Metapsychology After Lacan

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PREFACE

This book could be described in a number of ways. First and foremost, it is a study of Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious and, in particular, what Freud called his "metapsychology." At the same time, it is a treatment of Jacques Lacan's radical reinterpretation of psychoanalysis, a treatment that seeks both to clarify key aspects of Lacan's thought and to map its relation to Freud. Then again, it is a work of philosophy that draws new implications from the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious and does so by means of introducing a number of original concepts.

It both is and is not the book I wanted to write. It succeeds in laying out the rudiments of an idea, though not always with the ease and elegance I might have wished for. The idea occurred to me in 1985 in one of those exceptional flashes of insight, vividly intense and absolutely compelling, that seem suddenly to penetrate to the heart of a problem. Yet for all its appearance of instantaneous clarity, it was an idea that required a great deal of time and labor to articulate. The lightness and transparency of the original inspiration now seem somewhat compromised by the workman-like style with which I have had to unfold it.

But I remark upon the distance between the conception and execution of my idea less to make apology for my insufficiencies as a writer than to introduce a larger point that is central to this book. For the book is ultimately concerned with the profound tension between simultaneity and succession. It is the tension between the instant flash of insight and the extended time required for its discursive elaboration, the tension between the image and the word. In one sense, everything is present with the first crystallization of the image. As Coleridge recognized, the image is the product of a seemingly magic fusional power. The image is the pregnant source of a virtually inexhaustible stream of realizations. At the same time, however, it is only through the labor of thought mediated by language that an idea, nascent in the body of the image, ripens and truly comes to birth. Only by traversing the pathways of discourse is the mute cargo of the image made available for deliberation.

Upon further reflection, this first sense of the relation of image and word, according to which the inchoate potency of the image is unfolded by the word, gives way to a deeper mystery. If the germ of the image is brought to fulfillment only by being trellised along the frame of language, it must also be said that language and its formative influence are always already there from the start. Human perception is always preinformed by the categories of speech and language. The seed of the image is sown by the word. Thus this paradox: the universe of language by means of which the human subject struggles to speak itself is at the same time the originary condition without which there could be no subject at all. The house of language is at once the destination of the human journey and also its point of departure.

Freud touched upon this paradox in his concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, the term rendered in English as "deferred action" and somewhat more aptly in French as "*après coup.*" By *Nachträglichkeit* Freud referred to the wrinkled temporality of human destiny, the circumstance that the human subject is never fully coincident with itself but is always at once behind and ahead of itself. *Nachträglichkeit* describes the elemental enigma discovered by psychoanalysis: that every seeking of an object of love is an attempt to refind an object *that was in fact never possessed.* As our discussion unfolds, this paradoxical temporality of retroaction will increasingly emerge at the very center of Freud's theoretical construction, and we will see it related to the master problem of all his work: the complex and dynamic relation of the image and the word.

A prime objective of the book, then, is to develop a new understanding of the meaning of *Nachträglichkeit* and of its place and function in the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious. But the trajectory of the argument is itself *nachträglich*: the real import of the opening three chapters is achieved only in the fourth and fifth chapters. This is not to diminish the value of the first chapters. They develop the guiding perspective for the book as a whole and offer interpretations of some of Freud's most important concepts and case studies. Without the material they develop the final chapters would be unintelligible. Nevertheless, the concluding chapters significantly augment and restructure the conceptual framework developed to that point. Unfortunately for those who would like to sample a section here and there, this book is understandable only as a whole. I can only beg the reader's patience to consider it as such.

INTRODUCTION

Returning to Metapsychology

This book seeks to regrasp the meaning of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and to chart its relation to some of the main currents of contemporary philosophy. But another book about Freud? Attacks on Freud's ideas seem only to have intensified in recent years, swelling a tide of criticism that nearly scuttled a major exhibition of his papers at the Library of Congress. After five years of controversy the exhibition finally opened, in altered form, in 1998. Psychoanalytic therapy is struggling to survive under pressure from behavioral and cognitive techniques and from a burgeoning industry of psychopharmacology. Already in 1993, a *Time* magazine cover pointedly asked "Is Freud Dead?" To revisit Freud's theories in the chilly atmosphere that now surrounds his legacy might well appear to be a quixotic enterprise. Why bother?

