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The concept of identity is as old as philosophy. One could say that an interrogation about the nature of identity is the founding moment of any authentically philosophical inquiry. Of course, an analysis of the concept of identity cannot be carried on without taking into consideration its other, the notion of difference.

Traditionally, "identity" is defined as the relation of an entity to itself, as opposed to relation it has with other entities, which we call "difference." The problem with this formulation of identity, however, is that of reconciling the necessary predicate of identity—unity—with the split that the definition itself produces at the very moment it determines its concept. The coincidence of something with itself forces us to count at least to two—the self as simple starting point and the (it)self as point of arrival. In order to have the one, we need the two. So which comes first? This is another long-lasting philosophical problem, and to be sure many solutions have been offered.

The contribution of psychoanalysis to this debate has been the recognition that human identity is achieved through a dialectical process that involves not only plurality but also temporality. Insofar as identity is achieved in time, it becomes identifi- cation, the operation through which the subject is constituted in time, in a mode of constant oscillation, by the infinite task of making the other into the same. As a result, identity can no longer be thought in terms of oneness and full presence. Identity will rather be defined as the gap and the difference between presence and non-presence, between the One and the other. It is precisely from the écart caused by the non-coincidence of the two poles of identity that the unconscious arises.
Through psychoanalysis, the self-possessed complacency of the Cartesian cogito leaves space to the perplexity of Rimbaud’s line “Je est un autre.”

But just what other are we talking about? The voiceless insubstantial other that comes before the ego and that constitutes the ground for ethical responsibility, the other that the ego looks up to and fashions itself after, the other as punitive agency that compels the ego to be what it is, or finally the other as alter ego, the neighbor that one should love as oneself?

This issue of Umbr(a) is devoted to the examination of the possible routes towards identity and their philosophical, logical, and sexual implications.
From "Passionate Attachments" to Dis-Identification

Slavoj Žižek

I want to address the problem of identification by confronting the predominant deconstructionist doxa according to which the main problem with Lacanian theory—which allegedly also limits its political use—is that Lacan elevates the symbolic into a kind of transcendental position of a fixed normative order exempted from the transformative process of historical practice. According to this critique, the symbolic fixes in advance the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality and reduces all resistance to it to imaginary misrecognition. And if one does effectively break up the chains of the symbolic order, one is expelled into the void of psychosis. Since the main proponent of this criticism is Judith Butler, let me focus on her latest book, *The Psychic Life of Power*.¹

Butler's, as well as Lacan's, starting point is the old Leftist one—how is it possible not only to resist effectively, but also to undermine and/or displace the existing socio-symbolic network—the Lacanian "big Other"—which predetermines the only space within which the subject can exist. Significantly, Butler identifies "subject" with the symbolic position occupied within this space, while she reserves the term "psyche" for the larger unity encompassing that in the individual which resists being included in the symbolic space.² Butler, of course, is well aware that the site of this resistance cannot be


² Butler demonstrates that the Foucauldian "body" as the site of resistance is none other than the Freudian "psyche." Paradoxically, "body" is Foucault's name for the psychic apparatus insotar as it resists the soul's domination. That is to say, when, in his well-known definition of the soul as the "prison of the body," Foucault turns around the standard Platonic-Christian definition of the body as the "prison of the soul," what he calls "body" is not simply the biological body, but is that which is already caught in some kind of pre-subjective psychic apparatus.
simply and directly identified as the unconscious: the existing order of Power is also supported by unconscious "passionate attachments," attachments publicly non-acknowledged by the subject—

If the unconscious escapes from a given normative injunction, to what other injunction does it form an attachment? What makes us think that the unconscious is any less structured by the power relations that pervade cultural signifiers than is the language of the subject? If we find an attachment to subjection at the level of the unconscious, what kind of resistance is to be wrought from that? (88)

The exemplary case of such unconscious "passionate attachments" which sustain Power is precisely the inherent reflective eroticization of the regulatory power-mechanisms and procedures themselves. In the performance of an obsessional ritual, one designed to keep at bay the illicit temptation, the ritual itself becomes the source of libidinal satisfaction. It is thus the "reflexivity" involved in the relationship between regulatory power and sexuality, the way the repressive regulatory procedures themselves get libidinally invested, that functions as a source of libidinal satisfaction. And it is this radical masochistic reflective turn which remains unaccounted for in the standard notion of the "internalization" of social norms into psychic prohibitions.

The second problem with the quick identification of the unconscious as the site of resistance is that, even if we concede that the unconscious is the site of resistance which forever prevents the smooth functioning of power mechanisms, that interpellation—the subject’s recognition in his or her allotted symbolic place—is always ultimately incomplete, failed. "[D]oes such resistance do anything," asks Butler, "to alter or expand the dominant injunctions or interpellations of subject formation?" (88) In short, she concludes that "[t]his resistance establishes the incomplete character of any effort to produce a subject by disciplinary means, but it remains unable to rearticulate the dominant terms of productive power" (89).

Therein resides the kernel of Butler’s criticism of Lacan. According to her, Lacan reduces resistance to the imaginary misrecognition of the symbolic structure. Such a resistance, although it thwarts the full symbolic realization, nonetheless depends on the symbolic order and asserts it in its very opposition, unable to rearticulate its terms—"For the Lacanian, then, the imaginary signifies the impossibility of the discursive—that is, symbolic—constitution of identity" (96-97). Along these lines, she even identifies the Lacanian unconscious itself as imaginary, as “that which thwarts any effort of the symbolic to constitute sexed identity coherently and fully, an unconscious indicated by
the slips and gaps that characterize the workings of the imaginary in language" (97). Against this background, it is then possible to claim that, in Lacan, “psychic resistance presumes the continuation of the law in its anterior, symbolic form and, in that sense, contributes to its status quo. In such a view, resistance appears doomed to perpetual defeat” (98).

The first thing to take note of here is that Butler seems to conflate two radically opposed uses of the term “resistance.” One is the socio-critical use—resistance to power, for instance—and the other the clinical use operative in psychoanalysis—the patient’s resistance to acknowledge the unconscious truth of his symptoms, the meaning of his dreams, etc. When Lacan determines resistance as “imaginary,” he has thereby in mind the misrecognition of the symbolic network which determines us. On the other hand, for Lacan, radical rearticulation of the predominant symbolic order is altogether possible. This is what his notion of point de capiton—the “quilting point” or the master-signifier—is about. When a new point de capiton emerges, the socio-symbolic field is not only displaced, its very structuring principle changes. Here, one is thus tempted to turn around the opposition between Lacan and Foucault as elaborated by Butler. It is Foucault who insists on the immanence of resistance to power, while Lacan leaves open the possibility of a radical rearticulation of the entire symbolic field by means of an act proper, a passage through “symbolic death.” In short, it is Lacan who allows us to conceptualize the distinction between imaginary resistance—false transgression which reasserts the symbolic status quo and even serves as a positive condition of its functioning—and the effective symbolic rearticulation via the intervention of the real of an act.

Only at this level, assuming that we take into account the Lacanian notions of point de capiton and the act as real, does a meaningful dialogue with Butler become possible. Butler’s matrix of social existence as well as Lacan’s is that of a forced choice. In order to exist at all within the socio-symbolic space, one has to accept the fundamental alienation, the definition of one’s existence in the terms of the “big Other.” As she is quick to add, however, this should not constrain us to—what she perceives as—the Lacanian view according to which the symbolic order is a given which can only be effectively transgressed if the subject pays the price of psychotic exclusion. So on the one hand we

3 Incidentally, Butler here blatantly contradicts Lacan for whom the unconscious is “the Other’s discourse,” i.e. symbolic, not imaginary. Is not the best known single line from Lacan the assertion that “the Unconscious is structured like a language?” Slips and gaps are for Lacan thoroughly symbolic facts. They confirm the functioning of the signifying network.
have the false imaginary resistance to the symbolic norm, and on the other, the psychotic breakdown, with the only “realistic option” being the full acceptance of alienation in the symbolic order—the goal of the psychoanalytic treatment. Butler opposes to this Lacanian fixity of the symbolic the Hegelian dialectic of presupposing and positing. Not only is the symbolic order always-already presupposed as the sole milieu of the subject’s social existence, but this order itself exists and is reproduced, only insofar as subjects recognize themselves in it and, via repeated performative gestures, again and again assume their places in it. This, of course, opens up the possibility of changing the symbolic contours of our socio-symbolic existence by way of its parodically displaced performative enactings. Therein resides the thrust of Butler’s anti-Kantianism. She rejects the Lacanian symbolic a priori as a new version of the transcendental framework which fixes the coordinates of our existence in advance, leaving no space for the retroactive displacement of these presupposed conditions. So when in a key passage Butler asks the question—

What would it mean for the subject to desire something other than its continued ‘social existence’? If such an existence cannot be undone without falling into some kind of death, can existence nevertheless be risked, death courted or pursued, in order to expose and open to transformation the hold of social power on the conditions of life’s persistence? The subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced, but the repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm ‘in the right way,’ one becomes subject to further sanction, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened. And yet, without a repetition that risks life—in its current organization—how might we begin to imagine the contingency of that organization, and performatively reconfigure the contours of the conditions of life? (28-29)

The Lacanian answer to this is clear—“to desire something other than its continued ‘social existence’” and thus to fall “into some kind of death,” that is, to risk a gesture by means of which death is “courted or pursued,” points precisely towards the way Lacan reconceptualized the Freudian death-drive as the elementary form of the ethical act. Note that the act, insofar as it is irreducible to a “speech act,” relies for its performative power on the preestablished set of symbolic rules and/or norms.

Is this not the whole point of Lacan’s reading of Antigone? Antigone effectively puts at risk her entire social existence, defying the socio-symbolic power of the city embodied in the rule of Creon, thereby “falling into some kind of death”—i.e., sustaining
symbolic death, the exclusion from the socio-symbolic space. For Lacan, there is no ethical act proper without taking the risk of such a momentary “suspension of the big Other,” of the socio-symbolic network which guarantees the subject’s identity; an authentic act occurs only when a subject risks a gesture which is no longer “covered up” by the big Other. For that reason, Lacan pursues all possible versions of this entering the domain “between the two deaths,” not only citing Antigone after her expulsion, but also Oedipus at Colonus, King Lear, Poe’s Mr. Valdemar, and so on. Up to Sygne from Claudel’s Coufontaine-trilogy, their common predicament is that they all found themselves in this domain of the undead, “beyond death and life,” in which the causality of the symbolic fate is suspended. Butler, in the above-quoted passage, too quickly conflates this act in its radical dimension with the performative reconfiguration of one’s symbolic condition via its repetitive displacements. The two are not the same. In other words, one should maintain the crucial distinction between a mere “performative reconfiguration,” a subversive displacement which remains within the hegemonic field and, as it were, fights against it an internal guerilla battle of turning against the hegemonic field its own terms, and the much more radical act of a thorough reconfiguration of the entire field which redefines the very conditions of socially sustained performativity—in Foucault’s terms, the passage from one episteme to another.

Is it possible to undermine also the most fundamental level of subjection, what Butler calls “passionate attachments”? The Lacanian name for the primordial passionate attachments on which the very consistency of the subject’s being hinges is, of course, fundamental fantasy. The “attachment to subjectivation” constitutive of the subject is thus none other than the primordial “masochist” scene in which the subject “makes/sees himself suffer,” that is, assumes la douleur d’exister and thus provides the minimum of support to his being—like Freud’s primordially repressed middle term “Father is beating me” in the essay “A Child is Being Beaten.” This fundamental fantasy is thoroughly “inter-passive.” In it, a scene of passive suffering, or subjection, is staged which simultaneously sustains and threatens the subject’s being—only insofar, that is, as being remains foreclosed, primordially repressed. From this perspective, a new approach opens up to the recent artistic practices of sado-masochistic performance. In such practices, isn’t this very foreclosure ultimately undone? In other words, what if the open assuming/staging of the fantasmatic scene of primordial “passionate attachment” is far
more subversive than the dialectic rearticulation and/or displacement of this scene?

The difference between Butler and Lacan is that for Butler primordial repression is the foreclosure of the primordial "passionate attachment," while for Lacan, the fundamental fantasy, the stuff of which "primordial attachments" are made, is already a filler, a formation which covers up a certain gap or void. Thus it is only here, at this very point where the difference between Butler and Lacan is almost imperceptible, that we encounter the ultimate gap that separates Butler from Lacan. Butler again interprets these "primordial attachments" as the subject's pre-suppositions in a proto-Hegelian meaning of the term, and therefore counts on the subject's ability dialectically to rearticulate these presuppositions of his or her being, to reconfigure and displace them. The subject's identity "will remain always and forever rooted in its injury as long as it remains an identity, but it does imply that the possibilities of resignification will rework and unsettle the passionate attachment to subjection without which subject formation—and reformation—cannot succeed" (105). For example, subjects are confronted with a forced choice in which rejecting an injurious interpellation amounts to not existing at all; under the threat of non-existence, they are, as it were, emotionally blackmailed into identifying with the imposed symbolic identity, "nigger," "bitch," etc. Since symbolic identity retains its hold only by its incessant repetitive re-enacting, however, it is possible for the subject to displace this identity, to re-contextualize it, to make it work for other purposes, to turn it against its hegemonic mode of functioning.

What Lacan does here is to introduce a distinction between the two terms which are identified in Butler, the fundamental fantasy which serves as the ultimate support of the subject's being, and the symbolic identification which is already a symbolic response to the trauma of the fantasmatic "passionate attachment." The symbolic identity we assume in a forced choice when we recognize ourselves in ideological interpellation relies on the disavowal of the fantasmatic "passionate attachment" which serves as its ultimate support. This leads to a further distinction between symbolic rearticulations and variations on the fundamental fantasy—like the variations on "Father is beating me"—which do not effectively undermine its hold, that is, between this dialecticization and the possible "traversing" the very fundamental fantasy. The ultimate aim of the psychoanalytic process is precisely for the subject to undo the ultimate "passionate attachment" which guarantees the consistency of his or her being, and thus to undergo what Lacan calls the "subjective destitution." At its most fundamental level, the

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4 For example, apropos of the army life, such a "passionate attachment" is provided by a homosexual link which has to be disavowed if it is to remain operative. See Chapter 2 of Slavoj Žižek, The Plague of Fantasies (London: Verso, 1997).
primordial "passionate attachment" to the scene of fundamental fantasy is not "dialecticizable."

An example of the reconfiguration of fantasy would be Clint Eastwood's Dirty-Harry series. In the first film, the masochist fantasy in all its ambiguity is almost directly acknowledged, while in the following installments, it looks as if Eastwood self-consciously accepted the politically correct criticism and displaced the fantasy to give to the story a more acceptable "progressive" flavor. In all these reconfigurations, however, the same fundamental fantasy remains operative. With all respect for the political efficiency of such reconfigurations, they do not really touch the hard fantasmatic kernel—they even sustain it. And in contrast to Butler, Lacan's wager is that even and also in politics, it is possible to accomplish a more radical gesture of "traversing" the very fundamental fantasy. Only such gestures which disturb this fantasmatic kernel are authentic acts.

Here, one should look to the problematic of the original Hilflosigkeit (‘helplessness’, ‘distress’) of small infants. The first feature to be noted is that this "distress" covers two interconnected, but nonetheless different, levels—first a purely organic helplessness, the inability of the small child to survive, to satisfy his or her most elementary needs, without the parents' help, and second the traumatic perplexion when the child is thrown into the position of a helpless witness of sexual interplay among the parents, other adults, or between adults and him- or herself. The child is helpless, without "cognitive mapping," when confronted with the enigma of the Other's jouissance, unable to symbolize the mysterious sexual gestures and innuendos he or she is witnessing. Crucial for "becoming-human" is the overlapping of the two levels, the implicit "sexualization" of the way a parent satisfies a child's bodily needs—say, when the mother feeds the child by excessively caressing him, and the child detects in this excess the mystery of sexual jouissance.

So, back to Butler—the crucial question concerns the philosophical status of this original and constitutive Hilflosigkeit. Is this Hilflosigkeit not another name for the gap of the primordial dis-attachment which triggers the need for the fantasmatic primordial "passionate attachment"? In other words, what if we turn around the perspective and conceive of the obstacle which prevents the infans fully to fit into its environs—this original "out-of-joint" state—in its positive aspect, as another name for the very abyss of freedom, for that gesture of "disconnecting" that liberates a subject from its direct immersion into its environs? Or, to put it in yet another way—true, the subject is as it were "blackmailed" into passively submitting to some form of the primordial "passionate
attachment,” since, outside of it, he simply does not exist. This non-existence is not directly the absence of existence, however, but a certain gap or void in the order of being which “is” the subject itself. The need for “passionate attachment” to provide a minimum of being implies that the subject qua “abstract negativity,” qua the primordial gesture of dis-attachment from its environs, is already here. Fantasy is thus a defense-formation against the primordial abyss of dis-attachment that “is” the subject itself. At this precise point, then, Butler should be supplemented—the emergence of the subject and subjection in the sense of the “passionate attachment,” i.e., submission to some figure of the Other, are not strictly equivalent, since, for the “passionate attachment” to take place, the gap which “is” the subject must already be here. Only if this gap is already here, can we account for how it is possible for the subject to escape the hold of the fundamental fantasy. 

