

THE IMAGOS OF FREUD AND LACAN TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING STRUCTURE.

Helen Sheehan

Imago is a word in Latin: image in English, or, to be more precise; form. Lacan's reading of the term, particularly in his Seminar on Identification (1961-1962) leads him to ask: why have we allowed the imagos of Freud and Lacan to be trivialised? Why have we permitted these 'imperceptible traces' to serve for our amusement, even our derision? Lacan reminds us that their use is revelatory as a means of understanding structure. This paper aims to examine this issue.

Brendan Behan, a Dublin playwright once said, 'The first item on the agenda of any newly formed group in Ireland, is the split'. At this stage over 40 years since Cormac Gallagher brought the 'plague of psychoanalysis' (as Freud called it) to our shores, there have been so many splits and repleating and restitching that very soon none of us will have anything to wear.

And, perhaps that may not be so bad after all, because the *prêt à porter* of the psychoanalyst is much easier to don than the especially fabricated – the 'be-spoke' tailor made, as they say in all the best circles. This *prêt à porter* of the phantasy seems to be spreading its wings. As Lacan remarks, 'Is it not true that in our era psychoanalysis is everywhere and psychoanalysts everywhere?'¹ It seems to be a matter of 'have mobile will travel' but is it not fair to say that this is evidence of some discord – even if it is true that psychoanalysts themselves are poorly situated to judge the ills in which they are immersed. But one source of this going astray is that the imagos discovered by both Freud and Lacan have been rendered totally banal.

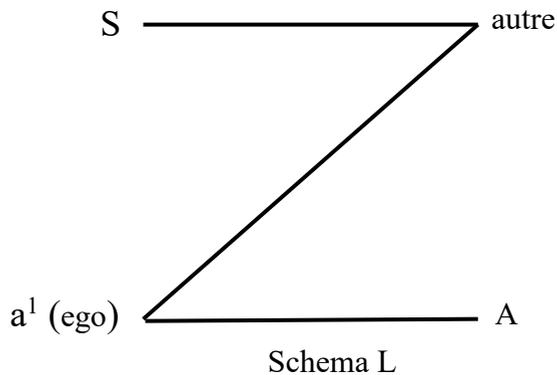
The remnants may cover an initial unease, dis-ease at the heart of some of us but Lacan's schema L² will help to clarify our ideas and orient our soul for those of us who are lost in these ideas. As he explains, our very condition as

¹Lacan J. *Founding Act in Télévision*. Trans. Hollier D. Krauss. R. Michelson A. Ed: Copjec J. WW New York, Norton & Company, 1990 p. 104.

²Lacan J. *On the Possible Treatment of Psychosis in Écrits*, A Selection, Transl. Sheridan, A. Tavistock Publications 1977 p.193. (simplified version of Schema L)

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subjects (neurotic or otherwise) depends on what unfolds in the *Autre*, in the big Other, as it has been translated into English.



We are drawn to the four parts of the schema because for those of us with a question which becomes not ‘who am I?’ but as Lacan says:

“What am I there?” - concerning his sex and his contingency in being, namely on the one hand, he is a man or a woman and, on the other, that he might not be, the two conjugating their mystery, and binding it in the symbols of procreation and death.³

Some elements of this schema are like symptoms – one for the other, like the man who explains so many rats, so many debts – how do we deal with all the signifying articulation that is announced in the detail?

This schema very clearly shows how the dividing up of our subjective lot is articulated like a discourse, there where the subject in waiting is party to it with *a*, his objects and with *a'* his ego. This is particularly registered in a clash of egos. On the one hand there is a call for reciprocal exchange and in this desperate struggle to emerge – to exist – Lacan calls this ‘stupid, ineffable existence’, because it doesn’t have any signifiers of its own, there is always the *Autre*, waiting patiently, hanging on to be acknowledged because as Lacan

³ Lacan J. *ibid.* p.194

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reminds us ‘If (his place *Autre*) is taken away, man can no longer even sustain himself in the position of Narcissus’.⁴

How do we keep the *Autre* in its place? It is animated in each of us by the whole ancestral history of real others. ‘It is there in the *Autre*, that there is the unconscious structured like a language’.⁵ Everything that is realised in S depends on the signifiers that are posed in the *Autre* so that this *Autre*, as locus of the signifier must carry some import of an essential signifier.

This play of signifiers will become the rule and the S or the ‘subject in waiting, will enter into it like a ‘dummy’ as Lacan calls it, but in order to be realised the subject will find himself depending on the three instances or agencies which Freud determined in his second topography, which are the ego, (including ideal ego and ego ideal) reality and superego.⁶ These instances will in turn help to determine structure which is another way of describing our psychic origins.

