



## Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject

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Fredric Jameson

Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan:

Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject

The attempt to coordinate a Marxist and a Freudian criticism confronts—but as it were explicitly, thematically articulated in the form of a problem—a dilemma that is in reality inherent in all psychoanalytic criticism as such: that of the insertion of the subject, or, in a different terminology, the difficulty of providing mediations between social phenomena and what must be called private, rather than even merely individual, facts. Only what for Marxist criticism is already overtly social—in such questions as the relationship of the work to its social or historical context, or the status of its ideological content—is often merely implicitly so in that more specialized or conventional psychoanalytic criticism which imagines that it has no interest in extrinsic or social matters.

In “pure” psychoanalytic criticism, indeed, the social phenomenon with which the private materials of case history, of individual fantasy or childhood experience, must initially be confronted is simply language itself. Even prior to the establishment of those official social phenomena which are the literary forms and the literary institution as such, language—the very medium of universality and of intersubjectivity—constitutes that primary social instance into which the pre-verbal, pre-social facts of archaic or unconscious experience find themselves somehow inserted.<sup>1</sup> Anyone

<sup>1</sup> See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, Chapter I (“Certainty at the Level of Sense Experience”) for the classic description of the way in which the unique experience of the individual subject (sense-perception, the feeling of the here-and-now, the consciousness of some incomparable individuality) turns around into its opposite, into what is most empty and abstract, as it emerges into the universal medium of language. And see, for a demonstration of the social nature of the object of linguistic study, V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973).

who has ever tried to recount a dream to someone else is in a position to measure the immense gap, the qualitative incommensurability, between the vivid memory of the dream and the dull, impoverished words which are all we can find to convey it: yet this incommensurability, between the particular and the universal, between the *vécu* and language itself, is one in which we dwell all our lives, and it is from it that all works of literature and culture necessarily emerge.

What is so often problematical about psychoanalytic criticism is therefore not its insistence on the subterranean relationships between the literary text on the one hand and the "obsessive metaphor" or the distant and inaccessible childhood or unconscious fascination on the other: it is rather the absence of any reflection on the transformational process whereby such private materials become public—a transformation which is often, to be sure, so undramatic and inconspicuous as the very act of speech itself. Yet insofar as speech is pre-eminently social, in what follows we will do well to keep Durkheim's stern warning constantly before us as a standard against which to assess the various models psychoanalytic criticism has provided: "Whenever a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false."<sup>2</sup>

## I

In any case, it was Freud himself who, as so often, first sensed the methodological problems raised by the application of psychoanalytic techniques to those intersubjective objects which are works of art or literature. It has not sufficiently been observed that his major statement in this area, the essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1907), far from using the identification of literary productivity with private fantasy as a pretext for "reducing" the former to the latter, on the contrary very specifically enumerates the

<sup>2</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les Règles de méthode sociologique* (Paris: Alcan, 1901), p. 128.

theoretical difficulties such an identification must face. His point is that it is by no means so easy as it might seem to reconcile the collective nature of literary reception with that fundamental tenet of psychoanalysis which sees the logic of the wish-fulfillment (or of its more metaphysical contemporary variant, "le désir"), as the organizing principle of all human thought and action. Freud tirelessly stresses the infantile egotism of the unconscious, its *Schadenfreude* and its envious rage at the gratifications of others, to the point where it becomes clear that it is precisely the fantasy or wish-fulfilling component of the literary work which constitutes the most serious barrier to its reception by a public: "You will remember how I have said that the day-dreamer carefully conceals his phantasies from other people because he feels he has reasons for being ashamed of them. I should now add that even if he were to communicate them to us he could give us no pleasure by his disclosures. Such phantasies, when we learn them, repel us or at least leave us cold."<sup>3</sup> Here again the dream provides a useful confirmation, and anyone who has had to listen to the dream narratives of other people can readily weigh that monotony against the inexhaustible fascination of our own dream memories. Thus, in literature, the detectable presence of self-dramatizing, and most often, self-pitying, fantasies is enough to cause a withdrawal from the implied contract of reading. The novels of Baron Corvo may serve as illustrations, or most best-sellers; even in Balzac, a good many thinly disguised wish-fulfillments become the object of what is at best amused complicity on the reader's part, but at the worst outright embarrassment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), Vol. IX, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> It is true that the taboo on biographical criticism ought to make statements of this kind inadmissible; yet, particularly in a period in which literary biography is flourishing as never before, it is perhaps time to have a closer look at the ideological function of that taboo. It should be observed that, where the older biographical criticism understood the author's life as a context, or as a cause, as that which could explain the text, the newer kind understands that "life," or rather its reconstruction, precisely as one further text in its turn, a text on the level with the other literary texts of the writer in question and susceptible of forming a larger corpus of study with them. In any case, we need a semiotic account of the status

Freud does not conclude, but proposes a two-fold hypothesis for exploration as to the nature of the poetic process itself, which he characterizes as “the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others... The writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal—that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies. We give the name of an *incentive bonus*, or a *fore-pleasure*, to a yield of pleasure such as this, which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources.”<sup>5</sup> Repression of the private or individual relevance of the fantasy, or in other words, its universalization, on the one hand; and the substitution of a formal play for the immediate gratification of wish-fulfilling content on the other—these two “methods” as Freud calls them correspond to a dual interpretive system that runs through all of his reading of texts—from those of dreams all the way to literary and cultural objects, but most strikingly, perhaps, in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*: namely, an account of the wish-fulfillment in terms of its content, in other words, the nature of the wish being fulfilled, and the symbolic ways in which it may be said to reach fulfillment, side by side with an explanation of the “supplement” of a more purely formal pleasure to be derived from the work’s organization itself and the psychic economy the latter realizes. It is thus perhaps not too far-fetched to see at work in this two-fold account of the poetic process the subterranean presence of those primordial Freudian powers of Displacement and Condensation; gratification of the wish by its displacement and disguise, and a simultaneous release of psychic energy owing to the formal short-cuts and superpositions

of what are here designated as “autobiographical” passages, and of the specificity of those registers of a text in which authorial wish-fulfillment—in the form of complacency, self-pity and the like—is deliberately foregrounded.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, p. 153. The mechanisms outlined here are much closer to the model of *Jokes and the Unconscious*—its object a message and a communication situation—than to that of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

of overdetermination. For the moment, however, we must retain, not Freud's solution, but rather his formulation of the problem in terms of a dialectic between individual desire and fantasy and the collective nature of language and reception.

It cannot be said that the literary criticism of orthodox Freudianism—even at its best—has followed the example of Freud himself in these reflections; rather, it has tended to remain locked within the categories of the individual and of individual experience (psychoanalyzing, as Holland puts it, either the character, or the author, or the public), without reaching a point at which those categories themselves become problematical. It is rather in some of the oppositional, or heretical, applications of psychoanalytic method to literature that we will be likely to find suggestive hints towards a further specification of the problem itself.

Thus, for example, Sartre may be said to have pioneered a psychobiographical method which cuts across some of the false problems of an orthodox psychoanalytic and a traditional biographical criticism alike. In both Sartre and Erikson, indeed, the conventional opposition between the private and the public, the unconscious and the conscious, the personal or unknowable and the universal and comprehensible, is displaced and reanchored in a new conception of the historical and psychic situation or context. Now the meaning of Genêt's style or Luther's theological propositions is no longer a matter for intuition, for the instinctive sensibility of analyst or interpreter in search of a hidden meaning within the outer and external one; rather, these cultural manifestations and individual productions come to be grasped as responses to a determinate situation and have the intelligibility of sheer gesture, provided the context is reconstructed with sufficient complexity. From an effort at empathy, therefore, the process of analysis is transformed into one of a hypothetical restoration of the situation itself, whose reconstruction is at one with comprehension (*Verstehen*).<sup>6</sup> Even the problem of evaluation (the greatness of Luther's political

<sup>6</sup> For good and for ill, Sartre's theory of language has much in common with that of Dilthey.

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acts, of Genêt's formal innovations) becomes linked to the way in which each articulates the situation and may thus be seen as an exemplary reaction to it: from this point of view the response may be said to structure and virtually to bring to being for the first time an objective situation lived in a confused and less awakened fashion by their contemporaries. The concept of the context or situation here is thus not something extrinsic to the verbal or psychic text, but is generated by the latter at the very moment in which it begins to work on and to alter it. It should be added that in both Sartrean and Eriksonian reconstructions, the family proves to be the central mediatory institution between the psychic drama and that social or political realm (papal authority for Luther, nineteenth century class society for Flaubert), in which the psychic drama is ultimately acted out and "resolved."

At least for Sartre, however, this valorization of the situation goes hand in hand with a radical depersonalization of the subject. Here, despite the Lacanian polemic against the Cartesianism of *Being and Nothingness* and against the alleged ego-psychologizing of the psychobiographies and the evident revisionism of Sartre's early attacks on the Freudian concept of the Unconscious, it must be observed that another Sartre—that of *The Transcendence of the Ego*—was an important predecessor in precisely that struggle against ego psychology in which Lacan and his group have for so long been engaged. In that work, as well as in the chapter on the psyche in *L'Être et le néant* which prolongs it, the ego in the traditional sense—character, personality, identity, sense of self—is shown to be an object for consciousness, part of the latter's "contents," rather than a constitutive and structuring element of it. A distance thus emerges within the subject between pure consciousness and its ego or psyche which is comparable to that separating the subject (S) and the ego (*a'*) in Lacan's L-schema. Sartre's "Cartesianism" is not properly understood unless the attendant stress on the impersonality of consciousness is also grasped, on its utter lack of quality or individuating attributes, its "nature" as a mere speck or point without substance or consistency, in terms of which you, I, Luther,

Genêt, Flaubert, are all radically equivalent and indistinguishable. We are thus entitled to speak of an insertion of the subject here, both in the relationship of the historical figure to his situation and in the project of the psychobiography as a reconstruction of it: the opposition of particular to universal has been transformed into the relationship of an impersonal and rigorously interchangeable consciousness to a unique historical configuration. This said, it must also be noted that the psychobiographical form remains shackled to the categories of individual experience, and is thus unable to reach a level of cultural and social generalization without passing through the individual case history (a survival of the classical existential insistence on the primacy of individual experience which continues to govern both the *Critique de la raison dialectique* and the presentation of nineteenth century objective spirit—there called “objective neurosis”—in volume III of *L’Idiot de la famille*).

In contrast, the synthesis of Marx and Freud projected by the Frankfurt School takes as its province the fate of the subject in general under late capitalism. In retrospect, their Freudo-Marxism has not worn well, often seeming mechanical in those moments in Adorno’s literary or musical studies when a Freudian scheme is perfunctorily introduced into a discussion of cultural or formal history.<sup>7</sup> Whenever Adorno or Horkheimer found their historical analyses upon a specific diagnosis, that is, on a local description of a determinate configuration of drive, repressive mechanism, and anxiety, Durkheim’s warning about the psychological explanation of social phenomena seems to rematerialize in the middle distance.

<sup>7</sup> So for example, in his discussion of the sacrificial dance in Stravinsky’s *Sacre du printemps*, Adorno observes: “The pleasure in a condition that is void of subject and harnessed by music is sadomasochistic. If the liquidation of the young girl is not simplistically enjoyed by the individual in the audience, he feels his way into the collective, thinking (as the potential victim of the collective) to participate thereby in collective power in a state of magical regression.” (*Philosophy of Modern Music* [New York: Seabury, 1973]. p. 159) I am tempted to add that recourse to the hypothesis of a sadomasochistic or aggressive impulse is always a sign of an unmediated and psychologizing ideology (on the other hand, Adorno’s use of the concept of “regression” is generally mediated by the history of form, so that regression to archaic instincts tends to be expressed by or to result in regression to earlier and cruder formal techniques, etc.).

What remains powerful in this part of their work, however, is a more global model of repression which, borrowed from psychoanalysis, provides the underpinnings for their sociological vision of the total system or "verwaltete Welt" (the bureaucratically "administered" world system) of late capitalism. The adaptation of clinical Freudianism proves awkward at best precisely because the fundamental psychoanalytic inspiration of the Frankfurt School derives, not from diagnostic texts, but rather from *Civilization and Its Discontents*, with its eschatological vision of an irreversible link between development (or "Kultur" in the classical German sense of the word as technological and bureaucratic "progress") and ever-increasing instinctual renunciation and misery. Henceforth, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the evocation of renunciation will function less as psychic diagnosis than as cultural criticism; and technical terms like repression come to be used less for their own denotative value than as instruments for constructing, a contrario, a new Utopian vision of "bonheur" and instinctual gratification. Marcuse's work can then be understood as an adaptation of this Utopian vision to the quite different condition of the "société de consommation," with its "repressive desublimation," its commercialized permissiveness, so different from the authoritarian character structures and the rigid instinctual taboos of an older European industrial society.