Amid the sound and fury of his critics it is easy to forget that Freud is the most influential thinker of the twentieth century, having left his impress on a host of fields well beyond the borders of psychology, including anthropology and sociology, film and media studies, literature and poetics, aesthetics and art history, history and biography, philosophy and

theology. Equally remarkable, Freud's enduring presence in the academy is matched or even exceeded by the diffusion of his ideas in the popular domain, where the jargon of psychoanalysis has permeated the most everyday kinds of discourse. The very immensity of the shadow cast by Freud, in and out of the university, amply justifies continuing efforts to better understand his work.

But that is not all. Precisely to the extent that we appreciate the enormity of Freud's influence, we are bound to be struck by a remarkable paradox: the most criticized and most forcefully repudiated part of the psychoanalytic theory was precisely the part most prized by the master himself—what Freud called his "metapsychology." In its premises and conclusions alike, the Freudian metapsychology has generally been rejected by posterity, both inside and outside of the psychoanalytic community. If we accept Freud's own estimate of the importance of metapsychology, then we must reckon with the possibility that we may not yet have fully grasped what Freud himself was after. If we have failed to understand the basic terms of Freud's metapsychology, can we be said to have understood Freud at all?

What justifies another book on Freud is above all the unanswered question of metapsychology. In what follows, I will argue that the rejection of metapsychology is based on misunderstandings of its basic concepts. The result is a profound misconstrual of the real meaning of Freud's work and a failure to grasp its true radicality. Describing his hopes for metapsychology, Freud remarked that "when I was young, the only thing I longed for was philosophical knowledge, and now that I am going over from medicine to psychology I am in the process of attaining it."[1] Metapsychology was Freud's answer to metaphysics. The most unfortunate consequence of rejecting Freud's metapsychology consists in losing the philosophical richness of his thought, of truncating the conceptual horizon that the metapsychology opens up. Without the wide sweep of the metapsychological perspective, psychoanalysis becomes merely one of a legion of talking therapies, distinctive merely for its thematics of the Oedipus and castration complexes.

To Recall Freud's Witch

Freud coined the term "metapsychology" very early—indeed, it falls from his pen in February 1896, only a week after the first published appearance of the word "psycho-analysis."[2] In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud

defined metapsychology very generally as "my psychology that leads behind consciousness" (SE, 1:274). Metapsychology thus refers to the assumption of the unconscious itself, as well as to the structures that condition its relations with consciousness. It comprises the distinction of primary and secondary processes, the tripartite division of ego, id, and superego, and the activities of defense, repression, resistance, and symptom formation. Metapsychology is therefore the most comprehensive and all-encompassing viewpoint, one that seeks to coordinate the battery of psychoanalytic concepts into an integrated theoretical architecture. If the term "psychoanalysis" refers first of all to a therapeutic technique, a method of engaging the speaking subject in the interpersonal field of the transference, it was by means of metapsychology that Freud sought to place psychoanalytic experience within a comprehensive account of the working of the mind. It is this virtual identity of metapsychology and psychoanalytic theory that makes the repudiation of metapsychology so provocative. The question of metapsychology is nothing less than the question of psychoanalytic theory itself.

