

involved a metaphysical illusion. If it was held in place by the material and psychical benefits which accrued to men from it, it was also held in place by a complex structure of fear, desire, aggression, masochism and anxiety which urgently needed to be examined. Feminism was not an isolatable issue, a particular 'campaign' alongside other political projects, but a dimension which informed and interrogated every facet of personal, social and political life. The message of the women's movement, as interpreted by some of those outside it, is not just that women should have equality of power and status with men; it is a questioning of all such power and status. It is not that the world will be better off with more female participation in it; it is that without the 'feminization' of human history, the world is unlikely to survive.

With post-structuralism, we have brought the story of modern literary theory up to the present time. Within post-structuralism as a 'whole', real conflicts and differences exist whose future history cannot be predicted. There are forms of post-structuralism which represent a hedonist withdrawal from history, a cult of ambiguity or irresponsible anarchism; there are other forms, as with the formidably rich researches of the French historian Michel Foucault, which while not without their severe problems point in a more positive direction. There are modes of 'radical' feminism which emphasize plurality, difference and sexual separatism; there are also forms of socialist feminism which, while refusing to view the women's struggle as a mere element or sub-sector of a movement which might then dominate and engulf it, hold that the liberation of other oppressed groups and classes in society is not only a moral and political imperative in itself, but a necessary (though by no means sufficient) condition for the emancipation of women.

We have travelled, at any rate, from Saussure's difference between signs to the oldest difference in the world; and it is this which we can now explore further.

## 5 Psychoanalysis

In the previous few chapters I have suggested a relationship between developments in modern literary theory and the political and ideological turmoil of the twentieth century. But such turmoil is never only a matter of wars, economic slumps and revolutions: it is also experienced by those caught up in it in the most intimately personal ways. It is a crisis of human relationships, and of the human personality, as well as a social convulsion. This is not of course to argue that anxiety, fear of persecution and the fragmentation of the self are experiences peculiar to the era from Matthew Arnold to Paul de Man: they can be found throughout recorded history. What is perhaps significant is that in this period such experiences become constituted in a new way as a systematic field of knowledge. That field of knowledge is known as psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud in late nineteenth-century Vienna; and it is Freud's doctrines that I now want briefly to summarize.

'The motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one.' It was Freud, not Karl Marx, who made this statement, in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. What has dominated human history to date is the need to labour; and for Freud that harsh necessity means that we must repress some of our tendencies to pleasure and gratification. If we were not called upon to work in order to survive, we might simply lie around all day doing nothing. Every human being has to undergo this repression of what Freud named the 'pleasure principle' by the 'reality principle', but for some of us, and arguably for whole societies, the repression may become excessive and make us ill. We are sometimes willing to forgo gratification to an heroic extent, but usually in the canny trust that by deferring an immediate pleasure we will

recoup it in the end, perhaps in richer form. We are prepared to put up with repression as long as we see that there is something in it for us; if too much is demanded of us, however, we are likely to fall sick. This form of sickness is known as neurosis; and since, as I have said, all human beings must be repressed to some degree, it is possible to speak of the human race, in the words of one of Freud's commentators, as the 'neurotic animal'. It is important to see that such neurosis is involved with what is creative about us as a race, as well as with the causes of our unhappiness. One way in which we cope with desires we cannot fulfil is by 'sublimating' them, by which Freud means directing them towards a more socially valued end. We might find an unconscious outlet for sexual frustration in building bridges or cathedrals. For Freud, it is by virtue of such sublimation that civilization itself comes about: by switching and harnessing our instincts to these higher goals, cultural history itself is created.

If Marx looked at the consequences of our need to labour in terms of the social relations, social classes and forms of politics which it entailed, Freud looks at its implications for the psychological life. The paradox or contradiction on which his work rests is that we come to be what we are only by a massive repression of the elements which have gone into our making. We are not of course conscious of this, any more than for Marx men and women are generally conscious of the social processes which determine their lives. Indeed we could not be by definition conscious of this fact, since the place to which we relegate the desires we are unable to fulfil is known as the unconscious. One question which immediately arises, however, is why it is human beings who should be the neurotic animal, rather than snails or tortoises. It is possible that this is merely a Romantic idealization of such creatures and that they are secretly a good deal more neurotic than we think; but they seem well-adjusted enough to an outsider, even though there may be one or two cases of hysterical paralysis on record.

One feature which distinguishes human beings from the other animals is that for evolutionary reasons we are born almost entirely helpless and are wholly reliant for our survival on the care of the more mature members of the species, usually our parents. We are all born 'prematurely'. Without such immediate, unceasing care we would die very quickly. This unusually prolonged dependence on our parents is first of all a purely material matter, a question of being fed and kept from harm: it is a matter of the satisfaction of what may be called our 'instincts', by which is meant the biologically fixed needs human beings have for nourishment, warmth and so on. (Such self-preservative instincts are, as we shall see, a good deal more immutable than 'drives', which very often alter their nature.) But our dependence on our

parents for these services does not stop at the biological. The small baby will suck its mother's breast for milk, but will discover in doing so that this biologically essential activity is also pleasurable; and this, for Freud, is the first dawning of sexuality. The baby's mouth becomes not only an organ of its physical survival but an 'erotogenic zone', which the child might reactivate a few years later by sucking its thumb, and a few years later than that by kissing. The relation to the mother has taken on a new, libidinal dimension: sexuality has been born, as a kind of drive which was at first inseparable from biological instinct but which has now separated itself out from it and attained a certain autonomy. Sexuality for Freud is itself a 'perversion' – a 'swerving away' of a natural self-preservative instinct towards another goal.

