The Epicenity of the Text:  
LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS

In previous issues, Borderlines has published several pieces, notably that by Brenda Longfellow in #6, which assume the importance of the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, for the feminist project. In this issue we present an article by Quebecois psychoanalyst Charles Levin which expands on the difficulties inherent in this appropriation both in the nature of Lacan's own work and in the manner of its incorporation into the feminist discourse, particularly in the work of Jane Gallop and Jacqueline Rose. Notably, Levin emphasizes the centrality of the phallus as the principle of signification in Lacan's work and, by extension, as the "essence of sexuality as an epistemology." Thus the Lacanian feminist "is left with the dismal prospect of endlessly displacing the general significance of signification itself, and thus repeating the whole problematic of the Lacanian text." Levin's challenge to French-derived feminist theory is the first of a series of theoretical essays that Borderlines will publish on current debates in cultural theory.

 Joan Davies

"In epiphenomenal language, as distinct from language imagined as either neutral or androgynous, gender is variable at will, a mere metaphor (Jacobsen, p. 49)."

"The author of any critique is himself framed by his own frame of the other... (Johnson, pp. 167, 165)."

The letter as a signifier is thus not a thing or the absence of a thing, nor a word or the absence of a word, nor an organ or the absence of an organ, but a knot in a structure where word, things, and organs can neither be definably separated nor compatibly combined...

Freud and Lacan: the Psychopolitics of Totemism

In circles of social, cultural, literary, and film study—and among some feminists—Jacques Lacan has become something of an institution. He is constantly read in isolation from other psychoanalytic writers (Melanie Klein, Hanna Segal, Marion Milner, Edith Jacobson, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, to name only a few possibilities, apart from Freud himself, and his immediate circle). Even the best known of Lacan's contemporaries are rarely cited in the arts and social science literature, with the exception of Klein and D.W. Winnicott, who are mentioned very sparingly indeed. On the other hand, Lacan is taken seriously by nearly everyone doing up-to-date cultural or feminist research. And of course he is frequently cited on such matters as metaphor and metonymy, and on the relation of the tropes to the dreamwork. Nobody refers to Elsa Sharpe (pp. 9-10, 19-39), who developed this connection in the nineteen thirties.

The reasons for this condensation of psychoanalytic thought into the lone figure of Lacan are no doubt obscure, but they may have to do with the logic of identification. In order for Lacan to embody psychoanalysis, psychoanalyst first has to be reduced to the body of Freud himself. Then, on the basis of a fantasy about the betrayal of this body, Lacan can attempt to re-embody true psychoanalysis (the "return to Freud") in "the name of the father." Thus Lacan appears well situated both to share and to resolve the feelings of ambivalence which anyone approaching psychoanalysis is likely to feel.

Nearing psychoanalysis, especially in the atmosphere of a totemic fantasy such as this, it is easy to feel as if one is entering an already controlled space—specifically, the authoritarian father's space. Moreover, as Lacan was to point out, the dead father is rather difficult to dislodge from his privileged position in the carefully self-cancelling structure of an obessional discourse. The deliberate patterns of displacement and deferral in Lacan's Écrits and seminars provide a seductive occasion for the deflection and management of (Oedipal) ambivalence and conflict.

As Jane Gallop suggests in The Daughter's Seduction (pp. 33-36), Lacan's appeal to feminists may be related to the way in which he set himself up as "the cock of the walk," a kind of contemporary ally and lover who provides magical access to the feared and admired opposite to be overtaken. Lacan not only disposes of the master, but reconstitutes him as well: he is both a rebel and a redeemer, consummating and then expanding the crime of desiring to partake in a fantasied omnipotence, such as that so commonly ascribed to Freud himself, and so universally resented in him. Lacan serves, in other words, as a conduit for the projective identification onto the father.

