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The World of Desire: Lacan between Evolutionary Biology and Psychoanalytic Theory

I.

The primary aim of this paper is to analyse the biological foundations of Lacan's notion of desire as expounded in his first two Seminars (1953–1955). These works provide us with his most detailed discussion of the species-specific preconditions that allow *homo sapiens* to speak and establish symbolic pacts among individuals. Despite its irreducibility to the domain of animal instincts, human desire can only be adequately understood against the background of an evolutionary enquiry on the emergence of language, one that problematises both the implicit teleological assumptions of a certain Darwinianism and the logical consistency of an investigation of origins. Drawing on organic and anatomical evidence endorsed by natural scientists as different as Stephen Jay Gould and Adolf Portmann, Lacan postulates a primordial biological discord between man and his environment, centred on premature birth and a subsequent disorder of the imagination, from which language and the Symbolic arise immanently.¹ Desire is seen in this context as coextensive with what, especially in Seminar I, Lacan repeatedly refers to as “the world of the symbol”, or “the symbolic world” – a crucial phrase, rich with philosophical implications, to which critics have not yet paid sufficient attention.² The most important point to be grasped here is that the symbolic order is a world in the sense that, in always presenting itself to man as a totality, a uni-verse, it compensates for the failure of a strictly “natural” relationship between man as animal and his environment. Yet, in performing this

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¹ On the organic and anatomic evidence that supports the hypothesis of man's premature birth, see for example S. J. Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 369–371; A. Portmann, *Le forme viventi. Nuove prospettive della biologia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1969), pp. 154–156, pp. 297–301.

² See *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I, Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954* (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 80, p. 87, p. 174, pp. 224–225, p. 268. See also *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955* (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 100, p. 170, p. 284.

function, the Symbolic also amounts to nothing else than “human nature” *tout-court*.³ In other words, the Symbolic is an exceptional and to a certain extent autonomous *pseudo-environment* that must nevertheless be interpreted by means of biological concepts.⁴ For this reason, the very opposition between nature and culture is as such put into question and reposed at a different level.⁵

Lacan’s seminars and articles of the early to mid 1950s are usually read from the standpoint of the notions of “empty” and “full” speech in their relation to the Kojévian dialectic of the recognition of desire. While not underestimating the importance of this first formulation of desire as desire of the other, I intend to dwell especially on its biological presuppositions, since Lacan will maintain them – to the point of often taking them for granted – even after abandoning the notions of “empty” and “full” speech. This will also enable me to show that the supposedly Hegelian Lacan of this period is already preoccupied with a materialist explanation of language and of human desire as desire for recognition which are framed within the context of a virulent anti-teleological, anti-humanist, and anti-vitalist polemics.

It is, however, paramount to specify pre-emptively that my new approach to Seminars I and II does not intend to deny the impasses of Lacan’s early notion of desire as desire for recognition, which I have thoroughly discussed in my *Subjectivity and Otherness*.⁶ In brief, the problem with Lacan’s appropriation of Kojève is that, at this stage, the mutual recognition of one’s desire is identified with the subject’s fully successful integration in the symbolic order. What is not sufficiently stressed in this way – yet not entirely overlooked – is the incompleteness of the latter, the fact that man’s pseudo-environment presents itself as a totality only insofar as it is structurally not-all. The elaboration of a meticulous theoret-

³ See *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 29.

⁴ I owe the term “pseudo-environment” to the work of the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno. See especially *Scienze sociali e “natura umana”* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2003) and Chapter 6 of *Quando il verbo si fa carne. Linguaggio e natura umana* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003). For an introduction to this theme in English, see P. Virno, “Natural-Historical Diagrams. The ‘New Global’ Movement and the Biological Invariant”, in L. Chiesa and A. Toscano (eds.), *The Italian Difference. Contemporary Italian Thought*, special issue of *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol 5, No 1 (2009).

⁵ See *The Seminar. Book II*, pp. 34–35.

⁶ See L. Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007) especially pp. 24–26, pp. 39–41.

ical distinction between need, demand, and desire carried out in Seminars IV and V, as well as a direct confrontation with the Real as the not-all of the Symbolic in Seminar VII, will later oblige Lacan to reconsider this harmonic view. By the early 1960s, full integration in the Symbolic will explicitly be regarded as impossible and the dialectic of desire consequently focused on the level of the subject's mapping of himself as failing onto the object of the repressed fantasy.

II.

According to Lacan, man is born prematurely, that is, with “foetalised traits”,⁷ which are especially observable in the retardation of the child's sensorimotor maturation. As he specifies in Seminar I, “this prematurity of birth hasn't been invented by psychoanalysis. Histologically, the apparatus which in the organism plays the role of nervous system [...] is not complete at birth”.⁸ Lacan never explicitly speaks of neoteny, an evolutionary notion Gould defines as the “retention of formerly juvenile characters by adult descendants produced by retardation of somatic development”.⁹ Yet, it is clear that, for Lacan, prematurity of birth gives rise to a permanent biological instability in our species that determines a continuous process of readjustment of *homo sapiens* to his environment. Human nature is indelibly marked by prematurity of birth. Its first noticeable consequence is the fact that the human baby is much more dependent on his mother – and the other adults around him – than the baby of any other primate.

Lacan supplements these biological considerations with an a priori anthropo-philosophical thesis, which is usually either not thematised as such or contested by evolutionary theorists: prematurity of birth amounts to an “essential lack of adaptation”, a “primitive impotence”.¹⁰ This disadaptation primarily manifests

⁷ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 210.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁹ *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, p. 483.

¹⁰ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 169; *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 140. Evolutionary biologists tend to regard prematurity of birth as an *adaptive* response to difficulty in parturition due to the dimension of man's encephalus. According to Gould, “at birth, our brains are still growing at fetal rates [...] if this increase continued in utero, heads would soon become too big for successful parturition” (*Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, p. 370). One may, however, argue that disadaptation could be attributed to the excessive growth of our encephalus [...]. More generally, the relation between adaptation and non-adaptation in human neoteny is further complicated by both Lacan and Gould. For the former, man's disadaptation is eventually a successful disadaptation

itself in man's imaginary relation to his *Gestalt*. Lacan accepts the idea that vital (i.e. first and foremost sexual) relations between animals of the same species, and hence indirectly between a species and its environment, are regulated by means of *Gestalten*. Like other animals, man is instinctively predisposed to recognise the image of the body of another member of his species as a whole form, and is consequently attracted by it. However, unlike other animals, man carries out an alienating identification with the *Gestalt* insofar as the completeness of the body image provides him with an ideal unity that compensates for his organic deficiencies. The imaginary order – which should thus not be understood as the realm of “illusions”, but as that of the natural “formative identifications” that make sexual reproduction possible; of Konrad Lorenz's so-called “releasing mechanisms” –¹¹ is nothing less than “perturbed” in man, Lacan says.¹²

More specifically, this means that man's primitive ego as an imaginary mental object is “constituted by a splitting, by a differentiation” – or, as Lacan has it elsewhere, an irreducible alienation – “from the external world”.¹³ Not only does the imaginary function of the primitive ego allow man to counterbalance ideally his organic deficiencies – in this sense “it has a salutary value” –¹⁴ but, at the same time, it also inaugurates a new level of prematurity that redoubles the prematurity of birth. “The sight alone of the whole form of the human body gives the subject an imaginary mastery over his body, one which is premature in relation to a real mastery. This formation is separated from the specific process of maturation and is not confused with it”.¹⁵ Lacan therefore promptly acknowledges that the salutary value of the ego “does not possess any the less of a connection with the vital prematuration, and hence with an original deficit, with a gap to which it remains linked in its structure”.¹⁶

as concretely shown by the fact that *homo sapiens* rules over other species. For the latter, human neoteny is basically adaptive but can give rise to nonadaptive consequences; see, for instance, “How the Zebra Gets its Stripes”, in P. Mc Garr and S. Rose (eds.), *The Richness of Life. The Essential Stephen Jay Gould* (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. 327–328. Having said this, for Gould neoteny is far from being an exclusively human evolutionary phenomenon (see especially Chapters 9 and 10 of *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*).

