

Chapter 1

The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience

OVERVIEW

Lacan first presented his views on the nature of the ego to the Fourteenth International Psycho-Analytical Congress at Marienbad, July 31, 1936, but failed to submit a written text to be included in the proceedings of the Congress (1966, p. 67, fn. 1). Hence the present text, dating from 13 years later, is the first full articulation of this important theme that we have. But even in 1936, Lacan's formulation did not fall completely out of the blue. To gain a better sense of the import of this essay, then, it may be useful to review briefly the course of Lacan's intellectual career up to that time.

We have seen already that Lacan's clinical training culminated in a doctoral thesis *On Paranoia and Its Relationship to Personality* (1932), in which he examined in a detailed case study the interaction between personality and social milieu. In that monograph, "personality" was understood loosely as "the ensemble of

specialized functional relations that establishes the originality of man-the-animal, adapting him to the enormous influence exercised by the milieu of mankind, or society, on the milieu of his life" (1932, p. 400; our translation).

More precisely, the personality is polarized around three different foci: an individual one that relates to a particular life story; a structural one that relates to typical elements that affect every human development; and a social one that relates to one's social interaction with others (1932, pp. 42, 313-315). Of these three, Lacan in his doctoral thesis underlined particularly the last, the *social* component of personality. It is worth noting, too, that in this early work, he recognized clearly the ambiguities involved in Freud's theory of narcissism (1932, pp. 321-322) as well as of the *moi* (pp. 323-326), promising to return to the subject in his later researches (p. 326). The unpublished (1936) essay on the "Mirror Phase" was clearly an effort to fulfill this promise.

Between the doctoral thesis of 1932 and the "Mirror Stage" essay of 1949, there are one essay and one article that are interesting because of their transitional nature. A third piece, "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," dates from 1948, one year before the "Mirror Stage" essay, but since the two are cut from the same cloth and the former appears immediately after the latter in the *Selection*, we shall examine them in the order in which they appear in the English edition.

The first transitional essay dates from 1936, the same summer as the first (unpublished) presentation of the "mirror phase" theme, and may be presumed to reflect a comparable level of development. It bears the title "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'" (1966, pp. 73-92), in obvious allusion to Freud's essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), and it takes that "fundamental principle" of Freud's doctrine as a reference point with regard to which the second generation of Freud's disciples can define both their debt to Freud and their task for the future.

In the first part (to have been followed by two others that never appeared), the essay focuses on the import of Freud's

epochal discovery: the method of “free association.” This involves a critique of nineteenth-century associationism in psychology (against which Freud was reacting), followed by a phenomenological description of the new psychoanalytic experience. Here Lacan sees Freud’s recognition of “*psychological reality*” as of major importance (1966, p. 88). Of interest to us is his insistence on two elements that help structure this “psychological reality”: (1) the image and (2) the complex.

According to Lacan, the essential function of an image is “in-form-ation,” which we take literally to mean “giving *form* to” something—whether this be the intuitive form of an object as in knowledge, or the plastic form of an imprint as in memory, or the form that guides the development of an organism (1966, pp. 77, 88). In any case, the image is a form that in-forms the subject and makes possible the process of identification with it. Identification with a constellation of images leads to a behavioral pattern that reflects the social structures within which those images first emerged. It is this constellation that is called a “complex,” a notion that is far richer for Lacan than that of “instinct.” “It is through the *complex* that images are established in the psychic organization that influence the broadest unities of behavior: images with which the subject identifies completely in order to play out, as the sole actor, the drama of conflicts between them” (1966, p. 90; our translation).

