

Jacques Lacan

Desire and Its Interpretation

The Seminar of Jacques Lacan
Book VI

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~~the sort of being with which we deal – namely, a subject who has the dimension of the unconscious.~~

108

The essential step that psychoanalysis has us take in the experience of humanity is that – after many centuries in which philosophy has, I would say, entered obstinately and ever further into a discourse in which the subject is merely the correlate of the object in the knowledge relationship, where he is what is presupposed by the knowledge of objects, where he is a sort of strange subject about which I said somewhere, I do not recall where, he could fill up philosophers' weekends, because the rest of the week (namely, during the workweek) everyone can naturally neglect altogether this subject who is in some sense but the shadow and underside [*doublure*] of objects – we analysts realized that something about this subject had been overlooked, namely, the fact that he speaks.

This is the case only from the moment at which we can no longer overlook him – that is, from the moment at which his domain as a subject who speaks stands on its own two feet, as it were, whether the subject is there or not. But what completely changes the nature of his relations to the object is the crucial thing known as desire.

It is in the field of desire that we try to articulate the relations between the subject and the object. These are relations involving desire, for it is in the field of desire that psychoanalytic experience teaches us that the subject must be articulated. The relationship between the subject and the object is not based on need; it is a complex relationship that I am trying to elucidate for you.

I will begin by quickly indicating that, inasmuch as the relationship between the subject and the object is situated in the field of desire, the object cannot be the correlate of, or something that merely corresponds to, one of the subject's needs. The object is something that props the subject up at the precise moment at which the subject has to face, as it were, his existence. The object is something that props him up in his existence in the most radical sense – namely, in the sense in which he exists in language. Otherwise stated, the object is something that is outside of him and whose true linguistic nature he can grasp only at the very moment at which he, as a subject, must be effaced, vanish, or disappear behind a signifier. At that moment, which is a moment of panic, so to speak, the subject must grab hold of something, and he grabs hold of the object qua object of desire.

Someone whom I will not name immediately today, in order not to create confusion, someone who is quite contemporary but is now dead, wrote somewhere: "To ascertain exactly what the miser whose treasure was stolen lost: thus we should learn much." This is exactly what we must learn, I mean learn for ourselves and teach to others.

Psychoanalysis is the first locus or dimension in which one can ascertain this. Of course, in order to get you to grasp what I mean, I will have to find another example, a more noble example, because the miser is ridiculous – in other words, far too close to the unconscious for you to be able to bear it.

If I were to articulate it to you in the same terms that I used in speaking of existence earlier, in two minutes you would take me for an existentialist, which is not what I want. I will take an example from the film by Jean Renoir entitled *La Règle du jeu* [*The Rules of the Game*].

In this film there is a character played by Marcel Dalio, who is an old man – the kind we see in everyday life, in certain social circles, and we must not believe that he is limited to this particular social circle – who collects objects and especially music boxes. If you still remember the film, recall the moment at which, in front of quite a few people, Dalio comes across his latest find: an especially beautiful music box. At that moment the character is literally in a position which is one we can or rather must call shame [*pudeur*] – he turns red, effaces himself, disappears, and is very ill at ease. What he has shown, he has shown – but how could the onlookers understand that we are faced here with the precise point of oscillation that manifests itself to the highest degree in the subject's passion for the object he collects, which is one of the forms of the object of desire?

Is what the subject shows none other than the major point, the most intimate point of himself? No, for what is propped up by this object is precisely what the subject cannot reveal even to himself. It is something that is at the cusp of the greatest secret. It is in this direction that we must seek to figure out what the treasure chest is for the miser. Another step is certainly required here for us to move from the level of the collector to that of the miser. This is why misers can only be presented in comedic registers.

But this has already introduced us to what is at stake when the subject finds he has begun, starting at a certain moment, to articulate his wish insofar as it is secret. How does he express his wish here? This expression varies according to different languages, and according to the forms that are characteristic of each language to which I alluded last time. Different modes and registers have been invented, which all strike different chords. ~~Do not always lend credence to what grammarians say on this score – the subjunctive is not as subjunctive as it seems, and other verbal modes can express the type of wish in question here just as well.~~

~~I looked around for something that could illustrate this for you and, I do not know why, a little poem came back to me from the~~

even if we know much more about the behavior of animals and ethology than Buffon did? What we find in specialized journals is unreadable. What is said in this short monograph is expressed, as you will see, in a style that I must say is verily and truly remarkable. Read, above all, the middle section, which is called "parallel lives" and which discusses the lives of tarantulas and ants.

