



## **Structure and subject: What do we know of Oedipus' desire?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at structure and subject, and tackles what do we know of Oedipus' desire. It also advances the proposition that the idea of 'structure and subject' can be said to represent a short history of psychanalytical thinking in itself.

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Structure, subject, and their possible relationship, we have here, in a nutshell, what psychoanalysis is all about. Indeed, the phrase, the formula « Structure and subject » can be said to represent a short history of psychanalytical thinking in itself. All this can be illustrated with a few simple drawings.<sup>1</sup>

Written when the United States was more viable than it had ever been, Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837-38)—both through its own hand-wringing nature, and its success as a serialized novel—suggests the nation was gripped by great anxiety. The internal conflicts over slavery, the ongoing violence and genocide on western frontiers, and the U.S.'s entrance onto the stage of global imperialism provide the backdrop to the angst of a young boy making his own way in the world; within this episodic thriller, Poe presents a gothic alternative to Cooper's novels of American masculine self-reliance.

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation is essentially founded on my recent articles about « The debt » and « Lacan's little letters » as they were published « on line », in French, in *Gradiva* Volume XIV, Number 2 and Volume XV, Number 1, 2014 and 2015. See also, in English, « Malaise, mal être, ma lettre, » *Psyart The Online Journal*, 2012, and « The Subject, the Object and the Law, » *Psyart*, 2014.

## I

I will start with the *Traumdeutung* and Freud's discovery that dreams have meaning. No doubt, you remember Freud's first words in his book on dreams :

*I shall bring forward proof that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams [...] (Ich habe mir vorgesezt, zu zeigen, das Träume einer Deutung fähig sind [...])*

In other words, thanks to notions such as *displacement* and *condensation* or, more specifically, metonymy and metaphor, thoughts one was not conscious of produce words and images which psychoanalysis can interpret.

The symbolical significance of King Oedipus' story, next, can be considered as the second essential step in the constitution of psychoanalysis as a « conjectural » science. This tale of a young man who happened to kill his father—a king—and then married his mother while becoming king himself had been known for some twenty-five centuries, at least, but had never been considered as anything but literature, a tragic comment, at best, on the hopeless nature of human destiny, while the possible symbolical meaning of the play, of the myth indeed, had remained veiled, unrevealed. Interpreting the tale, which in fact amounted to treating it as if it had been a dream, Freud, as the first psychoanalytical patient in history, recognized something of his own history in it and came to acknowledge the universal dimension of the myth. For indeed, the triangular structure could be said to apply to all of us, men and women, with a modification later as far as women were concerned.<sup>2</sup> And this was only the beginning. For with the years, a careful examination of the said triangle revealed it to be much more than just a representation of the nuclear family of mother, father and child.

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<sup>2</sup> A change of object, after a little while, or, perhaps, the acquisition of a second object.

In short, while one parent is the object of desire, the other is the « prohibitor », and therefore a good representation of the « bar ». When Lacan speaks of the law of the father, I consider it is this triangular structure he has in mind, at least partly. For as we know, when the child is born, that is to say when we go from One to two, a third entity must be taken into consideration, a voice, a presence, someone in fact whose rôle it is to enounce the law : the mother is not permitted to reintegrate her « product ». Thus what began as the analysis of a work of fiction, as a work of literature and as the study of a myth, the story of King Oedipus, led to the discovery of a universal structure. : a subject, an object, and a void between the two, a space, a distance which cannot be obliterated. This is the reason why we can speak of a subject which is as barred : an impassable *bar* prevents him or her (but in fact we are dealing with a concept here : S/) from ever reaching its object, whatever this object is (for the time being a concept also). Such a structure, as we can judge, goes far beyond the oedipal triangle and proves richer in its implications.<sup>3</sup> It is to be found in the writings of Freud after the Twenties, and in those of Lacan in the Sixties, no longer just the concrete law of a father who is standing between mother and child but a more specific representation of man's tragic nature.

But this is not the end of the story. In fact, it is only the beginning, its cause one might say. For however universal the prohibition, however evident, if we look at our own lives, our helplessness, *Hilflöslichkeit*, we are not prepared to accept such a fate, *we refuse to acknowledge it*. For indeed, with more or less « luck »—and, yes, the word will have to be defined somewhat more carefully—we do survive, and the reason for this is our refusal to accept that the object of our quest, of our love, shall for ever remain out of reach, remain « ideal, » in fact. In other words, what characterizes human beings is their capacity of resistance--« the power to successfully oppose», the *OED* says (and here I must insert my doubts about the « successful » part of it), but also, and this is more satisfactory : « the refusal to comply ». Whatever the ambiguity of the notion of « resistance », in any case--and we know that since Freud the word has a very specific meaning in psychoanalysis--, such a denial of reality—and here we think of Freud's « Reality Principle »—is the condition of our desiring. For we do desire, that is to say we foster the illusion that the «

