

But what is lacan's symbolic order?

ROBERT SILHOL*

I know, Lacan is difficult to read. Even though some of his “Seminars” have remained quite legible, we are not always sure we understand what was said in them. It is therefore safer to maintain that Lacan is a very difficult author.

But I think there were reasons for this and, to begin with, what must be acknowledged is the fact that Freud introduced us to a world for which there was no word, or at least no “signified,” before him. I am of course referring to what is *unconscious* in us, and to the epistemological break which the creation of psychoanalysis represents. Can one speak of what is not conscious in us, and if so can it still be called unconscious? (This is indeed the subject of some lessons in Lacan's *Seminar XVIII*, “*D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*”, 1971) Indeed, dealing with such new concepts is no easy task, and we must not be surprised if the meaning of these new words more than once seems very vague to us¹.

One of the consequences of this discovery that there is much in us which escapes consciousness is that communication is not as simple as we may think it is. As an analyst, Lacan didn't believe that what he had to say to his Wednesday audience could be understood and accepted without a necessary working through. In a word, just as an analyst requests his or her patients' collaboration, Lacan, very psychoanalytically, requested the collaboration of his audience and chose therefore to express himself like a poet, leaving his listeners or his readers to painfully construct their own meaning (there is no other!). And because of the way he had of coming relentlessly back and forth to the same themes and demonstrations, of the way he had of “encircling” the difficult and sometimes hardly acceptable ideas he was developing, he hoped that some coherence would eventually emerge from his discourse.

A poet, then, that is to say a practitioner of the metaphor – and it could be mathematical –, but a disciple of Freud also, which means that he spent his scientific life ceaselessly improving his models. And this naturally constitutes another difficulty for his readers. Indeed, Lacan's active career as a theoretician extended over some thirty years, and this explains why some of the concepts he worked with had their meaning modified over the years. Some terms or notions never varied, it is true, terms like “unconscious,” “castration” and even “phallus,” all received from Freud, but others, of Lacan's own coining, as “Other” with a capital letter (*Autre*) or “jouissance,” had their signified altered, while the well-known *signifiant*, “signifier,” may be said to convey a rather indefinite

* Centre d'Anthropologie Littéraire, Institut Charles V, Université Paris-Diderot. E-mail: rsilhol@club-internet.fr

¹ I have dealt with the concept of unconscious and with Freud's paper on the subject in: “Freud on ‘Repression’ and on the ‘Unconscious’”, *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ISPA, Lisbon, Portugal, 2008, 79-90.

meaning unless one decides it simply stands for “sign” or “symbol,” which is not quite, I think, a correct interpretation.

I am conscious, of course, that reading is always an interpretation and that, to a certain extent, misunderstanding is unavoidable, but we may stand a better chance of understanding what Lacan was trying to communicate if we always carefully replace the words he pronounced within their proper context, that is to say if we consider their place within the theoretical progress his work taken as a whole represents.

Among the terms that frequently recur in Lacan’s discourse, “Symbolic Order” may appear so simple and obvious that one may think it hardly deserves a specific debate. And yet, what seems at first like a general statement about the importance of symbolism is far from being as simple as it looks and I am not surprised it has given rise to so many misunderstandings.

I

“*Symbolique*,” the first half of the phrase, does not appear to be the term which poses much of a problem: we can say that its signified is simple and unambiguous enough, even though the question of representation, it is true, happens to be an essential topic in any philosophical debate.

With “*Ordre*,” however, things are not so simple. To begin with, it might be interesting to note that the very first meaning of the expression “Symbolic order” has *apparently* little to do with psychoanalysis. We are indeed reminded that Lacan first borrowed it from the ethnological findings and writings of Claude Levi-Strauss². A primal law organizes, regulates exchanges between the families observed by the anthropologist: “I have received a bride, I owe a daughter”. Order, here, means rule, the way exchanges have to be arranged: I have received, I owe...; I have a debt. This law defines a *passage obligé* in the social group studied, and it is what must have attracted Lacan’s attention in the first place: something which had to do with determination, the discovery of a structure, of a particular law which governed social behavior, and also the fact, pointed out by Levi-Strauss, that the *signifier* preceded the *signified*. I interpret this interest in structure on the part of Lacan as a manifestation of his wish to give psychoanalysis a scientific status. At this stage of his research, “order” expresses a desire for scientific certainty.

II

But of course, when thinking of exchange it is not too difficult to bring what takes place between mother and child into the picture. This, particularly in the Fifties, with Melanie Klein, was the main concern of Object Relation theory. The mother is the Great Giver, the great provider, at least at first, and the consequence of her absence is naturally something that must be taken into consideration seriously.

