Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan's dislocation of psychoanalysis

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since one either takes what they formulate or one leaves them."
(maisqu'à ce qu'ils formulent, il n'y a qu'à se prendre ou bien à les
dépasser). The alternative is drastic, and yet anything but simple.
For to "take" to such texts is inevitably to be taken by them: to be
moved elsewhere by a practice of language in which sense is	often overtaken - surprised - by sound, just as se prendre might
easily be taken for surprendre. To take to these texts is perhaps
above all to follow the lead of such surprises, even if this means
taking on more than can be reasonably reckoned with.
For if language is a condition of reason, the games it plays are
not always reasonable. We can learn about them, therefore, only
by playing along, at least for a while. It is only then that their
sense - i.e. their direction - begins to emerge.

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Mistaken identity: Lacan's theory
of the "mirror stage"

In "Of our antecedents," a short note written for the publication
of his Ecrits, Lacan comments in retrospect on his early writings:

We thus find ourselves replacing these texts in a future anterior: they
will have anticipated our insertion of the unconscious in language.1

Lacan uses the future anterior tense to describe not only his
own development, but also the historicity of the subject in
general, insofar as the unconscious plays a part in its
constitution. In his programmatic text, "Function and field of
speech and language in psychoanalysis," Lacan writes:

What is realized in my history [i.e. in that of the individual subject] is
not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the
present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of
what I shall have been for what I am in the process of beccming.2

The peculiarity of this future anterior tense, matrix for the
historicity of the subject, can perhaps be explained best by
means of a short comparison to Hegel. The (present) perfect
tense is undoubtedly the temporal medium of Hegelian dis-
course, a discourse that presents itself as a self-realization of
spirit [Geist]. Present in this tense is a spirit or mind that
(virtually at least) has always already been perfect. Without this
present tense, absolute knowledge and philosophical certainty

1 "Nous nous trouvons donc replacer ces textes dans un futur antérieur: ils
auront devancé notre insertion de l'inconscient dans le langage." Ecrits, p. 74.
2 J. Lacan, The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis,
63. ("Ce qui se réalise dans mon histoire, n'est pas le passé défini de ce qui fût
puisqu'il n'est plus, mais le futur antérieur de ce que j'ai été pour ce que je suis en
train de devenir." Ecrits, p. 300.) Sheridan, p. 86.
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...i.e. scientific knowledge as such—would never have been representable in Hegel's writings. In his "Introduction" to The Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel criticizes a notion of thought construed as a mere instrument, serving only to recognize something exterior to it. He concludes:

If the Absolute were only to be brought on the whole nearer to us by this agency [Werkzeug; instrument] of knowledge or (re)cognition: Erkenntnis, without any change being wrought in it, like a bird caught by a limestick, it would certainly scorn a trick of that sort, if it were not in its very nature, and did not wish to be, beside us from the start.3

The Absolute, the mind, must then according to Hegel already be—and want to be—in and for itself with us. Without this prior presence both philosophy as rigorous science and the identity of the subject would be impossible.4 For how could a subject come to know itself, dialectically realize its identity, if this matrix of presence were not (and did not want to be) at least virtually already there as a form to be filled or as an interiority to be unfolded and explicated over time. The thinking subject (or thought as subject) can only come to know itself to the extent to which the form of this Self has always already been there as a potential presence. The course of the Hegelian dialectic may be infinite, but this infinity, according to the claims of the dialectic itself, must not be a "bad" one. Rather, it should be the self-realization of an identity that has always already been virtually present to itself. For the self-conscious mind as it is expressed and represented in Hegel's Logic, this in-and-for-itself-having-been [des Immer-schon-gegenwartigen] by inscribing it in the inconclusive futurity of what will-always-already-have-been [Immer-schon-gegenwart-gegenwart, a "time" which can never be entirely remembered, since it will never have fully taken place. It is an irreducible remainder or remnant that will continually prevent the subject from ever becoming entirely self-identical. In the psychoanalytical perspective, then, memory becomes something very different from what it was for metaphysics—not because of a future that the subject will never be able to catch up with fully, but because every attempt by the subject of the unconscious to grasp its history inevitably divides that history into a past that, far from having taken place once and for all, is always yet to come. Consequently, the living present [lebendige Gegenwart] (Husserl) of the subject emerges as a focal point whose actuality can reside in an anticipated belatedness.

The consequences of such belatedness can be developed through the examination of a second aspect of the future anterior, in which it is considered less as a tense, designating a future past, than as a mode, entailing a conjecture. "You will have understood Freud" (Vous aurez compris Freud...). Used this way, modally, the "future anterior" designates a surmise, a conditional prediction and hence, a proposition bearing upon an uncertain state of affairs. This uncertainty, which cannot be


...Lacan's theory of the mirror stage...

The truth is neither being nor nothing, nor that being passes over into nothing, nor nothing into being, but rather that each has passed over into the other.5

The history of the subject of metaphysics attaining its most powerful and complete articulation in Hegel, is conceived according to the most self-contained form of presence, that of the present (made) perfect. The temporal structure of the subject that Lacan's reading of Freud strives to articulate, stands in marked contrast to this perfected present. The perfect tense is supplanted by the future anterior, thus calling into question the very foundations of subjective identity conceived in terms of an interiorizing memory. In invoking the future anterior tense, Lacan troubles the perfected closure of the always-already-having-been [des Immer-schon-gegenwart-gegenwartigen] by inscribing it in the inconclusive futurity of what will-always-already-have-been [Immer-schon-gegenwart-gegenwart, a "time" which can never be entirely remembered, since it will never have fully taken place. It is an irreducible remainder or remnant that will continually prevent the subject from ever becoming entirely self-identical. In the psychoanalytical perspective, then, memory becomes something very different from what it was for metaphysics—not because of a future that the subject will never be able to catch up with fully, but because every attempt by the subject of the unconscious to grasp its history inevitably divides that history into a past that, far from having taken place once and for all, is always yet to come. Consequently, the living present [lebendige Gegenwart] (Husserl) of the subject emerges as a focal point whose actuality can reside in an anticipated belatedness.

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identified simply with a future or a past, typifies the language of a subject whose self-consciousness is structured in terms of anticipated belatedness. In accordance with the split temporality of the future anterior, this will have been subject to and of the unconscious.

This split, quasi-temporality affects not only the unconscious as an object of theoretical discourse, but also, and perhaps more significantly, the discourse itself. Thus, whereas Lacan stresses the conceptual character of the unconscious—"The unconscious is a concept"—the structure of this concept distinguishes it fundamentally from that of the philosophical tradition culminating in Hegel. For Lacan, the concept is construed not as the presentation of a representation in thought through the determinate negation of its properties, but rather as the vehicle of a search. As a concept, the unconscious is thus "forged on the trace of what works to constitute the subject."6

The tendency of Lacan's earlier texts to use the conjectural quasi-time of the future anterior, thereby deferring the closure of comprehension indefinitely, suggests that the singular movement of the unconscious requires a theoretical discourse capable not merely of describing its trajectory, but rather of staging its movement. Lacan's use of the future anterior does not imply an absolute knowledge that has, is and will always have been present to itself. Rather, it returns to the theatricality that is so powerfully at work in Freud's writings and through which they are clearly distinguished from those of his followers. Lacan renews this Freudian tradition through which psychoanalytic writing gestures towards a stage whose borders are only provisionally determined by what is called the "reader" or "auditor": the difference in this case is not decisive. This "reader" or "audience," as the provisional "representative of the other," as Freud called Fließ, serves to delimit the borders of a stage that will always have been at a remove from the place we occupy as self-conscious subjects. Hence, the frequent apotrophes that give Lacan's writings a tone that is even more theatrical than it is pedagogical. For if discourse can be said to set the stage, the unconscious marks the eccentricity of its enabling limits. There—is the unconscious, not as an object of perception or of intuition, not as a clinical object, but as a theatrical scene that in turn is inscribed in an ongoing scenario. The future anterior announces the disjunctive immediacy of this other scenario, to which we shall have occasion to return.

