

Of Structure as the Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever

By Jacques Lacan

Somebody spent some time this afternoon trying to convince me that it would surely not be a pleasure for an English-speaking audience to listen to my bad accent and that for me to speak in English would constitute a risk for what one might call the transmission of my message. Truly, for me it is a great case of conscience, because to do otherwise would be absolutely contrary to my own concept of the message: of the message as I will explain it to you, of the linguistic message. Many people talk nowadays about messages everywhere, inside the organism a hormone is a message, a beam of light to obtain teleguidance to a plane or from a satellite is a message, and so on; but the message in language is absolutely different. The message, our message, in all cases comes from the Other by which I understand "from the place of the Other." It certainly is not the common other, the other with a lower-case *o*, and this is why I have given a capital *O* as the initial letter to the Other of whom I am now speaking. Since in this case, here in Baltimore, it would seem that the Other is naturally English-speaking, it would really be doing myself violence to speak French. But the question that this person raised, that it would perhaps be difficult and even a little ridiculous for me to speak English, is an important argument and I also know that there are many French-speaking people present that do not understand English at all; for these my choice of English would be a security, but perhaps I would not wish them to be so secure and in this case I shall speak a little French as well.

First, let me put forth some advice about structure, which is the subject matter of our meeting. It may happen that there will be mistakes, confusion, more and more approximative uses of this notion, and I think that soon there will be some sort of fad about this word. For me it is different because I have used this term for a very long time — since the beginning of my teaching. The reason why something about my position is not better known is that I addressed myself only to a very special audience, namely one of psychoanalysts. Here there are some very peculiar difficulties, because psychoanalysts really know something: of what I was talking to them about and that this thing is a particularly difficult thing to cope with for anybody who practices psychoanalysis. The subject is not a simple thing for the psychoanalysts who have something to do with the subject proper. In this case I wish to avoid misunderstandings, *méconnaissances*, of my position. *Méconnaissance* is a French word which I am obliged to use because there is no equivalent in English. *Méconnaissance* precisely implies the subject in its meaning — and I was also advised that it is not so easy to talk about the "subject" before an English-speaking audience. *Méconnaissance* is not to *méconnaître* my subjectivity. What exactly is in question is the status of the problem of the structure.

When I began to teach something about Psychoanalysis I lost some of my audience, because I had perceived long before then the simple fact that if you open a book of Freud, and particularly those books which are properly about the unconscious, you can be absolutely sure — it is not a probability but a certitude — to fall on a page where it is not only a question of words — naturally in a book there are always words many printed words — but words which are the object through which one seeks for a way to handle the unconscious. Not even the meaning of the words, but words in their flesh, in their material aspect. A great part of the speculations of Freud is about

punning in a dream or lapsus, or what in French we call *calembour*, *homonymie*, or still the division of a word into many parts with each part taking on a new meaning after it is broken down. It is curious to note, even if in this case it is not absolutely proven, that words are the only material of the unconscious. It is not proven but it is probable (and in any case I have never said that the unconscious was an assemblage of words, but that the unconscious is precisely structured). I don't think there is such an English word but it is necessary to have this term, as we are talking about structure and the unconscious is structured as a language. What does that mean?

Properly speaking this is a redundancy because "structured" and "as a language" for me mean exactly the same thing. Structured means my speech, my lexicon, etc., which is exactly the same as a language. And that is not all. Which language? Rather than myself it was my pupils that took a great deal of trouble to give that question a different meaning, and to search for the formula of a reduced language. What are the minimum conditions, they ask themselves, necessary to constitute a language? Perhaps only four *signantes*, four signifying elements are enough. It is a curious exercise which is based on a complete error, as I hope to show you on the board in a moment. There were also some philosophers, not many really but some, of those present at my seminar in Paris who have found since then that it was not a question of an "under" language or of "another" language, not myth for instance or phonemes, but language. It is extraordinary the pains that all took to change the place of the question. Myths, for instance, do not take place in our consideration precisely because those are also structured as a language, and when I say "as a language" it is not as some special sort of language, for example, mathematical language, semiotical language, or cinematographical language. Language is language and there is only one sort of language: concrete language — English or French for instance — that people talk. The first thing to start in this context is that there is no meta-language. For it is necessary that all so called meta-languages be presented to you with language. You cannot teach a course in mathematics using only letters on the board. It is always necessary to speak an ordinary language that is understood.