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<sup>3</sup> Do we have a different triangular structure in the case of twins ? There is no reason the original loss I mentioned should not also be felt by each individual twin ; can we say it is more complex since what is lost is not only the paradise of the mother's body but also something like the proximity, kinship, of the other « occupier » of the womb ? Indeed, a part of what preceded birth is preserved and it may make a difference. What do twins say about this ? Does the law (of the father) work in the same way in the case of twins ? There is no reason to think that the prohibition—the bar--should be different in this case. Where I think the difference lies is to be found at the time of the mirror stage, since twins, then, have a ready-made, live duplicate of themselves, with all the consequences, positive or negative, this may entail : a stronger, more secure sense of identity, but also perhaps, in some unfortunate cases, a weakening of this sense of identity, when one twin feels himself or herself reduced to just an image of the other twin.

bar » can be traversed, that we can trespass such a metaphysical interdiction and that the Object, with a capital O this time, can be reached.

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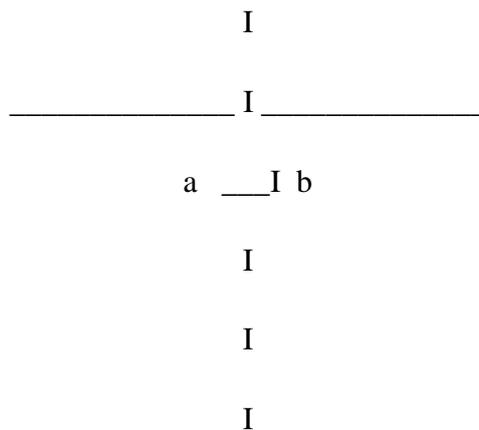
Whatever the ultimate reason for such an unconscious denial, its cause indeed, and I have a feeling it has to do with memory—the memory of happier times before birth perhaps—, what is certain is that we do persist in refusing to accept the inaccessibility of the Real (Lacan's real) and live on with the hope we can bridge the gap which, as subjects, separates us from the world out there, the world of objects. For if the distance between us and objects cannot actually be overcome, we have a way to pretend it can, thus making life more bearable. Yes, as humans, we *represent*, that is to say produce *signs*, signs which permit us, as in hallucination,<sup>4</sup> to replace objects. « Sign, » « referent, » « language, »

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<sup>4</sup> « As in a hallucination » is the important notion here ; I use *hallucination* in an attempt to define what happens, not only when we read or write, but also in the plain speech act. This constitutes indeed the act of representation, which could not function without the *illusion* that the word is the thing. We all know Coleridge's well coined phrase about our « willing suspension of disbelief », a *suspension* without which no pleasure can be expected from literature. I say « pleasure » and not « truth », and I take the distinction to be essential ; a commonplace again : the truth of literature lies on the illusion it is founded on, that it to say its lie. Naturally, this is not saying that psychoanalytic knowledge aims at suppressing our pleasure when we read, and I am sure it will suffice me to say that we must carefully distinguish reading from analysis (as the fact of dreaming from the analysis, afterwards, of what remains of the dream in our memory) to put your minds at rest. For such is indeed the first epistemological recommendation psychoanalysis has to make : exactly as in the case of dreaming, in which not only what the dreamer recalls is not the dream, but in which the actual dream as it may be remembered *is not its meaning* but has to be analysed to make some sense. This argument is developed in « Le Sens », *Cahiers Charles V*, N°16 (Université Paris VII), December 1993, 179-183. As we know, until today, the main task of standard classical literary criticism has been to concentrate on what we can briefly call the « surface » of the text, something which in fact mostly corresponds to « day's residues » in the dream (occupies the same place in the structure, let us say), a necessary part of the literary experience, no doubt, *but not* the essential part of it. After Freud, we can no longer be satisfied with this for we are aware that literature has the structure of the metaphor, *lapsus*, slip of the tongue : its « truth » is not where we are inclined to think it is.

these notions are for the linguist ; for the psychoanalyst—and here this is not too far from the philosopher—, the very same structure leads to dream, speech and art, which naturally includes literature, and in passing you may have recognized Winnicott's space for cultural creation. I shall return to the problem of representation in a moment.

Once again, all this can be found in the works of Freud ; I have just mentioned « hallucination », which is quite similar to what happens when we dream, and this leads to *sublimation*, a concept Freud used to describe the way we deal with desire, in other words the mental operation which enables us to overcome the prohibition meant by the « bar ». Overcome, but only « in imagination ». Thus is the solace procured to us by art. I cannot recover the object that is lost for ever, but I can at least satisfy my libido (which we can translate by my « desire to live », well or not so well, this is another matter altogether) thanks to the choice of a *substitute*—the very word used by Freud. Inevitably, the structure of representation in the dream comes to mind : I cannot reach *a*, but thanks to such a substitute, *b*, I may, in hallucination, give way to my desire.



