

Chapter 1



A Theory of the Subject

Psychoanalysis is not a *Weltanschauung*, nor a philosophy pretending to deliver the key to the universe. It is supported by a particular intuition that is historically defined by the elaboration of the notion of subject.¹

The introduction of “das Ding” in the *Ethics Seminar* marks a change at the very core of Lacanian theory. Such, at least, is the consensus of practically every commentary on Lacan. Prior to his seventh seminar, so the story goes, Lacan conceived the subject as entirely determined by the signifier. Since signifiers continually refer to other signifiers, the subject that emerged was thought to be exceptionally agile, slippery, and flexible—an insight that does justice to the paradoxical and devious paths the subject is forced onto by its capricious drive-life. Yet with his seventh seminar, the commentaries continue, Lacan introduced an important correction into his theory. Despite its agility within the realm of signifiers, the subject is now presumed to remain simultaneously “attached” to something that is not a signifier: something that is beyond all signifiers and which Lacan, with Freud, names *das Ding*, the “thing.” It is this “thing” that gives the subject’s slippery libidinal economy its ultimate consistency. Henceforth Lacan no longer considers the subject solely as the bearer of an unconscious chain of signifiers (as in the previous six seminars), but also, and more fundamentally, as *attached* to a “thing”: this is the new insight offered in Lacan’s *Ethics Seminar*. According to these commentators, the idea of attachment is the key to understanding Lacan’s difficult expositions in this seminar.²

However, although the emphasis on “*the thing*” is unquestionably there, readers will seek the word ‘attachment’ in vain. Nowhere is the rela-

tion between the subject and its ‘thing’ described in these terms, nor does it appear in any other contexts. The term “attachment,” which has meanwhile been developed into a concept, seems to have been an invention of Lacan’s interpreters rather than of Lacan himself. Nevertheless, this term rightly turns our attention to the “object” that the subject is related to. It presumes an emphasis on the “thing” at which the subject aims, an emphasis one can indeed find on practically every page of Lacan’s *Ethics Seminar*.

Yet to define the relation between the subject and “the thing” as an “attachment” is to say more than this. It names the *nature* of that relation. It presumes this relation to be close, “attached,” and involving a strong bond or “attraction.” As I will show, such an interpretation is in fact far less easy—if not impossible—to extract from the text. At any rate, the “tie” between subject and object will be so much more complex that one must ask whether a notion like “attachment” is capable of doing it justice at all.

What is more, these commentaries that refer to the idea of ‘attachment’ seem to imply that the attention to the object pole in desire is something new in Lacanian theory, something that is only introduced in his *Ethics Seminar*. This too, however, is not substantiated, neither in the text of the seminar, nor in the wider development of his theory. It is in flagrant contradiction with the fact that Lacan had *always* put the emphasis on the object pole of desire. This was evident from the opening steps of his oeuvre, that is, his theory of the mirror stage. Many of the turns of his oeuvre are motivated by further, ongoing corrections and refinements of this first “object relations theory.”

In this respect, his entire theory could be regarded as an “object relations theory,” at least if we understand this term in a wider sense than that assigned by Ronald Fairbairn, the analyst who made the first breakthrough of this theory. Fairbairn defined the *object relation* as the opposite of a *libido relation*: in his eyes, object relations theory contests the primacy of the libido as the basic principle of the drive-life.³ Lacan’s preference, on the other hand, for approaching things from an *object relations* perspective is always accompanied with an even greater emphasis on the libidinal aspect of the problem.⁴ If we thus understand the term “object relation” in the widest sense of the word, that is, as a psychoanalytic theory that centers on the problem of the object in the libidinal economy, Lacan’s thought has always been an object relations theory. Although he has long been one of its most formidable critics, he has always moved *within* the same paradigm of the diverse object relations theories of his time.

If one tries to conceive of the relation between the drive and its object (the “thing” in the *Ethics Seminar*) as an “attachment,” one must do so at least against the background of the object relations theory per-

sisting and developed in the course of his oeuvre. And, what is more, one must conceive of that object relations theory as a theory of the *subject*. For the libidinal economy cannot solely be regarded as an “object relation.” It is crucial to recall how the object relation requires a “bearer,” a “*subjectum*,” an instance giving support and ground to the entire slippery libidinal economy. This is why Lacan’s “object relations theory” is first of all a theory of the subject. In this chapter I will cover the basic principles of Lacan’s theory of the subject. Solely this perspective offers the background necessary for understanding the subject’s complex relation to the ultimate object of its desire, that is, the “object” which is central in Lacan’s seminar on the “Ethics of Psychoanalysis” and whose implications have far-reaching consequences for the ethical condition of the modern subject in general.

1. The Object Relations Theory and Its Moral Premises

In the period preceding his seventh seminar, Lacan was firmly opposed to the object relations theories that were popular in the fifties. Already in the forties—in part under the influence of the violent controversies swirling around Melanie Klein—the argument was that libidinal life is best approached from one of the four components Freud attributed to the drive, namely the drive’s “object.”⁵ This argument emerged from an article by Karl Abraham in 1924 where he distinguishes a number of stages in “object love” that parallel the stages of the libidinal development. Already prior to attaining a “true” object love (and this is only true of the *genital* phase, the phase during which the Oedipus conflict is settled), the child displays “partial love,” as Abraham called it: a pregenital relation toward (oral, anal and other “partial”) objects. His study explains how the phases of the evolution of the pregenital, still incomplete “object relation” perfectly replicate the libido’s evolution.⁶ Following in the line of Abraham’s discoveries, Melanie Klein showed, on the basis of often very convincing case studies,⁷ how already in the child’s earliest months there is a relation with objects that are of primordial interest for the formation of identity. From its first experiences (hence, long before the Oedipal phase) the child identifies with objects—“partial objects,” such as the mother’s breast, the feces, or the phallus—that are all localized in the maternal body. According to Klein, this identification is the determining factor for the subsequent course of the child’s libidinal development.

