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The Imaginary and Symbolic of Jacques Lacan

John Shannon Hendrix

The principal categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the structuring of the psyche are the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The imaginary (*imaginaire*) refers to perceived or imagined images in conscious and unconscious thought, sensible and intelligible forms; picture thinking (*Vorstellung*), dream images or manifest content, and conscious ego in discursive thought. The symbolic (*symbolique*) refers to the signifying order, signifiers, in language, which determine the subject; it refers to the unconscious, and the intellectual, the *logos endiathetos* and the *logos prophorikos*. It is the relation between the imaginary and symbolic in conscious and unconscious thought which is the core of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The real (*réel*) is that which is neither imaginary nor symbolic in conscious or unconscious thought, and which is inaccessible to psychoanalysis. It is only proposed as an algebraic concept, as it can not even be conceived, like the One of Plotinus, which cannot be thought or described, but which exists as an absence in the symbolic order (language) in the same way that the unconscious exists as an absence in conscious thought. The real is as the umbilical cord of the Freudian unconscious, which Lacan reframes as constituted by the symbolic.

The imaginary and the symbolic, perception and language, are always interwoven, but while they are always interwoven, the experience of the mirror stage also constitutes a fundamental disjunction between the two, which can never be overcome, and which causes a disjunction or gap within the subject, as it is constituted by the image and the word. At about eighteen months of age, after the initial acquisition of language, the infant first recognizes itself in the mirror in self-consciousness, thus distinguishing itself from its surroundings. From the mirror stage, all perception is subsumed in language, as the imaginary is subsumed in the symbolic, and it is the perceived image which becomes the basis of conscious thought and ego, while language structures the unconscious, in the Lacanian scheme.

The ego is formed in the imaginary image of the self in the mirror stage prior to the development of the subject in relation to the Other, which is defined by Lacan as the network of identifications which determine the subject in interpersonal relations, and which constitutes the unconscious. The image of the self formed by the mirror must be reconciled with the image of the self

formed in relation to language and other people, which is an impossible reconciliation, and stages a dialectical process, related to the Hegelian dialectic between subjective and objective spirit, or reason and perception, but without resolution. Following the mirror stage, perception, “takes what is present to it as a universal” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* §111),¹ in the words of Hegel. The act of perceiving is “the movement of pointing-out” in combination with the movement of the event of the object perceived, as in Zeno’s paradox. Perception is already a dialectic of the imaginary and symbolic, the image and the conceptual framework in which the image is perceived. In the movement from the subjective to objective spirit of Hegel, that which is perceived becomes identified with the conceptual process of the perceiving subject, which for Lacan is the identification of the imaginary and symbolic as ego-formation and language.

The development of the child in the mirror stage is the passage from behavior based on object identifications which is not regulated by any kind of conscious logic to the insertion of the subject into the symbolic order, language, where the object identifications are reconciled with conceptual structures. In the mirror stage, objects gain exteriority and alterity, and become invested with the self, the point of view of the subject, the subjective; beginning with the mirror stage, all perceived objects are seen in relation to the body of the perceiver, which is seen for the first time as an entity differentiated from its surroundings, as if taking on a kind of armor. The body of the perceiver is thus differentiated from all other bodies or objects in perception, and the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived is established. One goal in Lacan’s concept of the gaze, the real in perception, a gap or scotoma in perception which is the equivalent of a gap or scotoma in discursive reason, is the dialectical synthesis, or re-unification, of the perceiver and the perceived, which is a goal of the intellectual of Plotinus.

The differentiation between the perceiver and the perceived is cemented by language, or the symbolic order, which leads the subject to see itself as constructing what it perceives, and which absorbs the gestalt object identification of the mirror stage and makes impossible the undifferentiated interiority of the perceived object in the imaginary. Any state of being-in-self is absorbed by being-for-self. The differentiation is primarily manifest in the contrast between the unity of the image of the body in relation to perception and the multiplicity of perception itself. The unified body image as formed in the mirror stage does not conform to the experience of perception as established in the imaginary, as multiple and differentiated, as a phenomenal flux

of forms, and it transforms it, in a conflicting manner, from perception to apperception, from multiplicity to the manifold in the a priori intuition, in Kantian terms, which would be an attribute of the Lacanian symbolic.

The images of the imaginary, as experienced by the pre-mirror stage infant, are not subject to a hierarchy or dependent on a particular point of view. They are “visible without their visibility being the result of the act of any particular observer, to be, as it were, always already seen,”² in the words of Fredric Jameson in *The Ideology of Theory*. The images are independent of thought as pure perception, but such pure perception cannot be conceptualized, because it is prior to thought. It is thus immediately an *archê*, an originary state prior to differentiation. In that way the real can be seen to be contained in the imaginary, while conditioned by the symbolic. Differentiation occurs in the object identification of the mirror stage, in a gestalt projection of the self. Objects in the sense experience prior to the mirror stage lack the exteriority of specular or symbolic objects; they are only singular, and have no relation to other objects, as in apperception, which is established in the categories of a priori intuition in the manifold, such as space and time, in the Kantian scheme, and through mathematics and geometry in relation to intelligibles in the intellectual in the Plotinian scheme. The perceived objects are not doubled, so they do not contain alterity or differentiation, which are products of the conceptual order of the symbolic.

