death of Lacan in 1981, which means that subsequent volumes have not been, and can never be, approved by Lacan in their final form.⁵⁹ Violent disputes have erupted amongst Lacanians since the passing of Lacan, and various challenges have been made to Miller's versions of the seminar. In dispute are not only possible adulterations by Miller, but also possible mistakes by him and others. A book-length catalogue of "errors" in *Séminaire VIII: Le transfert* was published in 1991 and covers 312 pages.⁶⁰ The serious problem with translating Lacan into English is that there is no wholly recognized original, even in French.

This lack at the heart of Lacan's seminars has an odd consequence for their translation: sometimes, the translation is more accurate than the original. John Forrester, who translated the first two seminars into English with Sylvana Tomaselli, comments on the peculiar status of those translations with respect to the French texts.⁶¹ Actually, his first comment is generalizable: translators necessarily stumble upon errors in the text they work upon, and the seminars were no exception. Forrester also explains,

⁵⁷ James H. Nichols, Jr., translator's note to *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, by Alexandre Kojève, ed. Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), xiii.

⁵⁸ "Texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller." The English translations say "Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller."

⁵⁹ The vociferous critics of Miller have made much of Miller's control of the seminars, which is one reason for the deep schisms in Lacanian psychoanalysis after Lacan. In Miller's defense, Lacan did explicitly approve at least some of Miller's earlier editions. In particular, it was Miller's work on *Séminaire XI* that won him Lacan's blessing to edit the rest.

⁶⁰ e.l.p., *Le transfert dans tous ses errata, suivi de Pour une transcription critique des séminaires de Jacques Lacan* (Paris: E.P.E.L., 1991).

"Editorial" work became necessary; the work of a host who wishes to introduce this new guest in the most accurate of lights. Such, however, were the differences in philosophy of translation between the writer of the original versions of Lacan's *Seminars*, Jacques-Alain Miller, and myself, that this was not possible. Nor was I permitted to include the notes to the text which attempted to indicate significant literary allusions, significant errors of fact or, most intriguingly, those most psychoanalytic of "errors," Freudian slips, particularly those numerous occasions on which Lacan mistook one name for another. All vetoed and censored, although they have been "silently" corrected in the English translations—whence the promise to "correct" eventually the original French editions.⁶²

Forrester, who is as elegant and painstaking a reader of psychoanalysis as he is a writer about it, is quite plain about who wrote the seminars—and it wasn't Lacan. Yet beyond this decisive attribution of authorship, there is this curious matter of the errata in the original French editions. Whether they are small or, as Forrester pointedly notes, "significant," they have been corrected "silently," without being identified or admitted. In that respect, the translation is more original than the original. Even if we make the assumption that the French texts are for the most part reliable—and the catalogue of "errors" in *Séminaire VIII* puts that assumption in radical doubt—there is still no way to know exactly where those errors are. Every seeming deviation in translation makes the veracity of *both* English and French versions undecideable, for the translation itself can still be in error. In 1994, I contacted Forrester about his translation of a line from *Seminar II*, because the versions in the two languages directly contradicted each other. The French reads, "*Je dirais sans issue*," but the English says, "I wouldn't say without remedy."⁶³ I wanted to know if this was a "silently corrected" error, but Forrester, after examining the text, said the mistake was his and

⁶¹ Officially, Forrester is credited with the translation of *Seminar I* and Tomaselli with that of *Seminar II*, but according to Forrester, both translators worked on both volumes (private communication, 15 July 1995).

⁶² John Forrester, "A Note on Translation," in *Seductions of Psychoanalysis*, 101.

⁶³ Lacan, *Séminaire II*, 304; *Seminar II*, 262.

Tomaselli's.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, short of calling him up on each and every occasion, there is no way to know if any such deviation is a stylistic or idiomatic choice by the translator, an error by her/him in the translation from French to English, an error in Miller's editing in the translation from transcription to finished text, an error in note-taking or transcription in the translation from the spoken to the written, or an error by Lacan in the translation from . . . someplace else . . . to speech. If Miller stands by his "philosophy of translation," then this densely layered problem of translation holds for every seminar, past or future.

All this troubling of translation does not even take into account the error in reading: my own very fallible translation from the written page to conceptualization and re-writing. I could venture that my very difficulty with French embodies—or at least figures—the problems of translation that pervade the Lacanian text. Of course, this is too neat; this is too easy—or at least it is so if that embodiment or figuration is meant as an excuse for not being fluent in French. But the figure can work in exactly the opposite way: the necessity to keep trying to read French, and the impossibility of my learning to do it sufficiently, is correlative to the necessity to keep trying to read Lacan, and the impossibility of my learning to do *that* sufficiently. Every good teacher I have had in French has maintained that fluency in written or oral comprehension must exceed translation, in the sense that translating in one's head works directly against any fluency. Each one of those good teachers has something to teach to every artist of teaching: that teaching is not an exercise in translation; instead, teaching is precisely the excess to translation.

⁶⁴ I was particularly interested in this line because it was at the heart of a passage that is cited by Dorothy Leland ("Lacanian Psychoanalysis," 91) as evidence of Lacan's profound sexism and by Jacqueline Rose as evidence of Lacan's usefulness for feminism ("Introduction-II," 45). My fantasy was that they would be arguing polar positions, on the basis of their respective, slightly different, but indisputably correct translations of the same incorrect original. Alas, once more, my desire was thwarted.

Amusing Lacan

It is largely because I teach that I identify, in my own way, with Lacan. If I find a home with him, if Lacan is my theoretical parent, then that identification is a recapitulation of Lacanian alienation. Surprisingly, though, this makes Lacan, as a figuration for his theory and writing, not father, but rather mother. In Fink's reading of Lacan, "the subject [gains], via alienation, a foothold within [the] divided mother-figure: *the subject has lodged his or her lack of being (manque-à-être) in that "place" where the Other was lacking.*"⁶⁵ Lacan is divided because he is too much and too far away from me, in all the ways discussed above—too many inaccessible texts, too many references to other thinkers, too much a part of the Parisian intellectual scene, too different from North America, and so on. The great Other of Lacanian theory, that behemoth corpus, is always glimpsed as if from across the ocean. My lack is precisely my faltering French and my dependence on translation. This is a crude rendering of Lacanian alienation, but that is exactly the point: it is the very crudeness of my readings of Lacan which allows me to grasp, as far as I can, the subtleties of his theory, at the same time as it irrefutably demonstrates how they elude me. That is one reason that every translated citation from Lacan in this dissertation is footnoted with the French version. There is always that distance on the page between the two, a gap that I can never quite close.

