

CHAPTER TWO  
'THE MIRROR STAGE'  
(1936)

**B**Y 1934, Lacan had joined the Société Psychanalytique de Paris, of which he became a full member just before the war. In 1936 he presented his paper on the mirror stage to the International Psychoanalytic Congress in Marienbad, but it was not published. Its contents are outlined in his article on the family in the *Encyclopédie Française* (1938), while the paper in the *Ecrits* (1966) is a revised version which he delivered at the Zurich International Psychoanalytic Congress in 1949.

The mirror stage was a new addition to psychoanalytic theory, and we will give a short account of some of the relevant classical psychoanalytic concepts before tackling Lacan's contribution. These proposed some revision of the concepts of the ego and of narcissism.

In Freud's theory of the mind, the psychical apparatus was differentiated into a number of systems or 'agencies', each of which had distinct properties and functions, but which interacted dynamically and in conflict with each other.\* Two theories of these agencies can be identified in Freud's writings. The first theory, dating from about 1900 – the 'first topography' – distinguishes between the unconscious, pre-conscious and conscious, while the 'second topography',

\* In chapter 6 (p. 107) we argue that the old English word 'instance' is more faithful to Freud's use of the German 'Instanz' than 'agency'.

dating from 1923, differentiates the three agencies of id, ego and super-ego (Das Es, Das Ich, Das Über-Ich). There is overlap between these two models, e.g., the ego and super-ego are partly preconscious and partly unconscious.

In the first topography the situation is as follows:

The unconscious consists of wishful impulses ('drive representatives') which seek to discharge. They exist side by side without being influenced by each other, and are exempt from mutual contradiction. Unconscious processes are subject to the seeking of pleasure and avoidance of pain, to the so-called 'pleasure principle'. They are also governed by the primary process, which means that there is a great mobility in the psychical energy attached to unconscious ideas – a mobility of 'cathexis', the word traditionally used to translate Freud's term 'Besetzung', literally in German 'occupation'. Thus one idea may surrender to another idea all its quota of cathexis by the process of 'displacement', or appropriate the cathexis of several other ideas by the process of 'condensation'.

The preconscious is quite distinct from the unconscious. Preconscious contents differ from those of the unconscious in that they are in principle accessible to consciousness, e.g., as memories that are available to consciousness but not actually yet conscious. The preconscious and the conscious are governed by the secondary process, which coincides with waking thought, judgement, reasoning and controlled action. In the primary process psychical energy flows freely, while in the secondary process energy is much more bound and flows in a more controlled way. Satisfaction is postponed, allowing for an assessment of external circumstances. This corresponds to the 'reality principle', a concept discussed by Lacan with a new emphasis in his paper 'Beyond the reality principle' (1936), which we will describe in the next chapter.

The conscious is closely linked to the organs of perception. Consciousness is a function of the perception-con-

scious system, which receives information made up of sensations from internal and external sources. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud viewed the conscious as a 'sense-organ for the perception of psychical qualities' (SE5, p. 615). Although consciousness provides us with a sketchy picture of our mental processes, it is of great importance whether or not a psychical phenomenon can be recognized consciously. Painful or forbidden thoughts can be refused entry into the conscious by repression, but remain dynamically active in the unconscious, where they are seeking expression. They seek re-entry into the conscious, but can only gain access indirectly, e.g., symbolically in symptoms, in dreams, or in slips of the tongue and jokes, and they are then called 'derivatives of the unconscious'.

The ego in the first topography has various roles. In Freud's pre-analytic 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' (1895), its prime function is that of inhibition. Its neurological basis is that of an organization of nerve-cells with relatively stable boundaries, and it acts as a store of energy which enables it to send out nerve impulses which can control and attract discharges from other nerve-cells. It particularly acts to inhibit the primary processes we described above, and so to inhibit impulses which might evoke unpleasure. It helps the organism to take account of the external world, and is linked with the secondary processes.