[...] in the plus/minus opposition, presence and absence, we already have, virtually, the origin, the birth, the possibility, the fundamental condition of a symbolic order (*Le Séminaire IV*, 68. My translation)³.

² From this point of view, page 68 in *Le Séminaire IV*, which deals with the relationship between the symbolic and the real, is essential. In this page, could the insistence on “presence and absence”, and on “the opposition minus/plus”, which discusses the infant mother relationship and which I have quoted earlier, be interpreted, because of this very insistence, as perhaps a sign of an unconscious regret not to have given the mother all her due? It is a question.

³ As obvious as the fantasmatic dimension of my reading, or of the original text, may seem – “to complete,” “to add” – it in no way alters the correctness of the observation.

Order, here, can undoubtedly be given a specific signified – and in passing we shall note the insistence –; to the first meaning already marked out – determination – we can now add a second: representation. In short, and one naturally remembers Freud’s grand child and his game with the reel, the fact that the mother can be represented in her absence introduces us to the field of language where things are replaced by signs. Quite simply, the “symbolic order”, now (1956), denotes the domain where symbols are used, or, to put it more strongly, the fact that one can only express oneself “symbolically”. But what was said earlier about determination is not forgotten:

It’s only from the moment of entrance of the subject into an order which preexists to all that happens to him, events, satisfactions, disappointments, that all in which he approaches his experience [...] falls into an order, is articulated, takes its meaning, and can be analyzed (*Le Séminaire IV*, 102).

The synthesis is clear and complete. We are now dealing with an already established symbolic order and this does correspond to the “Law”, as was the case with the findings of anthropology, and *at the same time* to language, for linguistics deals with representation. Humans speak, that is to say use signs, in short symbolize. As human *subjects* separated from the world-out-there – Lacan says submitted to the “real”, to the mother as power –, the world of *objects*, we can nevertheless, and do, *represent* it. In fact, there is no other way of dealing with the “unattainable” real. This first structure is well-known: on one side the sign, on the other the referent, and between them an insuperable space, a gap which can only be bridged symbolically (Winnicott). After Levi-Strauss, Saussure and the linguists. Never mind if Lacan’s linguistics was only “*de la linguisterie*” as he himself pointed out. We have here a structure which he will never forsake, a fundamental element of his system. For there is more, and Saussure and his sign articulated into signified and signifier (which in passing I take to have nothing to do with Freud’s “manifest” and “latent thoughts”, with the added remark that this is a distinction which is not always made clearly enough by Lacan himself!) cannot but ring a bell for the psychoanalyst, for this is a structure which equally applies to the dream, to language and to literature... not to speak of the concept of unconscious! As we know, it is easy to go from the structure of language, which as we have just seen is the structure of representation, to the structure of the metaphor. Metaphor and metonymy very much resemble what Freud discovered in the functioning of our dreams: condensation and displacement (Jakobson). It is here that the findings of the linguist become particularly useful to the psychoanalyst: because several signifieds can correspond to a single signifier we can play with language, use, that is, a given signifier to carry a meaning, a signified, which, because of the ambiguity, will remain concealed while being secretly expressed: I can say “table” aloud and be inhabited by the unconscious desire of thinking “bed” (love?), or perhaps “operation table” (castration, destruction). The same structure applies to our slips of the tongue or to parapraxis. We can make fun of Lacan’s jargon in sentences such as: “The subject’s secret lies in the signifying chain”, but we must realize there is nothing wrong, from the point of view of logic, with such a statement.

Much more could be said – and much more has been written already – about the relationship between Freud’s discovery and language; let it suffice here to repeat that the symbolic nature of language, the fact that humans do give a *name* to *things* (the sign, as mentioned above, on one side and the referent on the other) and the fact also that, without knowing it, they can *name* what is repressed, what is hidden to their conscious self, constitutes them into a particular group of beings. “*Ca parle*”: as in our dreams, what was not intelligible before Freud can now be given meaning through the interpretation of what symbolically *manifests* itself, at last “*latent thoughts*” are made accessible, and this applies to discourse also. We are indeed endowed with such a power of representation, but this faculty of adding a signifier to a signified in order to make a sign – because of the slippery nature of the signified, which is the individual mark of each subject –, entails our submission to a symbolic order, that is to say to an order of things where what we say cannot be reduced to its “manifest” meaning, “surface” at best and often screen, and always carries more

(unconscious) meaning than we consciously think. Thus can a concealed, “repressed” meaning suddenly be revealed (as when a slip of the tongue is successfully understood) or on the contrary remain secret, as in our dreams until they are analyzed. In the end, Lacan’s perhaps most famous formula can be understood without too much difficulty and we can agree with him that the unconscious *is* structured like a language.