If the Sartrean approach tended to emphasize the individual case history to the point where the very existence of more collective structures becomes problematical, the Frankfurt School's powerful vision of a liberated collective culture tends to leave little space for the unique histories—both psychic and social—of individual subjects. We must not forget, of course, that it was the Frankfurt School which pioneered the study of family structure as the mediation between society and the individual psyche;<sup>8</sup> yet even here the

<sup>8</sup> See "Authority and the Family", in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury, 1972), pp. 47-128; and also Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), chapters 3-5. The appeal to the institution of the family as the primary mediation between childhood psychic formation and class realities is also an important feature of Sartre's program

results now seem dated, partly owing to precisely that decay of family structure in modern times which they themselves denounced. Partly, however, this relative obsolescence of their finding is owing to a methodological shift for which they themselves are responsible, namely the change of emphasis—particularly in the American period—from the family as a social institution to more properly psychological concepts like those of the authoritarian personality or the fascist character structure. Today, however, when it is ever clearer just how banal evil really is, and when we have repeatedly been able to observe the reactionary uses of such psychological interpretations of political positions (e.g., the student revolt as an Oedipal manifestation), this will no longer do. Frankfurt School Freud-Marxism ended up as an analysis of the threats to “democracy” from right-wing extremism which was easily transferred, in the 1960’s, to the Left; but the original Freud-Marxian synthesis—that of Wilhelm Reich in the 1920’s—evolved as an urgent response to what we would today call the problems of cultural revolution, and addressed the sense that political revolution cannot be fulfilled until the very character structures inherited from the older, pre-revolutionary society, and reinforced by its instinctual taboos, have been utterly transformed in their turn.

A rather different model of the relationship between individual psychology and social structure from either that of Sartre or of the Frankfurt School may be found in a remarkable and neglected work of Charles Mauron, *Psychocritique du genre comique* [Paris: Corti 1964]. Mauron’s work cuts across that static opposition between the individual and the collective whose effects we have observed in the preceding discussion by introducing between them the mediation of a generic structure capable of functioning both on the level of individual gratification and on that of social structuration.

Comedy is in any case a unique and privileged type of cultural and psychic material, as the lasting theoretical suggestiveness of Freud’s joke book may testify. Nor is Mauron’s Oedipal interpreta-

for a reform of Marxist methodology in *Search for a Method* (New York: Vintage, 1968), pp. 60-65.

tion of classical comedy as the triumph of the young over the old particularly novel for the Anglo-American reader (a similar analysis of comedy is to be found in Northrop Frye's work). Even here, however, the psychoanalytic reading raises the fundamental issue of the status of character as such and of the categories that correspond to it: are the characters of classical comedy—hero-protagonist, love object, split drives or fragments of libidinal energy, the father as super-ego or as Oedipal rival—all structurally homogeneous with each other as in other forms of representation, or is there some more basic structural discontinuity at work here which the theatrical framework serves to mask?

It is precisely such a discontinuity which Mauron sees as constituting the originality of the Aristophanic form, in contrast to the classical theater of Molière or of Roman comedy. He shows that the fundamental Oedipal analysis can be made to apply to Old Comedy only if the framework of representation and the primacy of the category of character be broken: the place of the love object of Oedipal rivalry is then seen to be taken, not by another individual character, as in the heroines of Molière or of Plautus, but rather by the *polis* itself, that is, by an entity that dialectically transcends any individual existence. Aristophanic comedy thus reflects a moment of social and psychic development which precedes the constitution of the family as a homogeneous unit, a moment in which libidinal impulses still valorize the larger collective structures of the city or the tribe as a whole; and Mauron's analysis may be profitably juxtaposed with the results of the investigation by Marie-Cecile and Edmond Ortigues of the functioning of the Oedipus complex in traditional African society: "The question of the Oedipus complex cannot be assimilated to a characterology, or to a genetic psychology, or to a social psychology, or to a psychiatric semiology, but circumscribes the fundamental structures according to which, for society as well as for the individual, the problem of evil and suffering, the dialectic of desire and demand, are articulated . . . The Oedipus complex cannot be reduced to a description of the child's attitudes towards his or her father and mother . . .

The father is not only a second mother, a masculine educator; rather, the difference between the father and the mother, insofar as it projects that of man and woman in society as a whole, is part of the logic of a structure which manifests itself at several levels, both sociological and psychological... The principal distinction [between the manifestation of the Oedipal problem in Senegalese society and that of Europe] lies in the form taken by guilt. Guilt does not appear as such; in other words, as the absence of depression and of any delirium of self-denunciation testifies, it does not appear as a splitting of the ego, but rather under the form of an anxiety at being abandoned by the group, of a loss of object."<sup>9</sup> The source of these modifications is then seen by the Ortigues to be the ancestor cult, into which much of the authority function of the Western father figure is absorbed: "It is the collectivity which [in Senegalese society] takes the death of the father upon itself. From the outset traditional Senegalese society announces that the place of each individual in the community is marked by reference to an ancestor, the father of the lineage... Society, by presenting the law of the fathers, thus in a sense neutralizes the diachronic series of generations. In effect the death fantasies of the young Oedipal subject are deflected onto his collaterals, his brothers or his contemporaries. Instead of developing vertically or diachronically in a conflict between generations, aggressivity tends to be restricted to a horizontal expression within the limits of a single generation, in the framework of a solidarity and rivalry between collaterals."<sup>10</sup>

The methodological recourse to formally different textual structures, as in Mauron, or sociologically different contexts, as in *Oedipe africain*, thus has the merit of freeing the psychoanalytic model from its dependency on the classical Western family, with its ideology of individualism and its categories of the subject and (in matters of literary representation) of the character. It suggests

<sup>9</sup> Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues, *Œdipe africain* (Paris: Plon, 1966), pp. 301-303.

<sup>10</sup> Ortigues, p. 304.

in turn the need for a model which is not locked into the classical opposition between the individual and the collective, but is rather able to think these discontinuities in a radically different way. Such is indeed the promise of Lacan's conception of the three orders (the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real), of which it now remains for us to determine whether the hypothesis of a dialectically distinct status for each of these registers or sectors of experience can be maintained within the unity of a single system.

## II

For the difficulties involved in an exposition of the three orders spring at least in part from their inseparability. According to Lacanian epistemology, indeed, acts of consciousness, experiences of the mature subject, necessarily imply a structural coordination between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. "The experience of the Real presupposes the simultaneous exercise of two correlative functions, the imaginary function and the symbolic function."<sup>11</sup> If the notion of the Real is the most problematical of the three—since it can never be experienced immediately, but only by way of the mediation of the other two—it is also the easiest to bracket for purposes of this presentation. We will return to the function of this concept—neither an order nor a register, exactly—in our conclusion; suffice it to underscore here the profound heterogeneity of the Real with respect to the other two functions,

<sup>11</sup> Serge Leclaire, "A la recherche des principes d'une psychothérapie des psychoses", *La Solution psychiatrique* (1958), p. 383. Besides Lacan's early work (in the *Ecrits* [Paris: Seuil, 1966] and above all the first volume of the *Séminaire, Les Ecrits techniques de Freud* [Paris: Seuil, 1975], I have found the following works the most useful on the Imaginary/Symbolic distinction: Anika Rifflet-Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (Brussels: Dessart, 1970 — the most complete exposition of Lacan's thought to date); A. G. Wilden, *The Language of the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1968 — still the best introduction to Lacan in English); Edmond Ortigues, *Le Discours et le symbole* (Paris: Aubier, 1962); Louis Althusser, "Freud and Lacan", in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971); and the above-mentioned article of Leclaire. An English translation of Lacan's "The Mirror phase as Formative of the Function of the I" may be found in *New Left Review*, #51 (September-October, 1968).

between which we would then expect to discover a similar disproportion.

Yet to speak of the Imaginary independently of the Symbolic is to perpetuate the illusion that we could have a relatively pure experience of either. If, for instance, we overhastily identify the Symbolic with the dimension of language and the function of speech in general, then it becomes obvious that we can hardly convey any experience of the Imaginary without presupposing the former. Meanwhile, insofar as the Imaginary is understood as the place of the insertion of my unique individuality as *Dasein* and as *corps propre*, it will become increasingly difficult to form a notion of the Symbolic Order as some pure syntactic web, which entertains no relationship to individual subjects at all.

In reality, however, the methodological danger is the obverse of this one, namely, the temptation to transform the notion of the two orders or functions into a binary opposition, and to define each relationally in terms of the other—something it is even easier to find oneself doing when one has begun by suspending the Real itself and leaving it out of consideration. We will however come to learn that this process of definition by binary opposition is itself profoundly characteristic of the Imaginary, so that to allow our exposition to be influenced by it is already to slant our presentation in terms of one of its two objects of study.

Fortunately, the genetic preoccupations of psychoanalysis provide a solution to this dilemma: for Freud founded his diagnosis of psychic disorders, not only on the latter's own aetiology, but on a larger view of the process of formation of the psyche itself as a whole, and on a conception of the stages of infantile development. And we shall see shortly that Lacan follows him in this, rewriting the Freudian history of the psyche in a new and unexpected way. But this means that, even if they are inextricable in mature psychic life, we ought to be able to distinguish Imaginary from Symbolic at the moment of emergence of each; in addition, we ought to be able to form a more reliable assessment of the role of each in the economy of the psyche by examining those moments in which their

mature relationship to each other has broken down, moments which present a serious imbalance in favor of one or the other registers. Most frequently, this imbalance would seem to take the form of a degradation of the Symbolic to an Imaginary level: "The problem of the neurotic consists in a loss of the symbolic reference of the signifiers which make up the central points of the structure of his complex. Thus the neurotic may repress the signified of his symptom. This loss of the reference value of the symbol causes it to regress to the level of the imaginary, in the absence of any mediation between self and idea."<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, when it is appreciated to what degree, for Lacan, the apprenticeship of language is an alienation for the psyche, it will become clear that there can also be a hypertrophy of the Symbolic at the Imaginary's expense which is no less pathological; the recent emphasis on the critique of science and of its alienated "sujet supposé savoir" is indeed predicated on this overdevelopment of the Symbolic function: "The symbol is an imaginary figure in which man's truth is alienated. The intellectual elaboration of the symbol cannot disalienate it. Only the analysis of its imaginary elements, taken individually, reveals the meaning and the desire that the subject had hidden within it."<sup>13</sup>

Even before undertaking a genetic exposition of the two registers, however, we must observe that the very terms themselves present a preliminary difficulty which is none other than their respective previous histories: thus Imaginary surely derives from the experience of the image—and of the imago—and we are meant to retain its spatial and visual connotations. Yet as Lacan uses the word, it has a relatively narrow and technical sense, and should not be extended in any immediate way to the traditional conception of the imagination in philosophical aesthetics (nor to the Sartrean doctrine of the "imaginaire," although the latter's material of study is doubtless Imaginary in Lacan's sense of the term).

<sup>12</sup> Rifflet-Lemaire, p. 364.

<sup>13</sup> A. Vergote, quoted in Rifflet-Lemaire, p. 138.

The word Symbolic is even more troublesome, since much of what Lacan will designate as Imaginary is traditionally designated by expressions like symbol and symbolism. We will want to wrench the Lacanian term loose from its rich history as the opposite number to allegory, particularly in Romantic thought; nor can it maintain any of its wider suggestion of the figural as opposed to the literal meaning (symbolism versus discursive thought, Mauss' symbolic exchange as opposed to the market system, etc.). Indeed, we would be tempted to suggest that the Lacanian Symbolic Order be considered as having nothing to do with symbols or with symbolism whatsoever in the conventional sense, were it not for the obvious problem of what then to do with the whole classical Freudian apparatus of dream symbolism proper.

