Lionel Bailly : Lacan, London 2009

- auf jeden Fall Kapitel 3+4, wenn möglich auch noch 5+6 lesen

child between six and eight months old manages to recognise itself in the mirror.

Linguistics and structuralism

Linguistics was another fast-developing field from which Lacan borrowed ideas, and his 'borrowings' here were inspired by the work of social anthropologists, who had done it first. Early in the twentieth century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's innovative course at Geneva overturned the orthodox views of German philology (the study of the historical development and morphology of languages) and laid the basis for a new approach, not just to linguistics, but to anthropology and sociology as well. Saussure had been a part of the movement that launched the investigation of the Asiatic origins of European languages.

Saussure rejected the positivist conception of language as one of simple correspondence to the physical world. The relationship *between words* is of greater importance than the relationship between words and objects. It is the relation of the Sign (the word) to the code of signification (the language) that accords it meaning, rather than a simple correspondence with an external object. Saussure showed, through looking at linguistic variation and innovation, that distinctions within the language had a knock-on effect upon other terms, tenses, prefixes, etc., which meant that any singular innovation necessarily impacted upon the whole code of language or its structure (hence his linguistics being called 'structural'). For Saussure, language was studied not as a tool or medium, but an object of study in its own right. One of Saussure's innovations in linguistics that was to become central to Lacanian conception and practice was his analysis of the relationship between signifiers (words) and the signified (meaning).

Claude Lévi-Strauss saw parallels between Saussure's findings in linguistics and recent developments in anthropology –

another new and labile 'science', which was still in the process of separating fully from its parent disciplines of sociology and ethnology. At the time, anthropology was drawing heavily on the 'functionalist' sociology of Emile Durkheim, and using it to look at the rituals, taboos, and mores of primitive societies from the standpoint of their functionality to those societies. This approach to anthropology was pioneered by Durkheim's nephew, Marcel Mauss, who employed it in his study of the nature and function of sacrifice, and in his famous essay on the role of symbolic gifts amongst Native Americans (*Essai sur le don*, 1924).

Lévi-Strauss was not satisfied with the functionalist approach in anthropology, which involved isolating particular institutions and trying to find parallels between those and modern institutions (for example, Azande witchcraft is 'their version' of medicine), as it implied looking at other cultures simply as versions of our own. Lévi-Strauss realised that Saussure's approach allowed him to go further than Durkheim's functionalism, and to look at culture in itself as a code of meaning. Just as Saussure came to his linguistic codes by studying the relationship between the elements of language, Lévi-Strauss tried to find the code that underlies and links the elements within a culture – for instance, the way that a culture's mores and taboos interact and support each other.

The literary critic Roland Barthes extended the analysis of codes of signification developed by Levi-Strauss and Saussure to analyse popular culture. In his hands, Saussure and Lévi-Strauss's structuralism became a full-blown 'science of signs' or semiology. Barthes reversed the commonsense view that authors wrote texts, to argue – cryptically – that texts 'wrote' authors. The slogan of semiotics became 'The death of the author'.

By the mid 1940s, Lacan had already discovered the relevance of Saussurian linguistics in the formulations of his theories of psychoanalytical practice – one of his first presentations after

the war showed that he had been reflecting upon how meaning is encoded in the speech of the analysand in a way that escapes the consciousness of the speaker. In the 1950s and 1960s, Lacan took up Lévi-Strauss's method, 'structuralism', and used it to examine how not just language and culture but individuals themselves could be seen as a code of meaning in Saussure's sense; and as Barthes argued that texts 'wrote' authors, Lacan argued that 'discourse writes the Subject'.

Also drawing on Saussure, Lacan proposed that in the Subject's unconscious, the relationship of words one to another is of greater importance than the relationship of a word to an object. Another of his theories was that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' – which has sometimes been misunderstood as the unconscious being structured *by* language. Lacan's insight here is that of an experienced clinician: he saw that the encoding of meanings in dream images followed the same rules as the encoding of meaning in language. This allowed him to 'read' dreams by their Subjects' discourse about them.

cannot know (or recognise) itself. The Subject is thus never what it thinks it is, and the ego is the product of the Subject's imaginary game. The ego helps protect the individual against the threat of incoherence and impotence, and provides a fictitious coherence. The Subject is the symbolic part, unconscious but active, which produces unity, although not wholeness; it thinks itself at the source of everything, but is in reality the product of successive images, of language and its signifiers. The signifiers are not produced by the Subject, they are what constitutes it.

3

In the beginning was the word

Structural linguistics and Lacan

Lacan's view was that the characteristic that sets human beings apart from other animals is language: we are speaking beings (*parlêtre*). If language is what makes us human, then the fundamentals of the human psyche should be found in language. Lacan hypothesised a structural mirroring between what we say and the way we think, and even the way our brain is organised: we think like we speak, we speak as we think. This view can be taken as far as the neuropsychology of language and it is possible that language bears the marks of the neuronal organisation, or conversely that our neurones are organised in a way that reflects the structure of language. Lacan's intuition was that this also applied to the unconscious: the unconscious is structured like a language.

The word itself, 'unconscious', requires definition because many liberties have been taken with it over the century since Freud formulated his psychoanalytical concept of it. Under the influence of other early theorists such as Jung, the word took on shadowy, mystical connotations; under the influence of the more behaviourist model, it assumed the shape of something animal-like and instinctive. Lacan was rather appalled by these deviations from the original Freudian model: 'the unconscious as archaic function ... the metaphysical unconscious of Eduard von Hartmann ... above all the unconscious as instinct – all this has nothing to do with the Freudian unconscious ... nothing at

all to do with our experience. I will ask analysts a straight question: *have you ever, for a single moment, the feeling that you are handling the clay of instinct?*'[1]

For Lacan, the unconscious is comprised of symbolic elements, and because we are speaking beings for whom language is the main vehicle of representation, its building blocks are words, and its structure is grammatical (an oversimplification which will be refined very shortly). This is why discourse in the setting of an analytical session is the only way of working effectively with it.

The unconscious is what the Subject represses, and by definition is therefore not consciously expressible by the Subject; however, it constantly manifests itself, quite without the Subject's intentions, in dreams, unsuccessful/self-defeating acts, slips of the tongue, and even pathological symptoms. These manifestations were for Lacan 'the discourse of the unconscious': *discourse*, because they always show the structure of language. Lacan found with the patients upon his couch, that even what they thought of as their conscious speech obeyed a hidden structure: that their omissions, denegations, 'forgettings', repetitions, etc. contained the discourse of the unconscious. This observation led him to an intense reflection upon what constitutes the unconscious, the manifestations of which have such a language-like structure. He approached this question using theoretical tools being developed by linguists.

Structural linguistics and the unconscious

In order to understand Lacan's view of language and the unconscious, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who was a great source of inspiration for Lacan. For Saussure, the fundamental building

block of language is the Sign – which was commonly thought of as comprising a word plus its meaning; linguistic expression is achieved by the selection and combination of Signs. Saussure's innovation was to say that the linguistic Sign unites not a name and a thing, but a sound-image and a concept: he spoke not, therefore, of words and meanings, but of signifiers and signifieds.

Why was he not content with 'words' and 'meanings'? For a start, words exist in a spoken and a written form, and they can have many meanings; meanings can be expressed in many ways – in pictures, writing, etc. The object, a needle, can exist without the word 'needle'; the word 'needle' can take a written form or a spoken form and it can be uttered in the absence of the object, to which its link is entirely intellectual; it also has other meanings than that of the slim, pointed metallic object with a hole in one end through which thread is introduced, used in sewing. Saussure was not undertaking to generalise about semiotics; he was concerned with linguistics only and wished to analyse the composition of the linguistic Sign in its *primary* form – the form in which human beings first access it, which is speech, composed of sound-images. Speech pre-dates writing by a long way, both in human history and in child development; writing is secondary to speech. Therefore, it was first of all the formation of signs in *speech* that Saussure was interested in, and he was aware of the psychological nature of this process. He emphasised the immateriality (abstract nature) of the linguistic Sign: thus, the signifier (sound image/acoustic image) is not the *material* sound but the hearer's psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes on our senses. Also, the signified (concept) is not the object (the chair in front of you) but *the idea of the object* (any chair – the property of being a chair – of which an example may or may not be before you at the time of speaking).

Signified = concept → Signifier = acoustic image

These two elements combine in a relationship called 'signification' to produce the linguistic Sign, which is represented in this Saussurian diagram:

$$\text{Sign} = \frac{\downarrow \text{signified} \uparrow}{\text{signifier}}$$

The horizontal line marking the two elements of the Sign is referred to as 'the bar'; the vertical arrows denote the relationship of signification. For Saussure signifiers and signifieds are like words written on a sheet of paper, with the signifier on one side and its signified on the other; they cannot be separated, and yet they cannot occupy the same place.

In a different context, the philosopher Susanne Langer wrote: 'Symbols [what Saussure would have called Signs] are not proxy for their objects but are *vehicles for the conception of objects* ... In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly mean*. Behaviour towards conceptions is what words normally evoke; this is the typical process of thinking'.[2]

Lacan must have noticed that Saussure's formulation of signifiers and signifieds corresponded with terms that Freud had already used in his writings, and which were not very satisfactorily rendered in French, where the word 'representation' was being used without any discrimination about what exactly was being represented. The German *Vorstellungen* allowed Freud to distinguish between the 'ideas of things' and the things themselves; Freud's *Vorstellungreprasentanzen* are therefore 'representations of the *ideas of things*' – not 'representations of things'. This corresponds very well with 'signifiers' (the symbolic representations) and their relationship with 'signifieds' (the ideas).

Signifiers and the human psyche

From the very birth of psychoanalysis, the spoken word has had a special importance, being the gateway to the patient's psyche; Freud had already pointed out that emotions (affects) attach themselves not to meanings but to signifiers, although he used the term *vorstellungreprasentanzen* – 'ideational-representatives'. Where Freud linked 'drives' with ideational-representatives, in understanding Lacan, the equivalent could be thought of as the 'emotional load attached to signifiers'. What is important is that it is *signifiers* (and not the signifieds) that bear this load.

As a clinician, Lacan was struck by the extent and frequency of disjunction between words and their intended meanings – how the words uttered by the analysand upon the couch often escaped the intentions of the speaker, and expressed something not consciously intended. The more he heard, the weaker the links between signified and signifier appeared to be; and the greater the connection between signifiers among themselves. Lacan, who liked to use paradox, sought to highlight the primacy of the signifier in the psyche by rewriting Saussure's model of the Sign in the form of a quasi-algebraic sign in which a capital S (representing the *signifier*) is placed over a lower case and italicised *s* (representing the *signified*), these two symbols being separated by a horizontal 'bar'.

$$\frac{S}{s}$$

This suited Lacan's purpose of emphasising how the signified inevitably 'slips beneath' the signifier, resisting our attempts to delimit it. The importance of the bar is that it conveys the idea of the resistance to meaning inherent in language: meaning does not simply appear spontaneously but involves the act of crossing the bar, and it is in this act that signification, or meaning, is produced.

The crossing of the bar

This may be the quintessentially human act: the intellectual exercise that no other animal performs. Dogs respond to verbal commands, and numerous studies have been carried out to try to show that chimpanzees are capable of using language; some have succeeded in training individual chimpanzees to perform linguistic signs in American Sign Language. However, there is no conclusive evidence that the chimpanzees' 'appropriate use' of these signs (signing 'toothbrush' at bedtime) are any more than Pavlovian trained behaviours, accomplished after months of repetition. The human child needs no training, or even teaching: human beings *acquire* language by simply 'crossing the bar' in the relationship between signifier and signified; and once the bar is crossed, the human psyche is in the entrance hall of the Symbolic realm, with all its vast possibilities.

The notion of a *failure* to 'cross the bar' recurs in Lacanian theory at several points – the failure to cross the bar of metaphor, for example, being both an indicator and a cause of psychosis. But the formulation of signifier/signified has another importance for Lacan: it also underlines the *autonomy* of the signifier in relation to the signified, and it is this autonomy that makes signifiers so highly mobile, so easily lent to different associations of substitution and recombination, and indeed so perfect as the building blocks of human thinking, both conscious and unconscious.

It is important here to note that meaning is given by *the association of signifiers in a signifying chain*. The simple association of signifier with signified is far less important, particularly as this link is not permanent and other signifiers can always be substituted. This substitution of signifiers becomes enormously complex when the child crosses the bar of metaphor, as this allows for multiple layers of signifiers to be substituted (as we shall see later on). The same signifieds may therefore be represented by a vast array of different signifier chains; for example,

the idea of failure or impotence may lurk beneath the bar of a range of different signifying chains: '*I did not get into Oxford or Cambridge*', '*She was not impressed by what I said*', or '*She manages to live on very little*'... The associations between signifiers and their high mobility allow for the immeasurable complexity of human psychological functioning, both conscious and unconscious.