The diagram is Freud's and is well known, I am sure. The distance between *a* and *b* represents a change of course, a deflection (from reality to dream one might say), the mental act thanks to which a substitute is selected : this is sublimation, and also symbolisation : *b* as a symbol of *a*. Such a figure naturally calls to mind the metonymy and the metaphor of the linguist. It seems as if we were dealing with a single structure and, in any case, it is a structure we have already met : *ça parle*.

## II

All right then, « *Ca parle* », something, someone, it, speaks, and we notice in passing how appropriate Lacan's *ça* is, which although it is not used here as part of the Second Topology is not without reminding us of Freud's *Es*. More specifically, we realize at this point that these two words represent a turning point in our research. For indeed they enrich the single structure mentioned above with a second dimension, a second meaning as it were. So far, the psychoanalytic critic—and the analyst also, perhaps—were approaching literature with the tools of the anthropologist, making use, among other things, of the Oedipus myth to uphold his or her interpretation. In a way, this shows we were the prisoners of such a triangular structure in our analyses, and although the observation is quite correct and does correspond to reality, in putting so much emphasis on it we tended to limit our inquiry into the human « *Seele* ». The error was not—I repeat myself—that the oedipal structure was not fundamental, but that it was the only one. In short, now that we have learnt so much more about *representation*, another question comes to the forefront, namely : something speaks, but what does it say ?

For there are other structures, and among others those which interest the linguist, as we have seen. The first structure, the original one, distinguishes sign and referent (Saussure), and this leads to Signifier and signified (still Saussure), and also distinguishes *énoncé* from enunciation. All this is well known and I certainly do not wish to embark on an elementary lesson in linguistics. I am only discussing the concept of representation and, for this purpose, wish to point out the structural similarity there is between elementary linguistic structures and the famous formula which best expresses Freud's discovery : Cs/Ucs.

Naturally, the fields of linguistics and of psychoanalysis are two completely separated fields and we are not going to succumb to the temptation of reducing the one to the other (« the one » being psychoanalysis and « the other » linguistics). What structurally « unites » both fields is an *homology* and certainly not a similarity (i.e. an equality). Lacan, when speaking of the subject and of regression, discussed all this as early as 1955 in his seminar on the Ego (*Séminaire* II, 163-175), carefully distinguishing, as I do,<sup>5</sup> language and the unconscious. In the end, what matters is the realization that the conceptual pair Cs/Ucs is dependent on the way men and women represent the world-out-there or, better still, the realization that, as subjects, men and women mentally « recreate » the objects they perceive. Our relationship to the world is founded on representation, and this naturally includes the unconscious dimension of such a reconstruction. We may not be aware of it, but this reconstruction has a

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<sup>5</sup> The question of representation is a very difficult one ; I made an attempt at dealing with its difficulties in 1993, in « Language and the Unconscious, » (London), *Prose Studies*, Vol. II, December 1988, 21-31 and « 'Me Jane, You Tarzan' : on Meaning, » *Compromise Formations*, edit. Vera J. Camden, Kent, Ohio, London, England, Kent State University Press, 1989, 1-14

lot to do with the transference, an essential element indeed in the psychoanalytical cure.

There is no need to abandon the oedipal structure, or that of child and mother, but with Lacan, at last, we have started to take the words of the subject into consideration again, in what is after all a very Freudian enterprise (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* was indeed published in 1905). Yes, nothing more than a return to Freud !

We are still dealing with structures, but some of them are linguistic structures and this time the place of the subject is clearly marked. There lies the essential difference between anthropology and psychoanalysis : our object of inquiry is now the subject, S, and even S/, and not simply anthropological structures. It follows that we have now a better chance of finding out what the subject's desire is, which after all is the only sensible aim of a psychoanalysis.

That this is an extremely difficult—and sometimes painful—affair, we are aware of it, but there is no reason to abandon our quest ; we have already learnt too much to stop now in mid course.

What we learn from Oedipus's story, as much as the particular nature of the child's desire, is that this desire is not conscious, is completely veiled, absent from a list of possible motivations, a cause that has nothing to do with reason or will-power and that does not offer itself readily for interpretation, quite on the contrary. Once again, all this is known, but our unconscious desire is so elusive, is so much part of ourselves, *nous tient tant à la peau*, sticks so to our very skin that it may not be a bad thing, now and then, to remind ourselves of this. For what it's worth.