Along the same lines, an entire current of both theoretical and practical psychoanalysis in the fifties focused on the intimate relation between the drive and the object. Freud had previously described the relation as free,⁸ although other theorists at that time regarded this relation as more static.

The idea gained ground that the drive is more or less *naturally* attuned to its object.⁹ The translation of the German word “Trieb” as “instinct” (in English as well as in many other languages) supported this interpretation. Regarding it in terms of a developmental process of *instincts* affords the idea of a natural physiological process, and object relations are then spontaneously conceived of in the same way. Psychoanalytic practice, too, doesn’t escape this tendency: the cure enables the analysand to arrive at a renewed relation to the object that his entire drive life naturally aims at but with which he had become at odds. This same *object* relations theory is then able to bring the importance of the *pregenital* objects back into view, although the main emphasis remains the *genital* object. After some ambivalent (because) oral and anal adventures during the period of pregenital object relations, the drive, in the natural order of things, should turn around and evolve into a stable (because) genital object choice that is both a sign of and condition of possibility for a mature libidinal life. That such a “mature” object relation fits with the acceptable *ethical* ideal of a monogamous sexual culture simultaneously grants the latter an underlying scientific legitimacy. This type of psychoanalysis implicitly declares that the heterosexual, genital and monogamous object choice is the *normal* and *natural* one. If Lacan turns against this kind of object relations theory, it is primarily because of its unarticulated ethical pretensions. In their so-called psychoanalytic logic, the ambivalences and conflicts characteristic of our libido are supposed to find a “natural” answer in what culture postulates as normal and good.¹⁰

However, this is not what psychoanalysis is about, according to Lacan. For him, Freud’s intuition points in exactly the opposite direction. Does analytic practice not notice every day how difficult it is for people to enjoy the so-called natural and normal objects offered to their desire by culture? Freud would never have invented a new theory had he not seen how stubborn and incurable human discontent is. In one way or another, people also “love” the discontent they hate. This is the Oedipal structure Freud discovered in human desire. And this is what he observed with the hysterics on his couch as well as with the remarkably persistent discontent in human civilization. Remarks to this effect can be found long before his famous 1930 essay, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.¹¹ People may love the rigid limits culture forces them into, but their relation to culture is never “natural.” They relate to it from a *polymorphous-perverse* drive, that is, from a drive that “perverts” nature.

Here “perversion” refers to the way an organism does not live its biological functions for their own sake, that is, for the sake of what they are for, but for the *pleasure* they give. If life is a reaction to stimuli (as the biological definition of life claims), then this reaction, according to Freud, must be considered ‘perverse,’ that is, as turning around on itself,

detached from the aim and the proper orientation of its function.¹² That is why its *principle* of reaction—and, thus of drive and of life—is not self-preservation, but pleasure—pleasure being a purely “formal” principle to be defined as a “perversion” of reaction/drive/life. Life, as a reaction to stimuli, is guided by pleasure, not by self-preservation: this is the axiom of psychoanalytic theory. The drive “driving” the organism may indeed be biological, but the principle driving that drive is not to be found in the biological self-preservation of the organism but in the *pleasure* accompanying the biological functioning. What “drives” an infant to suck at its mother’s breast may have been caused by its biological feeding function, that is, its hunger, but the drive’s reaction to the hunger stimulus starts with the *pleasure* the infant obtains from this sucking activity. At the most basic level, the child sucks not in order to live but from the sheer pleasure of slurping and sucking itself.¹³ We find the same thing in adults: the sucking reflex can be “perverted” in smoking, defying the risks of cancer, or in overeating (bulimia) or in eating the “nothing” preferred above all (anorexia nervosa). Hence, it is the pleasure principle that makes life *polymorphous*. Because pleasure is not linked to the proper aim of a biological function, one can live that function for all kinds of other purposes, as these examples clearly illustrate. At the most fundamental level, it is not a self-preservation principle (i.e., the axiom of modern biology, including all Darwinist theories) but a pleasure principle that governs our drives: this is the founding axiom of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Note that the idea that life is governed by drives is not restricted to psychoanalysis. This is, more or less, what the entire philosophical and scientific tradition says, albeit each proceeding from its own paradigm. What is distinctive about Freudian psychoanalysis is its new concept of the *principle* driving the drives. At the most fundamental level, the drive attends not to the self-preservation of the organism, but to the *pleasure* that it can gain. Pleasure may be found in self-preservation, but it isn’t necessarily the case. The organism can just as easily experience pleasure from what is not in the interests of self-preservation.

Moreover, Freud does not attribute the polymorphous-perverse pleasure principle to a self-conscious subject, but to a completely unconsciously functioning *libido* that, if only for that reason, carries all of the old connotations of “sin.” In Augustine’s Latin, “libido” stands for a bodily or psychological movement released by a will that escapes conscious, rational control. The Church Father interpreted the involuntary “rebellion” of the male genital in erection as an unmistakable expression of *libido*. This erectile “insurrection” that, by definition, escapes conscious control was, in Augustine’s eyes, an exquisite sign of man’s insurrection against God and his Creation.¹⁴ This negative, Augustinian connotation is undeniably present in Freud’s concept of the unconscious, polymorphous-perverse

libido. Unlike Augustine, however, he does not believe in the possibility of redeeming the libido from its negative “sinful” nature. For Augustine, man’s sinful, libidinal condition will be reconciled at the end of time and regain the perfection it knew in Paradise before the Fall. For Freud, in contrast, human life is basically—and will remain—a matter of a “sinful” and “disturbing” libido, which is also true for our most self-conscious rationality and morality. The libido, by definition, has no natural destination or “object” where it will ultimately come to rest. It functions only insofar it can polymorphously “pervert” everything natural.