A few years ago, I was an unwitting participant in a pre-enactment of that distance. When I made my first visit to Paris, one of the things I made sure I did was to browse in the psychoanalytic bookstores. In one of them, I ended up spending much more money than a graduate student could afford on some of those "unpublished" seminars. It was a cramped little store, with a remarkably cantankerous manager who repeatedly shoved her customers out of the way as she bustled about the shelves and yelled at me sharply for leaning on the

heater. As I hurriedly straightened up, I ruefully thought, "How fitting—here I am, thousands of kilometers from home, handing over hundreds of dollars for Lacanian texts that will be agonizing to read, and, for that privilege, I am being given a tongue-lashing that I can barely understand." If this is not a measure of love, then at least it is something of a Lacanian joke. Clément observes that "Lacan's disciples didn't mind making themselves ridiculous."⁶⁶

The adage is that there is a thin line between love and hate, but there is also a thin line between love and the joke. Lacan always teetered on the dangerous line that Clément draws between the Prince of Homburg and the clown. The two aspects, she says, are inseparable.⁶⁷ Both were sometimes in evidence. In 1975, Lacan visited an America almost utterly unaware of him.

Convinced that he was world famous, he wanted to be allowed to make a private visit to the Metropolitan Opera House. "Tell them I'm Lacan," he bade his three bemused companions. Pamela Tyrell solved the problem with very "Lacanian" humor: she phoned the director of the Metropolitan and told him Jean-Paul Sartre wanted to visit incognito. The director was flattered and delighted to have such an eminent visitor and agreed at once. As if warning him about one of the great man's eccentricities, Pamela advised him not to address the philosopher by name. Despite her efforts, someone did ask after Simone de Beauvoir, but the deception wasn't discovered: Lacan's English wasn't good enough to see through it, and Pamela, acting as translator, did all she could to keep up the pretense. It was a memorable day, and Lacan was delighted with his welcome.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 54, emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 33; This is a rather free translation of the last part of "Les autres ne peuvent l'imiter qu'au risque du ridicule. Ils y sont tous tombés" (*Vies et légendes*, 47).

⁶⁷ Clément, *Lives and Legends*, 20; *Vies et légendes*, 31.

⁶⁸ Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 376-377; *Jacques Lacan: Esquisse*, 349.

Persuadé d'être mondialement célèbre, Lacan voulut avoir le privilège d'une visite privée au Metropolitan : « Dites-leur que je suis Lacan », s'exclama-t-il devant ses trois interlocuteurs médusés. Pamela Tyrell résolut le problème avec un humour très « lacanien » : elle téléphona à l'administrateur de l'opéra et lui annonça que Jean-Paul Sartre voulait venir incognito. Flatté de recevoir un hôte aussi prestigieux, celui-ci accepta aussitôt. Pamela lui conseilla simplement, comme s'il s'agissait d'une lubie, de ne pas interpeler le philosophe par son nom. Elle ne put néanmoins éviter que, dans la conversation,

Not all of Lacan's trip to America went so well. His audience at MIT filed out of the auditorium confused, insulted, and convinced that Lacan was either delirious or senile or both.⁶⁹ Yet such effects could not have been wholly unanticipated. Turkle makes the logical comparison with Freud's celebrated voyage to the United States in 1909, in order to note that Lacan was well aware of how the founder of psychoanalysis lived to regret his too easy successes with the American physicians he had come to court.⁷⁰ The enthusiasm of Freud's reception gives a special edge to his famous words to Jung about America: "They don't realize that we're bringing them the plague."⁷¹ It is sometimes not recognized that it is Lacan who is the source of this quotation, which he claims was told to him in private by Jung, but which has never been substantiated by the latter or by any other source. Orthodox Freudian scholarship gives quite a different version—"They'll be surprised when they find out what we have to tell them"—and Roudinesco, who has sometimes been accused of being Lacan's apologist, openly suspects his more provocative rendition.⁷² Lacan's attribution of the words to Freud makes of himself a bastard heir to a fictional or imaginary Freud. In 1975, Americans became only too quickly aware that Lacan was, nearly seventy years later, retroactively trying to bring them the plague. If Lacan is delivering the *matheme* as a gift, then those Americans would know how to label it "mathematically," just as teaching sociologists and the AERA would:

fussent demandées des nouvelles de Simone de Beauvoir. Malgré cela, la supercherie ne fu pas dévoilée : Lacan ne comprenait pas suffisamment l'anglais pour la déceler. Quant à Pamela, elle déploya tous ses talents de traductrice pour prolonger le quiproquo. La journée fut mémorable et Lacan enchanté de l'accueil réservé. (*Jacques Lacan : Esquisse d'une vie*, 486)

⁶⁹ Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 231.

⁷⁰ Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics*, 227. Another version of the logic of "too easy."

⁷¹ Lacan, "Freudian Thing," 116. "Il ne savent pas que nous leur apportons la peste" ("La chose freudienne," 403).

⁷² Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 265.



Gift, after all, has a German cognate which means *poison*.

Is this serious or a joke? Or the most serious of jokes? The distinction between the two largely dissolves in psychoanalysis, for which jokes are, along with dreams, the royal road to the unconscious. From that perspective, it should be no surprise to encounter “Lacanian humor,” despite the not inconsiderable pain demanded by the Lacanian text. Neither should it be a surprise to discover humor bound up with an imaginary, ventriloquized Freud invoked to posit Lacan as Freud’s double: the return to Freud as the return of Freud (or the return to Freud as the return to *Das Unheimliche*, in both substance and form). Psychoanalytic websites, which by their nature condense the imaginary and the symbolic, are exemplary venues for this particularization of the uncanny. For instance, *La Page Web de la Psychanalyse d’Orientation Lacanienne* for the *Association Mondiale de Psychanalyse* juxtaposes a portrait of Lacan with one of Freud.⁷³ The Group for the Discussion of the Freudian Field at SUNY Buffalo goes one step further, and provides an animated sequence by which nine small pictures of Freud morph into one large one of Lacan, and back again.⁷⁴

The matheme arises in the parallel uncanniness of the “figurative” mathematics of the letter. Partly for that reason, Stephen Melville finds humor in the matheme, and that is one reason why his analysis is so acute. Melville even shows that Lacan himself caught the joke of the matheme, through the following exchange with his baffled American interlocutors at Yale. This occurred a few days before Lacan visited the Met:

DUPRÉ: But that’s the problem. What is the exact status of the symbolism of the mathemes? Is it a universal symbolism or a . . .