The originality of Lacan's rewriting of Freud may be judged by his radical reorganization of this material which had hitherto—houses, towers, cigars and all—been taken to constitute some storehouse of universal symbols. Most of the latter will now be understood rather as “part-objects” in Melanie Klein's sense of organs and parts of the body which are libidinally valorized; these part-objects then, as we shall see shortly, belong to the realm of the Imaginary rather than to that of the Symbolic. The one exception—the notorious “phallic” symbol dear to vulgar Freudian literary criticism—is the very instrument for the Lacanian reinterpretation of Freud in linguistic terms, for the phallus—not, in contradistinction to the penis, an organ of the body—now comes to be considered neither image nor symbol, but rather a signifier, indeed the fundamental signifier of mature psychic life, and thus one of the basic organizational categories of the Symbolic Order itself.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The fundamental text here is Ernest Jones, “The Theory of Symbolism,” in *Papers on Psychoanalysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961); to juxtapose this essay, one of the most painfully orthodox in the Freudian canon, with the Lacanian doctrine of the Signifier which appeals to it for authority, is to have a vivid and paradoxical sense of the meaning of Lacan's “return to the original Freud.” This is also the place to observe that the feminist attacks on Lacan, and on the Lacanian doctrine of the Signifier, which seem largely inspired by A. G. Wilden, “The Critique of Phallogocentrism” (in *System and Structure* [London: Tavistock, 1972], pp. 278-301), tend to be

In any case, whatever the nature of the Lacanian Symbolic, it is clear that the Imaginary—a kind of pre-verbal register whose logic is essentially visual—precedes it as a stage in the development of the psyche. Its moment of formation—and that existential situation in which its specificity is most strikingly dramatized—has been named the “mirror stage” by Lacan, who thereby designates that moment between six and eighteen months in which the child first demonstrably “recognizes” his or her own image in the mirror, thus tangibly making the connection between inner motricity and the specular movements stirring before him. It is important not to deduce too hastily from this very early experience some ultimate ontological possibility of an ego or an identity in the psychological sense, or even in the sense of some Hegelian self-conscious reflexivity. Whatever else the mirror stage is, indeed, for Lacan it marks a fundamental gap between the subject and its own self or *imago* which can never be bridged: “The important point is that this form [of the subject in the mirror stage] fixed the instance of the ego, well before any social determination, in a line of fiction which is forever irreducible for the individual himself—or rather which will rejoin the subject’s evolution in asymptotic fashion only, whatever the favorable outcome of those dialectical syntheses by which as an ego he must resolve his discordance with his own reality.”<sup>15</sup> In our present context, we will want to retain the words “dans une ligne de fiction,” which underscore the psychic function of narrative and fantasy in the attempts of the subject to reintegrate his or her alienated image.

The mirror stage, which is the precondition for primary narcissism, is also, owing to the equally irreducible gap it opens between the infant and its fellows, the very source of human aggressivity; and indeed, one of the original features of Lacan’s early teaching is its insistence on the inextricable association of these two drives.<sup>16</sup>

vitiated by their confusion of the penis as an organ of the body with the phallus as a signifier.

<sup>15</sup> “Le stade du miroir,” *Ecrits*, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Insofar as this insistence becomes the basis for an anthropology or a psychology proper—that is, for a theory of human nature on which a

How could it indeed be otherwise, at a moment when, the child's investment in images of the body having been achieved, there does not yet exist that ego formation which would permit him to distinguish his own form from that of others? The result is a world of bodies and organs which in some fashion lacks a phenomenological center and a privileged point of view: "Throughout this period the emotional reactions and verbal indications of normal transitivity [Charlotte Bühler's term for the indifferenciation of subject and object] will be observed. The child who hits says he has been hit, the child who sees another child fall begins to cry. Similarly, it is by way of an identification with the other that the infant lives the entire spectrum of reactions from ostentation to generosity, whose structural ambiguity his conduct so undisguisedly reveals, slave identified with despot, actor with spectator, victim with seducer."<sup>17</sup> This "structural crossroads" (Lacan) corresponds to that pre-individualistic, pre-mimetic, pre-point-of-view stage in aesthetic organization which is generally designated as "play,"<sup>18</sup> whose essence lies in the frequent shifts of the subject from one fixed position to another, in a kind of optional multiplicity of insertions of the subject into a relatively fixed Symbolic Order. In the realm of linguistics and psychopathology, the fundamental document on the effects of "transitivity" remains Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten," which has had considerable emblematic significance for recent theory.<sup>19</sup>

A description of the Imaginary will therefore on the one hand require us to come to terms with a uniquely determinate configuration of space—one not yet organized around the individuation of

political or a social theory may then be built — it is ideological in the strict sense of the term; we are thus entitled to find Lacan's stress on the "pre-political" nature of the phenomenon of aggressivity (see *Le Séminaire*, Livre I, p. 202) somewhat defensive.

<sup>17</sup> "L'Aggressivité en psychanalyse," *Ecrits*, p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Der Begriff des Spiels," in *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965), pp. 97-105.

<sup>19</sup> Freud, *Standard Edition*, Vol. XVII, pp. 179-204; and compare Jean-Louis Baudry's discussion of the 1911 essay, "On the Mechanism of Paranoia," in his "Écriture, fiction, idéologie" in *Tel Quel: Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 145-146.

my own personal body, or differentiated hierarchically according to the perspectives of my own central point of view—yet which nonetheless swarms with bodies and forms intuited in a different way, whose fundamental property is, it would seem, to be visible without their visibility being the result of the act of any particular observer, to be, as it were, already-seen, to carry their specularly upon themselves like a color they wear or the texture of their surface. In this—the indifferentiation of their *esse* from a *percipi* which does not know a *percipiens*—these bodies of the Imaginary exemplify the very logic of mirror images; yet the existence of the normal object world of adult everyday life presupposes this prior, imaginary, experience of space: “It is normally by the possibilities of a game of imaginary transposition that the progressive valorization of objects is achieved, on what is customarily known as the affective level, by a proliferation, a fan-like disposition of all the imagination equations which allow the human being, alone in the animal realm, to have an almost infinite number of objects at his disposition, objects isolated in their form.”<sup>20</sup>

The affective valorization of these objects ultimately derives from the primacy of the human *imago* in the mirror stage; and it is clear that the very investment of an object world will depend in one way or another on the possibility of symbolic association or identification of an inanimate thing with the libidinal priority of the human body. Here, then, we come upon what Melanie Klein termed “part-objects”—organs, like the breast, or objects associated with the body, like feces, whose psychic investment is then transferred to a host of other, more indifferent contents of the external world (which are then, as we shall see below, valorized as good or as evil). “A trait common to such objects, Lacan insists, is that they have no specular image, which is to say that they know no alterity. ‘They are the very lining, the stuff or imaginary filling of the subject itself, which identifies itself with these objects.’”<sup>21</sup> It is from Mel-

<sup>20</sup> *Le Séminaire*, I, p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> Rifflet-Lemaire, *op. cit.*, p. 219; and see for an analysis of schizophrenic language in terms of part-objects, Gilles Deleuze, “Préface,” to Louis Wolfson, *Le Schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

anie Klein's pioneering psychoanalysis of children that the basic features of the Lacanian Imaginary are drawn: there is, as we might expect for an experience of spatiality phenomenologically so different from our own, a logic specific to Imaginary space, whose dominant category proves to be the opposition of container and contained, the fundamental relationship of inside to outside, which clearly enough originates in the infant's fantasies about the maternal body as the receptacle of part-objects (confusion between childbirth and evacuation, etc.).<sup>22</sup>

This spatial syntax of the Imaginary order may then be said to be intersected by a different type of axis, whose conjunction completes it as an experience: this is the type of relationship which Lacan designates as aggressivity, and which we have seen to result from that indistinct rivalry between self and other in a period that precedes the very elaboration of a self or the construction of an ego. As with the axis of Imaginary space, we must again try to imagine something deeply sedimented in our own experience, but buried under the adult rationality of everyday life (and under the exercise of the Symbolic): a kind of situational experience of otherness as pure relationship, as struggle, violence, and antagonism, in which the child can occupy either term indifferently, or indeed, as in transitivism, both at one. A remarkable sentence of St. Augustine is inscribed as a motto to the primordially of this rivalry with the images of other infants: "I have myself seen jealousy in a baby and know what it means. He was not old enough to speak, but, whenever his foster-brother was at the breast, would glare at him pale with envy [et intuebatur pallidus amaro aspectu contactaneum suum]."<sup>23</sup>

Provided it is understood that this moment is quite distinct from that later intervention of the Other (Lacan's capital A, the

<sup>22</sup> The archetypal realization of these fantasies must surely be Philip Jose Farmer's classic story "Mother" (in *Strange Relations* [London: Panther, 1966]), which has the additional interest of being a historic document of the psychological or vulgar Freudian *Weltanschauung* of the 1950's and in particular of the ideology of "momism" elaborated by writers like Philip Wylie.

<sup>23</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I, part 7, quoted in *Ecrits*, p. 114.

parents) which ratifies the assumption of the subject into the realm of language or the Symbolic Order, it will be appropriate to designate this primordial rivalry of the mirror stage as a relationship of otherness: nowhere better can we observe the violent situational content of those judgements of good and evil which will later on cool off and sediment into the various systems of ethics. Both Nietzsche and Sartre have exhaustively explored the genealogy of ethics as the latter emerges from just such an archaic valorization of space, where what is “good” is what is associated with “my” position, and the “bad” simply characterizes the affairs of my mirror rival.<sup>24</sup> We may further document the archaic or atavistic tendencies of ethical or moralizing thought by observing that it has no place in the Symbolic Order, or in the structure of language itself, whose shifters are positional and structurally incapable of supporting this kind of situational complicity with the subject momentarily occupying them.

The Imaginary may thus be described as a peculiar spatial configuration, whose bodies primarily entertain relationships of inside/outside with one another, which is then traversed and reorganized by that primordial rivalry and transitive substitution of imagoes, that indistinction of primary narcissism and aggressivity, from which our later conceptions of good and evil derive. This stage is already an alienation—the subject having been captivated by his or her specular image—but in Hegelian fashion it is the kind of alienation from which a more positive evolution is indistinguishable and without which the latter is inconceivable. The same must be said for the next stage of psychic development, in which the Imaginary itself is assumed into the Symbolic Order by way of its alienation into language itself. The Hegelian model of dialectical history—as Jean Hyppolite’s interventions in Lacan’s first Seminar make clear—remains the fundamental one here: “This development [of the human anatomy and in particular the cortex] is lived as a temporal

<sup>24</sup> See in particular *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Saint Genêt*. Neither fully realizes his intent to transcend the categories of “good and evil”: Sartre for reasons more fully developed below, Nietzsche insofar as his philosophy of history aims at reviving the more archaic forms of rivalry rather than dissolving them.

dialectic which decisively projects the formation of the individual as history: the *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal dynamic shifts from insufficiency to anticipation—a drama which, for its subject, caught in the mirage of spatial identification, vehiculates a whole series of fantasies which range from a fragmented image of the body to what we will term an orthopedic form of its unity, and to that ultimate assumption of the armature of an alienating identity, whose rigid structure will mark the subject's entire mental development. Thus the rupture of the circle in which *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt* are united generates that inexhaustible attempt to square it in which we reap the ego."<sup>25</sup>

The approach to the Symbolic is the moment to suggest the originality of Lacan's conception of the function of language in psychoanalysis. For neo-Freudianism, it would seem that the role of language in the analytical situation or the "talking cure" is understood in terms of what we may call an aesthetic of expression and expressiveness: the patient unburdens himself or herself, his "relief" comes from his having verbalized (or even, according to a more recent ideology, from having "communicated"). For Lacan, on the contrary, this later exercise of speech in the analytical situation draws its therapeutic force from being as it were a completion and fulfillment of the first, imperfectly realized, accession to language and to the Symbolic in early childhood.

For the emphasis of Lacan on the linguistic development of the child—an area in which his work necessarily draws much from Piaget—has mistakenly been criticized as a "revision" of Freud in terms of more traditional psychology, a substitution of the psychological data of the mirror stage and of language acquisition for the more properly psychoanalytic phenomena of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex. Obviously Lacan's work must be read as presupposing the entire content of classical Freudianism, otherwise it would be simply another philosophy or intellectual system. The linguistic materials are not intended, it seems to me, to be

<sup>25</sup> "Le stade du miroir," *Ecrits*, p. 97.

substituted for the sexual ones; rather we must understand the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic Order as an attempt to create mediations between libidinal analysis and the linguistic categories, to provide, in other words, a transcoding scheme which allows us to speak of both within a common conceptual framework. Thus, the very cornerstone of Freud's conception of the psyche, the Oedipus complex, is transliterated by Lacan into a linguistic phenomenon which he designates as the discovery by the subject of the Name-of-the-Father, and which consists, in other words, in the transformation of an Imaginary relationship to that particular imago which is the physical parent into the new and menacing abstraction of the paternal role as the possessor of the mother and the place of the Law. (Meanwhile, we have already seen above how this conception allows the Ortigues to posit a continuing validity for the Freudian notion of the Oedipus complex in a social and familial situation in which many of the more parochial and purely European features of this relationship no longer obtain.)

The Symbolic Order is thus, as we have already suggested, a further alienation of the subject; and this repeated emphasis further serves to distinguish Lacan's position (what we have called his Hegelianism) from many of the more facile celebrations of the primacy of language by structuralist ideologues. Perhaps the link with Lévi-Strauss' primitivism may be made across Rousseau, for whom the social order in all its repressiveness is intimately linked with the emergence of language itself. In Lacan, however, an analogous sense of the alienating function of language is arrested in Utopian mid-course by the palpable impossibility of returning to an archaic, pre-verbal stage of the psyche itself (although the Deleuze-Guattari celebration of schizophrenia would appear to attempt precisely that). Far more adequately than the schizophrenic or natural man, the tragic symbol of the unavoidable alienation by language would seem to have been provided by Truffaut's film, *L'Enfant sauvage*, in which language learning comes before us as a racking torture, a palpably physical kind of suffering upon which the feral child is only imperfectly willing to enter.

