Mis-taken on Lacan: the manqué business of psychoanalysis

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Our abortive actions are actions which succeed, those of our words which come to grief are words which own up. These acts, these words reveal a truth from behind. Within what we call free associations, dream images, symptoms, a word bearing the truth is revealed. If Freud's discovery has any meaning, it is that—truth grabs error by the scruff of the neck in the mistake.1

Thus in 1954 Jacques Lacan reminded his seminar what was at stake in a practice calling itself psychoanalysis. And six years later, in a seminar devoted to the ethics of that practice: "The signifier introduces two orders into the world: the truth and the event."2 And later still, in a television interview: "Suicide is the only successful act."3

Hence my anxiety at the task set before me (one I could only partially fulfill, as you will note as I go on)—to say something about a teaching whose twists and turns span thirty years. Anxiety, yes, but not about the prospect of making a mistake, but of falling into error. Apparently they are not the same thing, at least in the register of psychoanalytical utterances as such. "Truth," Lacan told us, "emerges from the mistake." Or again: "The subject is constituted in the dimension of making a mistake."4 And finally, in an address I now direct to myself: "Anxiety is that which does not deceive."5

I introduce this essay (the transcript of a lecture delivered in January 1989) with this barrage of quotations if only to provide a taste of the vaunted, infamous density and even gnomic quality of a teaching and a speech, in short, a style, named Lacan. It is to that speech, that style, and that name that I direct my comments; as for the man, the life, you can go to the scandal sheets for that. Not that it might not prove instructive, even important; but it would hardly be decisive. Within the context of a teaching that claimed to do nothing but "return to Freud," to return to a reading of his text—we too can follow this route to see just how far Lacan got. And I would add, and with a real sense of assurance here, without anxiety, that if anything interesting is still to be said about Freud, it is thanks to Jacques Lacan.

Thus, in pondering over just what might be at stake in introducing Lacan, a dead man, to an audience for whom, really, he ought to have needed no introduction, it struck me that first and foremost that stake was simply another dead man—Freud himself. And so I begin here with Freud—there will only


ever be one—and let the dead bury, or in this case, introduce, their dead. For was it not Freud who, at the dawn of our century, of our modernity that he helped invent, noticed that the dead were once again beginning to speak?—in dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue and the pen, in short, in our culture and its science. Making curiosity the very precondition of the cure, uniting theory and therapy, science and truth, Freud placed psychoanalysis in the midst and not to one side of the world. Surrounded by darkness and hardly face-to-face, Freud made of analyst and analysand that couple at the very heart of culture for and upon whom nothing would be lost, irrevocably. The analytic session maintains its continuity with culture by forging and performing a break with it. It actualizes and gives body and speech to a discontent with and within the discourses of civilization. Its complete assimilation to those discourses—whether behavioral science, popular self-help, abject individualism, etc.—can only effect its complete falsification.

One need only read On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement to realize that Freud himself knew that his teaching would be forgotten, would be distorted; but he knew too that it would be re-membered, re-discovered, that the institution he founded would continually repeat what it had first lived in theory. In this sense Freudianism could only discover its truth as the re-discovery of that truth: as a "return to Freud." It is here that the repressed and the return of the repressed become exactly the same thing, a message Lacan spent thirty years trying to hammer home, which is why it seemed, and still seems, to me that an introduction to Lacan must always be a re-introduction to Freud, about whom we could safely say that a first reading is no longer possible. Lacan’s self-styled "return to Freud" is monumentally important not only because of its return to the letter of Freud’s texts but because of its very sensitivity to the function of return within those texts.

What follows, then, was my attempt to take the function of the return, within and to Freud—as dramatized by Lacan—seriously and to express this function to an audience of psychiatrists, psychologists, and medical students at the State University of New York Health Science Center (Syracuse, New York). My thanks to Dr. Seymour Fisher, chair of the Department of Psychiatry, for his kind invitation, and to Professor Pat Miller of the Department of Religion, Syracuse University, for introducing us. Of course, my remarks were incomplete, and how could it be otherwise? This is, in fact, a central lesson of Lacanian theory: that the core of my being can only be registered as a lack or loss insofar as it is established by the demand (the inscription of some other in me) that I put my desire into signifying form, that is, in language. One cannot say everything, not because of some deficiency in language, but because language installs that deficiency, that insufficiency, within the subject who speaks, by virtue of which, where it is a question of desire, there is always more, because there is always less. It was Freud, listening to hysterics, phobics, obsessinals, who discerned the dialectic of this ‘more or less’ as a subject’s attempt to decipher the sexual relation—the gap gender inserts into humanity—and whose subjective import he named castration. Lacan returns us to it, and like Freud, not without resistance.

