

SUBJECTIVITY

THEORIES OF THE SELF FROM
FREUD TO HARAWAY

NICK MANSFIELD

3 Lacan: The subject is language

FREUD ARGUED THAT subjects could only deal effectively with unconscious material when they could talk about it with their analysts—by bringing it into language, in other words. It took the work of Jacques Lacan (1901–81) to draw out fully the significance of language for psychoanalysis. In doing this, Lacan was in tune with other major developments in twentieth-century thought. Indeed, it is hard to overstate the importance to the modern era of the idea that language defines human life. Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889–1951) idea of the 'language game', and Martin Heidegger's identification of language with the limits of (human) Being both in very different ways and in very separate traditions propose language as the centrepiece of the interactions of consciousness with both the world and others.

In the 1950s and 1960s, structuralism and semiotics encouraged the use of the linguistic theories of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) as a general model of all human culture. The human being was to be seen as the *signifying animal*, and all human rituals and behaviours could ultimately be *read*. The anthropological work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908) and the cultural analysis of Roland Barthes (1915–80) were pivotal in the application of structuralist models of the sign to human behaviour in general.

Lacan's ultimate and most influential conclusion is that *the unconscious is structured like a language*. The aim of this chapter is to give an outline of Lacanian thought in relation to its forebears: Saussurian linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis. It must be said that Lacan's writing is notorious for its ambiguity and its intentional obscurity. Given that Lacan's aim was to challenge the common-sense idea that language exists in order to communicate, and is

instead the very material of subjectivity, it seems logical that he chose to use language himself in the most intense and self-conscious way. He was merely drawing attention to language's material density, rejecting the platitude that language is at its best when it is used most clearly and transparently. His writing, then, illustrates the understanding of language that has become common amongst philosophers and cultural theorists. It is not that subjects exist in the world and then use language as their tool. This may seem at first glance a logical explanation for how language came into being in the first place, but it does not represent the relationship we have with language as individual subjects. The sequence is, in fact, reversed. Language existed before any of us was born, and we must locate ourselves in the field of language in order to take up a place in the human world. As the post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida (b. 1930) has pointed out in his influential *Of Grammatology* (1967), it is impossible to isolate a moment that could be called the origin of language. Yet we still continue to think of it as a tool under our control, as if we give rise to it ourselves for our own purposes. Lacan's work reverses this unthinking assumption, reminding us that our subjectivity has had to emerge in a world in which language is always already established.

SAUSSURE AND STRUCTURALISM

Behind Lacan's ideas about language lies, as I have said, the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, as found in an edited version of his lecture notes, *The Course in General Linguistics* (1916). To Saussure, language is a system of signs, each of which connects a material form, the *signifier* (written marks on a page or spoken sounds in the mouth) with an abstract concept, its *signified*. This last is not a material thing in the world as much as the idea of the thing as it forms in the mind of the language user. Signs are not directly anchored in reality, therefore, but in the conceptualisation of reality in the human mind. The relationship of each signifier is thus not with the object in the outside world with which it is supposed to connect, but with other signifiers, as they form a systematic world-view.

Language is not a medium, then, but a *system*. This system is not determined by what happens outside of it, in some pre-linguistic space. It is built around an internal arrangement of *differences*. In a famous analogy, language is compared to pieces in

a game of chess. You can use anything as chess-pieces (medieval figurines, dolls based on your favourite sit-com, buttons found in the street), as long as it is clear to the players what defines the system of differences between the various pieces that allows them to move in specific ways (small identical pieces are pawns, larger individual ones are knights, bishops, the king, etc.). It is not important what you use as king, queen, rook and pawn, as long as everyone knows which is which. In the case of signifiers, it does not matter which particular marks or sounds are used to denote a certain object. What makes language work is the difference between one signifier and all others. Language efficiency depends not on the perfect way the marks 'cat' define a certain quadruped, but on the complex web of differences which allows us to recognise the minute but crucial distinction between 'cat', 'bat' and so on. Indeed, although this distinction is minute, we are so sensitised to language as a system of differences that we consider those who cannot recognise the distinction to be either non-users of our language or suffering from a learning disorder.

This leads to another important point. The relationship between signifier and signified is not inevitable, but is governed by convention; it is *arbitrary*. There is nothing in the pre-linguistic nature of a set of railway carriages that forces us to use the signifier 'train' to denote it. Onomatopoeia may give us the illusion that signs imitate things, but they too prove to be merely conventional on closer inspection (guns go 'bang!' in English and 'pan!' in French, for example). In sum, to Saussure, language is not a set of tools haphazardly connected, but a concrete system of conventions built around two relationships: the difference between one signifier and another and the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. Language is thus a complex cultural order.