It is not only because the material of the unconscious is a linguistic material, or as we say in French *langagier* that the unconscious is structured as a language. The question that the unconscious raises for you is a problem that touches the most sensitive point of the nature of language that is the question of the subject. The subject cannot simply be identified with the speaker or the personal pronoun in a sentence. In French the *énoncé* is exactly the sentence, but there are many *énoncés* where there is no index of him who utters the *énoncé*. When I say "it rains," the subject of the enunciation is not part of the sentence. In any case here there is some sort of difficulty. The subject cannot always be identified with what the linguists call "the shifter."

The question that the nature of the unconscious puts before us is in a few words, that something always thinks. Freud told us that the unconscious is above all thoughts, and that which thinks is barred from consciousness. This bar has many applications, many possibilities with regard to meaning. The main one is that it is really a barrier, a barrier which it is necessary to jump over or to pass through. This is important because if I don't emphasize this barrier all is well for you. As we say in French, *ça vous arrange*, because if something thinks in the floor below or underground things are simple; thought is always there and all one needs is a little consciousness on the thought that the living being is naturally thinking and all is well. If such were the case,

thought would be prepared by life, naturally, such as instinct for instance. If thought is a natural process, then the unconscious is without difficulty. But the unconscious has nothing to do with instinct or primitive knowledge or preparation of thought in some underground. It is a thinking with words, with thoughts that escape your vigilance, your state of watchfulness. The question of vigilance is important. It is as if a demon plays a game with your watchfulness. The question is to find a precise status for this other subject which is exactly the sort of subject that we can determine taking our point of departure in language.

When I prepared this little talk for you, it was early in the morning. I could see Baltimore through the window and it was a very interesting moment because it was not quite daylight and a neon sign indicated to me every minute the change of time, and naturally there was heavy traffic and I remarked to myself that exactly all that I could see, except for some trees in the distance, was the result of thoughts actively thinking thoughts, where the function played by the subjects was not completely obvious. In any case the so-called *Dasein* as a definition of the subject, was there in this rather intermittent or fading spectator. The best image to sum up the unconscious is Baltimore in the early morning.

Where is the subject? It is necessary to find the subject as a lost object. More precisely this lost object is the support of the subject and in many cases is a more abject thing than you may care to consider — in some cases it is something done, as all psychoanalysts and many people who have been psychoanalyzed know perfectly well. That is why many psychoanalysts prefer to return to a general psychology, as the President of the New York Psychoanalytical Society tells us we ought to do. But I cannot change things, I am a psychoanalyst and if someone prefers to address himself to a professor of psychology that is his affair. The question of the structure, since we are talking of psychology, is not a term that only I use. For a long time thinkers, searchers, and even inventors who were concerned with the question of the mind, have over the years put forward the idea of unity as the most important and characteristic trait of structure. Conceived as something which is already in the reality of the organism it is obvious. The organism when it is mature is a unit and functions as a unit. The question becomes more difficult when this idea of unity is applied to the function of the mind, because the mind is not a totality in itself, but these ideas in the form of the intentional unity were the basis; as you know, of all of the so-called phenomenological movement.

The same was also true in physics and psychology with the so-called Gestalt school and the notion of *bonne forme* whose function was to join, for instance, a drop of water and more complicated ideas, and great psychologists, and even the psychoanalysts are full of the idea of "total personality." At any rate, it is always the unifying unity which is in the foreground. I have never understood this, for if I am a psychoanalyst I am also a man, and as a man my experience has shown me that the principal characteristic of my own human life and, I am sure, that of the people who are here — and if anybody is not of this opinion I hope that he will raise his hand — is that life is something which goes, as we say in French, *à la dérive*. Life goes down the river, from time to time touching a bank; staying for a while here and there. without understanding anything — and it is the principle of analysis that nobody understands anything of what happens. The idea of the unifying unity of the human condition has always had on me the effect of a scandalous lie.

We may try to introduce another principle to understand these things. If we rarely try to understand things from the point of view of the unconscious, it is because the unconscious tells us something articulated in words and perhaps we could try to search for their principle.