As Lacan reminds us, the ego is never alone. It always implies a strange twin, an ideal ego. As we know, the ego of the subject is constructed on the foundations of an imaginary relationship. Something appears in psychical development whose function is to give form to narcissism. This new entity, which gives form to narcissism, is the subjects libidinal being so that he can see his being in a reflection with regard to his fellow that is to say, his ideal ego.

As far as the question of reality is concerned, Freud shows how this goes from the perception consciousness system to the notion of psychic reality. The first and immediate aim of reality testing as Freud tells us is ‘not to *find* an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to *refind* such an object.’⁷ In fact the subject is caught in a ‘constituting division’ as Lacan describes it. The problem therefore does not lie in the reality that is lost but in that which takes its place. It is here that Lacan places the imago which

⁴ Lacan J. *ibid.* p.195

⁵ Lacan J. *From An other to the Other, Book XVI* (1968 – 1969). Transl: Gallagher C. 12:3:69. Week XIV

⁶ Freud, S. *The Ego and the Id and Other works.* (1923) S.E. Vol XIX. (1923-1925) London, Hogarth Press

⁷ Freud S. *Negation* (1925) in *ibid* p.237.

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implies, at least in a primitive way, a certain recognition which becomes later a misrecognition.

These three instances of the ego, its ideals and the superego will play a role in the structuring of reality for two principal reasons. The subject has to go through a fundamental alienation which constitutes the reflected image of oneself as well as having to deal with the reflexive image of his fellow. Freud is quite clear on this, 'This ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego....As always, where the libido is concerned, man has again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed'.⁸

The ideal is just that, waiting for the perfection to come along (and we know how long that wait is!!). It's like waiting for Godot. So that this ideal ego is antagonistic from the beginning and indeed everyday experience bears this out. Because this specular image is desirable for the subject and is at the same time destructive towards the other – this means that all the so called progress of the ideal ego is made as Lacan reminds us 'against the wind, in risk and defiance that there will be made all its subsequent development'.⁹ This instance is an imaginary projection.

Of course, this *Autre* is still waiting patiently and it's here, that something may happen which 'goes very far'¹⁰ If, within the symbolic world of the child there is an understanding, empathetic relationship established, it follows that there is something interiorised which is called the ego ideal. In other words, it is the symbolic function which defines the degree of completeness of the Imaginary. It is here a distinction can be made between the ideal ego and the ego ideal.

The ego ideal is what gives order 'to the relationship with our fellows'.¹¹ Because of this putative empathy and understanding, Lacan calls this ego ideal 'a symbolic introjection'¹² What prompts this according to Freud is 'the critical influence of [the subject's] parents, (conveyed to him by the medium of the voice), to whom were added, as time went on, those who trained and

⁸ Freud S. *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, (1914) SE XIV. London, Hogarth Press p.94.

⁹ Lacan J. *Transference. Book VIII* (1960 – 1961) Transl: Gallagher C. 7.6. 61. Week XXIV. p.301

¹⁰ Lacan J. *ibid.* 7.6.61. Week XXIV

¹¹ Lacan J: *Les Écrits techniques de freud. Seminaire I.* Seuil p. 161 (Personal translation).

¹² Lacan J. *Transference.* Op. cit. 15.3.61. Week XXIV p.178

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taught him and the innumerable and indefinable host of all the other people in his environment - his fellow-men - and public opinion'.¹³

And, why not his analyst?

Before you protest, Lacan tells us that this is a question which merits being posed with regard to the transference relationship. When we look for the foundation of therapeutic action it is said by some analysts that the subject identifies with the analyst – with his ego ideal or on the contrary with his superego. There is a fundamental difference between both those psychic instances that is, between the ego ideal and the superego, even though they co-exist and can be both co-dimensional. And yet they are different because they correspond to different formulations and productions. The superego is formulated along the lines of a signifying articulation of prohibition. In other words it's as if the *Autre* says to the child, I don't recognise your need and stop demanding and therefore, the demand is never recognised, while the ego ideal is produced along the lines of the transformation of desire, in 'so far as desire is always linked to a certain mask'.¹⁴ With the ego ideal the demand is recognised but it is refused and so dissatisfaction sets in and in this way a mask may be set up, which goes beyond need and demand but may only reveal its true nature later on.