The myth of Freud as primitive father is of course fundamental to psychoanalytic politics. If psychoanalysis is the dead body of Freud, then the rituals over his remains—the vigil against grave robbers, the appropriation and resurrection of the corpus as the body of the analyst himself, sitting at the right hand of Freud—are as characteristic of Lacanian practice as they are of members of the International. Lacan, however, is neither father, nor son, nor brother, but a kind of trinitarian demagogue—like Thoth, a devotee of writing, a "god of resurrection... interested...in death as a repetition of life and life as a rehearsal of death....
Theodora repeats everything in the addition of the supplement: in adding to and doubling as the man, he is other than the sun and the same as it; other than the good and name, etc. Always taking a place not his own, a place one could call that of the dead or the dummy, he has neither a proper place nor a proper name. His propriety or property is impropriety or inappropriateness, the floating indetermination that allows for substitution and play (Derrida, 1981, p. 93)."  

Unfortunately, this resolution of the problem of Freud's space (his resting place) runs into its own complications, which emerge most clearly in neostucturalist developments of Lacan's thought. Decollectionist symbolic is immersed in rivalry with the parents, obsessed with creation as a process of disembodiment and annihilation. The theory and practice of sexualityally have become a sort of allergy about what is stolen from the paradoxical father (the supplement, or name without referent or substance) and from the irretrievable mother (the virgin-origin-source, or substance and referent without name). This cosmogony is not exclusively Oedipal: it also draws upon the Orestes. In the Lacanian version of that less celebrated tragedy, however, revenge against the mother never seems to be followed by reconciliation with her law, and the turning of Eumenides (primitive superego). The Lacanian father may be an oppressor, but he remains the only source of order, while the mother becomes, in a sense, much more dangerous: she is the betrayer, and this appears to be a feature of Lacan's thinking which persists, not only in the writings of Krinetsi (1983, pp. 42-4; Gallop, 1982, pp. 117-8), but even in the anti-patriarchal discourse of Lacan's literary, as Gallop (pp. 113-5) suggests.

Philippe Sollers is reported to have said that Lacan's political problems arose because he had "run afoul of" the psychoanalytic "matriarchy." (Schmelzer, p. 13). Princess Bonaparte (who ranamed Freud after the Anacharsis) was not the only daughter (or imaginary wife) of Freud whose authority Lacan disputed. There was also Melanie Klein and Anna Freud herself, who between them presided over English-speaking psychoanalysis for nearly half a century. Implicit in Lacan's denunciation of "ego psychology," and his return to Freud, was the fantasy of a march against domestication, the feminization of psychoanalytic theory. The publication of Anti-Oedipus during the heyday of Lacan's notoriety was a development of this, with its virile imagery of the social process, and its picture of Lacan himself as a family-oriented counter- 

insurgent who unencumbered desire by theorizing it as a lack (Deleuze, 1972).

In general, the fact that Freud had a mother gets little play in the Lacanian imagination. But Freud actually seems to have had a privileged relationship with his mother. She had heard a prophecy that he would be a "great man," and told him about it. In some ways, Freud's feeling about his own creation, psychoanalysis, was like his mother's attitude toward him; he thought he had brought something significant into the world. A question -- or a fantasy -- arising out of this is the following: what if Freud were not only the stem and prohibitive professor-superego, but also a kind of mother, or even what Melanie Klein called the "good breast?" And what if the "conquering hero" of which Jones speaks in his biography of Freud were really psychoanalysis itself (as an opening, as something to be pursued, an adventure), and not Freud the man, or any other man or woman? Perhaps through his text, Freud was able to say: "This is my space, which I want to share with you; but the world is out there, still to be discovered!" That is a symbolic relation to psychoanalysis very different from Lacan's, though it is not unlike the transference which Gallop managed to develop onto the work that Lacan left behind, in her Reading Lacan.