The new image of perception in the mirror stage results in the projection of the self into that which is perceived, that is, the ego, which is found in the dream image and fantasy, phantasm, or hallucination as well. As a result of that projection, the subject is also self-perceived as fragmented in relation to the body image, or the opposite of that which is formed by the mirror stage; the self-perception of the fragmentation of the subject is the result of the insertion of the subject into the symbolic, and the conflicts arising between the imaginary and symbolic. In the symbolic, the subject sees its gestalt image, its ego, as a defense against that fragmentation, and thus the differentiation between the perceiver and perceived is preserved. The conscious ego in perception is a defense against the fragmentation and alienation of the subject in the symbolic. According to Lacan in *Écrits*, “the *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal dynamic shifts from insufficiency to anticipation—a drama that, 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 [ego], whose rigid struc-

ture will mark the subject's entire mental development."³ The interiority of the object in perception is no longer reconcilable with the exteriority of the object, as the interiority of the subject is no longer reconcilable with the exteriority of the specular image. "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" (*Écrits*, p. 97), which is the Lacanian dialectic.

The division of the object from itself is the division of the subject from itself, a subject which reinforces its identity in the symbolic (language) by perpetuating its identity with the other (object) by which it is objectified in the symbolic. The symbolic order, language, constitutes a self-alienation of the subject in the disjunction between the perceiver and the perceived, and in the disjunction between the ego of the subject, formed in the specular image, and the experience of perception. Such self-alienation re-introduces the Hegelian conception of the self-alienation of reason in consciousness into the definition of language in the formation of the subject from structural linguistics. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of Hegel, "desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that the supersession take place, there must be this other" (175). The self-certainty of reason, the ego, comes from its identification with the object in perception, as a result of mirror-stage development, as the subject forms itself in the imaginary order. The other to the existence of the subject is the absence of the object in perception, thus the absence of reason, language and perception. The subject defines itself in the perception of an object. It is not possible for reason to exist to itself in consciousness without the perceived presence of non-reason, because of the complicity of the imaginary and symbolic.

According to Johann Gottlieb Fichte in *The Science of Knowledge*, "the self posits itself as determined by the not-self."⁴ This can be seen to occur in mirror-stage development, in the disjunction between experience and identity, and is solidified in language. According to Hegel, in that reason in perception is given to self-consciousness as a double negative, the negation of a negation, as for Lacan, reason in self-consciousness cannot overcome the other; the symbolic subject in language cannot overcome the imaginary subject in its identification in language. The self-alienation of reason in being continually reproduces the other, the imaginary, in that it might be overcome by reason. The continuous process of reproduction is desire. As reason returns to itself from the other in the dialectic, it discovers itself as simultaneously "absolute negativity" and "infinite self-affirmation," as described by

Hegel. Reason (symbolic) is seen as the self-affirmation of absolute negativity (imaginary), the perpetuation of the externality of language in the void of being which language creates, which is given by the mirror-stage transformation in object identification after the acquisition of language, and which is given by both the arbitrary nature of the relation between signifier and signified in language in structural linguistics, and the resistance of the signified to the signifier in the science of the letter of Lacan.

According to Lacan in *Seminar I (Freud's Papers on Technique)*, "if we must define that moment in which man becomes human, we would say that it is at that instant when, as minimally as you like, he enters into a symbolic relationship."⁵ The subject is formed when language is gained, and the subject is defined in the beginning as self-alienation, the self-alienation of reason as given by language. The subject is defined by the imaginary, how he or she perceives the world, and the imaginary is absorbed into the constitution of the subject, as the other of reason in language. The imaginary, conscious language and perception, is seen as a kind of lost synthesis, or lost totality, which is the object of desire in reason to rediscover, as formulated by Hegel. The disjunction or self-alienation of the subject is preserved in discursive reason and language, and the conscious ego. The subject is divided when it enters into language in the form of a representative pronoun. As in any sign, the signifier, the imaginary subject, the ego of the subject, resists the signified, the symbolic subject, the unconscious of the subject, from crossing the bar of signification.

The signifier "I," ego, *das Ich*, becomes representative of or a substitute for the subject, while the subject disappears under the bar. The subject becomes a signifier to other signifiers. The substitutive nature of the signifier is reinforced by its participation in the signifying chain. The subject is excluded from the signifying chain at that point that it is represented in it, as the signifier represents the subject for another signifier. The subject is thus divided in language, and is represented by its own absence, which is the elided signified, which is the presence of the unconscious. The subject is defined by language, which at the same time assures its non-being, thus resulting in the Hegelian dialectic of desire in reason. The presence of the unconscious as absence in conscious thought is also given by language, and so for Lacan the unconscious is constituted by language as well. The distinction between *la langue* and *parole* is the distinction between the unconscious and conscious subject, and the structure of its division. The unconscious appears through the primary repression of language.

As the subject is inserted into language, it is inserted into the Other, which is the shared system of laws, customs, beliefs, etc. which language produces, as in the objective of Hegel, and which further alienates the subject from itself, as that which is both produced by those laws and excluded from them. If the unconscious is structured by language, according to Lacan, then the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, as *la langue* of language, the underlying matrix of expression. The subject is subverted in its subordination to the signifier in language, which is a function of the Other, which is the discourse of the unconscious. It is the unconscious, as absence in the signifying chain of language, to which the subject is subverted, the subject as it is known to itself as represented in language.