I suggest you consider the unity in another light. Not a *unifying* unity but the countable unity one, two, three. After fifteen years I have taught my pupils to count at most up to five which is difficult (four is easier) and they have understood that much. But for tonight permit me to stay at two. Of course what we are dealing with here is the question of the integer, and the question of integers is not a simple one as I think many people here know. To count, of course, is not difficult. It is only necessary to have, for instance, a certain number of sets and a one to-one correspondence. It is true for example that there are exactly as many people sitting in this room as there are seats. But it is necessary to have a collection composed of integers to constitute an integer, or what is called a natural number. It is, of course, in part natural but only in the sense that we do not understand why it exists. Counting is not an empirical fact and it is impossible to deduce the act of counting from empirical data alone. Hume tried but Frege demonstrated perfectly the ineptitude of the attempt. The real difficulty lies in the fact that every integer is in itself a unit. If I take two as a unit, things are very enjoyable, men and women for instance — love plus unity! But after a while it is finished, after these two there is nobody, perhaps a child, but that is another level and to generate three is another affair. When you try to read the theories of mathematicians regarding numbers you find the formula " n plus 1 ($n + 1$)" as the basis of all the theories. It is this question of the "one more" that is the key to the genesis of numbers and instead of this unifying unity that constitutes two in the first case I propose that you consider the real numerical genesis of two.

It is necessary that this two constitute the first integer which is not yet born as a number before the two appears. You have made this possible because the two is here to grant existence to the first one: put *two* in the place of *one* and consequently in the place of the *two* you see *three* appear. What we have here is something which I can call the *mark*. You already have something which is marked or something which is not marked. It is with the first mark that we have the status of the thing. It is exactly in this fashion that Frege explains the genesis of the number; the class which is characterized by no elements is the first class; you have one at the place of zero and afterward it is easy to understand how the place of one becomes the second place which makes place for two, three, and so on. The question of the two is for us the question of the subject. and here we reach a fact of psychoanalytical experience in as much as the two does not complete the one to make two, but must repeat the one to permit the one to exist. This first repetition is the only one necessary to explain the genesis of the number, and only one repetition is necessary to constitute the status of the subject. The unconscious subject is something that tends to repeat itself, but only one such repetition is necessary to constitute it. However, let us look more precisely at what is necessary for the second to repeat the first in order that we may have a repetition. This question cannot be answered too quickly. If you answer too quickly, you will answer that it is necessary that they are the same. In this case the principle of the two should be that of twins — and why not triplets or quintuplets? In my day we used to teach children that they must not add, for instance, microphones with dictionaries; but this is absolutely absurd, because we would not have addition if we were not able to add microphones with dictionaries or as Lewis Carroll says, cabbages

with kings. The sameness is not in things but in the *mark* which makes it possible to add things with no consideration as to their differences. The mark has the effect of rubbing out the difference, and this is the key to what happens to the subject, the unconscious subject in the repetition; because you know that this subject repeats something peculiarly significant, the subject is here, for instance, in this obscure thing that we call in some cases trauma, or exquisite pleasure. What happens? If the "thing" exists in this symbolic structure, if this unitary trait is decisive, the trait of the sameness is here. In order that the "thing" which is sought be here in you, it is necessary that the first trait be rubbed out because the trait itself is a modification. It is the taking away of all difference, and in this case, without the trait, the first "thing:" is simply lost. The key to this insistence in repetition is that in its essence repetition as repetition of the symbolical sameness is impossible. In any case, the subject is the effect of this repetition in as much as it necessitates the "fading," the obliteration, of the first foundation of the subject, which is why the subject, by status, is always presented as a divided essence. The trait, I insist, is identical, but it assures the difference only of identity — not by effect of sameness or difference but by the difference of identity. This is easy to understand: as we say in French, *je vous numérote*, I give you each a number; and this assures the fact that you are numerically different but nothing more than that.

What can we propose to intuition in order to show that the trait be found in something which is at the same time one or two? Consider the following diagram which I call an inverted eight, after a well-known figure:

You can see that the line in this instance may be considered either as one or as two lines. This diagram can be considered the basis of a sort of essential inscription at the origin, in the knot which constitutes the subject. This goes much further than you might think at first, because you can search for the sort of surface able to receive such inscriptions. You can perhaps see that the sphere, that old symbol for totality, is unsuitable. A torus, a Klein bottle, a cross-cut surface, are able to receive such a cut. And this diversity is very important as it explains many things about the structure of mental disease. If one can symbolize the subject by this fundamental cut, in the same way one can show that a cut on a torus corresponds to the neurotic subject, and on a cross-cut surface to another sort of mental disease. I will not explain this to you tonight, but to end this difficult talk I must make the following precision.