In Freud's early psychoanalytic papers, the ego is a defensive agency which fends off unacceptable ideas from consciousness. With the introduction of his first topography, however, the role of the ego becomes less clear. It still appears to function in mechanisms of defence, for example, in the 'Rat Man' case (1909), it is the agency which opposes itself to unconscious wishes. Then with the introduction of the concept of narcissism, 1909-1914, based on observations on homosexual and psychotic patients, the ego is conceived in a new way. A unified ego is not present from birth but has to be developed. There are, though, auto-erotic drives

which take place without any overall organization. The infant obtains satisfaction from his own body without the need of an external object, e.g., in thumb-sucking. For the ego to be formed, a 'new psychical action' (eine neue psychische Aktion) has to take place in order to bring about the stage of narcissism (SE 14, p. 77). The stage of narcissism occurs between auto-eroticism and the relationship with an external human object, when the individual's own body is taken as his love-object.

There comes a time in the development of the individual at which he unifies his sexual drives (which have hitherto been engaged in auto-erotic activities) in order to obtain a love-object; and he begins by taking his own body as his love-object, and only subsequently proceeds from this to the choice of some person other than himself (SE 12, pp. 60-61).

Presumably, the ego in this scheme is formed at the stage of narcissism, between the stages of auto-eroticism and object love, while being itself taken as a love-object. But it is not clear in Freud what is this new psychical action that brings about ego formation, though we are told that the ego first picks out objects by identification and by incorporating objects into itself. Here one is dealing with fundamental dilemmas in analytic theory, and Lacan's mirror stage offers a new formulation of the problem of ego formation.

The second topography clarified a number of Freud's ideas. Once again the three agencies are in a dynamic relationship. The id has all the characteristics of the unconscious and it is the store of drives. Then under the influence of the external world, one portion of the id undergoes a special development. 'From what was originally a cortical layer, equipped with the organs for receiving stimuli, and with the arrangements for acting as a protective shield, a special organization has arisen which henceforward acts as an inter-

mediary between the id and the external world . . . the ego' (SE 23, p. 145).

The ego is not only formed under the influence of the external world, but also by contributions from the person's own body, particularly the surface. 'The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides representing the superficialities of the mental apparatus' (SE 19, p. 26). The ego's functions include voluntary movement control, memory, flight, adaptation and learning. It also strives to avoid unpleasure. Any increase in unpleasure is met by a signal of anxiety, which sets off its defensive actions.

On the surface of the ego lies the consciousness-perception system, while the inside of the ego is partly made up of preconscious processes, particularly linked with speech; but a large part of it is unconscious. It should be said that Freud emphasized that these descriptions of locality were metaphors for the complex workings of the mental apparatus.

The super-ego is like the conscience and is formed by the internalization, through a complicated process of identification, of parental demands, prohibitions and ideal images (which in Aimée's case were turned into internal enemies). 'The long period of childhood, during which the growing human being lives in dependence on his parents, leaves behind it as a precipitate the formation in the ego of a special agency in which this parental influence is prolonged . . . the super-ego' (SE 23, p. 146). The super-ego, in fact, comprises both a critical, self-observing and punishing function, and also the setting up of ideal goals derived from the 'ego-ideal'. The notion of the ego-ideal, which preceded the second topography, brings into a basically persecuting and aggressive super-ego (with which it is difficult to identify) a narcissistic element, the love for one's own ideal. What the individual projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own

ideal. We have already seen in Aimée's case how her ideal images and the beliefs of her delusions were charged both with extreme resentment and love, and how difficult it was for her to bring together these conflicting feelings.

In his formulation of the mirror stage Lacan used Freud's concept of narcissism, and some of his formulations on ego formation. In trying to identify the 'new psychical action' that was meant to bring about ego formation, Lacan seems to agree with the idea that the ego is not present from birth, and instead has to be developed; but he disagreed with certain aspects of Freud's formulation of the ego in the second topography. In particular, he thought there was not enough emphasis on the ego's function of *méconnaissance* – the refusal to acknowledge thoughts and feelings – and that the later Freud put too much emphasis on the ego's adaptive functions. We will return to this point after we have described the mirror stage.