The concept of the Other was inherited by Lacan from the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who saw society as “an ensemble of symbolic systems, in the first rank of which would be language, marriage-rules, economic relations, art, science, religion,”⁶ placing importance on interpersonal relations in the definition of the subject in society. Lévi-Strauss concluded that “symbols are more real than what they symbolize” and “the signifier precedes and determines the signified” (“Introduction à l’Oeuvre de Marcel Mauss” in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, p. xxxii); social life, and therefore the subject, are determined by a system of rules, namely the social signifiers. The theory of Lévi-Strauss’ corresponds to the structural linguistics of Saussure in that, Lévi-Strauss explained in *Totemism (Le Totémisme aujourd’hui, 1962)* that “systems do not consist of a sequence of one-to-one relations between terms (human groups and natural species), but rather of two parallel series of *differences* between terms,” in the words of Peter Dews in *Logics of Disintegration* (p. 75).

The Other (language, law, systems of rules) assumes predominance over nature and instinct in human behavior. Lacan reflected the position of Lévi-Strauss when he wrote in “The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis” in *Écrits*: “The primordial Law is therefore that which in regulating marriage ties superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating... This law, then, is clearly revealed as identical with an order of language.”⁷ The primordial law is no longer a myth of origin, but language itself. For Lacan, though, the symbolic order is ultimately irreducible to human experience; the subject is found to be alienated within it, while it is being caused by it. The human being is left with no subjectivity, in the inaccessibility of the linguistic order of the Other in unconscious thought. In *Seminar II (The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the*

Techniques of Psychoanalysis), Lacan described language as “constituted in such a way as to found us in the Other, while radically preventing us from understanding him.”⁸

The so-called L-schema of Lacan is a diagram which represents the resulting quadrature of the subject: the ego, the unconscious subject, the Other, and the other (as in the other person, or object in perception). The relation between the subject as ego and the other is an imaginary relation in conscious perception, a relation of unmediated identification in conscious desire, but that relation, in the quadrature of the subject, is determined by the relation between the unconscious subject and the Other, or language. In a profound way, individual conscious activity is shown to be determined by predetermined unconscious activity, and the subject is shown to be a product of language. The desiring relation of the ego to the other is seen as *parole*, or enunciation, individual speech in language, which is propelled by the ego as representative of the subject in language, in the use of the pronoun as signifier. *Parole* is intersected by *la langue* in language in the same way that the conscious desire of the speaking subject as ego is intersected by the discourse of the Other in the unconscious.

The ego projects itself onto the other in desire, and it seeks a reinforcement of itself in a response from the other. In *Écrits*, the “subject always imposes on the other in the radical diversity of modes of relation, which range from the invocation of speech to the most immediate sympathy, an imaginary form which bears the seal, or the superimposed seals, of the experiences of powerlessness through which this form was modeled in the subject: and this form is nothing other than the ego.”⁹ Beyond the identification of the projection of the ego as representative of the subject in language, it is impossible to know what the significance of the desire of the ego for the other is for the subject, or for any definition of human behavior. The ego is an imaginary ego, the product of the specular image of the body, but the imaginary has been subsumed by the symbolic, by the reformulation and *Spaltung* of the subject through insertion in the mirror experience and the symbolic order.

The resistance of the ego to the unconscious is the resistance of the signified to the signifier in language. It is also impossible for the ego to know what the other is, because the other is already constituted by the symbolic. A relation between two individuals is predicated on the impossibility of them knowing each other in terms other than how they are constituted in the Other. Relationships are mutual reinforcements of egos, reinforcements of the representation by the subject of itself in language, a representation which is false

and misleading in relation to the full constitution of the individual. In that perspective, relationships between individuals are based on dissimulation, concealment, deceit, and individuals are separated from each other by the wall of language, by their mutual *méconnaissance*.

In *Seminar II* of Lacan, the reality of the subject is thus not in the ego, but in the unconscious, and “in the unconscious, excluded from the system of the ego, the subject speaks.”¹⁰ The reality of the subject in the unconscious exceeds the reality of the subject as ego in conscious thought. As Lacan explained, “If this *I*,” or ego, “is in fact presented to us as a kind of immediate given in the act of reflection by which consciousness grasps itself as transparent to itself,” which was the case for Hegel, and even for Freud, “for all that, nothing indicates that the whole of this reality... would be exhausted by this” (*Seminar II*, p. 6). The reality beyond language in conscious thought is given by the absences in language, the holes or scotomata, which reveal the existence of language as a comprehensive system of knowledge, a manifold reflecting the manifold of perception, to be a mirage. Language appears to be so by necessity, otherwise it could not function as representation.