To say that metapsychology formed for Freud himself the most valued portion of his theory is not to deny Freud's own ambivalence toward it. Of the twelve papers written by Freud and originally intended for a collection to be entitled *Zur Vorbereitung einer Metapsychologie* (Preliminaries to a metapsychology), only five have survived: "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," "Repression," "The Unconscious," "A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams," and "Mourning and Melancholia." The other seven papers, the existence of which became known only in the course of Ernest Jones's review of Freud's letters, were apparently destroyed by Freud himself. Jones's research has shown that five of the seven missing papers dealt with the topics of consciousness, anxiety, conversion hysteria, obsessional neurosis, and the transference neuroses in general. More indirect evidence suggests that the other two papers were concerned with sublimation and projection (or paranoia). We can only conclude that Freud's dissatisfaction with the seven papers was sufficiently intense to wish them not only withheld from publication but disposed of altogether. We may readily suppose that a similar dissatisfaction with his efforts at metapyschology was responsible for Freud's attempt to suppress the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* of 1895—which was posthumously published—a work that deserves more than any other, with the possible

exception of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to be considered Freud's most sustained attempt at metapsychology. The text of the *Project* survived thanks only to the happy circumstance that Fliess did not destroy his copy and that Marie Bonaparte, after finding the manuscript among Freud's letters to Fliess, ignored Freud's explicit instructions to burn it.

Freud's restless dissatisfaction with his metapsychology is also discernible in texts that successfully found their way into print. In one of his very last papers, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Freud once again attempts to orient his compass with the help of a metapsychological perspective. Summoning his "Witch Metapsychology," Freud maintains that "without metapsychological speculation and theorizing—I had almost said 'phantasying'—we shall not get another step forward. . . . Unfortunately," he goes on to say, "here as elsewhere, what our Witch reveals is neither very clear nor very detailed" (SE, 23:225). Similar self-critical reminders of the limits to Freud's powers of theoretical construction are frequent throughout his oeuvre and betoken his enduring sense of conceptual inadequacy. Indeed, Freud's complaints of his limited success at theoretical exposition constitute a veritable leitmotif of his text. They provide a measure of his intellectual honesty yet also underscore the magnitude of his theoretical ambitions. The question remains whether we, the inheritors of Freud's theories, bring a comparable breadth of vision to the task of interpreting them.

What, then, did Freud mean by metapsychology? The key concept that underlies the whole system of metapsychological ideas is that of psychical energy. The notion of a mobile energy, capable of variable investments or "cathexes" and susceptible of transfer along a chain of associated representations, remained throughout Freud's career his single most important theoretical construction. The concept of psychical energy clearly points back toward Freud's theoretical precursors in the nineteenth century, especially to the psychophysics of Gustav Theodor Fechner, yet it is essential to grasp the distinctive uses to which Freud put it. It was in terms of the buildup and release of energetic tensions that Freud conceived the nature of pleasure and pain. Moreover, the notion of psychical energy was virtually consubstantial with Freud's concept of libido. It was thus the energetic metaphor that enabled Freud to posit the psychical equivalence of apparently disparate psychical contents and as such provided the basis for his understanding of the processes of displacement and condensation that guide the dream-work and

the formation of symptoms. Energetics was likewise the theoretical taproot for Freud's concepts of repression and resistance, inasmuch as Freud came to think of the process of defense as a play of cathexis and anticathexis of energies. It was in terms of a distribution of energy that Freud distinguished between object love and the narcissistic investment that is constitutive of the ego, the distinction that led him to envisage "a libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to the object-cathexes much as the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out" (SE, 14:75). So, too, it was the energetic assumption that opened the way to distinguishing between primary and secondary processes in terms of free and bound energies. In his 1915 paper "The Unconscious," Freud reaffirmed the indispensability of energetics, claiming that the distinction between bound and unbound energies "represents the deepest insight we have gained up to the present into the nature of nervous energy, and I do not see how we can do without it" (SE, 14:88). Finally, the concept of psychical energy underlay Freud's notion of the instincts or drives and thus formed the foundation of his most daring theoretical construction: the supposition of the two primordial drives of life and death.[3] In the theory of the dual drives, the energetic metaphor, far from being left behind as an artifact of an early, exploratory period, comes to occupy the very center of Freud's most mature and far-reaching synthesis, according to which the entirety of the psychical process down to its minutest increment is to be reckoned in terms of the two great destinies of energy: the gathering together into ever greater unities under the influence of Eros and the splitting apart and disintegration effected by the death drive.