The clinical equivalent of this agonizing transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic is then furnished by an analysis, by Melanie Klein, of an autistic child, which makes it clear that the "cure," the accession of the child to speech and to the Symbolic, is accompanied by an increase, rather than a lessening, of anxiety. This case history (published in 1930 under the title "The Importance of Symbol-Formation in the Development of the Ego") may also serve to correct the imbalance of our own presentation, and of the very notion of a "transition" from Imaginary to Symbolic, by demonstrating that the acquisition of the Symbolic is rather the precondition for a full mastery of the Imaginary as well. In this case, the autistic child is not only unable to speak but unable to play as well—unable, that is, to act out fantasies and to create "symbols," a term which in this context means object substitutes. The few meager objects handled by Dick all represent in a kind of undifferentiated state "the phantasied contents [of the mother's body]. The sadistic phantasies directed against the inside of her body constitute the first and basic relation to the outside world and to reality."<sup>26</sup> Psychic investment in the external world—or in other words, the development of the Imaginary itself—has been arrested at its most rudimentary form, with those little trains that function as representations of Dick and of his father and the dark space or station that represents the mother. The fear of anxiety prevents the child from developing further symbolic substitutes and expanding the narrow limits of his object world.

Melanie Klein's therapy then consists in the introduction into this impoverished realm of the Symbolic Order and of language; and that, as Lacan observes, without any particular subtlety or precautions ("Elle lui fout le symbolisme avec la dernière brutalité, Melanie Klein, au petit Dick! Elle commence tout de suite par lui flanquer les interprétations majeures. Elle le flanque dans une verbalisation brutale du mythe oedipien, presque aussi révoltante pour

<sup>26</sup> Melanie Klein, *Contributions to Psychoanalysis 1921-1945* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), p. 238.

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nous que pour n'importe quel lecteur").<sup>27</sup> Verbalization itself superposes a Symbolic relationship upon the Imaginary fantasy of the train rolling up to the station: "The station is mummy; Dick is going into mummy."<sup>28</sup>

It is enough: from this point on, miraculously, the child begins to develop relationships to others, jealousies, games, and much richer forms of substitution and of the exercise of language. The Symbolic now releases Imaginary investments of ever new kinds of objects, which had hitherto been blocked, and permits the development of what Melanie Klein in her paper calls "symbol formation." Such symbol or substitute-formation is a fundamental precondition of psychic evolution, since it can alone lead the subject to love objects which are equivalents for the original, now forbidden or taboo, maternal presence: Lacan will then assimilate this process to the operation of the trope of metonymy in the linguistic realm,<sup>29</sup> and the profound effects of this new and complex "rhetorical" mechanism—unavailable in the pre-verbal realm of the Imaginary, where, as we have seen, only the rudimentary oppositions of inside/outside and good/bad are operative—may serve to underscore and to dramatize the extent of the transformation language brings to what without it could not yet have been called desire.

We may now attempt to give a more complete picture of Lacan's conception of language, or at least of those features of articulate speech which are the most essential in the structuration of the psyche and may thus be said to constitute the Symbolic Order. It will be convenient to consider these features in three groups, even though they are obviously all very closely interrelated.

<sup>27</sup> *Le Séminaire*, I, p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> Melanie Klein, p. 242.

<sup>29</sup> See "L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient," *Ecrits*, p. 515 (or "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," *Yale French Studies* [36/37, 1966], p. 133). But see, for a powerful critique of the Lacanian figural mechanism, Tzvetan Todorov, *Théories du symbole* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), ch. 8 esp. pp. 302-305; and for a more general analysis of Lacan's linguistic philosophy, Henri Meschonnic, *Le Signe et le poème* (Paris: Galilard, 1975), pp. 314-322.

The first of these groups—we have already seen it at work in the Oedipal phenomenon of the Name-of-the-Father—may be generalized as that naming function of language which is not without its profound consequences for the subject himself. For the acquisition of a name results in a thorough-going transformation of the position of the subject in his object world: “That a name, no matter how confused, designates a particular person—this is precisely what the passage to the human state consists in. If we must define that moment in which man [sic] becomes human, we would say that it is at that instant when, as minimally as you like, he enters into a symbolic relationship.”<sup>30</sup> It would seem fair to observe that Lacan’s attention to the components of language has centered on those kinds of words, primarily names and pronouns, on those slots which, like the shifters generally, anchor a free-floating syntax to a particular subject, those verbal joints, therefore, at which the insertion of the subject into the Symbolic is particularly detectable.

Even here, however, we must distinguish among the various possible effects of these types of words: nouns, in particular the Name-of-the-Father itself, awaken the subject to the sense of a function which is somehow objective and independent of the existence of the biological father. Such names thus provide a liberation from the here-and-now of the Imaginary; for the separation, through language, of the paternal function from the biological father is precisely what permits the child to take the father’s place in his turn. The Law, as Lacan calls it, the order of abstraction, is thus also what releases the subject from the constraints of his immediate family situation and from the “bad immediacy” of the pre-Symbolic period.

Pronouns, meanwhile, are the locus for a related, yet distinct, development which is none other than the emergence of the Unconscious itself. Such is indeed for Lacan the significance of the bar which divides signifier from signified in the semiotic fraction: the

<sup>30</sup> *Le Séminaire*, I, p. 178.

pronoun, the first person, the signifier, results in a division of the subject or *Spaltung* which drives the “real subject” as it were underground, and leaves a “representative”—the ego—in its place: “The subject is figured in symbolism by a stand-in or substitute [un tenant-lieu], whether we have to do with the personal pronoun ‘I’, with the name that is given him, or with the denomination ‘son of’. This stand-in is of the order of the symbol or the signifier, an order which is only perpetuated laterally, through the relationships entertained by that signifier with other signifiers. The subject mediated by language is irremediably divided because it has been excluded from the symbolic chain [the lateral relations of signifiers among themselves] at the very moment at which it became ‘represented’ in it.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, the discontinuity insisted on by linguists between the *énoncé* and the subject of the enunciation (or, by Humboldt’s even broader distinction between language as *ergon* or produced object, and language as *energeia* or force of linguistic production) corresponds to the coming into being of the Unconscious itself, as that reality of the subject which has been alienated and repressed through the very process by which, in receiving a name, it is transformed into a representation of itself.

This production of the Unconscious by way of a primary repression which is none other than the acquisition of language is then reinterpreted in terms of the communicational situation as a whole; and Lacan’s redefinition of the signifier, “the signifier is what represents the subject for another signifier,”<sup>32</sup> now illuminates what it may be artificial to call a different form of linguistic alienation than either of the above features, but what is certainly a distinct dimension of that alienation, namely, the coming into view of the inescapable mediation of other people, and more particularly of the Other with a capital O or A, or in other words the parents: yet here the Law represented by the parents, and in particular by the father, passes over into the very nature of language itself, which

<sup>31</sup> Rifflet-Lemaire, p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l’inconscient freudien,” *Écrits*, p. 819.

the child receives from the outside and which speaks him just as surely as he learns to speak it. At this third moment of the subject's alienation by language we therefore confront a more complex version of that strategy which we have elsewhere described as the fundamental enabling device of structuralism in general, namely, the possibility—provided by the ambiguous nature of language itself—of imperceptibly shifting back and forth between a conception of speech as a linguistic structure, whose components can then be tabulated, and that which, now on the contrary understanding speech in terms of communication, permits a virtual dramatization of the linguistic process (sender/receiver, destinaire/destinateur, etc.).<sup>33</sup> Lacan's "capital A" is the locus of this superposition, constituting at one and the same time the *dramatis personae* of the Oedipal situation (but most particularly the father or his substitutes) and the very structure of articulate language itself.

So it is that this third aspect of Symbolic alienation, the alienation by the Other, passes over into the more familiar terms of the accounts of the "chaîne du signifiant" given in Lacan's mature doctrine,<sup>34</sup> which, embattled in a struggle against ego psychology, and emerging from a long polemic with the neo-Freudian emphasis on the analysis of resistances and the strengthening of the subject's ego, has found its fundamental principle and organizing theme in "a conception of the function of the signifier able to demonstrate the place at which the subject is subordinated to it to the point of being virtually subverted [suborné]." <sup>35</sup> The result is a determination of the subject by language—not to say a linguistic determinism—which results in a rewriting of the classical Freudian Unconscious

<sup>33</sup> *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 205. This is the place to add that, while I would maintain my position on the other thinkers there discussed, I no longer consider the account of Lacan given in that book to be useful or adequate: let the present essay serve as its replacement.

<sup>34</sup> Its fundamental texts are now available in English: "The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis" or so-called "Discours de Rome" (translated in Wilden, *The Language of the Self*); "The Insistence of the Letter" (see note 29 above) and the "Seminar on The Purloined Letter," in *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), pp. 39-72.

<sup>35</sup> "La Direction de la cure et les principes de son pouvoir," *Ecrits*, p. 593.

in terms of language: “the Unconscious,” to quote what must be Lacan’s best-known sentence, “is the discourse of the Other.”<sup>36</sup> For those of us still accustomed to the classical image of the Freudian Unconscious as a seething cauldron of archaic instincts (and inclined, also, to associate language with thinking and consciousness rather than the opposite of those things), the Lacanian redefinition must inevitably scandalize. As far as language is concerned, the references to Hegel have a strategic role to play in confronting this scandal with the philosophically more respectable idea of alienation in general, and alienation to other people in particular (the Master/Slave chapter is of course the basic text here): thus, if we can bring ourselves to think of language itself as an alienating structure, particularly in those features enumerated above, we are halfway towards an appreciation of this concept.

The other half of the way, however, presents the more serious obstacle of our preconceptions, not about language, but rather about the Unconscious itself. To be sure, the relationship between the Unconscious and the instincts will seem less problematical when we recall the enigma posed by Freud’s notion of the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* (or “ideational representative”),<sup>37</sup> one of those rare moments in which, as with his hypothesis of the death wish, Freud himself seems terminologically and theoretically inarticulate. Yet the function of the concept seems clear: Freud wants to avoid giving the impression that instincts or drives (*Triebe*) are conceivable in a pure state, even for the purposes of building a model of the psyche, and his tautological term is meant to underscore the indissociable link, no matter how far back we go in the history of the psyche, between the instincts to be found there and the fantasies or objects to which they are bound and through which alone they must express themselves. What is this to say but that the instincts, indeed, the libido itself, no matter how energetically boiling, cannot be conceived independently of their representations,

<sup>36</sup> As, e.g., in “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir,” *Ecrits*, p. 814.

<sup>37</sup> Freud, *Standard Edition*, Vol. XIV, pp. 152-153. This is the term Lacan translates as “le tenant lieu de la représentation.”

in short, that, in Lacanian terms, no matter how archaic they may be, the instincts are already of the order of the signifier? So it is that the place A of the Lacanian topology indifferently designates the Other (the parents), language, or the Unconscious, now termed the "treasurehouse of the signifier," or in other words, the lumber-room in which the subject's most ancient fantasies or fragments of fantasy are still stored. Two well-known, if less well understood, graphs illustrate this topology, in dynamic as well as in static forms. The static version is, of course, the so-called L-schema,<sup>38</sup> in which the subject's conscious desire, which he understands as a relationship between the desired object (a) and his ego or self (*a'*), is mediated by the more fundamental relationship between the real subject (S) and the capital A of the Other, language or the Unconscious. In the dynamic version of this topology (the so-called "graphe du désir"),<sup>39</sup> this structure of the subject is as it were put in motion by the movement of desire, considered as a *parole* or act of enunciation: the inexhaustible fascination of this graph comes from the difficulty of thinking its intersections, in which the speech act of the subject, on its way from sender to receiver, is traversed by the retroactive effect of the "chain of the signifier" travelling, *nachträglich*, in the opposite direction, in such a way that the capital A constitutes the source and the fulfillment of both trajectories.