So what is a proper act? Jacques-Alain Miller proposes as the definition of “a true woman” a certain radical act—the act of taking from man, her partner, of obliterating, destroying even, that which is “in him more than himself,” that which “means everything to him” and to which he holds more than his own life, the precious agalma around which his life turns. The exemplary figure of such an act in literature is that of Medea who, upon learning that Jason, her husband, plans to abandon her for a younger woman, kills their two young children, her husband’s most precious possession. It is in this horrible act of destroying that which matters most to her husband that she acts as une vraie femme, as Lacan put it.

5 One should link this opposition of attachment and dis-attachment to the old Freudian metapsychological opposition of Life and Death drives. In The Ego and the Id, Freud defines these drives as the opposition between the forces of connection/unity and the forces of disconnection/disunity. Dis-attachment is thus death drive at its purest, the gesture of ontological “derailment” which throws “out of joint” the order of Being. It is the gesture of disinvestment, of “contraction”/withdrawal from being immersed into the world. The primordial attachment is the counter-move to this negative gesture. In the last resort, this negative tendency to disruption is none other than libido itself: what throws a subject “out of joint” is none other than the traumatic encounter with jouissance.


7 Lacan’s other example is that of Andre Gide’s wife who, after his death, burned all his love letters to her, considered by him his most precious possession.
Would it not be possible, along these lines, also to interpret the unique figure of the femme fatale in the new noir of the 90s, as exemplified by Linda Fiorentino in John Dahl’s *The Last Seduction*? In contrast to the classic noir femme fatale of the 40s, who remains an elusive spectral presence, the new femme fatale is characterized by direct, outspoken sexual aggressivity, verbal and physical, by direct self-commodification and self-manipulation. She has the “mind of a pimp in the body of a whore.” Two dialogues are here indicative—the classic exchange of *double entendres* about a “speed limit” which finishes the first encounter of Barbara Stanwyck and Fred McMurray in Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*, and the first encounter of Linda Fiorentino with her partner in *The Last Seduction*. In the latter, Fiorentino directly opens up his fly, reaches into it and inspects his merchandise before accepting him as a lover: “I never buy anything sight unseen,” she says, and later rejects any “warm human contact” with him. How does this brutal “self-commodification,” this reduction of herself and her male partner to an object to be satisfied and exploited, affect the allegedly “subversive” status of the *femme fatale* with regard to the paternal Law of speech?

According to standard feminist cinema theory, in the classical noir, the femme fatale is punished at the level of explicit narrative line. She is destroyed for being assertive and undermining the male patriarchal dominance and for presenting a threat to it. Although she is destroyed or domesticated, her image survives her physical destruction as the element which effectively dominates the scene. The subversive character of the noir films is exhibited in the way the texture of the film belies and subverts its explicit narrative line. In contrast to this classic noir, the neo-noir of the 80s and 90s, from Kasdan’s *Body Heat* to *The Last Seduction*, at the level of explicit narrative, openly allows the femme fatale to triumph, to reduce her partner to a sucker condemned to death—she survives rich and alone over his dead body. She does not survive as a spectral “undead” threat which libidinally dominates the scene even after her physical and social destruction. She triumphs directly, in social reality itself. How does this affect the subversive edge of the *femme fatale* figure? Does the fact that her triumph is real not undermine her much stronger spectral/fantasmatic triumph, so that, instead of a spectral all-powerful threat, indestructible in her very physical destruction, she turns out to be just a vulgar, cold, manipulative “bitch” deprived of any aura?

Perhaps what one should do here is change the terms of the debate by, first, pointing out that, far from being simply a threat to the male patriarchal identity, the classic femme fatale functions as the “inherent transgression” of the patriarchal symbolic.

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8 I rely here on Kate Stables, British Film Institute, London.
universe, as the *male* masochist-paranoiac fantasy of the exploitative and sexually insatiable woman who simultaneously dominates us and enjoys in her suffering, provoking us violently to take her and to abuse her. The threat of the femme fatale is thus a false one. It is effectively a fantasmatic support of patriarchal domination, the figure of the enemy engendered by the patriarchal system itself. In Judith Butler's terms, femme fatale is the fundamental disavowed “passionate attachment” of the modern male subject, a fantasmatic formation which is needed, but cannot be openly assumed, so that it can only be evoked on the condition that, at the level of the explicit narrative line—standing for the public socio-symbolic sphere—she is punished and the order of male domination is reasserted. Or, to put it in Foucauldian terms, in the same way that the discourse on sexuality *creates* sex as the mysterious, impenetrable entity to be conquered, the patriarchal erotic discourse creates the femme fatale as the inherent threat against which the male identity should assert itself. And the neo-noir's achievement is to bring to light this underlying fantasy: the new femme fatale who fully accepts the male game of manipulation, and as it were beats him at his own game, is much more effective in threatening the paternal Law than the classic spectral femme fatale.

One can argue, of course, that this new femme fatale is no less hallucinatory, that her direct approach to a man is no less the realization of a (masochist) male fantasy; what one should not forget, however, is that the new femme fatale subverts the male fantasy precisely by way of directly and brutally realizing it, acting it out in “real life.” It is thus not only that she realizes the male hallucination; she is fully aware that men hallucinate about such a direct approach, and that directly giving them what they hallucinate about is the most effective way to undermine their domination. In other words, what we have in the above-described scene from *The Last Seduction* is the exact feminine counterpart to the scene from Lynch's *Wild at Heart* in which Willem Defoe verbally abuses Laura Dern, forcing her to utter the words “Fuck me!” And when she finally does respond, i.e., when her fantasy is aroused, he treats this offer of her as an authentic free offer and politely rejects it—“No, thanks, I've got to go, but maybe some other time...” In both scenes, the subject is humiliated when his or her fantasy is brutally externalized. In short, Linda Fiorentino acts here as a true sadist, not only on account of her reduction of her partner to

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9 The fantasy of the all-powerful woman whose irresistible attraction presents a threat not only to male domination, but to the very identity of the male subject, is the “fundamental fantasy” against which the male symbolic identity defines and sustains itself.

10 For a detailed analysis of the scene from *Wild at Heart*, see Appendix 2 to Slavoj Žižek's *The Plague of Fantasies*. 
the bearer of partial objects which provide pleasure—thereby depriving the sexual act of its “human and emotional warmth” and transforming it into a cold physiological exercise—but also because of the cruel manipulation of the other’s fantasy which is directly acted out and thus thwarted in its efficiency as the support of desire.

Is this gesture of intentionally and brutally dropping the spectral aura of the traditional femme fatale not another version of the act of _une vraie femme_? Is not the object which is to her partner “more than himself,” the treasure around which his life turns, the _femme fatale_ herself? By brutally destroying her spectral aura of “feminine mystery,” by acting as a cold manipulating subject interested only in raw sex, reducing her partner to a partial object, the appendix to—and the bearer of—his penis, does she not also violently destroy what is “for him more than himself”? The enigma of this new femme fatale is that although, in contrast to the classic femme fatale, she is totally transparent, openly assuming the role of a calculating bitch, the perfect embodiment of what Baudrillard called the “transparency of Evil,”_ her enigma persists_. Here we encounter the paradox already discerned by Hegel—sometimes, total self-exposure and self-transparency, i.e., the awareness that there is no hidden content, makes the subject even more enigmatic. Sometimes, being totally outspoken is the most effective and cunning way of deceiving the Other. For that reason, the neo-noir femme fatale continues to exert her irresistible seductive power on her poor partner. Her strategy is the one of deceiving him by openly telling the truth. The male partner is unable to accept this, and so, he desperately clings to the conviction that, behind the cold manipulative surface, there must be a heart of gold to be saved, a person of warm human feeling, and that her cold manipulative approach is just a kind of defensive strategy. So, in the vein of Freud’s well-known Jewish joke “Why are you telling me that you are going to Lemberg, when you are actually going to Lemberg?” the basic implicit reproach of the sucker-partner to the new femme fatale could be formulated as “Why do you act as if you are just a cold manipulative bitch, when you really are just a cold manipulative bitch?”

This allows us further to specify the Lacanian notion of an authentic act. Act is to be opposed to mere activity. Activity relies on some fantasmatic support, while the authentic act involves disturbing—“traversing”—the fantasy. In this precise sense, act is for Lacan on the side of the object _qua_ real as opposed to signifier—to “speech act.” We can only perform speech acts insofar as we have accepted the fundamental alienation in the symbolic order and the fantasmatic support necessary for the functioning of this
order, while the act as real is an event which occurs \textit{ex nihilo}, without any fantasmatic support. As such, act as object is also to be opposed to the subject, at least in the standard Lacanian sense of the “alienated” divided subject. The correlate to the act is a divided subject, but not in the sense that because of that division act is always failed or displaced. On the contrary, act as traumatic \textit{tuche} is that which divides the subject who cannot ever subjectivize this act, assume it as “his own,” posit himself as its author-agent. The authentic act that I accomplish is always by definition a foreign body, an intruder which simultaneously attracts/fascinates and repels me, so that, if and when I come too close to it, this leads to my \textit{aphanisis}, self-erasure. If there is a subject to the act, it is not the subject of subjectivization, of integrating the act into the universe of symbolic integration and recognition, of assuming the act as “my own,” but rather it is an uncanny “acephalous” subject through which the act takes place as that which is “in him more than himself.” Act thus designates the level at which the fundamental divisions and displacements usually associated with the “Lacanian subject”\footnote{That is, the split between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciated/statement, the subject’s “decenterment” with regard to the symbolic big Other, and so on.} are momentarily suspended. In the act, the subject, as Lacan puts it, \textit{poses itself as its own cause} and is no longer determined by the decentered object-cause. Thus if we subtract from it its scenic imagery, its fascination with the divine majesty, and reduce it to the essential, Kant’s well-known description of how a direct insight into the noumenal God as the Thing in itself would deprive us of our freedom and turn us into lifeless puppets paradoxically fits perfectly the description of the ethical act.\footnote{“[I]nstead of the conflict which now the moral disposition has to wage with inclinations and in which, after some defeats, moral strength of mind may be gradually won, God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand uneasingly before our eyes…. Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty. The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even of the world depends in the eyes of supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it is now, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figures." Immanuel Kant, \textit{Critique of Practical Reason} (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 152-153.} This act is precisely something which unexpectedly “just occurs.” It is an occurrence which most surprises its agent itself.\footnote{After an authentic act, my reaction is always, “I myself do not know how I was able to do that—it just happened!”} The paradox is that in an authentic act, the highest freedom coincides with the utmost
passivity, with a reduction to a lifeless automaton who just blindly performs its gestures. The problematic of act thus compels us to accept the radical shift of perspective involved in the modern notion of finitude. What is so difficult to accept is not the fact that the true act—in which noumenal and phenomenal dimensions coincide—is forever out of our reach. The true trauma resides in the opposite awareness that there are acts, that they do occur and that we have to come to terms with them.

This shift is homologous to that implied in the Kierkegaardian notion of “sickness unto death.” The “sickness unto death” proper, its despair, opposes the standard despair of the individual who is split between the certainty that death is the end, that there is no beyond of eternal life and the equal certainty that death is not the last thing, that there is another life with its promise of redemption and eternal bliss. The “sickness unto death” rather involves the opposite paradox of the subject who knows that death is not the end, that he has an immortal soul, but cannot face the exorbitant demands of this fact—the necessity to abandon vain aesthetic pleasures and to work for his salvation—and so, desperately wants to believe that death is the end, that there is no divine unconditional demand exerting its pressure upon him. The standard religious je sais bien, mais quand meme is inverted here. It is not that “I know very well that I am a mere mortal living being, but I nonetheless desperately want to believe that there is redemption in eternal life.” It is rather that “I know very well that I have an eternal soul responsible to God’s unconditional commandments, but I desperately want to believe that there is nothing beyond death, I want to be relieved of the unbearable pressure of the divine injunction.” In other words, in contrast to the individual caught in the standard skeptical despair—i.e., the individual who knows he will die but cannot accept it and hopes for eternal life—we have here, in the case of “sickness unto death,” the individual who desperately wants to die, to disappear forever, but knows that he cannot do it, that he is condemned to eternal life. The predicament of the individual “sick unto death” is the same as that of the Wagnerian heroes, from the Flying Dutchman to Amfortas in Parsifal, who desperately strive for death, for the final annihilation and self-obliteration which would relieve them of the hell of their “undead” existence.

In the criticism of Kant implicit in this notion of the act, Lacan is thus close to Hegel who also claimed that the unity of the noumenal and the phenomenal adjourned ad infinitum in Kant is precisely what takes place every time an authentic act is accomplished. Kant’s mistake was to presuppose that there is an act only insofar as it is adequately “subjectivized,” that is, accomplished with a pure will, a will free of any “pathological” motivations. And, since one can never be sure that what I did was
effectively motivated by the moral Law as its sole motive, the moral act turns into something which effectively never happens, but can only be posited as the final point of an infinite asymptotic approach of the purification of the soul. For this reason, Kant, in order to guarantee the ultimate possibility of the act, had to propose his postulate of the immortality of the soul, which, as it can be shown, effectively amounts to its very opposite, the Sadean fantasy of the immortality of the body. Only in such a way can one hope that, after endless approximation, one will reach the point of being able to accomplish a true moral act. The point of Lacan's criticism is thus that an authentic act does not presuppose its agent, the way Kant assumes with misleading self-evidence, “at the level of the act” with his will purified of all pathological motivations. It is inevitable, then, that the agent is not “at the level of its act,” for he is himself unpleasantly surprised by the “crazy thing he just did” and is unable fully to come to terms with what he did. This, incidentally, is the usual structure of heroic acts—somebody who, for a long time, led an opportunistic life of maneuvering and compromises, all of a sudden, inexplicably even to himself, resolves to stand firmly, cost what it may. Thus the paradox of the act resides in the fact that although it is not “intentional” in the usual sense of the term, it is nonetheless accepted as something for which its agent is fully responsible—“I cannot do otherwise, yet I am nonetheless fully free in doing it.”

So, if we return for a brief moment to *The Last Seduction*, Linda Fiorentino's gesture nevertheless does not quite fit the description of a true ethical act, insofar as she is presented as a perfect diabolic being, as the subject with a diabolical will who is perfectly aware of what she is doing; she fully subjectivizes her acts, insofar as her Will is at the level of her wicked deeds. As such, she remains a male fantasy: the fantasy of encountering a perfect subject in the guise of the absolutely corrupted woman who fully knows and wills what she is doing.

Consequently, this Lacanian notion of act also enables us to break with the deconstructionist ethics of the irreducible finitude, of how our situation is always that of a displaced being, caught in a constitutive lack, so that all we can do is to assume heroically this lack, to assume heroically the fact that our situation is that of being thrown into an impenetrable finite context. The corollary of this ethics, of course, is that the ultimate source of totalitarian and other catastrophes is man’s presumption that he can overcome this condition of finitude, lack and displacement, and “act like God,” in a total transparency, surpassing his constitutive division. Lacan’s answer to this is that absolute/unconditional acts do occur, but not in the idealist guise of a self-transparent

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gesture performed by a subject with a pure will who fully intends them. They occur, on the contrary, as a totally unpredictable tuche, a miraculous event which shatters our lives. To put it in somewhat pathetic terms, this is how the “divine” dimension is present in our lives, and the different modalities of ethical betrayal relate precisely to the different ways of betraying the act-event. The true source of evil is not a finite mortal man who acts like God, but a man who disavows that divine miracles occur and reduces himself to just another finite mortal being.15

15 In a further elaboration, one should thus reread Lacan’s matrix of the four discourses as three modes of coming to terms with the trauma of the analytic act. The master’s semblance resides in the fact that he pretends to nominate and thus directly translate into the symbolic fidelity the dimension of the act. That is, the defining feature of the Master’s gesture is to change the act into a new master-signifier. In contrast to the master, the hysteriC maintains the ambiguous attitude of division towards the act, insisting on the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of its symbolization. In contrast to both of them, the perverse agent of the university discourse disavows that there was the event of an act in the first place. By means of the chain of knowledge, he wants to reduce the consequences of the act to just another thing which can be explained away as part of the normal run of things.
That the concept of difference has been poorly or insufficiently theorized goes without saying—we find evidence of this in the fact that philosophy in the last fifty years has been characterized precisely by the attempt to re-examine such a notion. But what do we talk about when we talk about difference? To be sure the idea of difference implies the notions of identity and alterity. We must then begin by distinguishing—as Aristotle does—between specific difference, that is, the difference between two things which belong to a different species but to the same genus, and absolute difference, the difference between two entities that are non-comparable because they are completely other in relation to each other. The distinction between these two types of difference is crucial, for specific difference, insofar as it presupposes a common genus, must always be a difference of, or within, the same, and as such it cannot be thought of as a radical, or absolute difference.\footnote{Rodolphe Gasché, “The Eclipse of Difference,” in *Inventions of Difference* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994), 87.} I will call specific difference “alterity,” (for ‘alter’ in Latin is always the other of two), and refer to absolute difference—because it is the difference in the being of two distinct entities—as “ontological difference.” I am for the moment putting off Heidegger’s formulation of ontological difference as the difference between beings and being not because it doesn’t obtain, but because it is my aim to show how such a definition fulfills itself only when the ontological difference is thought in terms of sexual difference. I will proceed from the following assumptions:
• Western philosophical tradition has always been ready to acknowledge difference, but only in the form of specific difference even when it claimed otherwise.
• Contrary to appearances, the theological notion of God, even the negative one, does not indicate a successful attempt to think ontological difference. As Heidegger shows in *Being and Time*, God in theology is still thought from an ontic point of view as an entity among other entities (that is, only as specifically different from man) except that it is considered in the realm of the *causa efficiens*, the first cause.
• It is with Heidegger that it has become possible to begin to formulate the idea of ontological difference as a non reducible difference in being.