The mirror stage was viewed by Lacan as a formative event in the development of the subject, occurs roughly between the age of six and eighteen months when the infant begins to recognize his image in the mirror. This event has been observed with babies looking at themselves in the mirror, and is also based on studies of animal behaviour made by psychologists as well as on psychoanalytic work.

The recognition may be accompanied by pleasure. The child is fascinated by the image and seems to be trying to control and play with it, so that one may observe that,

unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial . . . he nevertheless overcomes in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstruction of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image (E, pp. 1-2).

One can observe the 'signs of triumphant jubilation and

playful discovery that characterize, from the sixth month, the child's encounter with his image in the mirror' (E, p. 18). To illustrate Lacan's point, we have found useful the work of Wolfgang Köhler with chimpanzees. Chimpanzees are also fascinated by their mirror image, and in ways that shed light on human activity. Thus Köhler wrote that

Rana [a chimpanzee] . . . gazed long and intently into the mirror, looked up and then down, put it to her face and licked it once, started into it again, and suddenly her free hand rose and grasped – as though at a body behind the mirror. But as she grasped emptiness she dropped the mirror sideways in her astonishment. Then she lifted it again, stared fixedly at the other ape, and again was misled into grasping into empty space. She became impatient and struck out violently behind the mirror. . . She held the mirror still in one hand, drew back the other arm as far as possible behind her back, gazed with an air of indifference at the other animal, then suddenly made a pounce with her free hand. However, both she and the rest soon became used to this side of the affair, and concentrated all their interest on the image; this interest did not decrease . . . but remained so strong that the playing with reflecting surfaces became one of the most popular and permanent of their "fashions" (Köhler, pp. 268-9).

As with the chimpanzee, the human infant seems to go through an initial stage of confusing the image with reality, and may try to grasp hold of the image behind the mirror, or seize hold of the supporting adult. Then comes the discovery of the existence of an image with its own properties. Finally, there is the realization that the image is his own – when he moves his image moves, and so on. It might be that the chimpanzee does not recognize what he sees as his own image, unlike the child, and that this is what distinguishes the human as a subject from the animal who merely remains fascinated by reflections.

Babies are from birth intensely interested in what is going on around them, and respond to many aspects of their parents' activity, but the mirror stage is a particular moment when the infant's response is of a different order. Of course, an infant may never actually see a real mirror reflecting himself. In this case he may not have an image of himself which is distinct from the mother's gaze. Lacan's mirror stage refers to a particular moment of recognition and jubilation, when the infant is moving away from the simple reflection of the mother's gaze.

Lacan begins his account with the first months of the infant's life. The infant from birth does not have overall sensorimotor co-ordination, and the main motor pathways leading to his limbs do not mature (myelinate) until the second year (Freud called this 'motor helplessness'). He is also very dependent on external care. So he is relatively unco-ordinated, helpless and dependent, and these first months of life are full of anxiety, uneasiness and 'discord'. Lacan referred in this context to a biological factor – man's 'specific prematurity of birth'. The infant's body is relatively immature and takes a long time to develop, and he is dependent on others for longer than any other animal. There is a basic deficit, a lack of co-ordination and fragmentation of functions.

At a certain point, around six months, and presumably when the perceptual apparatus has reached a certain stage of development, the infant becomes aware, through seeing his image in the mirror, of his own body as a totality, a total form or *Gestalt*. The mirror image is held together, it can come and go with a slight change of the infant's position, and his mastery of the image fills him with triumph and joy. The mirror image anticipates the mastery of his body that the infant has not yet objectively achieved. He falls in love with his image and, in contrast to the auto-erotic stage, in which he has an erotic relationship to his fragmented body, he now

takes the image of his whole body as his love-object. Lacan's description here is very close to Freud's of the narcissistic stage, when the body is taken as love-object.