¹¹ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 116, p. 121.

¹² *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 37.

¹³ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

It is crucial to emphasise that what is ultimately at stake in the gap between ideal and real mastery is not so much man's unavoidable delay in achieving motor maturity – in brief, a child's identification with the human *Gestalt* does not immediately enable him to walk – as his libidinal prematurity. Lacan boldly claims that “man's libido attains its finished state before encountering its object”,¹⁷ by which he means that, following Freud's idea of narcissism and opposing Jung's monistic concept of “psychic interest”, we must always logically distinguish between egoistical and sexual libido.¹⁸ This should enable us to recognise that, even before establishing any relation to a sexual partner, man both eroticises and aggressively vies with the image of the human body as a whole form. The latter constitutes the ideal unity with which he achieves an alienating identification, but which, for this very reason, he never really possesses. As I have exhaustively argued in my *Subjectivity and Otherness*, without the mediation of the symbolic order, such an ambivalent libidinal relation between man and his ideal image would in the end lead to the self-destruction of the species *homo sapiens*.¹⁹

Lacan seems to suggest that while a primary form of narcissism characterises the libidinal lives of *homo sapiens* and other animals alike insofar as they all depend on imaginary *Gestalten*, secondary narcissism, the alienating identification with the ideal image, is a prerogative of man alone. This image is then projected by man onto his environment in the guise of the so-called ideal ego; as such, it is literally what enables him to see and establish a “libidinal relation to the world in general”.²⁰ However, this is possible only on condition that the ideal image is itself understood as an “imaginary source of symbolism” that inherently contains the potential to keep at bay the aggressive-narcissistic tendencies of the ego.²¹ The relation between this “noetic possibility” of man's ideal image and his sexual function is what mainly distinguishes human biology from that of other animals. In animal sexuality, there is a perfect imaginary fit, an identity, of the *Innenwelt* with the *Umwelt*. Lacan considers animal sexuality as a “closed

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁹ See *Subjectivity and Otherness*, especially pp. 82–84. On how some animal traits “only appear to be self-destructive [but] are actually self-promoting” and the impossibility of reducing human self-destructiveness to this scheme, see J. Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 192–204.

²⁰ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*

world of two” in which there is a “conjunction of the object libido and the narcissistic libido”:²² thanks to primary narcissism, the “animal makes a real object coincide with the image within him”.²³ On the other hand, man’s “disordered imagination” causes a “game of hide and seek” between the image, that is, the human *Gestalt*, and the sexual object.²⁴ The species *homo sapiens* can ultimately fulfil its sexual function only by means of a symbolic “adequation”, which in modern Western society is provided by the Oedipus complex.²⁵

Most importantly, Lacan specifies that man’s sexual function is never fulfilled completely: genital love should, in this sense, be regarded as a tentative “series of cultural approximations”.²⁶ The introjection of the ego-ideal that resolves the Oedipus complex – a process which I cannot analyse in detail here and which, at the time of Seminars I and II, Lacan had only begun to sketch – represents a partial symbolic re-adaptation of man’s dis-adapted libido, a palliative for a disordered imagination. Such a symbolic re-adaptation may, in the first instance, appear to be somewhat paradoxical, as it re-naturalises, if only partly, the dis-adapted nature of *homo sapiens*. In man, the relation between the imaginary body and the real libido – and hence the propagation of the species – is made possible by the “position of the subject [...] characterised by its place in the symbolic world, i.e. the world of speech”.²⁷

Here, we should stress that symbolic adequation corresponds to nothing else than secondary narcissism. Commentators usually miss this point. Against superficial approaches to Lacan’s distinction between the orders of the Imaginary and of the Symbolic, in this context, it is important to insist on their interaction and mutual dependency. We should even go as far as proposing that the ideal ego as the projection of man’s alienating identification with the human *Gestalt* and the ego-ideal as the introjection of a “new form” are the two inextricable sides of the very same process of natural re-adjustment.²⁸ The ego-ideal symbolically shapes the narcissistic libido of the ideal ego insofar as it is an image that

²² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133. We must of course logically presuppose a virtual stage at which the child projects

“takes up its place within the totality of demands of law” and thus “governs the interplay of relations [...] with others”.²⁹ This eventually allows a conjunction of the object libido and the narcissistic libido in man, one that nevertheless does not fully overcome the basic disadaptation of his Imaginary. As a matter of fact, we continue to eroticise and vie narcissistically with the human *Gestalt* even if we manage to associate it with the other – the fellow man or woman – as the object of our libido.

The fact that man’s libidinal life is normalised only through a symbolic detour should also clear up Lacan’s apparently contradictory remarks on the vital function of the ego. In Seminar II, the ego as an “alienated [...] unity” is confusingly said to have a “vital, or anti-vital, relation with the subject” [*un rapport vital, ou contre-vital, avec le sujet*].³⁰ Similarly, according to Seminar I, the ego is not “the high point of the hierarchy of the nervous functions” while, at the same time, there is an obvious “relation between the strictly sensorimotor maturation and the function of imaginary mastery”.³¹ Even more radically, Lacan manages to juxtapose a definition of the ego for which it is “the mental illness of man” to one for which it is “an essential structure of the human constitution”.³² What do these conflicting statements mean? I think Lacan implicitly answers this question when, in Seminar II, he claims without reservations that “the ego, the imaginary function, intervenes in psychic life only as *symbol*”.³³ This is an incredible admission that, again, blatantly refutes any doxastic endeavour to draw clear-cut divisions between the orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real – as a consequence of which the ego would be confined to the Imaginary. To put it simply, Lacan is here suggesting that the ego is unthinkable without the ego-ideal – which, as we have seen, is itself inextricable from the ideal ego – and, most importantly, that the ego has a vital function for *homo sapiens* only inasmuch as it is linked to the Symbolic. On the other hand, strictly speaking, only the primitive ego, the Freudian *Ur-Ich*, as the

the ideal ego before introjecting the ego-ideal. This initial unidirectional movement can be better understood in terms of the primitive ego, the *Ur-Ich*, and not as the ideal ego.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134, p. 141.

³⁰ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 50, my emphasis.

³¹ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 193, p. 105.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 16, p. 52. Lacan criticises ego psychologists insofar as they aim at bringing about the patient’s “re-adaptation” to the Real (*ibid.*, p. 18). What they fail to acknowledge in this way is the fact that the alienated ego is nothing less than the structural mental illness of *homo sapiens* as a disadapted species.

³³ *The Seminar. Book II*, pp. 38–39, my emphasis.

virtual locus of an Imaginary as yet unmediated by the Symbolic, is anti-vital (i.e. narcissistically self-destructive).³⁴

To summarise, beneath his – predominantly polemical – critique of ego-psychology’s foreclosure of the dimension of the Symbolic in psychoanalysis, throughout his first two Seminars, Lacan invites us to think the ego’s biological aspect together with the fact that, as imaginary function, it is always-already a symbol. Conversely, it should come to no surprise that in the very first lesson of Seminar I, pre-emptively collapsing the triadic system he will strive to articulate for the rest of his life, Lacan regards the ego-ideal as “an organism of defence”.³⁵ On the basis of what we have just explained, this provocative definition should be interpreted without hesitation as compatible with the pedagogical one Lacan offers later in the same Seminar, for which the ego-ideal is the subject’s “symbolic relation” to the imaginary “other as speaking”.³⁶

Let me add that my new approach to the notions of ego, ideal ego, and ego-ideal as an attempt to think the imaginary insertion of the Symbolic into man’s primitive biological gap³⁷ also appreciates Lacan’s stressing of the fact that the ego should be conceived in terms of contingency. For him, this is valid in two distinct, albeit related, ways. Not only is the ego the sum of a series of contingent identifications with the loved objects at the ontogenetic level,³⁸ but, more radically, the fact that, as members of the species *homo sapiens*, we can now say “I am me” is a radical “historical contingency”.³⁹

III.