This “infamous” insight, Lacan repeats over and over again, is the core of Freudian psychoanalysis. And it is precisely this “scandalon” that many critics and even many psychoanalytic theorists try to repress or deny by, for instance, ascribing the drive (or the libido) a “natural” object. This was the main presupposition supporting the different “object relations theories” of the fifties. According to Lacan, it was their way of denying the “scandalon”—and, thus, the core—of psychoanalysis. Against these, Lacan reaffirmed Freud’s basic intuition: there is simply no object that corresponds to the drive in a *natural* way. The drive relates to its object in a polymorphous-perverse way¹⁵ and it perverts the natural logic we have always used to think about human life and its condition. This is why it demands a new logic, that is, a psychoanalytic logic.

2. Lacan’s Target: Maurice Bouvet

In the name of his rereading of Freud—his famous “return to Freud”—Lacan fiercely attacks any form of object relations theory that fails to keep this in mind. Although he pits himself against a number of big names, for many years Lacan focuses his attention primarily on a single figure, Maurice Bouvet.¹⁶ In this younger contemporary, he finds all the evils from which, in his eyes, the most successful of object relations theorists suffer. Bouvet, like no other, formulated the phases of the object relation as steps in a spontaneous and natural process. In that sense, he elevated the genital object relation into a “normal, ideal and natural” thing.

This already gives us one of Bouvet’s central conceptual pairs. As opposed to the “pregenital type,” a catchall for anything that can go wrong with the drive, Bouvet outlines the positively valorized “genital type”: the type of person who, because of his or her genitalized object relation is capable of having a “normal,” “objective” relation to reality, the result of which is a “strong ego.” In one of his essays¹⁷ he writes that “pregenitals” (“les pré-génitaux”) are characterized by a “weak ego.” Their ego is still too closely modeled on the oral and anal object relation, where the various partial drives are not yet in possession of the right relation

to the object. At this level, the ego so “cathects” the object that it tries to overcome the distance holding the object at bay. It tries to negate this distance and take the object as a whole. It thereby undermines precisely the object *relation* that it lives by, and it therefore continually threatens to destroy itself. The problematic identity of the “pregenitals” stems from the shaky structure of the earlier (oral and anal) ego. With the “genitals,” things are quite different says Bouvet. These persons are able to acquire a more stable distance in relation to the object because their egos are less directly dependent on the object relation.¹⁸ Later in the same essay, he characterizes the transition from the pre-genital to the genital phase in the following way:

Once the drives that kindle the ego have been genitalized, once they have been through the maturing process that forms the transition from the pre-genital to the genital formation, they are no longer controlled by an unmanageable, unremitting, unconditional and partially destructive possessive impulse. They are instead tender, amiable and even if the subject is not willing to make sacrifices here (i.e., to act disinterestedly), even if it treats its objects as narcissistically as before, yet, it is capable of understanding and adapting to the situation of others. (Bouvet 1972; 178–179)

It is easy for Lacan to expose the unquestioned moral presuppositions in passages such as this. Here, the drive relates purely to a spontaneous, natural growth process which, moreover, coincides with the moral achievement of man as a social, comprehending being capable of making sacrifices. According to Bouvet, ethics seems to be rooted in a natural libido. It is not surprising that Lacan cannot resist taking pot shots at such a naturalizing and moralizing distortion of psychoanalysis.

Let us, however, permit Bouvet to speak first, for, from a certain perspective, his position doesn’t seem to differ so radically from Lacan’s after all. Like all object relations theorists, Bouvet starts out from the primacy of the object relation: the organism is *primarily* a cluster of (among others, oral and anal) object relations, and *only later*—as an effect of their mutual conflicts—does it form a more or less stable ego, rooted in a central relation to a privileged object. The ego is the agent that channels the organism’s inexorable drive tensions in a good—that is, pleasurable—way. Rather than a point of departure, the ego must be conceived as an *effect* of these primordial object relations. For Bouvet, the success of the ego’s formation depends on the organism’s ability to identify and maintain the correct distance in relation to its central object. In the pregenital phase, however, this object relation has not yet transcended

its internal contradictions and tensions. The organism can only maintain itself through an identificatory clinging to the object. In this way, it tries to negate the distance that separates it from the object. In fact, it wants to *be* its object. Both oral and anal-sadistic aggression stem from this. By the same token, when the object is another person (the mother, family members, other children), the young child tries to annihilate the distance between itself and the other and *become* that other. Because of the aggressive and destructive nature of such a relation, the other/alike elicits the greatest anxiety in the child. For the other/alike, too, is driven to (orally or anally sadistically) eat up and destroy the object. This is why, in the pregenital object relation, the child is subject to such erratically ambivalent feelings. It is unable to assume a fixed position, either in relation to the outside world or to itself.