As the infant grows, other erotogenic zones come into play. The oral stage, as Freud calls it, is the first phase of sexual life, and is associated with the drive to incorporate objects. In the anal stage, the anus becomes an erotogenic zone, and with the child's pleasure in defecation a new contrast between activity and passivity, unknown in the oral stage, comes to light. The anal stage is sadistic, in that the child derives erotic pleasure from expulsion and destruction; but it is also connected with the desire for retention and possessive control, as the child learns a new form of mastery and a manipulation of the wishes of others through the 'granting' or withholding of the faeces. The ensuing 'phallic' stage begins to focus the child's libido (or sexual drive) on the genitals, but is called 'phallic' rather than 'genital' because according to Freud only the male organ is recognized at this point. The little girl in Freud's view has to be content with the clitoris, the 'equivalent' of the penis, rather than with the vagina.

What is happening in this process – though the stages overlap, and should not be seen as a strict sequence – is a gradual organization of the libidinal drives, but one still centred on the child's own body. The drives themselves are extremely flexible, in no sense fixed like biological instinct: their objects are contingent and replaceable, and one sexual drive can substitute itself for another. What we can imagine in the early years of the child's life, then, is not a unified subject confronting and desiring a stable object, but a complex shifting field of force in which the subject (the child itself) is caught up and dispersed, in which it has as yet no centre of identity and in which the boundaries between itself and the external world are indeterminate. Within this field of libidinal force, objects and part-objects emerge and disappear again, shift places kaleidoscopically, and prominent among such objects is the child's body as the play of drives laps across it. One can speak of this also as an 'auto-eroticism', within which Freud sometimes includes the whole of infantile sexuality: the child takes erotic delight in its own body, but without

as yet being able to view its body as a complete object. Auto-eroticism must thus be distinguished from what Freud will call 'narcissism', a state in which one's body or ego as a whole is 'cathected', or taken as an object of desire.

It is clear that the child in this state is not even prospectively a citizen who could be relied upon to do a hard day's work. It is anarchic, sadistic, aggressive, self-involved and remorselessly pleasure-seeking, under the sway of what Freud calls the pleasure principle; nor does it have any respect for differences of gender. It is not yet what we might call a 'gendered subject': it surges with sexual drives, but this libidinal energy recognizes no distinction between masculine and feminine. If the child is to succeed in life at all, it obviously has to be taken in hand; and the mechanism by which this happens is what Freud famously terms the Oedipus complex. The child who emerges from the pre-Oedipal stages we have been following is not only anarchic and sadistic but incestuous to boot: the boy's close involvement with his mother's body leads him to an unconscious desire for sexual union with her, whereas the girl, who has been similarly bound up with the mother and whose first desire is therefore always homosexual, begins to turn her libido towards the father. The early 'dyadic' or two-term relationship between infant and mother, that is to say, has now opened up into a triangle consisting of child and both parents; and for the child, the parent of the same sex will come to figure as a rival in its affections for the parent of the opposite sex.

What persuades the boy-child to abandon his incestuous desire for the mother is the father's threat of castration. This threat need not necessarily be spoken; but the boy, in perceiving that the girl is herself 'castrated', begins to imagine this as a punishment which might be visited upon himself. He thus represses his incestuous desire in anxious resignation, adjusts himself to the 'reality principle', submits to the father, detaches himself from the mother, and comforts himself with the unconscious consolation that though he cannot *now* hope to oust his father and possess his mother, his father symbolizes a place, a possibility, which he himself will be able to take up and realize in the future. If he is not a patriarch now, he will be later. The boy makes peace with his father, identifies with him, and is thus introduced into the symbolic role of manhood. He has become a gendered subject, surmounting his Oedipus complex; but in doing so he has, so to speak, driven his forbidden desire underground, repressed it into the place we call the unconscious. This is not a place that was ready and waiting to receive such a desire: it is produced, opened up, by this act of primary repression. As a man in the making, the boy will now grow up within those images and

practices which his society happens to define as 'masculine'. He will one day become a father himself, thus sustaining this society by contributing to the business of sexual reproduction. His earlier diffuse libido has become organized through the Oedipus complex in a way which centres it upon genital sexuality. If the boy is unable successfully to overcome the Oedipus complex, he may be sexually incapacitated for such a role: he may privilege the image of his mother above all other women, which for Freud may lead to homosexuality; or the recognition that women are 'castrated' may have traumatized him so deeply that he is unable to enjoy satisfying sexual relationships with them.

The story of the little girl's passage through the Oedipus complex is a good deal less straightforward. It should be said right away that Freud was nowhere more typical of his own male-dominated society than in his bafflement in the face of female sexuality – the 'dark continent', as he once called it. We shall have occasion to comment later on the demeaning, prejudiced attitudes towards women which disfigure his work, and his account of the girl's process of oedipalization is by no means easily separable from this sexism. The little girl, perceiving that she is inferior because 'castrated', turns in disillusionment from her similarly 'castrated' mother to the project of seducing her father; but since this project is doomed, she must finally turn back reluctantly to the mother, effect an identification with her, assume her feminine gender role, and unconsciously substitute for the penis which she envies but can never possess a baby, which she desires to receive from the father. There is no obvious reason why the girl should abandon this desire, since being 'castrated' already she cannot be threatened with castration; and it is therefore difficult to see by what mechanism her Oedipus complex is dissolved. 'Castration', far from prohibiting her incestuous desire as with the boy, is what makes it possible in the first place. Moreover the girl, to enter into the Oedipus complex, must change her 'love-object' from mother to father, whereas the boy has merely to carry on loving the mother; and since a change of love-objects is a more complex, difficult affair, this too raises a problem about female oedipalization.