I WOULD LIKE TO SAY right off the bat that I am not a psychoanalyst, that I have no firsthand experience in analysis apart from its texts, principally those of Freud and Lacan. My interest in psycho-

Establishment, trans. D. Hollier, R. Krauss, A. Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 82: “In anxiety, the subject is affected by the desire of the Other. He is affected by it in a nondialectizable manner, and it is for that reason that anxiety, within the affectivity of the subject, is what does not deceive.” Lacan’s seminar on anxiety remains unpublished.
analysis, however, is long-standing, ever since high school, when quite by accident I chanced upon a copy of Erich Fromm's Forgotten Language. Little did I know then that this language was more than a metaphor; this lesson awaited my entrance into graduate school. Since then, the writings of Jacques Lacan have been for me the object of an abiding passion; and my own career, as literary critic, is hardly at odds with it, at least in principle. One need only recall that Freud himself stipulated the universitas litterarum, the universe of letters, or the university, as the ideal place for the training of, at the least, lay analysts. And one might also recall that neither Oedipus nor Hamlet was a patient of the Viennese doctor.

That said, I'd like to mention two things that came to my attention recently. The first was a note from Dr. Fisher, informing me that he had added what he called a "clarifying statement" to my title: "An exposition of the basic concepts in the theoretical system of the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan." About this I will say quickly that when Lacan, in his seminar of 1964, came to speak on the basic concepts of his system, they turned out to be neither his concepts nor his system. The unconscious, repetition, the transference, the drive—these were the four fundamental concepts, and they are all Freud's, as is the system. To speak of Lacan is to speak of Freud; and rest assured, that hardly simplifies things. Lacan never claimed to do anything more than "return to Freud," although, as he was to demonstrate time and again, the function of the return to and in Freud was the destiny of anyone wishing to take on the name of psychoanalyst.

If, for example, one of the things we have inherited from Freud is a theory of paternity, that theory finds its destination not only in the patient, the analysand, but in the analyst, who puts his or her desire to the test every time he or she embarks upon a practice under the name of Freud, the father of a science with profound effects, even if disavowed, upon our entire culture.

The second thing that came to my attention was an article that appeared in the New York Times Book Review by one Richard A. Shweder, chair of the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago and president-elect of the Society for Psychological Anthropology, which I suppose means that he is not only a scholar but a bureaucrat of sorts, so he's got something of the best of both worlds. In Shweder's article Lacan is accused of (1) being French, which I suppose one has to own up to, and (2) of possessing an impenetrable style, which Shweder concludes, without the slightest hint of irony, is simply bad style, and worse still, out of style. Apparently Lacan wrote run-on sentences; but when an analyst is accused of being "impenetrable," well, something is up, or not, depending on how you want to look at things.

I don't mean to simply sound glib here, because the whole affair in fact turns out to be more serious than one might at first suspect. Shweder reduces Lacan's thought to this sentence: "I think, therefore I am the language I speak, which is a run-on sentence." No doubt you recognize the formal play here on Descartes's famous dictum, "I think, therefore I am." Shweder believes he parodies both Descartes and Lacan here, but the price of this parody is a rather serious error. First, Descartes never reduced Being, the sum, the I am, to thinking, the cogito, the I think, but made of thinking the proof or minimal sign of Being, the ergo, the therefore. Being
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and thinking are not the same: that was Descartes’s problem, and it remains ours. To reduce the *cogito ergo sum* to an equation of identity would be tantamount to saying that an animal is identical with the tracks it leaves in the snow, a manifest absurdity. You have to follow the tracks to find the animal, and you have to follow thought, which is always someone’s thought, to find a little bit of Being. You might be wondering what all this can possibly have to do with psychoanalysis, since Descartes and Freud would seem to have very little in common, especially since the latter is credited with having undone the former precisely by discovering an other reason, a reason beyond reason that he called the unconscious, which on the face of things appears fairly irrational. So let me give you an example, a fictive one, but for all that, instructive as a means of introducing Lacan.

Suppose this Mr. Shweder were to come to you. He has fallen ill, suffers from anxiety attacks, can no longer write. “I am worthless,” he says, “therefore my writing stinks.” “Oh, come come, Mr. Shweder,” you reply, “one need only look at your impressive credentials to see that this can hardly be the case.” “What? You think I’m lying!” he shouts. “You think I’d pay all this money just to pull the wool over your eyes?”

Let’s stop there and note that there are two ways to take Mr. Shweder at his word. On the one hand, we might do what Mr. Shweder himself does with Descartes and Lacan: take his “I am worthless” as an absolutely logical equation and conclude that what he needs is a course in self-esteem, a strengthening of the ego, a role model; in short, someone to hold up to him a mirror in which he might see reflected an image better than the one he at present seems to have. Nothing Dale Carnegie or ego psychology couldn’t help him out with.