Still, it will be observed that even if language can be invested to this degree with the content of the subject's alienations, it remains to square the Lacanian linguistic bias with the predominantly sexual emphasis of psychoanalysis' inaugural period. Even if, in other words, one were willing to grant the phallus provisional status as a signifier, the relationship between language and sexuality remains to be defined, the suspicion lingering that a system which permits you to talk about language instead of sexuality must betray a revisionist, if not a downright idealistic, impulse. The connection

<sup>38</sup> *Ecrits*, p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> *Ecrits*, pp. 805-817; but see also J. B. Pontalis' comptes rendus of the 1957 and 1958 seminars, *Bulletin de psychologie* XI/4-5, p. 293, and XIII/5, pp. 264-265.

is made by way of the distinction between need (“pure” biological phenomenon) and demand (a purely interpersonal one, conceivable only after the emergence of language): sexual desire is then that qualitatively new and more complex realm opened up by the lateness of human maturation in comparison with the other animal species, in which a previously biological instinct must undergo an alienation to a fundamentally communicational or linguistic relationship—that of the demand for recognition by the Other—in order to find satisfaction. Yet this alienation also explains why, for Lacan, sexual desire is structurally incapable of ultimate satisfaction: “plaisir”—as the momentary reduction of a purely physical tension—not being the same as “jouissance,” which involves that demand for recognition by the Other which in the very nature of things (in the very nature of language?) can never be fulfilled. This structural distance between the subject and his own desire will then serve as the enabling mechanism for the Lacanian typology of the neuroses and the perversions; and nowhere is Lacan more eloquent than in his defense of the ontological dignity of these primordial malfunctionings of the human psyche: “Hieroglyphics of hysteria, blazons of phobia, labyrinths of the *Zwangsneurose*—charms of impotence, enigmas of inhibition, oracles of anxiety—armorial bearings of character, seals of self-punishment, disguises of perversion—these are the hermetic elements that our exegesis resolves, the equivocations that our invocation dissolves, the artifices that our dialectic absolves, in a deliverance of the imprisoned sense, which moves from the revelation of the palimpsest to the pass-word of the mystery and the pardon of speech.”<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, this conception of desire as a proto-linguistic demand, and of the Unconscious as a language or “chain of signifiers,” then permits something like a rhetorical analysis of psychic processes to come into being. As is well known, not only is desire for Lacan a function of metonymy, the symptom is a product of metaphor, and the entire machinery of the psychic life of the mature subject

<sup>40</sup> Wilden, “The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis,” p. 44, translation modified.

—which consists, as we have seen above, in the infinite production of substitutes, or, in other words, in Melanie Klein's "symbol-formation"—may be said to be figural in its very essence, figuration being that property of language which allows the same word to be used in several senses. The correlative of the chain of signifiers is thus the conception of a "glissement du signifié" or slippage of signifieds which allows the psychic signifier to be displaced from one object to another. Here once again, the material of the Imaginary serves as a useful contrast by which to define the Symbolic: for not only does the latter, with its slippage of signifieds, know a structural malfunction in the language of the schizophrenic (whose syntagmatic experience of the signifying chain has broken down, on account of a radical *forclusion* or expulsion of the Other), it may be said to have something like a zero degree in the so-called animal languages which constitute the very prototype of the code proper to the Imaginary, involving no demands on the Other, but simply a fixed one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified, between signal and place, from which the more properly human phenomenon of figuration is absent.<sup>41</sup>

Displacement of the subject and redefinition of the Unconscious as a language, topology and typology of desire and of its avatars—this brief sketch of "Lacanianism" would not be complete without a mention of that third overriding preoccupation of Lacan's life work—the one which it is most tempting and convenient for laymen to overlook, namely, the strategy of the analytic situation itself, and in particular the role to be played in it by the analyst's interventions and the nature of transference. It is clear that in the Lacanian scheme of things, the uniqueness of the analytic situation—its emblematic as well as therapeutic value—derives from the fact that it is the one communicational situation in which the Other is

<sup>41</sup> Wilden, p. 61ff. (or *Ecrits*, p. 297); here and elsewhere, Lacan bases a whole phenomenology of Imaginary space on ethological data. It would be suggestive, but not altogether accurate, to claim that the Imaginary and animal or "natural" languages alike are governed by *analog* rather than *digital logic*. See Thomas A. Sebeok, *Perspectives in Zoosemiotics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), esp. pp. 63-83, and also A. G. Wilden "Analog and Digital Communication," in *System and Structure*, pp. 155-190.

addressed without being functionally involved: the analyst's silence thus causes the structural dependency of the subject on the capital A of the Other's language to become visible as it never could in any concrete interpersonal situation. So the subject's gradual experience of his or her own subordination to an alienating signifier is at one with the theorist's denunciation of philosophies of the subject and his Copernican attempt to assign to the subject an ec-centric position with respect to language as a whole.

We may now ask what, apart from the incidental mention of phenomena like that of animal language, above, can be said to be the place of the Imaginary in the later teaching; and we shall later on have occasion to see that its gradual eclipse in Lacan's later work is not foreign to a certain overestimation of the Symbolic which may be said to be properly ideological. For the moment, we may suggest that Imaginary thought patterns persist into mature psychic life in the form of what are generally thought of as ethical judgments—those implicit or explicit valorizations or repudiations in which “good” and “bad” are simply positional descriptions of the geographical relationship of the phenomenon in question to my own Imaginary conception of centrality: it is a comedy we may observe, not only in the world of action, but also in that of thought, where, in that immense proliferation of private languages which characterizes the intellectual life of consumer capitalism, the private religions which emerge around thinkers like the one presently under consideration are matched only by their anathematization by the champions of rival “codes.” The Imaginary sources of passions like ethics may always be identified by the operation of the dual in them, and the organization of their themes around binary oppositions; the ideological quality of such thinking must however be accounted for, not so much by the metaphysical nature of its categories of centrality, as Derrida and Lyotard have argued, as rather by its substitution of the categories of individual relationships for those—collective—of history and of historical, transindividual phenomena.

This view of ethics would seem to find confirmation in Lacan's essay, "Kant avec Sade," in which the very prototype of an attempt to construct a rationally coherent (or in other words, Symbolic) system of ethics by the first-named is thoroughly discredited by a structural analogy with the delirious rationality of the second. By attempting to universalize ethics and to establish the criteria for universally binding ethical laws which are not dependent on the logic of the individual situation, Kant merely succeeds in stripping the subject of his object (a) in an effort to separate pleurability from the notion of the Good, thereby leaving the subject alone with the Law (A): "Cannot moral law be said to represent desire in that situation in which it is not the subject, but rather the object, which is missing?"<sup>42</sup> Yet this structural result turns out to be homologous with perversion, defined by Lacan as the fascination with the pleasure of the Other at the expense of the subject's own, and illustrated monotonously by the voluminous pages of Sade.

Whatever the philosophical value of this analysis, in the present context it has the merit of allowing us to conceive the possibility of transforming the topological distinction between Imaginary and Symbolic into a genuine methodology. "Kant avec Sade" would seem indeed to be the equivalent in the realm of moral philosophy of those logical paradoxes and mathematical "travaux pratiques" which have so disoriented the readers of Lacan in other areas. Thus, for example, we find a properly psychoanalytic reflection on the timing of the analytical situation unexpectedly punctuated by a meditation on a logical puzzle or metalogical paradox (see "Le Temps logique"), whose upshot is to force us to reintroduce the time of the individual subject back into what was supposed to be a universal or impersonal mental operation. Elsewhere the experiment is reversed, and the laws of probability are invoked to demonstrate the Symbolic regularity (in Freudian terms, the repetitive structure) of what otherwise strikes the subject as sheer individual chance. Lacan has however explained himself about these excursions, designed, he

<sup>42</sup> "Kant avec Sade," *Écrits*, p. 780.

says, to lead “those who follow us into places where logic itself is staggered by the glaring incommensurability between Imaginary and Symbolic; and this, not out of complacency with the resultant paradoxes, nor with any so-called intellectual crisis, but rather on the contrary to restore its illicit glitter to the structural gap [*béance*] thereby revealed, a gap perpetually instructive for us, and above all to try to forge the method of a kind of calculus able to dislodge its secret by its very inappropriateness.”<sup>43</sup>

In the same way, “Kant avec Sade” transforms the very project of a moral philosophy into an insoluble intellectual paradox by rotating it in such a way that the implicit gap in it between subject and law catches the light. It is time to ask whether a similar use of the distinction between Imaginary and Symbolic may not be possible in the realm of aesthetic theory and literary criticism, offering psychoanalytic method a more fruitful vocation than it was able to exercise in the older literary psychoanalyses.

### III

We cannot do so, however, before first asking whether, alongside that Freudian criticism, of which everyone—for good or ill—has a fairly vivid idea what it ends up looking like, a properly Lacanian criticism is also conceivable. Yet it is here that the ambiguity of Lacan’s relations to his original—is he rewriting him or merely restoring him?—becomes problematical: for at the point of interpretation, either the attempt at a Lacanian reading simply resolves into the classic themes of all psychoanalytic literary criticism since Freud—the Oedipus complex, the double, splitting, the phallus, the lost object, etc.—or else, trying to keep faith with the linguistic inspiration of “L’Instance de la lettre,” it exercises the distinction between metaphor and metonymy to the point where the orthodox psychoanalytic preoccupations seem to have been forgotten without a trace.<sup>44</sup> In part, of course, this methodological

<sup>43</sup> “Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir,” *Ecrits*, p. 820.

<sup>44</sup> The aesthetic chapters of Guy Rosolato, *Essais sur le symbolique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), may serve to document this proposition; they

fluctuation can be accounted for by what we have suggested above, namely, that on the level of interpretive codes Lacan's position is not one of substituting linguistic for classical psychoanalytic concepts, but rather of mediating between them: and this is clearly a matter of some tact which cannot be successfully realized on the occasion of every text.

But there is another, more structural, side to this problem, which raises the question of the syntagmatic organization of the work of art, rather than the issue—a more properly paradigmatic one—of the interpretive schemes into which it is to be “transcoded” or interpreted. Freud's own two greatest narrative readings, that of Jensen's *Gradiva* and that of Hoffmann's *Sandmann*, turn on delusions which either come to appeasement or culminate in the destruction of the subject. They thus recapitulate the trajectory of the cure, or of the illness, or—ultimately, and behind both—of the evolution and maturation of the psyche itself. We have here, therefore, narratives which formally require the final term of a norm (maturity, psychic health, the cure) towards which to steer their itineraries, whether catastrophic or providential; of that ultimate norm itself however, the narrative can have nothing to say, as it is not a realm, but rather only an organizational device or term limit.

also suggest that our frequent discomfort with psychoanalytic criticism may spring just as much from those ahistorical and systematizing categories of an older philosophical aesthetics in which it remains locked, as from its Freudian interpretative scheme itself. It will indeed have become clear that in the perspective of the present essay all of that more conventional Freudian criticism—a criticism which, above and beyond some “vision” of human nature, offers the critic a privileged interpretative code and the ontological security of some ultimate content—must for this very reason be understood as profoundly ideological. What now becomes clearer is that the structural oscillation here referred to in Lacanian conceptuality itself—the strategic alternation between linguistic and “orthodox Freudian” codes—often determines a slippage in the literary or cultural analyses of its practitioners whereby the properly Lacanian tension (or “heterogeneity”) tends to relax into more conventional Freudian interpretations: I will argue elsewhere for example that something like this is happening in the best of the recent work of the so-called Tel Quel group after their movement away from historical materialism.

It would not be difficult to imagine a Lacanian criticism—although I do not know that there has been one<sup>45</sup>—in which the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic described above played an analogous role in organizing the syntagmatic movement of the narrative from disorder to the term limit of the Symbolic Order itself. The risk of an operation like this lies clearly in the assimilation of what is original in Lacan to the more wide-spread and now conventionalized structuralist paradigm of the passage from nature to culture; and this is surely the moment to ask ourselves whether the Lacanian emphasis on the Law and on the necessity of the castration anxiety in the evolution of the subject—so different in spirit from the instinctual and revolutionary Utopias of Brown's polymorphous perversity, Reich's genital sexuality and Marcuse's maternal super-id—shares the implicit conservatism of the classical structuralist paradigm. Insofar as the Lacanian version generates a rhetoric of its own which celebrates submission to the Law, and indeed, the subordination of the subject to the Symbolic Order, conservative overtones and indeed the possibility of a conservative misappropriation of this clearly anti-Utopian scheme are unavoidable. On the other hand, if we recall that for Lacan "submission to the Law" designates, not repression, but rather something quite different, namely alienation—in the ambiguous sense in which Hegel, as opposed to Marx, conceives of this phenomenon—then the more tragic character of Lacan's thought, and the dialectical possibilities inherent in it, become evident.

Indeed, the one sustained literary exegesis that Lacan has published, the seminar on Poe's "Purloined Letter,"<sup>46</sup> suggests that

<sup>45</sup> But see the chapter on Michel Leiris in Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) and my own "Balzac and Lacan: Imaginary and Symbolic in *La Rabouilleuse*," in *Social Science Information*, Vol. XVI, No. 1, 1977, pp. 59-81 (or in my forthcoming book *The Political Unconscious: Studies in the Ideology of Form*); and see also Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Screen*, Summer, 1975, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 14-76. With respect to this last, not strictly speaking, an analysis of an individual work, it may be observed that the structural discontinuity, in film, between the visual plenitude of the filmic image and its "diegetic" use in the narrative of a given film makes it a privileged object for the exercise of the Lacanian dual registers.