Before leaving the question of the Oedipus complex, its utter centrality to Freud's work should be emphasized. It is not just another complex: it is the structure of relations by which we come to be the men and women that we are. It is the point at which we are produced and constituted as subjects; and one problem for us is that it is always in some sense a partial, defective mechanism. It signals the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle; from the enclosure of the family to society at large, since we turn from incest to extra-familial relations; and from Nature to Culture, since we

can see the infant's relation to the mother as somehow 'natural', and the post-Oedipal child as one who is in the process of assuming a position within the cultural order as a whole. (To see the mother-child relationship as 'natural', however, is in one sense highly dubious: it does not matter in the least to the infant who the provider actually is.) Moreover, the Oedipus complex is for Freud the beginnings of morality, conscience, law and all forms of social and religious authority. The father's real or imagined prohibition of incest is symbolic of all the higher authority to be later encountered; and in 'introjecting' (making its own) this patriarchal law, the child begins to form what Freud calls its 'superego', the awesome, punitive voice of conscience within it.

All, then, would now seem in place for gender roles to be reinforced, satisfactions to be postponed, authority to be accepted and the family and society to be reproduced. But we have forgotten about the unruly, insubordinate unconscious. The child has now developed an ego or individual identity, a particular place in the sexual, familial and social networks; but it can do this only by, so to speak, splitting off its guilty desires, repressing them into the unconscious. The human subject who emerges from the Oedipal process is a *split* subject, torn precariously between conscious and unconscious; and the unconscious can always return to plague it. In popular English speech, the word 'subconscious' rather than 'unconscious' is often used; but this is to underestimate the radical *otherness* of the unconscious, imagining it as a place just within reach below the surface. It underestimates the extreme strangeness of the unconscious, which is a place and a non-place, which is completely indifferent to reality, which knows no logic or negation or causality or contradiction, wholly given over as it is to the instinctual play of the drives and the search for pleasure.

The 'royal road' to the unconscious is dreams. Dreams allow us one of our few privileged glimpses of it at work. Dreams for Freud are essentially symbolic fulfillments of unconscious wishes; and they are cast in symbolic form because if this material were expressed directly then it might be shocking and disturbing enough to wake us up. In order that we should get some sleep, the unconscious charitably conceals, softens and distorts its meanings, so that our dreams become symbolic texts which need to be deciphered. The watchful ego is still at work even within our dreaming, censoring an image here or scrambling a message there; and the unconscious itself adds to this obscurity by its peculiar modes of functioning. With the economy of the indolent, it will condense together a whole set of images into a single 'statement', or it will 'displace' the meaning of one object on to another somehow associated with it, so that in my dream I am venting on a

crab an aggression I feel towards somebody with that surname. This constant condensation and displacement of meaning corresponds to what Roman Jakobson identified as the two primary operations of human language: metaphor (condensing meanings together), and metonymy (displacing one on to another). It was this which moved the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to comment that 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. Dream-texts are also cryptic because the unconscious is rather poor in techniques for representing what it has to say, being largely confined to visual images, and so must often craftily translate a verbal significance into a visual one: it might seize upon the image of a tennis *racket* to make a point about some shady dealing. At any rate, dreams are enough to demonstrate that the unconscious has the admirable resourcefulness of a lazy, ill-supplied chef, who slings together the most diverse ingredients into a cobbled-together stew, substituting one spice for another which he is out of, making do with whatever has arrived in the market that morning as a dream will draw opportunistically on the 'day's residues', mixing in events which took place during the day or sensations felt during sleep with images drawn deep from our childhood.

Dreams provide our main, but not our only, access to the unconscious. There are also what Freud calls 'parapraxes', unaccountable slips of the tongue, failures of memory, bunglings, misreadings and mislayings which can be traced to unconscious wishes and intentions. The presence of the unconscious is also betrayed in jokes, which for Freud have a largely libidinal, anxious or aggressive content. Where the unconscious is most damagingly at work, however, is in psychological disturbance of one form or another. We may have certain unconscious desires which will not be denied, but which dare not find practical outlet either; in this situation, the desire forces its way in from the unconscious, the ego blocks it off defensively, and the result of this internal conflict is what we call neurosis. The patient begins to develop symptoms which, in compromising fashion, at once protect against the unconscious desire and covertly express it. Such neuroses may be obsessional (having to touch every lamp-post in the street), hysterical (developing a paralysed arm for no good organic reason), or phobic (being unreasonably afraid of open spaces or certain animals). Behind these neuroses, psychoanalysis discerns unresolved conflicts whose roots run back to the individual's early development, and which are likely to be focused in the Oedipal moment; indeed Freud calls the Oedipus complex the 'nucleus of the neuroses'. There will usually be a relation between the kind of neurosis a patient displays, and the point in the pre-Oedipal stage at which his or her psychical development became arrested or 'fixated'. The aim of psycho-

analysis is to uncover the hidden causes of the neurosis in order to relieve the patient of his or her conflicts, so dissolving the distressing symptoms.

