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A Funny Thing Happened
on the Way to the *Symposium*

How to begin to discuss the decentered subject of psychoanalysis?

Perhaps it is best to yield the stage to Jacques Lacan who emphasizes Freud's most radical insight, saying that the "Freudian notion of the ego is so upsetting as to warrant the expression Copernican revolution" (Sem II 3). In the introduction to his second seminar on the ego in Freud's theory and the technique of psychoanalysis, Lacan highlights Freud's central idea: "the I is not the ego, the subject is not the individual" (3). Lacan frequently compares Freud's discovery to that of Copernicus, often using the comparison as a jumping-off point for the discussion of analytic technique. Thus, Freud's discovery that "the very centre of the human being [is] no longer to be found at the place assigned to it by a whole humanist tradition" frames Lacan's discussion of "the Freudian thing" in which he articulates the meaning of his own "return to Freud" (EE 114). This revolutionary decentering allows Freud to ask the question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis, a question that distances the psychic faculties of the subject from the certainties of positivist science (179). In the English *Écrits's* concluding essay, Lacan's Copernican Freud-as-revolutionary succeeds Darwin-as-evolutionary in a genealogical chain leaping from the decentering of the earth, to the decentering of humankind, to the decentering of the subject (295).

This Freudian decentering of the subject provides the material for Lacan's oral teachings, and in the early 1950s Lacan discusses Freudian texts in order to come to terms with Freud's discovery and its implications

for analytic practice. In "Overture to the Seminar," a brief introduction to Lacan's public teachings, Lacan remarks on the "ambiguity that is to be found throughout [Freud's] corpus" (Sem I 3). "Is a dream desire?" Lacan asks, or "the recognition of desire?" (3). Is the ego "like an empty egg, differentiated at its surface" or is it that "which says *no* or *me . . .* which expresses itself in different registers" (3). Here, in unraveling Freud's ambiguity, Lacan introduces an ambiguity of his own. On the one hand, Freud's revolutionary discovery raises questions about desire and its interpretation. On the other hand, Freud's discovery raises questions about the decentering of the speaking subject from the ego, about the gap between the symbolic register and the imaginary register. (The musical metaphor "register" allows Lacan to designate a range with an emphasis on its qualities rather than its boundaries.) Neither the motive force of desire nor the structural patterning of the registers alone exhausts the Freudian field, yet, paradoxically, either can organize it.

Because they engage Freud's double discourse, Lacan's Seminars and writings frequently cover the same conceptual territory twice using two distinct maps—the diachronics of desire and the synchronics of the registers. Jacques-Alain Miller observes that at the time of his earliest seminars, "Lacan seems to be asking himself whether there are in fact two different directions implicit in Freud's work and thus in psychoanalysis as a whole"(19).[1] A glance at the index of major concepts Miller has appended to *Écrits* reveals the overlapping of the schema of the Lacanian registers with the conceptual apparatus of desire.[2] The registers have pride of place, and among them, the symbolic order dominates. However, the language of desire is embedded in the discussion of the symbolic order, and desire's first cousin, "the demand for love," appears under the heading of the imaginary register's "primary identification." In a second set of concepts outlining the registers of the imaginary ego and the symbolic subject, critiques of the ego's illusion of autonomy and of the subject's division, splitting, and fading are cross-referenced: "see: *Desire and phantasy*" (328; 329). When the classic Freudian idea of the unconscious is at issue, register theory's famous aphorism "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" is cross-referenced: "see: 'Man's desire is the desire of the Other'" (329).

Just as the discourse of desire can be found embedded in the conceptual structure of the registers, the registers appear in the section of the index devoted to "Desire and its Interpretation." Here, the analysis of empty speech invokes "the discourse of the imaginary"; here, the analy-

sis of demand and suppression adds "see: The locus of the Other" (330). Given Lacan's two theoretical discourses, it isn't surprising that Anika Lemaire's systematic articulation of Lacanian concepts ends up covering the same conceptual territory twice.[3] After devoting half her volume to a discussion of structural linguistics, the signifier, and the registers of the symbolic and the imaginary, Lemaire turns to the topic of desire. In differentiating the terms "need," "demand," and "desire" from one another, she finds herself repeating register theory's concepts of *Spaltung* (entry into the symbolic order) and Splitting (alienation in the imaginary) "in different terms" (161). "Lacan seems to have provided two different perspectives on these themes" Lemaire remarks (161), and she concludes that the force of desire sets the apparatus of the registers in motion.