Some Lacanian Themes

An interesting example of Lacan's status in contemporary discourse on culture comes in the new book by Jacqueline Rose (1983). In her excellent introduction to the volume of essays on Feminine Sexuality by Lacan and his circle (Mitchell & Rose, 1983), What is so typical of this essay is not the handling of theoretical issues (which Rose does very well), but the mythogenic rhetoric in which the exposition of Lacan's "re-opening of the debate on feminine sexuality" is couched. Rose rejects the arguments of those, like Jones, Horney, or Klein, who dissented, in one way or another, from Freud's various hypotheses on gender. Yet, in describing Lacan's insight into sexual politics, she only reiterates the original line of reasoning used against Freud's claim that the analysis of the "physical consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes" leads to a kind of biological "bedrock" (Freud, 1937, p. 252). Rose insists that it is to Lacan alone (and his discovery of the signifier) that we owe the possibility of a genuine critique of phallocentricism according to her, how revealed that the inexodization of sexual difference on possession or absence of the phallic "covers over the complexity of the child's early sexual life with a cruel opposition in which that very complexity is refused or repressed (p. 42)." But nowhere in Lacan is there a discussion of this 'complexity,' or of early sexual life in general, apart from the child's relation to the phallic. One has to turn to writers like Klein or Robert Stoller or Massal Khan if one wants to read about the ambivalent of 'pre-Oedipal' sexuality.

The essence of Rose's historical account of the sexuality/gender debate within psychoanalysis lies in the claim that, with the exception of Lacan, psychoanalysis (and psychoanalytically inspired commentators) have "failed to see that the concept of the phallic in Freud's account of human sexuality was part of his awareness of the problematic, if not impossible, nature of sexual identity itself (p. 28)." This is a very broad and somewhat misleading statement which gets its force from two general features of Lacanian theory.

The first is a question of emphasis: it is probably true that the phallic plays a more fundamental and determinant role in Lacanian theory than in any other school of psychoanalysis. The second factor is that Lacan grants the phallic an objective status unusual in post- Freudian theory: it becomes a 'symbolic' universal in the classical sense, acting independently of the body's history and of its associations.

Lacan's recognition of the problematic role of the phallic is perhaps not so unique as Rose makes out. In work which preceded his, Melanie Klein paid a great deal of attention to unconscious processes involving a kind of archetypal phallic like Lacan's. Indeed one might say that the 'treat' of Klein's exploration of pregenital psychology
was her insistence that the fantasy of the phallic (and its structural correlate, the
repressed) is not delayed until the onset
of the classical Oedipal situation, as
Sigmund and Anna Freud had
maintained (Klein, pp. 135-6).

In fact there are striking parallels
between Klein's early conception of
infantile psychosis and Lacan's
emphasis on the child's identification
with the object of the mother's desire
(see the phallic). However, Lacan's
view is based on the idea of a quasi-
naturalistic symbiosis between the
mother and child -- the classical
conception of primary narcissism.
The infant lives passively in an objectless
state of psychic oblivion whose
accomplice, for Lacan, is the mother's
invidious desire. According to Lacan,
this is a trap from which only the
symbolic function of the father can save
the child, by separating the phallic from the
self (castration), and placing it in the
object of desire, which is language, so
that the child can be apprised of its own
"lack" (e.g., Lemaire, p. 92; Kristeva).

Whereas the Lacanian solution to the
psychology of infantile dependency thus
arises from an already constituted and
objectified function of the phallic -- a raising of its status within
description -- Klein's thinking moves in
the opposite direction. Klein stresses the
infant's active experience of its own
desire to have something different from the
Other. If the phallic is a term, at the
adolescent level of language and
society, for one of the more
primary conceptions of power, then
for Klein the infant does not identify
with the 'phallic' in the simple classical
sense, but actively appropriates it (as an
elaboration of the breast and other
experiences), in cycles of incorporation
and projective identification. In brief,
the problem for Klein's infant -- or the
'psychotic' child within us -- is not how
to accept the allegedly independent role
of the phallic in the symbolic order, but
how to demystify it. This involves
coming to terms with unconscious
fantasies of power (which eventually
have become displaced onto a genderal
sign system playing on
presence/absence of the penis). The
power fantasies (having to do mainly
with omnipotence and omnipotence),
inevitably conceal more profound
feelings of envy and guilt which
interfere with the infant's capacity to
explore, elaborate, and internalize
dimensions of pleasurable experience or
trust in mutuality (the 'good breast').
Thus, while Klein's work is full of
difficulties and by no means suggests
that the political problem of
'phallogocentric' society is simpler or less
severe than Rose maintains, Klein at
least refrains from arguing that the
structure of signification as such is
grounded in the phallic, or that meaning
derives from the body part the mother
doesn't have (as opposed to the ones she
does, which are of greater interest to
the infant anyway). 2