The making of the unconscious

The newborn, in a world of primary functioning, has no unconscious and a limited consciousness; unlike Freud and many psychologists, however, Lacan did not think that the baby is simply a set of drives and physical needs. For Lacan, the baby, born with the human potential of thinking, does from the very start display a kind of proto-thinking: it forms concepts and hypotheses from its earliest days. Its very first concepts are based upon the dialectic of comfort/discomfort, presence/absence: it recognises a change in environment if mother is there or not, and then, by means of facial recognition, forms an *idea of mother* – a signified, with the glimmer of signifier attached to it, even when the baby is unable to pronounce 'mama'. Other signifieds are formed in a similar fashion, they already have proto-signifiers for the baby, and await the signifiers designated by language to be attached to them. And yet, even before they have become represented by a socially recognised symbolic element, these signifieds already have some power, and can be thought of as unexpressed concepts.

It is this ability to think that makes the pre-language baby able, for instance, to find humour in situations: one has seen a baby laughing uproariously at the sight of a helium-filled balloon bobbing about against the ceiling – the baby has already formed a conception of the law of gravity, which the balloon is disobeying. The proto-conceptualisations of the newborn will be

discussed in greater detail later on in the book; for now, what is important is that it is the acquisition of language that allows the human infant the possibility of conceptual representation within the framework of human society, and the possibility of a far greater subtlety and flexibility in the elaboration of abstract ideas.

From the point at which the baby or small child begins to formulate its thoughts in language, there is the possibility of the creation of the unconscious. There comes a moment at which for the first time, a thought occurs which is unbearable to the child; and for the first time, its psychic apparatus represses it. And what does it repress? The signifier with which the thought was formulated.

For Lacan, there are no signifieds in the unconscious, only signifiers. If there were signifieds as well, then the meaning of any particular signifier for a Subject would be quite rigid: a signifier (and its emotional load) would remain immovable, attached forever to one particular thing and not be transferable to another. Fortunately, this is not so, because if it were, then a signifier, once repressed, would be evermore irretrievable. For example, because at a certain moment, the idea of 'loss' may be unbearable to the Subject, the Subject would never be able to use the word 'loss' in conscious speech again. This would be a very rare occurrence and a sign of psychopathology. In fact, what is repressed is usually *a configuration of signifiers* (a signifier in a certain relationship with other signifiers); this means that the signifier itself is still accessible in other contexts. Only in extreme cases is a signifier completely erased – this process is not repression but *foreclosure*.

In the unconscious, signifiers may also come apart into their constituents, sometimes down to individual phonetic elements (the letter-sound). These elements recombine into new signifiers; and perhaps these new signifiers might recombine into new chains. Lacan held that the letter-sound, as the smallest part of a signifier, was the smallest recombinable element; the first

letter-sound of a signifier is particularly important, as any child would recognise: a six year old who has just learned to spell his/her name will attach a special significance to the letter with which it begins.

This primary repression creates an aspect of the psyche which is inaccessible to consciousness – the unconscious. Rather than the topological representations used by Freud, one may think of the unconscious as the force field that orientates the molecules of a liquid crystal, where the molecules are the signifiers. The analogy of the liquid crystal is useful when describing the relation of signifiers inside the unconscious: they behave similarly to the molecules in the crystal, forming bonds between themselves, and under the influence of some energy-source, freely slide over one another to form different bonds with other molecules within the crystal. In the unconscious, signifiers develop the same type of relationship between themselves as they do in the conscious psyche: they form themselves into the 'signifying chain'. The unconscious is not within the Subject's control or even view, but it acts in spite of the ego, constantly throwing out signifiers that the Subject has repressed. It is at its most unruly in small children. The elements in the unconscious are the signifiers that represent wishes, desires, fears, and images.

The act of repression may bury the signifier linked with an unpleasant affect (emotion), but it cannot bury the affect. After the signifer is repressed, the now 'orphaned' affect roams free in the psyche, seeking another signifier to which it may attach. This forms the basis of Freud's theory of displacement: the 'roaming' affect may take, for example, the form of a feeling of worry or fear which the child attaches to some other signifier (maybe spiders or baldness), becoming worried about or fearful of a thing which was never the true cause of the fear. The re-attachment process itself is not random but controlled by a signifying chain formed in the unconscious, and this is why it is

possible in analysis, to 'source' the re-attachment of the affect to the apparently nonsensical object, by a work of retrieving the repressed signifying chain from the unconscious.

Lacan held that in the signifying chain, any one signifier has meaning through its connection with other signifiers, through its place in the chain. An anorexic girl may say: '*I just want to be thin*', but in her unconscious, *thin* is the end of a long associative chain – *in control, happy like when I was seven, pure and powerful as that child, not with this fat, these blobs, it's embarrassing* ...' It is by bringing into conscious speech the links of this chain that the patient can move further and further towards the core of his/her Subject – for the chain will go on a long way beyond those very few signifiers given in the example.

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another through their similarity [metaphoric way] or through their contiguity [metonymic way].[3]

Signifieds derive their coherence from the network of signifiers. The chain of signifiers governs the set of the signified, and words derive their full meaning from their association with others. These associations are performed by means of the two primary processes of selection and combination: when we speak we select a certain number of linguistic units from our mental lexicon and we combine them. These processes are described as the paradigmatic axis (selection) and the syntagmatic axis (combination). The axis of selection concerns the system of language (*langue*) in that it entails lexical choice, while in speech (*parole*), the use of chosen lexical terms depends on the axis of combination. The existence of these two axes can be inferred from the different clinical manifestations of aphasia – a neurological disorder that affects the speech centres.

There are many types of aphasia, of which the two most classic seem to demonstrate the existence of the two axes of

linguistic association. The first involves individuals who cannot access words, that is, their ability to select from the lexicon of linguistic signs is affected. If, for instance, they wanted to tell you that your hat was on the chair, they would not be able to find the words '*hat*' or '*chair*', but might be able to convey that '*Your thingy is on the thingy*'. In this kind of aphasia, one might postulate that the paradigmatic axis has been affected. In the other form of aphasia, the individual can access the words but cannot combine them: they would be able to name '*hat*' and '*chair*', but not come out with '*Your hat is on the chair*'; this suggests that the syntagmatic axis is affected.

Metaphor operates along the axis of lexicon (paradigmatic). A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable. Thus, it is a stylistic figure based on relations of similarity. Metaphor consists of referring to something by the name of something else. For example: *a star is born*. This metaphor consists of a linguistic sign, 'star', which consists of the signifier 'star' and a signified, which is the concept of a person who has the properties of brilliance and of high rank. But there is no mention of a person, and the signifier 'star' could anyway have a number of different signifieds, including a celestial body of great mass and energy, or a five-pointed shape. In order for the listener to understand the metaphor, a number of mental operations must be carried out. Firstly, there must be a selection of the correct signified associated with the signifier 'star' and an expulsion of the others. Secondly, the listener must insert the idea of a person beneath the signifying bar of 'star' in order to form a new signified composed of some of the properties of a star added to the idea of a person. However, the idea of a person has to be represented, because meaning arises from the crossing of the bar of signification. This means that the signifier 'person' would also have to have been there, subliminally, before being deleted. In

other words, for the metaphor to work, the listener must have mentally inserted an unspoken linguistic sign, 'person', in a process of several stages. This is how it would work:

(Unspoken)		(Spoken)	
$\frac{S1}{s1}$	acoustic image of 'person' idea of person	$\frac{S2}{s2}$	acoustic image of 'star' idea of brilliance and high rank

(Spoken metaphor)

$\frac{S2}{\frac{S1.s2}{s1}}$	acoustic image of 'star' the linguistic sign 'person' is unspoken beneath the bar and when the listener crosses it she/he links the acoustic image 'star' with a new signified resulting from the addition of the ideas of brilliance and high rank to the idea of a person: $s1 + s2$ makes a new signified, and S1 is deleted.

(Understood metaphor, created by the crossing of the bar)

(deleted) S1 $\leftarrow$ $\frac{S2}{s1 + s2}$ = $\frac{S2}{s3}$ 'star'
idea of brilliant high-ranking person

The metaphor is now a new sign (let's call it *S*3) made up of the acoustic image 'star' and a new signified.

This deals, of course, only with the metaphor 'star' in the sentence; there is also 'born', which, for a person unable to understand metaphor, might have rather disturbing connotations; here again, a complex mental operation must be performed. Lacan's point is that the human faculty of complex and abstract thinking is built upon the ability of the mind to perform these feats of substitution, selection, deletion, addition, and the crossing of many bars of signification so effortlessly that

one doesn't even think about the mechanics of it; and yet it is worth knowing the mechanics because these very same processes produce the manifestations of our unconscious, and indeed it is *only* by understanding these processes that we ever will understand why we think and feel what we do.

In certain cases of psychosis, the patient finds it impossible to cross the bar in metaphor, or to perform the mental acts of substitution, addition, and deletion. In the above example, *a star is born*, an unwanted signified such as 'idea of a five-pointed shape' might intrude in the mind of a psychotic patient, as might some disturbing image of a live birth. Even outside psychosis, if the words of a metaphor were taken in their literal meaning or out of context, the phrase would probably be considered illogical or funny.

This literality is normal in young children; it is also observed in deaf people who, after having been fitted with a prosthesis, start to hear and learn to speak; difficulty in understanding metaphor is one of the characteristics of some pervasive developmental disorders in children (for example Asperger's disorder).

Metonymy and synecdoche function along the syntagmatic axis of language – by the relationship of contiguity between signifiers. Metonymy is a figure of speech characterised by the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc., a word or phrase denoting a property or something associated with it: *Downing Street said, the Crown will prosecute, the pen is mightier than the sword.*

Metonymy: S2 is substituted for S1 but they have to remain in a relation of contiguity. s2 [the idea of a crown] is expelled.

$$\frac{S1\ \text{[signifier of the State]} \qquad S2\ \text{[signifier of Crown]}}{s1\ \text{[signified of the State]} \quad \star \quad s2\ \text{[signified of Crown]}} \rightarrow \frac{S2}{s1}$$

Metonymy is sometimes confused with synecdoche: in synecdoche, the whole is represented by the naming of a part of it, or vice versa: *a day at the wheel, a sail on the horizon, I'll have the lamb.*

A sail on the horizon. The part (a sail) is used for the whole (a ship):

$\frac{S1}{s1}$ acoustic image ship/idea of a ship

$\frac{S2}{s2}$ acoustic image sail/idea of a sail

Synecdoche: S2 is substituted for S1 but they remain in a relation of contiguity. s2 [the idea of a sail] is expelled. The process of synecdoche formation is the same as metonymic formation; the difference is that in synecdoche, there is a physical relationship between the usual signifieds of the signifier present and the signifier absent, whereas in metonymy, the relationship between the two implied signifieds is not physical but one of possession of properties (an intellectual possesses a pen, where a warrior possesses a sword; 'Downing Street' only works as metonymy while the prime minister lives there: if he moved to Tottenham Court Road, then 'Downing Street' would lose its metonymic meaning).

In metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche there is a substitution of signifiers; however, the substitution in metaphor is made on the basis of similarity of properties, while in metonymy/synecdoche, the substitution is made on the basis of contiguity of ideas. For example, the phrase *to fish for pearls* uses metonymy, drawing from *fishing* the notion of taking things from the ocean, although fish themselves are not involved. What remains similar is the domain of usage and the associations, but we understand the phrase *in spite of* rather than *because of* the literal meaning of fishing: we know you do not use a fishing rod or net to get pearls. In contrast, the metaphorical phrase *fishing for information* transfers the concept of fishing into an *entirely new domain*, and uses not the contiguity of signifieds but the similarity in the properties of the process itself, which may involve waiting, hoping, tentatively casting about...

The discourse of the unconscious

The hypothesis that the unconscious is structured like a language is based on the Freudian theory of dreams. Dream work involves unconscious mechanisms such as condensation and displacement, which transform latent thoughts into manifest thoughts. The role of these mechanisms is to hide from the dreamer his/her own disturbing unconscious thoughts – or for Lacan, the disturbing signifiers in his/her unconscious; but as the affects that accompany the signifiers cannot be repressed, these are often present and disturbing in dreams.

Condensation involves the process of creating a new 'idea of a thing' by means of joining up other 'ideas of things': for instance, a character in a dream may be a composite of ideas of other characters, or even the idea of a character and the idea of a thing. However, because there are only signifiers in the unconscious, the linkage of the signifiers belonging to these ideas often gives a surreal result.

Displacement is the process in which an affect linked to an idea is detached from it and linked to another one, which has only associative links with the first. For example, the dreamer dreams of a funeral, but rather than feeling sad or upset, experiences a state of joy. Something that is the source of happiness is still hidden from the dreamer, but the affect is displaced onto this other scene, the funeral. Displacement is often what gives to a dream its sense of bizarreness.

One can easily see how Lacan could take these notions of condensation and displacement into his own theory of signification and the unconscious by replacing Freud's ideational-representatives (*vorstellungreprasentanzen*) with 'signifiers'. This allows a new step to be made – that of seeking out the connections inherent in the dream *by means of the structure of language*. According to Lacan, 'the dream has the structure of a sentence ... of a rebus ... it has the structure of a form of writing [which]

reproduces the simultaneously phonetic and symbolic use of signifying elements, which can also be found both in the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt and in the characters still used in China.'