Language is complicit with both consciousness and perception in its representation of the subject as ego, in its totality as that which is represented by language. As Lacan expressed in “Agressivity and Psychoanalysis” in *Écrits*, the “theoretical difficulties encountered by Freud seem to me in fact to derive from the mirage of objectification, inherited from classical psychology constituted by the idea of the *perception/consciousness* system,” in which “Freud seems suddenly to fail to recognize the existence of everything that the ego neglects, scotomizes, misconstrues in the sensations that make it react to reality, everything that it ignores, exhausts, and binds in the significations that it receives from language...” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 22). This is “a surprising *méconnaissance* [misconstruction] on the part of the man who succeeded by the power of his dialectic in forcing back the limits of the unconscious.” The *méconnaissance* is surprising to Lacan because it is Freud himself who drew attention to those misconstructions and scotomata, in the form of jokes, puns, glossolalia, neologisms, slips of the tongue, etc.

Lacan described the constitution of the ego in language in the essay “The subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious,” in *Écrits*. The diachronic differentiation of signifiers, the *glissement* in the signifying chain in language, the “vector of enunciation,” is intersected by the relation between the elided subject in signification, the signified, and the ego ideal, or the identification of the ego with the Other. This relation is

predicated by the Other, the network of signifiers in which the subject is able to form an identity. The point at which the elided subject is identified is the point at which the line of the relation between elided subject and ego ideal is intersected by the vector of enunciation, which occurs retroactively in the signifying chain, in anticipation of signification. “The diachronic function of this anchoring point is to be found in the sentence, even if the sentence completes its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction of the others, and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 303).

The anchoring point of Lacan is the *point de capiton*, in the metaphoric chain, the point at which the bar between the signifier and signified is crossed. The vector of the relation between the subject and the other is an imaginary vector in the L-schema, a vector rooted in conscious perception, in image identification, so the crossing of the bar, which is a mythical crossing, occurs along the imaginary vector. Every act of speech must be supported by a self-conception of the subject in the insertion of the subject into language as ego ideal in the symbolic, but the conception of the subject can never be realized; it is always an expectation, and the subject can only identify itself after the fact of enunciation. “This is a retroversion effect by which the subject becomes at each stage what he was before and announces himself—he will have been—only in the future perfect tense,” according to Lacan (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 306).

This makes it impossible for the subject to recognize itself in language as other than ideal ego, because the subject is in part the elided subject in the *glissement* of signifiers, and only occurs as absence after the fact. As Lacan explained, “At this point the ambiguity of a failure to recognize [*méconnaissance*] that is essential to knowing myself (*un méconnaître essentiel au me connaître*) is introduced. For, in this ‘rear view’ (*rétrovisée*), all that the subject can be certain of is the anticipated image coming to meet him that he catches of himself in his mirror,” the imaginary vector between the subject and the other, the object of perception, which announces the absence of the subject in language, in crossing the bar between signifier and signified, but bars the subject from its own absence (the unconscious), in not being able to cross the bar at the same time, as in metaphor.

In the absence of the elided subject in language and the barring of it to itself, “it should be noted that a clue may be found in the clear alienation that leaves to the subject the favor of stumbling upon the question of its essence [unconscious, subjective], in that he cannot fail to recognize that what he de-

sires,” in the vector of enunciation, along which the desire of the ego for the other flows, “presents itself to him as what he does not want, the form assumed by the negation in which the *méconnaissance* of which he himself is unaware is inserted in a very strange way—a *méconnaissance* by which he transfers the permanence of his desire to an ego that is nevertheless intermittent, and, inversely, protects himself from his desire by attributing to it these very intermittences.” The vector of enunciation intersects with the vector of the relation between the subject and the Other, and the result is that in the *glissement* the elided subject cannot be present except at the one moment of retroactive presence which is connected to the imaginary, so that otherwise the elided subject can only be represented in the signifier as ego, intermittently in the diachronic process of the signifying chain, and the intermittence itself guarantees the perpetual absence of the elided subject.

The ego of Lacan is formed as a necessary replacement for the elided subject in the structure of language. “Thus the founding drama of the ego... is repeated in miniature as the imaginary dimension of every act of enunciation” (*Logics of Disintegration*, p. 99), in the words of Peter Dews. The subject is divided in language, between conscious and unconscious, signifier and signified, imaginary ego and symbolic, and the result is “the moment of a ‘fading’ or eclipse of the subject that is closely bound up with the *Spaltung* or splitting that it suffers from its subordination to the signifier,” as described by Lacan (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 313). The subject cannot be adequately represented by signifiers in language; non-being cannot be adequately represented by being. It is only in the gap between signifiers, the hole, that the subject is revealed. “It follows that the place of the ‘inter-said’ (*inter-dit*), which is the ‘intra-said’ (*intra-dit*) of a between-two-subjects, is the very place in which the transparency of the classical subject is divided and passes through the effects of ‘fading’ that specify the Freudian subject by its occultation by an even purer signifier...” (p. 299).