Much more difficult to cope with, however, is the condition of psychosis, in which the ego, unable as in neurosis partly to repress the unconscious desire, actually comes under its sway. If this happens, the link between the ego and the external world is ruptured, and the unconscious begins to build up an alternative, delusional reality. The psychotic, in other words, has lost contact with reality at key points, as in paranoia and schizophrenia: if the neurotic may develop a paralysed arm, the psychotic may believe that his arm has turned into an elephant's trunk. 'Paranoia' refers to a more or less systematized state of delusion, under which Freud includes not only delusions of persecution but delusional jealousy and delusions of grandeur. The root of such paranoia he locates in an unconscious defence against homosexuality: the mind denies this desire by converting the love-object into a rival or persecutor, systematically reorganizing and reinterpreting reality to confirm this suspicion. Schizophrenia involves a detachment from reality and a turning in on the self, with an excessive but loosely systematized production of fantasies: it is as though the 'id', or unconscious desire, has surged up and flooded the conscious mind with its illogicality, riddling associations and affective rather than conceptual links between ideas. Schizophrenic language has in this sense an interesting resemblance to poetry.

Psychoanalysis is not only a theory of the human mind, but a practice for curing those who are considered mentally ill or disturbed. Such cures, for Freud, are not achieved just by explaining to the patient what is wrong with him, revealing to him his unconscious motivations. This is a part of psychoanalytical practice, but it will not cure anybody in itself. Freud is not in this sense a rationalist, believing that if only we understand ourselves or the world we can take appropriate action. The nub of the cure for Freudian theory is what is known as 'transference', a concept sometimes popularly confused with what Freud calls 'projection', or the ascribing to others of feelings and wishes which are actually our own. In the course of treatment, the analysand (or patient) may begin unconsciously to 'transfer' on to the figure of the analyst the psychological conflicts from which he or she suffers. If he has had difficulties with his father, for example, he may unconsciously cast the analyst in that role. This poses a problem for the analyst, since such 'repetition' or ritual re-enactment of the original conflict is one of the patient's unconscious ways of avoiding having to come to terms with it. We repeat, sometimes compulsively, what we cannot properly remember, and we cannot remember it because it is unpleasant. But transference also pro-

vides the analyst with a peculiarly privileged insight into the patient's psychological life, in a controlled situation in which he or she can intervene. (One of the several reasons why psychoanalysts must themselves undergo analysis in training is so that they can become reasonably aware of their own unconscious processes, thus resisting as far as possible the danger of 'counter-transferring' their own problems to their patients.) By virtue of this drama of transference, and the insights and interventions which it permits the analyst, the patient's problems are gradually redefined in terms of the analytic situation itself. In this sense, paradoxically, the problems which are handled in the consulting room are never quite at one with the real-life problems of the patient: they have, perhaps, something of the 'fictional' relation to those real-life problems which a literary text has to the real-life materials it transforms. Nobody leaves the consulting room cured of exactly the problems with which he walked in. The patient is likely to resist the analyst's access to her unconscious by a number of familiar techniques, but if all goes well the transference process will allow her problems to be 'worked through' into consciousness, and by dissolving the transference relation at the right moment the analyst will hope to relieve her of them. Another way of describing this process is to say that the patient becomes able to recollect portions of her life which she has repressed: she is able to recount a new, more complete narrative about herself, one which will interpret and make sense of the disturbances from which she suffers. The 'talking cure', as it is called, will have taken effect.

The work of psychoanalysis can perhaps best be summarized in one of Freud's own slogans: 'Where id was, there shall ego be.' Where men and women were in the paralyzing grip of forces which they could not comprehend, there reason and self-mastery shall reign. Such a slogan makes Freud sound rather more of a rationalist than he actually was. Though he once commented that nothing in the end could withstand reason and experience, he was about as far from underestimating the cunning and obstinacy of the mind as it is possible to be. His estimate of human capacities is on the whole conservative and pessimistic: we are dominated by a desire for gratification and an aversion to anything which might frustrate it. In his later work, he comes to see the human race as languishing in the grip of a terrifying death drive, a primary masochism which the ego unleashes on itself. The final goal of life is death, a return to that blissful inanimate state where the ego cannot be injured. Eros, or sexual energy, is the force which builds up history, but it is locked in tragic contradiction with Thanatos or the death drive. We strive onwards only to be constantly driven backwards, struggling to return to a state before we were even conscious. The ego is a pitiable, precarious

entity, battered by the external world, scourged by the cruel upbraidings of the superego, plagued by the greedy, insatiable demands of the id. Freud's compassion for the ego is a compassion for the human race, labouring under the almost intolerable demands placed upon it by a civilization built upon the repression of desire and the deferment of gratification. He was scornful of all utopian proposals for changing this condition; but though many of his social views were conventional and authoritarian, he nevertheless looked with a certain favour upon attempts to abolish or at least reform the institutions of private property and the nation state. He did so because he was deeply convinced that modern society had become tyrannical in its repressiveness. As he argued in *The Future of an Illusion*, if a society has not developed beyond a point at which the satisfaction of one group of its members depends upon the suppression of another, it is understandable that those suppressed should develop an intense hostility towards a culture whose existence their labour has made possible, but in whose riches they have too small a share. 'It goes without saying,' Freud declares, 'that a civilization which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence.'

Any theory as complex and original as Freud's is bound to be a source of fierce contention. Freudianism has been attacked on a great number of grounds, and should in no way be taken as unproblematical. There are problems, for instance, about how it would test its doctrines, about what would count as evidence for or against its claims; as one American behaviourist psychologist remarked in conversation: 'The trouble with Freud's work is that it just isn't *testable*!' It all depends, of course, on what you mean by 'testable'; but it would seem true that Freud sometimes invokes a nineteenth-century concept of science which is no longer really acceptable. Disinterested and objective though it strives to be, his work is shot through with what might be called 'counter-transference', shaped by his own unconscious desires and sometimes distorted by his conscious ideological beliefs. The sexist values we have touched on already are a case in point. Freud was probably no more patriarchal in attitude than most other nineteenth-century Viennese males, but his view of women as passive, narcissistic, masochistic and penis-envying, less morally conscientious than men, has been searchingly criticized by feminists.<sup>1</sup> One has only to compare the tone of Freud's case study of a young woman (Dora) with the tone of his analysis of a small boy (little Hans) to catch the difference of sexual attitude:

brisk, suspicious and at times grotesquely off-target in the case of Dora; genial, avuncular and admiring towards that proto-Freudian philosopher little Hans.