Thus the infant's *imaginary* mastery of his body anticipates his biological mastery. In Lacan's view, any future relation with reality will be marked by this imaginary anticipation. 'The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation' (E, p. 4). There is then a fundamental 'alienation' in this action. The infant's mastery is in the mirror image, outside himself, while he is not really master of his movements. He only sees his form as more or less total and unified in an external image, in a virtual, alienated, ideal unity that cannot actually be touched. Alienation is this lack of being by which his realization lies in another actual or imaginary space.

This image of unity is not disturbed by the turbulent movements of the infant's unco-ordinated body. It is a mirage in a *Gestalt*, that is, an external form, which the mirror reflects back in a reversed symmetry and perspective. The infant's movements and bodily prematurity are reversed in the fixity of a big 'statue' of himself. 'This *Gestalt* . . . in these two aspects of its appearing [of fixity and stature] symbolizes the ego's mental permanence and at the same time prefigures its alienating fate, the statue into which man projects himself' (E, pp. 2-3).

In Lacan's view the formation of the ego commences at the point of alienation and fascination with one's own image. This image is the first organized form in which the individual identifies himself, so the ego takes its form from, and is formed by, the organizing and constitutive qualities of this image. The mirror image organizes and constitutes the subject's vision of the world, and Lacan cited examples from biology to demonstrate the organizing function of the image. 'It is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon,' for example, 'that it should see another member of its species of either sex; so sufficient in

itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror' (E, p. 3).

Nevertheless, as far as the ego's formation is concerned, one can see certain parallels with Freud's thought. We have explained how in Freud's early work, the ego was an organization of nerve cells with relatively stable boundaries, which acted as a store of energy, and this seems similar to a *Gestalt*. In Freud's later work the ego was regarded, in part, as a 'mental projection of the surface of the body'. This is compatible with the notion of a mirror image as a projection of the surface of the body. Finally, Freud's 'new psychical action' that brings about the stage of narcissism seems to be similar to the formative action of the image for the ego at the mirror stage.

The ego for Lacan is thus formed on the basis of an *imaginary* relationship of the subject with his own body. The ego has the illusion of autonomy, but it is only an illusion, and the subject moves from fragmentation and insufficiency to illusory unity. The analyst is familiar with the various images that symbolize fragmentation of the body and ego formation, e.g., in dreams. As Lacan wrote,

The fragmented body manifests itself regularly in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs, represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions – the very same that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch has fixed for all time in painting . . . the formation of the ego is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium – its inner area and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposite fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the lofty, remote inner castle whose form symbolizes the id in a quite startling way (E, p. 5).

As the dream images show us, the infant experiences this discord between the fragmented self and his unitary image as an aggressive disintegration of his own body. This identification with his own body as 'other' than himself structures the subject as a rival with himself. So although the infant identifies with the visual *Gestalt* of his own body, the body is invested with all the distress and fragmentation from earlier months. Thus in Lacan's view, aggressivity is first of all linked to the images of the fragmented body.

These are the images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body. . . One only has to listen to children aged between two and five playing, alone or together, to know that the pulling off of the head and the ripping open of the belly are themes that occur spontaneously to their imagination, and that this is corroborated by the experience of the doll torn to pieces . . . the works of Bosch are an atlas of all the aggressive images that torment mankind . . . [this kind of image] crops up constantly in dreams, especially at the point when analysis appears to be turning its attention on the most fundamental, most archaic fixations. I remember the dream of one of my patients, whose aggressive drives took the form of obsessive phantasies; in the dream he saw himself driving a car, accompanied by the woman with whom he was having a rather difficult affair, pursued by a flying fish, whose skin was so transparent that one could see the horizontal liquid level through the body, an image of vesicle persecution of great anatomical clarity (E, p. 12).

The mirror image inaugurates a new visual and mental experience in the infant's life, since an organized form of himself is seen projected outside, together with the space surrounding him, in the mirror's surface. The infant can then see his image only in relation to the space in which this image is projected, the *Gestalt* establishing a relationship

between the organism and the world around it. But this relationship is discordant because it is based on an imaginary and alienating experience. This discordance also determines the discordant nature of the relations with others who occupy the space around the subject's mirror image.