I thought of this short book because its author has something in common with me, which is that the question of mammals is resolved for him. Apart from man, who is an essentially problematic mammal – it suffices to consider the role that breasts [*mammies*] play in our imagination – there is but one truly serious mammal, which is the '*potamus*. Everyone agrees here, at least those who have some slight degree of sensitivity. T. S. Eliot, whose metaphysical ideas are awful, but who is nevertheless a great poet, immediately symbolized the militant Church as a hippopotamus – we will come back to that.

What does the hippopotamus do? People highlight the difficulties of his existence. They are great, so it seems, and one of the essential things he does is guard his grazing ground [*pacage*] – because he must nevertheless have a reserve of resources – with his excrement. This is an essential point: he maps his territory, as it is called, by delimiting it with a series of relays or points designed to adequately indicate to all those whom this concerns – namely, his fellow creatures – that this is his turf. As you see, we find a first sketch of symbolic activity in animals. In mammals, it is a specifically excremental symbolism.

Whereas the hippopotamus thus turns out to guard his grazing ground with his excrement, man does not guard his grazing ground with shit; it is his shit that he keeps as collateral for the essential grazing ground, the grazing ground that remains to be determined. This is the dialectic of what people call anal symbolism, which was one of the hitherto absolutely unsuspected dimensions that Freud revealed to us – a new revelation of the *Noces chymiques*, if I may put it thus, of man with his object.

In truth, the progress made by man depends on language alone – this singular intermediary – and we do not know where it comes from. It seriously complicates our relationship with objects – in other words, it leads us to have a problematic relationship with objects.

This is, in short, the same question that Marx raises, without resolving it, in his polemic with Proudhon – namely, how is it that human objects shift from having use value to having exchange value? I simply wanted to indicate to you why this happens and give at least a brief sketch of an explanation.

You must read a piece by Marx called *The Misery of Philosophy*:

I will ask you to excuse the algebraic tone things will take on today, but we must learn to set ideas out clearly, since, for some of you, questions arise. In my notation, ($\$ \Delta a$), something presents itself as being a barred subject – namely, a desiring subject [or: subject of desire, *sujet du désir*] – insofar as, in his relationship to the object, he himself is profoundly called into question. This is what constitutes the specificity of his desire. And it is to the degree to which the subject is a barred subject, insofar as he is a speaking subject, that one can say that it is possible, under certain conditions, to designate him with the phallic signifier [*lui donner comme signifiant le phallus*].

The subject both is and is not the phallus. He *is* it, because it is the signifier with which language designates him, and he *is not* it inasmuch as language and the law of language take it away from him.

In fact, these things do not take place at the same level. If the law takes it away from him, it is precisely in order to make things work out; it is because a certain choice is made at that moment. In the final analysis, the law brings a definition, distribution, or change in level into the situation. The law reminds the subject that he has it or does not have it. But what happens in fact occurs entirely in the interval between this signifying identification and this distribution of roles: the subject is the phallus, but the subject, of course, is not the phallus.

258

In the usage of the verb *être* [to be] in French, there is a certain slippage that the very form of the play of negation in speech allows us to grasp in a formulation that I will emphasize, inasmuch as it expresses what happens at the decisive moment, the one around which the assumption [*assomption*] of castration revolves. The formulation is as follows: one can say that the subject both is and is not the phallus, but “he is [also] not without having it.”

It is in the inflection of “not being without” – it is around the subjective assumption that is inflected between being and having – that the reality of castration is played out. The central value that the phallus takes on is based on the fact that, in a certain experience, the subject’s penis has been weighed in the balance against the object, and has taken on a certain function as an equivalent or standard in the relationship with the object. And one can say that, up to a certain point, it is to the degree to which he gives up his relationship to the phallus that the subject can possess the infinity of objects that characterize the human world.