Equally serious is the complaint that psychoanalysis as a medical practice is a form of oppressive social control, labelling individuals and forcing them to conform to arbitrary definitions of 'normality'. This charge is in fact more usually aimed against psychiatric medicine as a whole: as far as Freud's own views on 'normality' are concerned, the accusation is largely misdirected. Freud's work showed, scandalously, just how 'plastic' and variable in its choice of objects libido really is, how so-called sexual perversions form part of what passes as normal sexuality, and how heterosexuality is by no means a natural or self-evident fact. It is true that Freudian psychoanalysis does usually work with some concept of a sexual 'norm'; but this is in no sense given by Nature.

There are other familiar criticisms of Freud, which are not easy to substantiate. One is a merely commonsensical impatience: how could a little girl possibly desire her father's baby? Whether this is true or not, it is not 'common sense' which will allow us to decide. One should remember the sheer bizarreness of the unconscious as it manifests itself in dreams, its distance from the daylight world of the ego, before rushing to dismiss Freud on such intuitive grounds. Another common criticism is that Freud 'brings everything down to sex' – that he is, in the technical term, a 'pan-sexualist'. This is certainly untenable: Freud was a radically dualistic thinker, no doubt excessively so, and always counterposed to the sexual drives such non-sexual forces as the 'ego-instincts' of self-preservation. The seed of truth in the pan-sexualist charge is that Freud regarded sexuality as central enough to human life to provide a *component* of all our activities; but that is not a sexual reductionism.

One criticism of Freud still sometimes heard on the political Left is that his thinking is individualist – that he substitutes 'private' psychological causes and explanations for social and historical ones. This accusation reflects a radical misunderstanding of Freudian theory. There is indeed a real problem about how social and historical factors are *related* to the unconscious; but one point of Freud's work is that it makes it possible for us to think of the development of the human individual in social and historical terms. What Freud produces, indeed, is nothing less than a materialist theory of the making of the human subject. We come to be what we are by an interrelation of bodies – by the complex transactions which take place during infancy between our bodies and those which surround us. This is not a biological reductionism: Freud does not of course believe that we are nothing *but* our bodies, or that our minds are mere reflexes of them. Nor is

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There are other familiar criticisms of Freud, which are not easy to substantiate. One is a merely commonsensical impatience: how could a little girl possibly desire her father's baby? Whether this is true or not, it is not 'common sense' which will allow us to decide. One should remember the sheer bizarreness of the unconscious as it manifests itself in dreams, its distance from the daylight world of the ego, before rushing to dismiss Freud on such intuitive grounds. Another common criticism is that Freud 'brings everything down to sex' – that he is, in the technical term, a 'pan-sexualist'. This is certainly untenable: Freud was a radically dualistic thinker, no doubt excessively so, and always counterposed to the sexual drives such non-sexual forces as the 'ego-instincts' of self-preservation. The seed of truth in the pan-sexualist charge is that Freud regarded sexuality as central enough to human life to provide a *component* of all our activities; but that is not a sexual reductionism.

One criticism of Freud still sometimes heard on the political Left is that his thinking is individualist – that he substitutes 'private' psychological causes and explanations for social and historical ones. This accusation reflects a radical misunderstanding of Freudian theory. There is indeed a real problem about how social and historical factors are *related* to the unconscious; but one point of Freud's work is that it makes it possible for us to think of the development of the human individual in social and historical terms. What Freud produces, indeed, is nothing less than a materialist theory of the making of the human subject. We come to be what we are by an interrelation of bodies – by the complex transactions which take place during infancy between our bodies and those which surround us. This is not a biological reductionism: Freud does not of course believe that we are nothing *but* our bodies, or that our minds are mere reflexes of them. Nor is

it an asocial model of life, since the bodies which surround us, and our relations with them, are always socially specific. The roles of parents, the practices of child care, the images and beliefs associated with all of this are cultural matters which can vary considerably from one society or one point in history to another. 'Childhood' is a recent historical invention, and the range of different historical set-ups encompassed by the word 'family' makes the word itself of limited value. One belief which has apparently not varied in these institutions is the assumption that girls and women are inferior to boys and men: this prejudice would seem to unite all known societies. Since it is a prejudice with deep roots in our early sexual and familial development, psychoanalysis has become of major importance to some feminists.

One Freudian theorist to whom such feminists have had recourse for this purpose is the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. It is not that Lacan is a pro-feminist thinker: on the contrary, his attitudes to the women's movement are in the main arrogant and contemptuous. But Lacan's work is a strikingly original attempt to 'rewrite' Freudianism in ways relevant to all those concerned with the question of the human subject, its place in society, and above all its relationship to language. This last concern is why Lacan is also of interest to literary theorists. What Lacan seeks to do in his *Écrits* is to reinterpret Freud in the light of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of discourse; and while this leads to a sometimes bafflingly opaque, enigmatic body of work, it is nevertheless one that we must now briefly consider if we are to see how post-structuralism and psychoanalysis are interrelated.

