

Bruce Fink
The Subject as Metaphor

Lacan's short text, "*La Métaphore du Sujet*,"¹ contains a metaphor in its very title. While it could be rendered in a number of different ways in different contexts, the context here seems to imply that the Lacanian subject can be understood as resulting from a metaphor. Just as Lacan constructs the paternal metaphor in "On a Question Preliminary to any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," providing a new signification--that of paternity--Lacan seems to suggest here that another metaphor can be constructed (though Lacan does not appear to supply it here, nor does he even say this in so many words) providing, for each new child who comes along, a new signification--that of subjectivity.²

Yet the claim here seems more radical, requiring not simply that the signification of the subject result from metaphor, but the subject too. And this is related, it seems to me, to the shift in Lacan's concept of the subject from 1956 to 1961: from a stage of theorization in which the subject is viewed almost exclusively as a signified or signification--the subject of castration (a subject alienated in, taken up into, absorbed by meaning)--and a later stage in which the subject is essentially divided, including two moments: the subject as signified ("dead" meaning resulting from castration) and the subject as breach³ between two signifiers (as a spark jumping from one signifier to another, creating a connection between them). This twofold notion of the subject is nicely embodied in the expression "precipitation of subjectivity," found in as early a work as "Logical Time and the Assertion of Subjective Certainty" (1946)⁴, where we find the subject as both precipitate and "headlong movement."

The more radical claim contained within the title thus seems to be that the subject surges forth between two signifiers just as "metaphor's creative spark . . . flashes between two signifiers"⁵ in the

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process of metaphorization. In other words, metaphor's creative spark is the subject--metaphor creates the subject. Every metaphorical effect is then an effect of subjectivity (and vice-versa). There is no such thing as a metaphor without subjective participation; and there is no subjectification without metaphorization.

Lacan's title *could* be understood as suggesting that the concept of the subject, i.e. the very term "subject," is but a metaphor. But as opposed to what? a "serious" concept? What concept is not a metaphor at the outset? It seems to me that the translations with quotes--The Metaphor of the "Subject" or The "Subject" as Metaphor--need not be retained.

The title can be usefully understood as The Metaphor that is the Subject, the subject thus being seen to consist in a metaphor, in metaphor's creative spark. For the subject has no permanence or persistence, coming into being as a spark flying between two signifiers. What the title would then add to Lacan's famous ritornello--the subject is what one signifier represents for another signifier--is that subjectivity, like metaphor, involves a quadripartite structure ("*double coude de la métaphore*"⁶--metaphor's double articulation, each articulation involving two elements). In this sense, the metaphor in the title corresponds to what Grigg⁷ refers to as an appositive metaphor.

The metaphor of the subject or subject metaphor would, however, in Grigg's terms, be of the substitutional type, the only type which results in metaphoric meaning. To paraphrase

Lacan's closing remarks in 'Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,' if the subject is a metaphor, it is not a metaphor to say so. And if the symptom is also a metaphor, are not symptom and subject one and the same?

The End of Analysis: Creation of a New Metaphor

The end of analysis can be viewed, in Lacan's theory, as requiring that a new metaphor be forged. For each new metaphor brings with it a precipitation of subjectivity which can alter the subject's position--what else appears in the place of the question mark in the following metaphor⁸ than the subject as signified (by one signifier to another)?

$$\frac{\text{an ocean}}{\text{learning}} \text{ of } \frac{\text{false}}{x} \rightarrow \text{an ocean} \left(\frac{1}{?} \right)$$

--and, given that the symptom itself is a metaphor, the creation of

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a new metaphor in the course of analysis brings about not the dissolution of ail symptoms, but rather the reconfiguration of the symptom, the creation of a new symptom, or a modified subjective position with respect to the symptom.

The Subject as Signified

A new metaphor brings new meaning into the world. It alters the subject as meaning. But what is meaning in the Lacanian scheme of things? What exactly is it that metaphor creates, that metaphor affects, modifies?

What is the signified but what are commonly referred to as thoughts or ideas? And what are thoughts but specific combinations of signifiers? signifiers strung together in a particular way. When you "grasp" the meaning of something someone says, what goes on other than a situating of the statement in the context of other statements, thoughts, terms? To understand means to locate or embed one configuration of signifiers within another. In most cases it is as non-conscious a process as one could desire, requiring no action on the part of a subject: things fall into place within the web of multifarious connections among the thoughts already "assimilated."

When something "makes sense" to you, is anything else involved? Something makes sense when it fits into the pre-existing chain. It may add something to the chain without fundamentally altering it or rocking the boat.