III

Which brings to the foreground the notion of separation. For indeed, the unconscious *subject* of which psychoanalysis speaks is quite simply the separated being that I am: the infant separated from its mother at birth, the human being for whom the world-out-there will never be more than a representation – something which always has to be interpreted –, the boy who (anatomically) will never be a girl or the girl who will never be a boy, the image in the mirror, finally, which tells me that this face, this body, whole and in one piece, is me but remains all the same an image only and shall never represent a subject, the reflection, in a word, of the incomplete being that I am, for if the image tells me I am, and this is Descartes, it cannot tell me – without a psychoanalytic interpretation – who or what, as a subject, I am, and this is Freud and Lacan.

It is because such incompleteness is unacceptable that it is represented – so to speak – in a way that denies its very existence while realistically focussing on the many instances in life where we are seen to be lacking something. I do not think the concept of unconscious can ever be understood properly if we do not bear in mind such a fact: it all begins with this lack, “*le manque*” for which a reassuring, if paradoxically anxiogenetic, representation has to be found: better crave for the impossible, hanker after ideals, call it fusion if you like, than the nothingness of the world-out-there from which as a subject I am for ever separated.

This difficult concept of the lack is of course at the heart of Freud’s discovery, even though, more of a clinician than a philosopher at first, he never expressed himself with the words of the metaphysician, simply contenting himself with speaking of the bar between Cs and Ucs. This, however, was dramatic enough! And there were many practical reasons to introduce such a paradigm, if only because the object the infant misses most in the first years of its life is the mother, the mother’s body from which we were “cut” at birth.

The structure, of course, is the same: *an infant and a lost object*, but because we cannot yet say “a subject and the representation of what has been lost,” this loss can be expressed in more ways than one, and this is where the difference between the sexes comes into the picture and makes matters a little more difficult for us.

In “The Dialectic of frustration,” which is the fourth lesson in *Séminaire IV*, in a subtle, and I think convincing, discussion, Lacan, for about ten pages, describes the child’s entry into the symbolic order (the mother has now become real because she can refuse to give, and the object has now become symbolic, entering “the connotation presence-absence”). The conditions for the formation of a symbolic order are therefore fulfilled, and it is true that the discussion could be brought to an end here, except that at this point another lack is introduced into the debate and will henceforth become the central point of interest. Justified or not, the shift is obvious in Lacan’s text:

Let us now ask the question from quite a different starting point [*à partir d’un tout autre point de départ*] (*Le Séminaire IV*, 70).

Following the Freud of 1935, Lacan chose to direct his attention to an imaginary object which he defined as essentially missing: *the phallus*. Not that he refused to take notice of that other lack clearly exemplified in the infant’s demand not to be separated from its mother, as we have just seen, but in the end, he does seem to have considered it as secondary. We have moved from:

the subject misses something or someone

to:

an object is missing.

Privilege is therefore given to sexual difference and to the concept of castration. In Lacan's work on Object relation theory, this theme is soon introduced:

Castration is essentially related to a symbolic order [...]

The connexion between castration and the symbolic order is made palpable [*mise en évidence*] by what we have said so far, and also by this simple remark – for Freud from the very beginning, castration is attached to the central position given to the Oedipus complex [...] (61).

Then, Lacan goes on discussing what he calls “frustration,” bringing back the mother, and woman, into the picture, in a demonstration that is much nearer his reflection on language than one might think at first. We all know that one of the theoretical steps which followed the discovery of the Oedipus complex by Freud concerned the difference between the sexes. In 1935, for instance, he discusses the relationship of the daughter and of the son to the father, pointing out how different their demands are: where the little girl will ask for a baby, the little boy will ask for the permission to use his own sexual organ (a permission which, in some cases, may not be so easy to obtain). We have therefore moved from an “order” which defines the law according to which children, young men and women, are to be exchanged, to an “order” to which humans are submitted and which describes them as capable of representation, and we have now finally come to the point where representation is given a particular content, to the point where what is represented is an *imaginary* object, the phallus namely or, in other words, what is missing. Considering ‘what is missing’, Lacan writes:

Freud tells us for his part that woman has, among what she misses as essential objects [*au nombre de ses manques d'objets essentiels*], the phallus, and that this is very closely connected with her relationship to the child (70).