The justification of Rose's wholesale
rejection of all but Lacanian
developments of psychodynamic lies
in her contention that Lacan alone
recognized that the unconscious
"constantly undermines" the
real/subject. Stated in this general way,
however, it is difficult to see how a
Freudian group of the "link between
sexuality and the unconscious"
can be denied to everyone but Lacan.
What it is in fact specific to Lacan is a claim about the
structure of the unconscious --
that is, that it is structured, like a
written language, or any other system of
inscription, and that it functions
according to the laws of association and
contiguity. Lacan expanded this claim
by suggesting that language and the
unconscious -- and by extension,
sexuality -- are homogenously
structured through their common link to an
essential process of substitution, or
what he often describes, in allusion to a
number of competing linguistic models,
"as metonymy." Substitutability is,
indeed, a basic property of any
unit defined within a diachronically
developed system of signification. For the
unconscious could be defined as such a
system, governed by mechanisms of
displacement, then psychanalytic
would be a metathic, whose subject
would be exhaustively describable in
terms of linguistic "how" or metonymic
and algorithmic graphs.3 But when
Lacan specifies the linguistic structures
of desire, he rarely invokes an automatic
reformulation of the functions of the
dreamwork and the structure of
compromise for which it provides some
explanation; or adumbrates a discourse model of some
feature of superego conflict, like
pure existential oscillations and manic
flights.

Rose by no means accepts the
postpositivist interpretation of Lacan's
work. But she does adopt its corollary,
which is that subjective experience
(including the emotional experience of
material object relations) is
epiphenomenal, and not the proper
object of psychoanalytic work. Neither
Rose nor Lacan have much to say about
signification, which are arranged in
systems and patterns either controlling
or undermining the illusion of
subjectivity. The Lacanian Symbolic is
an impersonal structural causality (e.g.,
Althusser, p. 216; Lacan, 1964, pp. 20-
1), which acts externally like a social
force. The subject is only determined in
the sense that desire itself cannot really
be experienced, except in terms of its
effects, which are always organized into
orders of signifiers. In this objectivistic
conception of the substitution process,
therefore, the basic psychanalytic
principle of the deco
genesis of the
subject is disconnected from the
existential experience of indeterminacy
and complexity. What remains is a
structure of symbolic power in which the
decoding of the subject is disconnected from the
existential experience of indeterminacy
and complexity, and related instead to a
psychosocial reduction: the subject is
decoded for Lacan because it is
determined -- because, in other words, it
will be fixed in advance. The irony of
this is consequently that whenever
Lacanian thought attempts to
demonstrate the "arbitrariness" of
sexual identity, it in practice reinforces
an underlying argument for its necessity,
by removing the sources of sexual
structures to an ideal region outside
the history of bodily experience as
psychospatiality has been able to
understand it. 4

Theoretical Problems
The implications of Rose's
socio-linguistic approach to the
unconscious emerge clearly from her
exclusion of alternative perspectives on
the mirroring relationships of early
infancy. In a passage which is
obviously violent. They also eticize an
environment that is to say that they are
restricted to the pure perspective of
behavioral psychology and the theory of
primary narcissism. 4 All of these qualities
of the small child's subjectivity can be
imitated, recognized, respected,
and accepted by the child's subjects -- or
at the other extreme, they can be
ignored, denied, or utterly disqualified.
Of course, the infant will always have
space to learn to take others into account
more or less, or may wish to -- Freud's
reality principle, like Lacan's Symbolic
Order, says essentially this. But when
the infant's expressivity is system-
atically disqualified -- or in other words,
when the caretaker(s) can only "print an
image to the child" (as Rose would have
it), while being unable to "mirror the
crude back to itself," the survival of the
child will come to depend on an irreversible
degree of self-repression and reactivity.
The schizoid sense of the unreality of
one's own being that develops out of this
passive survival strategy of the ego
is not due solely to the assumption of
an illusory or Imaginary identity in a
universal 'mirror stage,' as Rose,
following Lacan, maintains, but also to
a particular and local disregard for the
infant's differences. Whether the "lack" to
which Lacan refers is, in the
last analysis, an ontological
condition, or may also spring from a failure to
acknowledge the child as an independent
being in its relation with others. The danger
of any such interpretation, by another,
of one's distinctness, has nothing to do with the "ideology of the

