

RETURNING TO

FREUD

**CLINICAL PSYCHOANALYSIS
IN THE SCHOOL OF**

LACAN

**SELECTIONS EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
STUART SCHNEIDERMAN**

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Lacan's Early Contributions to Psychoanalysis

Anglo-American readers of Lacan's writings have found themselves face-to-face with an alien terminology. Too often they have reacted to this encounter with Otherness by turning away, unwilling to question themselves or their masters. However much Lacan bases his theories on those of Freud, he has introduced a number of new terms into psychoanalytic theory, and since this is a part of the problem, a brief discussion of them here is in order.

I have avoided producing yet another list of definitions. Such lists are by now rather common, and their uselessness is all that people seem able to agree upon when discussing them. In any case, the reader who craves definitions can find most of Lacan's terms defined, for better or worse, in a book entitled *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, written by J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis (New York: Norton, 1974).

The problem of definition is compounded by the following consideration. Except in a few instances, Lacan has not stuck to a single definition for a single term. Changes in meanings of course reflect part of the experience of any teacher who is obliged to backtrack and redefine his terms in different contexts—that is, if he wants to be understood.

It also happens that Lacan is not a systematic author. He does not follow an argument or a topic until he has exhausted it but prefers to move around, seemingly at random, asking a question today and proposing an answer six months or six years later. Or else it may happen that he will simply reformulate the original question. It takes considerable time and effort before the reader sees or recognizes a conceptual unit.

Many American analysts have openly stated their annoyance and even outrage at the apparent randomness of this procedure. It would probably be vain to justify it by saying that this is the way an analysis unfolds or even that this is how one learns language. The fact that a reader can perfectly well appreciate the justification for Lacan's presentation of theoretical material will not make him like it any better. It may well be that Lacan's idiosyncrasies and aristocratic tone will finally be unacceptable to people whose tradition is democratic, but after all, this remains to be seen. It is best to avoid prophecies that might, I would say, self-fulfill.

At present two books by Lacan are available in English. They are a selection of the *Ecrits* and one seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. This sampling is perhaps representative, but it does not in any way permit the reader to follow the development of Lacan's thought over the years. One day, when more of Lacan's work is available, an informed judgment will be possible.

An overview of Lacan's early contributions to psychoanalysis properly begins with his first work as a psychoanalyst, which is marked by his discovery of the "mirror stage." A first version of this concept was presented at a congress of psychoanalysts in 1936. This time must have corresponded with the end of Lacan's analysis with Rudolph Loewenstein. The 1936 paper was later rewritten and was published in 1949.

Between 1936 and 1949 Lacan worked on the problems of narcissism and aggressiveness, being careful to distinguish the latter term from aggression. In his paper "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis," he established the fundamental interrelation between narcissism and aggressiveness. Later, in the early 1950s, he introduced the categories or registers of the imaginary, the real, and the symbolic. As an organizing principle this triptych has remained the fundamental reference for psychoanalytic treatment performed by analysts in his school. Another statement, made in 1953 and spurred by dissensions within the French analytic group, was the now renowned "Function and Field of Speech and Language," in which Lacan declared that the instrument of analysis is speech and the field of its work is language. Lacan's borrowings from linguistics and anthropology, influenced by the publication of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, appeared at this moment, although only to the extent that these disciplines made relevant contributions to clinical work.

Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the signifier was introduced by Lacan to grasp what Freud had variously called the functions of switch-words, key-words, and nodal points. Contrary to Saussure's definition of the sign as the unit formed by signifier and signified, Lacan declared that the signifier could only function in combination with another signifier and that it represents not a signified but a subject. In short, signifiers always come in pairs.

During this time Lacan came to define the ego as the image the child encounters in the mirror. Certainly there is an identity between the child and his image, but this is a mistaken identity. The child is not in fact identical to this alien image; he simply acts as though he were. This occurs through what Lacan calls a "misapprehension" (*méconnaissance*) that is normative, though not in any way normal.

Lacan saw the inadequacies of the theory of ego psychology and thus introduced the concept of a subject distinct from the ego. Early in his career he defined the subject as whoever is speaking. The subject is determined retroactively by the act of speech. To the extent that what is spoken rarely coincides with what the ego intends to communicate, there is a splitting between ego and subject. Ultimately the subject is the subject of the unconscious, and it speaks most truthfully, as Freud stated, in slips of the tongue and other errors showing that the ego's censorship is suspended.