If the energetic metaphor can thus be seen to undergird virtually the whole of Freud's theory, much of its value for psychoanalytic practice consists in the way in which it forms a bridge between theoretical abstraction and immediate lived experience. The metaphor of energy readily renders the phenomenology of bodily experience by situating the body in a field of interacting quantities of force. It resonates with the daily cycle of morning freshness and evening fatigue, for example, and corresponds to our immediately convincing sense of being at times infused with a feeling of power and readiness for activity while at other times we are overwhelmed by a sluggish inertia, at a loss for the resources to take up even the most trivial tasks. On the level of the most immediately given sense of embodiment, the body is unreflectively experienced in terms of the ease and difficulty of its move-

ments, while the surrounding world of things is encountered first of all as allowing and facilitating movement or of resisting and frustrating it.

If the concept of psychic energy readily lends itself to accounts of bodily experience, even more striking is its aptness to describe the affective states with which psychoanalysis is typically confronted. In anxiety, for example, the psychoanalytic affect par excellence, we seem to perceive the effects of a pent-up quantity of force vainly in search of release. So, too, mania and dementia suggest the presence of an intense and chaotic overcharge of energy. In like fashion, it is tempting to characterize the behavior of the hysteric in terms of an excessive charge spread over the entire surface of the personality, as if to compensate for an internal lack or vacuity. The compulsive repetitions of the obsessive, on the other hand, are readily conceived as an excessively intense focus of energy, comparable in some way to a tightly coiled eddy in the flow of experience. Precisely the opposite impression is invited by depression, in which the listless and apathetic subject seems empty and, as the word itself suggests, deflated or depressurized.

Despite its theoretical centrality and its clinical relevance, however, the concept of energetics has remained a highly problematic one.[4] Indeed, in one way or another the rejection of Freud's metapsychology can be traced to a rejection of energetics. With respect to the concept of psychic energy itself, it has been repeatedly charged, especially by critics of the scientific pretensions of psychoanalysis, that Freud's concept corresponds to no scientifically recognized form of energy. Faced on the one hand with the excesses of Wilhelm Reich's quest to capture "orgone" energy and confronted on the other hand with the existentialist critique of Freud as overmechanical and deterministic, many otherwise enthusiastic supporters of psychoanalysis have felt inclined to dispense altogether with Freud's references to psychical energy. Thus Roy Grinker has remarked that "the series of words—instinct, drive, action, force, force, and energy—are misconceptions. There is no relation of 'psychic energy' to any known form of energy, and it is not remotely related to the physical concept of force."[5] Other analysts insist on the enduring relevance of Freudian energetics for clinical description yet despair of finding an adequate conceptual grounding for it. As L. Breger puts it,

> psychoanalytic theory deals with many aspects of human thought and action, but above all it is a theory of motivation. Its empha-

sis on the basic urges and forces that underlie human psychology—on man's unconscious impulses, on sexuality and aggression—have made it the most influential theory of human motivation. Yet the conceptual underpinning of the motivational theory—the concepts of psychic energy, of libido, of conservation or economy, of the life and death instincts—has long been its weakest aspect.[6]

Even more striking than the attacks on Freud's concept of psychic energy itself have been the successive waves of criticism aimed at the most far-reaching and highly speculative extrapolation of the energetic perspective: the theory of the life and death drives.[7] Here, too, criticism among Freud's followers aims at a portion of the theory considered indispensable by Freud himself. Despite continuing hesitations over the details of his construction, he was increasingly convinced of its fundamental value and importance. Freud reaffirmed the theory of the dual drives in his later and most famous works, including *The Ego and the Id*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *The New Introductory Lectures*, and *An Outline of Psycho-analysis*. More than a decade after introducing the two great drives, Freud remarked that "to begin with, it was only tentatively that I put forward the views I have developed here, but in the course of time they have gained such a hold on me that I can no longer think in any other way" (SE, 21:119). In his last major article, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Freud insisted more strenuously than ever on the necessity of the dual drive hypothesis, claiming that "only by the concurrent or mutually opposing action of the two primal instincts—Eros and the death instinct—never by one or the other alone, can we explain the rich multiplicity of the phenomena of life" (SE, 23:243).