One may draw a further conclusion from the above: if the conjectural quasi-temporality of the future anterior characterizes not only the historicity of the subject, but also its theoretical articulation in Lacan's texts,7 this in turn determines Lacan's choice of a synchronic perspective and his rejection of the diachronic, developmental point of view that has dominated orthodox psychoanalysis ever since Freud, and even more, ever since Karl Abraham schematized and codified the theory of libidinal stages.8 Thus if Lacan's entire theoretical project is concerned primarily with replacing the predominant genetic point of view with a synchronic one—his "technique of reading," Lacan writes, "is concerned simply with replacing each of [Freud's] terms in their synchrony"9—then what counts for him, as in the case of the future anterior tense, is to replace the temporality of the conscious subject, whose basis is the (present) perfect tense, with that of another, split, disjointed time that would be more adequate to the movement of the unconscious. Against a conception of development based upon identity and presence, Lacan advocates a synchronic perspective that, however, has little to do with mere simultaneity. However apodictic and systematic Lacan's language sometimes sounds, it is accessible only to a reading that does not stop at the seeming stability of individual propositions, but instead seeks out the process of enunciation, and the contradictions that fuel it. Like Freud's unconscious, Lacan's language seems "to know no contradiction," which means, of course, not that there are no contradictions but that the "law of non-contradiction" does not hinder them from proliferating and determining thought in its "truth."

7 Lacan characterizes psychoanalysis as a "conjectural science": cf. Écrits, pp. 472, 863.
9 "Il s'agit simplement de remplacer chacun de ses termes dans leur synchronie" Écrits, p. 856.

6 "L'inconscient est un concept forgé sur la trace de ce qui opère pour cons tituer le sujet." "Position de l'inconscient." Écrits, p. 830.
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With these preliminary remarks in mind, let us now turn to the essay where Lacan's discourse finds its initial articulation: his essay on "the mirror stage." At this point it is important to bear in mind that any interpretation of a discourse whose temporal medium is the future anterior must itself be caught up in processes of repetition difficult to master or to situate temporally. In short, such interpretations will themselves have been inscribed precisely in the temporal non-identity of the text read. They are inscribed literally as inter-pretation — as attempts to ascertain the price (pretium) of textual gaps — of the inter. At the same time, interpretation itself strives to reach that future anterior, when it will have done its work, repeating and displacing the gaps, replacing them with other, supplemen-tary gaps that will in turn elicit yet other retrospective anticipations...

Let us then begin with Lacan's first psychanalytic text, "The mirror stage as former of the function of the I." The mirror stage described by Lacan can be briefly summarized as follows: between the ages of six and eighteen months a child displays a reaction to its mirror-image that strikingly distinguishes it from other creatures such as chimpanzees. A chimpanzee loses interest in its mirror-image as soon as it recognizes it to be an image; a child, on the contrary, displays a jubilant reaction when it recognizes its own reflection. From this jubilant acknowledgment of one's mirror-image, Lacan does nothing less than to derive the constitution — and above all: the destiny — of the ego. At this point in time, the child is not yet in control of its body and finds itself in a state of total helplessness and dependency. This situation is an effect of the "premature" birth peculiar to human beings, a consequence of which is that visual perception is much more highly developed than the motor function. A human being is thus able at a much earlier stage to perceive the unity of an image than it is to produce this unity in its own body. The sight of another human being, be it the mother, caretaker, or even one's own mirror-image, becomes the matrix of a sense of unity, identity and continuity which the child's bodily existence is incapable of providing. Furthermore, the identification of a similar Gestalt constitutes the exact opposite of the turbulence and inadequate coordination that the child experiences most immediately. The jubilant reaction of a child who has recognized its mirror-image is a sign not of the recognition of the subject's identity but of its constitution. Later, Lacan will formulate the role of the other as image in the following way: "The mediation of the Other," he asserts, "cannot be considered as deriving from a second instance or as being of secondary importance, if the first or the one does not yet exist." The ego is thus initially constituted through the child's identification with an image whose otherness is precisely overlooked in the observation of similarity. Despite the effort to ignore it, however, such alterity can never be entirely effaced, since it is what permits the identification to take place. Thus, it is only the anticipated motor and mental unity, visually represented in the perception of the image and still wholly lacking in the child, which allows the mirror-image, so crucial for the constitution of the ego, to have its effect. The perceived image offers a semblance of wholeness that contrasts sharply with what the child has experienced of its own body: lack of motoric control, deficiency, and dependency. In order to present this semblance of unity and exercise its power, the image need not be a mirror-image; but the recognized relation of the reflecting image to the body reflected, heightens its fascinatory power, while the body's symmetrical inversion in the mirror-image endows the latter with a supplementary moment of alterity, thus heightening its ambivalent attraction.

According to Lacan, the mirror stage hereby locates the constitution of the ego in a dimension of fictionality and of self-deception, which will have an alienating effect on the subsequent existence and development of the subject. Or rather, the "self"— insofar as it is determined by the ego — is, as such, a result of alienation and deception (which also makes it problematic to retain the notion of "alienation"...). The sense of self-identity — of unaltered and enduring homogeneity and unity — derives from the internalization of a relationship that is effective only by virtue of its heterogeneity: i.e. by virtue of the difference between the semblance of unity of the image and the disunity of the subject's motoric, bodily functions. The sense of identity and even of reality that the subject obtains from its ego

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Thus harness in it the irreality, deception, and non-identity that will take on a variety of (familiar) guises, among which Lacan mentions: fantasies of disembodied bodies (studied by Melanie Klein), hallucinations of doubles, Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, and Hans Bellmer's puppets. The stade du miroir is thereby defined not primarily as a genetic moment, but rather as a phase and as a turning-point or trope, destined to be repeated incessantly, in accordance with a schema whose moments are inadequacy, anticipation, and defensive armoring, and whose result is an identity that is not so much alienated as alienating, caught up in the "inexhaustible squaring of its own vicious circle of ego-confirmed" ("la quadrature inépuisable des récollements du moi").¹¹ This vicious circle produces an aggressivity that in Lacan's view is initially the effect neither of social conditions nor of subjective interaction; rather, its roots are intrasubjective, deriving from a relationship of mis-recognition, through which the ego comes to be by taking the place of the imaginary other.

The subject is thus caught up in a future anterior - it will have been the image whose place it takes. But in order to take place, it must also repudiate or foreclose the alterity of that futural past. In order to say, I am, it must deny the irreducible alterity of the image upon which the ego depends, and instead interiorize that relationship. A hetero-reflective relationship is thus turned into an auto-reflective one marked by the transparency of self-consciousness. The ego forgets, in the words of Rimbaud, whom Lacan quotes in his essay on "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis," that "I is another" (Je est un autre).¹²

The ego is thus determined 'by a primary identification that structures the subject as competing with itself,"¹³ long before the Oedipus complex manifests itself. There are therefore good reasons to suspect that, in view of this kind of imaginary origin, the ego will be perennially alienated, and above all, from itself. For that Self consists essentially in an alienation: not from itself, but from the other.