Lacan aimed to use these ideas about the sign as a way of recovering what he saw as Freud's essential insight: the relationship between the subject and signification. Lacan always presented his project as a 'return to Freud', saying that he was merely drawing out ideas already present in the earlier theorist's own writings. Many of the famous seminars which Lacan conducted in the 1950s and 1960s were based around the close reading of Freudian texts. Indeed, Lacan's work can be seen as a direct adaptation of key Freudian models and motifs into mid-twentieth-century controversies about language and its importance.

THE MIRROR-STAGE

What is Lacan's understanding of the nature of subjectivity? The most famous and accessible idea in the writing of this most infamous and inaccessible theorist is the 'mirror-stage'. We remember that, for Freud, the boy-child's subjectivity is the result of a charged engagement with the figures around him, especially his physical relationship with the bodies of his parents. Before the Oedipus complex entered its final crucial phase, the boy felt himself in direct unmediated relationship with his mother. His separation from his mother's body is not yet complete. Something intrudes from 'the outside' to disrupt this secure relationship: the penis—firstly, the boy's own, as the focus of his own illicit preoccupation; secondly, his father's, as the sign of the distinction between masculine and feminine, and of the gender hierarchy that will bring the boy's sense of self into crisis, and lead it into the highly fraught field of subjectivity.

The boy's subjectivity, then, is constructed as the end of a complex and scary game, where the physical body's vulnerability intersects with the phantom body of the ideal gender types. The residue of volatility, frustrated dream, and lost security haunt human subjectivity everywhere and forever. Even as an adult, you endlessly recycle the imagery of this drama. A chaotic set of signs, linked to the Oedipus complex and reproducing the phantom parent-figures and their meaning, governs the subject's interior life.

Lacan also describes the development of subjectivity as the result of the intrusion of something external into the ideal space of the pre-Oedipal subject. In his work, the Freudian intuition that subjectivity is ruled by signs and images—the father-figure, the phallic *symbol*—becomes a complete theory of signification. In Lacanian theory, the critical stage for the development of subjectivity is called the 'mirror-stage' and it occurs usually between the ages of six and eighteen months. Prior to the mirror-stage, the child has no sense of itself as a separate entity. There is no understanding of the limits of the individual body, nor that there is necessarily anything external to it. The many surfaces that the child touches—the mother's skin, clothing, carpet—are all felt to be part of a continuous, uninterrupted, limitless being, so amorphous and open-ended that it cannot be compared to anything as located, specific and defined as selfhood. At this *pre-Oedipal* stage there is no subjectivity, therefore. An aspect of this undefined state is that the child has no sense of the coordination of its limbs. In

the same way that no surface with which the child comes into contact is felt to be necessarily alien to it, outside of the 'self', the child does not experience its body as its own, with a fixed perimeter and working as a unified system.

All this begins to change in the mirror-stage. Now, for some reason, the child starts to see an image of itself from outside of itself, perhaps in a mirror, perhaps reflected in an adult's eyeball, perhaps by suddenly recognising some similarity with a playmate. In Lacan's words, 'the *mirror stage* . . . manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality' (Lacan 1977, p.4). The visual field plays a crucial role in the development of subjectivity, offering the subject an image of wholeness, unity and totality to replace the fragmentation and dissociation that has dominated so far.

IMAGINARY AND SYMBOLIC

The sense of unified selfhood is one of the most crucial defining moments in the development of subjectivity, according to Lacan. For the first time, the child understands itself as separate from the world around it, that there are objects in the world with which it may come into contact and that there are other people with whom one is involved, but who are physically distinct. Linked to this sense of the separation of what is outside (or 'otherness', as it is commonly referred to) is the climactic intuition of the wholeness and completeness of the self.

Because of their location, human eyes are unable to provide the consciousness that inhabits the human body with an immediate awareness of that body's shape. The eye merely returns disconnected flashes of the line of the arm, the shape of the shoulder, the distance of the feet. To the eye, the body is a collection of disproportionate moving objects, shifting in and out of perspective in apparently random ways. The mirror-stage compensates for, and overturns, this lack of perspective, this sense of disproportion and randomness. The mirror image supplies the self with an image of its own coordination, of system and unity. The limbs are no longer part of the outside world. That world is separate, and the limbs now seem part of a simple unified whole that is set off against that world. This complex experience, where the subject feels its unity and separation in

response to what it has seen of itself in the mirror, becomes—because it is governed by the image—the *imaginary*.