I want to begin with a discussion of Hegel, since Hegel’s philosophy represents the moment of culmination of the thought of difference as specific, that is, as alterity, but also the moment in which the functionality of this concept breaks down leaving the field open for the notion of ontological difference. I will first draw upon Hegel’s *Logic* in order to show how the concept of alterity is a necessary support for the system of the dialectic; then, I want to make the case that at the level of the experience of consciousness, that is, of Spirit in the *Phenomenology*, the notion of alterity turns out to be inapplicable. As a consequence, the formulation of sexual difference as the figure of ontological difference becomes necessary.

It is impossible to talk about difference without first addressing the problem of the one and the many, that is, the problem of quality and quantity. Let’s set up the question with Hegel’s words in the *Logic*:

> Whenever we speak of the one, the many usually come into our mind at the same time. From where, then, we are forced to ask, do the many come? This question is unanswerable by the consciousness which pictures the many as a primary datum, and treats the one as only one among the many. But the philosophic notion teaches, on the contrary, that the one forms the presupposition of the many: and in the thought of the one is implied that it explicitly makes itself many.\(^2\)

As Hegel reminds us in the history of philosophy there have been two main positions regarding the problem of the one and the many—those who assert with Parmenides and

the Eleatic school that "being alone is and nothing is not," and those who side with Democritus and the Atomists by maintaining instead that nothingness exists as the void in which the many—the atoms—float and combine producing the multiplicity of the universe. For Hegel, however, both positions present a problem, for they cannot envision becoming, that is, they can neither explain the passage from the one to the many, nor that of the many to the one. By asserting that in order for being to be, nothing must not exist, Parmenides is in fact saying that being is always already fully present, complete, and essentially one, hence that it is beyond time and becoming. The Atomists, on the other hand, by conceiving nothingness as the void, take the many as their starting point, but cannot explain how and why the atoms would come together to form individual entities. That’s why Epicurus must resort to the concept of parenclisis ('clinamen' in its Latin translation), which is the slant in the fall of atoms that accounts for creation and becoming. This, however, gives no authentic solution to the problem of becoming, for becoming is then conceivable only through the addition of a third external and autonomous element—the clinamen, that we could also call force, or chance—to the pair made up by being and void.

As a way of introducing the concept of difference, I now want to move from the notion of the one and the many to that of quality and quantity. What is the relation between them? We can say that the one is to the many what quality is to quantity. We will then define quantity—the many—as a multiplicity of qualities which figure as its elements or parts. Quality then is the one of which we need many in order to obtain quantity. In this sense, quality coincides with pure being—and in fact Hegel says:

quality is, in the first place, the character identical with being: so identical that a thing ceases to be what it is, if it looses its quality. Quantity, on the other hand, is the character external to being, and does not affect being at all.\(^3\)

Being then is absolute quality to which number is added. But the problem now is the following—quality necessarily implies the notion of difference, which in turn presupposes that of number. How can we then say that pure being, which is whole and one, is quality and that number is only a predicate?

The route taken by Western philosophy up to Hegel was that of disallowing the notion of being as quality, that is, as difference. Let’s return to the main metaphysical positions within the tradition, those of Parmenides and Democritus. By barring the very

possibility of nothingness, Parmenides posits being as pure quality, and as absolute
identity, a fullness without time in an eternal present where there can be no room for
differing. Democritus, on the other hand, conceives of being as pure quantity and
dislodges the difference at the core by turning it into the clinamen, an external,
mechanical—and shall I say providential?—force that sets bodies in motion thereby
producing the physical elements. In this way, he creates room for specific difference, but
not for absolute, ontological difference for the elements differ from each other not in
absolute sense, but only to the extent in which they have something in common: the
clinamen itself that moves them and that, so to speak, constitutes the genus through
which they can differentiate from one another as species.

Now, what is Hegel’s innovation, when he says that being is pure quality? He can
draw this conclusion only by way of a radical transfiguration of the concept of identity.
Parmenides says: only being is, and nothing is not for if nothing existed, it would have to
be something, that is, an entity. Thus, we cannot say that being is different from nothing,
but only that being is, and in its being, it is absolutely identical with itself. If the nature of
being is that of being self-identical, then absolute identity will be formalized as \( I = I \),
which translates the statement “being is.” For Parmenides this means that being is one;
however, it is obvious if we take a look at the equivalence \( I = I \), that it takes two, two
different terms, to make the one of identity. In fact, two is still not enough, because we
must account for the space between the two terms, a space that is occupied by the symbol
“ \( = \)”. This space is also time, the time it takes to move from one term of the equivalence
to the other. This space which is time, this time which is space we can call with another
name—becoming. The result is that it takes three to make the one of identity. Becoming is the
movement that joins the first with the second term of the equivalence, but it is also what
creates the two terms by separating them. Indeed, without becoming, Hegel says, being is
on one hand pure abstraction, and on the other simple and indeterminate immediacy.
Hegel calls pure abstraction “the absolute,” and says that immediate being is its
predicate. Either pole dissolves into nothing unless it is tied to the other by becoming,
which is the very principle of thought. Pure abstraction in itself is completely empty and
absolutely negative; it is no-thing. It can become something, that is, it can join with its
predicate only through becoming, through thought. In the moment when thought
articulates pure abstraction and immediate contingency in a “concept” or “notion” the
domain of actuality and of reality is generated. Of course, to say that the notion
constitutes the actual and that becoming is the first “concrete thought” is the same as
saying that being is insofar as it is thought. Also, and more importantly, thought (the
Logos) is not a force applied to being from outside like the clinamen to the atoms. Thought in the form of becoming is constitutive of being itself. This explains why being can be conceived as pure quality, and as one and threefold at the same time. Being is pure quality because it is predicated on an internal difference, but it is only through this internal difference that it can achieve unity in the form of the “thing,” that is, in the concept. Moreover, because the concept is internally split, it does not come into this world alone (there is no first and original concept), but it can only co-exist in a movement of differentiation with its negation, in a multiplicity of concepts. As Hegel puts it:

The relation of the negative to itself is a negative reaction, and therefore a distinguishing of the one from itself—the repulsion of the one; that is, it makes many ones. . . . and the repulsion of every one of them becomes to that extent their repulsion against each other as existing units—in other words, their reciprocal exclusion.4

Hegel’s conception of being is similar to the theory of the Big Bang in astronomy (the latter, no doubt, deriving from the former). The instability at the core of the virtual One that is pure quality sets off an explosion (which can only be retroactively posited) that brings the actual world of things and concepts into existence. The multiplicity of reality is brought about by the existence of the principle of unity, but it is also at the same time gradually consumed by the same principle. There inevitably will come the moment when thought will have brought out all of the possible negations and its unifying force will meet no opposition. This is the point that marks the end of history, when multiplicity will be turned into the absolute order of unity again, only this time it won’t be virtual and retroactive, but actual.

As we know, the coming through of the notion as the movement of becoming from the one to the many and from the many back to the one goes under the name of dialectic, and as Hegel proclaims: “wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there the dialectic is at work.” But just how does the dialectic work? As we have seen, becoming marches not at a double but at a triple pace—this is the difference between the so-called “bad” and “good” infinity, and the reason why being is ultimately not simply multiple but, like the Christian God, one although threefold. If we conceive becoming as a binary system where one term overcomes the other, we will have an infinite progression in which the finite

4 G.W.F. Hegel, Logic, 142.
constantly reproduces itself by negating itself. Hegel calls this a “negative infinity” because it takes place through an infinite negation of the finite that, however, “rises again the same as ever, and is never got rid of and absorbed.” Negative infinity is opposed to the genuine infinity, that consists not of two, but of three moments: 1) being 2) its other 3) the one. What the concept of genuine infinity really tells us is that there is no being without its other and that two others make the one. As it turns out, there is no otherness without and outside the one, for the other's other is, in the final analysis, identity, i.e. the self. As Hegel puts it

What we . . . have before us, is that somewhat comes to be another, and that other generally comes to be an other. Thus essentially relative to another, somewhat is virtually an other against it: and since what is passed into is quite the same as what passes over, since both have one and the same attribute, namely to be an other, it follows that something in its passage into other only joins with itself.5

Now, this little paragraph from the *Logic*, short as it is, is enough to spell out the ominousness of the dialectic when taken in its ethical dimension, that is, in the dimension of the relation between identity and difference. It should be noted, however, that the danger doesn’t come quite from the side we expected. Often the dialectic is treated precisely as if it were a function of the negative infinity, as a sort of war machine that swallows up and digests the identity of the other along its march. But far from erasing the other’s identity, the dialectic is what makes it possible through the concept of reciprocity (each term of the pair is each other’s other). But at a cost: the cost is the submission to the One, which is, ultimately, a submission to the economy of the same. What this also means is that the “good infinity” defines the concept of totality: totality is a system that contains everything including its outside, and it can contain its outside because this outside is “its own,” its mirror, the opposite of itself and therefore complementary to itself.

This should serve as a cautionary note to a certain kind of feminism which in its ambivalent relationship to Hegel either indicts him on the ground that he leaves no room for alterity, or praises him by claiming that the master/slave dialectic does eventually lead to a notion of equality and reciprocity. The point is that we already live in an order that acknowledges the notion of reciprocity, and it is through this notion that the illusion of sexual difference can be produced. I say “illusion” because through the dialectical process, femininity is produced as complementary to masculinity, that is, as necessary but

5 G.W.F. Hegel, *Logic*, 139.
subordinate to the production of masculinity. This is because, as I have pointed out before, the other's other is the same, or to repeat Hegel's words "something in its passage into other only joins with itself." As a consequence, to the feminists who advocate a regime of double essence or identity within the human being—a masculine and feminine one—I will have to object that unfortunately, it is not possible to posit two positive essences within the same notion (in this case, that of human being) because as a dialectical operation, essence is always one or in the one, and the one, in a patriarchal order is always masculine. This is the reason why for Hegel, and for the whole Western tradition, femininity is defined and definable only as negativity, that is, as complementarity. Woman is not-man, and she will keep on being such despite our best intentions unless we intervene at the ontological level, that is, at the level of the notion of totality. It is evident that the only way in which the effect of the notion of essence can be offset is not by a priori positing the existence of an outside. To conceive of a radically different external entity—namely, God—would be impossible without relapsing into a pre-dialectical way of thinking. The only way out is to try to find ways to fracture the one so as to show that the very notion of totality is possible only insofar as it succeeds in disguising a residue, a remainder that is left unmarked, and which precisely for this reason serves as the support for the whole system. This support, I want to argue, is femininity not as a biological phenomenon but as a logical operation. I want to stress this because what is at stake here is not only the efficacy of the feminist project, but also the capacity of our philosophical system to recognize a type of difference that cannot be reduced to alterity. Now, the dialectic of essence is applied to the coming into being of human self-consciousness in the Phenomenology of Spirit through the parable of the master and the slave. This famous piece of Hegelianana deserves a closer look.

Let's start by saying that the assumption is, of course, that the real nature of man is that of being a master, and not a slave. Who is a master in this context? To be a master means nothing else than to have gone through the threefold operation of reflection and thus finally to own one's essence. The slave, on the other hand, because of his fear of death, has given up his right for recognition, that is, his essence and has agreed to work for the master. The slave then, insofar as he is an entity without a proper essence, is mere appearance, that is, being at the level of immediacy; and in fact the slave's existence consists of selfless action—his work in the name of the master. However, we have to remember what Hegel said about the conditions for the notion to realize itself (and the notion is essence)—the notion (in this case the notion of 'being human') arises only in the presence of the other, and of the other's other. In other words, the notion can come through only in the presence of two reciprocal others so that the passage from other to
other will produce the selfsame of essence. Now, it goes without saying that the slave from the moment he is being submitted cannot act as the master's other, and this lack of otherness ends up by turning the master into nothing. Far from safeguarding his position, the master grows completely dependent on the slave for all practical purposes so that eventually he alienates his essence in the slave's work. The slave, on the other hand, started out as submitted to two masters, the human and the absolute one—death. However, through his work he rises above both—above the human master by finally snatching away his identity, and above death through the transcendence achieved in the production of a future (history). The old conception of mastery is thus overcome through reciprocal recognition—the previous master has to recognize the essence of mastery in the slave, but this mastery is of a different order. It is no longer mastery over an external other through the submission of a fellow being, but mastery over oneself (note that otherness in this way becomes an intra-psychic dimension) based on transcendence and transformation through work.

But what is the place of woman in all this? As we know, Marxists for the longest time have insisted that woman, like the proletariat, occupies the place of the slave, and that the coming to power of the proletariat would automatically bring about the emancipation of woman. So the point is: can we put woman in the slave's place? Let's remember that the triumph of the slave over the old master can only take place at certain conditions. First of all, the slave submits to the master under the threat of death. It is obvious, however, that the same threat won't be effective against woman without jeopardizing the very life of the family, that is, the life of the master himself. The relation between man and woman, insofar as it is always also a relation between mother and son, cannot function in a logic of struggle for recognition. The relation between woman and man must be one of cooperation. No wonder, then, that Hegel implicitly conceives of the master/slave dialectic as a masculine operation. However, if this is the process through which self-consciousness is achieved, namely if the consciousness of oneself is achieved through the consciousness of another as equal, i.e. as alter ego, what is the status of the consciousness of woman? I mean this in both senses of the expression, namely: what is the consciousness that man has of woman, and what is the consciousness that woman has of herself? It is obvious that a man can become conscious of himself as a subject only through the confrontation with another man. On the other hand, for a woman this path is always precluded both in relation to another woman (her mother, her daughter) or in relation to another man (her father, her husband, or her son). In all her relations, a woman is determined by a principle different from that of the struggle for recognition.
Hegel calls it the principle of blood, meaning by this that all the actions of a woman are a function of the family ties and obey a logic of generation, of blood. It is easy to see that, despite much feminist criticism, Hegel's consequent alignment of woman with the body, the family and the divine law is not arbitrary, nor merely based on anatomical prejudice, but it is based on the recognition of the specificity of the maternal function. What follows from this, however, is that woman can never go through the dialectic of identity, and as a result she can never achieve self-consciousness: woman is, and always remains, an unconscious subject. This is the reason why in Hegel's interpretation Antigone cannot explain the reason why she is transgressing the law of the polis. Because it is an immediate response to the necessity of upholding the meaning of blood relations, her act is not truly ethical, i.e. self-conscious and therefore dialectical and universal, but merely contingent and particular. Incidentally, the objection that is often raised, namely that disobeying the law of the city automatically confers a dialectical character to her decision, if considered from within the Hegelian logic, is not tenable. Transgression of the law, in the Hegelian perspective, is not yet a dialectical negation of it; to the extent that it is made absolutely and a priori without taking into consideration the reasons of her opponent, Antigone's choice is not conscious, thus neither dialectical nor ethical.