Twin discourses/three registers. A pair and a set of three relations. This seems simple enough. But when twos meet threes, complications abound as we shall see in the following psychoanalytic readings of Plato's *Symposium*. These readings—by astute and insightful readers—try to resist dualism, try to get beyond the bedrock of foundational difference, try to set aside limited, categorical thinking. In fact, on the surface, Plato's text with its originary *trio* of sexes would seem inherently resistant to dualism. Yet Plato's man, woman, and androgyne are no more immune to category than Lacan's imaginary, symbolic, and real registers. Both the Lacanian and the Platonic discourses show the enormous difficulty of keeping the psychoanalytic decentering of the subject in play while discussing a text that treats of paired relations. Thus, the following critiques stitch together disparate elements of the source text into satisfyingly centered interpretive realities. Each reduces Plato's tale of sexual plurality to a foundational either/or. Cast into Plato's multiple possibilities, binaries offer a fundamental resting place. Foundational binaries ground positions from which to read, to speak, and even to argue because they present two alternatives, both of which revolve around a single interpretive axis. When readers for whom the decentering of the subject is a given reduce Plato's *Symposium* to binary interpretations, they demonstrate the problem of the linguistic unconscious and illustrate the pull toward binaries inherent in language itself.

A Symposium on the Subject

Plato's dialogue the *Symposium* boasts an honored cast of characters including Socrates, Phaedrus, and Aristophanes. Though each

speaker offers his thoughts on love, it is Aristophanes' comic theory of the origin of sexual desire that echoes through the psychoanalytic writings of Freud and Lacan and echoes through psychoanalytic literary theory as well. Aristophanes emerges as a recurrent signifier in a long chain of signification because of the structural properties of his discourse, structural properties that combine two-termed and three-termed constructions in various unstable ways. In fact, if Lacan had sought an allegory to fuse his early mirror stage theory with his later structural theory of the three registers, he might easily have used Aristophanes' tale since the story's three human conditions parallel an original naïve symbolic (three sexes are formed), followed by a powerful narcissistic fusion with an ideal mate (two severed parts are coupled), finally resolved by an appropriate intersubjectivity (three forms of sexual relation are practiced). I paraphrase here the tale that Plato gives to Aristophanes:[4]

> Lamenting humankind's lack of appreciation and understanding of the healing and helping qualities of love, Aristophanes offers a parable of love's power: The original human sexes were not two but three, a man, a woman, and a double-natured union of the two whose name has been lost and is merely suggested by the pejorative "androgyne." Each round being had four hands and feet, two faces looking opposite directions, and two "privy members." The sexes were three because the man was child of the sun, the woman of the earth, and the man-woman of the moon, and all creatures were as round as their parents.
>
> Insolent and powerful, these creatures threatened the gods even as they provided them with necessary adoration. So Zeus discovered a way to diminish these roundlings' strength while increasing their numerical potential for devotion: he cut them in two. After the severing, however, each part experienced such longing for its other that when reunited in couples they nearly starved through refusing again to be parted—even long enough to eat. Compassionately, Zeus turned their organs of generation to the front so that the male/female couple could breed and so the male/male couple could "be satisfied, and rest, and go their ways to the business of life."
>
> It is thus that three kinds of relationship have formed. Men originally androgynous have become the lovers of women. [And presumably, vice versa, though Aristophanes does not explicitly say so. What he does say explicitly is that the males and females descended from the androgyne are "adulterous" (561).] Women originally of the woman have "female attachments" and become "female companions." Men

sprung from the ur-male "have the most manly nature" and are thus youths who "hang about men and embrace them" and who upon maturity become "statesmen" not inclined to marry or father children.

Plato's pointed genealogy of the human sexual condition could not fail to attract the attention of later theorists of desire. Thus, Freud turns to the Aristophanes story not once but twice. Lacan, too, mentions the *Symposium*. Aptly, the Aristophanes story reappears in Malcolm Bowie's *Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction*, and the tale of sexual origins figures yet again in Rachel Bowlby's review of Bowie's book. However, rereadings of Aristophanes' tale of the two become three—this clearly structured tale encompassing the transition from narcissism to intersubjectivity—so frequently run awry in the retelling that it seems imperative to ask why. What is it about these apparently straightforward relations between a two and a three that throws interpretation into disarray?

Freud first cites the *Symposium* in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* [1905], where he writes that "the popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic myth which tells how the original human beings were cut up into two halves—man and woman—and how these are always striving to unite again in love."[5] Freud's relentlessly binary foreshortening of the story stresses the opposites man/woman and parts/whole. His excisions of both the originary three sexes and the resultant three sexual orientations, allow him to conclude with mock astonishment: "It comes as a great surprise therefore to learn that there are men whose sexual object is a man and not a woman, and women whose sexual object is a woman and not a man" (136). Freud appears to have corrected himself when, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], he cites Aristophanes' story again, this time as an exemplary myth of the origin of instinct:

> [S]cience has so little to tell us about the origin of sexuality that we can liken the problem to a darkness into which not so much as a ray of a hypothesis has penetrated. In quite a different region, it is true, we *do* meet with such a hypothesis; but it is of so fantastic a kind—a myth rather than a scientific explanation—that I should not venture to produce it here, were it not that it fulfills precisely the one condition whose fulfillment we desire. For it traces the origin of an instinct to *a need to restore an earlier state of things*. What I have in mind is, of course, the theory which Plato put into the mouth of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*, and which deals not only with the *origin* of the sexual instinct but with the most important of its variations in relation to its object.