On the other hand, we might take a different path, which was that of Freud and Lacan, and hear in his words a thought in excess of itself, a thought leading to Being; that is, we might follow the tracks his discourse lays down for us. He says he is “worthless,” that his writing stinks, that he is not “lying,” not “pulling the wool over your eyes,” and that he is “paying all this money.” There is a story being written here: about wool and worth, about money and lies, and about a writing, a literary production, that smells.

Perhaps it was like this: as a young child Shweder had been given a dollar by his father. He went to Woolworth’s to buy something. On the way he lost his dollar, and later lied about it. This he has unconsciously connected with an earlier story; as an even younger child he had defecated in his pants. His father had asked him about it: “Did you make in your pants, Richard?” “No,” he had replied, lying. “But I can smell it,” Dad had replied, “it stinks.” All this triggered an anxiety attack when a little white lie about Descartes and Lacan appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*. The words, the language, the tracks lead back to a style, a writing, scatological though it may be, that leaked out of his very Being and that the child denied in the face of paternal censure. In trying to uphold a paternal law—one does not shit in one’s pants—he nevertheless broke it; and also one does not lie. How not to lie and yet please the father? The impossible problem, which our neurotic unconsciously solves by doing nothing—until he arrives at the analyst’s, perhaps only to find the father who will tell him that when one lies one is not necessarily lying; that there are lies that
9. Any reader unfamiliar with the discourse I am presently entertaining will probably be struck by my use of the pronoun form "it" when I speak of the subject. I mean this use to suggest that prior to assuming its status as gendered (through castration) the subject must be understood to be something fairly inhuman. In this sense the law of castration can be stated simply: one is either a woman or a man, never both. In short, there is no third sex to mediate the absolute division between the sexes. The psychoanalytic name for this mediating term is the phallus ("The Signification of the Phallus," in J. Lacan, Écrits, A Selection, trans. A. Sheridan [New York: Norton, 1977], 281–91).

By phrasing the law of castration this way I hope to stress that it is not a law binding one to a heterosexual choice of object. Homosexuals are as subject to the law of castration as heterosexuals are. They too are either men or women (Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality [New York: Basic Books, 1975]).

tell the truth and someone willing to hear that truth beyond the lies. This story, as I've already said, is a fiction, but a more common one than you might think. Anyone with a child knows well how easily feces can become the first implements of artistic expression.

The lesson here, which the real Shweder has not yet learned, is that one is not the language one speaks; rather, within that speech a meaning in excess of consciousness surges forth that leads toward the source of one's Being, the formation of the unconscious, what Lacan called the 'in you more than you'. And let me add that this little fable also contains those four basic concepts I spoke of earlier: the unconscious, made manifest as the return of the repressed in the patient's utterances; the drive, obviously anal, but with its own grammatical form; the transference, the analyst mistaken for the father; and finally repetition, of the grammatical form of the drive, which would go something like this: the patient's inaugural utterance, "to want to write and not be able to," which repeats a more primordial one written on the stage of the unconscious, namely, "to want to please the father and not be able to," which itself will be inevitably repeated within the transference, "to want to be a father and not be able to."

I want to close my fictive case presentation, which in fact I've drawn from bits and pieces of several actual cases, to approach Lacan more directly. But first I must confess my own little lie. I told you that by tracking the patient's words one might arrive at his Being; this is inaccurate. For in the end I only led you to more words, although their grammatical form was quite precisely structured and repeated. What we have found then is not Being but a being, a speaking being. What Lacan attempts to elaborate through Freud's work is that it is precisely by being a speaking being, a subject of speech, that a woman or man is a subject of the unconscious, and for that matter, not simply a being but a woman or man, a gendered being. This is what I will now set out to demonstrate, with one more detour, through structural linguistics. And I would remind you that this encounter of psychoanalysis with linguistics is not exempt from the story I have just told you, since it too repeats a prior encounter, of the infant with language, by virtue of which that infant becomes a subject who speaks and can therefore only know its Being as a lack of Being, a lack it and psychoanalysis itself will figure as castration.9

JACQUES LACAN is associated with a movement known as Structuralism, about which I will say a few words. Structuralism is a form of social theory that takes its bearings from certain discoveries of what came to be known as structural linguistics, whose founder was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and whose two most famous practitioners were Emile Benveniste and Roman Jakobson. Structural linguistics begins with a number of formal propositions about the nature of language that set it apart from previous historical or philological studies of language.

1. The object of linguistics is a theoretical object, la langue, language understood under its 'synchronic' aspect; that is, language as the manifold of lexical, grammatical, phonological, and transformative

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rules at a given moment in time. *La langue* is the amalgam of all possible utterances, all possible *paroles*, at any given moment. It is not evolutionary but discrete and static, a theoretical object distinct from what Saussure called *le langage*, language evolving through history.