Note that the formulation, “he is not without having it,” whose modulation and stress I beg you to retain, can be found in other forms in all languages – we will come back to this.

Now this is valid only for men. For women, relations to the phallus and to the phallic phase, which has an essential function

in the development of female sexuality, must be formulated in the exact opposite manner. This suffices to indicate that, when it comes to sexuality, male subjects and female subjects begin from different points.

A female subject's relation to the phallus can be formulated as follows: "She is without having it." This is the only precise formulation that allows us to leave behind the ambiguities, contradictions, and impasses around which we revolve concerning female sexuality. It is this "being without having it" that gives a woman's position its transcendence and that will later allow us to theorize the relationship between a woman and the phallus, a relationship that is highly specific and permanent, whose irreducible nature was insistently underscored by Freud, and that is psychologically translated by him in the form of *Penisneid* [penis envy].

To state things in an extreme manner in order to get them across as clearly as possible, I would say that the penis is restored to a man by a certain action that one can almost say deprives him of it.

This formulation is not exact. I am providing it in order to get you to open up your ears – the second one should not lead those who heard the first one to disparage it – but it nevertheless has its importance because it indicates where the junction occurs between the phallus and what are known as the first relations between the child and the maternal object.

~~These relations are usually broached developmentally. This is precisely what we must re-examine, and I am going to try to do so with you right now.~~

259

2

~~The question for us is to know how to use our algebraic elements to formulate what is involved in these much talked-about relations. Once we have such a formulation, we will be able to conceptualize how these relations are linked to the privileged signifier whose function I am trying to situate here.~~

~~If we endorse what psychiatrists claim, the relationship between the child and the mother comes first. Melanie Klein adds to this the notion that the child's first relations are established with the mother's body.~~

~~These relations, which are considered to be imaginary, are said to find their ideal locus, as it were, in her body. This is why, as everyone knows, Klein locates the relationship between form and symbol in the earliest experience of the mother's body, even if it is always an imaginary content that she brings out. Nevertheless, when reading~~

370

~~the phallus is already there, as such, [in the relationship between the child and the breast] and as, strictly speaking, destructive with regard to the subject. Right from the outset, she makes the phallus into a primordial object that is both the best and the worst, and around which all the avatars of the paranoid phase and the depressive phase revolve.~~

~~I am doing no more here, of course, than mentioning this and recalling it to mind. If S barred is of interest to us today, it is not, in fact, insofar as it is connected up with demand but with the element that we are going to try to home in on as closely as possible this year: little *a*.~~

Little *a* is the essential object around which the dialectic of desire revolves. The subject experiences himself here as faced with an element that is alterity at the imaginary level, as I have already formulated and defined it many times. It is an image, and it is pathos.

The other, which the object of desire is, serves a function that defines desire with twofold coordinates such that it does not aim at an object that satisfies a need, not in the slightest, but rather at an already-relativized object – I mean an object that has some relation to the subject, and specifically the subject who is present in fantasy. This is phenomenologically obvious and I shall return to it later on.

The subject is present in fantasy, and the object – which is the object of desire solely insofar as it is one of the terms in fantasy – takes the place, I would say, of what the subject is deprived of symbolically. This may appear a bit abstract to those here who have not followed the whole of my preceding path with me. For them, let me say that, in the articulation of fantasy, the object takes the place of what the subject is deprived of – namely, the phallus. It is owing to this that the object assumes the function it has in fantasy, and that desire is constituted with fantasy as its prop. It is difficult, I think, to go any further regarding what I mean about desire and its relationship with fantasy.

The object in fantasy is the alterity – image and pathos – by which an other takes the place of what the subject is deprived of symbolically. This formulation indicates the direction that allows us to conceptualize in what respect this imaginary object finds itself in a position in which what one might call the virtues or the dimension of being converge on it; it goes so far as to become the true decoy [or: lure, *leurre*] of being that the object of human desire is. This is what Simone Weil realized when she pointed to the thickest, most opaque relation that can be presented to us regarding man and the object of his desire – namely, the relationship between the miser and his treasure. The fetishistic character of the object of human desire is most blatant there. All of desire's objects are fetishistic in character.