The unconscious is found in the space between two subjects, in the space between two signifiers. It is in the gap that the mirage of the ego is revealed as representation, and the unconscious comes forward in the non-being of the subject in representation. The structure of the subject is one of discontinuity; the subject is never always present in language as being, and never always present as non-being. Absence and presence come and go in the *glissement* of signifiers in language; they are interwoven in an irresolvable dialectic. Absence is made present in the gaps and scotomata, and “these effects lead us to the frontiers at which slips of the tongue and witticisms, in their collusion,

become confused, even where elision is so much the more allusive in tracking down presence to its lair....” Freud did not conceive of this relation of the ego to the unconscious in language because he did not have the benefit of structural linguistics, the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, according to Lacan. “‘Geneva 1910’ and ‘Petrograd 1920’ suffice to explain why Freud lacked this particular tool” (p. 298). Lacanian psychoanalysis is predicated on the correspondence between the Freudian unconscious and the concept of the signifier in structural linguistics, a correspondence which corrects a “defect of history” in the progress of the science of the letter. “But this defect of history makes all the more instructive the fact that the mechanisms described by Freud which are those of ‘the primary process’, in which the unconscious assumes its role, correspond exactly to the functions that this school believes determines the most radical aspects of the effects of language, namely metaphor and metonymy,” that is, “the signifier’s effects of substitution and combination on the respectively synchronic and diachronic dimensions in which they appear in discourse.”

The imaginary ideal ego, as opposed to the symbolic ego ideal, is a product of the mirror stage, formed from the image which the infant sees in the mirror, and object identification in perception. The ideal ego is an imaginary ego (*moi*) as opposed to the symbolic ego of the speaking subject (*je*) in language. The ego ideal is a subjective ego “before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it in the universal [the concept], its function as subject” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 2), as Lacan described in “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience.” The objectification of the subject in language, in the universal, is the Hegelian transition from the subjective to the objective, which is enacted through perception.

Perception, or apperception, is differentiated from sense-certainty by Hegel in that perception “takes what is present to it as a universal” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111). The specular image of the infant is already taken as a universal, because the infant has the use of language, so the image is of the subjective subject, as defined by its interiority, as opposed to the objective subject, as defined by its exteriority, its representation in language between signifiers. For Hegel, the differentiated particulars given by perception in discursive reason, which are products of the dialectic between the universal and particular, symbolic and imaginary, are an “essence-less by-play” (687) of self-conscious spirit, the subjective ego ideal, in the same way that for Lacan the participation of the ego in language, as representative of the

subject, is an essence-less by-play in the play of differences in the signifying chain. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (687), “the determinations of this substance are only attributes which do not obtain to self-subsistence” in the same way that the ego as subject in language is an attribute which cannot prevent the disappearance of the subject.

The variable forms of appearance in sense perception are for Hegel indeterminate and insubstantial, adornments of reality, as in the luminous embroidered veil of Plato in the *Republic* (514), the curtain-wall hanging next to the cave separating the prisoners from a burning fire, which acts as a veil between the finite and the infinite, between the sensible and the intelligible, or for Hegel, between the particular and universal, and for Lacan, between the imaginary and symbolic. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the proliferation of differentiated forms, vanishing shapes in perception, is the “reeling, unconstrained life” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 688) of being-for-self, objective spirit, as it would be for ego, signifier, in language. The being-for-self of objects in perception as solidified in the universal, in language, is the negative antithesis of the consciousness of spirit, or the interiority of the symbolic ego ideal. Through language, according to Hegel, spirit descends into externality, as for Lacan the imaginary subject becomes the objectified subject of the symbolic. Hegel described the objectified subject as ego in language and perception as nothing other than the self-confirmation of reason in its negation of the other, what is other to it; it is for Lacan the self-confirmation of conscious thought in its negation of the other, what is other to it, its doubling in representation, which is the unconscious, as given by language.

The imaginary ideal ego (Ideal-I, *Ideal-Ich, je-idéal*) is a form which “situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone,” according to Lacan (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 2). It will “only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.” When the subject is subsumed into language the imaginary ego becomes inaccessible and difficult to discern, except in glimpses, which approach the unconscious in language, as presence in absence, but cannot accede to it, like the polygonal figures in relation to the circle in the negative theology of Nicolas Cusanus.

The specular image of the infant is in contrast to prior sense experience already, before it is conceptualized in the symbolic, which constitutes an organic discord in the infant as well as an inorganic one. The form of the body

is fixed in the mirror by the infant “in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him,” movements in experience which are precluded by the structure of language. The subjective, imaginary state has none of the completion and inclusiveness of the objective symbolic state of the subject; it is ambiguous, self-contradictory, given to a logic other than that of conscious reason, in the otherness of reason to itself in perception. As Freud showed, the imaginary plays a role in the formation of dream images, but as Lacan pointed out, the symbolic is always present in dreams, as a product of the immersion of the subject in the Other. Traces of the imaginary ideal ego are present in dream forms.

The organic discord in the infant is a sign of an “organic insufficiency in his natural reality” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 4), as described by Lacan, as the concept of nature is given in the symbolic. The relation of the subject to nature is, as a result of the self-consciousness brought about by the specular identification, “altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor uncoordination of the neo-natal months.” Many organic forms in nature, nuts for example, or pods or anthers (the pollen sac in the stamen in a flower; the release of the pollen, the male sex cells of the flower, is connected with the blooming of the flower [*anthêros*]), have seams built into them to allow for a natural dehiscence, or splitting apart. The formation of the subject is profoundly influence by the primordial dehiscence, and its effect is principally seen in the mirror stage, where, “caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body image” is transformed into a “totality that I shall call orthopedic,” which assumes the role of the “armor of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development.”