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The basic/structure, secondary drive model works itself out in Rose's account of Lacan through a vision of human sexuality as a wholly ideological construction masking the "fragmented and aberrant nature of sexuality itself" (p. 58). Sexuality as we know it, then—sexuality as constituted in language—is an arbitrary fusion of disparate bits and features of instinctual nature and accentuated psychic experiences into a false identity, a stream-lined discourse inflicted on the hapless subject by the Symbolic Order. Of course, there is no doubt that the emotional meaning of bodily experience is extremely plastic, especially in early childhood, when something like polymorphous perversity is more prevalent. However, the Lacanian theory of infancy supplements this with an implicit myth of origins—that the state of nature is an arbitrary chaos. If one is going to make a biological hypothesis out of sexual indeterminacy (a standard behaviorist assumption), then one also has to take into account the other psychological facts about neonates their perceptual, emotional, and social capacities. For, as we have already seen, the newborn child is much more coordinated, aware, and sensitive to the external environment than most academicians were prepared to believe in Lacan's day.

The Text and the Anti-Text

The widespread belief that Lacan represents the only critical development within psychoanalysis since Freud has encouraged an overestimation of the arbitrariness of subjectivistic psychological experience. Yet the apparent regularities of human sexuality (which need to be either wildly exaggerated or grossly unacknowledged) cannot be explained entirely by the hypothesis of an endlessly displaced instict or signifier. And so the doctrine of essential sexual randomness seeks compensation in an overly systematized, structural-linguistic (i.e., disemobled) conception of the symbolic process.

Lacan was perhaps the only psychoanalytic innovator of his generation not to take advantage of the fact that symbolization begins in the body's child, rather than with the father's (Symbolic) intervention against the (imaginary) mother-child dual unity. His effective strategy of the intimate role the mother plays, in Western culture, in the child's symbolic and linguistic development led him to pose the question of the psychic significance of the signifying gesture in an original way. Lacan's emphasis on the link between symbolization and the paternal order had the welcome effect of enriching philisophic criticism of the ideal types of linguistic 'meaning' privileged in the rationalist tradition (Bloom, 1985).

But the deeper influence of Lacan's thought has been to reinforce the Cartesian ontological split on a new level (cf. Gallop, 1985, pp. 59-60; 160). Lacanian deconstruction depends, in practice, on a hyptohorang of systems: in the Lacanian tradition, 'play' is derived theoretically from that manipulability of the formal elements which make up systems of signification, and not from the symbolizing body. The concrete and irreducible—what cannot be accounted for on the formal plane of rational codification—tends to be deduced from logical failures of the ideal type, as revealed through manipulation of the linguistic signifier. From this has developed the technique of deconstruction, which always produces the informal as a by-product or effect of the formal. In consequence, post-Lacanian theory has found itself in the uncomfortable position of having to derive and to explain the tacit and arational dimension of experience, while treating hypothetic systems, such as language, as given.

According to Jacqueline Rose, language is always moving in two directions, or functioning in contradictory ways. At the superstructural level, language tends toward the fixing of meaning, the fusion of signifier and signified, which entails the 'positioning' of the subject in the symbolic order and the imposition of an arbitrary sexual identity. At the infrastructural level, however, language engenders the slippage of meaning, which produces the displacement of the subject and what Rose describes as the 'constant failure' of sexuality.