Yet for all the importance placed upon it by Freud himself, the theory of the death drive was from the beginning viewed with suspicion, if not downright hostility, even among many of Freud's closest followers. As Ernest Jones observed, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* "is noteworthy in being the only one of Freud's which has received little acceptance on the part of his followers. Thus of the fifty or so papers that have been directed to the topic one observes that in the first decade only half supported Freud's theory, in the second decade only a third, and in the last decade, none at all."[8] For many, perhaps even the majority in the psychoanalytic

community, Freud's hypothesis that "the aim of all life is death" (SE, 18:38) signaled an unwarranted excess of theorizing. David Rapaport called the theory of the death drive "a speculative excursion which does not seem to be an integral part of the [psychoanalytic] theory."[9] Other commentators, seeking to explain how Freud could have spun such an obviously fantastic and implausible hypothesis, reckoned the death drive to be an expression of Freud's horror at the murderous spectacle of World War I or a precipitate of the generally morbid intellectual milieu of the time. Henri Ellenberger has suggested, for example, that "Freud's concept of the death instinct can be best understood against the background of the preoccupation with death shared by a number of his eminent comtemporaries: biologists, psychologists, and existential philosophers."[10] Still others suspected a more personal motivation, rooted in Freud's sadness at the deaths of his son and daughter or in worries over his own mortality. Paul Roazen notes that "an unusual number of elderly analysts . . . thought Freud's cancer preceded his theory of the death instinct."[11] Whatever the reasons adduced for its rejection, the majority judgment of Freud's followers has been clear: the final theory of the dual drives as Freud formulated it is unacceptable. Kenneth Colby thus speaks for many others in roundly concluding that "the postulation of a death instinct we now know was based on a misapplication of physical principles to living organisms. Today it is only an interesting part of psychoanalytic history."[12]

The troubled legacy of Freud's metapsychology unsettles our understanding of Freud at the most elemental level. The challenge before us is to regrasp the meaning of Freud's metapsychological speculations, relimning his basic distinctions and striving to make new sense of them. Our efforts must center first upon the notion of psychical energy itself, along with its companion concepts of *Besetzung*, or cathexis, and of binding and unbinding. We must then retrace the meaning of Freud's mature theory of the dual drives. Indeed, our capacity to arrive at a satisfactory reconception of the life and death drives may be taken as a key measure of the success or failure of our approach. We can also state in advance the general aim of such a reconception. Our investigation must fulfill Freud's intention to conceive of the entirety of psychical processes in terms of the grand opposition between Eros and death. The capacity to account for the most palpable manifestations of the conflict between the two "eternal adversaries," the epochal struggle between love and destructiveness described at the end

of *Civilization and Its Discontents,* was only part of Freud's hope for his dual drive hypothesis. He also longed to show how, beneath the level of their most spectacular effects, the two great pulsional forces are at work with one another in every microincrement of the mind's operation. It was precisely this dream of reconceiving the hidden working of the psychical process that led Freud to liken his theory of the two elemental drives to the Empedoclean dialectic of *Philia* and *Neikos.*

The Lacanian Return to Freud

In setting ourselves the task of regrasping Freud's conceptual apparatus, we will take the work of Jacques Lacan as a privileged clue. Arguably the most theoretically ambitious and sophisticated of all Freud's interpreters, Lacan enriches psychoanalysis by bringing it into dialogue with other theoretical traditions, prominent among them phenomenology and existential philosophy, structuralist linguistics and anthropology. This theoretical refounding of psychoanalysis recalibrates the tools of analytic practice but also extends the implications of psychoanalysis beyond the consulting room, demonstrating the extent to which Freud's theories are deeply resonant with other important intellectual movements of the twentieth century.