2. Within *la langue* the basic unit of linguistic study is the sign, which can be graphic, phonic, pictorial, etc. Hence linguistics opens out onto a general science of semiology, the study of signs—cultural, natural, etc.—precisely structured as languages, *les langues*.

3. The sign has two aspects: a sensible signifier and an intelligible signified, which Saussure compared with the recto and verso of a sheet of paper. The connection between signifier and signified is not natural but arbitrary; in other words the sign is unmotivated. For example, there is no natural connection between the graphic or phonic mark *t-r-e-e* and its concept or referent; it might have just as easily been called *arbor* or *Baum*.

4. Within language, signs derive their meaning or linguistic value not from the identity of signifier and signified but from the difference among signs. For example, a red light on the wing of an airplane does not mean stop, but a red light arranged in a sequence with an amber and a green one does. In language there are no positive terms, only differences. Difference founds even similarity; for example, the difference between a concept and its concrete instances makes those instances similar.

5. The arrangement of linguistic utterances derives from the two major axes of *la langue*: (1) the paradigmatic axis, also known as the axis of substitution or metaphor; for example, all grammatical categories like noun, verb, or adjective; and (2) the syntagmatic axis, also known as the axis of contiguity or metonymy; for example, all grammatical or syntactical clusters like phrases, clauses, or sentences. In short, the paradigmatic axis allows a sign to be substituted for another—a big apple for New York City. The syntagmatic axis allows signs to be placed in contiguity—the big apple never sleeps. The meaning of an utterance is therefore determined retroactively through the scansion of paradigmatic choices and syntagmatic arrangement. Meaning, therefore, is not primarily nor inaugurally referential but structural. Although words might be acquired referentially, language, *la langue*, can only be acquired as structure. Think, for example, of the value of a simple word like "or," whose meaning is purely structural; it can only be determined as a function of syntax—*A or B*—and as a function of paradigm—it is not *A and B*.

These then are the principal propositions of structural linguistics. Language is understood as structure, and that structure is by its very nature differential. Language begins not with the names of things but with the difference between signs. Structuralism begins when language is thought of as structure and as having structural or structurating effects.

Structuralism, therefore, applies the laws of structural linguistics to the 'languages' of culture. The French ethnologist and mythographer Claude
Métié-Strauss was the first to fully carry out this kind of work. According to Métié-Strauss, myths, rituals, and even table manners are languages, precisely structured, and give the exteriorized form of a culture thinking itself. That is, cultural objects form concrete and systematic structures, the formal coherence of which constitutes the ground or basic languages of culture. People think not so much with their own minds as with and through the systems of objects in which they are inscribed. These languages are structured differentially, through a series of fundamental oppositions. For example, studying various forms of food and cooking in traditional cultures, Métié-Strauss postulated a fundamental opposition between the raw and the cooked, which he associated with another opposition, that between nature and culture. This second, more abstract opposition is thought by means of the first. Therefore, through its culinary rituals, a society is able to think its relation to the natural world and understand how it might be elaborated and turned into culture.

I would like to stress that this exteriorized thought, what Métié-Strauss called the "primitive mind," does not take the form of some universal symbolization. What is at stake here is a certain articulation, a structure or combinatorial order that precedes symbols, allows them to come into being, to change their significations, etc. The "primitive mind" cannot be reduced to a dictionary of symbols; it is a grammar of signs, a language. This language makes up a kind of cultural unconscious that operates beyond and in excess of any of its users. I do not create the language of my culture; in a strong sense it constitutes me and enables me to think myself in relation to it.

A very simple example would be the menu in a restaurant. It is structured like a language: its paradigmatic axis includes all possible appetizers, entrées, desserts, etc.; its syntagmatic axis is the order of their appearance, appetizers first, entrées second, etc. I produce a gustatory utterance, a parole, when I order, when I create a meal. If, for example, I order three desserts, that choice signifies, rather outrageously, only in relation to the grammar of dining conventions, la langue of the dinner.

It is, therefore, important to note that the notion of language as culture thinking itself is not an intentionalist theory, not a theory of consciousness. The exteriority of the sign implies a difference and a distance between the one who thinks and the representation of that thought in signs. There is always a certain amount of slippage between what I am, my Being, and what I say I am, my meaning. Take a simple and very common example, love. I always want to be loved for what I am, not for anything anyone can say about me. Don't love me because I'm so good looking or so terribly charming, love me for myself. Hence love is always a little bit crazy, precisely because it pushes language to its limit, exposes the gap between representations and what they represent.