<sup>46</sup> *Ecrits*, pp. 11-41 (for English translation, see note 34 above).

for Lacan, in contradistinction to Freud himself, the norm *can* be the locus of a properly narrative exploration, albeit one of a uniquely didactic or "illustrative" type.<sup>47</sup> Poe's story is for Lacan the occasion of a magistral demonstration of the way "a formal language determines the subject:"<sup>48</sup> the three distinct positions structurally available in relationship to the Letter itself, or the signifier—that of the king, that of the queen, and that of the Minister—proving, when in the sequel to the narrative, the places change, Dupin taking the place of the Minister, who then moves to that previously held by the queen, to exercise a structuring power over the subjects who momentarily occupy them. So the signifying chain becomes a vicious circle, and the story of the norm itself, of the Symbolic Order, is not that of a "happy end," but rather of a perpetual alienation. Obviously, Lacan's interpretation of the narrative is an allegorical one, in which the signified of the narrative proves to be simply language itself. Once again, the relative richness of the reading derives from the dramatic structure of the communicational process and the multiplicity of different positions available in it; but while more lively on account of the musical chairs being played in it, Lacan's exegesis in this respect rejoins that now conventional structuralist conception of the auto-referentiality of the text which we have shown at work in *Tel Quel* and Derrida, as well as in Todorov's interpretations.<sup>49</sup> Read in this way—but as we will suggest later, it is not the only way one can read Lacan's essay—the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" by its programmatic demonstration of the primacy of the signifier, furnishes powerful ammunition for what must properly be called, in distinction to its other achievements, the ideology of structuralism (it may rapidly be defined here as that systematic substitution of "referent" for "signified" which allows one to pass logically from the properly

<sup>47</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," in *Yale French Studies*, #52 (1975), esp. pp. 45-47. But it might be argued against Derrida that it was Poe himself who first opened up this gap between the abstract concept and its narrative illustration in the lengthy reflections on detection and ratiocination with which the tale is interlarded.

<sup>48</sup> "Présentation de la suite," *Écrits*, p. 42.

<sup>49</sup> See *The Prison-House of Language*, pp. 182-183, 197-201.

linguistic assertion that the signified is an effect of the organization of signifiers to the quite different conclusion that therefore the "referent"—i.e., history—does not exist). Yet the present context suggests an explanation for this excess charge of ideology, this ideological effect, vehiculated or produced by Lacan's exposé: indeed, its opening page, with its polemic repudiation of those "imaginary incidences [which], far from representing the essence of our experience, reveal only what remains inconsistent in it,"<sup>50</sup> makes a diagnosis of an overestimation of the Symbolic at the expense of the Imaginary in its presentation wellnigh inescapable.

We have thus, strengthened by this detour through Lacan's own literary criticism, returned to our hypothesis that whatever else it is, the distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and the requirement that a given analysis be able to do justice to the qualitative gap between them, may prove to be an invaluable instrument for measuring the range or the limits of a particular way of thinking. If it is always unsatisfying to speculate on what a Lacanian literary criticism ought to be in the future, if it is clear that the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" cannot possibly constitute a model for such criticism, since on the contrary the literary work is in it a mere pretext for a dazzling illustration of a non-literary thesis, then at least we may be able to use the concept

<sup>50</sup> "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," p. 39 (or *Ecrits*, p. 11). Derrida's reading (see note 47 above), which emphasizes the moment of "dissemination" in the Poe story (in particular, the generation of doubles ad infinitum: the narrator as the double of Dupin, Dupin as the double of the Minister, the story itself as the double of the two other Dupin stories, etc.), thus in opposition to the Lacanian seminar foregrounds what we have learned to identify as the Imaginary, rather than the Symbolic, elements of Poe's text. Whatever the merits of the polemic here engaged with Lacan, as far as the tale itself is concerned, there emerges a sense of the tension between these two kinds of elements which suggests that it is not so much Lacan, as rather Poe's text itself that tends towards a suppression of the traces of just this Imaginary "drift" of which Derrida here reminds us; and that it is precisely the "work" of the text itself to transform those Imaginary elements into the closed Symbolic circuit which is Lacan's own object of commentary. This is why it does not seem quite right to conclude, from such a re-emphasis on the Imaginary and "disseminatory," that "the opposition of the imaginary and symbolic, and above all its implicit hierarchy, seem to be of very limited relevance" (Derrida, pp. 108-109). On the contrary, it is precisely from this opposition that the exegetical polemic here launched by Derrida draws its interest.

of the two orders or registers as a means for demonstrating the imbalance of other critical methods, and of suggesting ways in which they may be coordinated, and an eclectic pluralism overcome. So, for instance, it seems abundantly clear that the whole area of image-study and image-hunting must be transformed, when we grasp the image content of a given text, not as so many clues to its ideational content (or "meaning"), but rather as the sedimentation of the imaginary material on which the text must work, and which it must transform. The relationship of the literary text to its image content is thus—in spite of the historic preponderance of the sensory in modern literature since Romanticism—not that of the production of imagery, but rather of its mastery and control in ways which range from outright repression (and the transformation of the sensory image into some more comfortable conceptual symbol) to the more complex modes of assimilation of surrealism and, more recently, of schizophrenic literature.<sup>51</sup> Only by grasping images—and also the surviving fragments of authentic myth and delusion—in this way, as that trace of the Imaginary, of sheer private or physiological experience, which has undergone the sea-change of the Symbolic, can criticism of this kind recover a vital and hermeneutic relationship to the literary text.

Yet image criticism raises a problem which we have postponed until this time, namely, how, as a matter of critical practice now rather than abstract theory, to identify Imaginary materials as such, particularly insofar as the same contents can at different times or in different contexts have been part of an imaginary experience as well as of a symbolic system? Leclaire's useful example of the bronze ashtray<sup>52</sup> enumerates this gradual shifting of registers as the initial perception of the shape and the blackened metal surface of the object, of its density in the hand and its slickness for the eye, then is slowly by means of names ranged in the various sym-

<sup>51</sup> Reread from this perspective, Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on *Elective Affinities* ("Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*," in *Schriften*, Vol. I [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1955], pp. 55-140) takes on a suggestively Lacanian ring.

<sup>52</sup> Leclaire, p. 382.

bolic systems in which it seems to find a momentary home, first as a functional object ("ashtray"), then as an antique, further as the specimen of a particular style of rural furnishing, and so forth. This distinction between the experience of immediate sense perception and the various systems of abstraction into which the name of an object allows it to be inserted, has already become familiar to us.

It should, however, be possible to formulate more specific rules for the determination of the respective Imaginary or Symbolic function of a given object, such as the following one: "The same term may be considered imaginary if taken absolutely and symbolic if taken as a differential value correlative of other terms which limit it reciprocally."<sup>53</sup> This excellent formula, which we owe to Edmond Ortigues, should probably not be generalized into the kind of ahistorical system he goes on to offer us, in which the Imaginary becomes the regime of the eye, the Symbolic that of the ear and of language; in which the "material imagination," with its fascination with a single sense plenum, is opposed to all those differential systems which are essentially linguistic and social in character. Such an opposition is unfortunately, as we have come to learn, a properly Imaginary one. Yet the formula usefully insists on the tendency of the Imaginary object to absolutize itself, to exclude relationship and to overshadow the perceptual apparatus in a free-standing and isolated way, in contrast to the ways in which elements of Symbolic systems are always implicitly or explicitly embedded in a complex of binary oppositions and subjected to the whole range of what Greimas calls the "play of semiotic constraints."

The problem with such a definition is that when we reintroduce the subject into such relationships, the proportions change, and what it was useful to designate in terms of the isolation of the single Imaginary object, now becomes a two-term relationship, while the binary systems of the Symbolic must now be understood as introducing a third term into the hitherto duplex logic of the Imag-

<sup>53</sup> Edmond Ortigues, *Le Discours et le symbole*, p. 194.

inary: "This is the sense of J. Lacan's definition of the essence of the Imaginary as a 'dual relationship,' an ambiguous redoubling, a 'mirror' reflection, an immediate relationship between the subject and its other in which each term passes immediately into the other and is lost in a never-ending play of reflections. Imagination and desire are the realities of a finite being which can emerge from the contradiction between self and other only by the genesis of a third term, a mediatory 'concept' which, by determining each term, orders them into reversible and progressive relations which can be developed in language. The whole problem of symbolization lies here, in this passage from a dual opposition to a ternary relation, a passage from desire to the concept."<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, as we have suggested above, to stage the relationship in terms of so radical an opposition is somehow covertly to reintroduce Imaginary thinking itself into a thought which was apparently attempting to overcome it; nor is it really a question of repudiating the Imaginary and substituting the Symbolic for it—as though the one were "bad" and the other "good"—but rather of elaborating a method which can articulate both, while preserving their radical discontinuity with each other.

In this perspective, returning now to our critique of current literary methods, it becomes clear that above and beyond image criticism, it is phenomenology itself which must become the object of critical reconsideration, insofar as its fundamental materials of analysis—the lived experience of time and space, of the elements, of the very texture of subjectivity—are drawn almost exclusively from the Imaginary realm. Phenomenological criticism, whose program was heralded by Husserl's well-known slogan of a "return to things," clearly had a role to play as a kind of therapeutic corrective to overly intellectualized conceptions of the work of art, as

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205. The difference between an Imaginary study of the image and a Symbolic one may be dramatized by juxtaposing properly Imaginary works like Gaston Bachelard's *L'Eau et les rêves* (or its equivalent in the Anglo-American criticism of writers like G. Wilson Knight), with the new iconographic studies of the same image patterns, as in Alistair Fowler, "Emblems of Temperance in *The Faerie Queene*, Book II," *Review of English Studies*, n.s., Vol. II (1960), pp. 143-149.

an attempt to restore the authenticity of lived experience and sensory plenitude to the aesthetic text.

In retrospect, however, the aesthetic developed by the phenomenologists, and in particular by Merleau-Ponty, with its notion of the primacy of perception in the elaboration of the languages of art, would seem to be the very prototype of a theory of the Symbolic conceived almost exclusively from the perspective of the Imaginary. On the other hand, it cannot be said that in its most rigorous form, phenomenological criticism as such has been widely applied in the United States; what has tended to replace it, but sometimes to claim its authority, is the far more obviously ideological interpretation of works in terms of the "self" and its various identity crises. On readings of this kind—which have obviously become the dominant academic interpretive ideology, along with so-called "pluralism"—readings whose interminable oscillation between the subject, the ego, and the other reflects the optical illusions of the Imaginary register itself, the full force of the Lacanian denunciation of ego psychology may be allowed to fall.<sup>55</sup>

We must, however, specify an important variant of this approach which, framed in proto-social terms, has genuinely political consequences. This approach—the reading of cultural phenomena in terms of otherness—derives from the dialectic of the relationship to the Other in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, and beyond that, from the Hegelian account of the Master and the Slave in the *Phenomenology*. It is a dialectic which, particularly as developed in *Saint Genêt*, seemed to lay the basis for an aggressive critique of the relations of domination: hence, in particular, its extension by Frantz Fanon to the whole realm of Third World theory and of the psychopathology of the colonized and the colonial other; and something like just such a theory of otherness must surely always be implicit in a politics which for whatever reason substitutes categories

<sup>55</sup> It does not follow that as literary critics and theorists we have any business idly perpetuating the Lacanian polemic in the field of psychoanalytic criticism proper: rigorous work like that of Ernst Kris or Norman Holland deserves to be studied in its own terms and not in those of some (properly Imaginary) feud between rival standard-bearers.

of race for those of class, and the struggle for colonial independence for that of the class struggle proper.

Meanwhile, the work of Michel Foucault testifies to the growing influence of a similar theory of otherness in the analysis of culture and history, where it has taken on the more structural form of a theory of exclusion. So, following Sartre's analysis of criminality in *Saint Genêt*, Foucault showed how a society developing a conception of Reason found it necessary to devise one of insanity and abnormality as well, and to generate marginal realities against which to define itself; and his more recent work on imprisonment and incarceration proper rejoins what has become one of the most significant currents of American political reality since Attica, namely, the movement within the prisons themselves.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that "*Saint Genêt* is the epic of the 'stade du miroir'"<sup>56</sup>; and political reality, as well as the theoretical framework offered here, suggests that the Lumpenpolitics, the politics of marginality or "molecular politics" (Deleuze), of which such theories are the ideology, and which is in some ways the successor to the student movements of the 1960's both here and in France, is essentially an ethical—when not an overtly anarchist—politics dominated by the categories of the Imaginary. Yet, in the long run, as we shall see in our concluding section, an ethical politics is a contradiction in terms, however admirable may be its passions and the quality of its indignation.