> "The original human nature was not like the present, but different. In the first place, the sexes were originally three in number, not two. . . ." Everything about these primeval men was double: they had four hands and four feet, two faces, two privy parts, and so on. Eventually Zeus decided to cut these men in two, "like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling." After the division had been made, "the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and threw their arms about one another eager to grow into one."[6]

Freud halts Aristophanes' account at a line replete with dualities: "division"/ "two parts"/ "other half"/ "together"/ "one another"/ "grow into one," and even his nod in the direction of Aristophanes' concluding trio of adulterers, companions, and statesmen reduces itself to *the* sexual instinct versus its "variants." Freud makes this norming of heterosexuality explicit in a footnote in which he thanks Professor Heinrich Gomperz for pointing out what is "essentially the same theory" in the Upanishads:

> [T]he origin of the world from the Atman (the Self or Ego) is described: "But he felt no delight. Therefore a man who is lonely feels no delight. He wished for a second. He was so large as man and wife together. He then made this his Self to fall in two, and then arose husband and wife. Therefore Yagnavalkya said: We two are thus (each of us) like half a shell. Therefore the void which was there is filled by the wife."[7]

Freud's "same theory" leaves little doubt that the theory in question is fundamentally binary. Rhetorically distanced from its potential androgyny, any hint of sexual plurality seems further precluded by the Upanishad variant's initial emphasis on the comparative size of the original one Self, the Atman, rather than its composition. Freud's "same theory" asserts that so long as the theory gets to the husband and wife, it doesn't really matter whether the heterosexed opposites emerge from a splitting of the one or from an eliding of a third. For the father of the Oedipal triangle, this omission of variant modes of coupling seems an uncharacteristic lapse of distinction indeed.

While Freud's readings of Aristophanes privilege the male and the female, Malcolm Bowie's readings of Freud invert Freud's emphasis. Bowie introduces the Aristophanes quotation from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with the observation that "Plato's fabulous hermaphrodites . . . may perhaps suggest one way in which science, destitute of illuminating hypotheses about the origin of sexuality, could proceed"

(*Freud* 79). Bowie continues, noting that "[Freud's] own text returns upon the anterior textual world of Plato just as Plato's returned upon the fabled 'initial hermaphroditism' of the human species" (80). Lest Bowie's reader conclude that he means hermaphroditism in some purely structural sense that would include the dualities of the originary male/male and female/female creatures, Bowie again emphasizes that both Freud and Proust offer "fantasticated accounts of the yearnings felt by unisexual human creatures for their bisexual pre-existence" (81). In a review of Bowie's text, Rachel Bowlby points out that Freud and Bowie both read the Aristophanes narrative in ways that create "oversights [which] invert each other." Thus, "Where Freud sees in the *Symposium* only the origins of heterosexuality, to which homosexuality must be added on, Bowie sees only the buried bisexuality concealed beneath the surface mask of unisexual uniformity. In both instances, Aristophanes' trio of sexes is forgotten in favour of a coupling of heterosexuality and homosexuality" (94).

The three sexes of Aristophanes' theory are man, woman, and androgyne (the union of the two), Bowlby reiterates, stressing plurality over duality. Symbolically, she emphasizes the multiplicity of possible relations resulting from Zeus's cut and its creation of a universal desire among half-creatures. Desire, as a signifier, emerges in various ways when the resulting split-sexes, each seeking its object, define three forms of sexual relation: the male/male creature reunites in a male homosexual relation, the female/female creature reunites as lesbian companions, and the female/male hermaphrodite reunites in a heterosexual coupling of woman with man. The irony that Bowie's critique misses and Bowlby points out is that, "far from being bisexual or homosexual, the hermaphrodite is the paragon of heterosexuality" (93).

Bowlby sees the irony in the inverted critical readings because she reads the larger symbolic context rather than the critical arguments alone. Bowlby strives, in the language of Lacanian analysis, to *read* the registers, to decide how the text functions rather than to decide what the content "really" says. The problem posed here in this symposium on the decentered subject is endemic to critical reading; the challenge posed by Aristophanes' tale is posed by other texts as well. Consequently, I want to expand this decentering of Plato's text to include wider circles of reading, beginning with some issues in the reading of the film *Tootsie* which bear a close family resemblance to the issues raised by the *Symposium*.