In "Function and Field" Lacan defined the act of speech by saying that there is no speech without a reply, even if that reply is an enigmatic silence. Speech is addressed to an Other, and it is only by taking into account the response of the Other that the subject can know the sense of his own speech. Lacan defined the Other as a place rather than a subject. The Other is neither complete nor whole—it is not simply another name for a Self. We would perhaps be more accurate if we followed Lacan's suggestion and translated the term as "Otherness."

The Other is deceptive, a trickster, and if the subject knows anything, he knows that in having a fault or a lack, the Other is desiring. In English we can say that the Other is wanting. The question that establishes the subject's relationship with the Other is, "What does the Other want from me?" This Other, this quality of Otherness, is also distinguished rigorously from the "other," my counterpart, who resembles me and is my equal.

Lacan's Otherness is the Other scene that Freud, after Fechner, said was the place of dreams. The Other has a discourse that predates the subject's entry into the world of speaking beings, and Freud called this discourse the family romance or myth, whose structure is written as the Oedipus complex. Otherness is always and irreducibly outside the subject; it is fundamentally alien to him. Insofar as the discourse of the Other agitates a singular subject, it forms the Freudian unconscious. Otherness is structured, and the principle of its structuring is the Law of the prohibition of incest. Freud identified this Law as being that of the murdered father.

Another of Lacan's major contributions is the clarification of the place of desire as organizing human existence. Where the *Standard Edition* translated Freud's *Wunscherfüllung* as "wish fulfillment," French analysts have called it the "realization of desire." Desire is realized in the dream, and Lacan added that this is always the Other's desire. That desire must find expression in dreams suggests that it is a desire that the subject cannot accept as his own or cannot act upon.

The neurotic is someone who does not know what he wants. His transfer-

ence will be structured around the idea that his analyst knows and can tell what he knows. As Lacan put it, in the transference the analyst will be thought of as the supposed subject of knowing. This states not that the analyst does not know anything but that he is not the subject of his knowing. It is thus impossible for him to speak what he knows.

This leads to still another of Lacan's major contributions, the object *a*. For the psychoanalyst the important object is the lost object, the object always desired and never attained, the object that causes the subject to desire in cases where he can never gain the satisfaction of possessing the object. Any object the subject desires will never be anything other than a substitute for the object *a*.

With this overview in mind, let us examine the mirror stage more closely. It is inaugurated for the child at the age of approximately six months, in the instant of a look. Trapped in a motor incoordination, or what Lacan called a "fragmented body," the child finds in the unified field of the mirror image a sense of wholeness or togetherness, and he takes it upon himself. He puts the image on, or as Lacan would say, he assumes it as his own.

This experience is not sufficient to make the child a subject; it anticipates the subjectivity that he will gain when he acquires speech. This will occur according to the same dialectic as that by which he assumed his mirror image. The child assumes the words of the Other as though they were his own.

The child does not merely see his image in the mirror. He sees that image surrounded by a world of objects. This world is certainly integrated with the ego; the ego as image is its center. This integration is effected only at the cost of a misapprehension: the ego may be thought of as a subjective center of the world; in fact it is the first object of the child's look.

We must add that when the child first recognizes his image in a mirror, he greets the discovery with jubilation. He is transfixed by the image; he is fixated, even captured, by its immobility as well as by its wholeness. In a sense the child will invest his image narcissistically because it responds or appears to respond unfailingly to his cues. This is again a misapprehension of the fact that he himself has been captured within the field of the mirror.

The responsiveness of the world of objects is taken by the child as a sign of love. When the child demands objects, he is in fact demanding a sign of love from those whose task is to provide those objects. This love maintains and solidifies the child's identification with his mirror and is thus a barrier against the dread of fragmentation.

The end of the mirror stage comes at the age of approximately eighteen months, when the child can recognize that his parents are not entirely responsive

to inarticulate demands. Otherness is first denied, and the child will acquire language through mechanisms that appear to be rooted in the mirror stage.