The second interim work is the article on “The Family” (1938). Clearly Lacan sees the family as more significant as a social milieu than as a biological fabric out of which the subject is cut, hence his insistence on the importance of the complex rather than instinct in the development of psychic mechanisms within it. Here he is more detailed in his description of the complex. The complex, he tells us, is dominated by social factors. In its content, it is representative of an object; in its form, it represents this object insofar as the object influenced the subject at a given state of psychic development; in its manifestation of what is objectively absent at a given point of time, the complex is understood by reference to an object. With regard to the individual

integration of different forms of objectivization, it is the work of a dialectical process that makes each new form arise out of conflicts between the preceding form and the “real.” In any case, the complex, at least as understood by Freud, is essentially part of the unconscious dimension of the subject. The image, on the other hand, is seen as one element in the composition of the complex. Thus Lacan speaks, for example, of the weaning process as constituting a complex in the newly born, of which the image of the maternal breast is one element (1938, p. 6). The most important of the complexes is the so-called “Oedipus complex,” which includes as a constituent element an image of the father (pp. 11–15). The Oedipus complex is, of course, rich with implications for the social dimension of man, and receives lengthy treatment in the article.

When we come, then, to the landmark essay of 1949, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” two themes have clearly preoccupied Lacan up to this point: the role of the image in the development of the subject and the manner in which social experience evolves. In a certain general way, these two themes polarize the content of the essay, and in any case may serve to structure our remarks about it.

Lacan’s principal thesis is that the newly born human infant, initially sunk in motor incapacity, turbulent movements, and fragmentation, first experiences itself as a unity through experiencing some kind of reflection of itself, the paradigm for which would be self-reflection in a mirror. This normally occurs between the ages of six and 18 months. This mirrorlike reflection, then, serves as the form that in-forms the subject and guides its development. So it happens that there is an “identification” between infant and its reflection “in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (1977, p. 2/94). It is this reflected image of itself with which the infant identifies that Lacan understands by the “I.” The consequences of this conception are manifold.

What is meant by the initial experience of the “fragmented body” is understandable enough, given the “*specific prematurity of birth in man*” (1977, p. 4/96), his anatomical incompleteness, which few would wish to challenge. But are we to take literally the suggestion that every infant must perceive himself in a physical mirror in order to discover his own ego? It would seem not:

... the recognition by the subject of his [own] image in the mirror is a phenomenon that for the analysis of this stage [of development] is significant for two reasons: the phenomenon appears after six months, and the study of it at that moment reveals in demonstrative fashion the tendencies that then constitute the reality of the subject; the mirror stage, by reason of these affinities, offers a convenient symbol of this reality: of its affective valence (illusory like the image) and its structure as a reflection from a human form [1938, p. 10; our translation].

The essential here apparently is that a human form be the external image in which the infant discovers both himself and the “reality” around him, but presumably that human form could also be—and in the concrete is more likely to be—the mothering figure.

What, more precisely, does the infant discover in experiencing his form reflected in the mirror? First of all, a total unity that replaces his prior experience of fragmentation. This totality becomes idealized into a model for all eventual integration and, as such, is the infant’s primary identification—the basis for all subsequent “secondary” identifications (1977, p. 2/94). This model, however, although it “fixes” the subject in a certain *permanence* that contrasts with the “turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him” (1977, p. 2/95), does so through a form that initially (i.e., before the subject’s assumption of it through identification) is “other” than the subject, exterior to it, hence an “alienation” of it. The stability of this form, contrasting as it does with the instability of the initial fragmentation, assumes a tensile strength that eventually becomes rigid and armor-

like—the basis of “the inertia characteristic of the formations of the *I*” (1977, p. 7/99), i.e., its defense mechanisms. That is why Lacan can speak of the process as “the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development” (1977, p. 4/97).

There is another aspect of this primitive alienation that must be underlined—its “fictional” quality (1977, p. 2/94). This may be understood in the sense that the ideal of total unity, projected onto this alienating identity, is an unattainable one, wherein “the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power” (1977, p. 2/94). It can be approached by the developing subject only asymptotically.

But “fictional” may be understood in another sense as well, for the reflection in the mirror is an inversion of what stands before the mirror. Thus the child experiences “the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates—the child’s own body, and the persons and things, around him” (1977, p. 1/93). Initially, then, the external world with all its spatial relationships is experienced in an inverted way and, to that extent, awry. Thus, “the mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world” (1977, p. 3/95), in the sense that it establishes “a relation between the organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*” (1977, p. 4/96). But since this relationship is filtered through a prism of inversion, there is a primitive distortion in the ego’s experience of reality that accounts for the misrecognitions (*méconnaissances*) that for Lacan characterize the ego in all its structures (1977, p. 6/99).