I have described how for Freud, at an early point in the infant's development, no clear distinction between subject and object, itself and the external world, is yet possible. It is this state of being which Lacan names the 'imaginary', by which he means a condition in which we lack any defined centre of self, in which what 'self' we have seems to pass into objects, and objects into it, in a ceaseless closed exchange. In the pre-Oedipal state, the child lives a 'symbiotic' relation with its mother's body which blurs any sharp boundary between the two: it is dependent for its life on this body, but we can equally imagine the child as experiencing what it knows of the external world as dependent upon itself. This merging of identities is not quite as blissful as it might sound, according to the Freudian theorist Melanie Klein: at a very early age the infant will harbour murderously aggressive instincts towards its mother's body, entertain fantasies of tearing it to bits and suffer paranoid delusions that this body will in turn destroy it.<sup>2</sup> If we imagine a small child contemplating itself in a mirror – Lacan's so-called 'mirror stage' – we can see how, from within this 'imaginary' state of

being, the child's first development of an ego, of an integrated self-image, begins to happen. The child, who is still physically uncoordinated, finds reflected back to itself in the mirror a gratifyingly unified image of itself; and although its relation to this image is still of an 'imaginary' kind – the image in the mirror both is and is not itself, a blurring of subject and object still obtains – it has begun the process of constructing a centre of self. This self, as the mirror situation suggests, is essentially narcissistic: we arrive at a sense of an 'I' by finding that 'I' reflected back to ourselves by some object or person in the world. This object is at once somehow part of ourselves – we *identify* with it – and yet not ourselves, something alien. The image which the small child sees in the mirror is in this sense an 'alienated' one: the child 'misrecognizes' itself in it, finds in the image a pleasing unity which it does not actually experience in its own body. The imaginary for Lacan is precisely this realm of *images* in which we make identifications, but in the very act of doing so are led to misperceive and misrecognize ourselves. As the child grows up, it will continue to make such imaginary identifications with objects, and this is how its ego will be built up. For Lacan, the ego is just this narcissistic process whereby we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify.

In discussing the pre-Oedipal or imaginary phase, we are considering a register of being in which there are really no more than two terms: the child itself and the other body, which at this point is usually the mother, and which represents external reality for the child. But as we have seen in our account of the Oedipus complex, this 'dyadic' structure is destined to give way to a 'triadic' one; and this happens when the father enters upon and disrupts this harmonious scene. The father signifies what Lacan calls the Law, which is in the first place the social taboo on incest: the child is disturbed in its libidinal relation with the mother, and must begin to recognize in the figure of the father that a wider familial and social network exists of which it is only part. Not only is the child merely a part of this network, but the role it must play there is already predetermined, laid down for it by the practices of the society into which it has been born. The appearance of the father divides the child from the mother's body, and in doing so, as we have seen, drives its desire underground into the unconscious. In this sense the first appearance of the Law, and the opening up of unconscious desire, occur at the same moment: it is only when the child acknowledges the taboo or prohibition which the father symbolizes that it represses its guilty desire, and that desire just *is* what is called the unconscious.

For the drama of the Oedipus complex to come about at all, the child must of course have become dimly aware of sexual difference. It is the entry of the

father which signifies this sexual difference; and one of the key-terms in Lacan's work, the phallus, denotes this signification of sexual distinction. It is only by accepting the necessity of sexual difference, of distinct gender roles, that the child, who has previously been unaware of such problems, can become properly 'socialized'. Lacan's originality is to rewrite this process, which we have already seen in Freud's account of the Oedipus complex, in terms of language. We can think of the small child contemplating itself before the mirror as a kind of 'signifier' – something capable of bestowing meaning – and of the image it sees in the mirror as a kind of 'signified'. The image the child sees is somehow the 'meaning' of itself. Here, signifier and signified are as harmoniously united as they are in Saussure's sign. Alternatively, we could read the mirror situation as a kind of metaphor: one item (the child) discovers a likeness of itself in another (the reflection). This, for Lacan, is an appropriate image of the imaginary as a whole: in this mode of being, objects ceaselessly reflect themselves in each other in a sealed circuit, and no real differences or divisions are yet apparent. It is a world of *plenitude*, with no lacks or exclusions of any kind: standing before the mirror, the 'signifier' (the child) finds a 'fullness', a whole and unblemished identity, in the signified of its reflection. No gap has yet opened up between signifier and signified, subject and world. The infant is so far happily untroubled by the problems of post-structuralism – by the fact that, as we have seen, language and reality are not so smoothly synchronized as this situation would suggest.

With the entry of the father, the child is plunged into post-structuralist anxiety. It now has to grasp Saussure's point that identities come about only as a result of difference – that one term or subject is what it is only by excluding another. Significantly, the child's first discovery of sexual difference occurs at about the same time that it is discovering language itself. The baby's cry is not really a sign but a signal: it indicates that it is cold, hungry or whatever. In gaining access to language, the small child unconsciously learns that a sign has meaning only by dint of its difference from other signs, and learns also that a sign presupposes the *absence* of the object it signifies. Our language 'stands in' for objects: all language is in a way 'metaphorical', in that it substitutes itself for some direct, wordless possession of the object itself. It saves us from the inconvenience of Swift's Laputans, who carry on their back a sack full of all the objects they might need in conversation, and simply hold these objects up to each other as a way of talking. But just as the child is unconsciously learning these lessons in the sphere of language, it is also unconsciously learning them in the world of sexuality. The presence of the father, symbolized by the phallus, teaches the child that it must take up

a place in the family which is defined by sexual difference, by exclusion (it cannot be its parent's lover) and by absence (it must relinquish its earlier bonds to the mother's body). Its identity as a subject, it comes to perceive, is constituted by its relations of difference and similarity to the other subjects around it. In accepting all of this, the child moves from the imaginary register into what Lacan calls the 'symbolic order': the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society. In Freud's own terms, it has successfully negotiated the painful passage through the Oedipus complex.