Already this very early essay, apparently dealing with a developmental problem - the formation of the ego - bears the imprint of a structuralist approach that only much later will be called by that name. The narcissistic structure of the ego and the aggressive tensions that derive from it - which Lacan will later relate to the Freudian notions of primary masochism and the death drive - are as difficult to overcome as the ego itself. Insofar as the subject conceives of its history as that of its ego - insofar that is, as it identifies itself with the ego - there can be no exit from the aforementioned vicious circle of self-affirmations.

For Lacan this vicious circle attains its fullest expression in Sartre's existential philosophy. Given his postulate of subjective autonomy, Sartre's philosophy is for Lacan not only a "Je de l'esprit" but a "je de l'esprit", a spiritual ego that traditional philosophy has never seriously called into question. So far as it has tended to equate subjectivity with self-consciousness. Considered in this way, this ego, Lacan argues, is identified precisely with that part of the subject that renders a true historicity of the individual impossible. This point should be borne in mind when considering not only Lacan's theory, but also what has often - all too indiscriminately - been called the "structuralist attack on history." It is not history as such that is criticized by structuralism, or by Lacan, but the metaphysical conception that construes history in terms of a self-identical subject of self-consciousness.

In these early writings, then, Lacan thus challenges the conception of history as the self-production and self-realization of the subject. Instead, he points to the ego's inertia, which arises from a constitutive identification that leaves it unable to break out of the orbit and spell of its aggressive, narcissistic origins. Not yet able to define structurally an alternative trajectory for the ego's inherent alterity, Lacan can only insist on the non-coincidence of ego and subject. And yet, even at this point in time, it is already clear that this non-coincidence originates in a splitting of the ego that is primary, and not merely external or accidental. In apparent opposition to Freud, who identifies the ego at first with the system perception-consciousness, and later with reality testing within the psyche, Lacan emphasizes the ego's defensive functions, such as misapprehension [Verkennung] and denial. As a response to a fundamental predicament of the human being, what is most characteristic of the ego is the function not of reality testing, but

¹¹ Écrits, p. 97; Sheridan, p. 4. ¹² Écrits, p. 118; Sheridan, p. 23.
¹³ Écrits, p. 117; Sheridan, p. 22.

In his essay on the "mirror-phase," Lacan calls attention to the perspicuity of psychoanalytic theory for having been sensitive to the "semantic latencies" that resonate in the term "primary narcissism." The recourse to the myth of Narcissus entails two moments which, Lacan argues, are all too often forgotten in psychoanalysis. First, the fact that Narcissus, in the myth, is not merely in love with himself, but rather with an image of himself. And second, the fact that Narcissus' fascination with this image leads him to take his own life. Lacan links the suicidal aspect of the Narcissus myth to the process of identification and to its aggressive consequences, as already mentioned. More important, however, is the function of the image, which defines the imaginary realm as such. In philosophy, as well as in everyday usage, an image is generally construed as a representation that reproduces, with diminished intensity, a determined, structurally and temporally prior sensation, impression or idea: a subject places an object before its mind's eye, it imagines something; a picture depicts. Lacan slightly but decisively displaces this notion of the image: it depicts not so much by reproducing or representing an object, as by taking it apart, dismantling it. Nothing can be said to stand before the image - its model, for instance - that does not in effect come after it, just as the ego comes after the mirror-image and depends upon it. This belated arrival of the "model" inscribes it in a chain of doubles, as the "splitting" image of its ostensible original.

Something similar to this is already intimated in Freud's discussion of narcissistic identification, insofar as the latter does not merely express a subject, but also re-acts upon it and transforms it. For Lacan, however, the effect of the image becomes, as we have seen, constitutive of the ego itself. To be consistent with this reinterpretation of the image's constitutive power, its origins can no longer be located in a reality held to be temporally and structurally prior to it, since this reality, at least insofar as the ego is concerned, is itself only an after-effect of the image. That this shift in the conception of the image and of its powers should raise a number of logical difficulties should come as no surprise, considering the fact that it is the task of traditional logic to determine an order in which first things come first: the model before the copy, the repeated before the repetition, identity before difference. This order of precedence is challenged by Lacan's notion of the semblable, meaning the like or the similar. When Lacan claims that the condition of narcissistic identification is the reconnaissance du semblable: recognition, re-acknowledgement of the like, one might ask how the image can be re-acknowledged as being similar, without identity - like Hegel's Absolute - being necessarily presupposed. Distinct from this Hegelian position, which places identity first, ego-identity for Lacan is produced first by the image, by the representation.

We thereby find ourselves before the very problem already encountered in connection with the future anterior: "is" (the presence of the present tense) should be understood only as an "anticipated past," which has yet to arrive. The paradox can hardly be resolved according to the familiar rules of logic, and this is perhaps due to the fact that the subject implied by the Freudian unconscious cannot be conceived according to the traditional logic of metaphysics. Whether this must lead to a renunciation or revision of Freudian doctrine, or instead to a rethinking of the scope of traditional logic, must be regarded as an open question. Nevertheless, by virtue of what is illogical in this view we can understand why ego-recognition - whether as an objective or subjective genitive, or as both - must for Lacan always and of necessity remain a mis-recognition, a misconstruing implied in the reiterative structure of (re)ognition as such, a misconstruction and ultimately: a case of mistaken identity. For Lacan, the "coming into its own" of the thinking spirit, of the subject as ego and as self-consciousness, always entails "coming to another": av other, and never its other, in the dialectical sense of Hegelian determinate negation. In the strange light of Lacan's mirror-stage, there is the mirror, and then image; first the image, and then that which it depicts. And if we seek to be rigorous, we cannot even assert that the mirror is: that is, is present, as an entity, a being, but rather only that there is the mirror, and that there, on that other stage, the ego superimposes itself upon its mirror-image, forever to be
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haunted by that reflection, beyond the wildest stretch of the imagination.14

The imaginary can be defined as that fictive, illusory realm of the mirror-image, of the optical illusion, of the image which can no longer hope to be an accurate and faithful representation of its model, since the latter is fashioned in its image: I am the image of that image, a mirror without end.

Beyond the looking glass, there is nothing. Does that mean that there is nothing else? The mirror-stage, Lacan remarks, is "the moment that decisively tilts all of human knowledge into mediatisation through desire of the other."15 With this remark, desire enters the (narcissistic) picture. Before, the discussion of the mirror stage dealt only with the physiological prematuration of the human organism and with the formatory effects of images in the maturation of pigeons and migratory locust. Although in this essay desire is only mentioned in passing, as it were, it indicates the way that Lacan's future thought will take, a way that will lead away from physiology and which will allow the mirror stage to appear in a very different light: no longer as the expression of an organic deficiency, but as the response to the linguistic, "symbolic" nature of human being. Looking back years later on the mirror stage, in "Of Our Antecedents," (1966), Lacan remarks that it defines the rule by which the imaginary differs from the symbolic "at this moment of capture by an historical inertia..."16 To be sure, the rules of this differentiation, in which the symbolic dimension of desire is articulated, will only begin to be worked out from 1953 on, some fifteen years after the first formulation of "The Mirror Stage," which was initially presented in 1936 and then published for the first time in 1949. In the intervening years, much has happened, but for Lacan nothing will have been of greater importance than his encounter with the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structural linguistics. It is this encounter that turns the "stade du miroir" from a stadium (to which Lacan compares it), to a staging area where forces and figures of a very different kind are preparing to make their appearance.