The attempt to elaborate this gap between representation and what it represents, which is nothing but the bar between signifier and signified, marks the turn from Structuralism to what is now called Poststructuralism, which explores the irreducibility of cultural signifiers to the signifieds or subjects they claim to represent. Representation becomes the central problematic for thinking about culture and its constitutive members. For example, and to rephrase a traditional Marxist proposition, society might
now be thought of in terms of the contradiction not between means and forces of production but between means and forces of representation, making alienation or estrangement the central fact of civilization, and more radically, and here Lacan comes into play, of the subject who speaks, who represents itself in language and hence alienates part of its being there.

Before pressing this any further, let me say a few words about the notion of the subject and how I am using this term here. This concept too is taken from linguistics, where the subject is primarily a grammatical category, the subject of a sentence, represented by the pronoun, the 'shifter', I. "I think, therefore I am." The subject here would be anyone capable of representing him- or herself as the "I" of the sentence. But as noted at the opening of my talk, the subject here is a bit more complicated than that. There are in fact two subjects here: one of the "I think," one of the "I am." I tried to show that they cannot be reduced to a simple identity because the subject of Being does not refer precisely to the subject of thinking. The subject of thinking here is what linguists call the 'subject of the statement', that is, the grammatical marker as it might be read on a piece of paper. The subject of Being is what linguists refer to as the 'subject of the utterance', the subject capable of speaking or writing the proposition. The subject in language is therefore a profoundly divided or split subject, divided between its statements and the uttering of those statements, between the event and its meaning (whose logical and temporal disjunction is so clearly marked in Descartes' ergo).

Let me give another example, this one drawn from Freud's Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, which will return us once again to the question of lies and truth. It deals with a simple statement, but one not so simple that philosophy has ever really gotten a handle on it. The statement is this: "I am lying." We all know the game here; if I really am lying, then I'm telling the truth, which makes me doubly a liar, and so forth. If I am not lying, then I lie anyway, and the same result follows. So how does one determine the truth or falsity of the statement? This is how Freud settled the question.

"Two Jews met in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. 'Where are you going?' asked one. 'To Cracow,' was the answer. 'What a liar you are!' broke out the other. 'If you say you're going to Cracow, you want me to believe you're going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you're going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?""

This excellent story, which gives an impression of over-subtlety, evidently works by the technique of absurdity. The second Jew is reproached because he says he is going to Cracow, which is in fact his destination! But the powerful technical method of absurdity is here linked with another technique, representation by the opposite, for, according to the uncontradicted assertion of the first Jew, the second is lying when he tells the truth and is telling the truth by means of a lie. But the more serious substance of the joke is the problem of what determines the truth. The joke, once again, is pointing to a problem and is making use of one of our commonest concepts. Is it the truth if we describe things as they are without
troubling to consider how our hearer will understand what we say?
Or is this only Jesuitical truth, and does not genuine truth consist
in taking the hearer into account and giving him a faithful picture
of our own knowledge? I think that jokes of this kind are sufficiently
different from the rest to be given a special position. What they are
attacking is not a person or an institution but the certainty of our
knowledge itself, one of our speculative possessions. The appropriate
name for them would therefore be “sceptical” jokes. 10

Let me translate this episode into some of the linguistic terms with which
I’ve been barraging you. Freud divided the subject of the statement from
the subject of the utterance. The subject of the statement is
“I am lying.” But the subject of the utterance is “I am deceiving you.” Hence the possi-
bility of truth or falsity derives not from the relation of words to what they
signify but from the subject’s ability to represent itself in language as other
than it is for another person. I represent myself as something for some
other. The truth therefore is not a function of reference but of a signifying
scansion, an interpretation. Spoken to someone else, the “I am going to
Cracow” might have been an absolutely truthful statement, despite its
referential function remaining the same in both cases: he is in fact going to
Cracow.

The “I am going to Cracow” is a signifier that represents a subject, a
deceiving subject, for someone else. This someone else is itself a signifier,
the unspoken “you” of the statement, which we can now reformulate as “I
tell you that I am going to Cracow.” The “I tell” is the subject, represented
by the signifier “I am going to Cracow” for another signifier, “you.”
Freud’s fable allows us to determine the subject of this “you,” which is a
subject who will not be deceived, that is, the analyst, Freud himself, a Jew.

Freud called this a “sceptical joke” because it “attacks the certainty of
our knowledge itself”; 11 and in this sense he has given us an exact picture
of the unconscious as that which threatens the certainty of our conscious
statements. Of course, Freud did not have the opportunity to elaborate on
this joke using the tools of linguistics; nevertheless, it is easy to see how
close he came using what tools he did have. Lacan, however, was able to
bring together linguistics and psychoanalysis, the result being not only a
return to Freud via new insights into language but also a return to language
via psychoanalysis.

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HAT I WOULD LIKE TO DO in this next section is list six
Lacanian propositions and then elaborate on each of them. In
a sense they have informed everything I have already said, so
they also have the advantage of being something of a review.