All, however, is not entirely well. For as we have seen, in Freud the subject who emerges from this process is a 'split' one, radically divided between the conscious life of the ego and the unconscious, or repressed desire. It is this primary repression of desire which makes us what we are. The child must now resign itself to the fact that it can never have any *direct* access to reality, in particular to the now prohibited body of the mother. It has been banished from this 'full', imaginary possession into the 'empty' world of language. Language is 'empty' because it is just an endless process of difference and absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child will now simply move from one signifier to another, along a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite. One signifier implies another, and that another, and so on *ad infinitum*: the 'metaphorical' world of the mirror has yielded ground to the 'metonymic' world of language. Along this metonymic chain of signifiers, meanings, or signifieds, will be produced; but no object or person can ever be fully 'present' in this chain, because as we have seen with Derrida its effect is to divide and differentiate all identities.

This potentially endless movement from one signifier to another is what Lacan means by desire. All desire springs from a lack, which it strives continually to fill. Human language works by such lack: the absence of the real objects which signs designate, the fact that words have meaning only by virtue of the absence and exclusion of others. To enter language, then, is to become a prey to desire: language, Lacan remarks, is 'what hollows being into desire'. Language divides up – *articulates* – the fullness of the imaginary: we will now never be able to find rest in the single object, the final meaning, which will make sense of all the others. To enter language is to be severed from what Lacan calls the 'real', that inaccessible realm which is always beyond the reach of signification, always outside the symbolic order. In particular, we are severed from the mother's body: after the Oedipus crisis, we will never again be able to attain this precious object, even though we will spend all of our lives hunting for it. We have to make do instead with

substitute objects, what Lacan calls the 'object little *a*', with which we try vainly to plug the gap at the very centre of our being. We move among substitutes for substitutes, metaphors of metaphors, never able to recover the pure (if fictive) self-identity and self-completion which we knew in the imaginary. There is no 'transcendental' meaning or object which will ground this endless yearning – or if there is such a transcendental reality, it is the phallus itself, the 'transcendental signifier' as Lacan calls it. But this is not in fact an object or reality, not the actual male sexual organ: it is merely an empty marker of difference, a sign of what divides us from the imaginary and inserts us into our predestined place within the symbolic order.

Lacan, as we have seen in our discussion of Freud, regards the unconscious as structured like a language. This is not only because it works by metaphor and metonymy: it is also because, like language itself for the post-structuralists, it is composed less of *signs* – stable meanings – than of *signifiers*. If you dream of a horse, it is not immediately obvious what this signifies: it may have many contradictory meanings, may be just one of a whole chain of signifiers with equally multiple meanings. The image of the horse, that is to say, is not a sign in Saussure's sense – it does not have one determined signified tied neatly to its tail – but is a signifier which may be attached to many different signifieds, and which may itself bear the traces of the other signifiers which surround it. (I was not aware, when I wrote the above sentence, of the word-play involved in 'horse' and 'tail': one signifier interacted with another against my conscious intention.) The unconscious is just a continual movement and activity of signifiers, whose signifieds are often inaccessible to us because they are *repressed*. This is why Lacan speaks of the unconscious as a 'sliding of the signified beneath the signifier', as a constant fading and evaporation of meaning, a bizarre 'modernist' text which is almost unreadable and which will certainly never yield up its final secrets to interpretation.

If this constant sliding and hiding of meaning were true of conscious life, then we would of course never be able to speak coherently at all. If the whole of language were present to me when I spoke, then I would not be able to articulate anything at all. The ego, or consciousness, can therefore only work by repressing this turbulent activity, provisionally nailing down words on to meanings. Every now and then a word from the unconscious which I do not want insinuates itself into my discourse, and this is the famous Freudian slip of the tongue or parapraxis. But for Lacan all our discourse is in a sense a slip of the tongue: if the process of language is as slippery and ambiguous as he suggests, we can never mean precisely what we say and never say precisely what we mean. Meaning is always in some sense an approximation, a near-

miss, a part-failure, mixing non-sense and non-communication into sense and dialogue. We can certainly never articulate the truth in some 'pure', unmediated way: Lacan's own notoriously syllbline style, a language of the unconscious all in itself, is meant to suggest that language of the unconscious all in itself, is meant to suggest that any attempt to convey a whole, unblemished meaning in speech or script is a pre-Freudian illusion. In conscious life, we achieve some sense of ourselves as reasonably unified, coherent selves, and without this action would be impossible. But all this is merely at the 'imaginary' level of the ego, which is no more than the tip of the iceberg of the human subject known to psychoanalysis. The ego is function or effect of a subject which is always dispersed, never identical with itself, strung out along the chains of the discourses which constitute it. There is a radical split between these two levels of being – a gap most dramatically exemplified by the act of referring to myself in a sentence. When I say 'Tomorrow I will mow the lawn,' the 'I' which I pronounce is an immediately intelligible, fairly stable point of reference which belies the murky depths of the 'I' which does the pronouncing. The former 'I' is known to linguistic theory as the 'subject of the enunciation', the topic designated by my sentence; the latter 'I', the one who speaks the sentence, is the 'subject of the enunciating', the subject of the actual act of speaking. In the process of speaking and writing, these two 'I's' seem to achieve a rough sort of unity; but this unity is of an imaginary kind. The 'subject of the enunciating', the actual speaking, writing human person, can never represent himself or herself fully in what is said: there is no sign which will, so to speak, sum up my entire being. I can only *designate* myself in language by a convenient pronoun. The pronoun 'I' *stands in* for the ever-elusive subject, which will always slip through the nets of any particular piece of language; and this is equivalent to saying that I cannot 'mean' and 'be' simultaneously. To make this point, Lacan boldly rewrites Descartes's 'I think, therefore I am' as: 'I am not where I think, and I think where I am not.'