This wonderful sense of unity and oneness is not as simple as it may seem, however. The image of the self as separate has not been something that the subject has developed for itself, from within, as a result of its own creativity, or as an expression of its own interior, naturally occurring truth. The self's new understanding of itself has come to it from the outside, in an image it has seen in the external world. This image may provide it with a sense of its own unity, but the image has an external source: it comes from, and remains part of, otherness itself. The complication here is of huge significance in Lacanian theory. The subject, at its very birth, only gets a sense of its own definition from the outside, specifically from an image of itself returned to it from the world. The subject does not define itself. Instead, it is defined by something other than itself. Put in Lacanian terms, *the subject is the discourse of the other*.

The subject, then, is in a state of contradiction. It sees itself as unified and whole, as autonomous and complete, but this very imaginary identity subverts that wholeness. Your selfhood—your subjective centre of gravity—is grounded outside of you, in the very field of images from which you first gained a sense of separation. In short, your selfhood makes you alien to yourself. You are radically *decentred*. In Lacan's words, the mirror-stage ends in 'the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development' (Lacan 1977, p.4). Almost as soon as it has happened, the subject is tipped out of the heroic sense of unity and completeness provided for it by the imaginary. It realises that the image in which the imaginary was grounded instantly throws into doubt the security it seemed to provide. Your sense of self is outside of you, projected at you from a world over which you have minimal control. The system of meanings and identities from which your selfhood derives is not your own. This system is what Lacan calls the *symbolic order*.

This over-arching order is structured as a field of signification, defined in terms of the difference of each of its elements from the others. It is the field that Saussure had defined as language, a system of circulating signifiers. The self's mirror-image of itself that it had discovered in the imaginary finds its archetype in the signifier. The word 'I', for example, provides an image of the self, but only when that selfhood concedes its meaning and definition to the system of

signification, of which the signifier 'I' is a part. The imaginary unity it seems to provide is sucked away by its alien nature, the fact that it is part of a system that pre-exists the subject, that other subjects also use, and over which no individual subject has control. The subject's sense of itself is lost in the very field of signs that seemed to provide it in the first place. It is this paradox that governs human subjectivity:

THE REAL

As well as the imaginary and the symbolic, there is a third order in the Lacanian system: the *real*. The real is not reality as we conventionally describe it. Our notion of reality is really a shared cultural construct, a consensus about the material world and how it is to be measured, as an agreed limit to the point-of-view of the individual. Lacan's real is something else, and has to be understood in relation to the imaginary and the symbolic: it is simply that which lies outside of these two domains, and is unapproachable by them.

Subjects only exist in the tension and interplay between imaginary and symbolic. In this way, for Lacan as for Freud, subjectivity is not automatic or spontaneous. It is not simply as if there is always a subject where there is the biological entity we call the human being. Subjectivity is attained only at the end of a process which has many complex and dangerous passages. Subjectivity is always, therefore, problematic. We have become used to simply identifying the separate body with the individual subject as if the two always everywhere went together as the result of their spontaneous self-generation. But according to Lacan, the subject arises in the exchange between two orders whose material and impetus are from the shared, autonomous field of language. Language, if you like, inhabits the body as the subject. There is no simple individual, operating its body like the ghost in the machine, to use a famous metaphor. The subject is merely a fragment of a dynamic field of endless incompletions and disjunctions. The individual body is the hardness which makes this subjectivity appear in its illusory separation. The body is therefore the limit of the interplay of the imaginary and the symbolic, the sort of inert outside that language cannot reach. This is what Lacan calls the real, the irreducibly separate and unsignifiable asymptote of subjectivity.

To recap, then, the subject's mature life is dominated by the demands of the symbolic order. In the symbolic, things appear to make sense, hierarchies of meaning are established, and society functions in a tense but efficient manner. All the identities, systems and priorities we associate with the rational and liberal functioning of a stable social order require the subject to agree to the logic of the symbolic. The essence of the symbolic is the promise that language makes sense—in Saussure's terms, that for every signifier there is a signified. Social processes and institutions, whether they are as amorphous as the gender hierarchy of masculine over feminine, or as specific as the courts of law, rely on and claim to reproduce the same logic. At the heart of every process, it is assumed, is an agreed and rational meaning.