First, imitation of sounds plays an important role, and second, the child will attempt to repair the Other's defect by naming what he wants. If parents do not read the child's mind and do not give what he demands, then language comes to hold the promise of letting them know unambiguously. A problem then arises, concerning the fact that the speaking of the demand alters it, and the child who receives the demanded object will discover that he no longer wants it. Love, we might say, is no longer sufficient, and the child has entered into the world of desire.

Essentially there are two ways in which the child enters this world. First, when he perceives that a parent desires an object that is other than he, he will want to be that object, to be the desired object. Second, when he perceives a parent desiring an object, he himself will then consider that object desirable. Here he will identify with the Other's desire. Obviously, in this second case there will be a competition for the desired object.

The imaginary order derives from the mirror phase. The world is visible; it is present to consciousness through the agency of perception. At the same time it is captivating. In the imaginary the child has the illusion of being in control of a world that has enslaved him. This is one reason why Lacan has never been very enthusiastic about the idea of ego control. Another reason is dialectical: if we want to posit the ego as a master, then we must ask who or what its slave is. There are no masters without slaves.

In general terms we might say that the way in which the child relates to his mirror is determined by the way in which he is held by a parent before the mirror. In introducing this Other as determinant, Lacan says that the dual relationship between the child and his image is defined by the intervention of a third party. We may then ask what there is about this first Other, generally a mother, that determines the way she negotiates this crucial moment in the child's development. To answer this question we would want to know something about the history of this person, her relationship with her family and her husband, and the place the child has come to occupy for her within her own history.

The importance of these elements cannot be denied, but they are unknown to the child. At the time that the mirror stage is occurring, he is unaware of the forces that determine whether the phase occurs satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily. These factors form the material of the symbolic. For Lacan the structure of the imaginary is determined by the symbolic. The symbolic is a structure of differential thematic elements, whether they are the phonemes of language or what Lévi-Strauss calls the mythemes of myths. What counts here is that these ele-

ments exist within a structure, and this supersedes their content or meaning or form. Being structured, the elements of the child's prehistory hold together in much the same way that the child perceives his image in the mirror as being together. In fact, the symbolic should come to replace the imaginary as structuring.

In psychoanalytic work the symbolic manifests itself in the form of the family romance or the mythic structure of the Oedipus complex. This discourse is the conjuncture into which the subject was born, and it determines the success or failure of his maturation and development. When there is a failure of psychosexual or psychosocial maturation, relating it to a moment in a developmental process is secondary to analyzing the specific signifiers that the patient uses to talk about it. These signifiers are related to the constellation of signifiers that constitute the discourse of his family history. Since the symbolic order has the quality of Otherness, there is no subject in the symbolic.

Excluded from the symbolic, the subject is reconstituted in the real. The real is the scene of the trauma; the subject is constituted in an encounter with a traumatic situation. At one time Freud called this trauma the "primal scene." The fact that this scene is impossible to remember excludes the idea that something in the scene itself is traumatic. What it does mean is that the child bears witness to the conjunction of two beings from whose act he was conceived. The subject never truly escapes this trauma; in fact, he becomes it. The trauma always returns him to the same place, and we can say that this is where he lives, more truly than in the reality that philosophers and psychologists have arrived at by abstracting.

The patient ought to reach a point where he articulates the signifiers that inscribe him in the real and determine his destiny. His avoidance of the real is patent in his will to live out his fantasies. If Freud mistook the fantasies of his first hysterical patients for real seductions, it was at least an instructive error. In his fantasy the subject participates in, but does not bear witness to, the primal scene.

Trauma is not merely an encounter with sexuality; it is an encounter with sexuality signifying death. If what the subject seeks to encounter is the answer to the question of his existence, the trauma represents a failed encounter, one from which the subject retreats, knowing that death is the only answer to his question.

What stands between the subject and his desire for death is narcissism. The relationship between narcissism and aggressiveness makes for the fact that narcissism, the ecstatic affirmation of one's being alive, is always enacted at someone's expense. The affirmation of one's life entails the exploitation of someone else's life.

In the mirror stage the fragmented body arrives at a false sense of wholeness, of self through identification with an image. As several analysts have noted,

there is no such thing as an inborn true sense of Self. While this sense evolves in the imaginary, a parallel process will take place in the symbolic, in which the important point is not the subject but rather the name. In bearing a name, man gains, not a sense of wholeness, but rather a sense of an otherness that is neither whole nor complete. Lacan's most recent representation of this otherness is as a hole.