⁷³ <http://www.ilimit.com/amp/french/index.htm>.

⁷⁴ <http://wings.buffalo.edu/student-life/graduate/gsa/lacan/lacan.html>. The same animated GIF is used on the homepage of *La Cause des Filets* (http://www.worldnet.net/~fr_morel/).

LACAN: It is a symbolism elaborated, always elaborated, by means of letters.

HARTMAN: But *quid* of word? Even if analytic science contains mathemes, there is the question of practice and of the translation of such mathemes in analytic practice, which is verbal, isn't it?

LACAN: There is nevertheless a world between the word and the letter.

HARTMAN: But it is their link that you want to show . . .

LACAN: Yes, and that amuses me.⁷⁵

The Lacanian joke is that Lacan was amused because he *didn't* get it, at least in New York—and neither did the director of the Metropolitan. The two delighted each other, only through their mutual *méconnaissance*. The Lacanianism of the tour of the Met obtains, therefore, in how Lacan didn't know, in how his own situation escaped him. The Lacanianism is the untenability of Lacan's presumption to be *le sujet supposé savoir*. Lacan turns out to be anything but the master of his own discourse. Instead, the discourse speaks him as something other than himself, so that he makes merry in his own pretension. Something twists in the matter of love and the letter when Lacan says both "I love the person I assumed to have knowledge" and "My sole presence in my discourse, by sole presence is my stupidity."⁷⁶

Both Lacan and his student Žižek stage the paradox of identification and offer the means to think about that paradox. That paradox, in turn, offers a better alternative to the

⁷⁵ Quoted and trans. in Melville, "Place of *Jouissance*," 175.

Pr DUPRÉ : Mais c'est le problème : quel est la statut exact du symbolisme des mathèmes ? Est-ce un symbolisme universel ou un . . .

J. LACAN : C'est un symbolisme élaboré, toujours élaboré au moyen de lettres.

Pr HARTMAN : Mais *quid* des mots ? Même si la science analytique contient des mathèmes, il y a la question de la pratique et de la traduction de tels mathèmes en pratique analytique, qui est verbale, n'est-ce pas ?

J. LACAN : Il y a néanmoins un monde entre le mot et la lettre.

Pr HARTMAN : Mais c'est leur lien que vous désirez montrer . . .

J. LACAN : Oui, et qui m'amuse. (Lacan, "Conférences et entretiens," 30-31)

brutal abstraction of clarity. First, the hegemonic endorsement of clarity was itself an imaginary identification with abstraction, parallel to the identification of artists of teaching with the *Gestalt* mirrored in its credo. Second, that identification was only possible by foreclosing its own condition of abstraction, through its projection onto texts like Žižek's and Lacan's—thus, the tired old criticisms of such theoretical texts as abstracted from reality, when nothing could be more brutally abstract than the clear and systematic explanations to which those same critics are so consistently devoted. This inversion of the relation of clarity to abstraction is another version of the logic of “too easy.” It's too easy to dismiss hyper-theoretical texts as abstract, because that dismissal disingenuously covers over the abstraction immanent to that dismissal. Likewise, it's too easy to dismiss the hyper-theoretical as politically useless.

Žižek provides the illuminating case. In the American academy, Žižek has garnered such a reputation for his fluency in Lacan that some Millerians—the followers of Jacques-Alain Miller, the most prominent of Parisian Lacanians—have protested that Žižek is *not* the definitive authority on Lacan.⁷⁶ Regardless of the merits of either side of that argument, its very existence testifies to how Žižek, who is a social theorist and not an analyst, can justly serve as the exemplar *par excellence* of academic Lacanianism. Certainly his name must have become familiar by now to any reader of this dissertation. We can then inquire into the political status of Žižek's work. He is primarily affiliated with the Institute for Sociology and Philosophy in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The Slovenian government found Žižek to be such a political worry *because* of the Lacanian theory that he was teaching that it forbade him from

⁷⁶ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 67, 12. “Celui à qui je suppose le savoir, je l'aime,” “Ma présence seule dans mon discours, ma présence seule est ma bêtise” (*Séminaire XX*, 64, 17).

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, personal communication, 12 March 1996. It should be noted that Žižek regularly pays homage to his tutelage in Lacan by Miller. For example, *Sublime Object*, xvi.

continuing to teach, although it permitted him to retain his position and salary.⁷⁸ His *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* was originally delivered as a series of lectures in 1989–1990, during the breakup of Yugoslavia. Those lectures were intended to be heard, and the book is intended to be read, as interventions in that specific and politically charged time and place.⁷⁹ In tumultuous post-Communist Eastern Europe, in the struggles of “real” people and “real” lives, Žižek and Lacan were considered—and continue to be considered—*too* political for comfort. Moreover, Žižek has stood as a candidate for the five-man presidency of Slovenia, a political intervention which compares favorably to those of most sociologists who style themselves as activists.⁸⁰ The familiar North American complaints by sociologists and others about the disconnection of Lacanian theory from the real world, from social activism, and from political consequence cannot withstand even casual examination.

The *méconnaissance* of Lacanian theory as politically useless therefore recapitulates the *Teaching Sociology* debate that began this dissertation. A sociologist on the list argued that it is self-evident that if anyone wishes to have an audience of any size at all, it is necessary to communicate in clear (and therefore un-Lacanian) writing and speech.⁸¹ That claim not only ethnocentrically overlooks the phenomenal audience that Lacan maintained over the years of his seminar, but also, closer to home, ignores the wide appeal of Judith Butler. A University of Chicago Press editor called her the new Abelard: the rhetorician of the age, who, despite the often extreme difficulty of her discourse, speaks in halls and rooms across the continent

⁷⁸ It's interesting to see how governments decide to punish academics.

⁷⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 3.

⁸⁰ “Lacan in Slovenia,” an interview with Slavoj Žižek, in *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, ed. Peter Osborne, (London: Routledge, 1996), 28.