The basic concepts of psychoanalysis, Lacan maintains, "can only become clear if one establishes their equivalence to the language of contemporary anthropology, or even to the latest problems in philosophy, fields in which psychoanalysis could well regain its health."[13] Rightly interpreted, however, Freud's text becomes itself an unparalleled resource for the enrichment of other disciplines. From a Lacanian vantage point, Freud is seen to augment and extend intellectual traditions in which he never directly participated. Through Lacan's rereading, Freud emerges as a philosophical thinker of the first order, whose contribution is to be ranked with that of Heidegger or Hegel. "Of all the undertakings that have been proposed in this century," Lacan claims, "that of the psychoanalyst is perhaps the loftiest, because the undertaking of the psychoanalyst acts in our time as a mediator between the man of care and the subject of absolute knowledge" (E:S, 105). And elsewhere: "They say Freud isn't a philosopher. I don't mind, but I don't know of any text concerning the working up of scientific theory which is philosophically more profound" (S.II, 93–94).

If Lacan offers an especially promising path of "return to Freud," it is by no means an easy path to follow. In the first place there is the notorious difficulty of Lacan's style, which Jeffrey Mehlman has fairly described as "Mallarmean in hermetic density, Swiftian in aggressive virulence, Freudian in analytic acumen."[14] Still more apt might be Joseph Conrad's description of the enigmatic Kurtz:

> The man presented himself as a voice. . . . [O]f all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness.[15]

For many people otherwise interested in knowing what Lacan is up to, the torture of ploughing through his prose is too high a price to be paid. And indeed, Lacan often gives the maddening impression that he intentionally resists being understood. "I like to leave the reader no other way out than the way in," he says, "which I prefer to be difficult" (E:S, 146). One advantage of this choice is to prevent *too easy a reading*. As Lacan sees it, the masterfully lucid prose form by which Freud sought to make himself understandable, even to a lay audience, paradoxically contributed to widespread misunderstandings of his thought. The possibilities for distortion are multiplied to the extent that many of Freud's concepts appear assimilable to commonsense notions. The activity of repression, for example, is all too easily imagined as a mechanical process analogous to hiding something away in a box or cupboard—an image that, however wildly inadequate to the complexity of the psychical process Freud has in mind, is at times called up by Freud's own manner of speaking. Or again, the relation of the ego to the id and superego is too readily reduced to a conflict between the claims of base animality and duty to a higher nature. Pressed into this mold, Freud's discovery is trimmed to fit the Sunday school banality of a weak but well-intentioned self torn between its devil and its angel. The attractiveness of such notions derives precisely from their immense crudity, a circumstance that would concern us less were it not for the frequency with which they can be discerned not only in the vulgar reception of Freud's theories but also in discussions by people who ought to know better. Lacan's punishing style ups the ante for achieving a more sophisticated understanding

by first denying us such comfortable oversimplifications. As he puts it himself, Lacan "provides an obstacle to the experience of analysis being served up to you in a completely cretinous way."[16] The difficulty of Lacan's prose frustrates the flat-headed certainties of commonsense and helps restore the note of utter strangeness and even violence to common sense that is an essential feature of the Freudian perspective.

But there is more to it than that. The insistent obscurity of Lacan's style is intended not only to break old habits of thought but also to establish new ones. In the opacity of his own discourse, Lacan aims to produce in the reader an experience that bears some likeness to the analytic encounter with the unconscious. His style is an appropriate reflection of the fact, as he says, that "obscurity is characteristic of our field" (FFC, 187). Alternately intriguing and frustrating, Lacan excites a hunger for insight yet denies facile understanding. The result is that the reader is held in a concentrated suspense akin to the attitude of the psychoanalyst who must listen attentively for what is significant yet refuse the temptation to round off what is heard to fit within the contour of a pat understanding. Lacan's discourse trains us to listen less for what is known than for what is unknown. He thus succeeds in reopening the mysteriousness of the unconscious. Reading Lacan, we are repeatedly brought up against the most elemental considerations as if for the first time.