Given the fact that the infant subject first discovers himself in an external image, it is easy to understand how he confuses this external image of himself with the images of other subjects among whom he finds himself. It is in such fashion that the “social dialectic” begins. This confusion leads to a misidentification of himself with the other and has far-reaching effects, not only

on relationships with others but on knowledge of external things as well. This new development, called “transitivism” by Lacan, is the result of “a veritable captation by the image of the other” (1966, p. 180). Lacan points out how the child’s use of language reflects this, speaking in the third person before using the first person. In his 1948 essay, “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis” (which we will take up next), he writes of the period from six to 30 months:

During the whole of this period, one will record the emotional reactions and the articulated evidences of a normal transitivism. 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 reactions of bearing and display, 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 [1977, p. 19/113].

In discussing transitivism, Lacan refers to a well-known study by Charlotte Bühler (1927); Wallon (1934), in a detailed description of this study, describes (in the case of pairs of infants separated in age by no more than two and one-half months) the children’s reciprocal attitudes in terms of a reciprocal stimulation formed by a dyadic situation: “The roles are distributed according to age, but the two partners are equally captivated by the situation born of their reciprocal nearness. By it they are confused between themselves: the one who is showing off being as excited by the expectation of the other whose eyes are fixed on him” (p. 194). As a result of Bühler’s research, Lacan (1951) tells us, “we can assess the role of the body image in the various ways children identify with the *Socius*,” with the result that the child’s “ego is actually alienated from itself in the other person” (p. 16). How this gives rise to jealousy, aggressivity, and the Hegelian dialectic will be the main focus of the next chapter. For now, let it suffice to say that the mirror stage comes to an

end in this “paranoiac alienation, which dates from the deflection of the specular *I* into the social *I*” (1977, p. 5/98).

By “paranoiac alienation” in this context, then, Lacan seems to mean both the alienation, i.e., misidentification of the subject himself with his own reflection, and the misidentification of this reflected image with the image of the other in the process of transitivism. But this double alienation has its effect on the infant’s experience of external things, too. Just as it leads to a distorted grasp of the subject’s reality and to interpersonal confusion, it leads to a fundamental miscognition of external things, to which Lacan gives the term “paranoiac knowledge” (1977, p. 2/94).

More precisely, how is this to be understood? There seem to be two steps to Lacan’s argument. The first has to do with the role of desire, an essentially Hegelian term that has to do with prestige and recognition. Once the ego is identified with the other, “the object of man’s desire . . . is essentially an object desired by someone else” (1951, p. 12). Desire now mediates human knowledge and “constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence” (1977, p. 5/98). What becomes salient in the object is its desirability, not any “intrinsic” quality: “One object can become equivalent to another, owing to the effect produced by this intermediary, in making it possible for objects to be exchanged and compared. This process tends to diminish the special significance of any one particular object, but at the same time it brings into view the existence of objects without number” (1951, p. 12). This “instrumental polyvalence” of objects and their “symbolic polyphony” (in part through their role as gifts) introduces “a certain rupture of level, a certain discord” between man and nature, and at the same time “extends indefinitely his world and his power” (1977, p. 17/111).

This extension of man’s world appears to involve, in addition to the movement of desire, a second step in the process, whereby “we are led to see our objects as identifiable egos, having unity, permanence, and substantiality; this implies an element of inertia, so that the recognition of objects and of the ego

itself must be subjected to constant revision in an endless dialectical process" (1951, p. 12). But once the square of identification is complete (subject-ego-others-things) and things are treated narcissistically as reflections of the ego, they take on the role of "defensive armour" (1977, p. 17/111), and a certain rigidity grips human knowledge: "Now, this formal stagnation is akin to the most general structure of human knowledge: that which constitutes the ego and its objects with attributes of permanence, identity, and substantiality, in short, with entities or 'things' that are very different from the *Gestalten* that experience enables us to isolate in the shifting field" (1977, p. 17/111). Lacan seems to say, then, that human knowledge is paranoid because imaginary ego-properties are projected onto things; things become conceived as distorted, fixed, rigid entities; and things have salience for man insofar as they are desirable to others. Whether and how knowledge can be other than paranoid are questions for later discussion.