Such are, then, some of the forms taken in recent criticism by what we may diagnose as an over-estimation of the Imaginary at the expense of the Symbolic. That it is not simply a question of method or theory but has implications for aesthetic production may be suggested by the example of Brecht, whose conception of an anti-Aristotelian theater, an aesthetic which refuses spectator empathy and "identification" has raised problems that are clarified by our present context: we would suggest, indeed, that the Brechtian

<sup>56</sup> Mehlman, p. 182. Mehlman's critique of the limits of Sartre's Hegelianizing conceptual instruments in *Saint Genêt* (and most notably of the concept of synthesis) might well have been extended to Hegel himself, whose system in this respect constitutes a veritable *Summa* of the Imaginary.

attack on "culinary" theater—as well as the apparent paradoxes to which the ideal of "epic theater" gives rise—can best be understood as an attempt to block Imaginary investment and thereby to dramatize the problematical relationship between the observing subject and the Symbolic Order or history.

As for the complementary extreme, the over-estimation of the Symbolic itself, it is easier to say what this particular "heresy" or "illusion" looks like since the development of semiotics, whose fundamental program may in this respect be described as a veritable mapping of the Symbolic Order. Its blind spots may therefore be expected to be particularly instructive as to the problems of the insertion of the Imaginary into the model of a Symbolic system: I will here only point to one of them, but it is surely the most important one in the context of literary criticism, namely, the problem of the category of the "character" in a structural analysis of narrative.<sup>57</sup>

For, as the ideologies of "identification" and "point of view" make plain, "character" is that point in the narrative text at which the problem of the insertion of the subject into the Symbolic most acutely arises. It can surely not be solved by compromises like those of Propp and Greimas—whatever their undoubted practical value—in which the anthropomorphic remnant of a "subject" of the action persists beneath the guise of the "function" or the *actant*. What is wanted is not only an instrument of analysis which will maintain the incommensurability of the subject with its narrative representations—or in other words between the Imaginary and the Symbolic in general—but also one which will articulate the discontinuities within the subject's various "representatives" themselves, not only those that Benveniste has taught us to observe between the first and second pronouns on the one hand and the third on the other, but also, and above all, that, stressed by Lacan, between the nom-

<sup>57</sup> See for example Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," *New Literary History*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (Winter, 1975), pp. 256-260; and François Rastier, "Un concept dans le discours des études littéraires," in *Essais de sémiotique discursive* (Paris: Mame, 1973), pp. 185-206.

inative and the accusative forms of the first person itself. To a certain degree, the theoretical problem of the status of the subject in narrative analysis is itself a reflection of the historical attempt of modernistic practice to eliminate the old-fashioned subject from the literary text. My own feeling is that you cannot deny the possibility of an adequate representation of the subject in narrative on the one hand, and then continue the search for a more satisfactory category for such representation on the other: if this is so, then the notion of some relationship—still to be defined—between the subject and this or that individual character or “point of view” should be replaced by the study of those character systems into which the subject is fitfully inserted.<sup>58</sup>

In a more general way, however, this dilemma suggests that the most crucial need of literary theory today is for the development of conceptual instruments capable of doing justice to a post-individualistic experience of the subject in contemporary life itself as well as in the texts. Such a need is underscored by the persistent contemporary rhetoric of a fragmentation of the subject (most notably perhaps, in the *Anti-Oedipe* of Deleuze and Guattari, with their celebration of the schizophrenic as the “true hero of desire”); but it is not satisfied any more adequately by the (still very abstract) Marxist conviction that the theory as well as the experience of the decentering of consciousness must serve “to liquidate the last vestiges of bourgeois individualism itself and to prepare the basis for some new post-individualistic thought mode to come”.<sup>59</sup> At the least, however, and whatever their practical value as analytic machinery turns out to be, the Lacanian graphs of a properly structural “subversion of the subject” allow us in retrospect to measure both the anticipatory value, but also the Hegelianizing limits, of such conceptual precursors as the dialectics of *Saint Genêt*

<sup>58</sup> I have tried to explore the possibility of such an approach in two recent essays: “After Armageddon: Character Systems in Philip K. Dick’s *Dr. Bloodmoney*,” *Science-Fiction Studies*, 5, (March, 1975), pp. 31-42; and “The Ideology of Form: Partial Systems in *La Vieille Fille*,” *Sub-stance*, 15 (Winter, 1976), pp. 29-49.

<sup>59</sup> F. Jameson, “On Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. III, No. 1 (Spring, 1976), pp. 130-131.

and of René Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, as well as of Sartre's later concept of "seriality" in the *Critique*, while suggesting future areas for exploration in Bakhtin's pre-structural notion of a properly dialogical speech and the pre-individualistic forms of social experience from which it springs.<sup>60</sup> It is therefore tempting to reverse Lacan's polemics (in the "Seminar on "The Purloined Letter'" and elsewhere) and to suggest that at a time when the primacy of language and the Symbolic Order is widely understood—or at least widely asserted—it is rather in the underestimation of the Imaginary and the problem of the insertion of the subject that the "un-hiddenness of truth" (Heidegger) may now be sought.

#### IV

For Derrida's accusation is undoubtedly true, and what is at stake, in Lacan as well as in psychoanalysis in general is truth; even worse, a conception of truth peculiarly affiliated to the classical existential one (that of Heidegger as a veiling/unveiling, that of Sartre as a fitful reclamation from *mauvaise foi*).<sup>61</sup> For that very reason, it seems arbitrary to class as logocentric and phonocentric a thought which—insofar as it is structural—proposes a decentering of the subject, and—insofar as it is "existential"—is guided by a concept of truth, not as adequation with reality (as Derrida suggests), but rather as a relationship, at best an asymptotic approach, to the Real.

This is not the place to deal with Lacan's epistemology, but it is certainly the moment to return to this term, the third of the canonical Lacanian triad, of which it must be admitted that it is at the very least astonishing that we have been able to avoid mentioning it for so long. Just as the Symbolic Order (or language itself) restructures the Imaginary by introducing a third term into the hitherto infinite regression of the duality of the latter's mirror

<sup>60</sup> On seriality, see *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 247-250. The concept of the dialogical is most fully developed in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1973), pp. 150-169.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, pp. 81-94.

images, so we may hope and expect that the tardy introduction of this new third term of the Real may put an end to the Imaginary opposition into which our previous discussion of Lacan's two orders has risked falling again and again. We must not, however, expect much help from Lacan himself in giving an account of a realm of which he in one place observes that it—"the Real, or what is perceived as such,—is what resists symbolization absolutely"<sup>62</sup> (it would however be useful to have a compilation of all of these lapidary comments on the Real which are to be stumbled on throughout his work).

Nonetheless, it is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself: and if for psychoanalysis the history in question here is obviously enough the history of the subject, the resonance of the word suggests that a confrontation between this particular materialism and the historical materialism of Marx can no longer be postponed. It is a confrontation whose first example has been set by Lacan himself, with his suggestion that the notion of the Symbolic as he uses it is compatible with Marxism (whose theory of language, as most Marxists would be willing to agree, remains to be worked out).<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, it is certain that his entire work is permeated by dialectical tendencies, the more Hegelian ones having already been indicated above; and, beyond this that the fascination of that work lies precisely in its ambiguous hesitation between dialectical formulations and those, more static, more properly structural and spatializing, of his various topologies. In Lacan, however, unlike the other varieties of structural mapping, there is always the proximity of the analytic situation to ensure the transformation of such structures back into "moments"

<sup>62</sup> *Le Séminaire*, I, p. 80.

<sup>63</sup> "La Science et la vérité," *Écrits*, p. 876; and see also the remarks on historiography in the "Discours de Rome" (Wilden, pp. 22ff, p. 50, or *Écrits*, pp. 260ff, p. 287). The problem of the function of a genetic or evolutionary set of stages within a more genuinely dialectical conception of historical time is common to both psychoanalysis and Marxism. Lacan's insistence on the purely schematic or operational nature of the Freudian stages (oral, anal, genital) may be compared with Etienne Balibar's reflections on the proper uses of the Marxian evolutionary schema (savage, barbarian, civilized) in *Lire le capital*, Vol. II (Paris: Maspero, 1968), pp. 79-226.

of a more process-oriented type. Thus, in that "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" which we have hitherto taken at face value as a "structuralist" manifesto against the optical illusions of the Signified, other passages on the contrary suggest that the circular trajectory of the Signifier may be a little more closely related to the emergence of a dialectical self-consciousness than one might have thought, and project a second, more dialectical reading superimposed upon the structural one already outlined. In particular, the dilemma of Poe's Minister implies that it is in awareness of the Symbolic that liberation from the optical illusions of the Imaginary is to be sought: "For if it is, now as before, a question of protecting the letter from inquisitive eyes, he can do nothing but employ the same technique he himself has already foiled: leave it in the open. And we may properly doubt that he knows what he is thus doing, when we see him immediately captivated by a dual relationship in which we find all the traits of a mimetic or of an animal feigning death, and, trapped in the typically imaginary situation of seeing that he is not seen, misconstrue the real situation in which he is seen not seeing."<sup>64</sup>

Even if the structural self-consciousness diagnostically implied by such a passage is a properly dialectical one, it would not necessarily follow that the dialectic is a Marxist one, even though psychoanalysis is unquestionably a materialism. Meanwhile the experience of a whole series of abortive Freudo-Marxisms, as well as the methodological standard of the type of radical discontinuity proposed by the model outlined in the present essay, both suggest that no good purpose is to be served by attempting too hastily to unite them into some unified anthropology. To say that both psychoanalysis and Marxism are materialisms is simply to assert that each reveals an area in which human consciousness is not "master in its own house": only the areas decentered by each are the quite different ones of sexuality and of the class dynamics of social history. That these areas know local interrelationships—as

<sup>64</sup> "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" *Yale French Studies*, p. 61, or *Écrits*, pp. 30-31.

when Reich shows how sexual repression is something like the cement which holds the authority fabric of society together—is undeniable; but none of these instinctual or ideological ion-exchanges, in which a molecular element of one system is temporarily lent to the other for purposes of stabilization, can properly furnish a model of the relationship of sexuality to class consciousness as a whole. Materialistic thinking, however, ought to have had enough practice of heterogeneity and discontinuity to entertain the possibility that human reality is fundamentally alienated in more than one way, and in ways which have little enough to do with each other.

What one can do, however, more modestly but with better hope of success, is to show what these two systems—each one essentially a hermeneutic—have to teach each other in the way of method. Marxism and psychoanalysis indeed present a number of striking analogies of structure with each other, as a checklist of their major themes can testify: the relation of theory and practice; the resistance of false consciousness and the problem as to its opposite (is it truth or knowledge? science or individual certainty?); the role and risks of the concept of a “midwife” of truth, whether analyst or vanguard party; the reappropriation of an alienated history and the function of narrative; the question of desire and value and of the nature of “false desire;” the paradox of the end of the revolutionary process, which, like analysis, must surely be considered “interminable” rather than “terminable;” and so forth. It is therefore not surprising that these two nineteenth century “philosophies” should be the objects, at the present time and in the present intellectual atmosphere, of similar attacks, which focus on their “naive semanticism.”

It is at least clear that the nineteenth century is to be blamed for the absence, in both Marxism and psychoanalysis, until very recently, of a concept of language which would permit the proper answer to this objection. Lacan is therefore in this perspective an exemplary figure, provided we understand his life’s work, not as the transformation of Freud into linguistics, but as the disengagement of a linguistic theory which was implicit in Freud’s practice

but for which he did not yet have the appropriate conceptual instruments; and clearly enough, it is Lacan's third term, his addition of the Real to a relatively harmless conceptual opposition between Imaginary and Symbolic, which sticks in the craw and causes all the trouble. For what is scandalous for contemporary philosophy in both of these "materialisms"—to emphasize the fundamental distance between each of these "unities-of-theory-and-practice" and conventional philosophies as such—is the stubborn retention by both of something the sophisticated philosopher was long since supposed to have put between parentheses, namely a conception of the referent. For model-building and language-oriented philosophies, indeed (and in our time they span an immense range of tendencies and styles from Nietzsche to common language philosophy and from pragmatism to existentialism and structuralism)—for an intellectual climate dominated, in other words, by the conviction that the realities which we confront or experience come before us pre-formed and pre-ordered, not so much by the human "mind" (that is the older form of classical idealism), as rather by the various modes in which human language can work—it is clear that there must be something unacceptable about this affirmation of the persistence, behind our representations, of that indestructible nucleus of what Lacan calls the Real, of which we have already said above that it was simply History itself. If we can have an idea of it, it is objected, then it has already become part of our representations; if not, it is just another Kantian *Ding-an-sich*, and we can probably all agree that that particular solution will no longer do. Yet the objection presupposes an epistemology for which knowledge is in one way or another an identity with the thing: it is a presupposition peculiarly without force over the Lacanian conception of the decentered subject, which can know union neither with language nor with the Real, which is structurally at distance from both in its very being. The Lacanian notion of an "asymptotic" approach to the Real, moreover, maps a situation in which the action of this "absent cause" can be understood as a term limit, as that which can be

both indistinguishable from the Symbolic (or the Imaginary) and also independent of it.