The difficulties posed by Lacan's style are compounded by the fact that he rereads Freud's theory by reference to a battery of highly original concepts that are unfamiliar to traditional students of psychoanalysis. Prime among these new Lacanian concepts are the three cardinal categories of imaginary, symbolic, and real. To provide a brief sketch of the three categories:

Lacan defines the Freudian ego as a precipitate of the *imaginary*. During the "mirror phase," the psychically formative period between the ages of six months and two years, the contours of the infantile ego are laid down in identification with the perceptual unity of the body image. In this conception, Lacan rediscovers the profound appropriateness of Freud's term "narcissism" and opens up a whole series of new problematics around the function of perception and the meaning of the object relation in psychoanalysis.

Beyond the identifications staged by the imaginary, Lacan locates the linguistically mediated cognitions of the *symbolic*. In his concept of the

symbolic, Lacan draws upon the structuralist conception of language as a diacritical system in an effort to provide a new understanding of the nature and destiny of unconscious desire, that of "the unconscious structured like a language." The claim is a provocative one, yet it becomes increasingly plausible when we reread Freud's great case studies with an eye to the way in which the workings of the unconscious are revealed over and again to turn around plays on words and phonemic linkages. As a grand system of differences, the structure of language comprises an immense and precisely articulated web, impossible of perceptual representation, in which the desire of the subject unknown to the ego finds its circuit toward expression.

The first two registers of imaginary and symbolic are triangulated by a third, that of the *real*, by which Lacan points enigmatically toward an unencompassable horizon that remains unthinkable and unknowable. The real forever outstrips everything figured by the imaginary or signified by the symbolic. As much an expression of the ineffable ground of the subject's own being as that of the world beyond it, the real escapes all representation, even as its indeterminate force may be encountered in the experience of the uncanny or evidenced in the effects of the trauma.

Lacan's innovative categories, particularly his conception of the imaginary ego, serve to mark a sharp departure from the prevailing interpretation of Freud's theory, especially in the United States, informed by "ego psychology." Given its initial impetus by Anna Freud and developed by Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris, Rudolph Lowenstein, and others, ego psychology conceives the primary task of psychic life to be *adaptation* to reality. The accomplishment of this task falls upon the executive ego, whose powers of synthesis and defense enable it to mediate the three-way conflict between the pressures of instinctual drives emanating from within the organism, the constraints of external reality, and the demands of conscience levied by the superego. For these theorists, the strengthening of the ego and the enlargement of the "conflict-free sphere" over which it holds sway become the primary goals of psychoanalysis.

For Lacan, nothing could be further from the essential aims of analysis. Far from being the key to health and happiness, the ego from a Lacanian viewpoint is the heart of the problem. "The ego," Lacan argues, "is structured exactly like a symptom. At the heart of the subject, it is only a privileged symptom, the human symptom *par excellence,* the mental illness of man" (E:S, 16). In Lacan's view, it is the imaginary character of the

ego that is decisive. Although the elaboration of psychic structure must necessarily pass through the formation of an ego, the imaginary institution of the ego is stabilized only at the price of a profound alienation of the subject from its own desire. The effect of this alienation is a profound misrecognition, or *méconnaissance*, with the result "that the ego hasn't a clue about the subject's desire."[17] Thus Lacan claims that "the ego, whose strength our theorists now define by its capacity to bear frustration, is frustration in its essence" (E:S, 42). Whatever its powers of unity and integration, the ego remains a kind of internal object whose effects on the rest of the psychic system are generally stultifying. "Literally," Lacan insists, "the ego is an object."[18] The ego is never capable of achieving more than a partial synthesis. It inevitably excludes the heterogeneity of the subject's desire. Lacan therefore distinguishes emphatically between the imaginary ego and the subject beyond the ego. It is the subject, not the ego, that is addressed by the action of psychoanalysis. Indeed, the aim of analysis is less a strengthening of the ego than a kind of controlled deconstruction of it. "What is at issue, at the end of analysis," Lacan insists, "[is] a twilight, an imaginary decline of the world, and even an experience at the limit of depersonalization" (S.I, 232).