Quite simply, the object – and I mean the object of Object relation theory –, be it breast or mother's body, has now been changed and has become what the mother desires. Where she was at first seen as the one who can give or refuse, she is now the one who asks, asks the child to replace what she misses. But what she misses is only *imaginary*, Lacan insists on this, and it may help us – it has helped me – to accept his theory more easily.

Naturally, males also suffer from a lack; only, they have the possibility of making use of a signifier which will help them to deny they are incomplete, which of course they are, as all humans. It is of this (false) claim that women are deprived. For the lack from which men suffer is not in the end so different from that of women (fathers also ask their children to “complete” them), and for instance they can be said to suffer from the impossibility of having an ideal sexual organ, an organ moreover which is under a permanent threat (castration), but when it comes to symbolization, there is a difference. Lacan does acknowledge the similitude (although I think he should have said “penis” and not phallus here):

Let's not forget, indeed, that the phallus of the little boy is not much more vaillant than the little girl's (193).

But because the object we are now discussing amounts to the possibility of signifying, amounts to the way women and men signify, symbolize, “our starting point has to be the existence of an imaginary phallus” (190).

And *imaginary* is the key word, needless to say, for we are here speaking of language, that is to say, and I prefer the expression: of representation. In a word, we represent what we are missing. It is true that Lacan may seem to overdo it in the way he gives this “phallus” the leading role, almost the only role in fact. But there is little doubt that as a clinician, like Freud, he has come across the domineering role of the fear of castration in us. The insistence on the imaginary nature of the phallus will help us to accept the ambiguity of the statement, for indeed it all starts with a discovery about anatomy. And at least we understand how the phallus, this imaginary object of desire, can be considered as a signifier, *un signifiant*.

For in fact, this lack we are talking about when we speak of women, we know quite well [*nous sommes déjà avertis*] it is not a real lack. This phallus, everybody knows they can have of it [*chacun sait qu’elles peuvent en avoir*], they have them [*elles les ont, les phallus*], and on top of this they produce them, they make boys, those phallusbearers [*phallophores*] (191).

True, in this short homage to women, the formulation, however apologetic, may seem more awkward than properly poetic: they can have “of it”, they have “them” remain vague, difficult to translate, but what matters to me here is the insistence on the fact that we are dealing with an imaginary object. As we have just seen, the “problem” is not so much sexual difference as such as the fact that males are provided with a particular signifier

Of course, straight away, one may object and add: “And the breast, and the round belly of the mother to be, aren’t these also signifiers?” No doubt, these are signifiers also, but as signifiers they come into existence later in life, after the discovery of sexual difference. (Also, as I pointed out above, the analyst only deals with what he or she hears from patients, and for the time being these belong to a culture which was until recently – and still *is* in reality – dominated by a patriarchal order.) In the end, though, essentially, what must be taken into consideration is the importance of what is genital for humans. That it should have been naturally selected as an area which provides symbols is not really surprising.

If, according to what she says, it is much more difficult for the woman than for the boy to enter the reality of what takes place in the area of the uterus or of the vagina in the dialectic of a desire that can satisfy her, it is indeed because she has to go through something with which she has a different relationship than the man, that is to say, because of what she lacks [*par ce dont elle manque*], that is to say the phallus (190).

It is now easy to see how totally Object relation theory has been reversed, subverted perhaps even: what it was in the power of the mother to give or to refuse has now become what she asks. But we can also see how perfectly the liaison between language and sex difference has been achieved: an essential element of exchange between mother and child has been added to psychoanalytical theory. This does not mean we should altogether set aside what happens between child and mother in the domain of nurturing, of giving, but the phallus as an imaginary object does radically change the situation: it adds a new and essential determination to what takes place in the making of a *subject*.

In short, what is symbolical in the “order” I have just described – organization *and* injunction – is the particular request the mother makes to the child.

Which causes me to disqualify an interpretation often made of the mother’s place in the parental couple according to lacanian theory. Although, it is true, it was not too difficult to misread the aspect of the theory which defines the mother as primarily wanting as resulting in a hierarchy between males and females. What was new in the theory was that the mother was no longer the Great Giver – and I would like to specify “the great giver only” – and had now become the one who asked, while the apparently all powerful father is the one from whom one expects a gift: a baby or a working penis. My argument, here, rests on two points: first, *this was half a century ago* and it may have seemed necessary at the time to complete Object relation theory, add (3) something to it or perhaps even to subvert it, following Freud’s footsteps in the enterprise (see Lacan’s comment on the case of Little

Hans in *Séminaire IV*). The second argument, which proceeds from the first, is that sexual difference cannot be denied, no more than the fear of castration, and had to be taken into consideration.