The problem with this account is not that it challenges the capacity of a substantive language to name sexuality, but that it reduces sexuality to the insufficiencies and aporias of the signifying process itself. Sexuality becomes the crisis of universal semiosis. The point is not to deny the existence of sexuality and language, but to show that the axis of Rose's linguistic perspective in the traditional base/superstructure model generates an abstract opposition between form (inevitably failing language) and material (a hypothetical deduction of sexuality as excess or remainder of linguistic systems), which might be termed the dialectic of the text and the anti-text. The orientation of this epistemological framework is a double one. In the beginning, the world can be known only through the text, the order of writing, which is thus in a sense a kind of origin of reality secondary to the knowledge gained by means of the text is always re-marked by an Other, the invisible and illusive anti-text, which exercises, sui generis, a powerfully disruptive influence.

In Rose's more sober terms, this means that sexuality (and by implication, all of our psychosomatic being, or 'body,' in the psychological sense) is a piece of social writing—a superimposition, or interpretation, of 'For Lacan...there is no predicative reality (p. 55).'' On the other hand, Rose is saying, there lies concealed beneath (and in a sense within) this observable but arbitrary order of signifiers, a kind of anti-text, which is like a pure potestas, a formless plasticity which subsists in the blanks between the marks—in the margins, gaps and abysses which inhabit the order of discourse, with its invisible plane of discrete elements.
arranged in systematic relations of opposition. The internal nothingness of this diachretical function, the absolute of difference, terrorism every structure, imposed on it, and therefore sexuality itself. Thus Rose’s auteur definition of sexuality “as a concept, or a division in language, a division which produces the feminine as its negative term (p. 555)” maps precisely onto the formalist opposition between footnote ‘force’ (difference, desire, power, nature) and the ‘text’, which is a didactic effects the fictional order of human signs. At its Nietzschean best, this diachretical function of the penis and blank, phallic and castration, text and anti-text, gives Lacanian Rationalism a wonderfully Dionysian turn; at its worst, however, it deteriorates into the terrorist domination of the ‘simulacrum,’ the precension of the model, the combinatorial, and the code, of which Jean Baudrillard speaks (1976).

Lacanians, ex-Lacanians and deconstructionists have argued interminably about whether the phallic is the penis, or is not the penis, and about whether discourse may after all really be organized around something other than the phallus. As with the Symbolic, the phallic for Lacan is something abstract, hardly part of the body, or even an experience. It is a metatheoretical function, a digital principle in structural terms, the differential function of signification; in Government terms (the terms of the mirror stage), the function of the ‘figure’ (standing out against a ground, but capable of oscillating with it); and in epistemological terms, the function of substitution as an originary condition (the simulacrum), the basic principle of philosophical deconstruction.

The discursive function of the phallic resembles a sort of rationalized version of children’s common fantasy about faeces. The wish of the phallic child is that the relations between human bodies of children’s common fantasy about faeces. The wish of the phallic child is that the relations between human bodies be simplified into a kind of political economy. In a discursive variant of this, the exchange value would be the signifier, which embodies the condition of human faeces. In possession of the idealized (presumably anal) substitutes for the parents’ sexual maturity (their breasts and bums, the mysterious intruders of the mouldering body, the penis, and so on) the phallic child fantasizes a competition with the aggressed parents, a satisfaction of their desires, a production of babies, even a self-production.

As that which circulates in the form of substitutability (exchange value), the phallic can be neither the metaphysical nor the metaphysico-ontological principle of difference, except to/also as these principles themselves are necessarily simulations. Difference is not a form, it does not circulate -- in other words, it has little to do with the psychoanalytic linguistic ontology which post-Lacanian philosophy has transposed into a theory of textuality. If difference is to be significant and primary, then it is unlikely that the phallic, either as a gender sign, or as the Ursprung of signification, can have anything so general to do with it. Difference is particular. It cannot therefore be systematized, or pinned up on a semiotic grid; which means it cannot be reduced to the general, formal principle of the signifier, or to a coded discursivity, or to any of Lacan’s “laws” and algorithms of the phallic and the father. But instead of simply abandoning the whole Lacanian paradigm, post-Lacanian thought has become inextricably mired in this problem of reserving difference for universalizing or formalizing it, and then having to rescue difference from the very attempt to save it.