Accordingly, the ego resulting from the pregenital object relation is particularly weak, Bouvet concludes. In this phase, the “*optimal distance*” between the organism and its object has not yet been guaranteed (Bouvet, 1972: 268). This only occurs in the genital phase. There, a “differentiated and nuanced” relation with the object predominates, enabling the ego to maintain its distance in relation to that object. It is this persistent distance that guarantees a more or less successful satisfaction of the drive (“*satisfaction instinctuelle*”).¹⁹ The subject no longer destructively cathects the object (i.e., its double) but assumes a self-sacrificial relation to it, arriving at an “understanding” and an “adaptation to the other’s situation.” Here, Bouvet concludes, “objective reality is perceived as such” (Bouvet, 1972: 268).

In the analytic cure, too, where the analyst takes on the role of the drive object in the transference, what is at stake is the “distance towards the object,” Bouvet continues. Following the phases of libido development, the analyst will continually reduce the distance between the analysand and this object, right up until his own disintegration. The analyst’s interventions are designed to help the analysand resist the ambivalences brought about by this process. This reduction to zero of the distance between the subject and the object is strongest at the moment when the transference relationship reaches its peak. As soon as the analysand (or, more accurately, his ego) has “introjected” these aggressive and conflicting drives, he must be able to take and maintain his distance from the object again. In Bouvet’s eyes, the analysand revisits the conflictual Oedipal transition from the pregenital to the genital phase in analysis, and reinstalls an Oedipal (and therefore stronger) ego (Bouvet 1972; 267).

According to Maurice Bouvet, the psychoanalytic cure essentially concerns the *distance* between the ego/subject and the object. From Lacan’s early writings onward, this distance is a major topic that comes into play from the subject’s earliest beginnings because it constitutes itself

by identifying with the drive object—which is the foundational axiom of every object relations theory. According to Bouvet, this is a radical and, in a sense, ontological identification: the organism only exists through its drive to merge with the object or, in other words, its drive to “become” its object. *Object relations* theory must posit that the libidinal being, at the most fundamental level, *is* its own drive object. Or, as Freud formulated it elsewhere in a collection of separate notes titled “On having and being in a child”:

The child happily expresses the object relation by means of an identification: I am the object. Having it comes only later [. . .].
 Mother: breast. The breast is a piece of myself, I am the breast.
 Only later: I have it, that is, I am not it.²⁰

At the same time, the infantile libidinal being can only maintain itself insofar as it fails in this radical identificatory movement, and thus keeps itself at distance from—in relation to—this object. It can only exist as an ego precisely insofar as it does not merge with the object. It has to constitute itself as the *subject* (in the literal meaning of “bearer”) of a *relation to* that object—that is, the subject of an object *relation*. In short, here we run across the basic paradox to which all object relations theories—Lacan’s included—must return: on the one hand, the libidinal being finds its ultimate ground in its object (or, so to speak, it *is* its object), but, on the other, it only exists by grace of the distance it takes from this object. In this sense, it “is” both its object *and* its relation to it.

This *distance* between itself and its object is what supports the libidinal being. Note however, this “itself” (i.e., its subject or ego) is not given in advance but is entirely the result of the installation and the maintenance of this distance. For Bouvet, the regression from which all “pathologies” stem entails a loss of this distance, causing the subject to fall back into a conflictual and in extreme cases self-destructive identification with the object. Arduous, protracted analytic work is often needed before this distance can be repaired.

Bouvet’s psychoanalytic theory is certainly not the most subtle of its kind, but it would be an injustice to turn him, following Lacan’s lead, into a caricature. One cannot, for instance, impute a crude naturalism to his theory. In the final analysis, his characterization of the drive object has not so much to do with content (the “true” object is the genital object) as with *form*: the “true” *relation* is genital, not because the object has a genital nature but because, in the genital phase, the subject is in a position to assume the *right distance* (“distance optima”) in relation to any object at all (Bouvet 1972; 195; 268). The genitalizing of the object is not so much a question of reaching the natural end of the drive’s development

but of maintaining a safe distance from it. It is true that Lacan shows how, intentionally or not, Bouvet's conceptualization of psychoanalysis is full of "physical," "natural," and, hence, ethical presuppositions. But if one considers Lacan's own statements in his seventh seminar, it is hard not to see how close he is to Bouvet's theoretical starting points. In his own way Lacan, too, will place the emphasis on a similar kind of "distance." For Lacan as well, the truth of the good—or, in psychoanalytic terms, the ultimate object of desire—is found in a correct "distance" from the subject. The subject's ethical attitude depends on the way he or she keeps that object at a distance. Or, to coin a phrase: not unlike Bouvet's, can Lacanian ethics be defined as an "ethics of distance"?

But before going into Lacan's *Ethics Seminar*, it is worth sketching the contours of his theory of the subject in more detail. In a different, more nuanced way than Bouvet, Lacan will try to provide an answer to the basic paradox on which all object relations theories are founded, namely, that the libidinal being "is" both its object *and* the distance it takes in relation to it.

3. Lacanian Object Relations Theory: A Theory of the Subject

... but above all he *is* these objects . . .

(Lacan, 2002: 240)

3.1. *An Imaginary Subject Theory*

As he rants about Maurice Bouvet in the fifties, Lacan is in fact revisiting his own previous theoretical position. At the end of the forties, he similarly approached the basic structure of libidinal life as an explicitly *dualistic* conflict between two antithetical parties, the *ego* and the *object*. And he, too, claims that man can neither avoid nor tolerate the strained *distance* between these two poles. The only difference in those days was that, unlike Bouvet, Lacan paid special attention to the *status* of the participants in this conflict. Bouvet paid little attention to this, beginning from the position that one can approach both the ego and the object as ordinary, *real* qualities. Lacan's starting point, in contrast, was that one must approach them both as strictly imaginary forms. In this way, he succeeds in clarifying the most basic paradox that all theories holding to the primacy of the object relation must face. For how can such a theory plausibly make the ego both its object *and* the relation to that object? How can it adequately explain why the ego wants to merge with its object (which is why it can be so aggressive and even destructive in relation to

the object) while acknowledging that this same ego only exists thanks to the distance it keeps from that object?