Lacan suggests that condensation is a metaphoric process and displacement a metonymic one. In language, the substitution of one signifier for another in a metaphor takes place between two terms with a 'traceable' similarity. In dreams this similarity is not always immediately identifiable when it occurs at an unconscious level, but if the analyst working with a patient's dream expects that some of the chains of words used to describe the dream have a metaphoric and a metonymic/synecdochal structure, she/he may help the patient 'chase' the substituted signifier through the patient's associations.

A young woman dreams that she's looking into a big chest full of clothes and strange objects. She finds what looks like the skin of a monkey but realises that it is actually still alive. She experiences a sudden outburst of violence and crushes one of the animal's feet with her bare hands. She can feel the bones cracking.

During the session, this patient described how she '*crushed the monkey's foot*', and tried unsuccessfully to remember a scene in her life in which a monkey or a foot were involved. When asked to go through the description again, she says: '*I can feel his foot being broken in my grip ... the crushing of his toes ... his tootsies*' and suddenly remembers that Tootsie was the childhood nickname of her older sister, with whom she had a relationship of intense rivalry.

In this dream, you can see the process in which her sister, Tootsie, has been disguised as a foot. The similarity is that the foot has toes, which could be called tootsies, and her sister had a nickname that was Tootsie. The initial substitution is metaphorical because there is no connection between her sister and a toe; it has been further disguised by a synecdoche, in that the thing being crushed was the foot of which the toe was a part, and only through an association did the dreamer arrive at the repressed signifier chain – that '*she was crushing Tootsie*'.

Displacement in dreams can be seen as a metonymic process: the essential part of the latent material appears secondary at a manifest level; it is represented by the incidental. The relation of contiguity can be revealed only by associations, as in the following example.

A young woman has talked to her analyst for some time about her difficult relationship with her parents: her mother is severely obsessional and her father used his daughter as a confidant, telling her in particular inappropriate details about his sexual life. She left home as soon as she could and has avoided contact with her parents for many years. This is a dream she told during a session three days after a holiday during which she saw her father but failed to talk to him:

> *There was this man who wanted to kill me. I knew it. I was hiding behind a bush with two children, a boy and a girl ... trying to protect them. I went to hide in a building. It was a library. People were lying on the floor – lots of people, like as if they were sleeping. I tried to hide in the middle of them, I wanted to melt within all the bodies. The children were gone. The man went into the library and without difficulty he found me. I was not scared even though I knew he wanted to kill me. So I stood up and stabbed him with a pen. I felt the pen entering his chest and there was blood everywhere. He was in pain and the situation looked terrible but I felt relieved. The people around me did not react at all, as if all this was normal – expected.*

The contiguity of the signifiers that she uses reveals the meaning of this dream: she hides in a library (she has hidden from her problems in books for much of her life), but this does not stop the man from threatening her. She tries to hide amongst bodies (she had in reality a promiscuous past in which her many, indiscriminate sexual contacts were a way of 'losing' herself in other bodies); she stabs him with a pen (in real life, she did not want to talk to her father; however, she had written a letter to him, to vent some of her anger – she wanted to hurt him, with her

pen). The man is now in pain, and 'the situation looked terrible', but she experiences some relief from her act (as she did from writing the letter). And finally, the act which sounds so extreme, creates no shock in anyone else: it seems that it's actually something that could be considered 'normal – expected' – as unremarkable, in fact, as the sending of a letter. In this dream, the patient's narrative is almost exactly a narrative of how she has dealt with the emotional problems posed by her father, and her recent real-life experience, but omits all the key signifiers and substitutes them with others, so that it is only in the *contiguity of the signifiers* that the meaning resounds.

In the unconscious, not only signifiers may be substituted or combined in hidden associations, but their component parts may be too. For Lacan, signifiers could be broken down into smaller phonic elements, and sometimes, a single letter-sound may carry a message. At others, phonemes from a repressed signifier may recombine to produce a new signifier, as in the following dream, recounted by a Jewish woman living in London.

> *There was this really annoying spider – I am afraid of spiders, but this one was more annoying than scary. It just kept bothering me, and somehow, I had to be nice to it. I couldn't just squash it, I had to talk to it. But it kept getting in my face and annoying me. It looked, well, not much like a spider – more a little ball of fluff with a dark centre and sort of light woolly hair coming off it.*

In talking about it, she realises that the feelings she has articulated towards this spider are the same feelings she has been experiencing towards a neighbour, whom she suspects of having an affair with her husband. She has described this neighbour as 'lightweight', 'an airhead', and racist – in a previous session, she said that this woman would have, during World War II, been a Nazi sympathiser. Her description of the spider describes her annoyance with the woman, 'a bit of fluff' to whom she is obliged to be 'nice', even though she hates her and fears her. One can

imagine that the signifier *Nazi* '*sympathiser*' – how she thinks of the neighbour – could be reduced to the phonic elements 's' – 'p' – 'i' – 'er' and recombined into 'spider' – and the fact that this dream is *not* about a spider is confirmed in the un-spider-likeness of the description of a lightweight ball of blond-ish fluff.

It is not only in dreams that unconscious speech appears: it appears also in slips of the tongue, in accounts of self-defeating acts, in denegation (saying the opposite of what you unconsciously mean), in grammatical errors, in people's choice of subject matter when they speak, and in countless other ways. Slips of the tongue may also be slips of the pen, or the keyboard, where again, a simple typographical error may be revealing.

The mother of an anorexic girl, who was a very controlling woman, had great problems in accepting the relationship between her daughter and the psychiatrist, which is one that necessarily excluded her. This mother wrote a letter to the psychiatrist in which she sought to influence the way in which the psychiatrist thought, telling him in some detail her understanding and interpretation of her daughter's behaviour and emotional state. Her aggression was restrained within socially acceptable bounds up until the end of the text, which concluded: '*You see, that's how the anorexic minx works.*' She had probably intended 'mind'.

Many of the symptoms encountered in psychopathology also follow this linguistic structure and can be seen as metaphors. This time, it's not a dream image that is linked to a metaphoric process but the symptom itself. For example, a teenage boy has started to regularly pass out at school; he passes out only at school, never at home, and all medical tests have revealed that there is no organic cause for his losses of consciousness. During sessions, he starts to talk about the fact that he has become quite 'naughty' (rebellious, sexually interested) and he's afraid that his mum is going to suffer because of that. He's also scared that his father, who travels a lot and is rarely at home, will be very cross

when he comes back. Talking about the episodes of losses of consciousness, he says, 'When I pass out, I can't do anything at school,' and realises that the symptom is for him a way of *not doing anything* [*naughty*] at school.

The analyst may use the metaphoric (or metonymic) structure of the patient's own discourse to try to help unveil the signifier. A ten-year-old boy developed an irrational fear of vomiting, which was not linked with any digestive illness. He was old enough to know that it was irrational, and tried to hide it from his parents, who were going through a divorce. This fear began to overwhelm him: he could not concentrate at school, was miserable at home, and spent his time making sure he was near a toilet in case he had to throw up. When his parents finally discovered his strange fear, he was sent to a therapist. He said: '*I don't know why I think I'll throw up. It's just that sometimes, it's like there's something stuck in my throat ... I feel sick, and I can't swallow it.*' The therapist knew his parents were splitting up – a fact that was very hard for the boy to accept, that 'sticks in the craw': he entered into this metaphorical structure and asked: '*What is it that's so hard for you to swallow?*' – opening the door for the boy's unconscious knowledge of the cause of his anxiety to be represented in speech.

The symptom may operate at more than one level of anxiety and almost always does. Before reaching the point of realisation that his parents' divorce may be at the centre of his anxieties, the boy had also said of his strange behaviour: '*I have to be near the toilet because if I throw up, I'll get myself dirty ... I'll soil myself.*' It transpired that the boy, who was in many ways a model child, had once had an embarrassing episode of soiling himself when he was four, which caused him great shame and stress and had provoked in him a fear that his parents would despise him and not love him any more. To him, the signifier 'soiling' was intimately linked with the signifiers which signified loss of parental love: his parents' imminent separation might have

indicated a loss of love for him as well, and could have been seen as being 'his fault' if he got himself dirty.

The passage between the conscious and unconscious mind of signifiers is constant and banal. It is not only in analysis that a repressed signifier reappears: it may spontaneously do so without any help from someone else, in the absence of the need to repress it any longer; equally, repression may be occasional, temporary, and trivial – it may cause you to 'forget' someone's name for the ten minutes in which you needed it.

Lacan placed much emphasis on signifiers, but it is important to understand that signifiers are essentially symbolic elements, which in special circumstances may take another form than speech. Deaf people, for example, use unspoken signifiers, but the same rules (adapted to the visual) would apply for them. An interesting and productive line of reflection for a clinician is upon the particularities or perhaps even the complete absence of the unconscious in severely autistic children who have never developed any language.

The master signifiers

These are the very backbone of the human Subject; they are also, perhaps in negative form (in the sense of the negative of a photograph), the stuff of denegation. A listener with a trained ear will be able, over the course of a relatively short period of time, to recognise the master signifiers of a speaker. They appear in those declarations that make, when examined, no logical sense to the listener (because they obey a logic entirely personal to the speaker). They are often repeated, in different contexts, sometimes so much that they come to constitute a linguistic tic in the speaker, for whom they have a significance that is nothing to do with the literal signified of the signifiers (this is not to be confused, however, with that common feature in the speech of

children, who upon learning a new word or a new bit of playground slang, use it *ad nauseam*). Before I explain exactly what a master signifier is, consider the following example.

An eleven-year-old girl had been bullying another in her class; the teachers were concerned that her behaviour was linked with the death, the previous year, of her father. After a few sessions, the psychologist noticed that she used the word 'lucky' a lot, often in ways that made little sense or in contexts that were fairly uninteresting or inappropriate. '*I'm so lucky, because I haven't got to go to the hairdressers*' or '*There were five purple bracelets and four pink ones, and I'm so lucky, I got one of the purple ones*' – indeed, 'I'm so lucky' was so over-used that one had to consider the meaning of it. The girl's bullying was of another girl who had been put down for a private school that she (the Subject) had wanted to go to, but which was too expensive for her family. When asked obliquely about this – the school was merely mentioned – she said: '*I'm so lucky, you know why? I haven't got to take the entrance exam!*'

One can see how the function of 'I'm so lucky' is to orientate the other signifiers in the signifying chain into a fiction that supports her ego. If you took the 'I'm so lucky' out of the sentence about the school, she would be left with '*I haven't got to take the entrance exams*' – which might point up too plainly the painful truth that she wasn't put down for the school in the first place. 'I'm so lucky' is the 'spin' she puts on it, and 'spin', even if rather too fashionable a term, is not a bad word in this context, for it describes exactly what Lacan said that master signifiers do: orientate and give direction.

A woman in her early fifties complained endlessly about the behaviour of her young adult sons. '*They're really too much!*' was her constant refrain, and was applied to descriptions of almost every action of theirs – bringing a girlfriend to the family's holiday home, having a few friends around for a week in the summer – things many listeners might not consider unreasonable.

It appears that she was always called upon to cater for the needs of the guests as well as her family, and resented this. Friends had advised her that if she didn't want to, she shouldn't do it, but she never felt that she could stop; nor did she feel that she could enunciate her resentment to her family in any direct way. In the 'too much'-ness of her complaints about those close to her (her husband got much the same portrayal) could be heard her own sense of being 'too little' appreciated; it is no surprise to discover that she had had this feeling of insignificance in comparison with her siblings from her earliest memories. The truth of her Subject was that she was the one who didn't matter, who never felt adequately loved, and who was constantly overlooked. 'Littleness' or insignificance, rather than 'too much'-ness was her master signifier, in contrast to what she could pronounce.

The master signifiers usually mask their opposites, or perhaps one should say they exist in a polarised form, with the audible side propping up the ego and the unenunciated buried in the unconscious, but constantly pushing up at its opposite number. Their function is to redirect signifiers in a signifying chain painful to the speaker in such a way that a signifying chain with the opposite, bearable, or even comforting meaning emerges in conscious speech. They are not new inventions of the speaker; they have been laid down at some quite early point in the Subject's life, although they may assume different guises to suit the linguistic fashions of the day. In the case of the eleven-year-old girl, 'lucky' was laid down as a master signifier many years before the death of her father. She had always defended herself against problems of jealousy of her older brother (and later friends at school) by insisting upon the 'luck' she had in life – 'I'm so lucky, I won the pass-the-parcel!' etc. – and inserting it in many situations in which to most people the luck factor would seem irrelevant. In fact, the true master signifier was the exact opposite – 'lucky' was the mask behind which was hiding 'unlucky' and her deep sense of (imagined) injustice and anxiety

that other people had it better than her. Upon the death of her father, the sudden increase in genuine bad luck in her life was greeted with a massive effort on her part to maintain her fiction with the use of her master signifiers; and there they were – already in place in the vanguard of her ego, ready to raise their shields when required.