### III

At this point, when we have left the field of the anthropologist in order to organize our search of the unconscious subject, S/, we can return to what we know about representation, and for instance about language and to Lacan's « *Ca parle* ». To make a long story short, I shall simply repeat here that we can only speak of the subject because there are signs of « it ». If Freud was able to conceptualize such movements of our « soul » not *directly* perceptible in any way (except perhaps in the brain as a flux going from one neuron to the other or in the form of a biochemical reaction which does not say anything about affect—emotion--, an effect, in any case, and not a cause), it was because he had discovered their presence at work in our dreams, first, then in our discourse and finally in our behavior at large (my reading of Lacan's *symbolique*).

I hope you will excuse my insisting so heavily on what we have all known for a long time, but Oedipus, after all, was also warned, and to no effect. For we are dealing with a signifier, « Desire » or « Unconscious », it is the same « thing »--which points to a void, to an absence ; we are dealing with a sign which has no material referent, an abstraction where logical motivations have no place, which means we are facing causes not immediately accessible to

consciousness and also that never present themselves otherwise than under a deceptive disguise.<sup>6</sup>

Again, we do know this and even theorize about it, but at the same time, quite naturally, we do not wish to know. Oedipus' flight from Corinth is a perfect illustration of the way our destiny is shaped by forces unknown to us at first and only accessible in the *Nachträglichkeit*, afterwards. Told by the Oracle that he shall kill his father and marry his mother, and honestly horrified at the thought, he runs away from his city. Thus, even before the crime occurs, does he leave what he thinks might have been the «crime-scene » had he not fled, thinking himself safe. We know how the story ends and how his very flight caused him to become a murderer and an incestuous son. That he should eventually blind *himself* is of course quite significant : this is the way the myth stresses how blind he was from the very beginning in fact. Are we to see in this last action a symbolical coming to awareness, something like an analytical progress or even the end of a cure ? This is open to interpretation, as is the idea that the blinding of Oedipus has something to do with a successful mourning.<sup>7</sup>

Our model, then, is almost « complete » ; following what can be said about structure, we have reached the domain of the subject, that is to say what concerns each individual in his or her personal history. Thanks to Freud and a few others, we know (but we do not want to know) that we are *incomplete* and have experienced a fundamental *loss* ; we also know that we desire and pretend to believe—although « pretend » is not adequate since none of this is at all conscious—pretend to believe that we can somehow manage to reach the other side of the « bar », get to the Real as if we were objects ourselves, which is of course impossible since by definition what makes a subject of each of us is that he or she can never be an object<sup>8</sup>, and finally, we are coming to realize—at least I strongly hope so—that we spend our time running after an impossible and mysterious object *a* (Lacan) which turns out to be the very cause of our desire.

So far, so good. Put roughly, we know why we desire : because of a loss. It is in Freud. A loss of love, and also the fear of a loss of love. But the observation is far too general and does not lead us very far in our personal analyses ; it seems we have reached the limits of the structural field and if we want to learn more about what the said subject desires (me or you in our intimacy) we must gather somewhat more information. This is the next step

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<sup>6</sup> The formula I use may help : discourse carries Desire and conceals it at the same time, *la parole porte/masque le Désir*.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the blinding as punishment can also be understood as having something to do with the superego, something like the law of the Other within the very Subject.

<sup>8</sup> By « can never be an object », I am defining the status of the subject, who in his or her incompleteness differs from the finite solidity of the object in the Real, out there, an object I reconstruct in my perceptions. And when we say, with Lacan, that the Subject is the object of the Other's desire, we are only saying that the Subject, *S/*, as we understand « it » is not free as he or she thinks, a consequence, in fact, of its incompleteness.

we can take : it is adumbrated in the final years of Lacan's Seminar and has to do with what I say(s) and do(es) as a subject and this is probably most perceptible within the transference. In fact, it is thanks to the transference—our careful and difficult analysis of it—that we may succeed in discovering what in our lives is destructive (what is not needn't worry us). This is where the Other makes his or her entrance, parents, naturally and to begin with, but acting as *unconscious agents*, which is why it is wiser to use the general notion of « environment » when we speak of such an Other.

In the diagram which illustrates how the subject, unable to reach O (for the ideal Object), « selects » o' as a substitute, the trajectory from *a* to *b* which charts the course of desire is the effect of the desire of the Other, an impelling force which tells the unconscious subject how to desire.

In the end--but this is for each of us to say--, what we shall discover thanks to the transference is that, besides being an abstract sign of what one generally desires, object *a* points to something specific in our personal history, that is to say to the unconscious desire of someone, the Other precisely, an Other who can of course be composite, *l'Autre*, who tells us what and how to desire.

$a = A$  (the Other)<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the object we pursue is also the master of our desire.

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<sup>9</sup> I thank Jerry Flieger for suggesting the formula: « *a* is co-extensive to A ».