90 We have discussed how, for Lacan, the animal world is characterised by a perfect correspondence between the Imaginary and the Real – “insofar as one part of

³⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁵ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁷ “In so far as [the ego] is image, it is caught in the chain of symbols. It is an element indispensable to the insertion of the symbolic reality into the reality of the subject, it is tied to the primitive [biological] gap of the subject” (*The Seminar. Book II*, p. 210).

³⁸ See *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 155: “The ego is the sum of the identifications of the subject, with all that that implies as to its radical contingency.” On this point, see also my *Subjectivity and Otherness*, p. 23.

³⁹ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 39, p. 58.

reality is imagined, the other is real and inversely” –⁴⁰ while the human world, what we refer to as “the external world”, is necessarily symbolised.⁴¹ As already remarked by Freud, in animals, the “world is built up in accordance with an instinctual structure”, for which there is “an essential [bipolar] relation [...] on one side the libidinal subject, on the other the world”.⁴² Unlike the animal’s primary narcissism, man’s secondary narcissism, his ego, cannot alone structure the world: the latter can be constituted only if “a series of encounters have occurred in the right place”.⁴³ This is to say that, in man, the relation of the Imaginary to the Real is always-already regulated by “the symbolic connection between human beings”, and man’s desire – as structurally different from animal instincts – should be located in this context.⁴⁴ “What is the symbolic connection?”, Lacan asks in an instructive lesson of Seminar I that effectively recapitulates our main arguments so far:

Dotting our i’s and crossing our t’s, it is the fact that socially we define ourselves with the law as go-between. It is through the exchange of symbols that we locate our different egos in relation to one another – you, you are Mannoni, and me Jacques Lacan, and we have a certain symbolic relation, which is complex, according to the different planes on which we are placed, according to whether we’re together in the police station, or together in this hall, or together travelling. [...] What is my desire? What is my position in the imaginary structuration? This position is only conceivable in so far as one finds a guide beyond the imaginary, on the level of the symbolic plane, of the legal exchange which can only be embodied in the verbal exchange between human beings. This guide governing the subject is the ego-ideal.⁴⁵

Bearing in mind that the phrase “the world of desire” – which was coined by Lacan himself –⁴⁶ could be taken as synonymous with the phrase “the world of the symbol”, I now intend to dwell on the specificity of the human world as analysed in Seminars I and II. I would suggest that Lacan conceives the symbolic world of desire as non-animal environment by means of a radical and protracted

⁴⁰ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 82.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, my translation.

⁴⁶ See *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 221.

oscillation between the concepts of openness and totality. This oscillation can be schematically rendered through the differentiation of three logical stages. Firstly, man's world is seen as open and thus fundamentally divergent from the closure of the animal environment. Secondly, man's world is regarded as a totality, which as such, can also be considered as a particular kind of animal environment. Thirdly, man's world remains an *open totality*, a pseudo-environment that is both animal-like and, at the same time, irreducible to an animal environment, since, differing from animals, man's very openness to his pseudo-environment makes him experience it as a totality, a meaningful uni-verse.⁴⁷

On the one hand, the alienating identification with the body-image allows man to open himself up to a potentially infinite number of objects, objects of exchange which are, however, filtered through, and hence somehow unified, by the projection of the human *Gestalt* onto them.⁴⁸ In Lacan's own words, *homo sapiens* is "the only animal to have at his disposition an almost infinite number of objects" since it "fans out" the "imaginary equations" carried out by other animals, and thus turns them into "imaginary transpositions" –⁴⁹ which are as such

⁴⁷ On how language should be regarded as a universe, see *ibid.*, p. 287. On how meaning relates to an open totality, a whole "with an exit", see *ibid.*, pp. 262–264. For a recent and original re-elaboration of the idea of human openness from a prevalently Heideggerian perspective, see G. Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). It is highly unlikely that Lacan knew Heidegger's lecture courses of the 1930s and early 1940s in which this topic is elaborated in detail, however, it is possible that, at the time of Seminars I and II, he was already familiar with the biological work of Jakob von Uexküll, whom he quotes in later years and was also a major reference for Heidegger.

⁴⁸ In this sense, Lacan recurrently speaks of a "hominisation of the world" (*The Seminar. Book I*, p. 141) or a "hominisation of the planet" (J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* [London: Tavistock, 1977], p. 88) that is valid for both organic and inorganic entities. As I observed elsewhere, "the individuation of organic and inorganic beings alike is possible only on the basis of an underlying imaginary anthropomorphisation" (*Subjectivity and Otherness*, p. 22).

⁴⁹ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 83. We could suggest that, for Lacan, man is consequently a "flexible" animal. The relation between human neoteny and flexibility has been investigated by Gould (see, for instance, "Challenges to Neo-Darwinism and Their Meaning for a Revised View of Human Consciousness", in *The Richness of Life*, pp. 231–232). On his part, Virno thinks neotenic flexibility as non-specialised potentiality together with language as a generic faculty based on an instinctual deficit. This last point, which is very close to Lacan's position, is explicitly mediated from what Virno calls "the tradition of modesty" of German philosophical anthropology – from Herder to Gehlen – for which man is, at the level of instincts, "poorer" than other animals (see Virno, *Scienze sociali e natura umana*, pp. 25–47). In my opinion, the tradition of modesty should ultimately be tracked back to the myth of Prometheus narrated by Protagoras in Plato's

the domain of affects.⁵⁰ On the other hand, a human subject is able to recognise an object only by means of a spoken agreement on the object that involves the recognition of another subject and, in this way, tacitly assumes the pre-existence of language as a shared intersubjective totality.⁵¹

With regard to this last point, as early as the second page of Seminar I, Lacan emphasises that “at first there is language, already formed”.⁵² A child is thus “passive” before the “universe of symbols”,⁵³ which is indeed initially deprived of any signification for him.⁵⁴ At the same time, he “enters naturally” into it insofar as, for *homo sapiens*, “the word in its materiality [...] is the thing itself [...] not just [its] shadow”, it is a “reality in its own right”.⁵⁵ Given that language has a “material, biological foundation”,⁵⁶ its acquisition is natural but cannot be limited to the acquisition of an organic motor mastery to utter words, since it primarily depends on “an appreciation of the totality of the symbolic system”.⁵⁷ If speech is nothing less than an environment for man,⁵⁸ and the subject’s integration in the symbolic system should in the end be understood in terms of development,⁵⁹ man is nevertheless “not just a biological individual”.⁶⁰ In fact, from this perspective, *homo sapiens* is an irremediably helpless primate bound to extinction; man therefore belongs to the common “register of law” – that is, “the totality of the system of language” – already at the level of his individual biology.⁶¹ In reading the sentence “man is not just a biological individual” the stress should be put on the term “individual”, and not on the “just”, which should prevent us from interpreting it as a surreptitious invitation to superimpose a transcendent symbolic order onto human nature. Rather, this sentence

homonymous dialogue (see *Protagoras* 320d–322d).

⁵⁰ Affects are therefore 1) exclusively human and 2) ultimately dependent on the symbolic order (see *ibid.*, p. 57).

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, p. 108, p. 54.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵⁴ See *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 284.

⁵⁵ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 178, p. 22.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁸ See *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 259.

⁵⁹ See *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

plainly acknowledges that the inter-subjective Symbolic is a structural component of the biology of the species *homo sapiens*.⁶²

In an intense dialogue with Lacan in one of the final lessons of Seminar II, Octave Mannoni proposes that “language is a universe [...] speech is a perspective [in this universe], whose centre of perspective, the vanishing point, is always an ego”.⁶³ I believe that this formula well summarises the way in which the world of the symbol can be seen as a particular environment for the *homo sapiens* species. However, there are a number of challenging, and at times terminologically contradictory, passages from Seminars I and II in which Lacan seems to be further complicating this conclusion by pointing out that man’s universe remains structurally different from any kind of animal environment. In brief, “the symbolic system is not like a piece of clothing which sticks onto things”,⁶⁴ as demonstrated by the sheer existence of the “polyvalence of meanings in language, their encroachments, their criss-crossings”.⁶⁵ In opposition to the natural sciences and their perennial search for a “well made language”, psychoanalysis should never forget that “the world of things is not recovered by the world of symbols [...] a thousand things correspond to each symbol, and each thing to a thousand symbols”.⁶⁶ Furthermore, because of this, the symbolic order as symbolised life rapes, conquers, and irremediably transforms nature.