⁸¹ Post to *TeachSoc* list, 13 December 1996.

with people literally hanging from the rafters.⁸² Sociologists, of all people, should be circumspect about transcendental (and therefore socially dislocated) declarations about the self-evident status of social acts, discourses, or theories. The sociological dismissal of Lacanian theory as too abstract from social reality to be politically effective is simply unsociological.

A Caricature of Lacan

Raymond Tallis, after comparing Lacan to a giant, senile spider, unexpectedly grants him beauty (albeit only in order to damn him further): “Lacan was a handsome dandy and, like many physically attractive psychopaths, he was able to command unconditional love.”⁸³ Here is the photo that accompanies Tallis’s article:⁸⁴

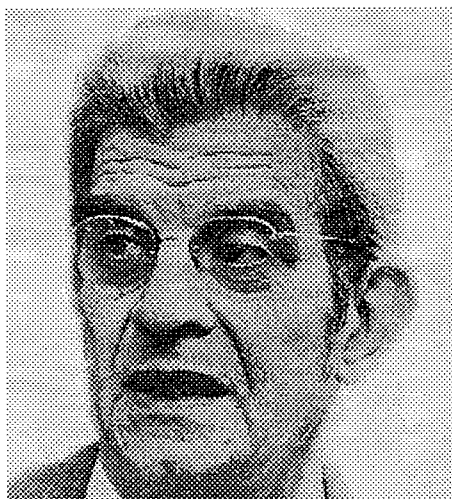


Figure 6.1: Raymond Tallis’s imaginary Lacan

⁸² Christopher Bracken, personal communication, 25 April 1996. Admittedly, Butler’s popularity has much to do with her political rhetoric and “queer mystique,” but it is precisely such factors that sociologists should be taking into account in their assessments of reception, and it is precisely the criticality of such factors that refutes the reduction of reception to the clarity of transmission. Of course, Lacan was not lacking in own brand of mystique, either.

⁸³ Tallis, “Shrink from Hell,” 20.

⁸⁴ Tallis, “Shrink from Hell,” 20.

Tallis's articulation of this image is oddly overwrought, both positively and negatively. While Lacan had his quirks and character flaws, he was something short of a psychopath; while he is not outright homely in this photo, he is hardly a matinee idol. This shot even flatters him, in its strategic diminution of his big jug ears. Now Tallis does capture, in at least a metaphorical way, the personal allure that Lacan had in his time. Pontalis notes the unnerving proliferation of cigars and bow ties (two of Lacan's signature accessories) during the heyday of *le séminaire*.⁸⁵ Still, imitation, no matter how sincerely it flatters, is something short of aesthetic totemization. How does Tallis, who so loathes Lacan, discover in him a beauty that utterly escapes me?

Part of the answer is that this is not my own image of Lacan. When I think of him, when I see him in my mind's eye, what I picture is not this photo, nor the grainy, much reproduced jacket-photo of *Écrits: A Selection*, nor the portrait of a fire-breathing Lacan by André Masson, nor any of the other pictures in the family album published by Lacan's daughter, Judith Miller.⁸⁶ Instead, I see something like the picture on the right:

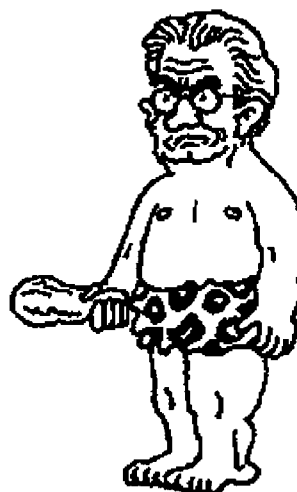


Figure 6.2:
Jérôme Hébert's imaginary Lacan

⁸⁵ Pontalis, "Big Other," 119.

⁸⁶ Judith Miller, *Album Jacques Lacan* (Paris: Seuil, 1991). This book does include some very interesting pictures, including a photo with Lacan together with Picasso, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus, pictures of Heidegger visiting Lacan's summer house, a series of shots of Salvador Dali and Lacan in New York, and a lovely portrait of Lacan, his wife, and someone in a polar bear suit. Miller, whose mother was Sylvia Bataille, is the wife of Jacques-Alain Miller.

This version of Lacan is a *vignette* by Jérôme Hébert.⁸⁷ After all the labor of wrestling with the matheme and its theory, after such an “extraordinary painful ascesis” of the written and the imagined, to wind up with a cartoon may feel more like cheating than anti-climax, even if Clément has already provided a precedent. Or perhaps it feels too easy. A caricature is by definition an untrue or unfair characterization. Of course, the very frustration of satisfaction of academic desire for truth or fairness is quintessentially Lacanian, but I would argue that the cartoon is even more directly germane. To make one more appropriation of mathematics, a cartoon is imagination to the second power: while a photograph is an image of its subject, a cartoon is a delineation of the image. The cartoon, in such a double remove from its subject, makes no pretension to the photo’s authenticity of similitude. A drawing is never admissible in a court of law as photographic evidence, for it is never real enough.

Yet a good cartoon captures enough of the singularity of the subject so that s/he is immediately recognizable. A very good one captures more than that—it shows more of the subject than a photograph ever could, for the very distortion definitive of the cartoon permits it to depict something *in* the subject (including pertinent context *outside* of her/him) which is inaccessible to the camera. A cartoon can be a better likeness because it is not an exact likeness. It can preserve through deformation, so a great cartoon is an expert exercise in topology. Hébert’s Lacan is emphatically Lacan—notwithstanding how Lacan is sometimes clearly Sartre—but he is also the glowering figure of the Law, *le Nom/Non-du-père*, in a way that Tallis’s “handsome dandy” is not.⁸⁸ The cartoon, as a drawing, is therefore a

⁸⁷ Oreste Saint-Drôme, *Dictionnaire inespéré de 55 termes visités par Jacques Lacan* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 25.

⁸⁸ The Father of The-Name-of-the Father is the Father who says “No!” In Saint-Drôme’s *Dictionnaire*, Hébert’s cartoon is the emblem of the “Circuit of Law” (*circuit de la loi*) (25).

condensation of the subject by the use of the line—an apt description of $\$$. Is this cartoon then the “matheme” of Lacan?