The master signifiers are those that, for the Subject, have become quite detached from their signifieds, but carry out the function of changing the meaning of the signifying chain into one that supports the ego. It is one of the main tasks of analysis to unmask these master signifiers, and to bring to light the side of them that is hidden in the unconscious. This may sound like a terrifying prospect for the ego, but Lacan never said that the ego had to be demolished for the Subject to be revealed. Rather, he used a metaphor in which the ego was an edifice built around master signifiers in whose shadow their negative counterparts are obscured. Analysis is therefore more like the movement of the sun that brings these negatives into the light: the ego can remain intact, but now we can see the whole thing more clearly.

One of the more difficult points that Lacan made about the master signifier was to equate it with the Name-of-the-Father. This is not as mystical as it seems, but in order to understand it, one must first understand what he means by the Name-of-the-Father, the Phallus, the *objet petit a* (chapters 6 and 7), and also his ideas about the place of desire in the construction of the Subject and its ego. I hope that this equation of the Name-of-the-Father with the master signifiers will become quite obvious to readers by the end of this book.

4
The Other

Lacan's linguistic hypotheses concern the kind of speech an analyst listens for in a patient; he is not a linguist making a general theory of language. The manifestations (or discourse) of the unconscious – dreams, slips of the tongue, pathological symptoms, etc. – are always signifiers in a signifying chain that seems to 'happen' to the Subject as if sent from somewhere else. Lacan held that the analysand's ego mistakes this unconscious discourse for a discourse that comes from the Other.

The 'other' and the 'Other'

The concept of 'otherness' is central to Lacanian thinking. He constantly posits the Subject as coming into being by means of its relationship with otherness, an insight inspired by his interest in Hegelian dialectics, which described the formation of self-consciousness as the result of a struggle between entities. For Lacan, 'otherness' took two forms: in 1955, he made a distinction between *le petit autre* (small other) and *le grand autre* (*Autre* or Other with a capitalised first letter). *Le petit autre* derives from the Mirror Stage: it is not a real 'other' but the reflection and projection of the ego. As such, it belongs in the realm of the Imaginary; it also gives rise later to the concept of *l'objet petit a* (the small a object), which is dealt with in chapter 8. Apart from the small other in the mirror, the individual comes to recognise all other people as 'little others', and to treat them as suitable objects of projection and identification. On the other hand, *le grand autre* – the Other – indicates a radical otherness which is

beyond the Imaginary and which cannot be resolved and dealt with through identification. This otherness comes from language and the Law – *le grand autre* belongs to the Symbolic order.

At the beginning of his teaching, Lacan uses the letter *a* (in lower case) to represent the small other (object of the self or *petit autre*) constituted in the Mirror Stage. It is used to distinguish the imaginary dimension within which the self constitutes its ego from the symbolic big Other (represented by a capital *A* for *l'Autre*). The Other is Society, the Law, etc. – the whole set of hypotheses within which the Subject is constituted – it is an illustration of the fact that the Subject is part of an order which predates its birth and is exterior to the self. This order is symbolic, and because its most elaborate and influential manifestation is language, the Other is sometimes used to designate language itself.

Language as the Other

Language pre-existed the child, and the child's parents; it is a lexicon of words and a rulebook handed down over the millennia. It was created by humankind and is the primary form in which the human subject experiences the human-ness of Society. The psychoanalyst, listening to the speech of the Subject upon the couch, hears this Other discourse. It is not a discourse that the Subject intends, but that it cannot help but produce; it is obvious in the unintended emergence of repressed signifiers, be they in slips of the tongue, in dreams, or in pathological symptoms. Lacan held that the analysand's ego mistakes this unconscious discourse for a discourse that comes from the Other. It also returns to the Subject in the words uttered by the analyst when she/he makes an interpretation: the discourse of the analyst is experienced by the Subject as the discourse of the

Other – the great treasury of knowledge, rules, and hypotheses that constitutes the Symbolic realm.

Many people picture the unconscious as a 'hidden character' inside the individual's mind, or, as Freud drew it, an area in the psyche. Lacan's view is radically different: as seen in the previous chapter, the signifiers repressed into the unconscious continue to exist, despite the Subject's antipathy towards them, because of the Other, the lexicon to which they belong, and they emerge from time to time in a form and structure dictated by this Other. The unconscious therefore exists within an abstract matrix – the discourse of the Other – and like the electromagnetic field operating upon a liquid crystal to form letters, it pulls signifiers into place in this matrix.

The Subject is constituted from the Other

The Lacanian Subject also exists in the discourse of the Other: it is created even before the baby is born in the discourse of its parents, a little like a registered 'domain name' on the Internet – a marker where a website may one day come into being. The parents talk about the child, or at least have in their minds some ideas and fantasies about the child, even before it is born. These ideas – this discourse – is formulated by their own Subjects and unconsciousness within the Other, which is the set of hypotheses into which they, too, were born. And in speaking of their hopes and fears, these parents are to some extent already 'giving birth' to the new Subject. If one takes this idea further, the Subject could exist whether or not the person is alive. This is not just a philosophical fancy: it has clinical relevance, as one may see how a dead child or a past patriarch may still act like a Subject within the dynamics of a family.

At the start of its life, the Other for the child is embodied by

the mother, who is for this reason in some contexts synonymous with the Other; it is from this Other that the child acquires language, as well as the set of laws and hypotheses to which she subscribes. This transmission of the Other from mother to child is, for Lacan, the primary identification (remember that identification is the process whereby the Subject assumes the *underlying structure* of another, so that its development, whatever the environmental circumstances, is governed by that structure). In Lacan's words, 'primary identification ... occurs on the basis of the mother's omnipotence [and] makes the satisfaction of needs dependent upon the signifying apparatus, [which] also fragments, filters and models those needs in the defiles of the signifier's structure'.[1] In other words, in acquiring speech from the mother, the child acquires also the mother's attitudes, rules, and assumptions – indeed, the whole Other of the mother.

The infant acquires language by hearing its parents speak; and as it 'crosses the bar' of meaning and begins to apply signifiers to its object self (the small other it recognised in the mirror), it seeks in everything it hears – particularly in the discourse of its parents – clues for the development of its ego. The Subject becomes subsumed into the fiction built by the parents' discourse, which is readily absorbed into the child's ego. For instance, if the parents' discourse is that '*Sally doesn't really like dolls, she much prefers running around in the garden*', this may become one of the founding myths of Sally's view of herself (her ego): she is not the kind of girl who likes dolls, she is sporty, a tomboy. In its search for identity the child is profoundly narcissistic; its mental response to everything that's said is necessarily: *What is my part in this? How does this relate to me?* So: the parents talk about football; the child thinks: *They are interested in football – if I play football, they'll be interested in me.* The parents talk about some celebrity's recent makeover; the child thinks: *They admire this celebrity – am I like her in some way?* The parents talk about their university days, and the child notes instantly that it is from

a family of graduates and expects a similar future for itself. Thus is the Subject developed *in the discourse of the Other.* However, this discourse, consisting of signifiers, allows also for repression: for every element inserted into the edifice of the ego, which is the fiction the Subject loves, there is another that is repressed into the unconscious.

The Subject is revealed in the Other

For Lacan, the Subject remained that elusive thing that hides behind the ego, that is alienated from it, that is created in an act of language, and that is largely unconscious. It is the Subject that speaks; but when it speaks, it barely knows what it is saying. And I am no longer referring here to the 'unconscious discourse' that appears in slips of the tongue, dreams, and pathological symptoms, I am referring to what the speaker (Subject) would think of as 'conscious speech'. This is because for the most part, the Subject is unconscious of itself.

This view may seem like overstatement: one feels provoked to say, '*But I do know what I'm talking about ... I only make a slip of the tongue very rarely, 99% of the time I mean exactly what I'm saying*', etc. But the experienced analyst knows instantly when she/he hears denegation ('*Of course, he's likeable enough*' nearly always means I don't like him); and even the most common, everyday use of language is closely governed by the unconscious. Most of the time, there is an interplay of conscious and unconscious in our speech: we may mean exactly what we say, but we hardly ever know why we say it. Consider the following examples:

'*Has so-and-so got a partner?*' appears a simple question, but what motivates it? Is the questioner a woman worried that the so-and-so in question is interested in her man? Or is it a man interested in so-and-so? Or is it a woman who, motivated by

jealousy, hopes to learn that so-and-so is unlucky in love where she herself is not? Whichever it is, the speaker is bound to deny it, and say it's an innocent question motivated by altruistic concern or curiosity. And even if that were true, then why the altruism/curiosity? We can never escape the unconscious – even when it is harmless.

'*We've cooked a roast for you – we got the joint from such-and-such specialist butcher*' could provoke guilt in a prodigal child, or encourage a guest to bring a bottle of better quality wine than usual (why not just 'a roast'? Why mention the quality of it?), etc. But again, in both cases, the speaker's intentions are entirely unconscious.

'*I'm still recovering from the weekend*' is a commonly heard phrase, but why does the speaker think the listener needs to know this? Is she/he boasting about her/his exciting social life, bolstering the edifice of an ego which includes the master signifiers 'socially successful' or 'popular'? Or is she/he trying to convince her/himself that she/he had a good time, when in fact she/he was very bored?

Even '*Please may I have a kilo of potatoes*' could be a multi-layered statement: why not simply, 'a kilo of potatoes' – why the time spent on a formula of *politesse*? Is the questioner trying to show her/his good breeding? Or if, on the contrary, all *politesse* is dispensed with – then why the rudeness? Might *that* be a way of establishing higher status over the lowly greengrocer? And is a kilo enough – or is the speaker being mean and not buying enough, or displaying an anxiety about inadequacy and asking for too many?

These trivial examples only underline the power of the unconscious in directing the selection and combination of signifiers into chains with or without our conscious 'will'; Lacan saw this interplay between conscious and unconscious in the Subject as being like the continuum of the surface of a moebius strip.

The Other is manifest not only in language (even though this may be its principal domain), but also in the whole set of hypotheses that exert their influence upon the Subject. The Law, societal rules, taboos, mores and expectations, and even Time are different faces of the Other. The Other is constituted by the entire symbolic realm of human productions; accessing the Other involves the crossing of the bar described in chapter 3; it also involves the act of alienation described in the Mirror Stage, which situates the Subject within the Other. These processes of alienation and symbolisation which tie together Subject and Other are the essential basis of human creativity.

How the Subject gains access to the Other

Access to the Other can be said to happen as a gradual process in which there are also two quantum leaps, or two initiatory 'gateways' through which the child must pass. The first is the Mirror Stage, in which the child is alienated from itself by its identification with its mirror image – a false object onto which it can transfer all the signifiers with which it builds the fiction of its ego. The dialectic created by the dualities of Subject and ego allows the formation of the concepts that can and do attract symbolisation. The 'small other' perceived in the Mirror Stage is the 'idea of self' to which signifiers may attach. A child who has never undergone the alienation of the Mirror Stage may remain locked out of language forever: it has no access to the Other. This would be observable in cases of severe autism. A child for whom the Mirror Stage happens a little late (missing the window of opportunity of usual language development) may need specialist help in overcoming this delay, unlike most children, who develop language with complete ease and naturalness.

The second initiatory gateway is that of castration, which will be dealt with in the next chapter. Briefly here, a failure of this stage would lead not to a total inability to access language but to a psychotic structure in which signifiers do not have the usual autonomy and flexibility of recombination, and the Other (Law, Society, language, and all other symbolic creations) is perceived as having a frighteningly direct relationship with the Subject. Lacan called this relationship with the Other a 'failure to access the metaphor', underlining how essential it is for the psyche to be able to make the complex substitutions of signifiers typified by metaphor in order to comprehend the Other.

Children with language difficulties because of a delay in or problem with building the foundation of the Symbolic (access to the Other) may be particularly resistant to rules and boundaries, because they are locked in an enjoyment of the Imaginary; but even when the foundation is laid normally, a child may still resist other manifestations of the Other. A child who has developed speech at the right time may be uninterested in symbolisation in another form – for example reading, paying attention to time, or even playing games that involve rules – but this behaviour is neurotic rather than psychotic in structure, and indicates a rebellion against the Other rather than a structural weakness that prevents the child from accessing it.

A child has difficulties learning to read, despite encouragement and support from his mother. In a session, he tells the psychiatrist that Mother knows all the words in the world; he knows a few, but she has all of them, in a big book. He doesn't really need to learn to read; it's better if Mum remains the keeper of the Book – she's the grown up, after all.

This description from the child sounds remarkably close to Lacan's own formulation: that the Other is the place where all signifiers are stored – a 'treasury' of words like gold coins in a trunk. In this case, it is not that the child cannot access the treasury, he simply prefers that his mother should remain its keeper: it prolongs a pleasant state of dependency upon Mother and ensures her continued presence.

The Other is omnipresent: all our lives we will play with, struggle against, and learn to use its manifestations. Verbal jokes are directed at the Other – they seek to subvert the Other by slyly playing with the boundaries of obscenity, social acceptability, or with the rules of language itself. A person who bumps against a piece of furniture and automatically says, 'sorry' is addressing the Other; a person who is habitually late may be rebelling against the Other in its guise as Time; the Other is in money: the miser and the gambler are both trying to bend it to their will. But in psychoanalysis, it is the Other as language that is the most important, because of the structuring effect that language has upon the development of the Subject, and because the truth of the Subject can only be apprehended by means of it.