14 On the problem of the "there is," cf. Martin Heidegger, "On time and being." trans. Joan Stambaugh, New York: Harper & Row, 1972, pp. 3ff. The relation of Lacan to Heidegger should be explored less in the manifest adoption of philosophemes, than in the ways the linguistic and rhetorical practices of both authors tend to jar established theoretical discourse into motion.
15 Ecrits, p. 98; Sheridan, p. 5.
16 "Le stade du miroir donne la règle de partage entre l'imaginaire et le symbolique à ce moment de capture par une inertie historique..." Ecrits, p. 69.
of the question, but its vehicle, or more precisely: its stylus. The apparently generic name, "subject," and the ostensibly "proper" pronoun, "I," thereby emerge as punctuation marks, with all the depth of a pack of cards. Saussure’s chess game has shifted to a game of cards. Between hearts and spades, however, the stakes have become slightly clearer.

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The polemical moment, the attack and parry style of distinguishing one’s own position that is so characteristic of Freud, plays an even more decisive role in the evolution of Lacan’s thinking. Almost from its inception, Lacan’s “return” to Freud is polemically aimed at the psychoanalytic establishment. Many issues are at stake in Lacan’s controversy with mainstream psychoanalysis, especially as institutionalized in the International Psychoanalytical Association: the length of the psychoanalytic session and the training of analysts being those explicitly mentioned by the IPA in excluding him from its ranks. But from a theoretical point of view, the decisive difference that separates Lacan from the conceptions predominant in the IPA involves the concept of the subject implied in the Freudian notion of the unconscious. Looking back upon the development of his thought, Lacan demonstrates his awareness of the importance of “strategic” factors, and in particular, as they relate to this question:

I shall not return here to the function of my “mirror stage,” that first strategic point that I developed in opposition to the favor accorded in psychoanalytic theory to the supposedly autonomous ego. The academic restoration of this “autonomous ego” justified my view that a misunderstanding was involved in any attempt to strengthen the ego in a type of analysis that took as its criterion of “success” a successful adaptation to society - a phenomenon of intellectual abdication that was bound up with the aging of the psychoanalytic group in the

they perform only in their place." Inasmuch as it is subject to the signifier, however, this place can be determined only by means of an alibi, since it can only take place by taking the place of another, for which it then stands and fills in. Such a place can never be definitively located, which is why the place of a signifying element is always the dissimulated place of another and hence its alibi.

In returning to the mirror-stage, then, it should come as no
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shock that we do not go back to the same place: to the immutable
topos of an unaltered text, but rather to another place and to
other texts, even if they appear under the same title. "The
mirror stage," Lacan observes in retrospect, "situates the line
dividing the imaginary and the symbolic at that moment in
which [the subject] is seized by an historic inertia (. . .)." As we
will see, this claim only holds, if we read the "original" text in
terms of what "it will have been": that is to say, in relation to
two later essays which supplement the earlier one in important
ways. These two texts are, first, an essay written in 1958 in
response to a paper by the French analyst, Daniel Lagache, and
entitled, "Psychoanalysis and the structure of personality"; and
second, a note, giving a brief sketch of Lacan's intellectual
genealogy: "On our antecedents," written in 1966. Revisited in
this perspective, the text of the mirror-stage provides us – at
least implicitly – with a preliminary account of what Lacan will
subsequently call the "imaginary." The elements that make up this account, such as the mirror-
image, cannot be considered in isolation, as though they were
intrinsically meaningful. Rather, they can be understood only
within a process of representation that necessarily misrepresents
itself, and in so doing produces a semblance of autonomy. Yet,
in what sense can the mirror stage be said to describe a process
of representation? The child, between the age of six and
eighteen months, as a subject-in-the-making, recognizes itself in
the Gestalt of its mirror image. At a time when motoric control
of its body is still inadequate, the child's powers of perception
are already able to grasp Gestalten, coherent images that
compose a whole. The child's discovery of its reflection provides
it with a model for all future feelings of identity. Such an image
exemplifies an instance that strives to stay the same no matter
how much it may change; it appears as enduring, substantial
and solid. This instance in which the subject seems to be
in-for-and-to-itself, this self-identical, unified and self-present
subject, is thus the effect of a particular mode of representation:
that of its own (or of a similar) body, perceived and introjected
as a Gestalt that will provide the matrix for all future presence
and identity.

Yet - and this is what makes all the difference in Lacan's
time - the process of projective identification with an image,
that is: with something other, something external, with some-
thing that appears to be similar or subtly different (the
mirror-image symmetrically inverts whatever it reproduces) –
this process remains a constitutive force and factor in the ego
that develops from it. Thus, although the ego may claim to be
self-identical, although it may strive to subordinate and to
appropriate heterogeneity as its other, it is in fact in constant
rivalry with itself and with everything else; aggressive tension is
fundamental to it. The autonomy of the ego, conceived as an
instance of consciousness, of reality, of perception, or of all of
these at once, is constituted only through a misconstruing
[Verleugnung] and denial [Verleugnung] of its structural
dependence on others.

The misconstruing we are dealing with here can be neither
avoided nor reduced to an instance of false consciousness. The
structure of consciousness is not merely misrepresented by the
ego, in order then to be all the better comprehended by it, in
accordance with a dialectical model of absolute knowledge. This
movement would be possible only if the ego actually were what
it claims to be: self-identical. Only then could it hope to know
and recognize itself. Yet if the ego always has and will have
been another, all such attempts to "come into its own," must
invariably entail misconception and disavowal.

Having thus touched on the structural necessity of this
misconception, let us now turn to its real basis. Lacan's
description of the latter is reminiscent of Aristotle's polemic

6 "Au principe des véritables résistances à quoi on a à faire dans les dédales de ce
qui fleurit de théorique sur le Moi dans la psychanalyse, il y a le simple refus
d'admettre que le Moi y soit en droit ce qu'il s'avère être dans l'expérience:
une fonction de méconnaissance." Écrits, p. 668. ("At the origin of the
veritable resistances with which one is confronted in the labyrinthine excesses
of psychoanalytical ego-theory, stands the simple refusal to acknowledge that
the I, considered theoretically, is nothing other than what it turns out to be in
experience: a function of misapprehension.")
ridiculing the inconsistency of the Sophists, who, when all is said and done, still prefer not to jump into an abyss first thing in the morning. In his “Remarks on the paper given by Daniel Lagache,” in which Lacan discusses at length the significance of the ego in Freud’s second topology, Lacan describes the resistances that any critical understanding and theory of the ego – namely as a function of misrepresentation – would inevitably evoke:

Such resistance is nourished by the fact that it is certainly indispensable to know something of reality in order to survive in it, and that practical evidence shows us that experience accumulated in the ego, and particularly in the preconscious, provides us with the surest bearings for getting around in this reality. Yet one thereby forgets – and it is all the more surprising that it is psychoanalysts who forget – that this argument breaks down when it is a question of the effects of the unconscious. Moreover, the sphere of influence of these effects extends to the ego itself: it was precisely to affirm this that Freud introduced his theory of the relations of the ego to the id. Its purpose was thus to extend the field of our ignorance, not of our knowledge...