1. A signifier represents a subject for another signifier, not another
subject (which was the lesson of Freud’s joke).
2. The unconscious is structured like a language, that is, the uncon-
scious is a language, a structure (which gives the subjective mean-
ing to Lévi-Strauss’s ethnology).
3. The unconscious is the discourse of the Other (which seems to be
a rather gnomic statement, until you recall the radical exteriority

10. Sigmund Freud, Jokes and
Their Relation to the Unconscious

n. Ibid.
of language to the subject who represents itself there, that is, its radical alterity, its otherness).

4. There is no Other of the Other (that is, in the attempt to locate the exact meaning of its being, the subject has no recourse to anything other than its own words, which cannot be reduced to the identity of meaning and Being, something I showed in my Shweber case).

5. Fantasy founds verisimilitude (which for now I will simply gloss as: reality does not precede structure, but that which is taken or mis-taken for reality is an effect of structure, the structure of fantasy).

6. The status of the unconscious is not ontological but ethical (in other words, the unconscious is not a localized place, neither the seat of primal instincts nor some portion of the brain, but the gap between signifier and signified, signifier and subject, or to say much the same thing, the difference between the subject of statement and utterance. This gap implies ethical obligations, since the subject, who is always other than her- or himself, radically depends upon some other to maintain her or his desire).

Let me now double back and go over these propositions, one at a time.

1. Lacan modified Saussure’s definition of the sign by freeing the signifier (which he called the letter, the minimal unit of language, the material support of discourse, and in itself radically insignificant) from the grip of the signified (the concept or the subject). Language begins not with the sign but with the difference between two signifiers (“ma” and “pa,” to take a hardly trivial example). Language therefore does not primordially mean but primordially structures; it forces and compels me to represent myself inaugurally as a pure difference: I am by virtue of what I am not, and as such I am for something or someone. A subject’s being is a being for, which means that in psychoanalysis a symptom, for example, is not a symptom of something but a symptom for someone, a message, a parole. For example, a red light is not representative of the concept stop; it represents something for green, which returns to red its meaning. “What you mean is stop,” Ms. Green would say to Mr. Red, if lights could speak. “Thank you,” Mr. Red would respond, “for now I understand that you mean go.” “My word, you are right,” Ms. Green might reply. Call red the patient, call green the analyst, and you are on your way toward understanding something about analysis. Call red the man, call green the woman, and you will see why the mysteries of gender must always be deciphered in the other sex.

This last example is, of course, not just any old example, so I will give a hint about its resolution, using what Lacan called his parable of the urinals: 12

A boy and a girl are sitting face to face on a train; as it pulls into the station, the little boy exclaims, “Look, we’re at Ladies!” “Not at all, you idiot,” the little girl replies. “We’re at Men.” Note two points here. First, the signifiers Hommes and Dames have the same signified, the door. This was as far as Saussure’s sign could go. But the signification here is the meaning attached to Hommes through the response it awakens in Dames and vice versa. Meaning is the spark that flashes from the friction of two signifiers. Second, the signifier Hommes represents a subject, the little girl, the fille, for another signifier, Dames. The signifier Dames represents a subject, the little boy, the garçon, for another signifier, Hommes. The two little subjects represent themselves in the register of a pure signifying difference, that between Hommes and Dames. To truly decipher that difference, each would have to get through the other’s door; but as we all know the laws of urinary segregation, that way is barred. The field then of desire, of sexual difference, is determined by language, by the differential law of the signifier, not by the biological imperatives purported to exist at the level of the signifieds. And as the crossed arrows make clear, heterosexual desire is in no way a destiny, but the effect of a law of difference, a law that Freud tells us is laid down with the oedipal stage. Hence Lacan’s little picture gives you the very image of two Freudian postulates: an original bi-sexuality (there are two sexes, but who can tell which is which) and the embryo of heterosexual desire, once the law is laid down, once the door is barred to the object of desire.

The field of capital letters in the picture is what Lacan called the field of the Other, the field of language and the law, the law of difference. A subject’s identity as well as its desire can be deciphered only there, in a field radically exterior to it. The exteriority of the signifier to the subject opens up the gap between a subject and the discourse that forms the unconscious, the field of the Other. In a moment I will show you how this takes place through what Freud called Urverdrängung, primal or primary repression.