5

The paternal metaphor

The role of the father in the unconscious

> The function of the father in the Oedipus complex is to be a signifier substituted for ... the first signifier introduced in symbolisation, the maternal signifier.
>
> (Lacan, 1958[1])

Primary concepts, primary signifiers

What is the maternal signifier? The very first concept that the newborn baby forms is that of the mother: she exists as a signified even before the baby is able to articulate anything more complex than a cry. The concept of 'Mother' is the baby's first mental act of symbolisation; this concept comprises comfort symbolised in the ideation of a person.

But Mother is not always there. Faced with her absence, the baby performs its first act of repression: the maternal signifier is thus the first signifier that is repressed. Upon her return, the signifier is retrieved: and thus is formed the baby's leaky new unconscious. From the one signifier, with which the baby has such a passionate relationship, arise many concepts – comfort, loss, regaining ... and the beginnings of many hypotheses. The first hypothesis, well known in developmental psychology, is

that of the permanence of objects: via the mother's disappearances and reappearances, the baby comes to understand that objects persist even when not within its view. But this creates further questions: '*Where is she when she's not with me? Why does she go away?*' These questions are there in proto-conceptual form even in pre-language infants. The 'obvious' answer arrives in the form of the father.

Long before the baby can understand concepts such as 'work' or 'chores' or the myriad other reasons for Mother's absence, it can understand *and see* the reality of Father. He is the other thing in the baby's world which might account for Mother's going away – and proof of it comes when she says to the child: '*It's time to sleep. Mummy and Daddy must have their dinner now.*' Father occupies a place in the child's world as the single biggest distraction for Mummy and therefore the single greatest rival to itself. As the central object in this drama, the mother names the father as the one with whom the baby was made and with whom she also wants to be. These are themes of great power for the child and form the basis for the construction of many infant hypotheses.

The hypothesis made by the child to explain Mother's 'choice' of Father is necessarily that '*Father has something I haven't got.*' But equally, sometimes Mother is with the baby, who might then quite naturally think '*Whatever it is, maybe I have it too.*' The baby has now hypothesised the existence of '*the thing that satisfies Mother*', or in Lacanian terms: the object of Mother's desire. '*What does she want? I'd like it to be me that she wants, but it is clear that it's not just me there is something else on her mind*' (Lacan, 1958[2]).

The Lacanian Phallus

The idea (signified) of the object of the mother's desire is an object that can fill 'the lack in the other'. Lacan named that

object the Phallus. The word denotes its imaginary quality: a phallus is never a 'penis' but a representation or image of potency; in mythology, ancient religion, and art, the phallus is always a symbolic object. A feminist interlocutor once suggested that 'uterus' might be a better word for the symbolisation of power – after all, she said, the power of the uterus is real. However, that is precisely the problem with this word: a uterus is a real object, invested with a real and specific power – the power of generation. The whole point of the word *phallus* is that it refers to an entirely imaginary object invested with an *entirely imaginary and undefined* power: it is the imaginary-ness that is important. There is an historical and mythical resonance to it – human tradition created the phallus to express a notion of potency. Also, as we shall see in chapter 9, the castration that is allowed by this representation is one that affects boys more radically than girls. Lacan appropriated the word to denote the imaginary object-of-power that the infant hypothesises *draws Mother away*, or that *perhaps I have, which brings her back*: it is an imagined perfect object.

When the mother is away physically or not paying enough attention to the child, the child may assume that its mother is involved with the object of her desire. Among the hypothetical questions the child forms may be: '*Is that involvement licit?*' and '*Should I accept it?*' How the child eventually answers these questions will be important in determining many facets of its personality structure.

The construction of the paternal metaphor

The object of the mother's desire can be represented by the following sign:

$$\frac{S1}{s1} \quad \text{or} \quad \frac{\text{signifier of the object of mother's desire}}{\text{signified (idea) of the object of mother's desire (Phallus)}}$$

The father can be represented by the following sign:

$$\frac{S2}{s2} \quad \text{or} \quad \frac{\text{signifier of the father}}{\text{idea of the father}}$$

When the mother explains her absence, she does so by means of a metaphor in which she 'blames' it on her submission to rules (Law) and not as an effect of her desire: all her excuses are metaphors, from the infant's point of view – '*It's time to sleep – Mummy and Daddy must have their dinner now ...*' or '*I have to go, Mummy must go to work ...*' To the child, 'must have their dinner now' or 'work' is an excuse veiling an incontrovertible truth: '*Mummy is seeking some other source of satisfaction than me, i.e. the Phallus.*' It must be pointed out that at this stage, the Phallus exists as an idea – a signified – but one to which no definite signifier has been firmly attached: the child is still groping around for what that might be; however, it is represented *enough* to be fitted into a signifier chain such as '*She's gone for thingamajig again.*' And of all the thingamajigs that could sit most firmly and plausibly above the Phallus, 'Daddy' is by far the most understandable and powerful for the child. Lacan wrote the paternal metaphor thus:

$$\frac{S \text{ of the object of mother's desire}}{s \text{ of the object of mother's desire}} \times \frac{S \text{ of the father}}{s \text{ of the father}} \rightarrow \frac{S \text{ of the father}}{\dfrac{S \text{ the object of m's desire}}{s \text{ the object of m's desire (Phallus)}}}$$

The signified associated with the father has disappeared in this metaphorical process and the sign *signifier of the mother's desire/Phallus* becomes the new signified for the signifier of the father. But this has already been symbolised as the Phallus (by 'symbolised' I mean that the child can fit it into a signifier chain – which implies it must have a representation, although

this representation is not fixed), so in the substitution process, we get this:

$$\frac{\text{Name-of-the-father}}{\text{desire of the mother}} \times \frac{\text{desire of the mother}}{\text{signified to the Subject}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{Name-of-the-father (O)}}{\text{Phallus}}$$

Lacan calls this metaphor the Name-of-the-Father (sometimes referred to as the 'paternal metaphor'), and as you see, the Name-of-the-Father comes to represent the Other where previously there was only her mysterious desire. 'The Name-of-the-father designates the recognition of a symbolic function defined in the place from which the law exercises its influence.'[3]

In the paternal metaphor, the signifier Father is substituted for the signifier 'object of Mother's desire'. In the course of the substitution the signifier 'object of Mother's desire' is repressed and becomes unconscious; this is part of Freud's 'primal repression' that makes up the kernel of the unconscious (as distinct from secondary repressions in which the already-developed psyche represses thoughts that are unacceptable to it). The signified of the desire of the mother (Phallus) is now associated with the Name-of-the-Father, in a metaphoric structure.

By naming the father as the cause of her absence from the child, the mother is nominating him in a symbolic act of language in the place of the fundamental object of her desire (Phallus) that the child imagines she is after. Both of them know that the reality is not this simple, but the mother must provide an explanation in her speech, and the infant can accept it or not: it is by an act of language that the child's unspoken hypotheses are addressed. Moreover, not only does the mother invoke the Name-of-the-Father in her explanation, the father's very existence in their lives implies the functioning of mother and child within a wider social sphere governed by social rules (the existence of kinship groups, peer relations, etc.). The mother usually reinforces this idea of the wider social realm to explain her absence or preoccupation by couching her excuse in terms

suggesting obligation: 'I *have* to go now', 'I *must* have dinner with Daddy', 'I *have* to go to work', etc. She rarely says 'I *want* to go.' In using this formula of obligation, she lets the child know that there are rules and laws 'out there' to which she too must submit: she is *not* the Other, the Other is out there. By accepting the mother's explanation, the child then enters into the game of discourse, and into the Symbolic realm.

With this process the dyadic relationship (involving only two entities) between mother and child becomes triangular – there is a third party, as represented by the father, although it may not be an actual father. The formulation *Name-of*-the-Father is particularly useful here as it emphasises the representative nature of this third party. Lacan points out that Freud himself had tried, in his work, to indicate that the 'father' he wrote about was not meant to be a real father but a representation, except that Freud had called it 'the *dead* Father'. In extracting the symbolic nature of it, the Name-of-the-Father, Lacan makes it clear that this could be a dead or estranged father, or whatever takes the place of Mother's main other role in life (her own family, her work, etc.). However, 'work' is a very much more abstract thing and harder for an infant to imagine than a solid human being, and does not have the mystical quality necessarily attached to a being who has contributed to one's very existence.

Castration and the symbolic realm

There are two important stages, which have different but related effects, in the child's submission to the paternal metaphor:

- The child must form the hypothesis of the Phallus as a reason for Mother's disappearances, a hypothesis which in itself implies a recognition that the mother is not the Other.
- The child must accept the Name-of-the-Father as the representative possessor of the Phallus; this implies that the child

accepts that it hasn't got it – a symbolic loss described as castration. Castration is the acceptance that one is less-than-perfect, limited, not all-powerful and able to control or satisfy the world. Castration is therefore a symbolic process which allows the child to situate itself within the Law, and to accept that its own desires are not paramount.

Why does submission to the Name-of-the-Father allow the child to situate itself within the Law? The mother is the first representation of the Other to the child, and therefore at the outset, the child's relationship with the Other is a dyadic one. While in this state, the child believes that it is omnipotent, through its identification with its mother, who represents the Other; there is a lack of distinction, therefore, about who makes the Law, who has all the hypotheses, etc. This is also potentially a terrifying state for the child, who is subject to the total power of this mother-Other and might experience her actions as persecutory when she goes away or refuses it something, because it cannot imagine that this Other, being all-powerful, could be acting in accordance with the requirements of a third-party Other, which it has not yet hypothesised. These fantasies of omnipotence or persecution are characteristic of psychosis. The hypothesis of mother's less-than-omnipotence – that she 'needs' something (the Phallus) and that this is what causes her absences or disobedience to the child – is the first step in allowing the child a way out of this condition. The second is that if mother is not perfect and complete and is actually obeying the dictates of 'something or someone else' – a third party – then she is not after all the Other: the Other is this third party. This situation of the Other in a third party outside the dyadic relationship is experienced both as a loss of power for the child (which may still hope to control the mother) and also as a great comfort – for it explains the mother's otherwise frightening behaviour, which previously appeared whimsical and persecutory. Imagine how

much less terrifying for the child to be able to think '*She's refusing me this* because *of something*', rather than simply '*She's refusing me*' – a psychological dead-end in which there is no reason why and which generates a feeling of senseless persecution. Thus, the Other becomes more remote, less directly manipulable, but less terrifying, and the child recognises the truth of the matter: the Other is 'out there' in the wider world, which the child is now more inclined to engage with.

Why does access to the paternal metaphor also allow the child to avoid the rigid literality seen in the psychotic structure? The Symbolic is comprised of signifiers and other representations of ideas; signifiers are perhaps the most agile and useful of all, being infinitely flexible in different combinations. All of human intellectual activity, social interaction, and indeed even the formation of the Subject itself is based upon an elaborate interplay of these symbolic elements, in which multiple signifier substitutions are effected effortlessly, without the individual being aware of it. These substitutions are of the order of metaphor, and the ability of the human mind to comprehend and effect metaphorical substitutions is the basis of functioning within the Symbolic order. When the child submits to the paternal metaphor, it is integrating into its psyche a *way of thinking* that is the template for Symbolic functioning. In addition, the Name-of-the-Father forms the first master signifier, which may be substituted with others as the child develops its Subject and its ego. The Phallus is a represented idea already hidden beneath a representation below the Name-of-the-Father; this 'one-step-removed' version of what is signified gives it great flexibility as a mental structure, because not only is the top layer of the algebraic fraction replaceable with other signifiers, but there is also the possibility of substitutions of the representation below the bar of metaphor, which at the start are repressed into the unconscious. This becomes relevant when studying the role of master signifiers and their link with the object cause of desire and with anxiety.

We can deduce from observation what happens if one or both of the two stages of the submission to the paternal metaphor fail to take place; we can also see what conditions may cause their failure.

First of all, in order for the child to form the hypothesis of the Phallus, the mother must indicate to it that her behaviours are neither whimsical nor persecutory, and that she is only obeying the dictates of some Other. This information will be conveyed in speech, and in normal social settings, other people will also be there to convey this information 'Your mummy had to go to work', etc. Secondly, the paternal signifier must be present in the mother's discourse as a representation of this Other. This does not require the real father to be present – he may be absent either temporarily or permanently, or some other office (work, the mother's current partner, own parents, etc.) may play the role of the Name-of-the-Father – but it must have sufficient power to be a credible representative for the possessor of the Phallus.

There are therefore two possibilities for the failure of the metaphor to happen. If the mother never indicates that her behaviour obeys any exterior requirements or logic, and the child is unable to deduce this, it will be truly locked within a very frightening fantasy based on the dyadic relationship with the mother-Other. This could lead to psychosis. If, however, the child does form the hypothesis of the Phallus, but the mother never speaks the paternal metaphor, then the child may remain in a fantasy that it has or is the Phallus for the mother. In this case as well, the relationship remains dyadic, but now the child may fantasise that it is the lawmaker, the omnipotent and omniscient. This leads to a psychotic structure but not necessarily pure psychosis; this structure is characterised by its difficult relationship with the Law in all its forms, some paranoid elements (as a failure of its will is experienced as persecutory rather than logical in a wider context), and a certain inflexibility with language.