The pragmatic demands of self-preservation thus require a perceptible reality, that is, one that may be identified with itself, assumed to be present and coherent, in order, in its turn, to permit the self-preserving subject to identify with itself, and to identify that Self as a unified and identical ego. What is most important, however, about this subject of self-preservation is that it can be constituted only on the basis of a particular structure, or more precisely, of a particular representation. Subject and object, ego and reality, self and other, all presuppose a form and a matrix of presence in which representation is conceived as the copy of an original [Abbild eines Urbildes], as the sign of referent, the signifier of a signified. It is this very

interpretation of representation and the notion of the subject that results from it that Lacan addresses in his theory of the mirror stage. In so doing, he attempts to point out both the necessity and the limits of such an interpretation.

According to Lacan, the child’s ego is formed:

1. through the child’s perception of its own mirror-image, or of that of someone similar.
2. through the recognition that this image represents its own or a similar body.
3. through the projective, “heteropathic” identification with this other as other in order thereby to anticipate that corporeal-motoric identity which the child still lacks.

This account has significant implications for a theory of representation. First and foremost, the logical priority of the “represented” over the “representative,” a priority that defines traditional conceptions of representation, is called into question. In the mirror-stage, the representative, the reflected image, in a certain way produces the “represented”: the body “proper,” conceived as a totality and as the matrix of the ego’s identity. However, if a certain image of the body thus produces identity, it at the same time also threatens it. For the perception of one’s own body as a whole perpetuates what it dissimulates: the disunity of the subject, which “returns,” as it were, in the phantasies of physical dismemberment described so vividly by Melanie Klein.

Insofar, then, as it describes the immutable structure of the ego, the theory of the mirror-stage suggests that the metaphysical interpretation of representation entails a conception of the subject that Lacan calls narcissistic. The subject of the signified is, ultimately, the narcissistic ego. As such, it is determined by a form of articulation which dissimulates the play of difference – that is, that of the signifier – in order to prioritize the signified. Lacan will later designate this difference-dissimulating form of articulation as the “imaginary.” The imaginary is defined as an order of representation which misrepresents difference as the

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7 See above, chapter 3.
8 “Cette résistance s’appuie sur le fait qu’il faut bien que nous connaissions quelque chose à la réalité pour y subsister, et qu’il est d’évidence pratique que l’expérience accumulée dans le Moi, spécialement dans le Préconscient, nous fournirait les repères qui s’y avèrent les plus sûrs. On y oublie seulement, et ne fait-il pas s’étonner que ce soit des psychanalystes qui l’oublient, que cet argument échoue quand il s’agit … des effets de l’inconscient. Or ces effets étendent leur empire sur le Moi lui-même: c’est même pour l’affirmer expressément que Freud a introduit sa théorie des rapports du Moi au Ca: c’est donc pour étendre le champ de notre ignorance, non de notre savoir […].” Écrits, p. 668.
Return to treud image of identity. One might say that it seeks to impose a ground upon the groundless "reality" of differential articulation. It is an effort that can never fully succeed, but that in missing the mark engenders powerful effects.

To be sure, the notion of reality implied in the imaginary should in no way be confused with Lacan's concept of the "real" (le réel), which in turn is derived from Freud's notion of "psychic reality." In Lacan, as also in Peirce, the "real" is defined by its resistance, which includes resistance to representation, including cognition. It is, therefore, in a certain sense at the furthest remove from the imaginary. At the same time, one could with equal justification describe it as residing at the innermost core of the imaginary insofar as the latter is constituted by an ambivalence and a conflict that, precisely, resists imaginary representation, and in so doing goads it on. For the imaginary aims not at the "real," but at a reality, which would be its self-contained and autonomous legitimation. Its constitutive incapacity to produce, or rather: to reproduce such a state results in a highly unstable struggle for power. Lacan's analysis of the imaginary corresponds - mutatis mutandis - to Heidegger's account of the "will to will": both are seen as the necessary but ominous culmination of the Western tradition of autonomous and constitutive subjectivity. Like Heidegger, Lacan stresses that the self-dissimulation of the imaginary, however "unreal" it may be, can have very powerful and dangerous consequences.

What distinguishes the imaginary, and constitutes its peculiar "reality," is not dissimulation or estrangement as such, since - as the Heideggerian comparison would suggest - they are inevitable effects of the signifier. What distinguishes the imaginary is that it is estranged from this inevitable estrangement. For the identity it seductively and alluringly promises is not simply unattainable, or structurally aporetic: it denies and dissimulates the repetition to which it is indebted. Which is to say, it denies its debt to the other.

The result of this denial is an antinomical relation to the other. Repressed, rejected and subordinated to identity, the debt of difference returns, as it were, in a dangerous spiral of destructive rivalry. If the ego is formed in the image of a mirror, this still presupposes a minimal but decisive difference between image and "imaged." It is precisely this difference, after all, that endows the image with its fascinating power. To regard it as an image of wholeness is to overlook the frame that delimits its contours, that separates the "figure" not simply from the "ground," as Gestalt-theory would have it, but from the rest. But can this rest: everything that remains "outside" the Gestalt, be reduced to a mere "background"? Can one ever be certain where the background stops, where the back hits ground. Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage, which is initially articulated with the aid of Gestalt psychology, thus tends to put the latter very much into question.

It is only by means of identifying with another, even if that other is its "own" mirror-image, that the ego is constituted. Yet to seek to appropriate that other is tantamount to denying the difference that makes it a suitable object of identification in the first place. The imaginary thus becomes a "trap," or a double-bind: the ego can only emerge by binding itself to the other; but for it to fulfill its image of wholeness, as a Gestalt, it is bound to deny the bond that constitutes it. No wonder the ego, as Lacan sees it, is the subject tied up in knots. Its efforts at self-affirmation and preservation tend to undermine the relationship upon which it depends. Far from appropriating the other, qua mirror-image, the ego is thus permanently suspended in denials that are ultimately as threatening to itself as to the other denied. The phenomenon of scapegoating suggests itself as an instance of such a dual threat.

Such narcissistic ambivalence can be discerned in psychoanalysis itself. To define the goal of psychoanalysis as the therapeutic strengthening of the ego is to place both the practice and the theory of psychoanalysis increasingly under the self-destructive sway of the imaginary. This, Lacan concludes, is the price psychoanalysis has paid for acceptance into the American establishment. Official psychoanalysis has thereby lost touch with the symbolic processes that were at the heart of Freud's discoveries.

Although the "imaginary" order evidently derives from the "image," it would be a mistake to conceive it as constituting a separate realm. For this would be to overlook that whatever coherence and structure may be attributed to the imaginary must in turn be seen in relation to the signifier as the condition of all articulation whatsoever. As Lacan notes in his remarks
on Lagache. "structure is defined by, and in turn defines, the
signifying articulation as such. [...] that is, the effects deter-
mind by the pure and simple combinatorics of the signifier in
the reality where it manifests itself." 10

This reference to Saussure can help to emphasize just how
different the "reality" in which the signifier "manifests itself"
is from its imaginary counterpart. The reality of the imagination
situates the imaginary as "mere" representation. "Reality" is
thereby construed as a domain that both precedes and outlasts
imagination, its origin and end. The reality in which the
symbolic shows itself, by contrast, is that of the showing itself,
not of its show. In its movement of "manifestation," the
signifier is never fully identical with its necessary localization
and materialization - that is, with its realization - but is always
both "more and less," more and less than itself. In coming forth,
the signifier, as we have argued, falls out. The signifier "is" the
falling-out, the fall-out of "being" with itself. It thus both
exceeds the reality of its manifestation, and at the same time
falls short of it. The signifier falls out with itself as it falls into the
signified. No signifier without a signified. But the signified is
ultimately only the signifier dissimulating its signification. It is
through such dissimulation that meaning takes place. The place
of meaning, or rather: the taking-place of meaning, is (the)
imaginary. The imaginary halts the fall-out of the signifier. But
the halt remains imaginary, for it does not put an end to the
falling-out. The imaginary arrests the fall-out of the signifier, but
only at the cost of falling-out with itself, or rather: with the Self.