IV

In his insistence on the importance of the phallus, however – an insistence which will appear quite necessary if we simply accept to look around us –, Lacan seems to have overlooked the necessity of insisting also on the proper “lack” of fathers. If only because “*Pater semper incertus*” – until recently at any rate –, the father is at a disadvantage and cannot be certain he is the true begetter. Much more could be said on this subject, and for instance that the possibility exists of a primal jealousy on the part of men, who are not the ones to give life to the child. A necessary condition to conception, no doubt, the role of the father is not a sufficient one. The *phallus* as an ideal image – an image is always “ideal”, I know, not really real except as a representation, but we have to insist on the ideality here – may have its *raison d’être* for the simple reason that no conception can be achieved without erection, as by the way it cannot either be complete without a womb, but I do not think *it* can in any way be used as an argument to sustain the existence of a hierarchy between the sexes. Once again, this is the reason why Lacan insists on the phallus as being only imaginary in the unconscious desire of the mother.

So much, then, for the possible misreading of Lacan’s phrase about “order”. But it is true that the expression remains so vague and general that it can easily lead to misinterpretation. What is certain, however, is that the bearer of the penis – not the phallus, needless to say – is also the one in the parental couple who, by his “No” after the birth of the child is instrumental in the separation between infant and mother, when the infant comes out of its fusion with maternal omnipotence. “There are three of us now,” the voice says, and to the mother: “Thou shalt not ‘reincorporate’ your ‘product’”. This primal “weaning” creates the possibility for a subject to exist, is in fact the necessary condition of its existence. At the heart of the infant’s entry into an order which symbolically defines its place and status, the father is the great “interdictor,” the one who prohibits, and for the little boy he comes into action twice since he will soon forbid sexual union with the mother.

At this point, however, and for the second time, there appears the possibility of another misinterpretation of the word “order” in Lacan’s formula. Because Lacan does not always clearly distinguish the two roles of the “prohibiting” father and often switches without warning from the first function – of separation – to the second – of prohibition and castration – one may fail to see the adequacy of his expression “Name-of-the-father” when thinking of the triangular situation, and reproach him with having forgotten that for the little girl the mother also has a prohibiting role. Thus this recourse to the father and his name may not be such a good way to describe the triangular scene and may remain confusing. In the end, I find it safer to read his phrase – which as we remarked he gives as equivalent for “symbolic order” – as simply standing for the freudian bar. For indeed, Lacan does equate the Name-of-the-Father with castration – and here the play upon *Nom* and *Non*, so easy in French, makes complete sense –, which brings us back to the utter radicality of the freudian discovery of an insuperable gap between conscious and unconscious and of the fundamental incompleteness of the human being, male or female.

*

Was Lacan’s phrase ‘too vague and too general’ to be of any interest? Meaningless because it carried so many meanings? Or was it on the contrary a perfect epitome of what Freud had discovered and expressed beautifully in his graphic formula Cs/Ucs?

The beginning of an answer might be found in yet another meaning which Lacan's phrase incites me to formulate. As an object, constituted as such by the "symbolic order," I depend on an Other *and* on a given order which was itself determined by "a regular succession of generations" (398).

If the psychoanalytic experience has taught us anything, it is that any interhuman relationship is founded on an investiture which comes from the Other. This Other is already in us from the very beginning under the form of the unconscious, but nothing in our own development can come into existence if not through a constellation which implies the absolute Other as locus of the spoken word [*comme siège de la parole*] (372).

This was half a century ago, we must remember, and still remained vague; but twenty years later, the "seminar" in which Lacan spoke of Joyce, *Le Séminaire XXIII*, found him giving a more precise definition of what he meant by Other and it was a way of repeating his phrase about generations. What may have been an interrogation about *determination* addressed to the work of Claude Levi-Strauss in the years of the beginning now comes to the forefront; I take it to have finally become Lacan's most open preoccupation.

In 1975, he may have had a good time playing with his "knots" on his own, but his perhaps not so successful pedagogical game was quite meaningful all the same, as we can judge today⁴. Thus, from Freud to Levi-Strauss, to Saussure, to Lacan, and to Freud we have come full circle – a "return to Freud" as the formula goes –, and in the process, already implied in freudian theory no doubt, a question has come to light which prompts us to ask what kind of an object the child was for the parent.

⁴ See my article on Lacan's knots: "Comment ne pas se faire des nouds avec les nouds de Lacan," *Gradiva*, Vol. IX, N° 2, 105-119, and Vol. X, N°1, 39-47, ISPA, Lisbon, and Univ. Paris VII, Paris, 2006.