The problem, however, is not that of rescuing Antigone's reputation, but that of dismantling the logic that produced her. In this regard, we may then want to ask what happens to the dialectic of totality and to the operation of identity through self-consciousness when one of its functions, that of femininity, proves to remain constantly external to it. The difference represented by woman is not the same as that of the slave. The slave, being the master's alter ego, is his opposite, his complementary other. The two belong to each other and depend on each other for the dialectical production of identity as totality, but depend on woman for their very physical life. In other words, while the relationship of the master and of the slave is based on reciprocity, their relationship to woman is not, and neither is hers to them. It follows that the identity they achieve is not universal, but specific, in fact specifically masculine. On the other hand, since the dialectic is precisely the process through which universals are effectively produced, as Hegel impeccably shows in the Logic, we must admit that the master/slave dialectic does produce identity as universal. This makes it necessary, however, to change our notion of what is universal. The scope of the universal is no longer absolute and in the Absolute because it is predicated on something irreducible to itself, something that in the logic of identity, we call femininity and in that of subjectivity, we can call unconscious. Every time the truth is articulated, as it must, in a universal, it both leaves behind and arises
from something which is not of the order of the true and the false, something that is not the opposite of the universal, but different from it, something that for these reasons can only reveal itself as being hidden and concealed. Note that this is not only a definition of the unconscious, but also the way Heidegger defines truth as *aletheia*, 'unconcealment,' something that shows itself by concealing itself. What this amounts to is that Hegel's concept of mastery whether in relation to the slave or to oneself, can never be accomplished. So if mastery is the way in which masculine identity is articulated, then masculinity is, in this sense, an illusion or a fraud.

But where does this leave woman? Is her fate that of being an unconscious subject, without a real identity, unaware of her motivations and incapable of authentic volition? Hegel is not troubled by this conception of femininity, and that is no wonder. The incapacity to account for the ontological status of feminine subjectivity is a common thread in the whole Western tradition and it is ultimately resumed by psychoanalysis with Freud's famous question—*Was will das Weib?* What does a woman want? For how and what can a being with no essence, and no hope to acquire one, want? In the light of the remarks I just made on the nature of the sexual dialectic in Hegel, it won't be difficult to see where Lacan is coming from when he makes his infamous pronouncement on the non-existence of woman:

There is woman only as excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words, and it has to be said that if there is one thing they themselves are complaining about enough at the moment, it is well and truly that—only they don't know what they are saying, which is all the difference between them and me.

It none the less remains that if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely that in being not all, she has, in relation to what the phallic function designates of *jouissance*, a supplementary *jouissance*.

Note that I say *supplementary*. Had I said *complementary*, where would we be! We'd fall back into the all.6

To the extent that the nature of things is the nature of words, femininity does not exist, that is, it is *complementary* to masculinity; but to the extent that, as we have seen, the nature of words—the logic of the universal—cannot include the space of its own origin,

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femininity persists as *supplementary*, that is, as ex-centric with respect to the One. Of course, if the logic of identity is always contaminated by an unconscious and irreducible residue, and if the relation to truth depends on each sex’s position vis-à-vis the universal, then we can define as masculine the subject who by definition knows what he wants, in the sense that he can *name* it, but by so doing completely misses its meaning. Feminine, on the other hand, is the subject who does not know what she wants. But she can not-know it in two different ways: either she does not know it and wants somebody to tell her, and in this case she will address the man with the hysteric’s question—who am I? What do I want? Or like Antigone, she wants something that she does not know in the sense that she cannot name it. However, the fact that she cannot name it, does not make it non-existent. In Lacan, we find a crucial distinction between knowledge and truth. While knowledge is a semantic operation that takes place in language, truth is an event, that is, a production that always exceeds the laws of signification. For this reason, despite Hegel’s claim that it cannot be considered ethical, Lacan contends that Antigone’s decision of burying her brother is the paradigm of any truly ethical act, not because it is anti-dialectical as Hegel has it, but because it originates in a space other than the dialectic. The point is not that Antigone’s decision is without value because it takes place at the level of the immediate, the contingent, and the particular. But rather that it is profoundly ethical in that it comes from the place where the truth conceals itself, and as such it can only show itself, not in its officiality and universality, but in its ex-centricity as a scandal or a tragedy. In this sense, the burial of Polynices is not to be read as a blind act of negation and transgression, but as a gesture of affirmation of the deepest meaning of individuality there where it is not touched by the mere letter of the universal. Lacan’s formulation of the ethical is in complete accord with, and in fact derives from Heidegger’s idea of *Eigentlichkeit*, ‘authenticity’. *Eigentlich* is what that represents one’s own most truth. Such is Antigone’s act. Hegel is not wrong when he points out the uniqueness of the brother/sister relation. However, this is not because a brother is the only blood relation that a woman cannot replace, as she could do instead with a child or a husband, but because for an ethics that reaches beyond the logic of the universal—a feminine ethics—every relation is irreplaceable and unique. As such, every relation is founded not on blood in Hegelian sense, but on the body; the body that is not replacable because it cannot be replaced by a signifier, the body that decays and turns into dust, and that for this very reason is unique; the same body that Antigone will not embalm so as to reintroduce it into the circle of signification, but bury, so that it can take its place in *aletheia* in the concealment of truth, that is, in truth itself.
It will help to remember at this point what Heidegger argues about the human being in Being and Time—it has no essence. This does not mean, as Sartre reads it, that existence precedes essence for this is a perfectly Hegelian interpretation of Spirit as transcendence. Man has no essence because being, insofar as it is aletheia, the non-dialectical movement of concealment/unconcealment of truth, has no essence. As we know, Heidegger calls the Western conception of being a “metaphysics of presence” meaning by this that being is conceived as a perfect self-identity, as full presence without lack suspended in an eternal present, i.e. as One. These can only be the predicates of God, which is the reason why Heidegger calls Western metaphysics an ontotheology, that is, an ontology that describes the attributes of God. In spite of the invention of the dialectic (admittedly, not a small invention) that injects movement in the “body” of being, Hegel does not change the definition of being as God; what he adds is the notion of alterity that must be factored in, in order to obtain the one of essence. As a result, the self is always one and always whole, which amounts to saying that there is no death, but only becoming, that death is only a transformation into a higher stage. To this Heidegger objects, precisely, that the idea of becoming is predicated on the disavowal of time and death. Eternal is what has always been and will always be present; the time of the eternal is the constant suspension of the “now,” but this suspension can only be maintained through the erasure of death and the impossible adoption of God’s point of view. But man is not God; when he dies, his death cannot be transcended and overcome—death is precisely the space of the residue that is irreducible to sense. Hence the experience of anxiety which is nothing else but the intuition of the absence of the one, that is, the intuition of the absence of being as presence. We could also say that anxiety is the intuition of the lack of essence. As we know, Heidegger calls this way of being-in-the-world, which is characterized at the same time by the ontological awareness of death and the ontic immersion in contingency, Dasein.

If we now return to Hegel and start thinking again within the frame of the dialectic, that is, through the logic of the universal, we will have to conclude in this way: on the level of the experience of consciousness, it is most immediately through woman, insofar as she is the figure of the residue that always escapes the recycling movement of the dialectic, that the intuition of the lack of essence can find its object. This means to say that in the present moment of the history of being, Dasein can only exist as “feminine” or in the feminine. To say that woman represents the historical manifestation of Dasein also means to say that woman is a figure of the ontological difference, that is, of the incurable discontinuity between being as immediacy and being as notion and essence. As such she
represents the "truth" of man—the revelation of his being as non-essential and the sign of the impossibility of ontological closure. Needless to say, this is also the reason why femininity is for man a perpetual source of anxiety, an anxiety that is the very cause of the question "what does a woman want." It follows that any attempt to find an answer to that question is doomed to fail because it is inevitably complicitous with the very logic it wants to defy. The question itself is but a symptom, the symptom of man's anxiety before the incurable difference of being.
Identification and The Real of Obsession
David Metzger

In an early essay relating religious rituals and compulsive behaviors, Freud asks the question "Is it possible for an obsessive act to be meaningful?" Within a Lacanian orientation, this question leads us to consider the history of the signifier's failure to bear the burden of sexual difference in as much as Freud's question can become for us "Is it possible that an act performed in order to insure the Other's absence can be performed in the Other's absence?" And one Lacanian response might be—Yes, it is possible but only if the $, the subject of the unconscious, is placed in the real and, as a result, becomes a point of identification in the real.1 Part I of this essay will show how Lacan's graph of desire introduces the possibility of this identification in the real. Part II will delineate the implications of this real identification in the case of the obsessional neurotic for whom the $ does not mark the Other's position in the real but obsession's relation to castration, which is not subject to the sinthome's dissolution in the real.

Part I: The Graph of Desire and the Real

Given the complexity of the graph of desire (see below), I would like to explicate its functions in terms of a specific example that Freud provides in "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," the essay mentioned above—

A girl of my acquaintance was under the compulsion to rinse out the basin many times after washing. The significance of this ceremonial lay in the proverbial saying, 'Don't throw away dirty water until you have clean.' The action had the meaning of a warning to her sister, to whom she was much attached, not to separate from her unsatisfactory husband until she had established a relationship with a better one. (43)
What possible relation could such a "compulsion" have with identification? I would suggest that the girl of Freud's acquaintance is in the position of the $ in the lower right-hand of the graph. She does not know who she is for the Other (S$_1$)—she does not know why she rinses out a basin many times after washing. There are, of course, other responses to the question, "Who are you?" 1) "What I am is what I am for you"—the hysteric. 2) "What I am is what I know about you"—the academic. Or 3) "What I am is someone who needs you to know who I am"—the master. These responses are taken from Lacan's discussion of the four discourses, and they underscore the fact that being—identity—in a social relation requires that the S$_1$, who one is for the Other, can never be substituted for the object $a$, something more than jouissance. Of course, at the level of one's symptoms, the desire of the Other might presume to speak without the aid of the S$_1$.
Indeed, the compulsive subject is not in a position to ask or to be asked anything, since this subject responds to the absence of the Other by throwing herself into the Other's place—i(a)—leaving her to rest in the position of "the basins are being washed" I(A). How does this happen? At point i(a), the compulsive subject is offered the possibility of a signifier (A), but avoids the Other for fear of being the Other. The compulsive, in this example at least, would be exhibiting a characteristic of the hysteric structure in which the S1 takes the position of the Other. The compulsive cannot, then, speak the Other for fear that it is she, but the Other must be said because it—at the level of the unconscious—is she. So, the compulsive attempts to position the "Other" in such a way as to speak herself. At this point, the ego—which Lacan is careful to say is not the Je of discourse—emerges as either a particular signified for the Other s(A) or "the basin is being washed," I(A), a choice identified in the lower left-hand section of the graph. The choice of "the basin is being washed" is not so difficult to understand if we think that $ may understand that there is a real presence to the Other and, in lieu of that, $ takes the position of the Other, speaks to it, washes for it, precisely in and to prompt its absence.

The perception that compulsive actions are meaningless shows us one of the principal functions of the Other. Its presence makes sense. It helps us to orient our world and experiences into a manageable space for the body. The compulsive’s project, then, is to discover what actions might "make sense" even in the absence of the Other—at least that part of the Other which cannot be identified with the compulsive's body. The compulsive believes that he or she has succeeded when the compulsive act ensures that the Other need not be experienced as real. At this point, Freud himself suggests, with some bravado, "Thus a ceremonial begins as an act of defense or security—as a protective measure" (23).

We might well ask, "A protective measure against what?" Even though the Other need not be experienced as real within the compulsive's scheme, this does not mean that a part of the ego might not be ceded to the Other, taking on the Other's project of orientation. In this circumstance, we encounter something like a catch-22—"shit can’t happen to you because shit happens to everybody." Another way of expressing this catch-22 is "You are nothing for the Other." But if this is true, then we must wonder why we are here and, as a result, make a demand of the Other, "Why?"—position ($ △ D) on graph above. The "why?" then provokes us to fantasy ($ △ a), the demonstration that there is an Other for whom we are something and that this Other is something for us.3 This Other holds the position Lacan identifies as S(A) on the graph of desire.

Now, because this Other lacks on account of the real, we are working against the
emergence of the real when we work against this Other that lacks, $A$. To take the point a little farther, we might also say that without this Other who lacks, there can be no place for a signifier in the real except as a not, the “You are nothing—you are no subject—for this signifier.” What signifier? The signifier that sticks to the real, $S(A)$, when the Other moves on to a position in the symbolic. In this manner, the Other is saved from castration, and the subject is saved from desire, or object $a$, by jouissance. The subject becomes this signifier in light of which all other signifiers appear as subjects, $S(A)$. Subjects for whom? All other signifiers appear as subjects for either the $S$ in the real or the Other that has moved from the Real ($A$) into the symbolic ($$).

We might speak of the s(ignifier) in the real in terms of the experience of the psychotic subject and the Other in the symbolic ($$) in terms of the position of perversion. In terms of the real, it is not possible to predicate the Other's castration. Rather, the object $a$ is anchored by the sinthome which is, in turn, understood/experienced as a possible subject position outside of discourse. In terms of the symbolic order as it is understood within the structure of perversion, the Other's castration becomes a burden to be carried by the Other ($$). This Other, it is assumed, lacks a signifier that is unavailable to the symbolic Other, precisely the signifier that the Other left in the real. This Other is thought to be lacking as a subject because it is the subject for whom jouissance is not a cure for desire. For the obsessional, the desire of this subject/Other is situated at some level other than the symbolic. The desire of the obsessional is situated in the imaginary, $a$. This signifier that the Other left in the real then helps the obsessional to screen out $a$ by supposing that all desire is the desire for an impossible knowledge. How does this happen? We will turn to the case of obsessional neuroses for our answer to this question. And we will see how something other than the object $a$ must be placed in the real if the obsessional's analysis is not to be interminable. 4

Part II: The Obsessional's Question—“Can $S(A)$ ever support $a$?”

Lacan suggested that obsessionals must wonder if they are alive or dead. Pushed a bit farther, one might see that obsessionals must wonder if they are the object of the Other's desire or not. Because they cannot experience the Other's jouissance, as the psychotic might, they know they must be the object rather than the Other itself. All the while, however, they are uncertain about how their existence as an object guarantees the existence of the Other. For the obsessional, the $S(A)$ is understood as the signifier of difference. And insofar as women are and do not have this signifier of difference,
obsessionals feel that they can be, but only as women. Yet, they are not women. Therefore, they can not be, but are dead. The presence of a, however, impels them to live, to feel what they are conscious of. But since they have no right to what they are conscious of, they can be and they cannot be dead. What’s the alternative? Obsessionals try to make the object a a signifier. For the obsessional the a must be a signifier, so much so that it is difficult for anything not to stand in the position of the Other for the obsessional. In terms of sexuation, one might say that the psychotic knows that the Other exists because she is it, while obsessionals believe that the Other might exist because they are trapped in their bodies—castrated—by the Other’s jouissance. As Alicia Arenas and others have expressed it, “Obsession attempts deliriously to remove the gap of the cause by determining the impossibility of desire. By filling the signifying interval with the phallic signification, the obsessional does not want to put the real at stake” (149).

When Lacan suggests that the phallus might function as an object a, I would say that this is from the perspective of the obsessionals and the phobic. The phobic fears the phallus—the phallus is Other. The phobic experiences the substitution of the Other as the presence of the phallus. But this does not mean that the phallus might not be an object a for the phobic. It is an object that he or she experiences not as the real but as the Other’s castration, a knowledge that the obsessional associates with the predication of the phallus in the absence of the real. This is not to say that an obsessionals might not go into philosophy, politics, acting, or assume some master discourse; it means that the obsessionals would experience that discourse as the quest, one might say, for the real phallus. In this way, the obsessionals attempts to show that desire is impossible.

Another way of explaining the obsessionals’ attempt to make desire impossible is to say that he desires an inherent sexual relation with the Other. This is another way of explaining the fact that the obsessionals’ fantasy is not much of a fantasy. The obsessionals does not desire the object a to which he is linked as an unconscious subject. The obsessionals desires the phallus—the Other—but only when it is not there—not real—and thus confuses the object of the drive with the object cause of desire. One might say that the obsessionals forgets to enjoy his symptom precisely because he desires it.

And for good reason. Ignoring the presence of the S(A) is tantamount to ignoring the presence of the S1—who one is for the Other—which is, in the case of the phobic, nothing. In the case of obsessionals, they are nothing but what they have given to the Other. The obsessionals then becomes something as the phallus of sexuation—the symbolic phallus Φ—which becomes the guarantee for the Other. The obsessionals does not need fantasy to guarantee the Other, so of course it is difficult for him to sustain in the
structure of fantasy. The obsessional does not enter discourse because there is a relationship between discourse and sinthome, which the obsessional would confuse with the impossible tasks of politics, philosophy, the master discourse. That is, both the sinthome and discourse are too much implicated in the master signifier. The sinthome functions as a master signifier. And discourse functions because of the antithetical relationship between the master signifier and the object a, which the obsessional embodies as the one who knows what everybody's thinking because thinking must be ciphered or siphoned through what we can know about/through language. Language is understood here in terms of the obsessional's experience/understanding of it—language as the set of all signifiers “minus one” that does not exist in the symbolic so the obsessional does not have to worry about it.