Lacan held that the principal cause of psychosis is the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father – that is, the child has never

actually 'crossed the bar' into metaphoric functioning. Foreclosure is a Lacanian concept derived from clinical observation of psychotic patients, whose ability to access the metaphor is either limited or completely lacking. To a person in the grip of a psychotic state, the symbolic realm does not exist: everything is frighteningly literal. When the theory of the Name-of-the-Father is applied to child development, one may see how a psychotic structure may emerge as a failure to submit to the paternal metaphor. This may happen in cases where a mother is in a fusional relationship with the child and may never wish to invoke a wider law to which they both must submit, or with a mother who fails to enter into a discourse about her obligations and place in society. It may happen when the mother herself has mental health problems and the child has no alternative carer.

Early childhood psychosis is a condition typically marked by poor language development and some behavioural difficulties; it is a French diagnosis of what in the United Kingdom would be labelled 'autistic'. The crucial difference between early childhood psychosis and autism is that childhood psychosis is something from which the child can recover and catch up to a level where it may function well in society; autism implies a permanent condition. Furthermore, childhood psychosis does not involve a lack of social interactivity or contact, where autism does: the child suffering from early psychosis does make eye contact and may even seek out interaction with others. Autism offers only an organic label; early childhood psychosis seeks out the psychological roots of the syndrome, and Lacan's proposal of the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father is particularly helpful in seeing what might have led to the condition and what is required to treat it.

Early childhood psychosis may occur when the child is merely *late* in accessing the symbolic realm: it remains for too long in its enjoyment of the Other as represented by the mother and misses a crucial step in the development of its thinking.

However, even if the child is able to formulate the hypothesis of the Phallus, it may still refuse to submit to the paternal metaphor by clinging to its fantasy that it may have the Phallus, or even be the Phallus for its mother. The symbolic castration is perhaps one of the hardest things for the child to accept, and childhood is liberally dotted about with episodes of regression in which the child passionately refuses to accept that its will does not reign supreme. Moreover, the fantasy of possessing the Phallus is too powerful to banish entirely, especially when it is reinforced from time to time by proofs of how very satisfactory the parents find the child. The incompleteness of the symbolic castration and the persistence of the Phallic fantasy may lead to the development of personality disorders as the child reaches maturity. These include psychopathic or perverse personality disorders that may at times border on delusional states. Symptoms may include megalomania, an irrational belief in one's own abilities, some apparently paranoid fantasies, dictatorial and obsessive rule-making, or sometimes simply psychopathic tendencies.

A father with a son who was born HIV-positive tries to prevent him getting the recommended treatment. He loves his son, but he is firmly convinced that he knows better than the experts in whose care the son should be. He is a very religious man, and believes that a combination of prayer and his own home-grown remedies are better, and that tricyclic drugs will endanger his boy. His opposition to the professionals trying to help his son leads to a serious deterioration of the boy's condition and to social services intervention; the man ends up trying to retain custody of his child in court. Even during the legal process, his belief that he is ultimately right and that his decision should be law is so strong that he refuses legal representation, and chooses to fight his own case. He defends his views by saying that he has a medical degree and expertise in pharmacology, when in reality, he has only a Bachelor's degree in biology and a half-completed diploma as a pharmacist; yet he presents his academic attainments to the court as if he has no understanding of the wider context in which they may be regarded. A psychiatrist diagnoses him as having delusions of grandeur, as well as some paranoid ideation, but he is not psychotic and is able to hold down a job. A Lacanian view would be that his personality has developed around an incomplete castration – that he has a 'psychotic structure', as distinct from being psychotic. In terms of the Name-of-the-Father, although he has been able to gain some degree of 'access to the metaphor' and to understand the existence of a symbolic level of functioning, he has accepted neither that he has not got the Phallus, nor that he is not in a position to make the law.

Even in children who have accepted this symbolic castration, the Phallic Object remains strong in the unconscious: the child may believe the literal truth of Mother's explanation, but 'dinner' and 'work' and even 'Daddy' are never fully satisfactory explanations, and the hypothesis of the Phallus persists, becoming even more mysterious: '*What is it about* Daddy?' may become the basis for the child's identification with the father, as it tries to acquire characteristics that may account for Daddy's ability to draw Mother away. And later on, as the mother's excuses for leaving multiply in accordance with the child's widening grasp of the world, the Phallus will come to exist in these other alibis: *What is it about work that she finds so fascinating? What is it about shopping?* If the Phallus appears most in 'work', then the child who still has some hope of possessing it may throw itself into 'work' in its attempt to discover its mysterious appeal or to absorb its absorbing essence; while the child that has abandoned hope, perhaps because the parents' absorption with work was so intense that it feels that it cannot possibly hope to compete, might set its face against 'work' entirely.

The paternal metaphor as a shield against anxiety

Why does the child accept the paternal metaphor? I have already mentioned the frightening aspect of the mother-as-Other, and

how the hypothesis of a third-party Other alleviates that anxiety. But another part of the answer must lie in the prematurity and helplessness of the human infant: lacking the physical possibility of imposing its desire, the child realises that it would be far too painful not to accept the 'solution' of the paternal metaphor. Imagine the child crying for its mother in its cot: she comes in, comforts it and excuses her departure with the paternal metaphor. The child could continue to scream itself to exhaustion, but ultimately, it is easier to accept and 'play the game'. One must not forget how anxiety-making are the mother's absences, or that the opposite of omnipotence is impotence; the reverse side of the child's fantasy of omnipotence, possible while Mother is there to gratify its wishes, is the despair of complete powerlessness and extreme anxiety when faced with the painful truth of infantile incapacity. The Name-of-the-Father/Phallus hypothesis is a shield against anxiety; the failure of the child to accept this could result in anaclytic depression.[4] In accepting the metaphor, the child enters into a '*marché de dupes*' with its mother – a game of complicity in a lie – they both know that the metaphor is a convenience, but a necessary one.

There is yet another advantage for the child in accepting the paternal metaphor: the Name-of-the-Father is something that can be identified with, whose power can be acquired by study and emulation: it is a kind of compensation, a defence against the psychological pain of castration. But there is soon another 'compensation': in the acceptance of castration, the child soon realises that not only has it not got the Phallus, but that *no living person* has; from this point, the Phallus exists in the Imaginary only as a notion – something whose experienced loss is the only 'proof' that it ever existed. It is a lost object, and a property of lost objects is that they may be found. In a later chapter, we shall see how the Name-of-the-Father becomes replaced by master signifiers, and the Phallus by the small a objects, which are the object cause of desire – to be sought after all one's

life. Thus it is far better for the child to 'go with' the paternal metaphor than to be constantly defeated by the inexplicability of Mother's behaviours, or its own inability to impose its will upon the exterior world. It has acquired in place of the already-disintegrating fantasy of omnipotence, the solid hope that it can gain by its own powers the lost object of desire, hidden beneath the Name-of-the-Father.

6

Real, Symbolic, Imaginary

Freud postulated a model of the psyche in his Topography: the first consisting of preconscious, unconscious, and conscious, and the second – the one still most commonly used – of ego, id, and super-ego. Lacan's model of the RSI – Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary – is often mentioned in some kind of comparison with this. Those familiar with classical psychoanalytical concepts may try to link or equate Lacanian ideas with those of Freud; they might expect, for instance, that the Symbolic order, which contains laws and signifiers, would correspond to the super-ego, or that the id and the unconscious belong together in the same realm (there has even been a suggestion that Lacan *replaces* the id with the unconscious!). Anyone making the attempt will be confounded in all their assumptions: the unconscious belongs in the Symbolic, and the super-ego and id figure nowhere. The RSI is not analogous with Freud's model: it does not represent the psyche but a system of interacting realms, orders, or registers in which the psyche functions. Where Freud's conception of the human mind always tended towards envisaging it as an interior space, Lacan's Subject is more abstract – it exists 'out there' like a force-field within a universal matrix. The Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary are properties of this matrix and are in every phenomenon associated with the human mind: they provide a framework for the understanding of the normal functioning of human mind, of psychopathology, and also of all human institutions and creations.

Lacan had already been using the concepts of Symbolic and Imaginary for some years before he formulated them into the schema with the Real. He presented the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary in 1953 – his first presentation immediately after he had resigned from the Société Psychanalytique de Paris, and the idea has remained one of his most important. However, it is also one that is quite hard to pin down – not because it is particularly abstruse (indeed, it is one of the most user-friendly of his concepts) – but because it continued to evolve over the decades, resulting in some inconsistencies. For example, when the Real first appeared in his work, it seemed to be the object of anxiety, but this view changes later; similarly, situating this or that phenomenon 'in' one or another of the RSI realms becomes equivocal because of his formulation of the RSI as a knot made up of the three threads, which suggests that it is, in fact, impossible to entirely disengage a phenomenon from any of the three realms. Moreover, towards the end of his life he added a fourth element – not another order, but something that ties together the three – the *sinthome*.

The Borromean knot of the RSI

Although Lacan's use of the Borromean knot as an analogy came quite late, it is necessary to mention it first to prevent the assumption that the three realms can be thought to function independently of each other – a line of thinking that can only result in frustration, as one follows a thread inevitably to a point where it intersects with another realm. The Borromean knot is so called because it is named after an Italian noble family – Borromeo – who used the formula of interlocking rings in their coat of arms as a symbol of strength in unity. It is a configuration in which the structure would fall apart if any one of the three rings was broken. Figure 1 shows the RSI as interlocking toruses; the use of toruses allows for spaces within each of the rings or realms.

Figure 1 RSI as interlocking toruses

All usual psychological phenomena exist within the spaces between the toruses of this Borromean knot, but psychosis signals its unravelling. Lacan's notions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic are already there in his first paper on the Mirror Stage, and as the Mirror Stage is especially important in the development of the Imaginary realm, and because it denotes the crucial moment at which the baby's Subject is 'split' or alienated from itself and takes on its truly human character, it is a convenient point at which to begin an explanation of the RSI. In early infancy, the functioning of the Imaginary realm is in the forefront, so this is where I shall begin.

The Imaginary

For an understanding of the Imaginary, we must avoid thinking of the word in its commonplace sense of *unreal* or *fictitious* – although there are elements of unreality and fictitiousness within it. We must not be seduced by the 'creative' or 'imaginative'

connotations that may attach to the word – although there is a seductive force in the Imaginary, which also contains the foundations of creativity. The Imaginary is named for the mental processes that issue from the encounter between the infant and its image in the mirror; but in order to fully appreciate both the intellectual leap made during the encounter, and the sophistications that flow from it, we must first rewind to a point before the Mirror Stage.

The Imaginary is the realm of the senses in that it houses the conceptions that issue directly from sensorial perception; because of the Mirror Stage, it is also the order of conceptualisations and functioning that proceeds *from the body's image*. The body is the first 'world' of which the baby is aware; before the Mirror Stage, it perceives its body as a collection of fragments – *Is that passing object my hand? What is the meaning of this pressure on my side?* The baby's ability to conceptualise 'my' hand and 'my' side issues from the information it receives via its kinaesthetic, pressure, and pain receptors – none of which are greatly developed in the human infant; also, it may know the sound of its own cry because it associates it with pain. Of all the senses, sight is the one that is best developed in the baby, and it comes to be of the greatest importance in the building of the Subject and its object relations. It is by means of images that the baby recognises its mother, who comes to be represented as the first signifier, and then itself as a *whole* object – in the mirror of her eyes, and then as a reflected image in the real mirror. The images belong in the Imaginary order: they are the clay from which the representations will be fashioned. Thus, at this point, the mother, already recognised in the image of her face, is a kind of proto-representation, pre-dating formal language; the same is true for the baby's own subject self.

Lacan saw the relationship of the Imaginary to the Symbolic as analogous to the relationship between signifieds and signifiers in language; if we remember that the linguistic sign consists of a

signifier associated with a signified, we see that the signifier belongs in the Symbolic and the signified belongs to the Imaginary order. Signifiers, I have already said, are the *vorstellungreprasentanzen* – the representations *of ideas*; signifieds are the ideas themselves, and at the age of the Mirror Stage, these are still half-baked and unstable and have not been associated with a signifier drawn from language.

One can see the close connection between sensory perception and the Imaginary in the creation of certain proto-concepts: children with cerebral palsy are often dyspraxic – they have difficulty in performing complex movements and are clumsy and uncoordinated – because without the right degree of sensory 'information', their conceptualisation of three-dimensional space is limited. This ability originates in one's own body and belongs in the realm of the Imaginary; children with severe motor disabilities may only become able to conceptualise space later, through the medium of language.

At the Mirror Stage, through a dialectic of identification with its mirror image, the baby begins to build up its ego or Ideal-I through a projection of ideas upon the object in the mirror. In building conceptions upon something that is both inherently false and powerful – an image – the Imaginary is programmed from the start to be a realm of illusion, and to have a force of fascination and seduction. Certain illusions are necessary for conceptualisation – they form 'proto-concepts' whose function is that of a substratum for the foundation of concepts. Such illusions, according to Lacan, include the abilities to grasp the totality of something, to effect syntheses, and to believe in dualities such as subject/object, exterior/interior, which allow for the functioning of dialectic.