Lacan saw the strategy of the quadrature of the subject as a way of breaking out of the fixing of an alienating identity. The alienating identity is sustained by the formation of the ego as signifier in language; the gestalt body image perceived in the mirror stage is the visual equivalent of the ego in language, although that has not been formulated yet, but its formulation develops from the specular image identification, the fixing of a point of view in the visual experience, a fixed point of reference, as well as a totalizing and inclusive body image of the self, in the imaginary as a product of the symbolic. The quadrature of the subject is also a means of breaking out of the Hegelian dialectic of the subjective and objective, “the circle of the *Innenwelt* into

the *Umwelt*,” given the introduction of the study of the tropic mechanisms of language, and the rules of structural linguistics.

The formation of the *I*, the imaginary ego, is symbolized in dreams by a fortress or a stadium, representing its alienating armor. The fortress protects against natural instincts, which threaten the mechanisms of the desire of the subject as constituted by the formation of the ego in language in relation to the other. The subject is constituted by a struggle between the organic and the inorganic. It is the natural instinct of all life to return to the inorganic, according to Wilhelm Worringer, and so the artificial self-construction of the subject in language can be seen as a natural instinct of reason to resist instinct and seek the inorganic. According to Worringer in *Abstraction and Empathy*, “the morphological law of inorganic nature still echoes like a dim memory in our human organism...every differentiation of organized matter, every development of its most primitive form, is accompanied by a tension, by a longing to revert to this most primitive form.”¹¹ This is manifest in the process of abstraction in reason, and in geometrical abstraction in the visual arts. “The urge to abstraction finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline or, in general terms, in all abstract law and necessity” (*Abstraction and Empathy*, p. 4). The geometrical form is seen as the “morphological law of crystalline-inorganic matter” (p. 34).

For Sigmund Freud, “the aim of all life is death,” a reversion to a prior state of inorganic matter. Consciousness itself is seen as a form of life in the psyche which arose from a prior state and which contains an instinct of self-negation. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the “attributes of life were at some time evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception,” according to Freud. “It may perhaps have been a process similar in type to that which later caused the development of consciousness in a particular stratum of living matter. The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavored to cancel itself out. In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state.”¹²

As Lacan put it, “to the *Urbild* of this formation, alienating as it is by virtue of its capacity to render extraneous, corresponds a peculiar satisfaction deriving from the integration of an original organic disarray, a satisfaction that must be conceived in the dimension of a vital dehiscence that is constitutive of man...” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 21). There is a desire in reason to preserve the dehiscence, to preserve the impossibility of the reconciliation of the organic and inorganic, the imaginary and symbolic, in the desire for the inor-

ganic. Such a desire in reason “makes unthinkable the idea of an environment that is preformed for him, a ‘negative’ libido that enables the Heraclitean notion of discord, which the Ephesian believed to be prior to harmony, to shine once more.” Reason preserves the disjunction between the *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt*, the imaginary and the symbolic (the preformed environment), which is characterized by fragmentation, disruption, ambiguity, and the impossibility of inclusiveness.

It is not by the function of the perception-consciousness system that the ego is formed in the imaginary, by the function of the self-consciousness of the infant in the mirror stage as a product of perception, but by the function of *méconnaissance*, and the function of the mirage of consciousness, which is given by perception in the imaginary, the self-certainty of the Cartesian *cogito*. The self-certainty of consciousness in the *cogito* prevents the subject from seeing itself as other than the objectified ego in language, and so “this ‘I’ who, in order to admit its facticity to existential criticism, opposes its irreducible inertia of pretences and *méconnaissances* to the concrete problematic of the realization of the subject...” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 15), as Lacan put it. Such is necessary for the subject to function in the Other, in society as seen as the symbolic order. The presence of the unconscious is kept as an absence by reason in language and perception.

In its self-definition the imaginary ego is self-alienating, as inherited from the ideal ego of the mirror stage, where the specular image immediately presents an other to the self, as the self which is not the self, and the part of the self which is absent from the self. This experience is objectified, as described, in language, and defines the formation of the ego in language, and the relation between the subject and the other. The form of the specular image in the mirror stage “will crystallize in the subject’s internal conflictual tension, which determines the awakening of his desire for the object of the other’s desire...” (p. 19). The desire of the other, as seen in the L-schema, the quadrature of the subject, is the result of the identification of the imaginary ego with the other, the search for self-reinforcement, self-reification in the presence of non-being, in intersection between the unconscious subject and the Other, an intersection which crystallizes the imaginary disjunction between the subject and the double of the subject in the mirror, the primordial dehiscence between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt* which the L-schema is designed to reveal and contextualize.

Lacan applied Freud’s dream analysis to the structuring of the unconscious in linguistic terms in the “Rome Discourse” of 1953, “The Function of

Language in Psychoanalysis.” He announced: “Take up the work of Freud again at the *Traumdeutung* [*Interpretation of Dreams*] to remind yourself that the dream has the structure of a sentence or, rather, to stick to the letter of the work, of a rebus,” or in other words, “it has the structure of a form of writing, of which the child’s dream represents the primordial ideography and which, in the adult, reproduces the simultaneously phonetic and symbolic use of signifying elements, which can also be found in the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt and in the characters still used in China.”¹³ The symbolic function of the signifying elements is of less importance than the linguistic mechanisms with which the dream is written, the phonetic elements.