Yet, if we intend to adopt a truly anti-transcendent approach to the relation between pre-symbolic nature and symbolised life, should we not endorse one of Hyppolite’s many insightful interventions in Seminar II, and ask whether the apparent lack of correspondence between symbols and things is ultimately a *new* natural form? Do symbols in their differential polyvalence really not stick onto things? From which position can we express this view if, as humans, we are always-already caught in symbolic life? Hyppolite’s objection is clear: the simple replacement of the naïve opposition between nature and culture with the more refined one between imaginary *Gestaltic* forms and the formalisations of the symbolic does not suffice. We must also concomitantly acknowledge that “the term

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⁶² In this sense, psychoanalysis aims at the “reintegration of the subject’s history well beyond the limits of the [biological] individual” (*ibid.*, p. 12).

⁶³ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 278.

⁶⁴ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 265.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265, p. 268.

‘universality’ at bottom means that a human universe necessarily affects the form of universality, it attracts a totality which is universalised”.⁶⁷

Lacan is aware of the difficulties involved in these open questions and the repercussions they have on the possibility of regarding man’s symbolic world as either yet another animal environment or something structurally different from it. In replying to Hyppolite, he concedes that the claim according to which the symbolic register is autonomous can “give rise to a masked transcendentalism once again”, but he also deems the preservation of the distinction between nature and symbol to be necessary in methodological terms.⁶⁸ The implicit admission that Hyppolite’s query paves the way to an apparent impasse resurfaces in an intricate passage from Seminar I in which, in rapid succession, Lacan advances that the Symbolic is a system of signs which, as a whole, *has* and does *not* have an “exit”. Or, more precisely, it does not have an exit (like any animal environment) only insofar as it has one (unlike any animal environment). In other words, the system of signs – or better signifiers – should be understood as a whole pseudo-environment inherently characterised by the differential polyvalence of meaningful discourse that is, as such, non-unitary, non-totalisable.⁶⁹ Conversely – and here Lacan comes very close to a contradiction in terms – discourse as organised discourse should not be confused with what he names “symbolic possibility”. While the Symbolic as a possibility corresponds to a non-animal “opening up of man to symbols”, the Symbolic as organised discourse partly closes this very opening and thus makes it possible to think the “world of the symbol” as an animal pseudo-environment.⁷⁰

IV.

The underestimated passages I have just commented on prove that, as early as Seminars I and II, Lacan is already attempting to think the Symbolic as a non-animal not-all in accordance with its immanent and contingent emergence from

⁶⁷ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 34.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶⁹ See *The Seminar. Book I*, pp. 262–264. “The system of signs, as they are concretely instituted, *hic et nunc*, by itself forms a whole. That means that it institutes an order from which there is no exit. To be sure, there has to be one, otherwise it would be an order without any meaning;” “We cannot conceive of human discourse as being unitary. Every emission of speech is always, up to a certain point, under an inner necessity to err.”

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

nature. In later years, he will thoroughly discuss the notion of the not-all through an enquiry on the status of the Real as remainder, and the complementary formula according to which “there is no Other of the Other”.⁷¹ In parallel, Lacan will also develop a compelling account of the dialectic between the partial closure of the Symbolic – the so-called suture which Miller will formalise as a critique of Frege’s theory of number – and the possibility of its re-opening – on which the ethics and ontology of psychoanalysis are based.

What, however, emerges more clearly in Seminars I and II than in later Seminars is the deliberate distance Lacan’s account of the material foundations of the world of the symbol – as pseudo-environment – keeps from biological discourse. This is particularly evident in his critique of the teleological bias of the dominant versions of evolutionary theory.⁷² The latter tends to regard man as the “pinnacle of creation” and is consequently both anthropocentric and vitalist. First, it problematically assumes that “consciousness has to appear, the world, history converge on this marvel, contemporary man, you and me, us men in the street”.⁷³ Second, it takes for granted the idea of a “living evolution [...] the belief that progress of some sort is immanent in the movement of life”, which, for Lacan, is profoundly incompatible with the most basic tenets of psychoanalytic theory and practice.⁷⁴ Following Freud, life should rather be understood as the maintenance of “a certain equilibrium [...] the action of a mechanism which we now call homeostasis, which absorbs, moderates the irruption of quantities of energy coming from the external world”.⁷⁵

Furthermore, in opposition to the teleology presupposed by biological discourse, and beyond Freud’s inability to account exhaustively for consciousness, Lacan invites us to develop what he refers to as an anti-humanist “materialist definition” of this phenomenon,⁷⁶ which would render it relative, plural, and, above all, independent of *homo sapiens*. From the observation that there allegedly is

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⁷¹ See Chapter 4 of my *Subjectivity and Otherness*.

⁷² In Seminar VII, Lacan will focus his critique on the work of Teilhard de Chardin.

⁷³ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 48.

⁷⁴ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 79.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60. “If living being exists, it is in so far as there is an internal organisation which up to a certain point tends to oppose the free and unlimited passage of forces and discharges of energy, such as we may assume to exist, in a purely theoretical way, intercrossing in the inanimate reality.”

⁷⁶ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 49.

an “organising centre” in the embryo, biology incorrectly infers that “there can be only one consciousness”.⁷⁷ Far from this being the case, consciousness is nothing else than the contingent apparition of an image on a surface produced by the bi-univocal correspondence between this surface and another set of points in space. Such a phenomenon should not be limited to the domain of animal primary narcissism: take the image of a mountain reflected in a lake and you have consciousness, Lacan provocatively suggests.⁷⁸ Conversely, the ego as man’s delusional self-consciousness – itself contingently dependent on “the existence of our eyes and our ears”⁷⁹ – is not only unable to perceive most phenomena of consciousness,⁸⁰ but also in constant tension with them. As Lacan has it,

The ego, which you allegedly perceive within the field of clear consciousness as being the unity of the latter, is precisely what the immediacy of sensation is in tension with. This unity [the ego] isn’t at all homogeneous with what happens at the surface of the field [of consciousness], which is neutral. Consciousness as a physical phenomenon is precisely what engenders this tension.⁸¹

At this point, it is important to stress once again that such a tension between man’s ego and his “immediacy of sensation” is both vital and anti-vital for the species *homo sapiens*. On the one hand, man’s secondary narcissism is broadly speaking vital in that, as a particular instantiation of the primary narcissism of other animal species, it “does not partake in the characteristics of inertia of the phenomenon of consciousness under its primitive [inorganic] form”.⁸² And yet,

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50. A similar point is made in another passage from Seminar II where Lacan articulates the relation and difference between the ego and perception. Partial perceptions, “the normal component parts of perception”, precede the unification of perception which is brought about by the ego. The former reappear as the “ultimate real” when the human world undergoes an imaginary decomposition, as it happens in anxiety (see *ibid.*, p. 166). Lacan’s critique of Merleau-Ponty should be understood in this context. Merleau-Ponty would not distinguish between the ego’s alienating identifications and partial perceptions. His “phenomenology of the imaginary” is essentially Gestaltic but, unlike Lacan’s, he hangs on the notion of a “unitary functioning” of human consciousness that would constitute the world through the “contemplative apprehension” of “good forms”. In this way, his position remains a humanist one (see *ibid.*, p. 78).