Lacan's conceptualization of the mirror stage²¹ gave an adequate formulation of this logical contradiction. There, he explains that identification plays out between purely *imaginary* antagonists. The ego's identification with the object—and, consequently, the “destruction” of the distance between them—is purely imaginary, not real. The entire explosive drama of (oral) devouring and (anal-sadistic) destroying the object remains caught in the imaginary status of this scene and, in this way, keeps the (object) relational nature of the ego in place. This imaginary scene lends a supporting surface to the entire event and, in this way, enables the libidinal being, despite those tensions, to exist at all.

The “aha-experience” the children undergo at the moment that they first recognize themselves in the mirror makes it easy to see how the ego does indeed first find itself in an outside object, that is, in its shape in the mirror. And it is also clear why that same ego, therefore, cannot “really” merge with that object. This imaginary relation permits a radical identification with the object while simultaneously keeping the distance between the libidinal being and its object intact. So, considering the entire object relation as imaginary one does full justice to the *relation as such*. Regardless of how self-destructive its dynamic is (wanting to *merge* with its object), the object relation remains a *relational* tension; it remains a *distance* toward that object.

Henceforth the ego is not only one of the two relating terms; it is at the same time the very “bearer”—the “subject”—of that (object) *relation*. The ego is capable of this because it miscognizes²² the inner structure of the whole scene, believing to be the cause of its mirror image, while, in reality it is only an *effect* of that image. *Unconsciously*, it behaves as if it had always possessed its own identity, which is only afterward reflected in the mirror. It miscognizes the primacy of the image. Precisely this miscognition enables the ego to be the “subject,” the “bearer” of its relation to its image and, thus, of the organism's entire libidinal scene, that is, of its “self.”²³

Lacan's hard-hitting critique of object relations theories in the fifties does not imply he turns against this kind of theory per se. On the contrary, like Maurice Bouvet and Melanie Klein (and not without being heavily influenced by the latter), Lacan's thought is deeply steeped in the object relations problematic. Without question, he is himself an object relations theorist, albeit in a contrary and rebellious way.²⁴ His first contribution to psychoanalytic theory—the mirror stage as a reformulation of narcissism—can easily be described as an object relations theory. There, the ego's narcissistic function is founded on an entirely imaginary object relation. Precisely by thinking the whole problematic as imaginary, Lacan enables

us to understand how the ego is not only one of the participants in the libidinal drama (between ego and object), but how the ego is at the same time the *bearer—the subject*—of that drama. Lacanian object relations theory of the thirties and forties is therefore, in the fullest sense of the word, also a *subject* theory, a theory about the “site,” the “surface,” the “platform,” the “stage,” the “scene,” the “*subjectum*,” or the “*hypokeimenon*” on which the entire libidinal economy, a fundamentally relational economy, takes place.²⁵ More specifically, his central argument is that *the stage on which the drive life takes place or the point from which it operates is, paradoxically, also an effect, a construction of the drive itself*. This recalls the famous story of Baron Munchausen who saves himself from drowning by pulling himself up by his own wig.²⁶ The “place” of the event (its “ground,” its “platform,” its “*subjectum*”)—the supporting point from where one pulls oneself up out of the mud—is in fact a purely imaginary *effect* of that event. As the bearer of libidinal activities, the subject is at the same time the fictional result of its cunning logic.

The Freudian unconscious, which already by this time Lacan is trying to reconceptualize, concerns first and foremost the subject. That which carries one, the surface on which the mirror effect one “is” takes place, the point from²⁷ where that one maneuvers: this is a place where the subject can never (consciously) be. This kind of “*andere Schauplatz*” (other scene) remains unconscious, yet it is from this scene that our libidinal life is driven.²⁸ This “other scene” is the virtual mirror surface on which man discovers himself as the object he will never have access to—impeded precisely by the very mirror that is supposed to grant his access. For Hegel, one of Lacan’s main sources of that time,²⁹ the subject resides at the point where the “speculative” relation is “sublated” (in the sense he gives to the word “*Aufhebung*”). For Lacan, in contrast, the subject of the object relation is located in the place where such an “*Aufhebung*” is impossible. It is located in the place—the scene, the “*andere Schauplatz*”—which escapes the dialectic of consciousness and which Freud defined as the unconscious.

Already in the thirties and forties, then, Lacan had developed a proper object relations theory. Without neglecting the conflictual, indeed self-destructive nature of the pregenital object, he succeeded in explaining precisely how this kind of relation provides the libidinal organism with a “ground.” Its imaginary character and the subject’s unconscious condition prevents this relation from ever being reconciled or sublated. This is why, despite its self-destructive conflictual structure, it is able to maintain itself *as a relation*. Hence in his own way, and before Bouvet, Lacan conceives of the “distance from the object” as constitutive of the subject.