Encoding the Problem

Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* replicates the critical problematic at issue in the *Symposium* readings and suggests the Lacanian registers as a theoretical solution.[8] A parallel inversion of critical perspectives—invited by a parallel problem of one-sexed versus androgynous characters—emerges when Garber discusses critical responses to transvestite disguise in the contemporary film *Tootsie*. The analytic problem posed by the out-of-work male actor Michael Dorsey, competing against actresses for a plum soap opera role while disguised as Dorothy Michaels, echoes the analytic problem posed by Aristophanes' tale of the sexes. Similarly, critical responses to the film echo the binary impulses of Freud's and Bowie's responses to Plato.

Some feminist critics read *Tootsie*'s transvestite disguiser Michael Dorsey/Dorothy Michaels as "affirming" feminist discourse by presenting a strong, subversive feminist image.[9] Others see the disguiser as "containing" feminist discourse by showing feminism's apparent subversiveness to rely on masculine power in female dress.[10] Garber, however, insists that "in *Tootsie* transvestitism is an enabling fantasy, not merely a joke or a parody, whether the laugh is thought to be on men or on women" (6). She points out that this "tendency to . . . appropriate the cross-dresser 'as' one of the two sexes, is emblematic of a fairly consistent critical desire to look away from the transvestite as transvestite, not to see cross-dressing except as male or female manqué" (10). Here, Garber's analysis of the critical pursuit of binary positions yielding inverted interpretations parallels Bowlby's. Moreover, Garber's concentration on a third possibility, "the transvestite as transvestite," parallels Bowlby's emphasis on the three sexes and the three unions as well.

Not only do Garber and Bowlby define parallel critical problems, they also invoke Lacanian psychoanalytic reading as a critical alternative. Their estimations of what Lacanian reading entails, however, differ. Garber, unlike Bowlby, locates power in the "blurred" gender disguise itself and insists that it has an ability to initiate "category crisis" which Garber defines as "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (16). Thus, for Garber, categorical distinctions such as male/female, black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, this/that, him/me are put "under erasure" by figures such as the transvestite (16). Here, Garber's privileging of the function of the

transvestite replicates Bowie's privileging of the bisexual in The *Symposium*. In fact, "category crisis" with its disruptive transvestitism pitted against the categorical sexes evokes the binary homosexual/heterosexual rather than displacing it.

This return to binary categories can be seen most clearly in Garber's use of the Lacanian registers to explain the relation between the transvestite and the more conventionally gendered others. The transvestite, Garber claims, is typical of all "third terms" which expose the fictional basis of distinction, not as a third one that could easily align itself with either of the elements of difference but rather as "something that challenges the possibility of harmonious and stable binary symmetry" (12). Third terms, in turn, imply the Lacanian symbolic register, she argues.[11] Thus Garber ultimately parallels the difference between the undisguised and the transvestite with the difference between the imaginary and the symbolic registers.

For Garber, the symbolic represents a force that disrupts the imaginary, an imaginary that constitutes "a dimension in which the human subject's relation to himself, and to other people, is structured like, and by, his relation to his mirror image: a dyadic, symmetrical complementarity . . . based on the fiction of a stable identity" (12). Consequently, Garber describes the symbolic as the source of contextualization for the binaries of the imaginary. "What once stood as an exclusive dual relation becomes an element in a larger chain" (12), the signifying chain. To this sophisticated and insightful description of the registers, Garber adds additional meanings. In Garber's interpretation of the Lacanian registers, "the Symbolic order . . . is the register of language, hierarchy, law, and power . . . to which the human subject must come to relate not only through one-to-one or face-to-face dyads (though these remain inescapable) but through immersion in the codes and constraints of culture" (12).

After its brief theoretical introduction, the bulk of *Vested Interests* devotes itself to the elaboration of the contents of specific codes and their various subversions. The binary political trope of subversion and containment thus reinforces the binary Lacanian registers of symbolic transvestite versus imaginary male or female, and Garber's celebration of the transgressive ultimately amounts to a critical reduction that treats the imaginary and the symbolic registers as just one more set of opposed categories. In fact, the sophisticated structural sensitivity that Garber's definitions of the imaginary and the symbolic reveal is not borne out in

her critical application. Garber's reductive move occurs when she equates the symbolic register with the "codes and constraints of culture," and Garber is not alone in equating code with the symbolic register. However, as the following set of readings will show, it is always possible to read the registers otherwise.

The Problem of Encoding

The idea of code has had enormous critical appeal, and Garber writes in the established theoretical tradition that merges the construct of code with culture and then merges both with Lacan's symbolic register. Because the code has been a dominant idea in cultural studies and in semiotics, and because these two branches of interpretive theory routinely assimilate Lacanian concepts, it was probably inevitable that the concepts of "code" and the registers would converge. Though the concepts of "encoding" and "decoding" were available to Lacan's founding influence Saussure, these concepts were strictly metaphors to the linguists of Saussure's day, alternative expressions of the idea of translation (Hill 205). Saussure does not associate codes with language or with semiology and, in fact, sees the systematic fixing of the arbitrary meaning of the sign within a society as "belong[ing] to a different order of questions altogether" than questions of the signifier, the signified, and language (219). It is not from Saussure but from Barthes, and most specifically from Barthes's extensive elaboration of codes in *S/Z*, that the popular idea of code springs.[12]

Recall that in Roland Barthes's *S/Z,* the *symbolic* code is only one of five master codes, each of which has its own semiotic domain (18–21). The symbolic code, which is the place for "multivalence" and "reversibility," differs from the four remaining codes, the hermeneutic code which allows an enigma to be distinguished, formulated, and disclosed; the semic code which expresses the "Voice of the Person" (21) through "flickers of meaning" (19); the proairetic code which relates to action and empiricism and unfolds through sequence as naming; and the cultural code which includes the reference codes that "afford the discourse a basis in scientific or moral authority" (18). When the whole of *S/Z* unravels Balzac's *Sarrasine* into its constituent codes, it is clear that the idea of cultural code predominates; in fact, Barthes specifically notes that "all codes are cultural" (18). Thus, Barthes essentially subordinates the idea of the symbolic to distinctly un-Lacanian concepts of code and culture, even though his use of

the musical metaphor—"the (readerly) text is comparable at every point to a (classical) musical score"—clearly parallels Lacan (28).

Where Barthes disagrees with Garber over the relation of the idea of culture to the symbolic and to code, Kaja Silverman disagrees with Garber over the symbolic register's relation to the binary. In her psychoanalytic study of the subject of semiotics, Silverman concludes not with Lacan or with Freud but with Barthes, and she offers the following expanded definition of the function of symbolic codes: "The symbolic code inscribes into literary and cinematic texts antitheses which are central to the organization of the cultural order to which they belong. Indeed, it could be said that the symbolic code is entrusted with the maintenance of that order's dominant binary oppositions. Its failure to do so thus has ramifications far beyond the boundaries of any individual text" (270). The link here between the symbolic, the code, and culture seems profound. Surprisingly, however, this description of the function of symbolic cultural code insists that code organizes and maintains binaries. Silverman, citing *S/Z* specifically, elaborates on symbolic binary codes at some length: "Barthes consistently links the symbolic code to the formulation of antitheses, especially that variety which admits of no mediation between its terms. In other words, he associates it with the articulation of binary oppositions, with the setting of certain elements 'ritually face to face like two fully armed warriors' ([*S/Z*] 27). These oppositions are represented as eternal and 'inexpiable.' Any attempt to reconcile them is seen as 'transgressive'" (270). Finally, Silverman gives the difference between male and female as the "most dominant and sacrosanct of all binary oppositions" supported by the *symbolic* cultural codes (270). Silverman's heterosexual symbolic binary seems definitively at odds with Garber's transvestite symbolic third term.

Together, Silverman and Garber have given theorists a *Symposium* on the symbolic. Where Silverman, using Barthes, links the symbolic with culture, code, and binary opposition, Garber, citing Lacan, links the symbolic with culture and code against an imaginary host of binaries. Moreover, Silverman locates male/female in the symbolic register while Garber sees male/female as imaginary. Finally, for Silverman, the symbolic defines irreconcilable oppositions whose violation would be transgressive; for Garber, the symbolic defines the transgressive itself. Given the two registers of the symbolic and the imaginary, Silverman and Garber produce a series of inverted critical positions and concepts evocative of the inverted readings of the *Symposium*.

What Silverman and Garber have done for the symbolic register, film theorists have done for the imaginary. Silverman's penultimate chapter on the symbolic, suture, and subjectivity in film complicates register theory still further. In her discussion of suture and ideology, Silverman notes that ideological studies of suture in film hark back to the writings of Althusser on the apparatus and draw heavily on his use of the term "imaginary." She points out that "when Althusser uses the term 'imaginary' he means identifications which have been culturally initiated" (216) in contrast to the spontaneous identifications Lacan describes in his mirror stage essay. Because Althusser associates the imaginary with culture, he concerns himself with "the operation whereby individuals are compelled to identify with the representations which their culture supplies" (218), an operation he terms "interpellation." Silverman notes that Althusser's imaginary is the locus of identificatory activities Lacan attributes to the symbolic.

Following Althusser, the Israeli film critic Daniel Dayan complicates the theoretical imaginary even further.[13] Dayan writes in the film tradition that brings together semiology and Marxism and indicates that he sees Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis as two theories having "a structural conception of causality" (23). Consequently, he links a series of critical concepts including semiotics, ideology, history, and code to the registers. Drawing on Jean-Pierre Oudart's previous discussion of these concepts,[14] Dayan uses Oudart's example of the discourse of classical figurative painting to advance the idea of code as produced by ideology, subject to historical change, and masked by "the imaginary" (26). The classical cinema masks its filmic message by "account[ing] *within itself*" for its own code and by providing "imaginary answers" to the viewer's questions (28). Where Althusser inverts both Garber's and Barthes's link between culture and the symbolic, Dayan goes even further to invert the register of code itself, associating code with imaginary meaning effects rather than with symbolic laws.

Consequently, the registers of the imaginary and the symbolic, so distinct in Lacanian theory have, in this chain of applications, become virtually indistinguishable. Both the symbolic and the imaginary have been read as the locus of code, of culture, or of binary, the distinction between the registers reflecting the critical assimilation of Lacanian theory rather than Lacanian theory itself. This critical impasse arises first and foremost because the imaginary and the symbolic have been treated

as opposed functions. Once opposed, the registers are reduced to categories, functioning not as analytic dynamics but as baskets into which concepts like code or culture or even binary itself can be stashed. What begins as exploration of the psychoanalytic paradigm ends as argument about classification—the implications of the decentering of the subject getting lost along the way, (lost from the content, though certainly not from the process, of the disagreements). Together, these inversions suggest that the reading of critical texts is as vulnerable to reduction as the reading of literature. The same problems arise in the interpretation of the psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan as in the interpretation of Plato's *Symposium*. In response, I will search Lacan's Plato for evidence of another kind of reading—a reading that employs the registers to trace the path of the decentered subject. First, however, I will review Lacan's visual counter to the categorical opposition of the registers in his illustrations of the position of the unconscious.

Coming to Terms with the Subject of Psychoanalysis

The old joke about ambiguity aptly captures Lacan's theory of the registers: Q. Is Lacan a structuralist or a post-structuralist? A. Yes. In a sense, the inverted readings of the Lacanian registers just surveyed have their genesis in this ambiguity. For heuristic purposes, the problems presented by the inverted critical readings and by the assimilation of Lacanian theory into other critical schools of thought can be positioned in the generic structural model, the semiotic rectangle defined by two terms A and B, their negations, and their combinations. If the imaginary and the symbolic registers occupy the first two terms of the basic structural relation, then the real must be the double negation, or negative complex term since the real is the register which is neither the imaginary nor the symbolic. The real is not the symbolic but rather "what resists symbolisation absolutely" (Sem I 66). Nor is the real the imaginary, for imaginary objects and real things "are not in the habit of co-existing for the subject" (Sem I 175). In fact, Lacan so frequently writes of the real as the "ineffable" or the "impossible" that his sense of the real as a double negative seems evident.

The structural model falters when we come to the "third term" or double positive, that which is both A and B. Though Lacan frequently refers to the symbolic as the "third term," this seems not to be a general structural reference. Lacan calls the symbolic the third term only in

connection with the idea of the Oedipus complex and with the addition of the symbolic father to the imaginary mirroring interaction between mother and child. The missing double positive fits Lacan's sense that positivism is the problem, the problem of everyday "reality," the problem of empty speech in which the imaginary confirms itself in the symbolic, the problem of self-certainty. Consequently, Lacan reserves the "between" of positivism for constructs such as the symptom or the "suture" which imply psychopathology or, at the very least, error. Lacan repeatedly shows that the symptom links the registers. The suture, too, is quite clearly a positive complex term since Lacan's only use of the word "suture" is in his discussion of the "frozen attitude" or the "anti-movement" of the *fascinum* as "a suture, a conjunction of the imaginary and the symbolic" (Sem XI 118). Suffice it to say, at this point, that when Lacan uses the phrase "third term" he does not mean what structuralists mean by it, and when Lacan employs the structuralist double positive, he does so reproachfully.

This generic structural heuristic invites the kinds of dualism and categorical thinking that dead end theoretical discussions of Lacan, however. Thus, for heuristic purposes of his own, Lacan employs a number of drawings and diagrams that resemble the basic semiotic rectangle in design but differ from it in dynamics. Two such diagrams, Schema L and Schema R, use the Lacanian registers to express the decentering of the subject. Lacan discusses his Schema L repeatedly both in his Seminars and in his *Écrits*. Schema L offers a "schema of the intersubjective dialectic" (EE 332), while Schema R weds the more basic Schema L to the registers to depict "the structure of the subject" (333). In his second
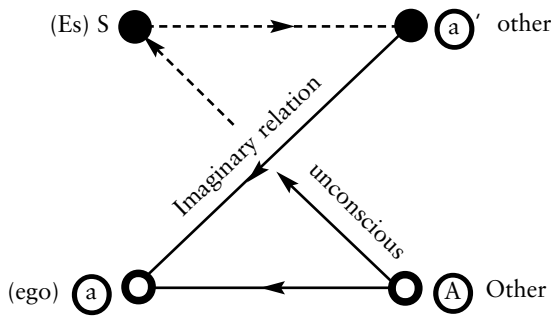

FIGURE 1.1
Lacan's Schema L: The Subject of the Unconscious

seminar on the Freudian ego and psychoanalytic technique,[15] Lacan suggests that a schema "would not be a schema if it yielded a solution. It isn't even a model. It's just a way of fixing our ideas, called for by an infirmity in our discursive capacity" (243). Each schema in its own way captures the decentering of the subject in a depiction of simultaneous relations between the registers, multiple structural relations that exceed the signifier's discursive limitations.

The more elaborate of Lacan's two presentations of his Schema L shows the relationship between the imaginary and symbolic registers as they distinguish the terms of subjectivity. Schema L, also called the Z-shaped schema, is presented in Seminar II as "a little schema . . . to illustrate the problems raised by the ego and the other, language and speech" (243). The ego and the mirroring other (*autre*) signify the imaginary relation and locate the imaginary register in the drawing while the Other (*Autre*) of language as such and the S or speaking subject locate the symbolic. It is clear from this simplest Lacanian schema that the speaking subject (*Es*, S) is not the ego (*moi*, a). It also clear that the mirroring other (a′) is not the Other (A). Lacan does not draw these relations because the necessary gaps between the Subject and the ego and between the other and the Other illustrate Freud's greatest discovery—the decentering of the subject of the unconscious. The Lacanian subject is not an *un*centered subject as is sometimes mistakenly inferred; the Lacanian subject is decentered vis-à-vis its own ego. The gap between the Subject and the ego in Schema L depicts Lacan's position contra the unified Cartesian thinking "I." The terms and relationships of Lacan's schema of the decentered subject of the unconscious are presented more fully in Schema R.

Schema R depicts both the structure of the three registers and the structure of the subject. On the upper left is the Imaginary triangle (whose corners are marked by e, i, and S). The register of the Real separates the Imaginary triangle from the Symbolic triangle on the lower right; the Real is denoted by a square with the corners e, i, o/M, and o′/I. The Symbolic triangle on the lower right is bounded on the inside by the letters o′/o/O and on the outside by the letters I/M/F. This simultaneous depiction of the three registers and the terminology of desire insinuates several ambiguities into Lacan's schema, suggesting that such simultaneous representation may be more that a simple two-dimensional drawing can handle. Perhaps the only thing that Schema R makes clear is that Lacan means to retain the gap between
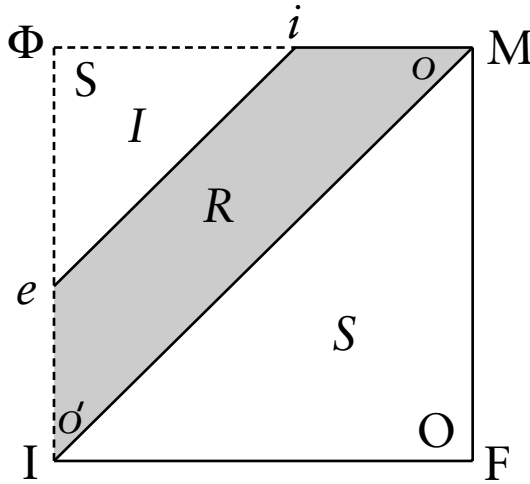
FIGURE 1.2
Schema R: The Three Registers

the imaginary and symbolic registers. The gap effected by the position of the real in Schema R reiterates the gap between the Subject and the ego in Schema L.

The structural paradigm applies even more loosely to Lacan's Schema R than to Schema L. In Schema R, terms change their value and meaning depending on their combination with other terms and depending on how many terms are considered simultaneously. The duplication of terms that occurs when the number of terms exceeds the number of available positions further reinforces the observation by Lemaire and by Miller that Lacan basically says the same thing in two different ways. As elaborations of earlier terms, the subject position (Φ), the *objet a* (M), the ideal ego (I), and the Other (as the F or Name-of-the-Father) contribute to the contradictions and inversions in the critical positions surveyed in this chapter.

Both Schema L and Schema R appear in Lacan's explication of the psychoanalysis of the psychotic in his essay "On the possible treatment of psychosis" (EE 179–225). In this essay, Lacan describes Schema R as a pattern composed of two triads. The first is an imaginary triad defined by "the two imaginary terms of the narcissistic relation, the ego and the specular image" together with the Subject's self-identification as third term. The second is the symbolic triad defined by the Oedipal relation. Another

ambiguity enters here, however, when Lacan specifically distinguishes between the "third term of the imaginary triad . . . in which the subject identifies himself . . . with himself as a living being" (196) and the "fourth term . . . given by the subject in his reality, foreclosed as such in the system [e.g., the subject as the neither/nor position], and entering into the play of the signifiers only in the mode of death" (196). Symbolic existence through speech alone can be either a kind of death (the "fourth" term) or a set of positivisms ("third" terms), either the truth of the unconscious or the "empty speech" of the analysand. In fact, Lacan indicates that this speaking subject becomes the true subject "to the extent that this play of the signifiers will make it signify" (196), that is to say, to the extent that it abandons its self-defining certainties, giving up its third terms for its fourths. All in all, Schema R has introduced a number of redundancies and replicating patterns into Schema L's rather straightforward illustration of the dynamics of the decentered Freudian subject of the unconscious.

In spite of their differences, Schema R and Schema L share several characteristics. First, for all their complexities, both schemas are determined rather than overdetermined. In both, Lacan astutely avoids the overdetermination that would inevitably be entailed in any model whose relations exceeded its terms. Schema L, with its four relations and four terms depicts a circuit in which the imaginary and symbolic registers appear at cross purposes. The gaps that distance the subject from the ego and the mirroring other from the Other of language ironically rescue the model from radical polyvocality. Schema R avoids overdetermination by the sheer multiplication of terms. This does not in any way imply the failure of either model, but rather suggests that the models are far more complicated than they appear and that they do make quite specific assertions about the nature of the subject and the position of the unconscious. The strength of Lacan's theorizing and the reason why Lacan is both a structuralist and a post-structuralist reside in Lacanian theory's justaposition of the determined with the indeterminate. Finally, Lacan's "intersubjective" models should not be taken to imply interpersonal ones. The Lacanian subject, though certainly not the unified subject of the humanist tradition, does not suffer from multiple personality syndrome. The phenomenal otherness of the ego's imagoes and the linguistic Otherness of the subject's language provide the psychic resources with which the Lacanian subject confronts the brute alterity of its real. The grapplings of desiring subjects toward their missing parts provide the material for Lacan's own symposium on the unconscious.

Lacan's Symposium on the Subject of Desire

Though Plato's *Symposium* pretends to be a dialogue that is truly multivocal, the *Symposium* assimilates all its allegedly competing discourses to one reigning symbolic polarity: heavenly love/earthly love.[16] As John Brenkman notes, this core opposition is never in question, and all the differences Plato's participants seem so hotly to debate ultimately align themselves with the *Symposium*'s dominant opposition. Differences between soul/body, idea/matter, paternal/maternal, the permanent/the transitory, the one/the many, male/female, and good/bad merely question the best way in which to position each polarity in relation to the foundational binary heavenly/earthly. Like the positions in Plato's *Symposium*, critical positions on the Lacanian imaginary and symbolic registers align their critiques with a foundational binary and then argue for their alignments.

Lacan's response to Plato's *Symposium* combines his discourse on the registers with his discourse on desire, producing the rich and ambiguous blend characteristic of all his later theorizing. The very title of Lacan's response to Plato is ambiguous: "Position of the Unconscious."[17] Is the position of the unconscious synchronic and spatial like a schema of the registers? Or is it the position to which desire has brought the subject unawares? Language, the very basis of analysis and the *modus vivendi* of the unconscious "supplies warp and woof to what is woven between synchrony and diachrony" (264). Like Lacan's twinned theoretical perspectives, the alternative between language and speech "proposes itself as a disjunction" (264).

Lacan's essay on the *Symposium* emphasizes the disjunction between the imaginary and the symbolic registers, maintaining the decentering of the subject that prevents the categorical error of opposing the registers to each other or of opposing the unconscious to the conscious. The unconscious is something very different from the "not conscious" (260), a psychoanalytic fact that psychology refuses to acknowledge. Psychology's central error, like that of Descartes, is the attribution of a unifying, synthetic capacity to consciousness (261), yet the only "homogeneous function" of consciousness is the imaginary ego's capture by its own reflection which must be seen as disjunct from the symbolic presence of the unconscious that haunts every enunciation (263). "Everything . . . points to the distribution of consciousness . . . being heterotopic in terms of levels and erratic at each level" (261), and this complex and erratic inter-

weaving of levels characterizes register theory through and through. Lacan concludes with another statement of the relationship between the registers and desire: As an effect of language, the subject of the unconscious is "born of this original split" between the registers; desire then beds down in the signifying cut Lacan concludes (265).

Lacan's desiring being has a less happy fate than Plato's: it seems caught between an imaginary paralysis and an inevitable symbolic lack. Freezing, the imaginary alternative, insists that the being is wholly what it imagines itself to be. Lack, by contrast, springs from the symbolic's organization around the "*vel*," the either/or that requires the subject to choose by eliminating one option or the other. The outcome of this forced choice initiates lack, and lack initiates desire. Thus, the *Symposium* is useful to Lacan because it demonstrates "this point of lack" (266). The *Symposium* illustrates and situates the libido, says Lacan, again pointing to the copresence of the situating registers with the dynamics of desire. In Plato's myth of desire, Lacan locates the registers of the imaginary and the symbolic not as categorical differences but as incommensurabilities. This disjunction between the registers, retained in Lacan's complex narratology of phallic potency and castration, has its genesis in his earliest theorizing and predominates in his early Seminars. Because register theory constitutes such a vital part of Lacanian reading practice, I will explore its genesis and then its full articulation before inviting Lacan's guests to return to the *Symposium*.