While the ego ideal has the task of repressing the Oedipus Complex, because of the promise it holds and because of its pacifying characteristics this means that the superego is burdened with the task of borrowing from the father, on a no pay, no gain basis, on a loan that is never repaid, no matter how many instalments, so that for Lacan 'the superego is an imperative'¹⁵ The superego is mythically, a simple tyrant – at one and the same time the Law and its destruction. It brings us back to that ferocious figure, in no matter what guise, which caused an initial trauma – this trauma to which we can reduce, in its most elementary form, language itself. The superego is the law but it is also a blind, mad ravaging one in the earliest experiences of the child. But, here the function of language takes on its most emotive, emotional form. Do this, or don't do that, or do that, do this, and did you do this – why didn't you do that? As Lacan clarifies it '(the superego) is not a person, it functions within

¹³ Freud S. Op. Cit. SE XIV. p.96.

¹⁴ Lacan J. *The Formations of the Unconscious Book V* (1957 – 1958) Transl. Gallagher C. 16: 4: 58. p.19.

¹⁵ Lacan J. *Seminaire I*. Op. Cit. p.119.

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the subject as a subject behaves with respect to another subject and precisely in this that there is a relationship between the subjects which does not imply for all that the existence of the person.’¹⁶ Perhaps this explains why this is such a lonely place.

And yet it is the superego which links us to others in the human community because of its capacity as Freud says to ‘stand apart from the ego... and to master it.’¹⁷ Kant raised it to the level of a universal maxim with his categorical imperative, a term also used by Freud. What is interesting to note is that whoever attempts to submit to the moral law sees the demands of his superego grow, in Lacan’s words ‘increasingly meticulous and increasingly cruel’.¹⁸ This very notion of the superego needs further clarification and this instance which inflicts atrocious misery on the subject needs to be spelt out more clearly, but this would entail investigating the relationship between duty and desire in far greater detail.

The question then becomes how does the experience of psychoanalysis help us to unravel these kinds of identifications which are absolutely necessary and fundamental as a condition for us to be able to speak? The question has to be asked, what is the role of psychoanalysis in tempering these identifications or does it in fact sometimes make things worse? In an interesting footnote in *The Ego and the Id*, in describing the battle with an unconscious sense of guilt, Freud writes that this battle is not made easy for the analyst. ‘Nothing can be against it directly and nothing indirectly but the slow procedure of unmasking its unconscious repressed roots.’¹⁹ And here he is quite clear.

Perhaps it may depend on whether the personality of the analyst allows of the patient’s putting him in the place of his ego ideal, and this involves a temptation for the analyst to play the part of prophet, saviour and redeemer to the patient. Since the rules of analysis are diametrically opposed to the physician’s making use of his personality in any such manner, it must be honestly confessed that here we have another limitation to the effectiveness of [psycho]analysis.²⁰

¹⁶ Lacan J. Op Cit. 19: 3:58. pp 3 - 4

¹⁷ Freud S. *The Ego and The Id*. (1923) SE Vol XIX. p.48.

¹⁸ Lacan J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis Book VII* (1959 – 1960) Trans. Porter D. Routledge p.176.

¹⁹ Freud S. Vol XIX Op. Cit. footnote. p.50.

²⁰ *ibid.* p.50.

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Lacan goes even further saying that Freud did not know how to properly delineate the fringes or the hinges of the doors he had opened up for us.

Is it enough to ensure that the analyst necessarily knows where he is, or where he is going? Lacan comforts us by stating that there is something which remains assured in the experience of psychoanalysis which is called that which is associated to the effects of unknotting, or to quote him directly ‘The unknotting of things charged with sense which cannot be unknotted by other means, this is the solid ground on which the analytic camp is established.’²¹ Lacan can of course say this and even repeat it in different ways but the question has to be asked, is the analyst able to bear witness to his work in terms of demand, transference and identification?

‘This question of the ideal is at the heart of the problems of the position of the analyst’,²² as Lacan reminds us. Because of this therefore, the question of the experience of psychoanalysis and what it does or not transmit is as Lacan reminds us ‘is the most difficult level at which to pose the problem, it is also the one at which it must be resolved’²³ But, he is adamant that the transmission of psychoanalysis is not a function of the ego ideal and adds ‘The identification involved can only be defined, grasped elsewhere’²⁴

The function of the ideal as Freud shows is to accommodate the relationship of the subject with his objects and although these ideals are very problematic they are profoundly structuring. Freud in *Group Psychology*, in disentangling identifications as it occurs in the structure of a neurotic symptom from its complicated connections, isolates a single trait and writes (there are) ‘a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego’.²⁵ Therefore, an initial identification has appeared instead of object choice or object choice has regressed to identification as Freud notes.