In the end, then, the image dominates this period of Lacan's thought: the subject is in-formed by his own image, is captivated by the other's image, and objects themselves take on the rigid features of the ego: "What I have called paranoid knowledge is shown, therefore, to correspond in its more or less archaic forms to certain critical moments that mark the history of man's mental genesis, each representing a stage in objectifying identification" (1977, p. 17/111). The impact of "objectifying identification" on social relationships will serve as the main theme of the next chapter.

MAP OF THE TEXT

- I. Introduction.
 - A. Our goal in calling attention to the mirror stage is to shed light on the formation of the I
 1. as experienced in psychoanalysis
 2. and as opposed to Cartesian philosophy.
- II. This conception is rooted in an aspect of human behavior

highlighted by a finding of comparative psychology.

- A. The chimpanzee can recognize his image in a mirror
 1. but this soon loses its interest.
 - B. The child jubilantly recognizes his own image in the mirror from the age of six months
 1. with far-reaching *effects* on his development.
 - a. The mirror image stage is an identification in which the subject is transformed.
 - b. This assumption of his image by the child precipitates the I in a primordial form.
 - c. This form is the Ideal I, "the source of secondary identifications"
 - i. prior to the form's social determination.
 - (a) This form orients the agency of the ego in a "fictional direction"
 - (b) and will remain irreducibly discordant with the subject's own reality.
 2. The *process* involves the anticipation of bodily maturation in a gestalt
 - a. which is exterior,
 - b. of different size,
 - c. and whose symmetry is reversed, leading to:
 - i. a rigid structure of the I;
 - ii. alienation;
 - iii. and its resemblance to statues.
 3. The *evidence* for formative effects of a gestalt is:
 - a. gonad maturation in the female pigeon;
 - b. social maturation of the migratory locust;
 - c. significance of space in mimicry.
 4. The *preconditions* for this spatial captation are:
 - a. man's organic insufficiency,
 - i. requiring that his relation to nature be mediated by an image;
 - b. man's prematurity at birth.
- III. Some of the intrapsychic implications of this stage are:
 - A. the image of the fragmented body

1. as present in dreams, painting, and hysteria;
 - B. the fortification of the I,
 1. as suggested in dreams and obsessional symptoms;
 - C. a means of symbolic reduction
 1. based on linguistic techniques rather than pure subjectivism;
 - D. and a genetic order of ego defenses, whose sequence is:
 1. hysterical repression;
 2. obsessional inversion;
 3. paranoiac alienation
 - a. when the mirror stage gives way to jealousy and the social dialectic begins.
- IV. Some philosophical implications follow:
- A. Knowledge becomes mediated through the desire of the other.
 - B. The I becomes defensive regarding natural maturation
 1. so that normalization requires cultural mediation.
 - C. In relating to others, the narcissistic, alienating I becomes aggressive.
 - D. Existential negativity cannot be based on a self-sufficiency of consciousness.
 - E. The ego is not centered on the perception-consciousness system or the reality principle
 1. but is characterized by the function of miscognition (*méconnaissance*)
 2. and marked by denial and defensive inertia.

NOTES TO THE TEXT

- 1*b*/93¹ The experience of insight is described in Köhler (1925).
- 1*c*/93 Recent research (Gallup, 1977) points to the chimpanzee and orangutang as the only primates, other than man, capable of recognizing their mirror images as their own. While the chimpanzee's "jubilant activity"

¹ This form of reference includes the page in the English text (1), the paragraph in the same text (*b*—the second), and the page in the French text (93).

may perhaps be exhausted, Gallup reports that the animal settles down to a pragmatic use of the mirror for grooming. Köhler (1925, pp. 317–319) also describes how his chimpanzees persisted in mirroring themselves in polished tin, pools of water, etc.