The primal intellectual act of self-recognition is an important moment in the development of the Imaginary realm, because it establishes the individual's narcissism and self-image – the foundations of the ego. In addition, the factitious nature of ego

construction and the splitting of the self into subject and object are the templates upon which the functions of synthesis and dialectic are built; these therefore are functions within the Imaginary order, through which we simultaneously figure out and hide reality.

Identification and narcissism define the relationship the baby forms with its mirror image – its '*petit autre*' or small other; identification and narcissism are the means by which it builds up its ego, and also its relationships with all other people. These processes form the basis of like and dislike, love and hate, admiration and disdain, attraction and disgust between Subjects: to simplify a little, it is in the realm of the Imaginary that one sees similarities and differences between oneself and another person, and comes to be attracted or repelled.

As described by Roland Chemama: 'In the relationship between subjects, there is always something false that is introduced – this is the imaginary projection of the one on the screen that the other becomes. The imaginary is the register of the ego with its obliviousness, alienation, love and aggressiveness in the dual relationship with the other.'[1] It is because identification and narcissism belong in the Imaginary that Lacan reproached the major psychoanalytical schools of the day for 'reducing the practice to the Imaginary order'. He felt that the emphasis on counter-transference as an analytical tool made identification with the analyst the objective of analysis (*Ecrits*, 'Directions of the Treatment', 1966): it seems to encourage the interweaving of the Imaginary of the patient with that of the analyst in such a way that finally nothing is elucidated, and the only thing developed is the relationship between the two.

The Symbolic

This is the order that appears at the outset the easiest to imagine and understand, because the word used to describe it remains

closest to its common meaning. However, there is a danger in making too many assumptions about it: the Symbolic contains many surprises. For instance, the Phallus, although a ideational 'symbol' of something, is not in the order of the Symbolic but of the Imaginary – to go back to Freud's very useful terminology, it is a *representanz* without a *vorstellung*. The Other – Society, Law, the set of hypotheses within which the Subject is constituted – is not an Imaginary object but a representation of representations, and therefore belongs in the Symbolic; and yet, as the realm of language, which has both a Symbolic and an Imaginary component, it must necessarily sit on the RSI knot at a point which is in contact with the Imaginary. The unconscious, on the other hand, is entirely a thing of the Symbolic, as it is made up of only signifiers, and not signifieds.

Lacan took the term 'Symbolic' from social anthropology, which showed that even the most 'primitive' societies have a symbolic order that regulates kinship, exchanges of goods, and marriages. This order works as a constraint and can be found in pacts of alliance, religious rituals, prohibitions, and taboos; it is also universal to all human society. Lacan extended this concept to embrace all human activity: the Symbolic is manifest in language, laws, and social structures. This is why it is wrong to think of these things as human 'inventions', as if we consciously invented them; rather, for Lacan, they are inherent in our nature, in the Symbolic realm. Hence, the Symbolic order is that of the laws of the *unconscious organisation* of human society.

> If Man brings the symbolic order into being by thought it is because he is already caught up within it. The illusion that he has formed this order within his consciousness stems from the fact that it is through the pathway of a specific gap in his Imaginary relationship with his alter ego that he has been able to enter into this order as a Subject. But he can only enter the Symbolic by means of the straight and narrow path of speech.[2]

Language, the distinguishing characteristic of human beings (*parlêtre*), contains elements belonging in the Symbolic and in the Imaginary. In order for the linguistic sign to be of any use, this relationship must exist, denoted by the Saussurian 'bar'. The originality of the human mind lies in the act of 'crossing the bar' between signifier and signified: this is a natural human ability which doesn't have to be 'learned', and which, in linking the signifier with the signified, makes language possible. Meaning appears at what Lacan called 'stitch-points' – *points de capiton* – between the signifier and signified; in terms of the RSI knot, it could be said to arise where the Symbolic and Imaginary rings touch.

It is signifiers – the *representations* of ideas – and not whole signs, which belong in the Symbolic realm, and it is only by means of representations that things can be conceived of, and by an association of signifiers that meaning appears. Therefore, it is in the realm of the Symbolic that an intellectual apprehension of any phenomenon can be arrived at, and this intellectual apprehension is, at the end of the day, the only truth that matters. This is why Lacan inverted the Saussurian formulation, represented the signifier with a capital S, placed it on top of the bar, and affirmed that the unconscious, and by extension the Subject, are composed of repressed signifiers in a signifying chain, and both therefore belong in the realm of the Symbolic.

'In the Symbolic order, the totality is called a universe. The Symbolic order from the first takes on its universal character. It isn't constituted bit by bit. As soon as the symbol arrives, there is a universe of symbols.'[3] Lacan held that the Symbolic order was always there – like language, it pre-exists the individual, who has to gain access to it. How, then, does this happen?

In Freudian theory, the child develops notions that belong in (what would be) the Symbolic order quite late – at around two years of age; for Lacan, the Symbolic is there, waiting to receive the child, from the moment of its birth. And yet, access to the

Symbolic is fraught with problems: it involves an initiation to which the baby can submit, or refuse. This initiation involves the experience of loss, and plunges the infant first of all into the realm of the Imaginary, which forms at this point a kind of bridge to the Symbolic.

Lacan holds that for the newborn, the 'first signifier' is the maternal signifier, and with it comes the baby's first tenuous foothold in the Symbolic. But how is this first signifier arrived at? How this entry into the Symbolic achieved? From the moment of its birth, the baby experiences a change of environment: something is lost, something is gained, and with this experience, the first sod is dug in the creation of the dialectical foundation, in the realm of the Imaginary. In the first days, the mother is indistinguishable from the 'world' surrounding the child; the mother who breastfeeds and carries the baby close to her body *is* the world for it. But the mother's face – sometimes in the baby's view but sometimes not – introduces anew the dialectic of presence/absence. Via this appearance-disappearance of the mother, the baby becomes aware when she is *not* there, and in doing so, becomes aware of her as an *entity* and not just a part of the environment. But it is the *absence* or the *lack* of the mother that makes her apprehensible as an entity, and this apprehension is, long before the baby is able to say 'mama', the first act of representation of an idea-embodied-in-an-object made by the child – in Freudian terms, the first *vorstellungreprasentanz*, and for Lacan, the formation of the first signifier.

The gaining of access to the Symbolic happens in quantum leaps: the first being the pre-language access to ideational-representatives, as demonstrated in Freud's baby playing with a bobbin, and uttering '*fort-da*' in accompaniment to a game of loss and retrieval. The second leap occurs at the Mirror Stage. It has already been said that this is when the ego is created by the affixation of signifiers to the mirror image – the alter ego; the Subject is the entity, oblivious to itself, which does the

affixing; the Subject 'sorts' the signifiers that float about in the discourse of the Other and in doing so invents stories about itself, while simultaneously being completed by the signifiers it represses. The Subject at this stage is largely unconscious, and could be imagined as a force-field reacting with the signifiers of the Other like the charge in a liquid crystal, organising them into chains, repressing some and attaching others to the ego. In its primary function, therefore, the Subject exists in the realm of the Symbolic; 'the Symbolic is the order in which the Subject, as distinct from the ego, comes into being'.[4] The completion of the individual's initiation into the Symbolic comes with the acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father, and of castration.

As we have seen in the formation of the first signifier, Lacan emphasised that 'lack' was essential for access to language, or at least to signifiers; to put it simply, if everything was always present and available to you, you would never need to use language to ask for anything. And because language is the primary human characteristic, the Symbolic order is accessed through the experience of lack, because it designates what has been lost or is missing. From the beginning, this lack is given a meaning through the correlation between what is lacking and the signifier that symbolises it. This aspect of the Symbolic – that 'lack' is essential to its existence – will become important in the understanding of the Real.

The Real

> The Real expects nothing, especially not of the Subject, as it expects nothing of speech. But it is there, identical to its own existence, a noise in which one can hear everything, ready to submerge with its splinters what the reality principle has built under the name of external world.[5]

Lacan came up with more 'quotable quotes' about the Real than about any of the other orders, probably because it is by its very nature indescribable. There is always a tendency to lavish words upon what cannot be described, in the hope that some of them might stick – a little like throwing paint in the direction of the Invisible Man in order to make him out. It is not by chance that the Real was the last of his 'realms' to be formulated: the concept was put forward only because in the formulations of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, it became evident that something was always being 'left out'. For Lacan, the Real is what is expelled when a signifier becomes attached to some morsel of reality: it is the bit that the signifier fails to capture. Also, in terms of Hegelian dialectics, the Real must exist in tension with the other two – for something to exist, its inverse must exist as well; and for existence to be, there must also be a state of non-being. Lacan borrowed a term from Heidegger when he said that the Real ex-sists, because the Symbolic and Imaginary exist. More simply (and more usefully in psychoanalysis): for everything that comes into our field of recognition by means of a signifier, something of it must remain imperceptible, unsymbolised: this is the Real.

Lacan described the Real as 'smooth' and 'undifferentiated': 'There are no cracks, no interior or exterior – these distinctions are meaningless in the Real. Only the Symbolic can introduce some cuts in the Real.'[6] The Real is the featureless clay from which reality is fashioned by the Symbolic; it is the chaos from which the world came into being, by means of the Word. 'It is the world of words that creates the world of things, initially mixed up in the here and now of the whole in becoming.'[7]

The Symbolic brings into being all the phenomena of our world: these only exist because they have been symbolised. The Real is best thought of as ineffable and unimaginable – a state perhaps only experienced pre-birth, as even the act of birth introduces a 'cut' in the featurelessness of the baby's universe. Even the newborn has the proto-concept of duality – that there

is presence and absence – and by this understanding, it can begin to know that things exist. It is the perceptions of the Imaginary that create ridges and flaws, differences in temperature and texture, interiors and exteriors. Then, the baby learns to attach signifiers to things – which have already made their existence known in the dialectic of presence/absence – and to their properties (hot/cold, hard/soft, nice/horrid); it is these signifiers that bring the world into existence for the child. And yet, the Real persists, in all that cannot be pinned down by a signifier, or by any symbol at all, be it speech, writing, ritual, or art. It is what the Symbolic expels from reality when it forms a representation. Or, as Bruce Fink says, the Real is 'that which resists symbolisation absolutely'; it is 'the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation.'[8]

> The Real is something you find always at the same place. However you mess about, it is always in the same place, you bring it with you, stuck to the sole of your shoe without any means of exiling it.[9]

'*Always at the same place*' is one of the properties of the Real, in opposition to the high moveability of the major currency of the Symbolic – signifiers. 'Chair', or 'green', or 'mouse', or 'combustible' may attach themselves to an infinite number of things; but the Real has not that flexibility. Lacan saw the Real in behaviours associated with the death drive and in the repetitive-compulsive element of neuroses. Because it is unsymbolisable, it cannot be transformed and transferred in the way that signifiers may be; but as it too is tied into the Borromean knot, it can be affected by the other two realms. This is important in the understanding of the Real in psychological symptoms such as melancholia or repetition-compulsion: there is something unsymbolised which forms a 'sticking point' in the Subject's functioning, and it is through symbolisation (verbalisation upon the analyst's couch) that this bit of Real may be dealt with.

The character of the Real, being unsymbolisable, is that of absolute terror or absolute enjoyment – both impossible states. Its existence can be postulated by its manifestations. It appears in hallucinations and delusions, when the stitch-points between signifiers and signifieds come apart, where the Borromean ring unravels and the unrepresentable wanders freely in a lake of unattached signifiers. What is remarkable is that when psychosis strikes, it is precisely at the point that some few remaining stitch-points are still holding – where there is still a little contact between the threads of Symbolic and Imaginary – that the symptoms manifest. It is as if, as the knot unravels, in the total terror/total *jouissance* of the Real at large, the Subject clings, by means of its symptom, to the final, weakening but still-recognisable shreds of meaning it can still apprehend.

A mother, in a psychotic episode killed two of her children, because she 'saw the devil in their eyes'. '*Their eyes were black – not normal black – they were the devil's black,*' was one of the statements she offered in explanation. One can imagine the terror of the children in the face of their mother's murderous delusion; one can perhaps *not* imagine (and may not wish to imagine) the terror of the psychotic for whom the Borromean knot has come apart, detaching signifiers from reality, unleashing absolute terror in its pure form to bump at random into hapless signs, which may just contain a sufficient residue of meaning to appear to be some anchor to reality. Hence, the tenuous connection between 'black' and 'devil' is seized upon by the Subject as something it can still understand – some connection it can still make and act upon: but it is precisely because there is still some connection, where all others are falling apart, that it comes to be the unfortunate focus of the psychotic's attention. The unravelling of the knot threatens to annihilate the Subject, whose imperative is to act to preserve itself. This formulation of the symptom being an acting out upon the points at which there is still some attachment between the rings of the unravelling knot may account for

the 'meaningfulness' (in the literal sense) of psychotic symptoms observed by psychiatrists as far back as Bleuler. It also led to one of Lacan's last interesting theoretical constructs – the *sinthome*, which we come to shortly.