The phonetic elements constitute the role of the symbolic in the unconscious, as opposed to the imaginary, but of course depend on the role of the imaginary. Lacan explained, “But even this is no more than the deciphering of the instrument. The important part begins with the translation of the text, the important part which Freud tells us is given in the [verbal] elaboration of the dream,” which is a function of conscious reason, “in other words, in its rhetoric. Ellipsis and pleonasm, hyperbaton or syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition—these are the syntactical displacements,” along with “metaphor, catachresis, antonomasis, allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche—these are the semantic condensations in which Freud teaches us to read the intentions—ostentatious or demonstrative, dissimulating or persuasive, retaliatory or seductive—out of which the subject modulates his oniric discourse” (*The Language of the Self*, p. 31). Several of these linguistic mechanisms operate in the formation of dream images. In that these are the mechanisms which allow the subject to moderate the dream discourse, they are not mechanisms of the dream itself, but rather the conscious reading of the dream.

The absence of the subject in language follows the objectification of the ideal ego in the insertion of the subject in language along with mirror stage identification. The subject “becomes objectified in the dialectic of the identification with the other” (p. 45), according to Lacan, as spirit does for Hegel in objective spirit. The subject becomes a function of the universal, of concept in language, as it does for Hegel in the movement from the particular to the universal. The ideal ego in the imaginary becomes inaccessible to the subject in language. The relation between the subject in language, the symbolic, and the ideal ego, the imaginary, is an asymptotic one. The “wall of language” becomes a barrier to the self-identification of the subject, as it is to the realization of the subject for Hegel, the synthesis of the dialectic of objective and subjective in absolute spirit.

The subject is doubled and self-alienated in the imaginary of Lacan, as the subject is doubled and self-alienated in discursive reason in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of Hegel. The premise of the doubling of the subject in reason, language and perception, is the dialectic of self-consciousness, the elision of the particular in the universal, but in the insertion in the Other the Lacanian subject is decentered from consciousness, that in which the subject identifies itself in the *cogito*. In the imaginary the self-identification of the subject is defined by *méconnaissance* rather than consciousness. The imaginary is “an order which can only be ex-centric in relation to any bringing to realization of the consciousness-of-self,”¹⁴ according to Lacan. The dialectic of consciousness itself becomes other to the subject as it is defined in the imaginary, which precludes the possibility of a dialectical synthesis, a totality, however much it may be presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as containing its own negation. The subject can only be seen as divided.

For Hegel the division or alienation of the subject is synonymous with its formation. It is through the alienation (*Entfremdung*) of reason to itself that the subject discovers itself in its own dehiscence. In the Hegelian subject, existence (being-for-self) is set against nothingness (being-in-itself), which is not present in existence, or reality as given by language, as the being-in-itself of the Lacanian subject is not present in language. Being-in-itself, subjective spirit, is synthesized into the dialectic of reason, and in that way it becomes other to itself as fragmented being. As reason returns to itself from the other in the dialectic, it discovers itself simultaneously as “absolute negativity” and “infinite self-affirmation,” as described by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Mind* (§ 381).¹⁵ Reason is the perpetual self-affirmation of absolute negativity, the perpetuation of the externality of language in relation to the subject, the otherness of the subject in relation to the imaginary order of Lacan.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of Hegel, the “absolute certitude of self changes therefore immediately for it as consciousness into a dying echo, in the objectivity of its being-for-itself; but the world thus created is its *discourse* which it has heard similarly non-immediately and whose echo keeps on coming back to it....”¹⁶ The echo is subjective spirit, which can be seen as the unconscious, the absence which is present in the discourse, in language. Discourse, objective spirit, is seen as something which is always already in relation to the subject, which is other to it. The subject is present in discourse only as a non-presence; consciousness is only given by that which is other to it, which becomes the unconscious in the science of the letter. In the *Rome Discourse*, Lacan observed: “I identify myself in Language, but only by los-

ing myself in it like an object” (*The Language of the Self*, p. 63), the being-for-self of objective spirit. “What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.” Memory (related to perception in the imaginary) cannot establish presence in language. The present perfect of the subject, as a completion, is impossible in language. The subject is objectified in language as that which is in the process of becoming but has not yet become, which is nothing, non-being, as the signifier represents the subject to the next signifier in the chain of signification. The presence of the subject in language is presence as motion in the paradox of Zeno, the gap between the positions of the objects, as the gap between the signifiers, which always defines a particular place as it is translated into a universal concept, reason in language.

Freud translated the self-negation of reason in Hegel as a symptom of unconscious repression. In the essay “Negation” of 1925, the “content of a repressed presentation or thought can thus make its way through to consciousness on the condition that it lets itself be negated. The *Verneinung*,” denial, “is a way to take cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a ‘lifting and conserving’ of the repression, but not for all that an acceptance of what is repressed.”¹⁷ The Freudian unconscious is thus seen as being present in the Hegelian dialectic, in the form of repression as a symptom of self-negation, which is given by the insertion of the subject in the imaginary order, and the loss of the other to reason, the unconscious, in the objectification of reason, and the loss of the symbolic subject, the presence of the unconscious, in language and perception.