Not quite—I did say that my personal image of Lacan was only *something like* this cartoon. Suppose that we deform Hébert’s preserving deformation a little further, adding a small something extra—say, a matheme:



Figure 6.3: My imaginary Lacan

Inscribed in Lacan’s figurative flesh and between his imaginary nipples is now the matheme for the subject, the very first matheme encountered in this dissertation. Since $\$$ is the matheme for the subject divided or barred to itself by the signifier, it explicitly denies the authority of the original cartoon’s incarnation of Lacan as the Law.⁸⁹ Instead, Lacan becomes *not* the subject supposed to know—he becomes, among other things, the subject who is *not* supposed to know that he is $\$$ artre. Adding $\$$ thus takes something away. This subtraction

⁸⁹ On the other hand, insofar as cartoons are always second-hand imitations, the notion of Lacan as an *original* cartoon is quite appropriate in its self-contradiction.

through addition, which repeats the loss inscribed by the addition of the bar to the S , can be figured through the symbolic spatialization of the imaginary. That is, the writing of $\$$ into the cartoon—which writes the symbolic into the imaginary—is an externalization or formal conversion of the symbolic space immanent to the matheme.

If the cartoon, by its nature, is distanced from the photograph, it is equally distanced from the panel of the comic book. The adulterated S emblazoned across Lacan's chest signifies anything but Superman as the invincible embodiment of law and order, regardless of the phallic club half-raised in Lacan's hand.⁹⁰ Instead, the figuration of the Father as Law becomes the comic failure of its pretension. I have already quoted Butler's insight that "the paternal law ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler, preparing the ground for the insurrections against him."⁹¹ The Lacan of the matheme is therefore not an omniscient genius hidden "beneath" the obscurity of his own pronouncements, but rather a figuration of reading that prepares the ground for the insurrection against itself. Thus, Lacan can be seen as a cartoon on the condition that he be a very difficult cartoon to read—which is antithetical to the immediate uptake that defines a cartoon as such.

Michel de Certeau makes this comment:

Speech as comedy: a "fundamental failure" of action in order to return to the desire which resides there, a ceaseless failure of the object, a scorn for knowledge, an ambiguity of meaning in witty words, mutual misunderstandings among the characters on stage. Lacan the actor pulls out

⁹⁰ The cudgel gains a delightful resonance when paired with Clément's speculation about "the gold riding crop he was supposed to have sent to Jeanne Moreau" (*Live and Legends*, 18). "La cravache d'or qu'il aurait envoyée à Jeanne Moreau" (*Vies et légendes*, 29).

⁹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 28.

all the gimmicks through which a theory of desire unfolds. . . . The "Lacanian mass" is a tragi-comedy which tells us exactly what it does: it speaks.⁹²

Sokal and Bricmont are thus very Lacanian in ending their reading of Lacan by both laughing and suggesting that something is wrong. Regardless of the hits or misses of their argument, the material effect of their rhetoric is fitting. Moreover, their metaphor of *l'empereur est nu*, with all its contextual problems, still writes out, in the symbolic, an appropriately imaginary Lacan. While our cartoon can be seen as a poststructuralist Fred Flintstone, it can also be seen as an emperor without clothes, or at least as one stripped down to his leopard-skin boxers and the tattoo of his subjective destitution. Likewise, Sokal and Bricmont's pairing of Lacan with Woody Allen feels very apt in its risible oddness, much like the figure of Lacan trying to appear intimidating in his undershorts.

If Sokal and Bricmont's ending falls short, it does so because it goes no further than Hébert's original. Granted, Lacan is just as much a bumbler there as in my modest amendment, so from that perspective, the \S is superfluous. Yet I would argue that it adds to the comic oddness of the figure a crucial extra degree of oddness. The glowering bumbler still remains, *l'empereur est encore nu*, but the picture of him has been inflected with a little uneasiness. The effect of \S in the cartoon is exactly that of something extra, in the sense of being too much. If someone unfamiliar with Lacan were to see this cartoon, the first question on her/his lips would be, "What's that thing on his chest?"⁹³ The matheme adds to the cartoon the matheme's own manifest illegibility. It contaminates the cartoon, and makes

⁹² Michel de Certeau, "Lacan: An Ethics of Speech," trans. Marie-Rose Logan, in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), 51.

⁹³ As I share the characteristic theorist's fault of empirical weakness, after writing this I was delighted when one of my students came into my office when this image was on my monitor and asked, "What's that dollar sign on his chest?" Because \S forebodes the horrors of reading and its complications, \S is a more placid version of *Allen's* chest burster.

it unclear and difficult to read. It is thus the extra \S that turns a cartoon of Lacan into an image of Lacan as a cartoon, and therefore, as suggested above, into an image of the Lacan of the matheme. This is, of course, a partial Lacan: the cartoon nearly writes out Lacan (because it literally writes on him and hints at writing him off), through its inclusion of a letter that is not a letter. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but a cartoon cannot equal 8000+ pages and more than three decades of teaching. Yet a cartoon can be, at the same time, both “less” and “more.” The last chapter of *Seminar XI* is entitled, “To Conclude: In You More Than You.”⁹⁴ For me, as a reader of the matheme, the denaturing of a caricature is more like Lacan than Lacan, just as him duped into enjoying his visit to the Met is more Lacanian, in a certain sense, than him holding court in Paris. I think that reading Lacan into his cartoon is closer to the style of the man himself than reading him “correctly.” This dissertation has tried to demonstrate that reading between the lines of the Lacanian text can be essayed through reading the line of the Lacanian letter. If we wind up with a cartoon, it is not because it is the matheme of Lacan, but because it can pose as such. In the imaginary distance between the matheme and its cartoonish imposture, what is delivered to us is a little space to read the letter.

⁹⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 261-263. “Reste à conclure: En toi plus que toi,” *Séminaire XI*, 235-237.