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

on the other hand, man's very overcoming of imaginary inertia should be associated with the establishment of an exceptional symbolic world that, unlike the environment of other living beings, cannot be fully explained through the principle of homeostasis, and is thus somehow anti-vital. Man's environment remains a pseudo-environment because, as Freud had already remarked, the regulation of man's life as symbolic life is supplemented by "a very particular insistence", the so-called compulsion to repeat, that irremediably disrupts the idea of life as equilibrium.⁸³

This evolutionary complication represents an excellent introduction to Lacan's materialist re-elaboration of the Freudian notion of the death instinct, which throughout Seminar II he discusses in energetic terms. On this issue, let me initially just stress that the unbalance of man's pseudo-environment is precisely what, for Lacan, *refutes* Darwin's generalised notion of the struggle for life (as struggle to the death). There is no such thing as the struggle for life or the survival of the fittest in nature:

Everything tells against this thesis [...]. It is a myth that goes against the facts. Everything goes to prove that there are points of invariability and of equilibria proper to each species, and that species live in a sort of coordinated way. [...] The strict inter-adjustment which exists in the living world is not brought about by the struggle to the death.⁸⁴

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In this regard, man's aggressivity, which may eventually turn into proper aggression, and should be regarded as "an existential act linked to an imaginary relation" – or also, as the manifestation of the death instinct at the imaginary level – is, in a sense, an exception to intra and inter-species adjustment. As I have already remarked in *Subjectivity and Otherness*, according to Lacan, human evolution does not depend on a particularly successful "struggle for life"; the opposite is true: "the struggle for life" is a consequence of human – particularly successful – disadapted evolution.⁸⁵ Yet even man's struggle for life remains "sub-jacent", Lacan specifies, to the extent that the destructive desire for the other generated by the alienating identification with the human *Gestalt* is subordinated to the symbolic order.⁸⁶ The notion of the struggle for life is in the end only

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸⁴ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 177.

⁸⁵ *Subjectivity and Otherness*, p. 196.

⁸⁶ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 177.

an anthropocentric and implicitly teleological “political myth”: it conceals a racist bias that projects onto nature the preconception according to which the stronger race should win.⁸⁷

V.

Unsurprisingly, the critique of the teleological, humanist, and vitalist biases of evolutionary theory obliges Lacan to confront himself with the thorny issue of the origins of language. Bearing in mind that the crucial question for psychoanalysis is not “what is language?”, “where does it come from?” – or, more specifically, “what happened during the geological epochs? How did they begin to wail? Did they begin by making noises while making love, as some would have it?” – but rather “knowing how it actually works”,⁸⁸ he warns his audience against three common interrelated misconceptions. Firstly, the origin of language does not simply follow from an advance in thought. This argument is clearly a vicious circle, since how could thought accede to the symbol if the latter, that is the very structure of human thought, would not be there in the first place? Secondly, the emergence of the symbol, man’s supposed advance in thought, can in no way be seen as a progress over animal intelligence. A symbol, for instance a ring symbolising the sun, is valueless outside of a “world of symbols”, that is, if it is not related to “other formalisations”. It does not make sense to compare the animal’s environmental “appreciation of the whole situation” to man’s “symbolic fragmentation” as pseudo-environment. Thirdly, and most importantly, the passage from animal to man should not be thought as a transition. This means that there are no intermediary steps in it. Even holophrases, that is, “expressions which cannot be broken down and have to be related to a situation taken in its entirety”, should not be regarded as a juncture between the animal and human world. An analysis of their semantic contents shows that they too depend on the intersubjective openness, the “state of inter-gaze”, inherent to symbolic fragmentation.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* On Darwin’s strictly metaphorical use of the phrase “struggle for life”, its misleading popularisation by early Darwinians and successive problematisation by Neo-Darwinians, see Portmann, *Le forme viventi*, pp. 115–149. With regard to the social and political biases of this notion, Gould reminds us that “Darwin developed his theory as a conscious analog to the laissez-faire economics of Adam Smith” (“Challenges to Neo-Darwinism”, p. 224).

⁸⁸ *The Seminar. Book II*, pp. 119–120.

⁸⁹ *The Seminar. Book I*, pp. 224–225.

We are thus left with only one viable hypothesis on the origins of language and the concomitant transformation of animal instincts into human desire:⁹⁰ they must be thought in terms of a jump, which is precisely what psychoanalysis uncovers at the ontogenetic level. As Lacan has it in Seminar II, “the dimension discovered by analysis is the opposite of anything which progresses through adaptation, through approximation, through being perfected. It is something which proceeds by leaps, in jumps”.⁹¹ More specifically, this leaping or jumping corresponds to the always partly “inadequate application of certain complete symbolic relations” to man’s organically deficient Imaginary.

Turning to the phylogenetic level, I believe that Lacan effectively captures the idea of the emergence of language as a jump when, in another key passage from Seminar II, he suggests that “discourse closes in on itself [...] ever since the first Neanderthal idiots”.⁹² That is to say, discourse is always-already all, or better, all as not-all – Lacan in fact reminds us that discourse closes in on itself independently of its “disagreement with itself” – yet, this is valid only from a particular moment in so-called natural evolution. I take the doubly paradoxical phrase “always-already all as not-all since the first Neanderthal idiots” as an attempt to think together in the figure of the leap, beyond any synthesis, two irreconcilable perspectives, which are both essential and, if left alone, insufficient for a truly materialist theory of human nature. Schematically, these two perspectives can be defined as those of anticipation and retroaction. On the one hand, nature always-already contains and resolves the Symbolic, since the natural order of the Imaginary is the original “reservoir”, furnishes the “ballast”, Lacan says, of the symbolic order.⁹³ From this stance, there is a prevalence of the natural imaginary Real over the human Symbolic. On the other hand, the symbolic order is retrospectively eternal and nature will always have been symbolic as it can only

⁹⁰ Although the supreme narcissism of children – their relatively closed world – exerts a seduction on adults that makes them compare them to “beautiful animals” (*ibid.*, p. 132), children are always-already caught in the intersubjectivity of the Symbolic. All we can say is that a child is “more a captive of the imaginary” than an adult is (*ibid.*, pp. 218–219).

⁹¹ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 86.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 319; J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre IV. La relation d’objet, 1956–57* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 51. For a lucid account of the status of natural symbols in Lacan’s work, see Chapter 3 of Mike Lewis’s *Derrida and Lacan: Another Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), especially pp. 180–185.

be thought symbolically. From this stance, there is a prevalence of the human Symbolic over the natural imaginary Real.⁹⁴

Let us dwell on this opposition between the anticipatory and retroactive perspectives. Throughout Seminar II, Lacan incessantly moves from one to the other. He openly acknowledges that “the first symbols, natural symbols, stem from a certain number of prevailing images”⁹⁵ – especially that of the human body and, in particular, the penis “whose symbolic usage is possible because it can be seen, because it is erected”.⁹⁶ But he also insists on the gap between “the beginnings of symbolism in the instinctual capture of one animal by another” and symbolism *stricto sensu*, which makes exist “what doesn’t exist”.⁹⁷ Lacan does not want to run the risk of being associated with Jungian theory: while symbols emerge from images of the “world or nature”, the latter should in no way be regarded as “substantialised” archetypes. The natural symbols are formal *types*, not archetypes, given that, as images, they are symbolised only retroactively, as soon as they are “caught in [...] common discourse, a fragment of this discourse”.⁹⁸ Moreover, archetypes imply the existence of a collective unconscious that is ultimately nothing else than the “communal soul” of the whole of hu-

⁹⁴ We may venture to read Lacan’s theory of the emergence of the Symbolic through Gould’s evolutionary notion of exaptation, with which he criticises and complicates the classical Darwinian notion of adaptation. Exaptations are “structures that contribute to fitness but evolved for other reasons and were later co-opted for their current role” (“Challenges to Neo-Darwinism”, p. 231). Four important specifications should be made. The first two distance Gould from Lacan, while the others reinforce the impression that their positions should be compared closely. 1) Gould does not confine exaptations to human evolution. 2) He does not understand them as instinctual disadaptations. 3) He nevertheless concedes that “the range of exaptive possibility must be set primarily by nonadaptation” since “nonadaptive sequelae are more numerous than adaptations themselves”. 4) He also singles out the human brain as the most exaptive biological structure. Although it initially “became large for an adaptive reason [...] most of what makes us so distinctively human (and flexible), arises as a consequence of the nonadaptive sequelae, not of the primary adaptation itself” (*ibid.*, pp. 231–232). We must conclude that, for Gould, exaptations are for the most part retroactive adaptations of nonadaptive sequelae which are, as such, particularly evident in the case of *homo sapiens*.