Although difference cannot be thought in terms of the abstract and generalizing (or digital) discourses of linguistic and cultural coding, the Lacanian phallic remains an important concept -- not because it is the (dis)sensational ‘knot’ (near-sep) from which the textual conscious is unravelled, but precisely because the phallic is an idealisation of desire. It is a kind of ‘defence’; a dislocation of unconscious process, a figural sublimation of desire. Schematically visible (but oscillating and self-consuming), it functions like the preconscious stratum of a splitting of the body, or even an experimental concrete (2) a moment when he said that the phallic “can play its role only when veiled” (1966, p. 288)."

The Oedipal termination of infancy represents the linguistic crisis of the psyche: the man’s realization of the dream state and unconscious perception. The phallic defense is erected against the potential lack of the linguistic sign itself, the dissolution of formal or conscious difference in regression to unmediated differences, differences without applied structures to hold them in place for consciousness. In the transition from the imaginary to the Symbolic, the emotional intensity of the infantile body is subordinated to the phallic body and mediated by the functions of differentiation and substitution.

The veiled phallic, the simulacrum, corresponds to the figure-ground problem of the double proficiency (cf. Ehrenwein). The ‘signifier’ is like the ‘right hand’ side of the vertical split, the complement of which is the dread left hand of castration and death -- the ‘abyss.’ Like the ‘fort’ and the ‘da’ (Lacan, 1953, p. 83), they are both available to consciousness, but mutually exclusive at any given moment. What is ineradicable to phallic generation is the lack of power nor the image of nothingness (both manageable idealizations), but the possibility of ‘disidentification’ (Ehrenwein), the decoding regression which leaves the psyche defenseless against itself. On the preconscious surface of this undifferentiated difference -- unveiled order (Milner), meaning without meaning, body-within-body -- the complementary sides of the idealizing split, the ‘phallic’ and the ‘hole’, dance brilliantly back and forth, each reviving as the other fails, never losing themselves in each other.

The problem of idealization, and how it affects human sexuality (as an incorrigible part of it), is an important theme of Jane Gallop’s (1985) masterful misunderstanding of Lacan. Gallop approaches the question in the most direct way possible -- through the medium of her transformation onto Lacan herself. She works through Lacan’s texts in terms of her own impulse to rationalize and split, to idealize and desexualize, to double each experience into manageable separate but interchangeable chains of affiliation and negation. A particularly impressive occasion for these reflections occurs in Gallop’s encounter with Lacan’s famous essay on the phallic.

After some twenty readings, Gallop had noticed that at the top of page 590 of the original French edition of Ecrits, the word phallic itself was, inexplicably, not accompanied by the usual masculine article "le," as proper French requires, but by the feminine "La." The ramifications of such a lapse for a
close reader of Lacan are far from trivial. Like the phallus itself, the word "La" is, according to Lacan, a signifier without a signified. In the seminar "Encore," he frequently crossed out the feminine article when it appeared in conjunction with the word for "woman," declaring: "Il n'y a pas la femme, la femme n'est pas toute." (Lacan, 1975, pp. 13, 68). One can imagine Gallop's readerly delight when she encountered the misprint "La phallos" at the very beginning of the page.

"A feeling of exhilaration accompanies my glide from "phallos" to "La". Loaded down with the seriousness of ideological meaning and sexual history, the phallos mimes me in its confusion with the male organ. "La" seems to fly above all that in a disembodied ether of pure language, an epicene utopia where "gender is variable at will." But the "La" at the top of page 690 is nearly impossible to read, although I am convinced of the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, the masculinity of the phallic signifier serves as an emblem of the confusion between phallos and male which inheres in language, in our Symbolic Order (p. 140)."

In this passage, Gallop traces the two movements of the subject as first described by Jacqueline Rose described. In the rising (or slipping) phase, the phallus, as signifier, is liberated from the penis, as signified, in order to become the figure of an asexual or perhaps bisexual freedom, the trace of an "epicene utopia." In the falling (or fixing) phase, however, signifier and signified are reconected, to mark or "fix" the masculinity of the "symbolic order."