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Appendix 1

Elaborations on SCHEMA L

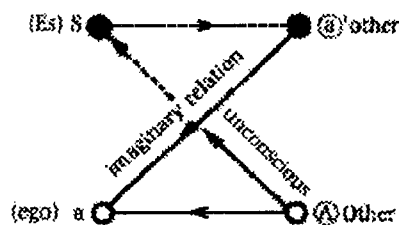


Figure 7.1: SCHEMA L as the subject and the other

The subject S is distinguished by the cut of the signifier, and this appears in SCHEMA L as a twinned and reversed diagonal directed from the Other to S . “The subject, *in initio*, begins in the locus of the Other, insofar as it is there that the first signifier emerges.”¹ The latter is now associated with Es , which is German for the id. This aligns S/Es with its ineffability: the pre-symbolic proto-subject, prior to assignation as female or male. Only through its inscription by the letter from the place of the Other, can the subject emerge as S . This relation “signifies that the condition of the subject . . . is dependent on what is being unfolded in the Other O .”² Moreover, the vector from O to S is labeled “unconscious,” which indicates how the subject is in some substantial way unaware of its foundation by the letter. “The symbolic realisation of the subject, which is always a symbolic creation, is the relation between $[O]$ and S . It is subjacent, unconscious, essential to every subjective

¹ Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 198. “Le sujet, *in initio*, commence au lieu de l’Autre, en tant que là surgit le premier signifiant” (*Séminaire XI*, 180).

² Lacan, “Possible Treatment,” 193. “. . . signifiant que la condition du sujet . . . dépend de ce qui déroule en l’Autre A ” (“Traitement possible,” 549).

situation.”³ But the vector between O and S is ambiguous with respect to time. It can mean that S qua *Es* is *yet to be acted upon* by the symbolic Other, as has just been discussed. But it can also mean that S *has already been produced* by the Other, that S is already a function of the Other, and therefore already aligned with the signifier. Because of this ambivalence, Lacan says, “here you have *S*, which is simultaneously the subject, the symbol, and also the *Es*.”⁴ But he seems to be thereby posing a problem for us, for we have labored hard over the criticality of the distinction between S as the signifier and *S* as the subject. The answer is that “S is the letter *S*, but it’s also the subject, the analytic subject, *that is to say not the subject in its totality*.”⁵ In other words, S is a *part-subject*. S is part-*S*, even as S qua signifier is the very condition of *S*.

To rephrase what has already been observed about the subject, it includes, in excess of its symbolic part-subject S, aspects which are imaginary and real. As Lacan puts it, “What is present in *S* passes via the corporeal support of the subject in order to be realised, via a biological reality which establishes a division between the imaginary function of the living organism, of which the ego is one of the structured forms—we don’t really have any cause for complaint—and the symbolic function which it is capable of filling and which gives it a preeminent position vis-à-vis the real.”⁶ The “corporeal support” of the subject pertains to

³ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 321. “La réalisation symbolique du sujet, qui est toujours création symbolique, c’est la relation qui va de *A* à *S*. Elle est sous-jacente, inconsciente, essentielle à toute situation subjective” (*Séminaire II*, 370).

⁴ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 321. “Vous avez ici *S*, qui est à la fois le sujet, le symbole, et aussi le *Es*” (*Séminaire II*, 370).

⁵ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 243, emphasis added. “*S*, c’est la lettre *S*, mais c’est aussi le sujet, le sujet analytique, *c’est-à-dire pas le sujet dans sa totalité*” (*Séminaire II*, 284, emphasis added).

⁶ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 324.

both the human body and the material embodiment of the signifier (the subtle body of language).

Further, in SCHÉMA L, the second, symbolic axis crosses the imaginary one, in the sense of inscribing an opposition to it, thereby indicating the agonism between their respective registers in the subject.⁷ Castration marks a certain ascendance of the symbolic over the imaginary:

Everything begins with the possibility of naming, which is both destructive of the thing and allows the passage of thing onto the symbolic plane, thanks to which the truly human register comes into its own. It is from that point on that, in a more and more complicated manner, the embodiment of the symbolic within imaginary experience takes place. The symbolic will shape all those inflections which, in the life of the adult, the imaginary commitment, the original captation, can take on.⁸

§ does fall under S, so much so that, as Gallop has incisively demonstrated, the casual reading of the mirror stage as a developmental episode must be highly qualified as a retrospective reconstruction by the already symbolically accomplished subject.⁹

However, observe that the “arrow of speech” from O to S is, in the more detailed rendition of the schema, broken by the imaginary axis. That is, that arrow begins as a solid and consistent vector at the Other, but becomes fractured into dashes halfway to S, when it

Ce qui est en S passe pour se révéler par le support corporel du sujet, passe par une réalité biologique qui établit une division entre la fonction imaginaire du vivant, dont le moi est une des formes structurées — nous n'avons pas tellement à nous plaindre —, et la fonction symbolique qu'il est capable de remplir et qui lui donne une position éminente vis-à-vis du réel. (*Séminaire II*, 372-3)

⁷ Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 114.

⁸ Lacan, *Seminar I*, 219.

Tout part de la possibilité de nommer, qui est à la fois destruction de la chose et passage de la chose au plan symbolique, grâce à quoi le registre proprement humain s'installe. C'est de là que se produit, de façon de plus en plus compliquée, l'incarnation du symbolique dans le vécu imaginaire. Le symbolique modèlera toutes les inflexions que, dans le vécu de l'adulte, peut prendre l'engagement imaginaire, la captation originaire. (*Séminaire I*, 244)

hits the imaginary relation. "Between S and O, the fundamental speech that analysis must uncover, we have the interference of the imaginary circuit, which resists its passage."¹⁰ What is happening here?

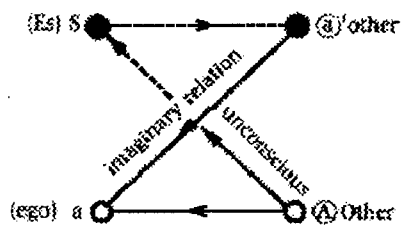


Figure 7.2: The arrow of speech

Lacan writes that "the imaginary gains its false reality, which nonetheless is a verified reality, starting off from the order defined by the wall of language."¹¹ As Borch-Jacobsen points out, this suggests that the axis between the ego and the other, standing for the imaginary relation, is itself a kind of wall, in the form of a "verified reality" that is sustained by language. "Language, of course, is not the imaginary; but, Lacan believes, language lends the imaginary the appearance of consistency insofar as it tends irresistibly to reify the interlocutor (and, on the rebound, the 'locutor')."¹² In other words, language lends a consistency of *meaning* to the subject. But insofar as that meaning is imaginary, it is fundamentally illusory—*méconnaissance* being definitive of the imaginary process—so this wall

⁹ See Gallop, "Where to Begin?", 74-92. The subject is symbolically *accomplished* in both senses of the classical structuralist paradigm: the subject speaks (the subject is *fluent*) and is spoken by language (for Lacan, subjectification is owed to language).