⁹⁵ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 306.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 272. On the possible signal function of the human penis and the importance of this field of biological research, see J. Diamond, *Why is Sex Fun? The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (London: Orion Books, 1998), pp. 186–192.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

manity seen as a “kind of large animal”. The Lacanian symbolic function abhors this view.⁹⁹

Moving from these premises, in what appears to be a complete shift in perspective from the previous assumption that first symbols stem from natural prevailing images, Lacan is also led to claim that the Symbolic “extends itself indefinitely into perpetuity, prior to itself”. It is worth quoting this passage at length:

Think about the origins of language. We imagine that there must have been a time when people on this earth began to speak. So we admit of an emergence. But from the moment the [...] emergence is grasped, we find it absolutely impossible to speculate on what preceded it other than by symbols.¹⁰⁰

Pressed by Hyppolite’s straightforward question “how does the use of the word symbolic help us? What does it give us?”, Lacan admits in a later lesson that we might “almost” qualify the Symbolic as an a priori category that has, as such, a transcendental function.¹⁰¹ But beyond this concession, what is primarily at stake in the continuation of the above passage from Seminar II is the issue of the *re-opening* of the partial closure of the Symbolic as man’s pseudo-environment. As we have seen, the biological deficit of *homo sapiens* is never completely overcome, and can therefore resurface in history itself beyond the level of ontogeny. From the potentially infinite re-opening of the “symbolic possibility” follows the

⁹⁹ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 31. In a recent interview, Jean Laplanche has problematically associated this Jungian view with Freud’s own biological ideas: “Freud thinks of the human species as a whole that is able to have a memory and a repression in the same sense as an individual human being has them.” Although Laplanche distances himself from this position, which would lead Freud to understand fundamental fantasies as being genetically transmitted, unlike Lacan, he sees the human species as a linguistic individuality rather than as a trans-individuality. “I completely disagree with Freud. I think that the [human] collectivity does not constitute a biological individuality, but rather an essentially linguistic *individuality*, that its memory is essentially a linguistic memory. We need to start up again from here, not from the idea that fundamental fantasies are inscribed in the genes of the species” (J. Laplanche, in *II manifesto*, October 15, 2008, my emphasis).

¹⁰⁰ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 36–38. For a possible “metacritical” application of a revised version of Kant’s notion of the transcendental to the question of the origin of language, see G. Agamben, *Infancy and History* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 44–50.

establishment of another categorical order that imposes itself as a new retrospective eternity. In Lacan's own words, "when another structural order emerges, well then, it creates its own perspective within the past, and we say – *This can never not have been there, this has existed from the beginning*".¹⁰² Here, the relativisation of symbolic retroaction intersects with the pluralisation of the original emergence of symbols as natural symbols. Such a transient intersection is precisely what Lacan refers to as a reiterated jump, and Mannoni more elegantly identifies as the question of contingent universals.¹⁰³ In light of this, the ego is just one among many historical, and yet universal, acquisitions of our species: *homo sapiens* as a linguistic animal was not always egological, as we can infer from the fact that Ancient Greek philosophy lacked this notion.¹⁰⁴

I think that in Seminars I and II Lacan is well aware of the importance of maintaining the perspectives of anticipation and retroaction as radical alternatives to the extent that they reciprocally criticise the residual anti-materialist elements still present in each. In brief, anticipation prevents us from thinking the sudden emergence of the Symbolic as dependent on some extra-natural attribute of *homo sapiens*,¹⁰⁵ while, conversely, retroaction forces us to admit that the Symbolic relies on man's disadapted openness, and not on the proliferation of natural "living forms".¹⁰⁶ To put it simply, anticipation is therefore, in this context, inherently anti-idealist and anti-humanist. On its part, retroaction is anti-vitalist and anti-teleological. In later Seminars, Lacan will further develop his antic-

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰³ See *ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

¹⁰⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁰⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 292, pp. 306–307, p. 312, p. 315. On the "self-presentation" of human and non-human "forms of life" as forms of appearance that, in expressing a "mysterious" interiority of the living as such, go well beyond serving exclusively self-preservation and the preservation of the species, see the biological work of Portmann and his praise of Jung's psychological theories. Even Lacan's disagreement with Lévi-Strauss's anthropology should be related to this context. As Anne Dunand has noted, Lévi-Strauss's thought finally resolves itself into an inscrutable voluntarism of culture as structured nature. "According to Lévi-Strauss [...] it is the group that wants to outlive the individuals that constitute it; therefore, the Other is the subject; the Other wants it to last. This implies some kind of obscure will, impossible to decipher, that harks back to a very antiquated conception of nature. Culture is identified with the blind energy of nature – the two systems are fused; because Lévi-Strauss leaves open a passage from nature to culture, they are never really heterogeneous" (A. Dunand, "Lacan and Lévi-Strauss", in R. Feldstein, B. Fink, M. Jaanus (eds.), *Reading Seminars I and II* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1996], p. 107).

ipatory and retroactive approaches to the materiality of language by means of the notions of phallic *Gestalt* and mythical discourse, which will, however, never be systematised. By contrast, what stands out in Seminars I and II through the repeated oscillation between the anticipation and retroaction of human nature, as well as their disjunctive synthesis in a jump, is Lacan's courageous attempt to leave behind the sterility of a presumed mutual exclusion between naturalistic and historical materialism.¹⁰⁷

VI.

The issue of the primordial "symbolic possibility" and the reopening of the partial closure of the Symbolic as man's pseudo-environment corresponds, for Lacan, to the very question of desire as being. Desire becomes manifest there where the Symbolic emerges,¹⁰⁸ which also means that the closure of the Symbolic as pseudo-environment amounts to the repression of desire, and that the latter thus normally operates at the unconscious level. Although in these first Seminars Lacan does not discuss in detail the structure of what is repressed since, at this stage, he has not yet developed his notion of fantasy, the fact that desire remains unconscious provides us with an additional reason to distinguish it from the domain of animal needs. On the one hand, need smoothly "connects up with the general homeostasis of the organism".¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, desire is repressed insofar as it is coextensive with the symbolic recuperation of the fundamental disorder of the instinctual life of man, its structurally problematic status, which we have already examined at length.¹¹⁰ The human subject is a discordant subject in that he is fragmented by his ego, and consequently "cannot desire without itself dissolving" (i.e. undergoing alienation) and "without seeing because of this very fact the object escaping it, in a series of infinite displacements".¹¹¹ This separation from the object, these displacements that determine desire are not referable

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¹⁰⁷ The break between naturalistic and historical materialism characterised philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. On how the 1971 dialogue on human nature between Chomsky and Foucault should be taken as paradigmatic in this regard, see Virno's considerations in *Scienze sociali e 'natura umana'* (especially pp. 13–24) and *Quando il verbo si fa carne* (especially pp. 147–155).