The illusion of autonomy from which the ego takes its origin is limited and contradicted by another important aspect of the *Gestalt*, that is, the fact that it includes in its capturing form the relation between one's image and the circumscribing space. In other words, the mirror stage inaugurates a *spatial identification* and the subsequent conflict with the reflected image of the world. The same conflict which was determined by the fracture between the subject's undifferentiated and fragmented way of being, and the imaginary autonomy with which the subject has identified himself as ego, is continued as the subject identifies with the image of the human form, that is, with other human beings.

Thus even though the infant is his own rival before being a rival of another, he is captured from very early on by the human form and conditioned by the other's look, for example by the face and the gaze of the mother. The mirror stage inaugurates an identification with other human images and with the world the subject shares with them. The primary conflict between identification with, and primordial rivalry with, the other's image, begins a dialectical process that links the ego to more complex social situations.

During this period [the mirror stage] one will record the emotional reactions and the articulated evidences of a normal transitivity. The child who strikes another says that he has been struck; the child who sees another fall, cries. Similarly, it is by means of an identification with the other that he sees the whole gamut of . . . display ['parade'], whose structural ambivalence is clearly revealed in his behaviour, the slave being identified with the despot, the actor with the spectator, the seduced with the seducer (E, p. 19).

In this context Lacan quoted a non-psychoanalytic source. He mentioned a passage from St Augustine's *Confessions*: 'I have myself seen jealousy in an infant and know what it means. He was not old enough to speak, but whenever he saw his foster-brother at the breast, he would grow pale with an envious stare'. Lacan interpreted the observation as one that involved the infant (who could not speak) in a confrontation with his counterpart, as if in front of a mirror. The infant observed, had an emotional reaction (he went pale), and then images of 'primordial frustration' were re-activated (he stared enviously). Lacan described these features of behaviour as the 'psychical and somatic coordinates of original aggressivity' (E, p. 20), and he went on to describe how aggressivity and narcissism appear, from observation, to be tightly bound to one another. They enter into action in every process of identification, whether it be with an image of oneself, with another person, or with fragments of oneself or another.

Analysts disagree on the exact nature of aggressivity, at the point in a baby's development at which one can observe it, and how it is linked to other drives. Melanie Klein, for example, insisted on the prominent role played by the aggressive drives from the earliest stages of infancy. Other analysts consider that it only makes sense to talk of aggressivity when the infant's ego is more organized than it is at birth, and can thus make a more obviously aggressive attack on other objects. Like Klein, Lacan seemed to consider that the roots of a primordial aggressivity could be seen in the earliest months of life, but unlike her he was more concerned with aggressivity as it arises in relation to the mirror stage (for example as it appears in St Augustine's observation), when the infant is arising as a subject in his own right. Aggressivity, for him, is a 'correlative tension of the narcissistic structure in the coming-into-being of the subject' (E, p. 22). Aggressivity is the irreducible accompaniment of narcissism, and is released in any relation with the other, 'even

in a relation involving the most Samaritan of aid' (E, p. 6).

Lacan parted company with other analytic schools in his view of the ego. For him, the ego's function is purely imaginary, and through its function the subject tends to become alienated. The ego 'neglects, scotomizes, misconstrues' (E, p. 22); it is an agency organized to misread the truth which comes to the subject from the unconscious; its basic function is that of *méconnaissance*, the refusal to accept the truth. In fact this view of the ego is nearer to the ego of Freud's first than of his second topography. In the former the ego's defensive properties are emphasized as well as its intimate connection with the stage of narcissism, while in the latter the ego is more clearly connected with the consciousness-perception system.