Metaphor, on the other hand, brings about a new configuration of thoughts, establishing a new combination or permutation, a new *order* in the signifying chain, a shakedown of the old order. Connections between signifiers are "definitively" changed. That kind of modification cannot occur without subjective participation. Why not? Because it is not a question of "simple" metonymic displacement from one term to another, but rather of substitution? That merely pushes the question back one step further

It is precisely insofar as understanding, as I said above, involves nothing more than situating one configuration of signifiers within another that Lacan is so adamant about refusing to understand, about striving to defer understanding, because everything is, in the process of understanding, brought back to the level of the status quo. Why is Lacan's writing so full of extravagant, preposterous, and mixed metaphors⁹, if not precisely to jolt one out of the easy

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reductionism inherent in the very process of understanding. As opposed to the considerable attention that has been devoted to the process by certain German thinkers,¹⁰ in Lacan's framework, "*verstehen*" might as well be translated "assimilation." Thus the gist of Lacan's claim that meaning (meaning as what you imagine you have understood) is imaginary: by assimilating something, you have the sense of being, you imagine yourself as someone (an ego) who has accomplished a certain difficult task, you imagine yourself as a thinker, whereas "true understanding" (which could perhaps be rendered in French using the expression *se saisir de quelque chose*, the emphasis being on the reflexive) is actually a process which goes beyond the automatic functioning of the symbolic order, involving an incursion of the symbolic into the real: the signifier as bringing forth something new in the real, or as draining off more of the real into the symbolic.

"True understanding" is, of course, a misnomer, in that understanding is precisely short circuited, unnecessary, irrelevant to the process: what is really implied is that something changes, and that is the point of Lacanian analysis as well (which is why Lacan's very writing style attempts to have some of the effects of the analytic process itself), something takes place at the border of the symbolic and the real, which has nothing to do with understanding, as it is commonly understood. Hence the irrelevance of the term "insight" in the analytic process, and why the analysand's subjective frustration at not understanding what is going on, how the analytic process is supposed to work, what is really at the bottom of his or her neurosis, etc. in no way hinders the efficacy of psychoanalysis.

The Passage of the Signifier into the Signified

The realms of the signifier and the signified are not as antinomic as they may seem at first glance, for the signified is in fact made up of signifiers, but those signifiers are chained together, "enchained" as it were. Their bonds constitute a type of impossibility: an impossibility to circulate from one signifier to another without following the bridges already existing among the signifiers. Stated differently, the signified, containing within itself the impossibilities inherent in the symbolic order, can be understood as real. In that sense it takes over the reality Saussure ascribed to the signified: not the real of the object (the thing in itself, the object out there, objective reality), but the materiality of our linguistic apparatus.

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The passage, in metaphor, of a signifier into the signified, shakes up the signified, alters the signified, and thus changes what constitutes the real for us. Hence its titillating, jouissance effect. It "releases" some of the jouissance "stored" in the letter.

It changes the signified and thus changes one of the faces of the subject: the split subject of castration under the bar. But it is also associated with a subject effect: an instance of subjectification.

Footnotes

1. *Ecrits*, Seuil, 1966, pps. 889-892; cf. my translation in this issue of *NFF*
2. The importance of metaphor in Lacan's work can, in part, be gauged by considering the following: 1) in *Seminar III*, Chapters 17 and 18 introduce the material developed in the *Ecrits*, showing the *substitution* of the father's name for the mother's desire to be the linchpin of the Oedipus Complex, the institution of the unconscious, and the very foundation of subjectivity; 2) in *Seminar IV*, the case of little Hans is formalized, during the entire third quarter of the year, as a failed paternal metaphor (the only thing able to take the place of the mother's desire being the signifier "horse"); 3) in *Seminar V* the construction of the graph of desire begins with a kind of metaphor--the word '*famillionaire*'; 4) in *Seminar VIII* love is expounded as a metaphor, *eromenos* coming to be there where *erastes* was; 5) in the *Ecrits*, three articles explicitly deal with metaphor: "Agency of the Letter", "On a Question Preliminary to any Possible Treatment of Psychosis", and "Metaphor of the Subject".
3. See my article on "The Lacanian Subject", *Analysis*, **3**, 1992.
4. *Ecrits* and *NFF*, **2**, 1988.
5. *Ecrits*, p. 507.
6. *Ecrits*, p. 518.
7. Cf. Russell Grigg's fine article in *NFE* 3, 1989.
8. One clue to Lacan's discussion of this metaphor may lie in the variety of French spellings one could provide for "ocean": *océan*, *ô céans* (*céans* deriving from old French *ça* "it" or "id" and *enz*, "inside", reminding us perhaps even of *ens privativum* from *Seminar IX*, *Identification*, 2/28/62), *ôseant*, *ô seyant*, etc.
9. Consider just this one example from "Metaphor of the Subject", which I have tried to translate as I could: "*La cathédrale engloutie de ce qui s'est enseigné jusque-la concernant la matiere, ne résonnera sans doute encore pas en vain a nos oreilles de se réduire a l'altérnance de cloche sourde et sonore par où la phrase nous pénètre lear-ning, lear-ning, mais ce n'est pas du fond d'une nappe liquide, mais de la fallace de ses propres arguments.*"
10. E.g., Max Weber; consider also the very title of critical theorist O'Neill's *Making Sense Together*, a clear contradiction in terms given that the essence of communication is misunderstanding.