If the arresting images of the imaginary order are effectively
inscribed in the force-field of the signifier, the latter would have
neither field nor force without the dissimulation by the
imaginary. Left to its own devices, the symbolic, like the
primary process, would tend to dissolve and to displace the very
determinations upon which it "itself" depends. In short:
without the imaginary, the symbolic would self-destruct. It is
therefore no less dependent on the imaginary than the imaginary
is on it, although it is this latter aspect that Lacan chooses to
emphasize, almost to the exclusion of the former. The reason for

10 "La structure définie par l'articulation signifiante comme telle [...] à savoir
les effets que la combinatoire pure et simple du signifiant détermine dans la
réalité où elle se produit." Ecrits, p. 649.

The imaginary and the symbolic

this one-sided emphasis is above all strategic: it is the signifying
function of the symbolic that had to be introduced into
psychoanalysis at the time Lacan was writing, whereas the
dissimulation of the imaginary was simply identified with
reality per se. Nevertheless, to misconstrue their reciprocal
relationship would be, ultimately, only to supplant one ethical
norm, that of the autonomous, if imaginary ego, with another:
the ontological, but no less hypostatized priority of the signifier.
By contrast, the imaginary and the symbolic constitute neither
an ethical opposition nor an ontological hierarchy, but a
differential relationship that disorders each of these "orders," as
Lacan often calls them; each order sets itself apart from the other,
but in so doing reveals its dependency upon the other and
thereby sets itself apart. 11

Such mutual interdependence and undoing of the symbolic
and imaginary recall the relationship between metonymy and
metaphor. If the metonymic movement may be said to consti-
tute the symbolic function "proper," its "slippage" must in turn
be held in check, given direction and hence, distorted by the
metaphorical function if it is not to dissolve into sheer
indeterminacy. In short, metonymic displacement must itself
be dislocated and disfigured - entstellt, to use Freud's term - by
metaphoric condensation, in order to function at all.

To be sure, for Lacan the metaphorical movement belongs to
the symbolic order, and hence, in it the narcissism of the
mirror-stage is subordinated to the movement of the signifier, as
the following passage, from Lacan's essay on "The situation of
psychoanalysis in 1956," asserts:

Without doubt, the imaginary is not simply the illusory, and it supplies
material for the Idea. But what enabled Freud to plumb the depths that
were to enrich his followers was the symbolic determination to which
the imaginary function is subordinated: we are constantly reminded of
this in Freud, whether we are dealing with the mechanism by which
words are forgotten, or with the structure of fetishism. 12

11 I have discussed how such setting apart works in the writings of Freud in In the
Legend of Freud, part i.
12 "Sans doute l'imaginaire n'est-il pas l'illusoire et donne-t-il matière à l'idée.
Mais ce qui permet à Freud d'y faire la descente au trésor dont ses suivants
furent enrichis, c'est la détermination symbolique à laquelle la fonction imaginaire
se subordonne, et qui chez Freud est toujours rappelée puissamment, qu'il
s'agisse du mécanisme de l'oubli verbal ou de la structure du fétilisme." Ecrits, p. 464.
We have already discussed the forgetting of proper names, and we will come to the phenomenon of fetishism shortly. For the moment, however, we are concerned only with specifying the role of the imaginary within the structure of the symbolic. As we have seen, this structure is also that of the unconscious primary process; its metonymic movement produces unending transference and displacements, concatenations but also fragmentation. Nevertheless, just as the allegedly "primary" process of the unconscious requires a no less "primary" censorship, or more precisely, repression, in order to constitute itself as a process, the symbolic needs the imaginary-metaphorical moment of fixation, in order to assure the minimum of determination necessary for any articulated structure.

Here we touch on the problem of what Freud described as *Ueberdrängung*, "primal repression." Without recourse to some such irreducible, initiating but also internally incoherent notion, it is difficult to conceive of the possibility of a drive's "attaching" itself to - that is defining itself in terms of - an ideational-representative; and since "attachment" - also known as *cathexis* - is an essential aspect of the drive as such, the theoretical fiction of a "primal repression" must be regarded not as an external "vicissitude" of drives, but as a necessary part of their *destination*. Considered in a purely subjective register, this reciprocal dependency can only appear to be paradoxical and circular: on the one hand, the unconscious presupposes (primal) repression as its enabling other (be it in the form of the ego or of the super-ego); on the other, primal repression likewise presupposes the differentiation of the psyche into unconscious - preconscious-consciousness, in order to have a space within which it can occur in the first place.

Such paradoxes, however, lose something of their logical absurdity when it is recognized that they are structural effects of differential articulation. The apparently vicious circle describes the necessary form of signification. Meaning - the signified - is an effect of the signifying chain; yet without such "meaning-effect," the chain itself would be unthinkable.

Thus, viewed from the structural perspective of differential signification, the imaginary and the symbolic must be considered primarily as forms of articulation. The subject of the imaginary, as described in the mirror-stage, is *le moi*, the reflexive ego of self-consciousness. Yet while this subject may appear to be present and identical, the very process of identification disrupts and divides it. Insofar as its identity is determined as self-consciousness, any and all divisions must be comprehended within the unity of a self; by contrast, the conception of a subject as a configuration of signifying chains is a notion that is not compatible with the conception of the autonomous ego as self-consciousness, however dialectically conceived. For the symbolic network of signification can never be totalized, even by dialectical negation. This essential incompatibility should be kept in mind when encountering Lacan's use of dialectical terminology: as is the case whenever he "borr. ws" a particular philosophical vocabulary, his use of it is always commanded by strategic imperatives: that of revealing an element of irreducible heterogeneity and difference there, where identity had previously been assumed. 13

Independently of its volition or designs the narcissistic ego of the imaginary signified - of the *énoncé*, the statement - is thus reinscribed in the symbolic as the eccentric subject that signs itself over to the signifier with a slip of the pen. It thereby subjects itself not merely to the utterance, but *in* the process of uttering (*l'énonciation*), in the sense of the shifter discussed earlier. This subject of the utterance is not simply diametrically or symmetrically opposed to the subject of the statement, the *moi*. Rather, and in sharp contrast to the purported unity and identity of this *moi*, the subject of the utterance is necessarily split and suspended between the statement as meaningful utterance, and the excessive overdeterminations of the signify-
ing chain. Left to its “own” devices – that is, to the metonymic movement of the signifier – the subject would become a hopeless drifter; it is as moi that the drift is stopped, but only through imaginary (dis-)simulation. As shifter, the subject remains suspiciously shifty.