¹⁰⁸ See *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 177, p. 227.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

to “the lack inflicted on need”¹¹² but, drawing together biological and ontological considerations, should be understood as a relation of lack to being. “This lack is the lack of being [...] It isn’t the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists”, Lacan says.¹¹³ Psychoanalysis thus regards the human subject as a “being in becoming”, not an object,¹¹⁴ a being-of-desire whereby being is a “function” of lack, “arises from a background of absence”.¹¹⁵

Here, it is not entirely clear whether being should be confined to the symbolic domain of repressed desire, as the quotations above seem to imply, or whether the latter rather amounts to “a new order of being”,¹¹⁶ which would therefore still allow us to predicate being of the pre-symbolic Real. However, it is doubtless the case that, for Lacan, it is language that introduces the mutual relation between being and lack, or even nothingness, precisely in that language “holes”, or opens up, the Real. Speech and the “hollow of being” in the Real are “exactly correlative”, that is, being as always-already hollowed being is not to be attributed to the pre-linguistic Real.¹¹⁷ Obviously, the pre-symbolic Real exists, Lacan says, that is out of question, but its ontological status is in the end irrelevant as long as it remains a closed, non-lacking, world.¹¹⁸ We could go as far as tentatively suggesting that the pre-symbolic world exists without being. What is at stake in such a formula is of course not a Berkeleian reduction of the pre-symbolic world to a vanishing mirage but a problematisation of the possibility of ontologising it as a closed, non-lacking world. Can an ontology, a logos or speech about being, be applied to a real world that, by definition, “resists symbolisation”,¹¹⁹ one that is, in other words, inconsistent, or, using Lacan’s own jargon, “ineffective”?¹²⁰ If at all possible, would such an application not immediately turn the real world into a consistent world, a symbolic world of meaningful effects? And most crucially, is Lacan not encouraging us always to distinguish between the *ontological*

¹¹² *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 214.

¹¹³ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 223.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 223-224.

¹¹⁶ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 239.

¹¹⁷ See *ibid.* p. 229. “Depending on the way one envisions it, this hole in the real is called being or nothingness. This being and this nothingness are essentially linked to the phenomenon of speech” (*ibid.*, p. 271).

¹¹⁸ See *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 219.

¹¹⁹ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 66.

¹²⁰ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 219.

inconsistency inherent to the consistent world of the symbol, man's repressed being-of-desire as the real not-all of the Symbolic, and the *pre-ontological* pure inconsistency of the pre-symbolic Real?

A similar interest in such a pre-ontological condition resurfaces indirectly in Lacan's considerations on the immortality of life. The pre-symbolic Real exists, and yet, even in the case of the highly developed organic life of animals, it cannot simply be said to be alive. The pre-symbolic Real exists, but it is un-dead, for eternity. In other words, "from the point of view of the species, individuals are, if one can put it in this way, already dead", while, conversely, the species is immortal, it is "the only thing to be perpetuated".¹²¹ More specifically, this means that the individual reproduces as a type, or form, that is by means of *Gestalten*, and not as an individual: the individual "only manages to reproduce the type already brought into being by the line of its ancestors [...]. It isn't this or that horse, but the prop, the embodiment of something which is *The Horse*".¹²² Whenever there is a correspondence between the *Innenwelt* with the *Umwelt*, whenever the sexual partner is sought like a key seeks a keyhole, the individual animal cannot be described just as mortal: it is rather "already dead in relation to the eternal life of the species".¹²³

Interestingly, in this context, Lacan speaks of two degrees of the death instinct. First of all, there is an animal death instinct, which corresponds to the fact that, as we have just seen, the individual animal is subjected to "the x of eternal life" of the species.¹²⁴ As Hyppolite has it, "the animal is bound by death when he

¹²¹ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 121. It goes without saying that the "immortality" of the species should be seen here as compatible with the evolution of the species via genetic mutations and its eventual "transformation" into another species.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 145. Lacan develops these arguments commenting on Freud's own considerations about the immortality of life in Chapter VI of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this text, Freud adopts Weismann's theory of the germ plasm according to which the living substance is divided "into mortal and immortal parts. The mortal part is the body in the narrower sense – the 'soma' – which alone is subject to natural death. The germ-cells, on the other hand, are potentially immortal, in so far as they are able, under certain favorable conditions, to develop into a new individual" (S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, S.E. XVIII [London: The Hogarth Press, 1986], pp. 45–46). On how Weismann's theory still tacitly informs present-day molecular genetics, see J.-A. Miller, "Lacanian Biology", in *lacanian ink*, 18 (2001), pp. 17–19.

¹²⁴ *The Seminar. Book I*, pp. 148–149.

makes love, but he doesn't know anything about it".¹²⁵ In this sense, Lacan can go as far as suggesting that ultimately, in the pre-symbolic Real, "life is concerned only with dying", it is a "blister" characterised by its aptitude for death, a "swelling", or "bubble" that always-already dissolves into the inorganic.¹²⁶ At this level there is no possibility for change and hence for the experience of death: the un-dead animal identifies smoothly with its *Gestalt* and thus both satisfies his desire, or better his needs, and propagates the species.¹²⁷ On the other hand, man's death instinct is complicated by his disordered imagination and by the related emergence of the "image of death". To put it differently, man's death instinct corresponds to his imaginary subjection to the ideal ego: "This image of the master, which is what he sees in the form of the specular image, becomes confused in him with the image of death".¹²⁸ The specular image that man, unlike animals, loves and vies with narcissistically is an image of death since it offers him an image of "adapted" perfection, of an equilibrium which characterises the always-already dead life of animals, and which, as such, he can never attain. Although in Seminars I and II Lacan had not yet introduced this terminological distinction, we can well advance that man's death *drive* is the insistent search for an unobtainable ideal un-dead perfection derived from the deformation of the animal's death instinct – the animal's subjection to the x of eternal life.

We should pay particular attention to the fact that, in this way, man opposes to the animal's unproblematic satisfaction of needs – itself ruled by the death instinct – the incessant "pursuit of the fulfilment of desire". Human desire is a negativity sustained by the death drive as a prolongation, a detour, of the animal death instinct.¹²⁹ I believe that we should attempt to understand this subtle but fundamental difference by referring to Lacan's recurrent remarks about energetics and the concept of entropy. Reinforcing his anti-vitalist polemics, Lacan claims that Freudian psychoanalysis has always considered need as an energetic notion, which is as such a symbolic notion.¹³⁰ In other words, we can approach living things only by means of their metabolism – "the balance sheet, what goes

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹²⁶ *The Seminar. Book II*, pp. 232–233.

¹²⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 238.

¹²⁸ *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 149.

¹²⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 147.

¹³⁰ See *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 113, p. 74.

in and what comes out”¹³¹ – only by regarding them as un-dead homeostats that “look after themselves” in that they assimilate and consume energy. Beyond this level, at which living organisms cannot simply be opposed to machines – without for this reason being reduced to sheer mechanistic processes¹³² – the phenomenon of life remains completely impenetrable to us. Thus, psychoanalytic biology should be taken by antiphrasis: “Freudian biology has nothing to do with biology. It is a matter of manipulating symbols with the aim of resolving energy questions, as the homeostatic reference indicates [...] Freud’s whole discussion revolves around the question, what, in terms of energy, is the psyche?”¹³³

While it is clear that psychoanalysis should not be a naïve science of sexual needs and desire understood as self-evident vital forces of nature,¹³⁴ we are initially left to wonder how to reconcile the idea of life – at least non-human life – as energetic homeostasis with that of the death instinct. At first sight, there seems to be on this issue a radical tension in psychoanalytic biology. However, even if Lacan warns against taking this analogy literally,¹³⁵ I would suggest that the animal’s death instinct could be seen as compatible with the idea of life as a homeostatic equilibrium insofar as the latter is structurally undermined by entropy. The individual animal as a homeostatic persistence, or conservation of energy, is concomitantly also characterised by a loss or degradation of energy, that is entropy: in this sense, it is always-already “concerned with dying” from the standpoint of the species.¹³⁶

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹³² See *ibid.*, p. 31. “We always try to explain the living organism in terms of mechanism. The first question which we analysts must answer, and which can perhaps help us get away from the controversy which exists between vitalism and mechanism, is the following – why are we led to think of life in terms of mechanism?”

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 75. Jacques-Alain Miller challenges Lacan’s conclusion on the basis of the significant changes that biology underwent in the last fifty years. “Because Freudian biology is first of all an energetics, Lacan allows himself to say that Freudian biology is not a biology. This is so if we understand by biology a discipline which has life as its object, but it is certainly less correct now that we have in some way a biology without life, a biology which has as its object – this is one of Jacob’s expressions, but it could just as well be Lacan’s – ‘the algorithms of the living world’” (“Lacanian Biology”, p. 7). The most authoritative text on Freud and biology remains F. Sulloway’s *Freud, Biologist of the Mind* (London: Burnet Books, 1979).