In fact, the “minus-one” becomes a signifier for nonexistence, which the obsessional in turn identifies with what cannot be taken from him, -φ. This -φ, then, is the obsessional’s support for the object as phallus, which in turn entails the phallus of sexuality. The logic of this will seem a little strange because the timing seems a bit off—for nonexistence to be that which cannot be taken from the obsessional, existence has first to be identified with the phallus—that which can be taken. The obsessional then speaks a member of a community, a particular predication of the phallus, but not as a member of a community. The obsessional’s existence requires that the phallus serves as a metonymy, not as a metaphor. The obsessional understands and wants sexuality to be castration because castration affords him the proximity to the object which he enjoys, and object that he assumes, by the way, that he has. The possibility of the sinthome guaranteeing the Other is quite frightening for the obsessional. The phobic need not even consider the possibility of a sinthome, accepting that he or she is nothing for the Other. Outside of discourse, that is, for the phobic, the little a can support the position of the S₁. We can see, here, however, how time, or a timing, can be said to make the sinthome—which comes first the phallus or castration? If neither, then the sinthome insists that the position of first-cause be upheld. The obsessional gives the first-cause to Momma.

For this reason, recognizing his own body qua body is not so easy for the obsessional. After all, the obsessional thinks of his body as something leftover from the mother. The obsessional is certain to have named his symptom, which he understands as a guarantee for whatever enjoyment he might take in his (Other's) body at the level of fantasy. This is where the obsessional subject might identify with the name-of-the-father and make the choice not to be psychotic by being dead. All of this is to say that the obsessional has learned to enjoy at the level of the (whole) name. Clearly, the obsessional
does not choose psychosis, but he chooses to live with the understanding that the Other lacks, $S(\mathbb{A})$, a signifier other than “mOm.” For this reason, traversing the obsessional’s fantasy can gum up the analytic works a bit. The obsessional reaction to analysis might be not to recognize the vacuity of the fantasy, but to re-experience the emptiness of the jouissance that holds his discourse together. In other words, the obsessional may feel that he’s all loved up with no place to go, leading to the reinforcement of what brought the obsessional to psychoanalysis in the first place—the feeling that he might be saying more than he means. This is another difficulty for the obsessional analysand, since to understand the dynamics of psychoanalytic discourse one must presume that it is possible that language should mean more than it can say. So, again the obsessional is able to imagine that his obsessional discourse is like any other—especially the psychoanalytic discourse.

To revise a Freudian commonplace in terms of the obsessional, one might ask, “Father, I can see you’re burning. Should I get someone to put it out?” Only if there is no one else to do it. Only if it might be demanded of him, only then would the obsessional presume to put his father’s fire out. Getting the Other to do it for him is quite another matter altogether. The obsessional, as analysand, will immediately try to get the Other to do the work for him. This is one of the things that happen when one hystericizes an obsessional. In this instance, the obsessional does not out-wait the Other in order to be addressed in the form of a demand. Rather, he will begin to make demands of the Other who is recognized in the position of the analyst.

The analyst will continue to bring the obsessional subject back to his body because it is at the level of the body—understood, here, as something to be seen—that the obsessional will become aware of his castration as an itch to be scratched at the level of the body. In the obsessional’s analysis, the $S$ might move from its position in the imaginary to a position in the real, which allows the $S(\mathbb{A})$ to move from the real to the symbolic and leaves $a$ to find a place in the imaginary. Without this identification of the obsessional’s subjective division in the real, the analysis of the obsessional would be interminable.
Notes

1. Those who argue that the end of the analysis is identification with the analyst would argue that a must be put in this position.

2. For further discussion of this point, see chapter four of my *The Lost Cause of Rhetoric*. For now, we might ask on what pivot the four discourses turn. My answer—at the level of discourse, the object a cannot be dissolved into or subtended by S₁.

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3. This “Why?” might also serve as a provocation to sublimation—the construction of an Other for whom one is something—love and discourse—the finding/being found of an Other for whom one is something—ideology and duty—the having been found by an Other for whom one is something. In these terms, sublimation, love, discourse, ideology, and duty are situated on the left-hand side of the graph as responses to the evacuation/absence of the Other.

4. In other words, the conclusion of the obsessional’s analysis is not the identification of perverse traits—object a in the real.

5. We might contrast the obsessional’s position with respect to the Other with the position we discover in the other neurotic categories. For example, the phobic knows, with greater certainty, that there is no Other because he or she is not the Other’s object. But if not the object, then what? Nothing? The phobic object, then, would take the place of the nothing and would be the guarantee that the nothing does not exist because in this place of the nothing there is something. Now, what is the process by which one thing and not another becomes a guarantee of the not-nothing? This process is what Lacan called sexuation. The guarantee that there is not nothing is the category of the not-all. The not-all is what the phobic fears. It is a desire that the phobic cannot drive out or destroy or explain away or dismiss or ignore. In other words, the not-all can resist the obsessional’s joy in castration, and it can function as the guarantee of difference for the phobic. The phobic object then functions as a phallus, not the phallus of sexuation—the Φ that the obsessional adores because it makes all women mammies, but the phallus as that which can be taken from the phobic because it is not his or hers.

6. For a cogent discussion of this point, see Fink, 143.

7. “Indeed, the neurotic, whether hysterical, obsessional, or more radically, phobic, is he who identifies the lack of the Other with his demand Φ with D. As a result, the demand of the Other assumes the function of an object in his phantasy, that is to say, his phantasy . . . is reduced to the drive ($ ⊕ D)” (“Subversion of the Subject,” 321).

8. This repetition of the truth of separation makes fantasy a problem for the obsessional, since fantasy relates the human subject as the unconscious subject and the object a by both
alienation and separation. What is more, without alienation, separation isn't really separation. This is what those who make the choice of obsessionals know, even if they do not know what it might mean. Obsessionals know that they have gotten the Other, even though the Other should be missing for them. But what does it all mean at the level of the signifier—that is, at the level of their enjoyment? "Are we having fun yet?" would be an excellent gloss of the obsessionals question, "Am I alive or am I dead?" Am I alive at the level of the signifier or am I dead at the level of the signifier? That is, "I seem to be enjoying something that I shouldn't be able to enjoy unless I'm too dead for people to really notice."

9. "Lacan viewed the neuroses as arising from an exaggeratedly incomplete 'psychic' separation from the mother's desire and from a conflictive set of experiences and expectations surrounding the Father's 'Name.' The rejection in hysteria is of being as a woman, while the obsessionals identifies with an unworthy Father signifier" (Ragland 124).

10. "L'expérience des fins d'analyse d'obsessionals conduit a souligner une préménance toute spéciale du fantasme. A l'opposé d'un allégement des significations du fantasme qui en constituerait la traversée, on observe une intensification de ces significations, qui conduit à parler d'un englacement du fantasme chez l'obsessionel. On a une condensation, une compression du fantasme qui ouvrirait la voie à une identification au impasse" (Matet 450-51).

11. Lacan writes the psychoanalytic discourse as follows—

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Again, psychoanalysis begins where the obsessionals discourse ends and begins and ends and begins. . . . But there is a difference—the introduction of castration and the unconscious. The obsessionals must move his body into the analysis. He must get on the subway, walk down the street, wait, and ring the door bell more times than he thinks should be necessary when dealing with "so-called professionals."
Works Cited


Sex as Fantasy and Sex as Symptom
Kirsten Hyldgaard

The conflict between biological naturalism and essentialism on the one hand and social constructivism on the other is an opposition that is as old as psychoanalysis itself. One might say that this conflict is pre-Freudian since the necessity of using the uncommon concept of drive made psychoanalysis resistant to a reduction either to biologism or culturalism. Nevertheless, there have been advocates for both biologism and culturalism since the beginning of psychoanalysis.

Lacan, following Freud, defends the concept of sex as “real”—not in the sense of biological determinism, but in the sense of that which resists symbolization, that which creates an impasse, that which is nevertheless not pre-symbolic but is connected intrinsically to the symbolic and the imaginary. For the late Lacan, the real is never “pre” or ontologically prior to the symbolic—the real is a function of the symbolic itself. Instead of wearying everyone with this constant “it is not,” Lacanian formalism serves the purpose of presenting this impasse, this necessary inconsistency of the symbolic.

The seemingly naive question of why it was necessary for Lacan to present his thinking in pseudo-mathematical terms—his so-called “mathemes”—of why he was obsessed with mathematics in the widest sense—logic, algebra, and topology—can find an answer in the question about the impasse of sex. It shall be argued that the turn to mathematics is an effort to think against the negation and disavowal of sex that is represented both by arguments for biological determinism and for “gender,” that is, sex conceived as a purely social construction.
In the following interpretation of the formulas of sexuation from the Encore seminar\(^1\) in connection with some points concerning negations in intuitionistic logic, I will argue that this particular formalization is exemplary of the necessity of formalization. Such an interpretation, however, can never replace the logical and algebraic terms, the mathemes. For such a "translation" of these formulas is always just one possible interpretation among others. And because this impasse can only be presented adequately in mathematical terms, Lacan could call mathematics "the science of the real."

This explains the fact that one does not find in Encore or in Lacan's unpublished previous seminar . . . ou pire, an interpretation of the formulas of sexuation—only brief hints at an interpretation. Their enigmatic status provokes different readings, and thus they reveal the fundamental precondition for thinking, that is, transference. It is supposed that thought or knowledge is condensed in those formulas and thus the reader—from his or her point of view—develops an interpretation.\(^2\)

I will start with a brief summary of some basic points concerning the way sexual difference is thought in psychoanalysis in order to show how traditional conceptions of sexual difference are variations on the same theme—the negation or disavowal of sex.

According to Freud castration is a threat as far as the boy and the man are concerned, a fait accompli for the girl and the woman. Sexual difference is defined by the question of whether one has or has not a penis. The woman's body is defined by what one does not see, by what she lacks. According to Freud sexual difference is not a question of one sex having a penis and the other sex having a clitoris, labia, and vagina that could be considered to be worth just as much. This would be a comforting democratic fantasy about equality between the sexes. Sexual difference concerns the fact that woman is represented by her lack of the masculine attribute par excellence. She is not complete. And as far as the drive is concerned, there is no psychic representation of the anatomic sexual difference. "[T]he little girl is a little man," Freud claimed. There is, therefore, only the opposition between the active and the passive aim of the drive.

For Lacan, however, castration is not a question of whether the subject has or has not what he calls the phallus\(^3\) as no one can "have"—no one can possess—the phallus.

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Since all, regardless of sex, are subject to castration, the sexes cannot be distinguished by subjection to castration.

The definition of the subject as lack is a point made elsewhere in the history of philosophy, but the originality of Lacan's contribution is that it turns the issue of castration away from the question of whether or not the subject has the phallus and toward the issue of the Other not having it. It is the Other that lacks, it is the Other that is incomplete, and written as A. It is the Other that is castrated.

A traditional evolutionary or ontogenetic exposition of the question goes as follows—The child discovers that the (phallic) mother lacks something, that she acts according to laws that the child does not understand, that according to the law her desire has to be directed elsewhere, to "the father," to "work," to "whatever" demands her attention, her desire. Lacan's famous thesis that "desire is the desire of the Other" means that the desire of the subject is not "mine" but the question of what the Other desires, the question of the lack of the Other. For instance, when the Other is an enigma, one asks the question, "This is what he says, but what does he mean, and what does he want from me, if anything? What am I to him?" An enigma is an enunciation without a statement. Any enunciation can therefore represent an enigma.

The name for what is lacking in the Other is phallus. "Phallus" is the signifier of the lack of a signifier, the signifier of castration. "Phallus" is the name of the object of desire, but only insofar as it is not possible to determine what is the object of the Other's desire. "Phallus" is the name for the fact that desire has no object that can be signified, but is only the well-known metonymic "slide" from signifier to signifier. "Phallus" is the signifier of lack as such.

Sex as a fantasy

For Lacan, however, it is the case that man can only be a universal via the fantasy of the woman. The way in which woman and sexual difference have usually been thought is fantasmatic in the sense that they are ways in which the fact that man is not whole—either as a man or as united with a woman—can be covered up. All representations of sexual difference are variations on the same theme—they are ways to cover over the fact that there is no sexual relationship. This lack is covered up by the representation of sexual difference as symmetrical. Man embodies the well-known clichés—rationality, activity, culture. Woman incarnates the reverse side of these

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3 With the exception of the article "Fetishism," Freud rarely uses the noun "phallus," preferring instead the adjectival form, as in the "phallic phase" and the "phallic mother."
clichés—irrationality, passivity, nature. That sexual difference is thought of as complementary is illustrated by Aristophanes's speech, in Plato's *Symposium*, that relates how man was cut into two parts, a female part and a male part, and there followed the visible result—two sexes that desire to be reunited to form a whole. The lack is thus covered up, and “the two become one flesh” as in the Old Testament.

The crucial point concerning sexual difference is this—not only are the two poles not symmetrical and not equal in the sense that the male pole is more culturally appreciated, but also in the sense that the two poles are not both original, as Aristophanes's speech would seem to imply. One pole is the original. One pole is ontologically prior to the other. If we once again start with the beginning of our culture, with nothing less than *Genesis*, we learn that Eve has been taken from the famous rib of Adam. The woman is derived from man. Man is the cliché, and woman is a deviation from this form and norm. Therefore we can talk about the human being as being identical to man, man as man, man as a universal.

These are all-too-well-known points. Inevitably, woman must be defined in relation to man, as man's opposite. There can be no such thing as an independent definition of woman, a definition that does not imply a definition of man. Within this horizon, femininity is necessarily the seamy side of man.

Sexual difference is contradictory. In logic if one proposition is true, its negation must be false—this is the Law of the Excluded Middle—*p or not-p*. If, however, sexual difference was thought of as a contrary relationship there would be a third possibility. The traditional example goes—all swans are white, which is contrary to “no swans are white.” There is a third possibility—“some swans are black,” so both propositions can be false. For our present problem concerning sexual difference, this means that if “everybody is castrated” is the contrary of “nobody is castrated,” then there would be a third possibility—“some have a vagina, labia, clitoris.” And sexual difference would not be a question of castration, but a question of having a penis in contrast to having a vagina, labia, clitoris. The psychoanalytic point is simply that this would be a fantasy of completeness, a fantasy that denies castration. For Lacan there is only one thing to be said about woman—“that she does not exist” and “that nothing can be said about the Woman.” But what does “exist” mean here?
The woman as a symptom

Lacan also states that "there is no sexual relationship." In the seminar ... *ou pire* the female position is defined as "that which is not included in the phallic function without, however, being its negation." And this is what the formulas of sexuation from the seminar *Encore* present.

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\exists x \  \Phi x & \exists x \ \Phi x \\
\forall x \ \Phi x & \forall x \ \Phi x \\
\end{array}
\]

The left side, the male side, reads \( \exists x \ \Phi x \), which means that there exists someone, \( \exists x \), for whom the law of castration does not count. And then below, \( \forall x \ \Phi x \) means that all, \( \forall x \), are subject to the law of castration. On the male side, then, we have the two contradictory propositions. Two points—1) both propositions cannot be true, and 2) the particular negation of the phallic function, \( \exists x \ \Phi x \), is not the woman. The woman cannot and should not be thought of as a negation of man, as the particular in contradiction to the universal. Not to be defined by castration is rather a position that consists of the limitless power and the limitless access to and jouissance of all women. The mythical primal father in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, is not subject to castration and the law against incest. He is the law by being the exception to the law. In other words, this last modern myth is, like all myths, an answer to a structural and logical necessity and not just a fairy tale. The universal is defined by its limit. In our case if "men" are a set that is defined by castration, this implies, in all its banality, that there is someone or something that has produced this law by which it can be decided whether or not an element belongs to the set. And consequently this "something" or "someone" cannot be defined by the trait of being castrated. It is the exception that proves the rule. In this sense, the universal quantifier presupposes that the dead primal father fills the place of the exception. It is no doubt a myth, but nevertheless a necessary one. If it is true that everybody is subject to castration, it cannot also be true that there exists one who is not subject to castration. The idea must nevertheless be thought in the form of a negation, the particular negation as a logical consequence. In Freud this is thought as a creation myth in order to explain how the fundamental law against incest is constituted and is constitutive for culture in general.
The right side, the female side, reads $\exists x \Phi x$. There exists no one who is not castrated. The question is why this is not identical with the male side $\forall x \Phi x$, why two negations do not, as in classical logic, negate each other—$\neg \neg p$ is identical with $p$. Lacan receives assistance from intuitionist logic which dreams of a mathematics free of negations.\(^4\) The reason for this dream is rather metaphysical than mathematical and concerns the question of the nature of the mathematical object. Platonism or realism is based on the assumption that mathematical objects exist independently of mathematics and mathematicians.