There is an interesting analogy between what we have just described and those 'acts of enunciation' known as literature. In some literary works, in particular realist fiction, our attention as readers is drawn not to the 'act of enunciating', to *how* something is said, from what kind of position and with what end in view, but simply to *what* is said, to the enunciation itself. Any such 'anonymous' enunciation is likely to have more authority, to engage our assent more readily, than one which draws attention to how the enunciation is actually constructed. The language of a legal document or scientific textbook may impress or even intimidate us because we do not see how the language got there in the first place. The text does not allow the reader to see

how the facts it contains were selected, what was excluded, why these facts were organized in this particular way, what assumptions governed this process, what forms of work went into the making of the text, and how all of this might have been different. Part of the power of such texts thus lies in their suppression of what might be called their modes of production, how they got to be what they are; in this sense, they have a curious resemblance to the life of the human ego, which thrives by repressing the process of its own making. Many modernist literary works, by contrast, make the 'act of enunciating', the process of their own production, part of their actual 'content'. They do not try to pass themselves off as unquestionable, like Barthes's 'natural' sign, but as the Formalists would say '[t]hey bare the device' of their own composition. They do this so that they will not be mistaken for absolute truth – so that the reader will be encouraged to reflect critically on the partial, particular ways they construct reality, and so to recognize how it might all have happened differently. The finest example of such literature is perhaps the drama of Bertolt Brecht; but many other instances are available in the modern arts, not least in film. Think on the one hand of a typical Hollywood film which simply uses the camera as a kind of 'window' or second eye through which the viewer contemplates reality – which holds the camera steady and allows it simply to 'record' what is happening. Watching such a film, we tend to forget that 'what is happening' is not in fact just 'happening', but is a highly complex *construct*, involving the actions and assumptions of a great many people. Think then on the other hand of a cinematic sequence in which the camera darts restlessly, nervously from object to object, focusing first on one and then discarding it to pick out another, probing these objects compulsively from several different angles before trailing away, disconsolately as it were, to frame something else. This would not be a particularly avant-garde procedure; but even this highlights how, in contrast to the first type of film, the *activity* of the camera, the way of mounting the episode, is being 'foregrounded', so that we cannot as spectators simply stare through this obtrusive operation to the objects themselves.<sup>3</sup> The 'content' of the sequence can be grasped as the *product* of a specific set of technical devices, not as a 'natural' or given reality which the camera is simply there to reflect. The 'signified' – the 'meaning' of the sequence – is a product of the 'signifier' – the cinematic techniques – rather than something which preceded it.

In order to pursue further the implications of Lacan's thought for the human subject, we shall have to take a brief detour through a famous essay written under Lacan's influence by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', contained in his

book *Lenin and Philosophy* (1971), Althusser tries to illuminate, with the implicit aid of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the working of ideology in society. How is it, the essay asks, that human subjects very often come to submit themselves to the dominant ideologies of their societies – ideologies which Althusser sees as vital to maintaining the power of a ruling class? By what mechanisms does this come about? Althusser has sometimes been seen as a 'structuralist' Marxist, in that for him human individuals are the product of many different social determinants, and thus have no essential unity. As far as a science of human societies goes, such individuals can be studied simply as the functions, or effects, of this or that social structure – as occupying a place in a mode of production, as a member of a specific social class, and so on. But this of course is not at all the way we actually experience ourselves. We tend to see ourselves rather as free, unified, autonomous, self-generating individuals; and unless we did so we would be incapable of playing our parts in social life. For Althusser, what allows us to experience ourselves in this way is ideology. How is this to be understood?

As far as society is concerned, I as an individual am utterly dispensable. No doubt someone has to fulfil the functions I carry out (writing, teaching, lecturing and so on), since education has a crucial role to play in the reproduction of this kind of social system, but there is no particular reason why this individual should be myself. One reason why this thought does not lead me to join a circus or take an overdose is that this is not usually the way that I experience my own identity, not the way I actually 'live out' my life. I do not *feel* myself to be a mere function of a social structure which could get along without me, true though this appears when I *analyse* the situation, but as somebody with a significant *relation* to society and the world at large, a relation which gives me enough sense of meaning and value to enable me to act purposefully. It is as though society were not just an impersonal structure to me, but a 'subject' which 'addresses' me personally – which recognizes me, tells me that I am valued, and so makes me by that very act of recognition into a free, autonomous subject. I come to feel, not exactly as though the world exists for me alone, but as though it is significantly 'centred' on me, and I in turn am significantly 'centred' on it. Ideology, for Althusser, is the set of beliefs and practices which does this centring. It is far more subtle, pervasive and unconscious than a set of explicit doctrines: it is the very medium in which I 'live out' my relation to society, the realm of signs and social practices which binds me to the social structure and lends me a sense of coherent purpose and identity. Ideology in this sense may include the act of going to church, of casting a vote, of letting women pass first through doors; it may encompass not only such conscious predilections