1*d*/93

In this teasing allusion to Baldwin, Lacan may be pointing us to the American tradition of philosophical social psychology of Baldwin, Cooley, and Mead, whose notions of genetic epistemology, the looking-glass self, and the generalized other are congenial to Lacan's concerns, if not at all to be confused with his own notions of paranoiac knowledge, the mirror stage, and the Other.

Baldwin, many of whose works were translated into French (and other languages), wrote the following dedication to his first volume of *Thoughts and Things* (1906): "To his friends who wrote in French—Janet, Flournoy, Binet, and to the lamented Tarde and Marillier—This book is inscribed by the author in testimony to the just criticism and adequate appreciation his other books have had in France."

According to Baldwin (1902, p. 206), imitation first appears in the infant after six months of age. Freud refers to Baldwin in Letter 74 to Fliess (1887–1902, p. 228) and in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905c, p. 174n). For a recent review of Baldwin's work, see Cairns (1980).

Wallon is credited by Laplanche and Pontalis (1967, p. 251) with providing data for the mirror experience in 1931. In a chapter titled "Le corps propre et son image exteroceptive," Wallon (1934) reports examples of infants responding to their reflections between their eighth and ninth months. M. Lewis (1977) reports that infants were aware of seeing their own images in the mirrors of his laboratory at nine months of age. Lacan places the onset of the experience at

- over eight months in a later paper (1951, p. 14).
- 2c/94 *Imago* is defined literally as “an imitation, copy of a thing, an image, likeness (i.e., a picture, statue, mask, an apparition, ghost, phantom). . .” (C.T. Lewis and Short, 1955, p. 888). For further discussion in Lacan, see *Écrits* (1966, pp. 188–193).
- 2d/94 The child, incapable of speech (*infans*), assumes the image in the mirror as his idealized identity, establishing the foundational reference for his “I” which he cannot yet speak. This referent is not yet given as an object to the barely inchoative subject, since self-consciousness has not yet emerged through the dialectic of desire and the struggle to be recognized by the other, as will be explained later.
- 2e/94 Lacan’s point seems to be that there are two irreducible aspects of the “I,” one fictional and experientially prior, the other social and structurally prior. Laplanche and Pontalis summarize:
- As far as the structure of the subject is concerned, the mirror phase is said to represent a genetic moment: the setting up of the first roughcast of the ego. What happens is that the infant perceives in the image of its counterpart—or in its own mirror image—a form (*Gestalt*) in which it anticipates a bodily unity which it still objectively lacks (whence its “jubilation”): in other words, it identifies with this image. This primordial experience is basic to the imaginary nature of the ego, which is constituted right from the start as an “ideal ego” and as the “root of the secondary identifications.” . . . It is obvious that from this point of view the subject cannot be equated with the ego, since the latter is an imaginary agency in which the subject tends to become alienated [1967, p. 251].
- 2f/95 The gestalt law of *Prägnanz* states: “Wholes tend to be

- as complete, symmetrical, simple, and good as possible under prevailing conditions” (Avant and Helson, 1973, p. 422). The formal properties of the specular image, not the concrete behavior reflected, fix the ego in a rigid, externalized manner analogous to the statue, the phantom, the automaton.
- 3b/95 The *double*, as discussed by Freud (1919), is linked originally with primary narcissism and ego preservation, but has now become a death omen. Both Freud and Lacan (1951) refer to Otto Rank, who discussed the double’s relation to reflections in mirrors (e.g., 1925, pp. 8ff.).
- 3c/95 In his later paper (1951) Lacan provides references for this research. See also *Écrits* (1966, pp. 189–190) for additional details. Lacan ends the paragraph typically, with a broad reference to the thought of Plato.
- 3d/96 Roger Caillois is mentioned by Lacan (1964) for his work on mimicry in animals.
- 4c/96 In presenting additional evidence for man’s premature birth, Gould (1976) reasons that the human embryonic brain, only one-fourth of its final size, has to leave the pelvic cavity before it becomes too large to pass through. Roussel (1968) quotes Freud on man’s prematurity at birth (1926a, pp. 154–155).
- 4e/97 “Quadrature” is puzzling and admits of several interpretations. Perhaps the ego as mediator between organism and environment buttresses its fictional role in an endless obsession with trying to keep things in place, a task as impossible as the squaring (quadrature) of the circle; perhaps the sense is that the task is as limitless as if the verifications were lifted to the fourth power (quadrature); in the astronomical sense, perhaps the ego would be in quadrature to the *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt*, raised above and observing both, as the half-moon is in quadrature, at a 90° angle from a line extending from the earth to the sun.