However, Lacan gradually realizes a crucial shortcoming in his subject theory. It is still left unexplained why, as merely the bearer (subject) of this

imaginary (object) relation, man is nevertheless able to lead a relatively peaceful existence. The very logic of such an imaginary relation means that such peace ought to be impossible. The same goes for the relational tension between the ego and its object, which is no less conflictual. If the ego is to merge seamlessly with the other in the mirror, it will not only miscognize the other; it will also want to destroy him if possible, because only then can it really *be* the other. Not only is this specular other the mirror image of my identity, he is also the image to be demolished so that I can *really* be who I suppose I am. In the logic of the imaginary, nothing can lessen this conflictual tension, certainly not the ego itself. It would thus only be logical if, in the long run, the ego (the bearer of the tensional relationship) also effectively gave way under the tension and succumbed to the aggression that such an imaginary relation inevitably brings with it. That the ego evidently doesn't and, in the midst of incessant libidinal conflict, generally conducts itself surprisingly well implies that there is something wrong with Lacan's theory. His ego-theory from those days (which is his purely *imaginary* theory of the subject) was to undergo a thorough correction.

Confronted with the object relations theory of Maurice Bouvet in the fifties, Lacan set himself primarily against Bouvet's neglect of this kind of imaginary aggression. However, it is now clear that he was at that moment primarily turning against the views he had himself held for many years. Lacan only ran across this kind of aggression at the end of the forties,³⁰ and it is this discovery that forced him to thoroughly revise the premises of his purely imaginary subject theory.

3.2. *A Theory of the Symbolic Subject*

Lacan's solution to this problem is well known. Until the end of his days, it will remain his most fundamental thesis. Under Lévi-Strauss's influence³¹ (and, beyond, the general influence of the then upcoming structural linguistics), he conceives the entire problematic no longer in terms of the imaginary but of the *symbolic*. Identification, which is to provide a support (a ground, a subject) to the cluster of (real) drives, no longer solely refers to an imaginary figure in a mirror but now also to a linguistic "figure." This figure is not to be approached as a mirror image but as a discursive narrative, as a story carrying a name. This name, and the narrative that weaves itself around it, operates inside a largely automatically functioning field of signifiers that linguistics baptized "the symbolic order." From now on, the subject must be sought not only in an imaginary *other* (with a small o) but first and foremost in a symbolic *Other* (with a capital "O"). Lacan reserves, more precisely, the term "ego" for the imaginary other the libidinal being thinks he is.³² The term

“subject” is henceforth reserved for the “bearer” of the symbolic Other, or, more precisely, for the bearer of a set of signifiers plucked from the Other that makes up my concrete identity.

Lacan’s variation on Rimbaud’s “I is another” (S2E: 7; S2F: 16) is that the human being—who is, according to Lacan, first of all a *speaking* being, a “*parlêtre*”—is the subject (i.e., the bearer) of a narrative that fundamentally and irrevocably comes from an Other. The subject can only exist in an element that never really gives it *presence* but only *represents* it (symbolically). Only in language does the human libidinal being find an element in which its alienation coincides with its realization, without immediately falling short as is the case in imaginary ego formation. In this endlessly sliding field of signifiers, it is able to be (symbolically) *present* as that which remains *absent* (in the real). For Lacan, this absence is the heart of what Freud called the unconscious, what the famous “other scene” is all about. In order to trace this insistent absence, one must continually encircle it with signifiers which hide it. This is why the psychoanalytic cure is indeed a *talking cure* (as one of the first analysands, Anna O, made clear to her analyst, Joseph Breuer).

For Lacan, this insight throws a surprising new light on Freud’s entire discovery. Mankind’s struggle with the unconscious is played out in one exclusive element, that is, language; therefore, the truth of the unconscious must be sought not *behind* but *in* language. This does not imply that language and the unconscious are one and the same. But since mankind is trapped in language and since each of us is its ‘subject’ (bearer), language is the only thing that enables us to track down something of the unconscious—and therefore something of the *subject* that bears us. Although there are many passages in Freud that contradict Lacan’s emphasis on language, his thesis nevertheless revalorizes the foundational praxis of psychoanalysis, that is, the analysis of dreams, slips of the tongue, jokes, daydreams, associations—in short, the analysis of linguistic phenomena.³³ It strikes Lacan now, more than ever before, how Freud was not so much seeking the meaning behind the words, as exploring their purely linguistic interrelations. Only by closely pursuing the interrelated (metonymic) displacements and (metaphoric) condensations between the signifiers can one find traces of the unconscious. The latter does not lie *behind* the words the analysand has given himself over to. It is only *in* the word-stream itself that it can be found. This is where, hidden among the signifiers and concealed within the linguistic caprioles, the analysand must look for his “self” as being the “object relation” that, in the last resort, he “is.” He must look for himself not only in the virtual image in the mirror surface but also, and primarily, in the even more slippery slope of the linguistic symbolic order in which he slides from one signifier to another.

The new premises of the symbolic put the entire object relation in a new light. The heart of the problem—the aporia that the libido “is” simultaneously its object and its distance from it—seems insufficiently explained if one regards each party solely as an imaginary entity. In such a case, they remain ravaged by an unbearable aggression that makes any kind of stable subject formation—or, what was then for Lacan the same thing, any ego formation—unthinkable. By locating the entire process in an autonomously functioning symbolic system, Lacan can keep the unbearable tension typical of the distance between the ego and its object *away from the ego*. Of course, the libidinal being remains an object relation and coincides with the strained distance in relation to the object. But the symbolic status of this object means that the entire tension is already situated at the level of the object, which makes the unbearable pressure of the ego fall away. Moreover, that object is taken up in an autonomous symbolic system where it resides neither as a *real* thing, nor as an enchanted *imaginary* figure but simply as a sliding *signifier*. By definition, this signifier exists only as a reference to another signifier, which in itself provides an appropriate platform for the object relation and its unbearable tension.