2. The unconscious is structured like a language, a redundant phrase since language and structure are exactly the same thing. That is, the unconscious is an effect of the structuration of the subject by language, which always comes to the subject from some other person. In short, the subject (and not the individual) is nothing but a story someone once told it, which gives you a kind of linguistic version of the primal scene as primal signifying incursion. The signifier, therefore, is at the origin not only of a subject’s identity qua subject but of the drives and their perversions, that is, the perversion or deviation of biological need into discursive demands. For example, as a response to its cry, the infant receives not just milk but also a signifier of parental desire, love or care. Later on in life, this child, say in
response to an overwhelming of parental love in the form of a surfeit of food, might choose not to eat, to starve itself, only showing that, even in a case of anorexia, its etiology might be traced to a signifying disorder, a subject’s unconscious and abject dependence upon a signifier, food. In this sense it is inaccurate to say that anorexics do not eat; rather they eat nothing, since nothing is the last signifier available to them with which to carve out a desire and a love beyond the caregivers’. And again, eating nothing is not so much a symptom of something as a symptom for someone, the mother, for example. “A little nothing, that’s what I wanted from you, just once to say no, so that something might have been forbidden, something taboo. I could have desired at least that.” I hope you see just how easily this discourse might graft itself onto the sexual scenario of the two toilets, where the law, the barred door, gave itself over as the prohibition determining the regulation of sexual desire and identity. Like good hysterics, anorexics take their bodies as ciphers upon which to practice the cryptography of sexual difference. The gap between woman and man inscribes itself upon the body as the empty mouth. The anorectic symptom is, therefore, a demand addressed to parental desire: “How can I be everything to both of you? Or must I be everything for one of you and nothing for the other?” The signifying relation of woman or man plays itself out as the dialectic of fat and skinny, everything and nothing. Anorexics are not stuck at some supposed oral stage of development; instead, they play with castration at the site of the mouth and make of eating and not eating the corporeal correlative of speech and silence.  

3. The unconscious, therefore, is the discourse of the Other, a surging forth of signifiers—in dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, free associations, symptoms, for example—of a particular set of signifiers and not a general battery of universal symbols (which is what we find in, say, Jung). This field or locus of the Other is formed quite simply because, as human beings, that is, as speaking animals, we are forced to ask for what we need. All brute needs become alienated in the linguistic form in which we must demand them. Hence the possible fulfillment of our needs is always deciphered by someone else in the form in which we ask for that fulfillment. In return we always get too much or too little. When you subtract the demand from the need, something is always left over, something that cannot be put precisely into words. This little bit left over Lacan called the “objet petit a,” the object of desire. Even for the anorexic, all of whose needs seemed to be fulfilled, something remained unsatisfied, the objet petit a, that nothing is still desired, even if that desire remains purely oral.  

4. There is no Other of the Other; that is, there is no metalanguage, no language beyond language with which to take account of the unconscious or with which to effect a cure. Psychoanalysis always leads back to a signifying scansion, to the economy of speech as such. The analyst hears here and there in the patient’s discourse words that have lost their meaning, that partake of an empty circulation; these words must be returned to some economy that might restore their value. This is what Anna O. called the “talking cure,” and it awaits the patient as some response from the Other, from the unconscious that the analyst helps to make manifest if only through silence or returning back to the patient his or her own words. As

13. No doubt anorexia has sociological determinants, especially the social determination of thinness as the ideal of femininity. Nevertheless, one of its consequences is precisely the destruction of the corporeal signs of femininity, loss of periods, or a body resembling a little boy’s. The anorexic, then, would seem to conform herself not to an ideal female but to an ideal third or non-sex. She becomes an ideal phallus, the ratio of parental desire.
in Freud's joke, the truth of a patient's speech is determined not by that to which it refers but by deciphering to whom it is addressed.

A true story: a student complains to me about the trouble she has taking exams. "I just can't seem to connect the dots, you know? I can write papers, but with tests, forget it." And she adds later on, speaking about her mother's attempts to "set her up" with guys, "you know, I have this fear of coffee. If I even smell it I get really nervous." She can remember the onset of this phobia. One morning, as a little girl, she saw her mother and father share a cup of coffee. "I just became disgusted," she says. "Later on they divorced." She can associate the word "coffee" with some homonyms, her father's cough and a family name (on the mother's side). I am not an analyst and hence in no position to supply an interpretation. Anyway, she shows up at my office a little too frequently, and I have a feeling that her self-professed love of writing papers means love of writing them for me (and it turns out that her mother is, like me, an English teacher). But I can hear the discourse of the Other in her words: the homonymic displacements around the signifier coffee, their relation to her parents' failed marriage and to her own origins, and the connecting of dots, also failed, like her mother's attempts at matchmaking. She wants to make good on all this. Luckily, she cannot. Coffee is her objet petit a; it marks out in her speech a field of pure loss that sustains her desire as it repeatedly reanimates and renegotiates its own history. Unlike the anorexic who sustains the parents' desire by alternately playing the role of its lack and that of its fulfillment, this young woman knows, unconsciously, how to make a lack sustain her own desire within sexual difference. She does not ask me to connect the dots for her. She wants to make of their failed connections the story of her own desire, her own success.