In Lacan's opinion, the ego cannot in any way be centred on the consciousness-perception system, nor can it be organized by the 'reality principle', with its emphasis on adjustment to external circumstances. This implies that he was absolutely and fundamentally opposed to any idea that one should help the analysand to strengthen his ego, or to help him adjust to society in any way, or that one should help him tolerate unconscious impulses by building up his ego. He was opposed to any notion that psychoanalysis is concerned with producing healthy, well-adjusted individuals who would be able to know what reality is, and who would be in possession of a healthy, tolerant ego. In addition, he considered that the individual was in permanent conflict with his surroundings, and that any notion of a unified, healthy individual who was happy with his adjustment to his surroundings was a *méconnaissance* of Freud's basic teachings.

This is an extreme and controversial interpretation of Freud. If it is taken literally, it seems to rule out any notion of an analysis of the analysand's defences. The ego for Freud is a defensive agency, warding off impulses from consciousness, and in this sense its prime function is to ignore the

unconscious impulses which seek to gain expression in consciousness, and it is an agency designed to ward off unpalatable truths. In classical analysis the ego's defences have a protective role, and we cannot ignore them. In this viewpoint one cannot just plunge into an analysis without a careful consideration of the nature of these defences. Most analysts agree that the ego must acquire an increased tolerance for 'crude' unconscious impulses, so that it can express them more easily both in direct and indirect form, thus increasing the number of choices and satisfactions that can become available to the analysand. They consider that an alteration in the ego can enlarge the analysand's capacity for self-scrutiny and capacity to bear unconscious impulses. Thus at first sight it would seem to be foolhardy to ignore the ego's defensive properties and only concentrate on its alienating properties.

However, there is some evidence that Lacan was aware of the importance of defences when it came to purely therapeutic questions. In the Rome Discourse, for instance, he discussed the necessity of understanding the role of the type of language determined by the ego. Nonetheless, he was still opposed to any idea of adjustment to the social environment, and his writings abound with a tireless polemic against such a notion. In some ways, such an attitude is very refreshing. It puts the emphasis on the workings of the unconscious, and the role of unconscious impulses; and it emphasizes the doubtfulness of the supposed reality with which the ego is trying to deal, by means of information derived from the consciousness-perception system. In Lacan's view, the ego's mastery of the environment is always an illusory mastery, as a result of the way it is formed at the mirror stage, and the human subject will continue throughout life to look for an imaginary 'wholeness' and 'unity'. He will want to master his environment, and feel a unified and total person. It is these quests, which for Lacan are futile, which are controlled by the ego.



Lacan considered that the mistake of many analysts, including the later Freud, was to confuse the human subject with the ego. The notion of the 'subject' is indeed more philosophical than psychoanalytic, and Freud himself rarely mentioned the concept of a subject; he usually referred to the 'individual', or to the individual's 'psychical apparatus', which was differentiated into the various agencies. He occasionally mentioned a 'self', but it was often confused with the ego, at least in the days of his first topography. On the other hand, he quite often referred to the 'eigene Person' (the person as an individual), and it is perhaps in this sense that one can talk of the 'subject'. This subject seems to have a psychical apparatus made up of various agencies, each of which has distinct properties and functions, and which interact dynamically and in conflict with each other; but it is not at all clear whether for Freud there is an additional concept of a unifying total 'self', which draws together all these agencies. Lacan considered that this cannot be found in Freud, and himself thought that the subject could only be grasped as a series of rather unstable tensions, and remains somewhat elusive. The ego might give a feeling of permanence and stability to the subject, but this is an illusion.

Lacan considered that the psychoanalytic relationship was one between subjects, and so could not be reduced to a relationship between two unified, stable individuals, with easily objectifiable psychological properties. It is not easy to grasp this notion, except perhaps within an analytic relationship, where thoughts and feelings often seem to come and go in a fluid and contradictory manner. In this context, Lacan's concept of the elusive subject seems to make sense, at the very least as a description of what takes place in the analytic relationship. But he certainly did not consider that the subject was totally elusive. In his view, it was through language that the subject could be grasped. In the next chapter, we describe Lacan's early attempts to outline a comprehensive theory of the subject, through considering the role of language.