¹⁰ Lacan, *Seminar III*, 161. "Entre S et A, la parole fondamentale que doit révéler l'analyse, nous avons la dérivation du circuit imaginaire, qui résiste à son passage" (*Séminaire III*, 181).

¹¹ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 244. "C'est à partir de l'ordre défini par le mur du langage que l'imaginaire prend sa fausse réalité, qui est tout de même une réalité vérifiée." (*Séminaire II*, 285).

¹² Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1991), 136. "Le langage, en effet, n'est certes pas l'imaginaire. Mais il lui donne, pense Lacan, un semblant de consistance, dans la

represents a barrier to determinative discourse. It is therefore concomitantly a wall *to* language, signifying the inevitable failure of representational language. For Lacan, meaning works against language and against itself. "Meaning (*sens*) indicates the direction in which it fails (*échoue*)."¹³ He is emphatic on the necessity "to dissipate once and for all the mistaken notion of 'language as a sign.'"¹⁴ Again we have a materialization of a limit to the signifier's power, at least qua signification. However, it should be noted that such a limitation concomitantly designates a certain complementarity. The symbolic establishes "the differences which are such an essential part of cultural existence," while the imaginary makes "it possible to discover correspondences and homologies."¹⁵

SCHÉMA L can also be read as depicting a three-dimensional system, rather than a planar one. In that case, the vector from the Other to Es would not be interrupted by the imaginary relation, but would pass beneath it. As Jean-Paul Gilson insightfully notes, this yields a surface which is topologically identical to a Moebius strip cut lengthwise.¹⁶ Then the schema embodies the straightforward paradox of the everyday object which has but one side. An infinite circuit would result, except that the vector between the ego and the Other (the horizontal vector at the bottom) is pointing the wrong way. This "interruption" of the circuit suggests that the schema, in at least its unsimplified form, shows not one continuous path, but rather two ways (symbolic and imaginary) in which the Other works on the ego.

mesure où il tend irrésistiblement à réifier l'interlocuteur (et, par contrecoup, le locuteur)" (*Le maître absolu* [Paris: Flammarion, 1990], 166).

¹³ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 79. "Le sens indique la direction vers laquelle il échoue" (*Séminaire XX*, 74).

¹⁴ Lacan, "Function and Field," 83. "... dissiper définitivement le malentendu du langage-signe, source en ce domaine des confusions du discours comme des malfaçons de la parole" ("Fonction et champ," 297).

¹⁵ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), 157.

¹⁶ "Le circuit produit sur le schéma « L » est celui d'une bande moebienne divisée en deux" (Gilson, *Topologie de Lacan*, 48).

Alternatively, we can return to SCHÉMA \mathcal{L} , and see it as limning precisely the conjoining of the subject to the Other qua symbolic order:

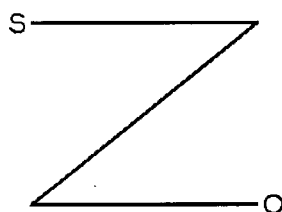


Figure 7.3: The subject and the other

Hence the unbroken but unstraight line joining S to O (once again, the signifying chain or line of discourse is bent). The point is that this symbolic relation is always mediated by the imaginary process. “For all existing human subjects, the relation between \mathcal{A} [O] and S will always pass via the intermediary of these imaginary substrates, the ego and the other, which constitute the imaginary foundation of the object— \mathcal{A} , m , a , S [Autre, moi, autre, E_s],” the four poles of the subject, as limned in SCHÉMA L .¹⁷

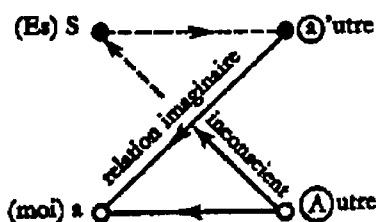


Figure 7.4: The four poles of the subject

The *méconnaissance* of the ego cannot be evaded; despite the illusoriness of the sense of self that the ego provides, it remains necessary. Thus the symbolic relation constitutive of the subject will always be, in some way, derailed by the imaginariness of the ego and its fixation on its objects. Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy interpret that derailment this way, with

¹⁷ Lacan, *Seminar II*, 323. “Pour tous les sujets humains qui existent, le rapport entre le \mathcal{A} et le S passera toujours par l’intermédiaire de ces substrats imaginaires que sont le moi et l’autre et qui constituent les fondations imaginaires de l’objet— \mathcal{A} , m , a , S ” (*Séminaire II*, 371).

respect to the analytic scene: "When the subject speaks in analysis, aiming towards the realization of the true subject (when he [*sic*] goes from S to O), he is diverting into o — o' [the relation between object and ego]. The truth is thus always being 'purloined', and the subject is constantly drawn to the four corners of the scheme."¹⁸ Benvenuto and Kennedy thus recognize that the schema, while it may be defined by its four corners, is also constituted by the spaces and vectors between them.

The parallel between these two cuts, the imaginary and the symbolic, is correlative to the homology of the real and the imaginary as surfaces. "The real is a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric, . . . a sort of smooth, seamless surface or space which applies as much to a child's body as to the whole universe."¹⁹ As Lacan writes, "The real is absolutely without fissure."²⁰ The imaginary introduces the imago, as a differentiated image which divides this seamlessness in order to create shape and line and color. However, the consequent mirror image is again a kind of unified surface, invested with the unity and cohesion of the image-object that the subject anticipates as itself—the helpless infant, gazing up at the seemingly all-powerful parent. The *Gestalt* is the particular fixation of the self-image, a recapitulation of the fantastic wholeness of the real in another register. Freud states that the ego is a projection of a body *surface*.²¹ This permits another reading of S: it can represent the impossibly unified subject, a S miraculously relieved of its cut, an ego mistaken, in the perfect flatness of the mirror, for the subject. The signifier cuts into the

¹⁸ Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction* (London: Free Association, 1986), 101.

¹⁹ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 24.