The neurotic subject seeks to avoid the distressing encounter with the real. In place of the real, he promotes the symptom, the psychic symptom, with which he lives in an uneasy coexistence. In his earliest work on hysteria, Freud defined the symptom as the moment when a part of the body enters a conversation at the place where a word should have been spoken. What is in play is not an attempt to shore up the impending ruin of the body image but the maintenance by the hysteric of the supposed integrity of the communication that is supposed to be taking place. One major characteristic of hysterical structures is the belief that words are too weak or feeble to express true feelings.

In the hysterical symptom a part of the body is sacrificed to fill in a gap in the Other, to make him understand or respond. The symptom is signifying. It speaks a reply that the hysteric cannot pronounce—this because she must await it from an Other body. When the symptom manifests itself, the hysteric is alienated from a body whose speech is actually addressed to her but in a language that she does not understand. The hysteric habitually identifies with the object *a* in her willingness to sacrifice her own happiness to cause the desire of a man, originally her father.

In Lacan's later work the crucial concept will be the object *a*. Lacan himself considers this to be one of his major contributions, and I will discuss it in some detail, using its definition, provided above, as an object that causes someone to desire.

In addition, the object *a* is circumscribed and disengaged by the drive, assuming that an analyst permits his patient to get beyond narcissism. The role of the object *a* in the drive is played by one of the four objects Lacan has named as objects of drives, namely, the breast, the voice, the look, and excrement.

We can distinguish the object *a* from the imaginary phallus attributed to the mother. The object *a* is not the representation of a denial of a lack; it indicates the place of the lack and its irreducibility. The object *a* is a trace, a leftover, a remainder. We can summarize its concept by saying that it leaves something to be desired. There is no such thing as the perfect crime—we have all heard this phrase—and we can add that there is no such thing as the perfect sexual act, the act that is totally satisfying.

The clue, the trace of the criminal's passage, causes the desire of the detective. In erotic relations it can be the beloved's look, the tone of his or her

voice, the curve of a body, that causes a lover to desire. It is always a fragment that causes desire, never the imaginary wholeness of the partner's being.

In fetishism the object that causes desire, this little bit of nothing that is detached from the body, becomes itself the object of desire. For an alcoholic it is the one more drink, or else it may be the bottle or the glass. In a phobia the object causes desire and revulsion at the same time. Anxiety, Lacan has said, is not the fear of nothing, the flight or fright before a void, but rather the encounter with the object *a* that marks the spot where there is a lack.

One might have the impression that in the case of obsessional neurosis, the object *a* is excrement. It also happens that obsessionals are intensely interested in the visual. Even in the case of the Rat Man, in the midst of a tale that aims at nothing if not anal erotism, we cannot fail to notice that the event unleashing the episode that led the patient to Freud was the loss of his glasses—exemplary manifestation of the object *a* as look. The object *a* here is not the patient's look, but his father's—and this is manifest in the scene where, examining his sex in the mirror, the Rat Man opens the door of the hallway just enough to attract the look of his dead father.

The object *a* represents the step beyond the Oedipus complex. The death of the father, as the Rat Man demonstrates, is not the end of the father but rather the beginning of his Law. Where we would say that the *a* is a fragment of a name, we note that in Freud's myth of the primal horde, it is the body of the murdered father that becomes fragmented. The importance of the name tells us not that man relates to his body through the image that he found in the mirror but rather that his relationship to the image is simply a precursor for his relationship with his name, which will determine his sense of his body.

In Freud's myth the band of brothers devour the body of the murdered father in order to make his influence disappear, to free themselves from the Law prohibiting incest. And here we encounter a radical impossibility; such a total devouring is impossible. There will always be a remainder, a trace of the father's passage among the living. Freud said in the last paragraph of *The Interpretation of Dreams* that desire is indestructible. We may thus conclude by saying that there is always something left to cause desire. If the analyst during an analysis will come to be this object, he will also at the end of analysis not be it. He will submit himself to the fate greeting any object that stands in for *a*, and that is to be discarded.