¹³⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 227.

¹³⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 115.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81. “A living organism continually increases its entropy – or, as you may say, produces positive entropy – and thus tends to approach the dangerous state of maximum entropy,

Such a scenario is complicated in *homo sapiens* by his disordered imagination. The gap that is produced by the “deviation” of his relation to the species-specific *Gestalt* is both the place where “death makes itself felt” and the originating cause of repetitive insistence. The imaginary and symbolic components of man’s alienation cannot be separated: this is the very “world of the symbol” which in terms of energy corresponds to the human death instinct.¹³⁷ In Seminar II, Lacan makes only two passing and cryptic remarks with regard to the specificity of the relation between the human death instinct and entropy, which, in my opinion, should be read together. Firstly, while in nature energy “always tends in the direction of an equalisation of levels of difference”, in the symbolic order, “to the extent that the information increases” – and is codified, or grouped – “the difference in levels becomes more differentiated”.¹³⁸ Secondly, if we take the Symbolic as the pseudo-environment of man and his manipulations of nature, this very increase in information can be seen as itself inserted into the circuit of the natural degradation of energy, the equalisation of levels of energetic difference. In this way, it “will cause the general level of the energy to rise again”.¹³⁹ Although Lacan does not develop this daring argument any further, it does not seem exaggerated to propose that the human death instinct *counter-balances* entropy, if not actually diminishes and slows it down, and thus prolongs, or at least complicates, the trajectory of the animal death instinct. As I suggested in *Subjectivity and Otherness*, the death drive is therefore, against doxastic readings, a conservative principle that temporarily suspends the indiscernibility between life and the un-dead, and postpones the return of the human individual to the immortal in-differentiation of the species *homo sapiens*.¹⁴⁰

which is death. It can only keep aloof from it, i.e. alive, by continually drawing from its environment negative entropy [...]. What an organism feeds upon is negative entropy. Or, to put it less paradoxically, the essential thing in metabolism is that the organism succeeds in freeing itself from all the entropy it cannot help producing while alive” (E. Schrödinger, *What is Life?* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], p. 71).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210, p. 76.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁴⁰ See *Subjectivity and Otherness*, pp. 143–147. “No doubt there is a principle that brings the libido back to death, but it doesn’t bring it back any old how. If it brought it back there by the shortest paths, the problem would be resolved. But it brings it back there only along the paths of life, it so happens” (*The Seminar. Book II*, p. 80). The human death drive could therefore equally be seen as a vital principle, in that it goes against the identification of animal life with entropy, and, for the very same reason, also as supremely anti-vital, in that it eventually only prolongs this identification and establishes death as an imaginary experience.

We must, however, never lose sight of the fact that, as an individual, *homo sapiens* remains a helpless self-destructive primate. At this level, which in his first two Seminars Lacan explains almost exclusively in terms of imaginary alienating identification and will later associate with the notions of symbolic demand and privation, the death instinct seems intuitively to accelerate animal entropy to the point of causing the extinction of the species. The specificity of the human death drive as a recuperation of entropy emerges only with the establishment of the intersubjective dimension of desire, which is a biological prerogative of the species *homo sapiens*.¹⁴¹ Desire should therefore clearly be distinguished from the suicidal libidinal instincts of *homo sapiens*, while, at the same time, it is that which, in the partial closure of the Symbolic as pseudo-environment, is derived from and employs these same instincts to counter-balance animal entropy. On the one hand, in energetic terms, desire amounts to a qualitative effect, that is, as such, irreducible to the libido as a mythical unit of quantity. On the other hand, from a strictly biological perspective, desire must nevertheless be identified with a symbolised libidinal “need for repetition” [*le besoin de répétition*].¹⁴²

Lacan explains both points in detail. With regard to the difference between desire and the libido, he claims that the latter is “a unit of quantitative measurement”. It is mythical since we ignore its nature, do not know how to measure it, and simply “assume [it] to be there”, yet it allows us to “unify the variation in qualitative effects”, that is, the “changes of state” which occur when a certain homeostatic threshold is passed. As Lacan has it, “you assume an undifferentiated quantitative unit susceptible of entering into relations of equivalence. If it can’t be discharged, can’t expand as normal, can’t spread out, overflows occur from which other states ensue”.¹⁴³ These qualitative effects as changes of state that we refer to as, for instance, regressions, fixations, sublimations of the libido, constitute what Lacan names in this precise context the “world of desire”. In this sense, psychoanalysis primarily focuses on desire as transformation, “the realisation of anything new”: it starts by postulating a field of novelty that equally opposes itself to the unchangeable realm of the un-dead animal and the conservative value of the death drive that sustains desire after its first emergence.¹⁴⁴

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¹⁴¹ Lacan will later understand this negation of negation as a passage from demand – associated with the discovery of privation – to desire.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 87–90. On this issue, see also *Subjectivity and Otherness*, pp. 151–154.

¹⁴³ *The Seminar. Book II*, pp. 221–222.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

Having said this, the world of desire also corresponds to the symbolic pseudo-environment in which animal libido manifests itself in the guise of a “need for repetition”. In Seminar II, Lacan often uses this phrase which, I believe, well renders in a concise way the libidinal dimension of the human Symbolic. While the need for repetition, introduced by language, goes “beyond all the biological mechanisms of equilibration”, it is nevertheless a “vital adaptation”.¹⁴⁵ To put it bluntly, man needs to repeat because his libido does not instinctively learn how to fit into his environment. The animal’s purely biological cycles follow the reminiscence of an imaginary “good form”. On the contrary, man’s disordered imagination is a “failure in learning” whereby memorisation can only logically follow repetition: “In man, it is the wrong form which prevails. In so far as a task is not completed the subject returns to it. The more abject the failure, the better the subject remembers it.”¹⁴⁶

Passages like this strike us for their vagueness with regard to what precisely the subject returns to in repetition and how his memorisation is paradoxically reinforced by a failure that is itself not better defined. They should alert us about the fact that, at this stage, Lacan has not yet clarified how desire as the libidinal need for repetition determines in *homo sapiens* the splitting between self-consciousness and the unconscious. As I have argued elsewhere, the conscious mutual pact of recognition to which, in Seminars I and II, Lacan associates the satisfaction of man’s desire necessarily presupposes man’s repeated obliteration of the other’s desire, which is only achieved by becoming its object, and for this reason repressed in the fantasy.¹⁴⁷ Lacan already senses that if human desire as the repetitive pursuit of the fulfilment of desire is ultimately a “desire for nothing”,¹⁴⁸ the desire of the other’s desire as an irreducible lack, the very opening of the “symbolic possibility”, then this biologically unbearable condition requires the introduction of a fantasy. However, he does not seem to realise yet that it is primarily at the phantasmatic level that desire is repeatedly satisfied “in another fashion than in an effective satisfaction” through the symbolic illusory satisfac-

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁴⁷ See *Subjectivity and Otherness*, especially pp. 163–166 and “Count-as-one, Forming-into-one, Unary Trait, S1”, in P. Ashton, A. J. Bartlett, and J. Clemens (eds.), *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*, especially pp. 173–176. On the way in which the satisfaction of desire depends on its recognition by the other, see *The Seminar. Book I*, p. 183.

¹⁴⁸ *The Seminar. Book II*, p. 211.

tion of “being acknowledged”.¹⁴⁹ In addition to this, in these early Seminars, he confines the inescapable overlapping of the recognition of the Other’s desire with its “abdication”, or even “annihilation”, to the domain of libidinal perversions.¹⁵⁰ What in this way still remains to be elaborated is the notion of fantasy as the historically contingent, albeit universal, natural structure of the unconscious that links up the recognition, repression, and repetition of desire as desire of the Other.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 213. Yet, in Seminar II, Lacan acknowledges in passing the parallelism between the conscious ego and the unconscious fantasy (see *ibid.*, p. 214).

¹⁵⁰ See *The Seminar. Book I*, pp. 221–222.