For intuitionists, however, mathematical objects exist only by virtue of being "mentally constructed." "To exist" means "to be a mental construction," that is without reference to the metaphysical questions regarding the nature of the constructed objects, such as whether these objects exist independently of knowledge. Consequently, intuitionists assert that we can only advance a proposition $p$ if we can prove $p$. That we do not have a proof of the negation of $p$ does not imply that we have proven $p$. If we assume a proposition $\neg \neg p$ and this leads to contradictions, we have indirectly proven the proposition $p$. Intuitionist logic does not recognize the Law of the Excluded Middle. It is a rule that is not valid for infinite sets. Heyting's example is a sequence of prime numbers. A prime number is a number that can only be divided by 1 and itself (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, ...). The definition of a natural number can be—

1) $k$ is the greatest prime such that $k-1$ is also a prime, or $k=1$ if such a number does not exist.

or

2) $l$ is the greatest prime such that $l-2$ is also a prime, or $l=1$ if such a number does not exist.

The difference between these definitions is that $k$ can be calculated. $k=3$, as 2 is the only even prime number, all following prime numbers-$1$ must necessarily be even numbers and therefore not prime numbers. The definition of $k$ is therefore finite as $k$ can be defined. The point is that we do not possess a general method for calculating $l$, as it is not known whether the sequence of pairs of twin primes $p$, $p+2$ is or is not finite. Therefore intuitionists will reject 2) as a definition of a natural number. It cannot be

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decided whether the sequence of twin prime numbers \((1+3, 3+5, 5+7, 11+13, 17+19, \ldots)\) is or is not finite. We can only take one prime number at a time and add 2 infinitely. There is no proof of or general method for deciding whether this set of prime numbers is or is not finite. It transcends verification. Therefore \(l-2\) cannot intuitionistically be recognized as a natural number. \(l-2\) cannot be defined as there exists no general method for calculating it.

The difference between Cantor’s and the intuitionists’ definition of a set concerns the difference of how the law is determined. Following Cantor the law which decides which elements can comprise a set is given in advance. This law does not ask whether there are actually any elements that can be subsumed under the definition of this law. Therefore one can operate with the empty set, \(\emptyset\). A set is any collection of objects that can be thought of as One, as a whole. The set corresponds to the Platonic Idea. As far as the intuitionists are concerned, however, it makes no sense to talk about a law or a set without deciding if an element belongs to the set and if there are any elements that can be said to belong to the set at all. As far as the intuitionists are concerned the empty set is an “empty formal postulate.” The set is a law that decides whether this or that predicate can be designated this or that element. “Cantorians” can operate with “the set of the eternal feminine” independently of and unconcerned with whether there actually exist any elements of which the attribute, “the eternal feminine,” can be predicated. Intuitionists, however, cannot operate with the set of “women” without deciding the question whether there exist any elements of the set. For an intuitionist the intension of a set is identical with its extension. The set of “women” can be determined by a law that designates, for example, the predicates “delicate” and “maternal.” Thereafter it must be decided on a one-by-one basis whether “delicate” and “maternal” can be predicated of any individual element such that an element can be said to belong to the set “women.”

The elimination of the double negation, on the ground that two negations negate each other is not a valid inference in intuitionistic logic. That one cannot assert \(\not \not p \rightarrow p\), but can assert \(p \rightarrow \not \not p\) as a proof of \(p\) makes it impossible to prove \(p\)’s negation. Regarding the formulas, it must be noted that inference from the left side to the right side is possible, but not the other way around, and that the formulas do not indicate rules of inference but must be interpreted as propositions about elements.

The point is that one cannot derive the proposition “all are castrated” from the proposition “there exists no one who is not castrated.” Nothing has been asserted or constructed that can be proven to be either true or false. One can decide the question only
by taking the elements one by one. The set of women is open. It is not a totality. That is why Don Juan has to seduce one woman after another, one by one, and he is dependent on Leporello for booking his conquests. Don Juan is doomed to this Sisyphean task because Woman does not exist. Being an intuitionist, he has to decide one by one whether this or that element is a woman, which makes it understandable why it is of no importance whether the 1003 in Spain are young or old, ugly or beautiful. They are not beforehand determined by a definite trait.

The contradictory sentence on the right side says “not all are subjected to castration” and corresponds to “there exists one that is not subjected to castration” on the left side, that is, Freud’s primal father or Lacan’s “the name-of-the-father.” But, again, one cannot say that a proposition has here been shown to be either true or false. Therefore Catherine Millot, following Lacan, can note in her essays on transsexualism, that $\exists x \Phi x$, the idea of Woman with a capital letter, is one of the names of the father. The Woman = The primal father. Consequently one can only be a woman if one is not a real woman.

“Nothing can be said about the woman,” says Lacan. No one exists who is not determined by castration, but hereby nothing has been stated about the woman as distinct from man, and nothing has been stated that can be judged to be either true or false. The right side of the formulas says only that women are also subjected to the law of castration but it says nothing about what they are as distinct from men. In other words, woman does not form a set with well-defined elements. The question of castration is undecided. It transcends verification. The woman is not a universal. The formulas serve the purpose of presenting the idea that there both is and is not a difference between men and women, and this difference cannot be decided.

Thus the difference between Freud and Lacan is that Freud was a Platonist or a Cantorian—the set of women was decided by a law, the lack of a penis—while Lacan was an intuitionist. But this difference only holds until Freud’s old age when he became a sceptic. Both Freud and Lacan reached the same conclusion—as far as the question of women was concerned they did not have much to contribute. For Freud femininity remained the “dark continent.” In his old age he became a sceptic and appealed to the women among his pupils and colleagues for an answer to his doubt. In the late article from New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis he stated that “the little girl is a little man” in the pre-oedipal phase. In the less popular and more subtle article “Female Sexuality,” this idea of “a complete parallelism” has been given up. The famous passage goes—
We have, after all, long given up any expectation of a neat parallelism between male and female sexual development.

Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus phase in the little girl’s development comes to us as a surprise, comparable in another field with the effect of the discovery of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization behind that of Greece.

Everything connected with this first mother-attachment has in analysis seemed to me so elusive, lost in a past so dim and shadowy, so hard to resuscitate, that it seemed as if it had undergone some specially inexorable repression.5

Comparably Lacan’s notations are precise and elegant ways in which the same point about the impasse of sex can be presented. Apparently the woman fits man like a glove as being his negation, seemingly there is a relation, a symmetrical relationship, “a neat parallelism.” But a closer inspection of the formulas shows that apparently the same thing is stated on both sides, with and without negations. If we follow the rules of inference in classical logic as far as negations are concerned there is no difference between men and women, all are castrated. But if we follow intuitionistic logic there is the small but crucial difference between the male and female side of the formulas that on the feminine side nothing has been proposed that can be shown to be either true or false.

When Lacan says that “there is no sexual relationship,” relationship means a symmetrical, complementary relationship as for instance the interior in relation to the exterior, culture-nature, rationality-intuition, sense-sensibility, logic-epic. The phallus is indeed what marks the sexual difference, but not that which can represent sexual difference. “Nothing can be said about the woman,” means that there is no feminine essence, the woman is not a universal. It is rather sex that disturbs the universal man. It is not the point that instead of having just one universal, man, we must have two universals, man and woman, for the sake of completion. The point is rather that sex is the constant contestation of the universal “man.”

Woman—that which does not exist—has been the name of that which has been expelled, exiled from the symbolic—but also that which “keeps coming back,” “keeps returning” and with a disruptive effect on the symbolic and the imaginary in the guise of that which cannot without friction be “that which keeps returning to the same place”—in

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short, a symptom. A symptom is "something" that is neither a thing nor nothing. It raises a question and implies a lack of knowledge. Its place is in speech. It is something to be heard by the Other. A fantasy, however, does not raise but answers a question. It is an answer to an impossibility, an answer that covers up a lack and prevents further questioning. In this sense all representations of femininity are fantasies.

To conclude—sex and woman have to be thought in "the real." That something "does not exist" (woman) and "is not" (the sexual relationship) does not mean that it is "nothing" but rather that no signifier can represent it, that it belongs to the real. To exist means to be represented by a signifier.

Logical notation serves the purpose of talking about a difference that cannot be determined, a presentation of difference that does not end up in imaginary complementarity. The interpretation of the formulas of sexuation above is one of many examples of the fact that Lacan's formalizations are not only to be considered a shorthand for that which could be expressed adequately in ordinary prose. The formalizations are not simply redundant. If that were so, an exposition in ordinary prose would be able to replace the formal notations. The contrary is the case—the formalizations serve the purpose of presenting and talking about an experience of a paradox, an impasse, an impossibility. With the help of formulas it is possible to recognize an impossibility as an impossibility without covering it up in imaginary representations or historically variable constructions, and it is possible to know what kind of impossibility we are talking about.

It is in this sense that psychoanalysis can be reduced to neither a biological nor a constructivist, historicist perspective. Both poles of this opposition negate the impasse, negate "the real" of sexual difference.
Absolute Difference: The Trace of the Concept

Andrew J. Lewis

Analysts have long been divided over the analyst's function in psychoanalysis. All can agree that in the discourse of the analysand the analyst is attributed the status of an ideal of the analysand's ego. From Freud's papers on technique this has been understood as a facsimile of the analysand's erotic life. To seek analysis is to place oneself in a position of demand, a demand that ultimately unfolds as one for love, hate or, as Lacan adds, a passion for ignorance. At first the analyst is called upon to sustain a narcissistic identification and—by virtue of this demand—a mode of jouissance. In effect, the subject greets the Other firstly with his ego. This is the preliminary stage of transference, and while it is a condition for the entry into analysis, this is far from its driving force. The power of the psychoanalytic treatment is to be sought not at the level of the ego, but at the level of the unconscious as it unveils the subject's desire.

The question then arises—what is the analyst to do with this position granted in the transference, and what principle is needed to sustain this practice? As Lacan states emphatically, "Any analysis that one teaches as having to be terminated by identification with the analyst reveals, by the same token, that its true motive force is elided." 2 In the context of a detailed discussion of identification, Lacan speaks of another kind of

1 This paper is the English original of a paper that was published with some modifications as "La Difference absolu: Le Trait du Concept" in Acts de la Cause Freudienne: Val de Loire et Bretang 6 (1996); French translation by Gilles Chatenay.

identification that is possible in analysis, an identification “of a strangely different kind, and that is introduced by the process of separation.” Instead of the imaginary object implied by the narcissistic object of identification, it is a separation that produces the object a—the object as cause of desire. The crossing of this plane of identification is predicated upon the analyst’s refusal to identify with the position that supports an idealizing identification. The analyst is not there as a greater good, a healer, or a sage. The analyst has only one thing to offer—an experienced desire. It is a desire that Lacan names as a desire to obtain absolute difference.

The desire of the analyst is the concept of psychoanalytic transmission. It is a desire to produce that desire in another. This would be neither an identical desire, nor simply a different desire but, to use the well quoted phrase, a “desire to obtain absolute difference.” The use of the definite article, appearing in the French only to vanish in the English, poses the question as to whether this phrase might itself prefigure the addition of a psychoanalytic concept. What is the desire for absolute difference? Is it something in the analyst’s discourse that adds, makes, provokes, a difference in the discourse of the analysand? Or perhaps this phrase is referring to a desire that would be the analyst’s own, a desire through which we can identify the analyst, a desire for his own desire to be one of absolute difference. Even if we choose either of these possibilities as an interpretation we cannot escape the very problem to which Lacan’s introduction of the phrase is intended to respond since “To obtain absolute difference” for someone, or for that matter, to ask after something as the aim of analysis, is a misconstrual of the analytic process that is not one that occurs entre d’eux ‘between two’. In order to think as much one would have to transform desire into a search for an ideal because desire is not caused by something or someone but by the kind of lack that one could call an absolute difference.

If this is a desire to obtain an absolute difference, does this not imply that, as a desire, it is not yet obtained, indeed, as a desire it is impossible to obtain, and in this way we are left wondering how it might be possible to act in relation this desire? In this sense this desire, and the very concept of this desire, refutes its completion. This brings into question the status of the analytic act that must be sustained against the impossible. How does one act with one’s desire, to act in such a way as to not give ground to one’s desire? This is to act in such a ways as to not not give ground to the impossible.

Thus we could extend this grounding concept of Lacanian analysis, that is, the

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3 *FFC*, 257.
4 *FFC*, 276.
ethical position that is the analyst's—Desire, that in the face of which an analyst makes neither concession nor compromise, is absolute difference. In the structure of this particular desire is the dislocation, Freud's Enstelung, which is the function of the unconscious. We find that the differentiating movement of desire, lacking an in-itself, takes its place only in relation to one of the four concepts that Lacan considered to be fundamental: the unconscious. It is in this very seminar that, underlying the elaboration of these four fundamentals, the question of the status of the desire of the analyst insists. With this Lacan places a question mark in the field of science. He does so precisely because this concept of the desire of the analyst must be developed in relation to what is fundamental. Thus, for the purpose of this exposition, we shall attempt to follow how the desire of the analyst might contend with the unconscious.

The analyst's desire is, like any other, a desire for desire. At the same time we have to introduce its particularity. On the one hand we have the Other: a differentiated structure, following Saussure, without positive terms, the institution of which brings forth both a universe and a universal. On the other hand we have, in the very institution of the Other, the particular as the discourse of the analysand. Indeed, it is the analyst's desire for absolute difference that renders any simple transition from universal to particular problematic implying, at the very least, a theory of the direction of the treatment: that analysis proceeds one by one, each case being itself exceptional, each one one.

Absolute difference cannot be a difference between two. It is naive to think that it is that which differentiates the analyst from his or her analysand, since that is not an absolute difference but a difference 'between two'. Such a difference is not absolute since it is restrained by the two pre-existing entities from which it takes its difference. In the abstract of the seminar . . . ou pire, Lacan locates the supposition of the subject in the "between-two" (entre-deux) of the signifiers. 5 If then, the reference here is clearly to his theory of transference we can postulate that the generation of the desire of the analyst is a product of that which liquidates this supposition. In order that difference be absolute it must be figured as a modality of one, but a one differing from itself. The difference is in itself a structuring of all other differences and identities.

It is in the direction of the extension of this numerical analogy that I would like to proceed via a reading of the following passage from Lacan's unpublished seminar Le savoir du psychanalyste.

I emphasize therefore that what is found at the upper level, the disappearance or vanishing of the existence of one of the partners which leaves the place for the inscription of speech empty, is not, at this level, the privilege of just any side. It’s only that in order for there to be a foundation for sex, as one says, it is necessary there be two. Zero and One, surely it makes two. It makes two on the symbolic plane insofar as we agree that existence takes root in the symbol. It is this which defines the speaker being.

Several general comments need to be made before we turn to the Fregean theory implied by this passage.

First, difference as absolute implies the lack of relation produced by Lacan’s formalization of the logic of sexuation. It is clearly this which is implied in the above reference to this ‘disappearance of one of the sides’. In fact this would seem to refer to the so-called feminine side of the sexual formulas where the impossible is designated by the function in which there “does not exist an exception to the negation of the phallic function.”

\[ \exists x \phi(x) \]

As such there is no writing or inscription here. As a mode of writing the female side represents that which does “not cease to not write itself.” Insofar as this is the case we see a corresponding shift in the notion of the real emerging. Namely we move from a real as impossible to a real that is produced as impossible by virtue of the Other being not-all. Now, the desire of the analyst, as it is manifest in the interpretation as act, must produce this impossible in the form of a cut, repeating this one of the original difference that is the subject.

Second, the lack of relation between universal and particular is precisely at issue in the formulas of sexuation. This is a relation between a One as all—the universal—and a one that differs from itself, “an increase by one”—which implies the function of the particular. On the side of the universal we locate the structure of language while on the side of the particular we locate the letter as a unique marker of castration, both an operation in the real and an operator of the real. Lacan defines that letter in Seminar 18 as

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“the mark of the lack of the signifier.” It is to this capacity for marking a difference that nevertheless retains its status as impossible that we shall return in the concept of the letter.

Third, in thinking through the difference between zero and one and the generation of the number series we see how an absolutely incongruous difference is implied and operative in a system, such as the number series, that develops through its own difference from itself. This difference is installed by virtue of its elimination of any reference to the real. This is the operation that Miller has named suture in his article of the same name.9

This move hinges upon Frege’s development of a number theory distinguishable from both the subjective idea and the empirical thing. So that when Frege employs the Kantian terminology of concept and object in order to generate his theory of number the inflection he gives to these notions is intended to evade both pitfalls. In the Grundlage we find that Frege’s introduction to the notion of concept already implies a critique of the empiricist position.10 In §22, Frege vividly outlines the problem for the empiricist who ascribes number to a property of things with the following example:

It marks, therefore, an important difference between colour and number, that a colour such as blue belongs to a surface independently of any choice of ours. The blue colour is a power of reflecting light of certain wavelengths and of absorbing to varying extents light of other wavelengths; to this our way of regarding it cannot make the slightest difference. The Number 1, on the other hand, or 100 or any other Number, cannot be said to belong to a pile of playing cards in its own right, but at most to belong to it in view of the way in which we have chosen to regard it; and even then not in such a way that we can simply assign the Number to it as a predicate. What we choose to call a complete pack is obviously an arbitrary decision, in which the pile of playing cards has no say. But

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9 “That which in the real is pure and simple absence finds itself through the fact of number (through the instance of truth) noted 0 and counted for 1.
Which is why we say the object not-identical with itself invoked-rejected by truth, instituted-annulled by discourse (subsumption as such)—in a word, sutured.” Jacques-Alain Miller, “Suture,” Screen 18.4 (Winter 1977-78): 31.
it is when we examine the pile in the light of that decision, that we discover perhaps that we can call it two complete packs. Anyone who did not know what we call a complete pack would probably discover in the pile any other Number you like before hitting on two.