Jane Gallop's temptation was to soar. After twenty odd readings of the phallos, her discovery of the misprint "La" makes her feel weightless -- she suddenly inhabits a utopia in which "gender is variable at will." And so it takes all the avoirdupois of the penis to bring her back down again.

But Gallop is a brilliant allegorist. There is no question that the loss of the phallos (or an alleged "symbolic order") returns Gallop to her body. Gallop just is her body, and nowhere leaves it. There is never the inhabitant of an "epicene utopia," a "disembodied ether of pure language," where "gender is variable at will." What this clever Lacanian tale dramatizes is that there is no escape into language, that there is no such thing as the "liberation of the signifier," except as a fantasy of absconding from physical existence. The only alternative to embodiment is disembemnt or prothetic hyp-evolution.

But since Lacanian theory is derived from the phallic significance of language, psyche and culture, Lacanian feminism is left with the dismal prospect of endlessly displacing the general significations of signification itself, and thus repeating the whole problematic of the Lacanian text. Such is the strategy evolved through deconstruction: to grant Lacan's ideal function (often performing under another name than the phallos) such a privileged autonomy as to permanently disjoin it from all play of meaning, all reference to the physical body; or to so generalize the linguistic function of the phallic as to make it mean (or "fail" to mean) virtually anything. But in either case, the phallic (or formalist) theory of difference only increases the power of the phallic to govern the feminist discourse, while occasionally remaining linked to the genital organs through denial, or repeated denunciations of the confusion between the raifled "Symbolic" and its irrevenent referents. If we take the foregoing as a more or less plausible rendition of what has been going on in radical academic discussion, then the question arises: why is that?

Sexuality and the subject certainly "fail," as Rose argues, but in a Lacanian universe, they always fail in the same, structurally determinant way, and always in order to return in due time to the same "fix" in the "symbolic order." This kind of simian-ism is no more than a confusing in a purely textual frame of reference: it enact an interplay of abstractions: the body reduced to the model of the text, and the rigidity of the text evaded in the ethical pseudo-naturality of the anti-text. We can see in this way that the Lacanian reading of human sexuality never moves outside the circular paradigm of "inscription" -- even as it slips in that momentary vision of an epicene utopia: for the "disembodied ether of pure language," the vacuum where the phallos can mean everything and nothing, and "gender is variable at will," is not the recovery of desire, or a reification of the uncodified (or encoded) body -- but only the splitting and projection, the idealization of the text itself. A configuration of vels, folds, and guills, writing prepares to receive the seminal spurt of a throw of dice." (Derrida, 1981, p. 265).

The endless structural play of abstract oppositions we have inherited (signifier vs. signified, mark vs. blank, phallos vs. castration, writing vs. abyss, presence vs. absence, father vs. mother, culture vs. nature) none of which ever disturbed in the slightest, no matter how it is manipulated, because the digital form of splitting is implicit in the code of inscription that Lacan laid down. The 'phallos' is the essence of textuality as an epistemology.

Notes
1. This paper was first presented at Elspeth Probyn's C.C.A. panel on "Feminist Perspectives in Communication," Winnipeg, June, 1986.

2. One of the implications of Lacan's anchoring of the Symbolic in the paternal phallos is that desire itself is conceived in its most fundamental constitution as little more than a displacement of narcissistic envy, since Lacanian desire has its roots in the "desire of the Other," which for Lacan is originally the mother's projection of "lack." Deleuze's Nietzschean reading of Lacanian desire at reification is thus entirely appropriate.

3. At a recent conference on "post-structuralism" at the University of Ottawa (1983), the addresses of Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, Jacques Alain-Miller, and Stuart Schneiderman all traded on the medico-linguistic fantasy of Lacan's 'discovery' of the 'structures' of the unconscious.

4. The outlook of experimental psychology has changed in the last ten years, largely as a result of more sophisticated infant research. For psychoneurologically oriented summaries

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