Yet our involvement in the symbolic order is the result of an imaginary identification. The subject enters the symbolic thinking that what it will gain is the intense self-identity it thought it found in the mirror-image. This image seemed to offer the sense of unity, totality and completion that the uncoordinated, fragmented pre-Oedipal child discovers as the first token of its identity. It is only when it finds that this image is not its own—that it is the play of light on a mirror, the gaze of a completely separate subject or a word in the mouth like 'I' that may seem to represent the self, but is equally the property of others—that it senses its identity is being sucked away from it into a public, shared world of orders and hierarchies.

DESIRE AND DEMAND

The subject seems to agree to inhabit the symbolic order, but maintains, at an unconscious level, its pursuit of the intense satisfaction, the sense of completion and self-identity, that it felt it had momentarily in the imaginary, but that it has lost. Indeed, the success of the symbolic is explained by the fact that it seems to hold out for the subject the intense identifications that will return to it the sense of completeness it now lacks. Here we encounter the crucial Lacanian distinction between *desire* and *demand*.

The subject's entry into the symbolic order is at the expense of the magical feeling of oneness it had in the imaginary. At the heart of its very being is a sense of *lack*. It endlessly seeks to compensate for this lack, to fill the hole at its core. This longing for self-completion is Lacan's definition of *desire*. The subject is

propelled into and through the world, into its emotional and sexual relationships, its fraught group identities with nation, race and political party, its careerism and material acquisitiveness, all as a result of this insatiable need to fill up the lack at the centre of its being. Each separate thing we pursue is called a *demand*. None of them will satisfy desire, which is by definition insatiable. Each demand offers momentarily the possibility that it will satisfy desire. We go shopping for clothes, electric with the sense of the new self our purchases will offer us. When we get home, we lay our new things on the bed, exultant in the new horizons of selfhood, the sense of identity and completion they seem to offer. But, after we have worn them once or twice, we put them away and the excitement soon passes. This is the drama of demand and desire. We are endlessly drawn towards the selfhood each new success, sexual relationship or night of intoxication may offer. But they are all illusions. There is no new self, except as the endlessly receding horizon of desire.

The tension between the endless desire that is the source of human motivations, and the hopeless demands that fail to appease it, is the very heart of the human tragedy, according to Lacan. We feel desire only because the imaginary has escaped us; because we are lost in the symbolic. In other words, the very fact that we feel desire means that we are part of the order in which desire cannot be satisfied. All the demands we pursue arise only in the symbolic. They are doomed to inevitable frustration, because we cannot fulfil what desire really seeks from us: to return from the symbolic to the imaginary we have always already lost.

THE OTHER AND THE *OBJET PETIT A*

Lacanian jargon is also worth noting here. What we seek is the image of completion that was coming to us from the world outside, specifically from other subjects—what, in general terms, the Other (French *l'Autre*) seemed to offer us. Each small transitory object that we mistake for the Other is called an *objet petit a* (literally, 'object little a [from autre]') by Lacan. This refers to another sort of other, an other so inconsequential it is not to be written with a capital letter. The motivations that fuel and guide our daily lives are each and every one the pursuit of one *objet petit a* after another. These objects in turn are mere substitutes for the huge and miraculous Other hovering on the horizon of human possibility,

always beckoning us as the ultimate object of desire, the lure of a complete satisfaction that would also be the stabilisation of a complete and meaningful selfhood. It is this dream of a great and glorious Other that would restore the subject's miraculous unity that explains the religious belief in a patriarchal God, and its rhetoric of purity, completion and totality.

THE NAME-OF-THE-FATHER

Here, we are very distant from the commonsense understanding of language as a human tool. We are used to thinking of words as subordinate to the essential ideas and meanings that we generate through our immediate and intense relationship with the world. We tend also to think of our relationships with others as a complex but rewarding adventure that we, as separate and autonomous individuals, undertake after we have attained our sense of self and personal identity. For Lacanian psychoanalysis, these ideas are reversed. It is impossible to gain any sense of selfhood outside of relationship with the Other. Selfhood, in fact, can only come to us in relationship. The ground on which this relationship develops is language. Language is not a transparent system of meanings and messages. In fact, this image of language as a system of communication is one of the ruses of the symbolic order, its perpetual offering of a stable meaning that perpetually eludes us. Language is an unstable and obscure system, offering us identities and simultaneously drawing them away from us. It seems to offer us imaginary individual completion, while entangling us in a shared symbolic order.