If number is, as Frege prescribes, an answer to the question "How many?" then its application must be without regard to the kinds of objects to be numbered—which thus accounts for the universality of its application. As Dummett notes, the meaning of an ascription of number is a "predicative expression," the meaning of which "consists in its applying, or not applying, to any given object."\(^{11}\) In this sense, and we see this in the example given, the notion of concept is always concerned with that of the object, but the object cannot be figured as numerable until a concept is applied to it.

So for the question "What, in general, is an ascription of number about?", or, alternatively, "What is the number ascribed to?" Frege gives his conclusion in §46. Frege writes "die Zahlangabe enthält eine Aussage von einem Begriffe." Austin’s translation reads—"the content of a statement of number is an assertion about a concept." Dummett notes that the German word, *Aussage* is used here in the sense of predication, and thus prefers as a translation—"The content of an ascription of number consists in predicating something of a concept."\(^{12}\) In Frege’s definition what is being called the content of the proposition is in no way reducible to an empirical reality. Dummett’s comments on the part played by this notion of content in the application of mathematics indicates that it is precisely this notion that will drive Frege to make his distinction between sense and reference.\(^{13}\)

That which remains identical to itself in the application of the concept to the thing will become that unit which is numerable. Miller comments that this notion of the concept is already doubled by Frege’s use of the terminology "identical with the concept of ..." in his definition of number.\(^{14}\) The repetition of this identical unit created by the concept


\(^{12}\) Frege, §57 and Dummett, ibid., 88.

\(^{13}\) See the section entitled "Psychologism" in Dummett, ibid., 13-19. For Frege, sense is a secondary phenomenon in relation to content. The content of an expression is that which serves to make the expression useful or not. In this manner, it has a certain independence from the psychological process through which its sense is grasped in the act of understanding.

\(^{14}\) Miller, ibid., 29.
constitutes the matter to be counted and in this manner all numbers are reducible to this process of the repetition of the self identical unit. Frege's example is again illuminating—

The proposition asserting that units are isolated and indivisible can, accordingly, be formulated as follows: Only a concept which isolates what falls under it in a definite manner, and which does not permit any arbitrary division of it into parts, can be a unit relative to a finite Number. It will be noticed, however, that "indivisibility" here has no special meaning. We can now easily solve the problem of reconciling the identity of units with their distinguishability. The word 'unit' is being used here in a double sense. The units are identical if the word has the meaning just explained. In the proposition "Jupiter has four moons", the unit is "moon of Jupiter". Under this concept falls moon I, and likewise also moon II, and moon III too, and finally moon IV. Thus we can say: the unit to which I relates is identical with the unit to which II relates, and so on. This gives us our identity. But when we assert the distinguishability of units, we mean that the things numbered are distinguishable.¹⁵

The concept creates the field of the thing to be identified and is thus that which is numbered in the counting. This leaves the possibility open of a concept that creates a field of which there are no members. Of this eventuality Frege says, "a property is assigned to the concept...namely that of including nothing under it."¹⁶ And yet in order for this operation to occur there must have been a unit formed of the concept in order to find that it is, so to speak, an empty unit. In this way the zero already implies the one, but at the same time, as we shall see, the one presupposes the zero.¹⁷ The imposition of the concept can create the void in its own field. This is as important for Frege's theory of number as it is for our thinking of sexual difference and the absolute difference which is that of the analyst’s desire.

Frege is thus able to make the remarkable assertion that: "In this respect existence is analogous to number. Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number nought."¹⁸ This affirmation brings into symbolic existence the function of that lack generated by the operation of the concept that can be produced without regard to its

¹⁵ Frege, §54.
¹⁶ Frege, §59
¹⁷ Miller's claim—"the unit which could be called unifying of the concept in so far as it is assigned by the number is subordinate to the unit as distinctive in so far as it supports the number."
¹⁸ Frege, §53.
having a content. If the number series is then reducible to the above operation it is
incumbent upon Frege to prove that every natural number has one, but only one
successor. He does this in the following manner.

Zero is a concept with an extension that does not contain an object. The object of
the zero is lacking and thus the concept of zero is the same as “non-identical with itself”
while zero as number is the object of the concept of one. This movement from concept to
object, from concept to number that then acts as an object of another concept is the
operation of succession. The one that is added as the successor is the counted zero. Thus
the lack generated by the system is implied in the very operation of the system. Miller
situates this function of succession in the signifying chain as nothing less than the
unconscious. As such he defines it as the possibility of one signifier more.\(^\text{19}\) He adds that
we can assign the progression of the series, “to the function of the subject, miscognised.”

For the generation of sexual difference it is crucial that the Other does not exist.
This lack of existence is crucial to Frege’s conception of that which repeats itself in the
number series—the successor. Lacan’s reference is surely to that of Frege’s successor
when he evokes a one that repeats itself but is not totalized in the relation.\(^\text{20}\) Miller will
thus assimilate this movement of succession, in which the added “unit” is but an empty
form of a missing content, to the structure of the unconscious saying, “only the
unconscious can name the progression which constitutes the chain in the order of
thought.”\(^\text{21}\)

At this point we have the opportunity to return to our original problematic and
ask—What then of our notion of particularity that is so crucial to the notion of absolute
difference? For instance, Frege writes “as soon as a word is used with the indefinite
article of in the plural without an article, it is a concept word (Begriffswort).”\(^\text{22}\) Identity
confers the property of being a unit by making an object identical to its concept and thus
numerable. In terms of identity it is clear that only the unit generated from the concept
can be substitute for itself and not the thing. Thus we arrive at a definition of the
particular as that which subverts the Leibnizian principle of identity invoked by Frege. In
this sense it is to be defined clearly in relation to the successor since Frege’s definition of
the zero is that which is not identical to the concept of which the unit is counted. The
particular is that which, in substituting itself for something else, always subverts the truth

\(^{19}\) Miller, ibid., 33.
\(^{21}\) Miller, ibid., 33.
\(^{22}\) Frege, §51.
of identity. In effect, this principle of no substitution without loss, and its generation of the object $a$ via the logical vel of separation, is that which promotes the analyst's desire as one which sustains the truth of psychoanalysis—that this loss is the cause of desire. One may only approach this truth as particular and so, to paraphrase Frege, we can now claim that the analyst’s desire does not know the definite article.

How then are we to make the argument from this theory of number, elaborated by Frege in the context of the logicist project and developed by Miller in relation to suture, to that of the very impossibility of the sexual relation developed by Lacan? This is what is implied by our initial quotation from *Le savoir du psychanalyste*. Before we could possibly make this connection to sexual difference we need to think through the relation between logic and inscription. For it seems that the impossibility implied in sexual difference is one which finds its place in the body, that is, the body as a signifying network. As such we need to make an argument from the notion of unit to that of trait. In this sense we can show that this real of sexual difference is inscribed in relation to an impossible identification with a particular trait that has the structure of successor that we have already elaborated. The mark that has this function of succession would be that which presents an absence or, in other words, puts the impossible to work.

We find an echo of this idea in Miller’s text occurring at the very juncture wherein the Fregean theory of number confronts Lacan’s logic of the signifier. Miller writes—

> Just as the zero as lack of the contradictory object must be distinguished from that which sutures this absence in the series of numbers, so the 1, as the proper name of a number, is to be distinguished from that which comes to fix in a trait the zero of the non-identical with itself sutured by the identity with itself, which is the law of discourse in the field of truth. The central paradox to be grasped is that the trait of the identical represents the non-identical, whence is deduced the impossibility of its redoubling and from that impossibility the structure of repetition, as the process of differentiation of the identical. 23

In this notion of the trait we find the materiality of the process of the unary trait. However there is a certain identification that produces the subject as an impossible identification. This is a continuity of Lacan’s thought on the formation of the subject via a cut, this cut being a material marker that is, at first, the unary trait. The constitution of the

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23 Miller, ibid., 33.
division of the subject occurs in the splitting. It is not that the subject is split but that the subject is this splitting. Thus with the writing of $ we have a differentiating marker that is implied in every operation of a signifying chain. This subject is itself split in relation to the materiality that both marks and divides it but that defies identity as such. Thus the letter is the inscription and trace of the differentiating one and as such it is a marker of the particular way in which the impossibility of the system, that which we call castration, is at work in the system.

We can distinguish classical logic from the psychoanalytic logic by a certain materialism that is implied in this notion of trait and developed in the concept of the letter. Indeed one might argue that the very limit of identity emerging at the level of materiality, but ultimately inscribing an absolute difference in relation to the alterity of the Other, implies its formal divergence, sustained in relation to its philosophical precursors, as it is found in Lacan's development of a psychoanalytic logic.
The remarkably fertile and innovative thinking which Lacan displays throughout his seminar Identification puts this notion that Freud handed it down to us into radical perspective, to the point, as Claude Conté remarks, that a kind of theoretical appraisal of it can be made:

[Summing up, in a way, his experience to make it converge on the concept of identification, he refers to three forms or three levels, the disparity of which is well-suited enough to give us to understand that it is not a question of a homogeneous set or of three kinds lined up in a common genre, but rather, of a sort of assessment, of a presentation which aims at giving an explanation for what he regards as certain in his experience, without for all that concealing any of the difficulties which clash in his theorization. He does this in such a way that the question arises of knowing whether or not a common concept can apply to the primordial, enigmatic identification with the father, then to the identification

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1] Originally published as chapter seven of Dor’s Introduction à la lecture de Lacan, vol. 2 La structure du sujet (Paris: Denoël, 1992), 110-119. Volume 1 of the Introduction has been translated and published in English; see footnote 7 below. All notes, except those in brackets, are the author’s. Some notes referencing other chapters of the Introduction, vol. 2, have been deleted.

which goes through the location of the Other's desire and which Freud refers to as particularly hysterical. 3

We immediately notice that Claude Conte invokes only two of the three types of identification specified by Freud, for which the question then arises of knowing whether or not they should be subsumed under the same concept. This is assuredly not a memory lapse on the part of the author, since the individual case of identification which he doesn't mention is precisely that which allows the introduction of a logical coherence between the two others, that is, the second type of identification referred to by Freud: identification with the single trait, brilliantly taken up by Lacan under the appellation identification with the unary trait.

If Lacan emphasized the Freudian matrix of identification with the single trait, it is because within the infrastructure of his metapsychological model he had an inkling of a substratum whose appropriateness proved to be completely consistent with the primordial consequence implied by the unconscious structured like a language: the allegiance of the status and of the structure of the subject to the function of the signifier, and more generally to the Other. His analysis of the Cartesian cogito is exemplary in this respect, since it leads him to determine one of the points at which this subjection is entrenched in the very principle of the subject's inaugural identification with the unary trait, which is pure signifier par excellence—its proper name. 4

Lacan also considers it legitimate to try to integrate within the matrix of this basic process the two other types of identification developed by Freud. This he does and satisfactorily establishes, provided we have the perseverance to follow the complicated progression of his thought. In fact, the two seminars 5 which he devotes to this attempted integration, while completely pertinent, remain sufficiently allusive for us to lament the absence of the explicit articulations necessary to clarify the coherence of his process. We are forced to admit that it is only at the cost of many circumlocutions, duly argued, that it becomes possible to define the utterly homogenous nature of these three types of identification collected by Freud. Let us point out, however, the trajectory of this synthesis.

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The first type of identification defined by Freud, the identification with the father, also referred to as cannibalistic identification, or identification with an ideal, constitutes itself against the background of an incorporation which finds its logical foundation in the myth of the "primal horde" whose decisive, symbolic shift begins with the jouissance of the devouring of a "violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up." 6

The Freudian myth of the primal horde only has symbolically structural value insofar as it stipulates the point of origin of the subjective entrenchment of the law and of the consequences which the law prescribes from the viewpoint of the symbolization of the difference of the sexes, 7 that is to say, the incidence of the paternal metaphor and the function of the signifier Name-of-the-Father.

In this manner, against the background of the Freudian myth of a body made absent, because it is murdered and devoured, the potentiality of a subjectivity takes shape, be it only through the institution of the lack—which comes to superimpose itself on the absence—introduced by the symbolic reference to the law and to the prevalence of the signifying function which it inaugurates and on which the subject henceforth depends. Beyond the founding myth, this subjectivizing potentiality reiterates itself through the Oedipal "putting to death" of the father against the same background of absence: incorporation of the Name-of-the-Father. In this way, on the ground of this "deprivation," the function of the proper name—identification with a signifier, pure element of the difference as such—takes place, which the child realizes on the slope of its ego ideal vectorized by the symbolic father.

Let us accept the structural identity which can exist between the identification of the first kind—known as identification with the father—and the identification of the second type, promoted by Lacan under the designation identification with the unary trait, as the root of all identifications. What remains to be proven through this same isomorphism vis-à-vis the identification of the third kind is identification with the desire of the other.

Freud doesn't hesitate to designate this third kind of identification with the term "hysterical identification," insofar as it encysts, in a symptomatic fashion, the charac-

teristic logic which regulates the desiring economy of the hysteric, that is to say, the
dramatized growth of the normal dynamic which governs the regulation of the desire of
each and all as desire of the desire of the Other. It is therefore by measure of this pithiatic
exacerbation⁸ that Freud accommodates this third profile of identification from which
he extracts what are indisputably the best illustrations of the unassailable alphabet primer
of hysteria:

There is a third particularly frequent and important case of symptom
formation, in which the identification leaves entirely out of account any object-
relation to the person who is being copied. Supposing, for instance, that one of
the girls in a boarding school has had a letter from someone with whom she is
secretly in love which arouses her jealousy, and that she reacts to it with a fit of
hysterics; then some of her friends who know about it will catch the fit, as we say,
by mental infection. The mechanism is that of identification based upon the
possibility or desire of putting oneself in the same situation. . . . One ego has
perceived a significant analogy with another upon one point—in our example
upon openness to a similar emotion; an identification is thereupon constructed on
this point, and, under the influence of the pathogenic situation, is displaced on to
the symptom which the one ego has produced.⁹

What else is presented in these illustrative cases, at the very point of overflowing
and invasion, than the reiteration of this originary moment of the structuring of desire
which would never know how to constitute itself other than on the terrain of an
identification with the object of the Other's desire? The dialectic of the graph of desire alerts us
to this contingency when in the encounter with the place of the Other, the subject can
only reply to the "Che vuoi?" by making itself precisely the object.¹⁰ This is another way
of recalling that the advent of the desiring subject only becomes established with its
relation to the Other, which arranges for it its subjection to the signifier. With the birth of

⁸ [Fr., 'exacerbation pithiatique'. Rather obscure vocabulary. "Pithiatic" comes from the
Greek and means "healed by suggestion." A second, broader sense of the word means "brought on
by suggestion." Dor is using the word in this second sense. "Pithiatism" is also an obsolete term for
hysteria.]


¹⁰ Cf. Joël Dor, "The 'Generation' of the Graph," chap. 25 in Introduction to the Reading of
the subject as captive of the lack of the Other, $S(\mathcal{A})$, falls the object $a$, which the subject never stops to examine other than when traversing the fantasy, $\$ \diamondsuit a$. It is indeed through the third type of identification that the desire of the subject is inaugurally constituted in the field of the Other by having partly joined with the object $a$.

It is no longer necessary to conceive how, through this signifying dependence upon the place of the object of its desire, stemming from its relation to the field of the Other, identification with the desire of the Other—of the hysterical type—is constitutively structured on the mode of identification with the unary trait, because of the signifying affinity which originally determines the mode of relation of the subject to the object.

From this structural isomorphism of the three types of identification,\textsuperscript{11} we can agree that the identification of the subject, in supporting itself through its relation to the signifier—the unary trait, which is to say, the pure element of difference as such—proves to be, in extreme cases, exclusively dependent on a subjection to the field of the Other.