5. Fantasy founds verisimilitude, le vraisemblable. Fantasy, which Lacan called the support of the subject and whose installation terminates an analysis, names the relation of the subject to the objet petit a. The relation of the subject to this fleeting object of desire is that which grounds it at the level of the preconscious by setting the stage, as it were, for all of its libidinal scenarios. Fantasy is the stage, desire's mise-en-scène, and all the world plays upon it. The theatrical metaphor here is in fact quite literal. When you go to the theatre, the first thing you invest (or cathect, as the Standard Edition translates Besetzung, which in fact is the German word for casting a play—Besetzen ein Schauspiel) is the stage, the phantasmatic ground upon which the actors enter and exit. My student's story about coffee provides a convenient example. It may well be a pure fabulation; however, it operates unconsciously as the primal fantasy recording her simultaneous presence at and separation from the primal scene of her sexual origins. It sets the stage for desire by marking out places for its missing object as well as for the gendered actors who play the game of hunting that object down. For her that object, coffee, is forbidden and hence installs the gap between male and female. The fantasy, then, positions her as a gendered subject over and against a lost object. The world is real to her as long as it partakes of this structure. There are many dots with which she can connect as long as the ideal dot, Ms. or Mr. Right, never appears to bring the entire scaffolding crumbling to the ground.
6. Finally, the status of the unconscious is not ontological but ethical. This is perhaps the most difficult although the most imperative part of Lacan's teaching. I don't have the time here to discuss Lacan's contribution to ethical thought in anything but a suggestive way. Let me say this much, however. All previous ethical thought usually began with some notion of the Good, which is taken to be unary, or at least univocal, and gave rise to categorical statements like "all men desire the Good" or Kant's categorical imperative that demands that one be able to form a universal, moral statement for any of one's actions. Lacan began not with the One, the Good, the Same, but with the two, desire and the other. What the unconscious made clear to Lacan is that no one is master of her or his own truth. I always receive my truth as a message from some other, and I love that truth, that good (not the Good), that meaning, only insofar as some other makes me hear it. The price of my autonomy is the recognition of my heteronomy, the radical dependence of my being and meaning upon some other. Care for myself, then, can only ever be really effected through care for others.

Since Freud, psychoanalysis has always been practiced in pairs, has always begun with at least two. This is not an accident: the Other, the field in which is inscribed the law of my desire and hence my truth and my good, is not subject to direct interrogation. When it speaks (or, when the id speaks), it only does so through mistakes. "Truth emerges from the mistake." Hence, to interrogate the Other, I put some other (person) in its place and submit my desire to that other. To find the Other, I must mistake it for some other. It is this other's ethical duty to finally disabuse me of that notion, tell me that he or she, as my analyst, is also not the master of my truth—in short, we are both castrated, cut off from our origins.

Our abortive actions are actions which succeed, those of our words which come to grief are words which own up. ... Within what we call free associations, dream images, symptoms, a word bearing the truth is revealed. If Freud's discovery has any meaning, it is that—truth grabs error by the scruff of the neck in the mistake.

This was Lacan speaking in 1954; nineteen years later, if only to add poignancy to this early pronouncement, he concluded: "Suicide is the only successful act."

Let me try to make this clear by fulfilling an earlier promise to speak of primary repression. The subject, as we have seen, is an effect of the infant's (the infans, that which does not speak) encounter with a signifier. That encounter, however, was a profoundly missed encounter, precisely because there was not yet any subject to take account of it. Hence the signifier that caused my original passion and heralded my emergence into the world of language cut me off from a prior state of being that I will forever feel as a loss, a lack of being, manque-à-être. I will mistake this loss for some lost object, a lost signifier. And in a sense I will repeat this missed encounter interminably the rest of my life. All my actions, my words, my dreams will be an "act of homage to a missed reality," a miss that the oedipal scenario will revalue as castration—"I am cut off from something." No greater tragedy can then befall the subject than to fulfill this encounter, to fulfill its desire (which, as you know, is how the gods punished Oedipus, giving

him the thing he desired that he would never have taken on his own, his mother).

Castration reminds us that we are all, women and men, cut off from something essential, deprived of a little bit of the real. None of us is master of her or his own truth, nor master of the other’s. We are all deprived of the Good, which leaves open to us a world of plural goods, in which we all must have the right and obligation to find our own ways, with a difference. This is what Lacan deciphered in linguistics and in Freud: difference is the law, and if it is broken, one only finds the tyranny of the master, the state, the censor, or the police. All those who preach the doctrines of success—and you can see them on TV, in the bookstores, selling you a diet, a God, a country—preach the doctrine of a society whose deepest desire is to suicide itself. Psychoanalysis, with Lacan, becomes the social science posed against society; it should remain the thorn in everyone’s side.