²⁰ My translation. "Le réel est absolument sans fissure" (*Séminaire II*, 122). The English translation of the seminar oddly omits any rendition of "absolument" (*Seminar II*, 98).

surface of the mirror, even as it inscribes the “smooth facade of the real.”²² “The mirror is splintered by the word,”²³ for the word is the general instrument of mortification. In this way, all three of Lacan’s registers are crossed as the subject is stretched across the quadrature of the schema.

The simplest reading of SCHÉMA \mathcal{L} —which, when it comes to Lacan, invariably means the most problematic—is that it gives a developmental history that links the three orders through a traversal of the four corners. So if we follow the trail of the \mathbf{Z} , we can start with \mathbf{S} , as the subject in its real pre-subjecthood, then enact the imaginary process by moving from the object, o , to the mirrored ego, o' , and finally locate the subject, through her/his castration, in the symbolic Other, \mathbf{O} .²⁴

²¹ “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, in *The Penguin Freud Library: Vol 11: On Metapsychology*, trans. James Strachey [London: Penguin, 1991], 364).

²² Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 24.

²³ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986), 279.

²⁴ Boothby proposes an interesting, if somewhat far-fetched, reading of the graph. He posits an original horizontal and compounded segment,

$$(E_s) \text{ ego } o \text{---} o' \text{ other}$$

as a kind of coincidence of \mathbf{S} — o' with o — \mathbf{O} . He then imagines a vertical, accordion-like expansion or *déroutement*, in which \mathbf{S} — o' is raised over o — \mathbf{O} , to form SCHÉMA L. But this interpretation depends on Lacan’s averment that “the condition of the subject \mathbf{S} . . . is dependent on what is being unfolded in the Other, \mathbf{O} ” (“Possible Treatment,” 193; “Traitement possible,” 549), and Boothby seems to be extrapolating in a rather loose way from that unfolding at an explicit and particular site in the graph to a general unfolding of the system *in toto* (*Death and Desire*, 116-7).

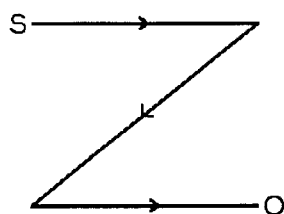


Figure 7.5: From the subject to the other

Then SCHÉMA \mathcal{L} would be tracing the Oedipal passage, from the helpless neonate, qua *Es* or “it,” to the attachment to the other qua figure of the mother and the subsequent founding of the ego, through to the intervention of law qua *logos*, in the figure of the Other qua father. The subject condenses this subjectifying history into a single \mathcal{S} , and is therefore both the product and bearer of that history. While this reading has some heuristic value, it defies the direction of the vector between the ego and the Other given in the unsimplified schema. Such defiance is not necessarily a bad thing, especially given Lacan’s perspective on reading. However, this interpretation is also severely compromised by Lacan’s abiding distaste of developmental paradigms and the implicit linearity of their assumptions about time.

A more fitting sense of the paradoxical psychoanalytic time of *Nachträglichkeit* is invoked by reading SCHÉMA L as a schematization of Lacan’s rereading of the Freudian slogan, “*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden.*” Strachey renders this in English as “Where id was, there ego shall be,”²⁵ but Lacan deeply disapproves of that reading. With a sensitivity to small differences, he notes that Freud customarily denoted the id, not by *Es*, but by *das Es*, and the ego, not by *Ich*, but by *das Ich*, and proposes a multitude of alternative translations:

There where it was . . . it is my duty that I should come into being.²⁶

I must come to the place where that was.²⁷

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Pelican Freud Library, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1973 [1933]), 112.

²⁶ Lacan, “Freudian Thing,” 129. “Là où c’était . . . c’est mon devoir que je vienne à être” (“La chose freudienne,” 417-418).

Wo (Where) *Es* (the subject—devoid of any *das* or other objectifying article) *war* (was—it is a locus of being that is referred to here, and that in this locus) *soll* (must—that is, a duty in the moral sense, as is confirmed by the single sentence that follows and brings the chapter to a close) *Ich* (I, there must I—just as one declared, ‘this am I’, before saying, ‘it is I’) *werden* (become—that is to say, not occur (*survenir*), or even happen (*advenir*), but emerge (*venir au jour*) from this very locus in so far as it is a locus of being).²⁸

There where it was just now, there where it was for a while, between an extinction that is still glowing and a birth that is retarded, “I” can come into being and disappear from what I say.²⁹

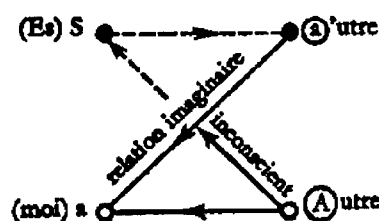


Figure 7.6: *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*

SCHEMA L, now read through the outer signifiers at each of its corners, traces emergence of the subject qua articulated “I” from the locus of the Other, and its coming-to-be in place of the *Es*, crossed by the tribulations of the imaginary process from other to ego. Perhaps even better would be to read across both versions of the schema, and recognize that the unidirectional, developmental/evolutionary arrow of time in the previous version of SCHEMA L is the satisfying, straightforward and reasonable *méconnaissance* of the multiple, colliding and

²⁷ Lacan, “Agency of the Letter,” 171. “Là, où fut ça, il me faut advenir” (“L’instance de la lettre,” 524).

²⁸ Lacan, “Freudian Thing,” 128.

Wo, où *Es*, sujet dépourvu d’aucun *das* ou autre article objectivant, *war*, était, c’est d’un lieu d’être qu’il s’agit, et qu’en ce lieu: *soll*, c’est un devoir au sens moral qui là s’annonce, comme le confirme l’unique phrase qui succède à celle-ci pour clore le chapitre, *Ich*, je, là dois-je (comme on annonçait: ce suis-je, avant qu’on dise: c’est moi), *werden*, devenir, c’est-à-dire non pas survenir, ni même advenir, mais venir au jour de ce lieu même en tant qu’il est lieu d’être. (“Chose freudienne,” 417)

Sheridan chooses to translate this passage by inserting new sets of parentheses, effecting a translation through the addition of punctuation.

crossing vectors of time of SCHÉMA L.

²⁹ Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject," 300. "Là où c'était à l'instant même, là où c'était pour un peu, entre cette extinction qui luit encore et cette éclosion qui achoppe, je peux venir à l'être de [sic] disparaître de mon dit" ("Subversion du sujet," 801). It appears as if "de" should be "et" here.