The subject of the utterance thus emerges not only as a drifter, always on the run, on the “rails,” at home nowhere, but moreover – to cite the English word used by Lacan – as a “fader”’. Lacan illustrates this “fading” by referring to certain so-called “expletives,” like the French ne, used primarily in subjunctive phrases to stress the counterfactual moment of desire or of affect. An approximate equivalent, in American English, would be the word, “really?”’, meaning everything and nothing, and confirming, by antithesis, the tenuous “reality” of the communicative process. A counterpart in conversational German would be the expression “genau!”’ “exactly”. Such “expletives” fill out the fall out of the signifier.

But as its name indicates, such filling is even shifter than the shifter. For the “I” as shifter still would seem to occupy one place at a time, and thus to be entirely compatible with the subject of the signified, one whose identity and presence – as author of a message and as creator of meaning – is never radically called into question. By contrast, a “filler,” such as ne, is closer to what Freud, in his discussion of dreams, refers to as “determinatives”: markers that have no semantic meaning of their own, but which function purely syntactically. In this particular case, ne also alludes to a process of denial or distancing, which is particularly appropriate for the “fading” of the subject of the unconscious

The unconscious, beginning with Freud, is a chain of signifiers which repeat themselves insistently somewhere (on another stage, he writes), thereby intervening in the fissures offered it by actual discourse and by the thinking that it informs.

14 Since the subject constitutes itself through the movement of the signifier, “it disappears as subject in the signifiers, for it only becomes” and “is” in and through the “fading that constitutes its identification.” Écrits, p. 835.
15 Such “expletives” can also play a decisive role in jokes, as I have sought to demonstrate; cf. Samuel Weber, “Laughing in the meanwhile,” MLN (Fall, 1987), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1988, pp. 704–705.

The structure of the symbolic, the symbolic as structure, thus stands out in sharp contrast to the imaginary. Symbolic is the play of differences that manifests itself in and as the concatenation of signifiers. While the imaginary reduces differential...
articulation to the ostensibly dualistic relationship of representa-
tive and “represented,” in which the latter term is presumed to
guarantee preconstituted identity and presence, the symbolic is
representation primarily in the sense of a Darstellung, of a
performance destined for another stage, or more precisely, for a
theater in which the representation simultaneously produces and
dislocates the represented. What is thereby “represented,”
however, is not, as one might expect, the signified, but what
Lacan insists upon calling: the subject. In one of his most
famous formulations, he describes the place of this subject by
demarcating the sign from the signifier. If, as in the celebrated
definition of Peirce, quoted by Lacan, the sign can be said to
represent “something to someone,” the “signifying order,” by
contrast,

constitutes itself through the fact that a signifier represents a subject
for another signifier. This is the structure of all the formations of
the unconscious, be it the dream, the lapsus, or the joke. It is also the
structure that explains the originary division of the subject.\(^\text{18}\)

The representation of the subject by the signifier is thus no
simple reproduction of something that – virtually or actually –
was already present. Rather, it is a movement of division that
constitutes the subject. Represented by this movement of
signifier to signifier, the subject cannot be suitably articulated in
the present indicative or in any of its modalities, such as the
present perfect. By contrast, the present participal, through
which the subject is determined through its participation in an
on-going (verbal) process, marks the subject’s subjection to a
movement of significiation. Another aspect of this subjection is
articulated, as already discussed, by the future past. And yet,
there is another tense in French – if indeed it is really a tense at
all – capable of indicating the elusive status of the subject of
signification: the imperfect. In French, the imperfect designates
not merely a “before,” which once was, but which no longer is;
by virtue of its incompleteness and imperfection, it can also
articulate a “not yet.” In this sense, it functions as what
grammarians call a “past future” (futur du passé); like the future
past of the “will have been,” this “past future” also implies a
conjectured “reality.” Take, for example, the French sentence:
“Un pas de plus, il était dans la rue,” which in English can be
rendered idiomatically only with the far less ambiguous con-
ditional phrase: “One step more and he would have been in the
street,” but which literally says: “One step more and he was
in the street.” What is decisive here is precisely the undecidability
of this temporal-conjectural distinction, and the fact that it
results from the differential structure of the signifier. As part of
a process of significiation, the signifier always anticipates a
signified. At the same time, however, it also refers back; and
inasmuch as it is always more or less determinate, each signifier
derives from, or has its point of departure in, a previously
determined signified.

Unlike the sign in Peirce’s definition, then, Lacan’s signifier is
based on a distinctive function: rather than being construed in
relation to a central presence or present tense (as is the case of
the sign), the before and after of the signifier are “centered”
around a difference. As a distinctive element, the signifier always
differs from itself and “is” only in this difference: not
merely to other, similarly differential terms, but to itself. To be
identifiable, each signifying mark must be repeated, must be
iterable, as Derrida argues.\(^\text{19}\) Its identity is thus imperfect in the
most “literal” sense: it can never fully take place because its
place is a function of divergent metonymic chains. Which is
why, as Lacan often writes, the signifier takes place “in [the]
place of the other,” (“au lieu de l’Autre”): both “in the place of
the Other,” and “instead of another.” As signifier, language is
“intrinsically” substitutive, and hence, figurative. But since
each figure always gestures toward another figure, the process of
configuration is addressed at a destination it can never attain.

The subject of both the signifier and the symbolic is
necessarily incomplete, and it is there, in the force-field of such
imperfectability, that the ostensible identity of the imaginary
ego will have been inscribed, albeit in invisible, self-effacing
characters. The “I” takes place, takes its place in the shadow of
an “uh . . .” To retrace the genealogy of this shadow, it may be

\(^{18}\) Le registre du signifiant s’institue de ce qu’un signifiant représente un sujet
pour un autre signifiant. C’est la structure, rêve, lapsus et mot d’esprit, de
toutes les formations de l’inconscient. Et c’est aussi celle qui explique la
division originaire du sujet.” Ecrits, p. 840.

\(^{19}\) J. Derrida, Limited Inc., trans. S. Weber, Northwestern University Press:
Return to Freud

useful to return, once again - assuming, that is, that we ever left it - to the mirror stage.

The mirror stage appears to be clearly pre- and extra-linguistic when considered from a genetic perspective, as a developmental "stage." The process of narcissistic identification sets in before the child has learned to speak, and it appears to occur independently of language, in the ostensible silence of infancy. It seems to involve a purely dualistic relationship of the child to its reflection. Furthermore, the relation Lacan establishes between the precocity of birth and the belated development of motor and sensory powers in humans, as compared with other mammals, would seem itself to betray what Lacan might call an imaginary mode of argumentation, structured upon the opposition of the organic and the perceptual. Moreover, the consequences of the mirror stage appear to be conceived in terms of a dualistic structure: the ego competes with itself as with an alter-ego. However, the text of the "mirror stage," upon which this reading is based, turns out itself to be incomplete and imperfect; what is lacking, or rather, effaced, is precisely that aspect of the figure which distinguishes it, as signifier, from a Gestalt: its gesture. It is this that will become - or rather, will have been - its gesture. This is why the recognition of the image that "already was" at work in its "jubilant assumption," must necessarily be as imperfect as the tense through which it is articulated: such recognition "already was" in the "jubilant assumption," and yet it never was fully there, since it is precisely the jubilant assumption that makes "verification" necessary.