The other version of this objection—that history is a text, and that in that case, as one text is worth another, it can no longer be appealed to as the “ground” of truth—raises the issue of narrative fundamental both for psychoanalysis and for historical materialism, and requires us to lay at least the groundwork for a materialist philosophy of language. For both psychoanalysis and Marxism depend very fundamentally on history in its other sense, as story and storytelling: if the Marxian narrative of the irreversible dynamism of human society as it develops into capitalism be disallowed, little or nothing remains of Marxism as a system and the meaning of the acts of all those who have associated their praxis with it bleeds away. Meanwhile, it is clear that the analytic situation is nothing if not a systematic reconstruction or rewriting of the subject’s past,<sup>65</sup> as indeed the very status of the Freudian corpus as an immense body of narrative analyses testifies. We cannot here fully argue the distinction between this narrative orientation of both Marxism and Freudianism and the non-referential philosophies alluded to above. Suffice it to observe this: that history is not so much a text, as rather a text-to-be-(re-)constructed. Better still, it is an obligation to do so, whose means and techniques are themselves historically irreversible, so that we are not at liberty to construct any historical narrative at all (we are not free, for instance, to return to theodicies or providential narratives, nor even the older nationalistic ones) and the refusal of the Marxist paradigm can generally be demonstrated to be at one with the refusal of historical narration itself, or at least, with its systematic pre-preparation and strategic delimitation.

In terms of language, we must distinguish between our own narrative of history—whether psychoanalytic or political—and the Real itself, which our narratives can only approximate in asymptotic

<sup>65</sup> The reproach that patients in analysis do not so much rediscover as rather “rewrite” their pasts is a familiar one, argued, however, most rigorously by Jürgen Habermas, in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 246-273.

fashion and which “resists symbolization absolutely.” Nor can the historical paradigm furnished us by psychoanalysis or by Marxism—that of the Oedipus complex or of the class struggle—be considered as anything more Real than a master text, an abstract one, hardly even a proto-narrative, in terms of which we construct the text of our own lives with our own concrete praxis. This is the point at which the intervention of Lacan’s fundamental distinction between truth and knowledge (or science) must be decisive: the abstract schemata of psychoanalysis or of the Marxian philosophy of history constitute a body of knowledge, indeed, of what many of us would be willing to call scientific knowledge; but they do not embody the “truth” of the subject, nor are the texts in which they are elaborated to be thought of as a “parole pleine.” A materialistic philosophy of language reserves a status for scientific language of this kind, which designates the Real without claiming to coincide with it, which offers the very theory of its own incapacity to signify fully as its credentials for transcending both Imaginary and Symbolic alike. “Il y a des formules qu’on n’imagine pas,” Lacan observes of Newton’s laws: “Au moins pour un temps, elles font assemblée avec le réel.”<sup>66</sup>

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism is that it has been conceived as a series of propositions about matter—and in particular the relationship of matter to consciousness, which is to say of the natural sciences to the so-called human sciences<sup>67</sup>—rather than as a set of propositions about language. A materialistic philosophy of language is not a semanticism, naive or otherwise, because its fundamental tenet is a rigorous distinction between the signified

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Radiophonie,” *Scilicet* 2/3 (1970), p. 75.

<sup>67</sup> See, for the most powerful of recent attempts to re-invent this older kind of materialism, Sebastiano Timpanaro “Considerations on Materialism,” *New Left Review*, 85 (May-June, 1974), pp. 3-22. The reckoning on Timpanaro’s attempt to replace human history within the “history” of nature comes due, not in his politics, nor even in his epistemology, but rather in his aesthetics, which, proposing that Marxism now “do justice” to the natural elements of the human condition, to death, sickness, old age and the like, turns out to be nothing more than a replay of existentialism. It is a significant paradox that at the other end of the Marxist spectrum—that of the Frankfurt School—an analogous development may be observed in Herbert Marcuse’s late aesthetics.

— the realm of semantics proper, of interpretation, of the study of the text's ostensible meaning—and the referent. The study of the referent, however, is the study, not of the meaning of the text, but of the limits of its meanings and of their historical preconditions, and of what is and must remain incommensurable with individual expression. In our present terms, this means that a relationship to objective knowledge (in other words, to what is of such a different order of magnitude and organization from the individual subject that it can never be adequately “represented” within the latter's lived experience save as a term limit) is conceivable only for a thought able to do justice to radical discontinuities, not only between the Lacanian “orders,” but within language itself, between its various types of propositions as they entertain wholly different structural relations with the subject.

The Lacanian conception of science as a historically original form of the decentering of the subject<sup>68</sup>—rather than as a place of “truth”—has much that is suggestive for a Marxism still locked in the outmoded antinomy of that opposition between ideology and science whose bewildering changes are rung in the various and contradictory models of that relationship proposed by Althusser at various stages of his work. And in view of the use to which we shall elsewhere see Althusser put the Lacanian notion of the orders, it is all the more surprising that he should not have profited from a scheme in which knowledge and science, the subject and his or her individual truth, the place of the Master, the ec-centric relationship both to the Symbolic and to the Real, are all relationally mapped.

For clearly, in Marxism as well as in psychoanalysis, there is a problem—even a crisis—of the subject: suffice it to evoke on the level of praxis the intolerable alternative between a self-sacrificing and repressing Stalinism and an anarchistic celebration of the subject's immediate here-and-now. In the area of theory, the crisis in the Marxian conception of the subject finds its most dramatic

<sup>68</sup> For the most part, these developments on the subject of science have not yet been published; but see *Le Séminaire, XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), pp. 20-21.

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expression in the contrast between what we may call the German and the French traditions—the Hegelianizing and dialectical current which, emerging from Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, found its embodiment in the work of the Frankfurt School, and that structural and science-oriented reading of Marx which, combining the heritage of Saussure with the lessons of Mao Tse-tung's *On Contradiction* (and also with Lacanian psychoanalysis), informs the theoretical practice of Althusser and his group.

The theme of the subject, indeed, clarifies many of the ambiguities of Althusser's positions. His polemic against that particular ideology of the subject called humanism is to be sure a relatively local one, directed not only against currents in the non- and even anti-Communist left in France, but also against some elements of the PCF itself, most notably Garaudy; while his polemic against Hegel is clearly intended to forestall the use of the early, Hegelianizing Marx, the Marx of the theory of alienation, against the later Marx of *Capital*.<sup>69</sup> Neither of these polemics is particularly relevant to the fortunes of Marxism in the Anglo-American world, where Hegel has never been a name to conjure with in the first place, and where the dominant individualism has never flirted very extensively with the rhetoric of humanism. Our present context, however, makes it easier to see the markings of the Imaginary and its distortion in that "idealism" with which Althusser reproaches Hegel, whose conceptual instruments—totality, negativity, alienation, *Aufhebung*, and even "contradiction" when understood in a fundamentally idealist sense—he takes such pains to distinguish from his own discontinuous and structural ones.<sup>70</sup> To rewrite Althusser's critique in these terms is to escape the antithesis between that affirmation of a "materialist kernel" in Hegel to which he rightly objects, and his own blanket repudiation, and to evolve a more productive way of handling the content of "idealistic" philosophies. Some such approach, indeed, seems implicit in Althus-

<sup>69</sup> See Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Chapter Two.

<sup>70</sup> As outlined, for instance, in "Sur la dialectique matérialiste," in *Pour Marx* (Paris: Maspéro, 1965), pp. 161-224.

ser's later conception of history as a "process without a subject"<sup>71</sup> (a polemic aimed at the Hegelianism of Lukács, whose characterization of the proletariat as the "subject of history" is here alluded to). Yet it must not be thought that this difference has to do with the content of a Marxian vision of history which both Lukács and Althusser share: rather, it would seem a question for Althusser of rejecting the use of categories of the subject in the discussion of a collective process structurally incommensurable with them, and with individual or existential experience.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the Althusserian emphasis on science is in this respect such an extreme overreaction as to leave no place for that very rich field of study which emerged from Lukács' tradition and which is customarily designated as the phenomenology of everyday life.

The lasting achievement of the Frankfurt School, meanwhile, lies in precisely in this area, and in particular, in its vivid demonstration of the reification of the subject under late capitalism—a demonstration that ranges from Adorno's diagnoses of the fetishization of aesthetic perception (and of artistic form) all the way to Marcuse's anatomy of the language and thought patterns of *One-Dimensional Man*. What we must now observe is that the demonstration depends for its force on the hypothesis of some previous historical stage in which the subject is still relatively whole and autonomous. Yet the very ideal of psychological autonomy and individualism in the name of which their diagnosis of the atomized subject of late capitalism is made precludes any imaginative appeal back beyond bourgeois civil society to some pre-individualistic and pre-capitalist social form, since the latter would necessarily precede the constitution of the bourgeois subject itself. Inevitably then, the Frankfurt School drew its norm of the autonomous subject from that period in which

<sup>71</sup> Louis Althusser, *Réponse à John Lewis* (Paris: Maspero, 1973), pp. 91-98.

<sup>72</sup> But it would be possible to show that Lukács' critique of bourgeois philosophy in *History and Class Consciousness* turns precisely on the distinction between referent and signified outlined above, particularly in the systematic demonstration of the inner structural limits of that philosophy which takes the place of a more conventional denunciation of the latter's "errors" of content.

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the bourgeoisie was itself a rising and progressive class, its psychological formation conditioned by the then still vital structure of the nuclear family; and this is the sense in which their thought has with some justification been taxed as a potentially regressive and nostalgic.

Whereas in France—and here the most dramatic illustrations are to be found rather in the *Tel Quel* group than among the Althusserians—the left-wing celebration of the “end of man” (Foucault) has generated a rhetoric in which it is precisely the so-called autonomous subject (in other words, the ego, the illusion of autonomy) which is denounced as an ideological and a bourgeois phenomenon, and the various signs of its decay—what the Frankfurt School took to be symptoms—welcomed as the harbingers of some new post-individualistic state of things. The historical reasons for this theoretical divergence—the Frankfurt School’s experience of the quality of consciousness among the subjects of Nazism, the absence from the France of the *société de consommation* of anything like a countercultural “revolution” in daily life on the American type—do not suffice to solve the theoretical problem of the status the subject ought to have for Marxism today.

The solution can only lie, it seems to me, in the renewal of Utopian thinking, of creative speculation as to the place of the subject at the other end of historical time, in a social order which has put behind it class organization, commodity production and the market, alienated labor, and the implacable determinism of an historical logic beyond the control of humanity. Only thus can a third term be imagined beyond either the “autonomous individualism” of the bourgeoisie in its heyday or the schizoid part-objects in which the fetishization of the subject under late capitalism has left its trace; a term in the light of which both of these forms of consciousness can be placed in their proper historical perspective.

To do so, however, would require the elaboration of a properly Marxist “ideology.” It should not, indeed, be forgotten that it is precisely to a Lacanian inspiration that we owe the first new and

as yet insufficiently developed conception of the nature of ideology since Marx and Nietzsche: I refer to Althusser's seminal definition of ideology as "the 'representation' of the Imaginary relationship of individuals to their Real conditions of existence."<sup>73</sup> Ideology conceived in this sense is therefore the place of the insertion of the subject in those realms or orders—the Symbolic (or in other words the synchronic network of society itself, with its kinship-type system of places and roles), and the Real (or in other words the diachronic evolution of History itself, the realm of time and death) both of which radically transcend individual experience in their very structure. But if this is how ideology is understood, then it is clear that it has a function to play in every conceivable social order, and not merely those of what Marx called "pre-history" or class societies: the ideological representation must rather be seen as that indispensable mapping fantasy or narrative by which the individual subject invents a "lived" relationship with collective systems which otherwise by definition exclude him insofar as he or she is born into a pre-existent social form and its pre-existent language.

The project of a Marxist ideology, alongside a Marxist "science," is therefore not so contradictory as it might seem. This is not the place to inquire why other ideological traditions—that of anarchist revolt, or even that of Christian poverty and charity—should have known a richer development and have exerted a more powerful influence than that properly communal and collective vision which was generated by Marxism at its moments of greatest intensity, as in the greatest, but also the most obscure, moments of labor militancy, in the brief vitality of the soviets, or in the rich collective innovations of the Chinese experience. To such a vision, to the

<sup>73</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 162. It is no accident that both the Marxist conception of ideology and the Lacanian notion of the Imaginary draw heavily on the model of optics: compare the Marxian image of the *camera obscura* and the inversion of the image on the retina (*Marxism and Form*, pp. 369-370) and the Lacanian experiment with the vase of flowers ("Remarque sur le rapport de Daniel Lagache," *Écrits*, pp. 672-677, and *Le Séminaire*, I, pp. 91-95, 142-145, and 187).

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theoretical elaboration of such an ideology of the collective, it would seem that the Lacanian doctrine of the decentered subject—particularly insofar as that structural “subversion” of the subject aims, not at renunciation or repression, but rather precisely at the realization of desire—offers a model more than merely suggestive.