The ego too, for that matter, is taken up on that same “platform.” Although it remains an imaginary entity, it functions as a signifier and not as a “subject” (bearer) of signifiers. It is, then, no longer the (imaginary) ego that must regulate the distance in relation to the object (in what Bouvet called “le réglage de la distance”).³⁴ This is now done by the *symbolic* subject, except that this subject must not actively take this task upon itself. This task henceforth belongs to the autonomously functioning symbolic order; and the libidinal being only has to be the passive bearer (the subject) of this self-functioning strained relation. Here, *subject* and *ego* are definitively to be distinguished from one another. They are to be located on different levels—symbolic and imaginary, respectively. The aim of the analytic cure will also, in this sense, be reformulated. Freud’s famous “*wo Es war soll Ich werden*” henceforth becomes Lacan’s “there where the *imaginary* ego was, the *symbolic* subject must come to be.” In the cure, the imaginary ego must be “de-centered” and confronted with its true bearer, the symbolic subject.³⁵

In contrast with Lacan’s earlier position where the ego and the object were *imaginarily* opposed to one another, as symbolic entities they are now in solidarity together. Both the ego and its object relation are part of a universe in which the tension that governs them can at any moment be discharged. The tension will by no means be lessened, but because neither the ego nor the object is the subject of the relationship, this tension will even benefit the (object) relation. It will remain “fluid,” thereby advancing

its relational character, with the result that the subject will also become more stable. Because this tension has more or less unlimited possibilities for discharge in the virtually unlimited universe of signifiers, it will rarely turn directly against the subject itself. This explains the relative stability the symbolic order gives to the subject permanently plagued by tension.

Lacan's major turn at the beginning of the fifties, when he introduces the *symbolic*, *imaginary*, and *real* triad,³⁶ also meant a new step in his conceptualization of object relations of which, despite his claims to the contrary, he has always been an adherent. Better than its imaginary precursor, his new symbolic concept of the subject clarifies how the strained relation between the ego and its object can maintain itself and how, nevertheless, under these circumstances a stable subject—bearing and guaranteeing the relation—is possible. Throughout the rest of his oeuvre, Lacan will never lose sight of the decisive impact of the symbolic on the human libidinal being.

Yet, this “primacy of the symbolic” will not enable Lacan's theory to definitively master the problematic tension that he finds right from the outset in the object relation. Precisely in his seventh seminar, the “Ethics of psychoanalysis,” all of the problems he encountered in his conceptualization of the object relation will pile up again, and more massively than ever. In what Lacan calls “*das Ding*,” the subject will once again find itself opposite something it stands in a tensile relation to that is no less pernicious and ambiguous than the dual imaginary relation between the ego and its object. In reading this seminar, we will retrace this turn in detail and see how it brings far-reaching implications along with it.

But let us first look more closely at Lacan's object relations theory which, as I suggested, either cannot be fully explained simply by referring to the primacy of the symbolic. One cannot lose sight of the fact that, before his seventh seminar, Lacan had already forged two important concepts that brought the whole object relations problematic into very nuanced focus, namely, the *phallus* and the *phantasm* (*fantasy*). The first concept enabled him to approach the object as a lack, more specifically, as a lack at the level of the signifier. This enabled Lacan to clearly show how desire advanced toward a perpetually retreating object. In this way, the sliding—and, thus, *relational*—aspect of the object relation is properly articulated conceptually (see below 3.3). The second concept, the *phantasm*, enabled him to explain the consistency and stability of this same object relation (see 3.4). Thanks to these two concepts, the phallus and the phantasm, Lacan was able to neutralize the most fundamental impasse that lurks in all object relations theory: man is *both* his relation to the phallic lack *and* that lack as such, albeit in a fantasmatic way.

In the period Lacan was putting the finishing touches on his theory of the phallus, the question arose as to whether one can think of this lack

as purely “phallic”—that is, symbolic (see 5). The negative answer with which he reluctantly concluded his sixth seminar led him, at the beginning of his next seminar, to introduce a new concept. This new concept is “*das Ding*,” whose status is no longer imaginary or symbolic, but *real*.

From this perspective, it is worth first looking more closely at Lacan’s purely symbolic—or as he called it “phallic”—approach to the human being as an object relation. In the following section we will once more take up his sketch of subject formation but now specifically from that “phallic” departure point where the object as a pure lack or, if you like, as lack “itself” will be conceived. Only in this light will the stakes of Lacan’s later definition of the object of desire as “real” become clear, as was introduced for the first time in his seminar on “the ethics of psychoanalysis.”

3.3. *Phallus* . . .

It is well known that Lacan’s major turn in 1953 coincides with his discovery of the primacy of the signifier in the operation of both the unconscious and in subject formation. He begins from the point that for the infantile libidinal being the very fact that it must settle down in a universe of signifiers is already a trauma but, to the extent that it is a libidinal being for whom attaining pleasure equals life, it simply has no other choice. Having no way of satisfying its life-sustaining need for pleasure *by itself*, the infant must rely on others from the outset and, because these others direct themselves to the infant through speech, it is completely at the mercy of their linguistic world. In expressing her needs, the infant encounters the other, not as someone who satisfies these needs *immediately*, but as someone who *asks* what she wants—as someone, that is, who never stops shooting signifiers in her direction.

If only because of this, the infant is traumatized. For what she is asking for is not a question in return, nor even an answer to that (linguistic) question. She asks for an immediate satisfaction of pleasure at the level of the drive. She is not asking for (distancing) words or signs; she wants actions that *immediately* turn the unpleasurable sensations into pleasure. The infant is entirely at the mercy of the other for her pleasure—and thus for her life—and the trauma of the whole event lies in this: all the other can offer is something as insufficient as signifiers. The other is thus primarily a stream of signifiers that descends on the child unasked. This is what Lacan means when he writes “the Other” with a capital “O” (*Autre*). It is via the (linguistic) Other that the child has to satisfy its life-sustaining pleasure needs, just as it is also through the Other that she must form her own identity and her own subject.