I have only considered the beginning of the series of the integers, because it is an intermediary point between language and reality. Language is constituted by the same sort of unitary traits that I have used to explain the one and the one more. But this trait in language is not identical with the unitary trait, since in language we have a collection of differential traits. In other words, we can say that language is constituted by a set of signifiers — for example, *ba, ta, pa*) etc., etc. — a set which is finite. Each signifier is able to support the same process with regard to the subject, and it is very probable that the process of the integers is only a special case of this relation between signifiers. The definition of this collection of signifiers is that they constitute what I call the Other. The difference afforded by the existence of language is that each signifier (contrary to the unitary trait of the integer number) is, in most cases, not identical with itself — precisely because we have a collection of signifiers, and in this collection one signifier may or may not designate itself. This is well known and is the

principle of Russell's paradox. If you take the set of all elements which are not members of themselves,

the set that you constitute with such elements leads you to a paradox which, as you know, leads to a contradiction. In simple terms, this only means that in a universe of discourse nothing contains everything, and here you find again the gap that constitutes the subject. The subject is the introduction of a loss in reality, yet nothing can introduce that, since by status reality is as full as possible. The notion of a loss is the effect afforded by the instance of the trait which is what, with the intervention of the letter you determine, places — say a_1 , a_2 , a_3 — and the places are spaces for a lack. When the subject takes the place of the lack, a loss is introduced in the word, and this is the definition of the subject. But to inscribe it, it is necessary to define it in a circle, what I call the otherness, of the sphere of language. All that is language is lent from this otherness and this is why the subject is always a fading thing that runs under the chain of signifiers. For the definition of a signifier is that it represents a subject not for another subject but for another signifier. This is the only definition possible of the signifier as different from the sign. The sign is something that represents something for somebody, but the signifier is something that represents a subject for another signifier. The consequence is that the subject disappears exactly as in the case of the two unitary traits, while under the second signifier appears what is called meaning or signification; and then in sequence the other signifiers appear and other significations.

The question of desire is that the fading subject yearns to find itself again by means of some sort of encounter with this miraculous thing defined by the phantasm. In its endeavor it is sustained by that which I call the lost object that I evoked in the beginning — which is such a terrible thing for the imagination. That which is produced and maintained here, and which in my vocabulary I call the object, lower-case, a , is well known by all psychoanalysts as all psychoanalysis is founded on the existence of this peculiar object. But the relation between this barred subject with this object (a) is the structure which is always found in the phantasm which supports desire in as much as desire is only that which I have called the metonymy of all signification.

In this brief presentation I have tried to show you what the question of the structure is inside the psychoanalytical reality. I have not, however, said anything about such dimensions as the imaginary and the symbolical. It is, of course, absolutely essential to understand how the symbolic order can enter inside the *vécu*, lived experienced, of mental life, but I cannot tonight put forth such an explanation. Consider, however, that which is at the same time the least known and the most certain fact about this mythical subject which is the sensible phase of the living being: this fathomless thing capable of experiencing something between birth and death, capable of covering the whole spectrum of pain and pleasure in a word, what in French we call the *sujet de la jouissance*. When I came here this evening I saw on the little neon sign the motto "Enjoy Coca-Cola." It reminded me that in English, I think, there is no term to designate precisely this enormous weight of meaning which is in the French word *jouissance* — or in the Latin *fruor*. In the dictionary I looked up *jouir* and found "to possess, to use" but it is not that at all. If the living being is something at all thinkable, it will be above all as subject of the *jouissance*; but this psychological law that we call the pleasure principle (and which is only the principle of displeasure) is very soon to create a barrier to all *jouissance*. If I am enjoying myself a little too much, I begin to

feel pain and I moderate my pleasures. The organism seems made to avoid too much *jouissance*. Probably we would all be as quiet as oysters if it were not for this curious organization which forces us to disrupt the barrier of pleasure or perhaps only makes us dream of forcing and disrupting this barrier. All that is elaborated by the subjective construction on the scale of the signifier in its relation to the Other and which has its root in language is only there to permit the full spectrum of desire to allow us to approach, to test, this sort of forbidden *jouissance* which is the only valuable meaning that is offered to our life.

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Since Dr. Lacan, as he remarks in his introduction, chose to deliver his communication alternately in English and French, and at points in a composite of the two languages, this text represents an edited transcription and paraphrase of his address.