Lacan's distinction between the ego (*moi*) and the subject (*je*) marks a radical point of contrast with the perspective of the ego psychologists, but it is not as different from that of Freud as it may at first appear. Indeed, the alienating disjunction posed by Lacan between the ego and the subject of the unconscious is homologous with the Freudian distinction between the ego and the id. Underlining precisely this homology, Lacan notes that the German "*Es*" is audible as the initial letter of the French "*sujet*." What is less recognizably Freudian is Lacan's contention that the desire of this *Es-sujet* is sustained and circuited by means of the structures of language. The Lacanian subject is "strung along" by the unfolding of the chain of signifiers; its very being is conditioned by the organization of a linguisitic code. Lacan's innovation here is to introduce the influence of linguistic structure on the level of primary process, to insist that even the most ostensibly primitive functions of the drives are subject to the formative effects of a symbolic order. As he puts it, with every intention to provoke:

> If what Freud discovered with a perpetually increasing sense of shock has a meaning, it is that the displacement of the signifier

> determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindnesses, in their end and in their fate, their innate gifts and social acquisitions notwithstanding, without regard for character or sex, and that, willingly or not, everything that might be considered the stuff of psychology, kit and caboodle, will follow the path of the signifier.[19]

If the first great lodestar of Lacanian psychoanalysis is a distinctive conception of the signifier, the second, equally unfamiliar to orthodox Freudians, is the concept of the Other. For Lacan, the unconscious is "the discourse of the Other." Human desire is "the desire of the Other." It is difficult to overestimate the importance for Lacan of this reference to the Other. Directly or indirectly, everything in Lacanian theory is bound up with it. Lacan's entire effort is aimed at raising it as a question: "Who, then, is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who agitates me?" (E:S, 172).

One of the primary objectives of the following discussions is to clarify the meaning of these Lacanian innovations and to assess their value in close readings of Freud's own text. But we cannot fail to be struck at the outset by the magnitude of the challenge. Indeed, in reading Lacan, one can often feel that Lacan's claim of fidelity to Freud rings somewhat hollow. The Lacanian turn to language seems closer to Ferdinand de Saussure or Claude Lévi-Strauss than to Freud. Lacan's evocation of the Other appears less Freudian than Hegelian. Does Lacan really return to Freud's theory or does he reinvent it altogether? The question seems especially pressing for our aim of reevaluating Freud's metapsychology and its pivotal concept of energetics. For what could be more foreign to Lacan than Freud's appeal to energetics? Isn't the hallmark of a Lacanian psychoanalysis the emphasis on form over force? Does the Lacanian algebra of the signifier not render Freud's energetic metaphor more obsolete than ever? As Lacan puts the question to analysts: "*[H]ave you ever, for a single moment, the feeling that you are handling the clay of instinct?*" (FFC, 126). Yet the concept of psychical energy and the drive theory that springs from it form the conceptual spine of Freud's metapsychology. No effort to reconsider the meaning of the metapsychology can ignore it. What, then, is the place of energetics in the context of Lacan's claim that the unconscious is structured like a language?

Along the course of our inquiry, we will have to provide an answer to this question. Yet to do so, we must be prepared to traverse a broad terrain of theory. In what follows, I will argue that what makes Lacan's "return" possible is Freud's complex relation to himself, the way in which Freud's invention of psychoanalysis allowed him to glimpse something that Freud himself could not fully articulate. And nowhere is this inchoate dimension of Freud's thought more palpable than in his metapsychology. Like the dreams he analyzed, the manifest terms of Freud's metapsychology conceal a latent content that can be brought to light only by transposition into concepts Freud didn't possess. The primary task of this book is to trace some of the main lines of that transposition. All the more appropriate, then, to begin by taking our bearings with respect to a point that lies outside the psychoanalytic field altogether.