- 5a-c/
97-98 Lacan typically balances hysterical and obsessional symptoms (e.g., 1977, pp. 46b, 89f-90c/254, 302-304), and the linguistic techniques he refers to would seem to be metaphor (the hysterical condensation) and metonymy (the obsessional displacement). He provides a more detailed treatment of the linguistic mechanisms elsewhere (1977, pp. 156-160/505-511).
- 5d/98 Lacan's genetic order appears predicated on the movement of the mirror stage: felt motor incoordination (later called the experience of *corps morcelé*) falls under hysterical repression; the rise of the specular ego institutes obsessional, fortifying defenses; and captivation by the image of the other in transitivity leads to paranoid identification.
- 5e/98 Lacan provides references in *Écrits* (1966, p. 180). In his later paper (1951) he says "transitivity" is a term used by French psychiatrists in the discussion of paranoia (p. 16; the actual word used twice there is "transitivity," apparently a misprint, as is the later "body" for "boy").
- 6b/98 For a careful elucidation of Freud's use of primary (autistic) and secondary (object-withdrawn) narcissism, see Laplanche and Pontalis (1967, pp. 255-257). Freud's paper, "On Narcissism" (1914a), is seen by Schotte (1975) as the first of Freud's turning points, in which he struggles ambivalently with "His Majesty the Ego" as narcissistic love object (Freud, 1914a, p. 91; see also 1908, pp. 149-150, and 1917, pp. 138-139). This, of course, sharply contrasts with Freud's later exposition of the ego as the agency of consciousness that adapts the organism to reality. Laplanche describes the ego as an object capable of passing itself off as a desiring subject (1970, p. 66).
- 6c/98-99 Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* first appeared in France in 1943; one section is titled "Existential Psychoanalysis."

- 6f/99 Lacan's view of the ego is in direct opposition to the view of the ego as a subject or agency facilitating adaptation to reality through rationality. The Lacanians see this emphasis on adaptation to "reality" made by the ego psychologists as the Americanization of Freud, the adapting of Freud to American life, much like the way the immigrant must adapt to his new environment, as nearly all of the ego psychologists did when they came here from Europe. In pointing this out, Mannoni (1968) states that the Americans have missed the ego's fictional, alienating, and distorting function (pp. 181-186).
- The ego's role in negation (*Verneinung*) is discussed by Lacan in his later paper (1951, pp. 11-12, 16) and in *Écrits* (1966, pp. 369-399). Lacan also makes clear his disquiet with any talk of "strengthening the ego" (1951, p. 16), and he tells us why: "...the ego is structured exactly like a symptom. Interior to the subject, it is only a privileged symptom. It is the human symptom *par excellence*, it is the mental malady of man" (1953-1954, p. 22). Leavy (1977) states that Lacan is not alone among analysts in taking a critical stance toward ego psychology.
- 7a/99 The "level of fatality" seems to allude broadly to the death drive, as well as to the ineluctable structures of the unconscious (and therefore of language).
- 7f/100 Lacan does not pretend to find in psychoanalysis a way of life as others do, e.g., Chrzanowski: "It is my thesis that psychoanalysis is not merely a particular form of psychotherapy; it is at all times also a philosophy of life" (1977, p. 175).