371

It is quite comical to hear, as I did recently, some guy try to explain the relationship between the theory of signification and Marxism by saying that we cannot broach the theory of signification without taking interpersonal relations as our point of departure. He went rather far, since, after three minutes, he claimed that the signifier is the instrument thanks to which men transmit their private thoughts to their fellow men. These are the exact words of someone who supposedly based his ideas on Marx's work. If we do not take interpersonal relations as our foundation, we fall, according to him, into the trap of fetishizing what is involved in the realm of language.

I assuredly agree that we encounter something fetishistic, but I wonder if what is known as a fetish is not one of the very dimensions of the human world, and precisely the dimension we must account for. If we locate interpersonal relations at the root of everything, we end up relating the fetishization of human objects to some sort of interpersonal misunderstanding, which in turn means relating it to significations. Similarly, the private thoughts in question – in a developmental perspective, I think – must make us laugh, for if they are already there, why bother to look any further?

In short, it is rather surprising that a thesis that considers human subjectivity to precede human praxis can be defended by someone who considers himself to be a Marxist. It seems to me, on the contrary, that it suffices to open the first volume of *Capital* to realize that the very first step of Marx's analysis of the fetishistic nature of commodities consists precisely in broaching the problem from the level of the signifier, even if the term is not used there. The relations between values are defined as signifying relations, and all subjectivity, and possibly even that of fetishization, comes to be inscribed within this signifying dialectic. This is true beyond a shadow of a doubt.

~~This is but a simple tangent – a reflection of the occasional indignation and boredom I feel when I have wasted my time – that I am pouring into your ears.~~

372

2

~~Let us now try to use this relationship, $\$$ in the presence of little a , which to us is the fantasized prop of desire. We must articulate it clearly. What does a , this imaginary other, mean?~~

~~It means that something more encompassing than a person can be included therein – a whole chain or scenario. I have no need to return here to what I brought out last year in my analysis of Jean Genet's *The Balcony*. To explain what I mean in this context, I need~~

~~certain form of practice, represents a regression when it comes to treatment.~~

I am now going to indicate what I would like to convey to you regarding the relations between $\$$ and a , by first providing a model of them, which is no more than a model: *fort-da*.

I have no need to comment on it otherwise than to remind you that we can theoretically consider it to be the first moment of the subject's entry into the symbolic order. *Fort-da* resides in the alternation of a signifying pair with regard to a small object, whatever it may be. The element in question may be a ball, or just as easily a bit of string, or a worn-out edge of bedding, as long as it holds fast and can be thrown away and reeled back in. This moment is situated just before the one in which we see the appearance of $\$$ – in other words, before the moment at which the subject wonders about the Other as present or absent.

This is thus the locus or level at which the subject enters into the symbolic order. This entrance immediately brings out something that Winnicott designated with the term "transitional object," which he invented. In his thought, which revolves altogether around the earliest experiences of frustration, the transitional object is necessary to all of human development. The transitional object is the little ball involved in the *fort-da* game.

When can we consider this game to be given its function in desire? From the moment at which it becomes a fantasy. For that, the subject must no longer enter into the game, he must short-circuit it, in order to bring himself forward [*s'anticiper*] and include himself altogether in the fantasy, where he catches hold of himself [or: gets his bearings, *se saisit*] in his very disappearance. He does so with a certain amount of difficulty, of course, but for what I call fantasy, qua prop of desire, it is necessary that the subject be represented therein at the very moment of his disappearance.

I am not saying anything extraordinary here. I am simply articulating the idea Ernest Jones dwelt on when he attempted to give concrete meaning to the term "castration complex." He identified the castration complex with the fear of the disappearance of desire, and that is exactly what I am saying to you in a different form.

~~Why did Jones go there and not elsewhere? For reasons based on the requirements of his personal understanding: this is how things were phenomenologically understandable to him. People are clearly impeded by the limits of understanding when they try to understand at any cost. And these are the limits that I am trying to get you to go a bit beyond by inviting you to stop trying to understand. It is in this regard that I am not a phenomenologist.~~

~~Since the subject fears that his desire may disappear, this must~~