The ruses of the imaginary provide the libidinal being with an initial strategy for saving itself from the traumatic situation in which, instead

of immediate pleasurable pacification, it receives alienating signifiers that require processing. It will constitute itself precisely out of the lack proper to these signifiers. Signifiers are characterized by a constitutive lack in the sense that they are structurally cut off from their meaning, their *signifié*. They do not first refer to that “*signifié*” (as taught by classical theories of language), but to other signifiers (as de Saussure has shown). They always need another signifier to say what they mean, and this lack is constitutive for how they operate. Precisely because of that lack, the signifier can constitute the solution to the infantile libidinal being’s traumatic problem. It enables the infant to identify her own drive-induced lack³⁷ with the signifier’s lack so as to be able to miscognize, at this imaginary level, all lack. More specifically, the infant will constitute her “self” as an *answer* to the Other’s demand. Or, in linguistic terms, the subject will maintain itself as the signified (*signifié*) of the signifiers (*signifiants*) it receives from the Other’s demand.

The infant may coincide with her demand for the Other’s love; her imaginary ruse, however, lies in acting as if it is *precisely the Other who made the demand*. This enables the infant to feel that she is herself *the exclusive answer to the supposed demand of the Other*. The object to which she “is” a relation can then be situated in the Other; the infant simply acts as if she were the object that the Other demands. She thus constitutes herself as “the Other’s demand” (“*Demande de l’Autre*”) in the double sense of the genitive. On the one hand, she is a bundle of demands directed at the Other; on the other, however, she can remain blind to that traumatic fact by taking herself as the answer to the demand of the Other (a demand the Other makes on her). In order to “create” a self, she takes herself as the “signified of the Other”³⁸ and in this (imaginary) way miscognizes both her own lack and that of the Other.

To explain what is at stake where the signifier and its bearer (here, the imaginary “subject”³⁹) encounter one another, Lacan uses the concept of the “phallus.” The term “phallus” stands primarily for that which can be “castrated,” that is, for what can be missing or lacking. In the imaginary strategy outlined here, the libidinal being occupies the point in the Other where the Other is purely a signifier and, thus, pure lack. It does so in order to deny that lack and to act as if it is itself the signified of the signifier, the filling in of the lack. In other words, it positions itself in the place where the Other is “castrated” in order to act (in an imaginary way) as if it *is* itself the Other’s “phallus.” It thus acts as if it corresponds with what fills in the Other’s lack. In this way, the libidinal being avoids confronting the fact that the Other is irrevocably “castrated.” The Other, on whom the libidinal being must rely for help with its drive-related lack, is also marked by an irreconcilable lack. It can do nothing other than miscognize the Other’s “castration” (in what Lacan technically calls “*méconnaissance*”),

and it does this by imagining that it is itself the adequate answer to the Other's lack, that is, that it is the Other's phallus.

This kind of imaginary strategy is doomed to fail. For the Other has more than just "his majesty the baby's" pleasure needs at heart; his desires go beyond the child. This is, again, a moment of shock and trauma for the infant: its entire imaginary ego-constitution begins to totter. Now the lack characterizing the Other can no longer be miscognized. The infant can no longer act as if she herself is what was missing, that is, the *signified*, the imaginary phallus. The lack in the Other now appears to be located somewhere else than where she is. Hence, the Other can no longer be regarded as a *complete* Other (complete, because the child fills up its lack), but is now undeniably seen to be lacking. It has become a *desiring* Other. This fact—that the Other *desires*—is again a genuine trauma for the infant. Imagining herself to be the answer to the Other's lack, suddenly, at a certain moment, she nonetheless hears the Other ask, "What do you want? (*Che vuoi?*)".⁴⁰ That "answer" destroys her entire ego-construction and pulls the ground out from under her feet. If the Other must still ask for something, what else could that mean for the child than that it is *not* the answer to the demand of the Other, and that the latter is not the complete Other the infant imagined it was? Now, she must face the lack in the Other without the comforting illusion she is that lack's answer.

The child that up till then could constitute herself as the object of the Other's *demand* must now do so as the object of the Other's *desire*. She will no longer be able to act as if she coincides (imaginarily) with that object. The Other's object now lies "beyond" the child, and, just like the Other, the child can only *desire* it. Henceforth, she can only exist insofar as she identifies with this desire, and in this sense, becomes "the *subject* of the Other's desire."⁴¹

Here, too, the subject occupies the position of the Other's phallus. However, it can no longer maintain that it indubitably "is" this phallus, thereby denying the Other's lack. Now it must refer to a *castrated* Other and thus to a phallus that the Other is also unmistakably lacking. The subject must now constitute itself as a libidinal being that *desires* the phallus without ever being able to have access to it. The phallus becomes a *symbolic* object par excellence that the subject can no longer identify with imaginarily. For here the phallus stands precisely for what escapes its mirror image—because it escapes the Other. It becomes exclusively that which the Other *doesn't* have and thus desires.⁴² And as the subject (the bearer) of a castrated Other, the libidinal being also becomes a subject of desire.

This confrontation with the castrated Other is crucial, among other things, for the sexuation of the young child's genital zone. Initially, the genitals are invested with the same pleasure as all the other parts of the body and have no further special libidinal meaning. Now, however, they