²¹ Lacan, J. *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis*. (1964 – 1965) Book XII 6:1:65 Week IV.

²² Lacan, J. *Transference*. (1960 – 1961) Book VIII. Op. cit. 7:6:61. Week XXIV p.305

²³ Lacan, J. *Crucial problems* Op. Cit. 16:12:64. Week III

²⁴ Lacan, J. *ibid*. 16: 12: 64. Week III. *ibid*

²⁵ Freud, S. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. (1921) S.E. Vol XVIII. London, Hogarth Press p.116.

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As we can see, a loss is entailed as the object is renounced. Identification reduces the object to a unique trait and is therefore made at the price of a loss. For Lacan, these exterior objects should be taken as having a common trait, which he calls a unary trait (*Einzigiger Zug*). Loss is what characterises our first encounter with the world of others and how these imagos will help or hinder us in coming to terms with this loss is part of the work of psychoanalysis.

The unary trait functions as a support for the signifier. This is because the signifier is constituted from a trait. All signifiers share in common this unary trait as a support. Psychoanalytic experience shows that it's from the signifier that the subject emerges.

The relationship the subject has with the signifying chain profoundly modifies the structure of every relationship of the subject with each of his needs. The subject is an effect of the signifier. The signifier functions as a mooring point from which the subject constitutes himself and this mooring point is encapsulated in the proper name. The proper name is linked to this unary trait, not only through the sound but through writing because in every language the structure of the proper name is preserved. So, it is here that there is inserted as such, as Lacan says, 'a function which is that of the subject, not of the subject in the psychological sense but of the subject in the structural sense.'²⁶ The proper name is a memorial to the act of nomination, as it is a reminder and a warning to the analyst as much as to the analysand that we are not dealing with dream figures and that the truth we are seeking in psychoanalysis is a very particular one, not a universal one. The proper name helps to keep us awake.

In dealing with these Freudian imagos in such a way, Lacan has introduced a specification in the register of the symbolic and put down firm roots there. He himself says that we must refer back to the time of their emergence in Freud and this in fact will help us in our interpretations.

The question raised by Lacan in his seminar on *Identification* is, why have we allowed the imagos of Freud and Lacan to become trivialised? These imagos serve to remind us of our psychic origins but of course it is certainly easier to efface the principles of a doctrine, by deviations and compromises,

²⁶ Lacan, J. *Identification* Book IX, (1961 – 1962) Transl. Gallagher C. 20:12:61. Week VI.

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than it is to remember ‘the stigmata of one’s origins’,²⁷ as Lacan puts it. In the structuring procedure that is involved in these imagos, something potentially lethal may begin here, as St. Augustine makes clear in his Confessions, because it gives rise to all sorts of phantasies about the primitive constitution of the maternal object and how the image of the other finds its support there. In other words, the image of the other getting something more than myself always fills me with rivalry and hurt. This in turn may pave the way to the very first form of sympathy. Psychoanalysis will at least hopefully give us a chance to clarify this very primitive relationship.

It’s true we have learned to live with these images? – which are in fact primordial images of analytic revelation and yet we make of them a day to day object of amusement in popular cultural circles but most worryingly in psychoanalytic circles. In other words, we have allowed the collapse of understanding of what determines structure and we instead debase these images.

This leaves us – exactly in the imaginary which in turn means that if all the objects of our world are always structured around the meandering shadow of our own ego and if the image of the other is always seen, in its imaginary completeness, totality, unity, wholeness, this results in our being more alienated from ourselves than is ever necessary. If this imaginary dimension which is maintained only by successive momentary experiences – so that we ‘can say here there is no lasting city’ as the poet puts it, is there not in this specular foundation a tension between an erotic aggression where the ego finds its locus and the rivalry which ensues so that the real of the object we are called upon to deal with is negated, even foreclosed?

So, we can, and sometimes do, make of these structuring imagos a new incestual object and sometimes we even raise it to the level of a ‘knowledge’. As Lacan reminds us, it can even serve for our amusement, or even derision.

On the contrary, if we make proper use of these imagos within the context of an analysis, these imagos could help us to move from place to place, including yes indeed even to walk the streets and perhaps one day to arrive at a place where you’ve always walked but you ‘forgot’ but perhaps you can remember

²⁷ Lacan, J. ‘*The Freudian Thing*’ in *Écrits*. A selection Transl. Sheridan, A. Tavistock. p.115.

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that you've always walked that way, because it's always been there and may remind us just how short that time for walking has been.

Address for Correspondence:

6 Annsbrook

Clonskeagh

Dublin 14