The imaginary becomes primary because it makes the ordering of reality possible in the entrance of the subject into language. An example of this is the *Fort! Da!* game described by Freud, the gone/here game enacted by the infant to compensate for the temporary departure of the mother. Freud explains in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “the interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child’s great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach” (p. 14).¹⁸ In the game, language, the ordering of reality in the imaginary, as the unconscious is the ordering of reality of conscious experience, becomes a substitution for the instinctual displeasure which the infant feels at the departure of its mother, as

well as the instinctual joy which the infant feels upon her return, or the anticipation of that joy. The departure of the mother is enacted in anticipation of the return in order to simulate the instinctual feeling in language. As soon as the linguistic game is constructed, the infant becomes a subject of the game, and the linguistic construction replaces the actual relation with the mother. Both the infant and the mother are defined as subjects by the Other, by the network of relations which connect them and determine them in language, the ordering of reality. Language assumes a primacy over perception, and the word becomes more important than the perceived object as the anchoring point of the subject in its conscious, imaginary experience as determined by its unconscious, symbolic order, the Other.

The unconscious was defined by Lacan in “The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis” as “that part of the concrete discourse, in so far as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse” (*Écrits, A Selection*, p. 49). As the subject becomes redefined to itself in relation to the Other, in the symbolic or unconscious, it loses its definition of itself in relation to itself in the imaginary, its conscious reason, spoken language and perception. The absence of the subject in language is perpetually recreated in language, as in the *Fort! Da!* game of the infant, in which is inscribed the trace of the presence of the unconscious or symbolic, the “world of meaning of a particular language in which the world of things will come to be arranged” (p. 65). The archetypal form of Plato, for example, the construction of a metaphysical language, is the recreation of such a reality, the transposition of a language which is already inscribed with the deceptive totality of a system which insures being. As in the metaphysic, “through that which becomes embodied only by being the trace of a nothingness and whose support cannot thereafter be impaired, the concept, saving the duration of what passes by,” as in Zeno’s paradox, “engenders the thing.” The intelligible form determines the sensible form in perception; apperception and a priori intuition determine the manifold of perceived reality.

The Platonic archetypal form is the trace of a nothingness, the absence in perception as given by the construction of perception in reason, in the imaginary order. “It is the world of words that creates the world of things,” for Lacan, as it was for Plato, Plotinus, Grosseteste, Ficino, Kant, Hegel, and Freud, in the concept, in the process of perception, and in the structuring of the unconscious as given by the dream. The thing is given by concept as an “everlasting possession” (Thucydides), as the archetype or intelligible, ac-

according to Lacan, thus the metaphysical structure of reason. “Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him man,” even prior to his birth. As the subject is both an absence in language and an always already presence in that absence, so the subject is an always already presence in history. As the subject is determined by language, so the subject is determined by history. In *Reason in History*, Hegel defined the subject in history as an “antithesis to the natural world” (III).¹⁹ History, like the subject, begins its purpose as the realization of spirit, being-in-itself (*an sich*), the unconscious. History is the process of making conscious the unconscious, the transition from subjective to objective spirit.

Historical events are seen as mechanisms toward bringing the unconscious to consciousness, in conscious reason; history is the stage on which are acted out the events of the constructed reality of mind in its self-alienation from nature and from its other, the unconscious, in objective spirit. The individual will is seen as the product of a culture, as the particular is a product of the universal, the thing is a product of the word. The individual historical subject can only act in relation to its position in history and the Other: “The individual does not invent his own content; he is what he is by acting out the universal as his own content” (III.2.b), that is to say, the unconscious is the discourse of the Other. Any action which contributes to the course of the historical development of a culture on the part of an individual is a consequence of that individual interpreting and carrying out the universal will of the culture, the concept of the culture, in particular events.

This essay developed and rewritten from sections of *Architecture and Psychoanalysis*, New York: Peter Lang, 2006, without the references to architecture, and with revisions and corrections.

¹ George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold Vincent Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

² Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan,” in *The Ideology of Theory, Essays 1971–1986, Volume I: Situations of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 85.

³ Jacques Lacan, “Le Stade du miroir,” in *Écrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 97, quoted in Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan,” in *The Ideology of Theory*, p. 87.

⁴ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), §4, III:I, 218.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953–54*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), quoted in Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan,” in *The Ideology of Theory*, p. 90.

⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Introduction à l’Oeuvre de Marcel Mauss” in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris, 1950), p. xix, quoted in Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 74.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits, A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), p. 66.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–55*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 286, quoted in Peter Dews, *The Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*, p. 79.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 346, quoted in Peter Dews, *The Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*, p. 79.

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–55*, p. 58.

¹¹ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy, A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (New York: Meridian, 1948), p. 34.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Standard Edition*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), p. 46.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self, The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 30.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Actes*, p. 206, quoted in Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self, Translator’s Notes*, no. 131, p. 140.

¹⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace, from *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, in *Hegel: Selections*, ed. Jacob Loewenberg (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929).

¹⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit (Phänomenologie des Geistes)*, ed. J. Hoffmeister, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1948, p. 462; II, p. 189), quoted in Anthony Wilden, *Lacan and the Discourse of the Other*, in Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, p. 289.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Negation," *Standard Edition XIX*, p. 239, quoted in Anthony Wilden, *Lacan and the Discourse of the Other*, in Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, p. 285.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Standard Edition*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

¹⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason in History, A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert Hartman (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1953 [1837]).