Experience shows us that as long as the subject manages to submit its desire to what it imagines to be, rightly or wrongly, the desire of the Other, the desiring dialectic displays itself by means of mobile accomplishments. But, if the psychological zone of projection of the Other’s desire should become somewhat opaque to the subject, then the dialectic jams and becomes the object of an intolerable experience. In this disclosure of the Other’s desire, the subject discovers \textit{ex abrupto} that it was precisely itself that constituted it as desiring subject. In other words, the subject perceives that to be the Other’s object of desire is only tolerable to the extent that the Other can be signified to it. As soon as it feels itself the possible object of a desire of the Other without knowing what it itself desires in the Other, the subject’s desire is confronted with the nothingness which Lacan defines as the point of emergence of \textit{anxiety}:

\textsuperscript{11} In 1976, in his seminar \textit{L’insu que sait de l’une bêvue, s’aile à mourre} (1976-1977), the session of 16 November 1976, published in \textit{Ornicar?}, 12/13 (December 1976), p. 9, Lacan evokes three modes of “reversal” of the torus and makes clear that these transformations are to be put into correspondence with the three modes of identification singled out by Freud. The development of these operations carried out on the same topological support does not fail to emphasize the structural isomorphism of the three types of identification while illustrating their respective singularity. J.-J. Bouquier provides us a demonstration in his study \textquote{“Retournements de tores et identification,”} in \textit{Analytica} 46, \textit{Investigations topologiques et interrogations sur la passe} (Paris: Navarin, 1986), 9-18.
The affect of anxiety is, indeed, connoted by a fault in the object, but not by a fault in reality. If I no longer know anything about myself as the possible object of this desire of the Other, this Other that is opposite me, its face is completely mysterious to me especially to the extent that this form as I have it before me cannot actually be constituted for me anymore as object, but I can all the same sense a mode of sensations which makes up the entire substance of what is called anxiety, of this unspeakable oppression through which we arrive at the very dimension of the place of the Other in the cases when desire can appear there.\textsuperscript{12}

From identification to anxiety is often only a step. That step is the unary trait, which, momentarily failing, cannot thus be called up to assume the function that pertains to it: to maintain the subject in the relation which it keeps with the object of its desire in the gaze of the Other.

Lacan suggests the metaphorical experience of this weakness when he compares himself in his imagination to an animal mask, so as to show what the experience of the pure apprehension of the Other's desire could be.\textsuperscript{13} In the same vein, I will propose another illustration, more urban, which also comes to justify this point of emergence of anxiety which Lacan defines in these terms:

\begin{quote}
The fear of desire is experienced as equivalent to anxiety . . . [A]nxiety is the fear of what the Other desires in itself of the subject, this "in itself" founded precisely on the ignorance of that which is desired at the level of the Other.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

During a stay in Venice, I found myself the spectator of certain carnivalesque rites which seemed to me to actualize this quite singular aspect of the mask's function as evoked by Lacan. I had met with some friends who had had the excellent initiative to don a typically local disguise—the stirring traditional costume of this lagoon city—which in turn consigned them to becoming veritable photographic prey for the tourists—who were themselves foreigners. At the end of a day, after a multitude of photographic solicitations which represented no less than several hours of daily pauses, everyone's weariness made itself known in the evening, comfortably seated about a table. One of them confided to

\textsuperscript{13} In the passage referred to, the mask of a "praying mantis." Cf. ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibib., session of 27 June 1962.
me: “I should put on some civilian clothes and go incognito!”

The phrase was all the more charming in that his humor was intended to temper the point of anxiety which served him as a pivot: emergence of the affect which betrayed, in the present case, this insidious moment where the subject does not manage to truly find its own image in the mirror of the Other’s gaze. In the case in point, the thing was all the more appreciable since it supported a “usurpation” of identity lived by the one concerned as a misrepresentation of identification.

It seems clear that it is indeed owing to this misrepresentation that anxiety had been able to find some favorable breach in which to insinuate itself. In a very singular way, in this situation, we can wager that only narcissistic jouissance was able to open such a breach. But at the same time, in transforming the subject into a privileged target offered up to the gaze of the Other, the misrepresentation was only able to lead an encystment of jouissance. The insistence and repetition of the Other’s gaze thus inevitably assigns the disguised subject to a place of identification of which it is captive. Captive, that is, of being the object of an Other’s desire in which it was no longer was able to pinpoint what it was desiring. Besides, how would it have been able to while exposing itself to the Other’s gaze in an assumed identity?

The Lacanian conception of anxiety, aside from constituting a remarkable conceptual advance in regard to the ambiguous consensus which Freud devoted to it, also provides a supplementary proof for the importance that he comes to grant the determination of the structure of the subject, vis-à-vis the place of the Other, thus of the signifying function which constitutes it on the terrain of the unary trait at the level of its primordial essence, that of the identification with a signifier:

The unary trait comes before the subject. “In the beginning was the Word” means, in the beginning was the unary trait. . . . Simplicity, singularity of the trait, is what we make enter into the real, whether the real wants it or not. But one thing is certain: it enters, and it already entered before us because it is already along this path that all the subjects which, for several centuries, engage in dialogue and have to make do as they can with precisely this condition, that there

15 Cf. Jacques Lacan, Anxiety, Seminar 10 (unpublished, 1962-1963), and Lacan’s remarks in the session of 14 November 1962, regarding Freud’s study Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety: “[W]hen we enter into this text, you will see what there is to be seen in connection with anxiety, that there is no net, because regarding anxiety, each stitch [of the net’s mesh], if I may put it this way, only makes sense when leaving the void in which there is anxiety. In the discourse, thank goodness, of Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, everything is discussed except anxiety.”
is, between them and the real, the field of the signifier—it is already through this device of the unary trait that they are constituted as subjects. Why would we be surprised to find its mark in our field, if our field is that of the subject? 16

This mark of the unary trait, indicating that the subject can only come to be in its dependence on the signifier, we rediscover symbolized by the bar dividing it: $ \ldots $

It remains for us now to establish how we can consider the subject as a *quotient*, it being agreed that the division of which it is the object throws off a remainder that indicates the radical alterity of the Other: “there is no Other of the Other.” 17 One never reaches the Other, always marked by the signifier of the lack which constitutes it, for us, as A. As for the remainder, which is strictly speaking object $a$, it finds its logical place at the side of the subject with which it is paired across the cut of the fantasy: $\Diamond a$.

This division, stemming from the primacy of the presence of the Other over the existence of the subject, can thus be schematized as such:

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
$ \Diamond a $ & A \\
\hline
\$ & \$ \\
a & \text{Bar of Division}
\end{array}
\]

Translated by Mark Lowenthal

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16 Ibid., session of 21 November 1962.
17 Lacan doesn’t cease to repeat this formula. He already explains it in *Le désir et son interpretation*, Seminar 6 (unpublished, 1958-1959), in the session of 8 April 1959: “A signifier is lacking at the level of the Other. It is, if I may say so, *the great secret of psychoanalysis*—there is no Other of the Other” (my italics). In “The Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious” (1960), in *Écrits*, he stresses: “The lack referred to here is indeed that which I have already formulated: that there is no Other of the Other.” There’s no need to multiply examples. One can draw the reader’s attention, however, to this magisterial demonstration which marks an intimate correlation between identification—and more precisely, again, the three types of Freudian identification—the Other, and the triad of real, imaginary, and symbolic joined Borromeanly: “[W]hat gives its consistency to the symbolic is precisely that there is no Other of the Other. . . . I propose, to close today’s session, this formulation of triple identification as advanced by Freud. If there is a real Other, it is nowhere else than in the knot itself, and it is because of that that there is no Other of the Other. To identify with the imaginary of this real Other is identification of the hysteric with the desire of the Other. . . . To identify with the symbolic of the real Other is thus identification with the unary trait. To identify with the real of the real Other is to obtain what I’ve pointed to as the Name-of-the-Father, where Freud designates what identification has to do with love.” (R. S. I, Seminar 22 [1974-1975], session of 18 March 1975, *Ornicar?* 5, [December-January 75/76]: 34-35)
On the Proper Name as the Signifier in Its Pure State
Russell Grigg

In his seminar Identification, Lacan paused for a moment over the logic of the proper name as articulated by Bertrand Russell. Lacan’s interest was aroused by the critique of the Russelian theory of the proper name that figured in a small polemical book by Alan Gardiner. This moment is of interest to us as one of the rare occasions upon which Lacan explicitly treats the question of the logic of proper names, which is, as we know, a central question in analytic philosophy—and to which Russell’s contribution is in no way insignificant. Thus it can serve as a point of departure for an exploration of the function of the proper name in psychoanalysis.

First of all, we must ask what leads Russell to advance a far-fetched thesis—which if taken literally is “obviously false from the point of view of common language”—according to which only “this” and “that” are proper names.

Behind Russell’s position, of course, lies the Fregean theory of the proper name with its distinction between sense, Sinn, and reference, Bedeutung. According to Frege, the sense of the proper name is the means by which it determines its reference, the meaning. For example, concerning the proper name Socrates, one knows who is referred to by means of a description of this kind—“Plato’s teacher.”

1 Published in La Cause freudienne 39 (1998), 125-8.
It is for this reason that Russell can maintain that what "common language" calls a proper name—Socrates, Walter Scott—is properly speaking an abbreviated description. In using the word Socrates, one employs a description such as "Plato’s teacher" or "the philosopher who drank hemlock." Now, a proper name in the sense called "logical" by Russell absolutely cannot abbreviate a description and therefore, strictly speaking, has no sense. Only the demonstratives “this” and “that” would satisfy the requirement of being devoid of sense in a manner such that the reference would be determined without any recourse to the slightest description. Thus they are the only words worthy of being called proper names.

Gardiner aligns himself rather with J. S. Mill, for whom that which distinguishes a proper name is on the one hand not to have sense and on the other to be of the order of a mark applied to a particular for the sole and exclusive reason of distinguishing it from others.5

Even when the name appears to have sense—Mill offers as an example 'Dartmouth', the city that is located “at the mouth” of the river Dart—it is merely contingent, given that eventually the sense might no longer be true of the object to which the name refers. What distinguishes the proper name according to Gardiner is that it be recognized as indicating the object to which it refers itself as a distinctive sound, without regard to any meaning the name might possess.

Lacan mentions that this definition is not sufficient to characterize the proper name because any usage of language satisfies these conditions—it is precisely the characteristic feature of language that it be made up of distinctive sounds. This is a difficulty that Gardiner is aware of, and which leads him to rely on a psychologistic element—namely that when it comes to proper names, the speaker is particularly sensitive to the sound of the name.

In any case, this is certainly the distinctive feature of the name that Gardiner insists upon to sustain his thesis. He criticizes the reference that Mill makes to the story of Ali Baba. Mill compares the proper name to the chalkmark on Ali Baba’s door that indicates his house so that the bandits can find him. His servant, Morgiana, thwarts the thieves by marking every door with the same symbol, making it impossible to figure out which house is his.

No, says Gardiner. The comparison is faulty. All Morgiana would need to do to foil the plan of the thieves would be to put a different mark on each door—leaving them unable to tell which mark was the right one. A name doesn’t distinguish one door from

another by the fact that it has a name whereas the others don't—but rather by the fact that its name is different from theirs.

While this critique of Mill hits its mark, a difficulty that Gardiner is aware of arises precisely at this point in his argument. As a matter of fact, what Gardiner says doesn't define the proper name, because every word is distinguished by its difference from all the others. Thus there is nothing in this definition that is specific to the proper name. And it is precisely at this point, in trying to determine the difference, that Gardiner appeals to a psychological phenomenon. This is a difficulty that he won't be able to resolve.

A proper name has no meaning. It only has a reference. Now, as it happens there are, on the one hand, proper names that do appear to have a sense—Mont Blanc, Yarmouth, Côte d’Azur—and on the other, connotations and meanings do tend to accrue to proper names. These considerations force Gardiner to maintain that the “purest” proper names are those made up of “perfectly distinctive” and “entirely arbitrary” sounds for which we have no feeling of meaning. But what are his examples? Vercingetorix and Popocatepetl! I'm not making this up.

Obviously there is something shaky in this argument. The claim that there is a distinction between “pure” proper names and others is only required by the demands of the thesis. Plainly, it has no justification. It is difficult to distinguish psychological sensations from what belongs to the logic of the signifier and its semantic effect and borders on the psychologism that, as Frege has shown, we have good reason to reject.

Lacan doesn't hesitate to express his disagreement with the psychologism of Gardiner, considering that his account founders on a major difficulty. Gardiner’s thesis miscarries because he doesn’t articulate the function of the subject in any other than a psychological manner and fails to define the subject in its reference to the signifier.

More precisely, Lacan insists that what is lacking in Gardiner’s approach is the function of the letter, and more particularly the function of the unary trait—“there can be no definition of the proper name except insofar as we perceive the relation of the naming utterance to something that is, in its radical nature, of the order of the letter.”

The sound structure is not dismissed by Lacan, since it possesses a singularity that must be respected across translations. Thus, if the proper name preserves its sound structure, it is “by reason of the affinity between the proper name and the mark.”

Why this insistence on the letter? Two reasons. There is on the one hand the

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6 Identification, session of 20 December 1961.
7 Ibid.
affinity between the proper name and the letter that arises because neither possesses any
meaning. Thus the proper name has the particularity of being the "signifier in its pure
state." On the other hand, there is something to the fact that proper names pass directly
from one language to another—"I am Lacan in any language," he tells us, while making
the same observation about the names Cleopatra and Ptolemy, which played a key role in
the deciphering of hieroglyphics.

How all this concerns the signifier as letter is not clear. What is incontestable,
though, is that from the fact that the proper name is untranslatable, one can conclude that
it has no sense—with few exceptions. The exceptions are on the one hand place names
and on the other the names of celebrated persons whose celebrity rests upon a common
description that serves to determine the referent for everyone. By choosing very well
known names—Socrates, Cicero—as examples of his theory of descriptions, Frege thus
concealed the fact that the proper name lacks meaning.

Five years later, in his seminar *The Crucial Problems of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan
revisits the question of proper names. Once again he refers to Gardiner’s book. But this
time, instead of appealing to the ins(is)tence of the letter in the translation of proper
names, he emphasizes what he calls "the significative effects" of the proper name—

"If I present myself to you as Jacques Lacan, I say ... something that ... for you
entails a certain number of significative effects. . . . From the moment that I introduce
myself to you as Jacques Lacan, any possibility of my being a Rockefeller, for example, or
the count of Paris is already eliminated." From this he concludes, "To say that a proper
name . . . has no meaning is grossly inaccurate." 8

There is a difficulty here that arises from the fact that what Lacan says in this
context evokes the Fregean theory of descriptions. For what distinguishes proper names
other than the descriptions—"author of the Écrits," "famous French psychoanalyst,"
etc.—that determine that it just happens to be a matter of Jacques Lacan and not the count
of Paris?

Before renouncing the thesis—which to me seems to be justified—that the proper
name is the signifier in its pure state, it is necessary to take into account what Lacan says
elsewhere in Seminar 12. It is Saul Kripke’s concept of the "rigid designator" that can
serve as a compass here. 9 Kripke maintains that the Fregean theory is unprovable. His
insight is to see that if the sense of "Socrates" is a description such as "Plato’s teacher,"

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1965), session of 6 January 1965.

then "Socrates is Plato's teacher" would be necessarily true. If "Plato's teacher" is the sense of "Socrates," then Socrates just has to be Plato's teacher. However, it is obviously contingent that Socrates should ever have become a philosopher. Or, to take a more convincing example, if by "Thales" we signify "the philosopher who believed that all things are made of water," and no one ever maintained such a thesis, it is necessary to conclude that Thales never existed. To whom, then, does Aristotle refer? A person, according to the theory of descriptions. For, it must be possible that Thales was a mason, for example, and that Aristotle was deceived as to what this person did and thought.\(^{10}\) It follows, therefore, that one could refer to Thales by using the proper name "Thales" even if it turns out that the only description that we have of him is false. That the proper name is a rigid designator therefore means that, contrary to the theory of descriptions, no meaning is essentially tied to the proper name.

The term "rigid designator" implies therefore that no signification, no description, belongs to the proper name. And this is what Lacan seems to confirm a little later in the same seminar when he says, "I am called Jacques Lacan, but as something that can be missing, for which the name will tend to cover over another lack. The proper name, therefore, is a moveable function."\(^{11}\) We better understand this "other lack" and this "fluctuating function" in the context of the concept of rigid designation of the proper name taken independently of all identifying descriptions.

It is possible to carry all of this over into the clinical context. Without going into the details—which could be developed at another time—it is very suggestive in the case of Joyce, for example, for whom the use of proper names is inscribed against this thesis of the proper name as "signifier in its pure state." Isn't it all the more striking that Joyce never stops playing on the function of the letter in the proper name? For example, he has only to think of the three great names of European letters, Gouty, Doughty, and Shopkeeper, in which his idea seems precisely to be the flooding of the signifier with an abundance of sense. On the other hand, we must wonder about the meaning of wanting "to make a name for oneself" in which all the effort consists in filling the emptiness of the essence of the proper name.

Translated by Daniel G. Collins

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\(^{11}\) Lacan, ibid.
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