In Freud, the penis operates as the marker of sexual difference. Men aspire to ownership and control of the penis, which they identify not only as the site of pleasure, but also the symbol of masculine power. They are aware that their possession of the penis is not certain. They have been threatened with castration, and they believe that the female body is already castrated. They interpret this to mean that women cannot gain access to power, because they lack its symbol and instrument. Only ownership of the penis guarantees the certainty of power and stable identity and order. Masculine subjectivity is governed by the pursuit of this certainty, by the unconfessed anxiety about the ownership of the penis and a need for continual confirmation of masculinity itself and all its

prerogatives. Control of the penis seems always available to the man, but is never completely stable and certain.

Lacan's view of subjectivity repeats the Freudian schema, but with one major variation: the drama of gender and power is displaced from anatomy to language. Subjectivity still has the same dramatic gender inequity. It still operates with the same threat of loss and incompleteness. It is still a pursuit of stable identities and structures. Yet all this takes place in language and not in mere biology. For Freud, the penis operates as the essence of the system of gender order. Subjectivity and all its material—gender, sexuality, pleasure, desire, power—perpetually return to the penis as the logic of identity and order, particularly the defining identity of masculine and feminine and their inextricable relationship with power. To Lacan, language defines gender, keeping identity, order, meaning, reason and truth firmly on the side of the masculine as they were in Freud. Yet it is not the literal penis that is the essence, symbol and guarantee of this process.

Where the masculine subject had pursued control over the penis in Freud, as the imaginary image of his totality and authority, of his *meaning*, in Lacan he is pursuing that ideal moment of language use that draws him ever on into the field of language, with the ever-postponed but ever-renewed hope of a complete and efficient image of himself appearing to stabilise his subjectivity. For Freud, it was the father's penis that functioned as the basis of the social law. For Lacan, it is the signifier of the father that seems to hold all charisma and power. In other words, what takes the place of the penis for Lacan is the Name-of-the-Father—in French, *le nom-de-père*—or the *transcendental signifier*. In the same way that the social order for Freud was governed by the masculine principle—and masculinity was in turn defined by ownership of the penis—for Lacan, the symbolic order is a masculine domain, governed not by the penis, but by the symbol of the penis, the phallus. The symbolic order is thus commonly described as a *phallogentric* order.

LANGUAGE AND SUBJECTIVITY

Freud provided a model of the construction of subjectivity that emphasised the place of gender in influencing family relations and defining social place. Although he came to the conclusion that 'anatomy is destiny', he did end by separating the formation of

gender—and indeed of selfhood—from the inevitability and spontaneity of Nature. Instead, obscure and fragile social processes were involved—ones that often went wrong, leading to neurosis, maladjustment and mental illness. Lacan both generalised and intensified this model. Although the family supplies some of the imagery for the development of the subject (the archetypal Other remains the mother, the law is the Name-of-the-Father), it is the amorphous and ubiquitous field of language that determines the development of the self. The gender politics of subjectivity are played out in every aspect of human culture and society, because always and everywhere human interaction must rely on shared symbolic processes of exchange and mediation.

Lacan shared with semiotics the conviction that every social process was a symbolic process. Even your relationship with yourself involves the dramatisation of images and identities projected into your interior life by the great field of otherness that is co-extensive with language. In other words, selfhood is never spontaneous and always derivative. Only in our fantasies of a return to the imaginary do we encounter an image of the subject as self-generating and complete. In the symbolic order in which we must live, we are separated from that imaginary completion; even though our desire drives us forever on to try and recover it, it will always elude us, forging the contradiction with which we all must live.

It is no wonder, given the intense pathos of the human condition as Lacan has defined it, that his work is often criticised for its conservatism and pessimism. In later chapters we will meet other adaptations of Lacanian theory that use its terms and schemas to propose ways of subverting the phallogentrism of the symbolic order (see the discussion of Luce Irigaray in Chapter 5, Julia Kristeva in Chapter 6, and the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in Chapter 10). We will also see how Lacanian theory, and the reaction to it, together provide insights into the gender politics of cultural practices like literature and film. What is important to recognise in Lacan is a major step forward in finding a theoretical framework in which to talk about something as notoriously hard to pin down as subjectivity: for this theorist, the key is in reversing commonsense logic and seeing the self as a by-product of the language it thinks it uses for its own ends.