The Real appears also in psychological trauma. *A tortured Kurdish patient had been having a nightmare over and over again; it remained the same, in every detail, and was a re-experiencing of his real-life experience. In it, the torturer would enter the room and begin to apply the electrodes to his skin. The patient would wake up screaming at the point at which the electrodes touched him.* Lacan would have said that the terrifying quality of the dream was the irruption of the Real that is in helplessness, pain, and mortality. The job of the analyst would be to try to help the patient find signifiers for the unsymbolisable – to allow him to talk in circles around this intrusion of the Real, until at some point he is able to symbolise at least something of it. The Real, of course, is unbanishable; some residue of it will remain, but perhaps an altered residue – in the way an element may be taken up in a chemical reaction, and be combined into a different substance at the end. In this clinical instance, the patient carried on having the dream and talking about it, until one day, the dream occurred again – but with an alteration: the scene remained the same, except that the torturer, when he entered, had the head of a dog. The patient was baffled by this until the analyst said, in agreement with his almost-conscious knowledge: '*These people are indeed real animals.*' The character with the dog-head was a creation of the Imaginary realm, but the interpretation was in the Symbolic, because it translated the image into the signifier 'animals' which revealed the hidden message. Whatever the nature of the Real in the dream before this transformation and interpretation, it was not the same afterwards, because the dream ceased to have its full terrifying effect. Some transformation of the Real can be said to have taken place – some 'chemical synthesis' in which it was combined with elements of the Symbolic and Im[illegible]

To begin with, Lacan thought that the Real was the object of anxiety: 'the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence'.[10] Later on, he came to associate anxiety with the small a object (*l'objet petit a*), which is explained in chapter 8.

Although Lacan does not say this, it seems consistent with his ideas of the Real to suggest that the drives (German *trieb* and *instinkts* and French *pulsions*) belong in this realm. Freud had posited the existence of an erotic or libidinal drive, which tends towards creation and pleasure; to account for the fact that so much of human behaviour appears to counter this, he postulated the death drive, and also the drive for self-preservation. In Lacan's 1959 seminar on Pleasure and Reality, there is an indication that he places the drives in the Real in the words in which he describes the death drive: 'Beyond the pleasure principle we encounter that opaque surface which to some has seemed so obscure that it is the antimony of thought – not just biological but scientific in general – the surface that is known as the death instinct'.[11] The death drive could manifest as pleasure-seeking to begin with, but distinguishes itself in the way that a person who seeks the pleasure of a glass of a good wine is distinct from the person who seeks oblivion in a bottle of hard liquor. As an interesting aside, Lacan linked aggression with the drive for self-preservation and not with the death drive: apart from cases of perversion, one is usually aggressive in the preservation of the ego rather than because one simply enjoys an act of destruction.

Drives are the 'featureless clay' of instinct that Lacan has banished from the unconscious. They do not have as a goal the satisfaction of some biological need. They exist quite independently of need; like a kind of engine, their satisfaction lies merely in the functions they propel, and the enjoyment produced by the function connected with a drive is what Lacan calls *jouissance*.

Drives are unsymbolisable and the passions to which they give rise through the mediation of the Imaginary remain difficult to capture with signifiers. 'Anxiety', 'anger', and 'fear' are relatively stable in their meanings, and even they have a slippery quality about them. Other emotional signifiers are even more weakly joined to any signified: who can truly say what it is to 'love' someone, or to be 'happy', or 'excited', or 'depressed'? The weakness of the stitch-points between signifiers and signified in the area of emotions may be because of the unrepresentable nature of the drives from which they arise.

Various examples of the RSI at work

We have already spoken a little of the Borromean knot of the RSI. In talking about each individual torus within it, one may forget that psychological phenomena are created by the knot itself, at points where the realms come into contact. Every human creation contains all three rings, even if one predominates over another; take art as an example.

Because the Imaginary is the realm of the senses, much of representative art contains a great amount of Imaginary: it is in the sensuous quality of paintings of draped robes, the glitter of frost, warm brickwork, etc. One can easily discern to what extent the Imaginary is being granted importance in the look of an artwork. Before the Renaissance, the Imaginary in art was held somewhat in abeyance: ideas and their symbols – mostly with a strongly religious flavour – took such great precedence over the realm of the senses that not even perspective was deemed important, let alone perceptions even more intimately linked with the body. In conceptual art, once again, the Symbolic comes to the fore: it is *what can be said* of an item that matters – the ideas it evokes, rather than the sensuous response. Another simple example can be seen in the contrast between Western and Chinese gardening: the Western gardener who cultivates the

softest, lushest lawn is pandering to the fantasies of the Imaginary; the Chinese one who constructs a pile of rockwork to represent the mountain-lair of gods and propitious spirits is functioning almost entirely in the realm of the Symbolic.

The RSI can be found in the commonest examples of human activity. A girl buying 'pampering products' – moisturisers, body creams, bath salts, aromatherapy oils – is a good example of someone in search of a small a object, which sits in the Borromean knot of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. She imagines, somehow, that these products contain the object cause of desire of some perfect imaginary state. The Imaginary creates the sensuous fantasy involved with skin, softness, warmth; the Symbolic extracts that into words, and piles on many other signifiers that have nothing to do with the product in question – to the point that it often seems that the purchaser is buying signifiers. However, the Real is present too, '*stuck to the sole of your shoe*' as Lacan would have it – for what motivates the purchase must be the anxiety attached to the loss of the perfect state and also the (libidinal) drive – both of which belong in the Real.

The *sinthome*

We have already mentioned that in the unravelling of the Borromean knot that occurs in a psychotic episode, the delusion usually appears still to have some meaning to the Subject, and that it manifests precisely at the stitch-points at which the RSI orders are still connected. This observation may have contributed to Lacan's formulation of the construct he named the *sinthome*.

The word *sinthome* is an old French spelling for symptom, and this idea is one that Lacan came to very late in life: he taught it in his seminar of 1975–76. *Sinthome* designates the structural aspect of symptoms, which are its observable manifestations. It

may be useful here to describe the context in which symptoms are usually understood in psychoanalysis.

Freud first noted that many symptoms displayed by patients had a psychological rather than a biological origin; Bleuler hypothesised that symptoms, even psychotic delusions, have meaning for the patient. Lacan's reflections on the matter were to begin with an elaboration of the classical hypothesis that the treatment of symptoms lay in their interpretation, and that the elucidation of their meaning would result in a 'curing' of the patient. In his theoretical trajectory, he reflected upon the mechanism and process by which this curing comes about, thereby arriving at his theories of the role of language in the structure of the Subject. In 1957, he had come to the view that a Subject's symptom came into being in the process of the formation of the unconscious, and that this process involved acts of language, or discourse: the symptom is 'inscribed in a writing process'.[12] This was directly in line with his reflections upon the role of language in the formation of the Subject and it clearly situates the symptom within the structure of the Subject; by implication, as a product of language, the symptom is also excisable only by discourse.

But soon, Lacan became preoccupied by a different, albeit related matter: what exactly does 'curing' mean? Is it simply the disappearance of a symptom, or does one aim to change the underlying personality structure that produced it and *in which it is inscribed*? Is this at all achievable, and if it is, is it desirable? If it is neither achievable nor desirable, then where should curing stop – at what boundary line? And finally, is it always a good thing even to begin the process, when you don't know where to end it or whether you will be leaving behind a damaged and less effective Subject?

We may all look around us and notice acquaintances who have obvious (although never to themselves) neurotic symptoms – a woman locked into an unhappy marriage for no material

reason, a man in love with a manipulative and selfish woman, a gardener so obsessed with his allotment that he cannot even allow himself to go on holiday for a week – but we know intuitively not to meddle with their symptoms, *especially* not to point out any 'home truths', for fear of the damage this 'wild interpretation' (as Lacan would have called it) might wreak in their lives.

By the early 1960s, Lacan felt that forcing people to confront the truth about themselves, the meaning of their symptoms and the hitherto repressed elements in their unconscious, had consequences too serious to be undertaken with anything less than the greatest caution.

> The Freudian unconscious is situated at that point where, between cause and that which it affects, there is always something wrong ... what the unconscious does is to show us the gap through which neurosis recreates a harmony with a real – a real that may well not be determined. Once this gap has been filled, is the neurosis cured? After all, the question remains open. But the neurosis becomes something else – sometimes a mere illness, a scar. As Freud said – this scar, not of the neurosis, but of the unconscious.[13]

Those last two sentences suggest that sometimes neurosis is preferable to the 'illness', the scarring its removal would leave.

Lacan's decades of clinical observation and preoccupation with the ethics of psychoanalysis led him to a surprising view of the symptom that is best explained in terms of the RSI orders, although I must first add a final word relating to the symptom as something inscribed in the Subject. If the symptom is indeed so intimately connected with the structure of the Subject's personality or psyche, then its removal would necessarily leave a scar – the foundation of the house which has been demolished. It is this – the structural foundation of the symptom – that Lacan calls the *sinthome*, in one of his most arcane seminars near the end of his life.

In terms of the RSI, Lacan saw the symptom as the effect of elements within the Symbolic realm (for the most part, signifiers) upon the Real of the body, the drives, etc. As a quick and easy example, one could think of a symptom such as soiling in children who are past a nappy-wearing age: it is not difficult to see the connection between the signifiers produced by the angry parent or authority figure in a sentence such as, '*Can you stop being such a baby?*' and the child's use of the part drive (control) and its attendant function (anal) to insist upon his status as a child. This is in no way intended as a generalisation upon the meaning of this particular symptom, which will be different in every case, only as an illustration of the way in which signifiers from the Symbolic may interact with the drives of the Real.

In his seminar in 1975–76, Lacan suggested a modification of his Borromean knot, introducing into it a fourth circle – the *sinthome*, whose role is to hold the knot in place, so preventing any unravelling of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Thus, the *sinthome* in fact provides stability to the system. This seminar has been of great interest to students of English, because in it, Lacan goes into some detail about the work of James Joyce, whom he views as having a potentially psychotic personality structure in which the Borromean knot is prevented from unravelling by his writing. Only Joyce's peculiar relationship with his art allowed him to keep meaning and being together, and in this respect, his writing was a prosthesis – a *sinthome*.

The *sinthome* is inscribed in the Subject as a signifier chain, and it is through the action of this specific configuration that it acts upon the Real to produce the symptoms. Lacan also held that the *sinthome* was that which allowed the Subject to experience enjoyment – the kind of enjoyment linked with drives (which will be explained in chapter 7). This enjoyment is a component of desire – the desire that Lacan held to be a structural force in the Subject – and cannot be removed. These are complex concepts that can only be understood after

jouissance (enjoyment) and desire have been explained, and the *sinthome* will be revisited towards the end of the book when this has been done.

Lacan clarified his position about patients and symptoms, saying that while it is reasonable that individuals expect their symptoms to disappear following an analytical treatment, it might not be prudent to try to suppress the use of the fourth circle of the Borromean knot. If the *symptom* must 'fall' during the treatment, the *sinthome* should stay but become modified in such a way that enjoyment and desire remain possible – a little like strengthening and deepening the foundations of the demolished house so that a better one can be built upon them. I shall finish with an example of a patient who, at the end of her treatment, seemed quite aware of the loss she would suffer as a result of being cured.

The young woman, who had been severely anorexic, talked about a dream during one of her last sessions. In it, she had on a necklace on which there was a great, pointed spike or barb. The curious thing was that this necklace was under her skin, within her body, and she wanted to remove it – to get it out of her. She somehow managed to tug it out, but as the spike came out of her body, it left a gaping hole, and she was bleeding. The analyst said in agreement with her unconscious knowledge: '*Yes, you will be left with a hole. And you will be bleeding.*' The patient understood immediately and perfectly the meaning of both: that the giving up of her symptom would indeed leave a hole in the structure of her Subject, and she would face the new reality of menstrual bleeding. If this illustration leaves one with many questions, that is as Lacan would have wished.

7

Unspeakable need, unquenchable desire

Need, speech, and desire

You can't always get what you want,
But if you try sometimes
You just might find
You get what you need.
(Mick Jagger, 1968)

Desire has a special place in Lacan's work; at times, he seems to focus upon it to the exclusion of other affects. But to Lacan, desire was more a condition than an affect; he did not talk very much about 'affects', perhaps because unless one knows precisely what is talking about, one may end up in a dialogue of the deaf. His method was to examine in close detail and depth a phenomenon in its singularity: rather than filing it into a category whose rigours are untested, he would involve himself in intense reflection upon its nature and origins, how it comes into being (he liked the expression '*inscribes itself*') in the Subject, what part it plays in the structure of the Subject, and how it plays this part (i.e. the mechanisms by which it makes its mark).

I would suggest three reasons he chose to focus such attention upon desire: firstly, desire seemed to figure large in his own personality; he must have been aware of the strength of his own desires – for nice things, fast cars, beautiful women, recognition, knowledge, and to find the answers to his own myriad questions. Secondly, desire is the mainspring of all creativity: