

- 3 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 771.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 772.
- 5 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
- 6 *Vatel*, a French, British, and Belgian film released in May 2000, was produced by Roland Joffé.
- 7 *Primum vivere, deinde philosophari*, live first, then philosophize.
- 8 Lacan, *Ethics*, 209.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 304.
- 10 Jacques Lacan, “. . . ou pire. Compte rendu du séminaire 1971-72,” in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 547.
- 11 Lacan, “Jeunesse de Gide ou la lettre et le désir,” in *Ecrits*, 756.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 757.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Jacques Lacan, “Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. B. Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 69.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 283-84.
- 16 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of René Descartes*, ed. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 17 Denis Diderot, *Ramneau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream*, trans. and intro. L. Tancock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).
- 18 Lacan, *Ethics*, 177. Translation modified.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Miller's interview with Daniel Widlocher was published in March 2003 in the first issue of the review *Psychiatrie et sciences humaines*.

Paul Verhaeghe

**2**  
**Enjoyment and**  
**Impossibility: Lacan's**  
**Revision of the**  
**Oedipus Complex**

The strength of the master is determined by the degree of weakness he can bear.  
 —Jacques Lacan

*Seminar XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, will undoubtedly enter history as the seminar on the four discourses. In this essay I will focus on what grounds the discourse is structured: the prohibition on enjoyment.<sup>1</sup> In classical Freudian thought, this has everything to do with the father, meaning that the function of the father will become our second focus. In *Seminar XVII*, we learn that enjoyment is not so much forbidden as impossible, and that the real father only plays the role of the structural operator. In brief: he is the one “left holding the baby,” the one who not only has to pass through and transmit castration but is also subjected to it himself.

In the wider span of Lacan's seminars, *Seminar XVII* sits in opposition to *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, and occupies a transitional place between *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts*, and *Seminar XX, Encore*. In his seminar on ethics, jouissance was conceived as real and therefore diametrically opposed to the symbolic. Enjoyment could be reached only through transgression of the law. In *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, in contrast, jouissance is of the order of an invasion. Moreover, Lacan will put forward a primordial relationship between jouissance and the signifier. In so doing, certain themes of *Seminar XI* will be taken up again and enhanced, only to reach their full devel-

opment in *Seminar XX*. These principally concern the *objet a*, the impossibility of the sexual relationship, and the function of the father. The changes in the latter are particularly far reaching: the famous Name-of-the-Father will be replaced by  $S_1$ . Furthermore,  $S_1$  can now be any signifier.

Enjoyment and Knowledge: (a) //  $S_2$

*Enjoyment* is a very ambiguous term, particularly as it always evokes the idea of pleasure. Lacan will never define this concept very clearly, providing us with only vague indications. We learn that "it begins with a tickle and ends in a blaze of petrol" (83). In fact, jouissance is the opposite of pleasure: *Unlust, déplaisir* (89). This imprecision is deliberate: for Lacan, enjoyment is by definition undefinable; it is that which escapes symbolization (205). There is no concept of jouissance in Freud, despite the fact that Lacan takes his inspiration for it from Freud.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, he finds it in Freud's conclusion that there must be something "beyond" (*jenseits*) the pleasure principle that works against it and which serves, furthermore, as the cause of a strange repetition—strange, because what is repeated is not exactly what could be called pleasure. This will ground Freud's final conception of the drive in the opposition between Eros and Thanatos.

The heart of this theory is that the human being is driven by two opposing drives, one striving for death (Thanatos), that is, a return to a state of total rest and zero tension, the other (Eros) striving to maintain life through the production of differential tensions. In the end, Thanatos always wins, hence Freud's conclusion that life is nothing but a self-fashioned detour on the way to death. One of the implications of this theory is that the idea of "pleasure" must be reexamined very closely. Indeed, the inescapable conclusion of Freud's new drive theory is that death is the final form of pleasure.

Lacan continues along this same line of reasoning. The surprising new theme in *Seminar XVII* is the idea of an original relationship between jouissance and the signifier, in the sense that the origin of the apparatus of the signifier in the subject is closely bound up with jouissance. This is in diametrical opposition to his *Seminar VII* on ethics, where jouissance is regarded as the opposite of the symbolic. For that matter, the relation

between the signifier and jouissance also remains a bit paradoxical in *Seminar XVII*. As we will shortly see, for Lacan the signifier is both the cause of the impossibility of reaching jouissance and, simultaneously, the path to its attainment.

At the beginning of the seminar, Lacan revisits Freud's idea of *Jenseits*. Life is a self-fashioned detour on the way to death and, in most cases, life is in no hurry to reach the end (17–18). One is reminded of the joke about the two alcoholics: "Alcohol is supposed to slowly kill you." "Well, we're not in any hurry, are we?" Lacan connects this detour to the instinct, making a connection between jouissance and a certain form of knowledge. The instinct contains an ancestral knowledge that causes life to dawdle on the road to death (17). As death is the final form of jouissance, this detour is at the same time the road to jouissance. Understanding the instinct as knowledge implies that there is an original connection between a certain form of knowledge and jouissance (54). This gives rise to an even more surprising new thesis in view of his previous theory: the connection between knowledge and jouissance is the foundation for the introduction of the apparatus of the signifier in the subject.

Lacan finds the explanation for this in Freud's theory of repetition (50, 89). Repetition is grounded in an attempt to reach jouissance, which is why one starts out again on the (side) road to jouissance. But, unlike Freud, Lacan presents us with a specific elaboration of the way this detour is paved. The line of reasoning runs as follows: jouissance takes place in the body, through invasions (19). These invasions acquire markings; they are inscribed on the body through the intervention of the Other (55). Walking along the road to jouissance, one will inevitably follow the signs that have previously been erected along this road (89). The instinctual knowledge is then grafted onto this mapping.

One finds the germ of this reasoning in Freud, who posits that every mother "seduces" her child while caring for it. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan describes the real body as an "enjoying substance," during which the initial experiences of jouissance (the invasions) simultaneously imply their inscription on the body.<sup>3</sup> This is their "use value," but in itself this does not suffice for talking about jouissance in terms of the subject. The necessary supplement is the mother's interventions—her "motherly language"—that mark the invasions of jouissance in the course of her interactions

with the child. Through these interventions, the original use value enters into a dialectical exchange between the subject and the Other, and the experiences of jouissance acquire an “exchange value.” In this way, a map of jouissance is built up through the sign markings.

The conceptual double of “invasion” and “inscription” is important because it sets up an original ambiguity that will only increase from that point onward. Invasion refers to the enjoying body itself, the body as a “being of jouissance.” At first sight, this tallies perfectly with Lacan’s earlier theory, in which jouissance was regarded as something of the order of the real. Inscription, on the other hand, refers to something or someone who inscribes—that is, to the Other (55). “Jouissance of the Other” then takes on an ambiguous expression in *Seminar XX*, where “the Other” becomes both the body and the Other who marks jouissance on that body.

The simplest form of inscription is the “unary trait.” In his *Seminar IX* on identification, Lacan used the unary trait as the starting point for subject formation. The subject identifies with a unary trait that comes from the Other in order to build a singular identity over its lack of being. In *Seminar XVII* he develops this connection between the unary trait and the Other through the concept of jouissance. The Other marks the invasions of the enjoying body through the unary trait. The mandatory repetitions—mandatory because they mark the road to jouissance—lie at the origin of the signifier, says Lacan, and therefore also at the origin of the knowledge that interests us as analysts (52). The surprising conclusion, then, is that the human being learns about the signifier through jouissance. In other words: jouissance is the gateway to the apparatus of the signifier (14, 18, 206).

The repetition of the inscriptions forms the basis of the signifier and gives content to the ancestral, instinctive knowledge. This is an acephalous knowledge, a “knowledge without a head,” that is, without self-consciousness, that forms the kernel of what Freud calls primary repression—that which has always been repressed (102). In terms of content, we learn that it concerns life and death, with the detours paved by life toward death. As knowledge, it is inscribed on the body every time the invasions of jouissance on this body are marked by the Other (54–56). Consequently, this knowledge is originally a means to jouissance. In addition, it has little to do with speech in itself; it is a question of

structure (57). The theory of discourse is the best illustration of this, as it permits us to chart certain fundamental relations that precede actual speech (11). Later in this essay, I will discuss what effects this has on the positions in the Oedipal structure.

#### Heads You Win, Tails I Lose: Loss and Gain

Jouissance is the gateway to the apparatus of the signifier because the unary trait is inscribed and repeated as a marking of jouissance. The aim of the repetition is both jouissance in itself (repetition of the inscription as an invasion of jouissance) and that which opposes this jouissance (the unary trait and the signifier always imply a loss). Each repetition will therefore be less than what it tries to repeat (51). This idea appears under different names throughout the seminar: “objet a,” “déperdition,” “entropie,” “plus-de-jouir.” However, the signifier is also the cause of the loss, the cause of the division between the subject and the body as organism. Hence the fact that the signifier, as a means for attaining jouissance, necessarily must fail and, in failing, can only further confirm the original loss. Here, we encounter a second ambiguous relation: knowledge, once it has been introduced into the signifier, is both the means to jouissance and the cause of the loss of jouissance.

This idea of loss and lack is central to Lacan. When compared to his previous seminars (particularly *Seminar XI*), his conception of lack in *Seminar XVII* appears strikingly novel and different. Here, lack is described as an effect of the signifier that, as a means for recovering jouissance, precisely confirms its loss. Beginning with his paper on the mirror stage, Lacan always described the loss, whose clearest formulation can be found in *Seminar XI*, in terms of nature. The birth of the individual as a sexed being implies the loss of eternal life (see the myth on the lamella in *Seminar XI*), because sexed life makes death a necessary consequence.<sup>4</sup> But in *Seminar XVII* it is the introduction of the signifier that causes the loss of jouissance, which would seem to be a reversal of his previous position. In my reading, this is not the case. The loss caused by the signifier comes *on top of* the loss caused by the introduction of sexed life. It is not only another iteration of this original loss but an attempt to formulate an answer to this loss. This attempt at an answer must fail, for structural reasons, hence the inevitable “encore”—Freud’s

repetition compulsion. Elsewhere I have described this as a never-ending but always failing circularity, a flywheel movement whose original cause is the original loss (the loss of the eternal life) that continues to repeat an impossible relation on a different level each time (organism-body; bodily image-ego; ego-subject; man-woman).<sup>5</sup>

In addition, this loss is not solely a loss: the introduction of the signifier results in a form of gain alongside the loss, expressed perfectly by yet another ambiguous expression: *plus-de-jourir*. Lacan connects this idea to Marx's concept of "surplus value" (56). This gain is closely bound up with the repetition that has become necessary because of the loss. This already indicates how this is an ambiguous gain, one that lies elsewhere, in a different place than the original jouissance. The comparison with Marx is not coincidental, because this "elsewhere" has to do with the products of culture and industry that provide us with (an always) temporary and partial satisfaction. As products, they are both the effect of the loss of jouissance and a response to this loss—in this sense, they provide us with a plus-de-jourir. The name Lacan gives this is "sivers of jouissance," *les lichettes de la jouissance*. In this way, Lacan comes quite close to Marx's idea of "surplus value" that has to be not only spent but even squandered (19).

But Lacan's idea of plus-de-jourir goes further still. He will completely redefine the Oedipus complex as a cunning social institution that replaces jouissance with something that has a different origin, that is, this plus-de-jourir. What is of principal interest to us during analysis, Lacan says, is learning how the function of plus-de-jourir is established as a replacement for the prohibition of phallic jouissance (85). I will return to this reading of the Oedipus complex in my discussion of the function of the father.

#### Master Signifier and Divided Subject: S<sub>1</sub> and §

As we saw, the original knowledge, the means to jouissance, is knowledge "without a head" that functions automatically through the repetition of the signs that mark the invasions of jouissance. These invasions have to do with the body as an enjoying substance in itself, while the inscriptions are from the Other. The result is the automaton, knowledge that functions without knowing itself. The question then is: When and how is the "head" introduced, and what are its effects? As we will see,

it is a question of identity development and subject formation, that is, the ego versus the divided subject.

Right from the start of the seminar, we learn that S<sub>2</sub> is already present before there is anything like a subject. S<sub>1</sub> enters the game only later, as an interference in S<sub>2</sub> and as an indication of the subject's position (11-12, 178).<sup>6</sup> The introduction of S<sub>1</sub> is the function of the father as a structural operator (143-46). From the moment that repetition is put in motion in the dialectical exchange between S<sub>1</sub> and S<sub>2</sub>, the subject becomes a divided subject (18) that tries to reach S<sub>2</sub> in an attempt to attain jouissance, even while this is precisely the cause of the loss of jouissance.

In contrast, the master—that is, the ego—may try to maintain a certain appearance, to coincide with himself, with the S<sub>1</sub>, the jubilatory "That's me!" Recall the master's discourse: the divided subject is located under the bar, covered by the S<sub>1</sub>, with all the accompanying illusions (106). This idea can already be seen in Lacan's paper on the mirror stage. The body as an organism, that is, as an enjoying substance, is the reunification of all the partial drives that are bundled together in and by the imaginary body-image into a totality and presented by the other: "That's you!" ("tu es cela!").<sup>7</sup> In this way, an imaginary totality is placed on top of the divided subject, as a "me" (32), a little master who pretends to know. Moreover, he pretends to be identical to "himself" (102), an I that is in control of himself: "m'être/maître à moi-même," to be myself, to belong to myself, to be master of myself (70, 178). This is the illusion of the autonomous ego (83). Nevertheless, the knowledge of the master has nothing to do with that other knowledge, whence the clinical fact that this masterly knowledge goes off the rails from time to time. Hence Freud's famous expression: "The I is not master in its own house." And hence, too, every symptom, with the slip of the tongue as the most elementary example. Furthermore, the essence of the master—the ego—is that he does not know what he wants (34).

Such a use of the signifier—the subject supposedly identical to its "own" signifier, "m'être/maître à moi-même"—implies a split between the master signifier and the body, whereby the other signifiers remain inscribed on the body. This is Freud's primary repressed, that which has always been repressed. The master's knowledge is produced as completely autonomous knowledge, independent of that other, mythical, ancestral knowledge (102-3).

Here, we encounter a double division in which the second comes on

top of the first. In a first logical moment, a division occurs between the nonspeaking “being,” the body as an enjoying organism, and the master signifier. This latter may maintain the illusion of coinciding with itself. Nevertheless, from the introduction of the  $S_1$  onward, man is perpetually marked by a lack of being. This master signifier intervenes on an already existing  $S_2$  and will represent the subject for any other signifier there. The result is the second division, that of the subject in and among the signifiers. Elsewhere I have interpreted this first process as Freud’s primary repression, as what, from a Lacanian point of view, could be regarded as a primary alienation. The second process, then, combines Freud’s secondary repression and identification. From a Lacanian point of view, this could be coined as secondary alienation.<sup>8</sup>

It’s clear that all this is closely bound up with identity acquisition. Here, the introduction of the master signifier is as necessary as it is paradoxical.  $S_1$  forms the basis both for the ego—that is, an illusory, imaginary unity—and for the divided subject. What is less clear is what identity acquisition has to do with jouissance and the place of the Other in this process. In brief, where does the Oedipus complex fit in?

Lacan’s earlier theory in this respect was a retake and extension of Freud’s theory in structural terms. With his metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father, he mapped out a structure that explains how a child is freed from the desire of the mother by the intervention of the Name-of-the-Father. The most important new aspect, in comparison with Freud’s Oedipal theory, is that the father’s intervention is directed not toward the child but toward the mother. This remains, by the way, a fairly classic (that is, patriarchal) view: the mother/woman is the dangerous element whose desire must be constrained. The father takes the role of the savior who must free the child from the mother’s threatening desire by the grace of his almighty position.<sup>9</sup>

This idea—which might very rapidly result in maternal blame and a call for stronger fathers—is not so rare in Lacan’s earlier theory. In *Seminar XVII* it will appear only once, when he compares the mother to a crocodile from whose jaws the only possible escape is through the phallus (129). It is precisely this aspect of his previous theory that will undergo important changes in this very *Seminar XVII*. Here, both the mother and the father are reduced to little more than pawns in a social shadow play of chess, resulting in the impossibility of jouissance being hidden behind a prohibition (85, 91).

### The Oedipus Complex: Social Complicity

In Freud, the Oedipus complex deals with identity acquisition and the regulation of the drive, as summed up in the idea of the superego. Lacan dubs Freud’s Oedipal theory a dream, a myth, that calls for extensive correction (135, 159). On the basis of *Seminar XVII*, we can propose the following statement: we are the way in which we (don’t) enjoy. At first sight, the negation between the brackets seems paradoxical, but this negation is significant because it indicates our dividedness toward “our” enjoying “being.” If we “were” our enjoyment, we could not exist as a subject.<sup>10</sup> One’s existence as a subject simultaneously implies a divided stance toward jouissance. Note that this was also one of Freud’s earliest discoveries, which became one of the starting points of psychoanalysis: there is a division and a defense within ourselves in relation to what we desire and enjoy. Hence the need for an *Abwehr*, a defense system.

The divided stance toward jouissance—why do we not go full speed at it?—has to do with the threat that enjoyment poses to life itself. This is what Freud understood in his study of *Jenseits* in the opposition between the life and death drives. Lacan offers another take on this: enjoyment and death lie very close to one another; the road to enjoyment is the road to death. Hence the need for an internal, instinctive brake prior even to the onset of a divided subject and an identity. Once subject formation proper begins, this internal brake takes the form of what constitutes the subject: signifiers and, hence, the Other. The distribution of roles in this are as follows: the mother acquires the part of jouissance, the father plays both the role of the brake and that of the brake’s guarantee through his prohibition. The price to pay is castration, not just for the mother and the child, but for the father, too. The fact that, in Lacan, “castration” acquires a completely different meaning than in Freud is quite clear—as we will shortly see.

Where does jouissance stem from? It stems from the body as an enjoying substance. This, in itself, is not enough in the sense that jouissance can only ever be experienced as jouissance by being inscribed through the repetitions centered around these inscriptions. The oyster “knows” no enjoyment because it lacks a signifier. At most, it can only “be” enjoyment, a “being of enjoyment” (206). The signifier that inscribes enjoyment in man comes strictly from the Other who, through his or her

gestures, marks the body, even the skin, as an object of enjoyment. This means that the subject receives its “own” enjoyment—in actual fact, the enjoyment of the body—in the form of the Other’s enjoyment. It is not by accident that in this context Lacan refers to Freud’s idea of the lost object, the mythical primordial enjoyment that can be never refound (55). Following on from this, the inscriptions will be repeated in an attempt (not) to attain jouissance: the signifier is both the means for arriving at enjoyment and the cause of its loss. The subsequent articulation of this process leads to subject formation, where the dialectical exchange of alienation and separation—the original division between organism and enjoyment—now becomes both a division within the subject and a division between subject and Other.

Hence, the living being’s original divided stance toward its enjoyment—founded on an instinctive knowledge that the road to enjoyment leads to death and therefore must be slowed down—becomes, from the point of the introduction of the Other’s signs onward, redistributed. In this way, the original internal division and internal impossibility can be externalized onto the Other. It is she who carries the enjoyment in her, with the result that it is to her that the demand will be addressed and upon whom the prohibition will be put. But the structural impossibility ensures that this demand will never fully be met. This will have far-reaching consequences for the sexual relationship—I refer you here to normal, that is, hysterical desire and the distribution of roles between the genders.

Lacan describes this as a “cunning” transition that replaces the impossibility of jouissance with the prohibition of enjoyment. What makes this possible is the social apparatus that results in the Oedipus complex (85). The question now is how the impossibility is replaced by prohibition and how this emerges as what he calls “*plus-de-jouir*.” Here, woman takes on an unavoidably central role. As a mother, she dominates the inscriptions of jouissance; any attempt to repeat jouissance must be addressed to her. The child becomes the demanding party and inhabits a position of dependence toward her. Whereas the original (im)possibility of jouissance was previously located in the living body as a “being of enjoyment,” now the possibility for jouissance and the simultaneous need for its failure are displaced onto the mother. She leads her little one toward the plus-de-jouir, as the roads toward jouissance are opened for

the child on condition that it renounce the enjoyment that from now on (i.e., from the first moments of inscription) is situated in the mother (89). Lacan locates the cause for this shift in what he calls “social complicity”: as the child fixates on the mother, she becomes the chosen seat of the prohibitions through which absolute enjoyment can be avoided (91). This immediately becomes the cause of desire.

The next question is what the role of the father is. At this level, Freud’s theory is contradictory, to say the least. The few descriptions he gives of the Oedipus complex are fairly crude. Briefly summarized, his theory goes like this: the child—that is, the male child—wants to kill the father so as to have sexual access to the mother. Out of fear of the father and his threat of castration, the child renounces his incestuous desires and directs his desire toward a future, elsewhere. The drives become regulated by a special identification that results in the formation of the superego. Once one takes a closer look at Freud’s theory, however, it becomes obvious that his reasoning does not make sense, clinically, conceptually, or historically.

#### The Oedipus Complex: Freud’s Dream

What we find in Freud’s case studies is diametrically opposed to what he asserts in his theory. From *Studies on Hysteria* onward, we find only weak, ill fathers who need taking care of, frequently by the person who later becomes Freud’s patient. Lacan talks of the “father-out-of-service” and refers to the function of the idealized father (108). In Freud’s wider case studies, this is even more striking. We encounter an impotent father who barbers his daughter with his mistress’s husband (Dora); a father who, in several meanings of the word, is very much a “noncommissioned officer” living off his wife’s fortune, for which he left his poorer lover (the Rat man); a melancholic father who wanders from one sanatorium to another (the Wolf man); and a father who learns from Freud that he must assume his Oedipal place, despite it being quite clear that he is a weakling (little Hans).

The last case study is the most instructive for noting the gap between Freud’s theory and his clinical practice. Hans’s mother wears the pants, so the threat of castration comes from her. When Freud produces his famous interpretation, this can be read only—in light of the clinical ma-

terial—as a suggestive construction: “Long before he [Hans] was in the world, I went on, I had known that a Little Hans would come who would be so fond of his mother that he would be bound to feel afraid of his father because of it; and I had told his father this.”<sup>11</sup> This last part was essential, and it operated in a therapeutic-suggestive way. Freud’s theoretical model—the child longing for the mother; the severe, castration-threatening and forbidding father; the child thereby renouncing his desire—does not in the slightest correspond with the clinical picture. A Lacanian reading is much closer to the clinical material. Confronted with an invasion of enjoyment—recall his initial phallic “wiwi” experiences—Hans does not know how to handle it and looks for protection. He associates the threat arising from his own enjoyment with his mother and looks to his father for protection. This is why Freud’s backup was necessary, although it took on a strange form: desire for the mother, anxiety about the father. Lacan will introduce his first important correction to Freud’s Oedipal theory on this point. In Lacan’s previous conception, the dominant desire is the mother’s desire; the fatherly intervention must be directed toward the mother, thereby freeing the child from his mother and opening up the possibility for a desire of his own. This is the standard reading of the metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father, and it is precisely this reading that undergoes serious changes in *Seminar XVII*.

Freud’s theory (of the strong, prohibiting father) thus clearly contradicts his own clinical practice (weak fathers). In *Totem and Taboo*, he will try to solve this inconsistency through a self-invented myth that is designed to save the Oedipal father, that is, his image of this figure. Later he will write that when the individual’s reality does not follow the expected and needed model, the child can call on a supraindividual, historical reality that, in one way or another, has been preserved in the collective memory of mankind.<sup>12</sup> Hence, it is no big deal if one is unlucky enough to have a weak father. One can always fall back on this archaic figure. What comes through from this part of the “theory,” albeit differently than Freud intended, is the need for a specific father figure. In fact, what he is doing here is giving form to neurotic desire and elevating it, moreover, to a supposedly historical reality.<sup>13</sup>

Now, if we take a closer look at his myth, we are in for another surprise. As Lacan observes, the result of the primal murder is precisely the

opposite of its aim in Freud’s model (137–38). Once the primal father has been murdered by the sons, they realize that they are brothers and together they collectively install the incest prohibition—that is, they make enjoyment definitively unreachable. In Freud’s story, the threat of castration, let alone the actual castration by the primal father, is barely mentioned. As a result, the conclusion is the exact opposite of Freud’s: the murder of the primal father is what installs the enjoyment prohibition (139). Freud’s reading of Sophocles’s tragedy, for that matter, is just as odd. In contradiction to Freud’s reading, Oedipus does not gain access to his mother because he has murdered his father. His mother is given to him as a wife because he has solved an existential question. The sequence of the story—during which he confronts truth for a second time—ends in a symbolic equivalent of self-inflicted castration as he puts out his own eyes (139–40).

The conclusion is that, needing a defense against jouissance, the child calls for help from a supposedly almighty father figure. We find this not only in Freud’s clinical studies, but also appearing more fully in his revised version of the myth of the primal herd. The murder of the primal father is thus an expression of a death wish whose aim is to make the father immortal and, therefore, almighty (141). In the revised version of the myth (*Moses and Monotheism*), it is the youngest son who, in the face of a patriarchy, elevates the (meanwhile murdered) primal father to divine proportions.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it appears as though this enjoyment is somehow associated with a dangerous femininity, with the woman/mother. This is as famous as it is misunderstood (witness the three religions of the Book).

As I said above, in the first instance Lacan corrects Freud’s theory on this point. It is not so much the child’s desire that has to be restrained. Rather, it is the dangerous jouissance that comes from the mother; it is her desire that needs to be signified through the symbolic Name-of-the-Father so as to enable the child to develop its own desire. That such a theory would rapidly form the basis for patriarchal interpretations along the lines of the religions of the Book, is easy enough to predict in hindsight. There are calls everywhere today for the reintroduction of strong father figures, along with the mother-at-the-hearth. The renewed fascism in Europe is, alas, no exception—with the United States coming in right behind—and what Klaus Theweleit described with regard to the

male-female relationship and the onset of fascism during the interwar years, is now repeating itself in a contemporary version.<sup>15</sup>

In the end, with his Oedipal theory Freud did nothing but “scientifically” confirm the neurotic’s fundamental fantasy. It is no coincidence that the very same Oedipal figure is constructed in the neurotic’s all too familiar “family romance.”<sup>16</sup> We are invariably tempted to elevate our father to unknown proportions in order to combat a danger we locate in the woman/mother, a danger that, in one way or another, always has to do with jouissance and our fear of becoming its victim.

#### Beyond the Oedipus Complex:

#### The Real Father as a Structural Operator

Lacan’s reworking in *Seminar XVII* distances itself from any psychologizing, moralizing interpretation. The idea of an almighty father, enjoying all women, is an illusion; the father is scarcely capable of satisfying one woman (114, 144). Lacan’s thesis is that man and woman, father and mother, are inevitably invested in certain positions on the basis of an already existing fact: the impossibility of jouissance. The social complicity ensures that this impossibility is translated into a prohibition, leaving man the illusion that it can be transgressed. This is nothing but the Oedipus complex, whatever the form it might take in different cultures.

As far as the Oedipal theory is concerned, Lacan notes an important difference between Freud and the post-Freudians. Freud will systematically put the emphasis on the father, regarding the first identification with the father as primordial. Both the post-Freudians and contemporary attachment theorists stress the earliest relation between mother and child (100, 113). In general, one could say that the post-Freudians have very little interest in Freud’s Oedipal theory: the castration complex has almost entirely disappeared. Lacan returns to Freud’s focus on the father but will give it a structural interpretation that enables him to put forward a different theory of castration. In place of Freud’s castrating primal father, he will offer the castrated father who must hand on a certain function to the child—the  $S_1$ .

It is clear that Lacan defines the notion of castration in a completely different way than Freud. For Freud, the emphasis is on castration-anxiety in which the Oedipal boy fears being castrated by the father in

punishment for his incestuous desire for the mother. For Lacan, *symbolic* castration is the inevitable consequence of the fact that man becomes a subject and must therefore pass through the signifier in order to gain jouissance, with the simultaneous implication that jouissance is impossible. Becoming a subject, being “taken in” by language, takes place through the  $S_1$ , more specifically, through a primary identification with the  $S_1$ . This also means that symbolic castration is determined by that  $S_1$ , and it is here that Lacan locates the function of the father.

As opposed to the supposedly almighty Freudian patriarch, here the father becomes nothing more than a structural operator (143) that performs the job of the “agency of the master” (146). It is not by chance that Lacan has previously already discussed the humiliated father and that he will end this seminar with a lesson on shame. What the father has to pass on to his son is the  $S_1$  that gives the subject the illusion of coinciding with itself. This is Freud’s primary identification with the father figure. The introduction of the  $S_1$ , however, inevitably implies the division of the subject and, hence, castration—that is, the impossibility of attaining jouissance (141). In fact, the  $S_1$  intervenes in the already existing  $S_2$  that divides the subject through the chain of signifiers, making enjoyment impossible to reach. In sum, the intervention of the master signifier  $S_1$  on  $S_2$ , that is, on knowledge as a means for attaining jouissance, induces and determines symbolic castration (101). And this applies for the father as well; from the moment he enters the master discourse, the father is also symbolically castrated (115).

The role of the social apparatus is to convert this into a prohibition on jouissance, closely linked with woman, and to combine it with the fantasy of the imaginary father-castrator. Jouissance is ascribed to woman because it is the mother who inscribes the invasions of jouissance on the body. The child’s “own” jouissance comes from the Other. Next, the need to keep jouissance at bay, to create a halt on the road to jouissance, takes the form of defining both the mother and her jouissance as prohibited, presumably by the father, punishable by castration. This imaginary castration covers up and conceals a fundamental truth which is that enjoyment is impossible from the moment that one speaks: this is symbolic castration, as a given of structure. Its agent is the real father (149). Both “real” and “agent” must be understood in Lacanian terms. “Real” means impossible, which is why Freud needed a primal father



As a consequence, the father and child join forces; the child is the father of man. As the agent of the master agency, the father confronts impotence from the moment he speaks and, hence, makes a demand. The child itself begins with an original impotence and helplessness. The mediation between them is what Lacan calls the "instance of the master" insofar as this instance produces the master signifier. At this point, Lacan adds an important nuance, thereby considerably changing his previous theory regarding the Name-of-the-Father: the master signifier can be produced by *any* signifier (144). This nuance can be understood in terms of the evolution of his theory of the Name-of-the-Father to the Names-of-the-Father to, finally, any signifier whatsoever so long as it is produced as an  $S_1$  by the instance of the master (ROI). It is clear that we are a long way from the exclusive signifier of the Name-of-the-Father.

This is doubtless the most difficult theme that will be taken up again in *Seminar XX*: in order to make subject formation possible, the intervention of the  $S_1$  is necessary. The question then is: Where does this  $S_1$  come from? Lacan provides a tautological answer: the  $S_1$  comes from the signifier "One," as in the axiom: "There is a One" ("Y a de l'Un"). The  $S_1$  based on this can be any signifier, hence his homonymic word-

INAL LAUER. I'NO WOULD THAT I'VED UNDER THIS SYMBOLIC RECOGNITION. . . .  
"Credo quia absurdum"—I believe it because it is absurd.<sup>19</sup>

The Strength of the Master Is Determined  
by the Degree of Weakness He Can Bear

From the moment the subject is introduced into discourse, jouissance becomes impossible. This impossibility is translated by the social apparatus into a prohibition that assigns specific positions to the two sexes. We find the fullest expression of this in the statement "There is no sexual relationship," through which psychoanalysis demonstrates how the sexual relationship must be understood in terms of the plus-de-jour (179).

The effect of discourse on the man, his being introduced into the symbolic order, is that he is unable to attain jouissance except by way of the plus-de-jour, *objet a*, which is at the same time the cause of his desire. The implication is that man must reduce woman to this *objet a*, if he wishes to walk the jouissance road (186). These roads contain knowledge, founded on the Other's inscriptions of the invasions of jouissance.

master signifier presents an envelope through which the whole chain of signifiers—knowledge—can subsist (*Seminar XX*, 141–43).

7 See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. B. Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 3–9.

8 Verhaeghe, *Beyond Gender*, 65–97.

9 Of course, this reading is post-Lacanian. Lacan's theory itself is purely formal and structural. The psychological interpretations were made by the post-Lacanians. Note that in Lacan's theory, even the idea of prohibition is absent. The Oedipal transition is due to a signifying process: the desire of the mother (her incomprehensible comings and goings) is signified through the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father. This process reassures the child because it puts a name, a signifier, to a previously all-too-real process.

10 To exist is to stand outside the real, in the symbolic; this is the existence of the subject as a subject of the signifier.

11 Sigmund Freud, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year Old Boy," in *The Standard Edition*, 10:42.

12 See Sigmund Freud, "Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," in *The Standard Edition*, 15–16:374; Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *The Standard Edition*, 17:119.

13 Here, as a subject, Freud wants to elevate his own father to what he felt he needed

17 The presumed omnipotence of the child in psychoanalysis is an illusion and comes down to an identification with a presumed omnipotence of the mother.

18 Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 141–43.

19 Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 118.

20 Jacques Lacan, *Televisión: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment* (1974), trans. and ed. D. Holler, R. Krauss, and A. Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 37–38.

21 See Freud, "Fetishism," in *The Standard Edition*, 21:149–58.

22 Lacan, *Televisión*, 40.