It is this imperfection of the child's jubilant recognition - its contamination by something else, something unsettling, that impels the child to turn around, for such verification can only come from somewhere else, from another place. It does not take place in the ostensible perceptual relationship of the child to the mirror, of subject to object, or even, despite appearances, of subject to subject. It takes place in the encounter of look and look. The look is no longer determined by the object it seems to perceive: the mirror image, but rather by its encounter with another look. This turning, from object or image, to look, marks not merely the movement of the child, but the Kehre of Lacan as well. In it, the ethological perspective that initially marks the mirror stage, turns away from the descriptive discourse of Gestalt psychology and moves toward the theater of the symbolic. What is now added to the mirror image is the glance of the other and the gesture of turning around that returns the child to the signifier.

The present participle indicates an ongoing movement: that of the child, turning around, seeking to "decant": to purify, separate, decontaminate "the recognition of the image" from its "jubilant assumption," in which such recognition already was: was already at work. What is not said here, but what is implicit, is that in that recognition something else was at work as well, something capable of adulterating it, and which thereby requires a confirmation that Lacan compares here with "decanting." A liquid is decanted for at least two reasons: to separate it from its sediment or precipitate, and, correlatively, to preserve its homogeneity, or purity. We recall that one of Lacan's favorite figures for describing the manner in which the signifier falls out into the signified is precisely that of a certain "precipitation." The signifier precipitates out as a sediment that attaches to every signified. This is why the recognition of the image that "already was" at work in its "jubilant assumption," must necessarily be as imperfect as the tense through which it is articulated: such recognition "already was" in the "jubilant assumption," and yet it never was fully there, since it is precisely the jubilant assumption that makes "verification" necessary.

It is this imperfection of the child's jubilant recognition - its contamination by something else, something unsettling, that impels the child to turn around, for such verification can only come from somewhere else, from another place. It does not take place in the ostensible perceptual relationship of the child to the mirror, of subject to object, or even, despite appearances, of subject to subject. It takes place in the encounter of look and look. The look is no longer determined by the object it seems to perceive: the mirror image, but rather by its encounter with another look. This turning, from object or image, to look, marks not merely the movement of the child, but the Kehre of Lacan as well. In it, the ethological perspective that initially marks the mirror stage, turns away from the descriptive discourse of Gestalt psychology and moves toward the theater of the symbolic. What is now added to the mirror image is the glance of the other and the gesture of turning around that returns the child to the signifier.

In the gesture by which the child at the mirror, turning around, seeks to "decant": to purify, separate, decontaminate "the recognition of the image" from its "jubilant assumption," in which such recognition already was: was already at work. What is not said here, but what is implicit, is that in that recognition something else was at work as well, something capable of adulterating it, and which thereby requires a confirmation that Lacan compares here with "decanting." A liquid is decanted for at least two reasons: to separate it from its sediment or precipitate, and, correlatively, to preserve its homogeneity, or purity. We recall that one of Lacan's favorite figures for describing the manner in which the signifier falls out into the signified is precisely that of a certain "precipitation." The signifier precipitates out as a sediment that attaches to every signified. This is why the recognition of the image that "already was" at work in its "jubilant assumption," must necessarily be as imperfect as the tense through which it is articulated: such recognition "already was" in the "jubilant assumption," and yet it never was fully there, since it is precisely the jubilant assumption that makes "verification" necessary.

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20 "Car l'Autre ou le discours se place, toujours latent á la triangulation qui consacre cette distance, ne l'est pas tant qu'il ne s'étale jusque dans la relation
With the appearance of this gesture, a problem noted in our previous discussion of this text begins to be clarified, if not decanted. In the original version of the text of the mirror stage, the effect of the reflection upon the child seemed to result from its recognition of the image as its own likeness. Yet what remained unclear was just how this recognition could produce such jubilation. In the later essay, recognition as such is no longer enough; instead, in its stead, there appears the anxiety which causes the child to twist back, turning around, and in this gesture, to seek the confirming look of another. Recognition of the "same," in the guise of a mirror image, is no longer described simply as a means by which the child seeks to compensate for physiological helplessness. Instead, the jubilant reaction does not relieve the child from having to seek something like an acknowledgment of the other. In this sense, recognition is no longer a process organized around two poles: child and mirror image, subject and object. Instead, it emerges as a triadic relation in which acknowledgment emanates not from the self-identical ego, but from the "person who carries it," that is, from the place of the Other.

At the same time, the twisting and turning of the child marks a decisive articulation in Lacan's thinking itself. The linear temporality of a before and after is no longer adequate to measure the gesture at stake here. The acknowledgment "was" - and Lacan stresses the imperfect here - "already" at work in the jubilant reaction (including, perhaps, Lacan's own jubilation at his discovery of the signification of the mirror stage . . .). That the tense of this turn should, as I have indicated, be the imperfect, suggests that the discovery involves more than simply meets the eye:

But this "already" should not deceive us about the structure of that tertiary presence: it owes nothing to the anecdotal figure that incarnates it.21

In the later text, "Of our antecedents," dealing with the same problem, Lacan stresses the fact that the personal identity of the other is a matter of indifference; what is important in the

production of this reaction is the sheer fact of "being there." 22 The other, whose role as witness is, in Western societies, at least, generally (but not always) assigned to the mother, can in essence be determined neither as an individual, nor as a social function, nor as a subject in general. Indeed, it is nothing more or less than the differentiality upon which discourse depends, but which itself is not so much discursive as gestural. Like the "uh . . .", this other takes the place of the signifier, whose imperfection appears as a fading in and out, or as an interruption. The realm of the signifier is not confined to the verbal discourse it makes possible, but includes the appeal and the exchange of looks, "that most evanescent of objects, for it appears only on the margins." Such gestures and appeals may antedate verbal discourse, but their structure is homologous to its condition, that of the signifier.

The "clarification" of the essay on the mirror stage thus sets the stage of a very different theater, albeit one that was already "on the scene." The mirror stage is not negated or invalidated, far from it; it is given a new twist by a gesture that turns away from the image in a silent appeal to the look as such. The place of the subject is thus no longer framed by the mirror, but relegated to the enabling margins of the visible. On this margin, the manifestation of a certain "prematuratiou" is replaced by another lack, a "much more critical one, the concealment of which is the secret of the subject's jubilation." 23 The new twist, the look that is lacking, sets the stage for a very different kind of drama: that of desire conceived as the desire of the other.

21 "Mais ce déjà ne doit pas nous tromper sur la structure de la présence qui est ici évoquée en tiers: elle ne doit rien à l'anecdote du personnage qui l'incarne." Ibid.

22 "Ce qui se manipulate dans le triomphe de l'assomption de l'image du corps au miroir, c'est cet objet le plus évanouissant à n'y apparaître qu'en marge: l'échange des regards, manifeste à ce que l'enfant se retourne vers celui qui de quelque façon l'assiste, fût-ce seulement de ce qu'il assiste à son jeu." ("What is manipulated in the triumph of the reception of the bodily image in the mirror is that most evanescent object, which only appears on the fringe: the exchange of glances, manifest in the turning-around of the child toward the person who aids it, be it merely through the fact that the person is there witnessing the game." ) Ecrits, p. 70. In this mention of the "most evanescent" objects that appears "only on the margin," Lacan alludes to that most elusive theory of the "objet petit a" - the object small a - which thereby makes a fleeting appearance here, in the margins of this book. See also below, Appendix A, where the relation of the object a to anxiety is explored.

23 "Cette fonction est d'un manque plus critique, à ce que sa couverture soit le secret de la jubilation du sujet." Ibid.