

Bruce Fink

**"There's No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship"
Existence and the Formulas of Sexuation¹**

" . . . l'être parlant - ce qui est un pléonasme,
parce qu'il n'y a d'être que de parler s'il n'y avait
pas le verbe être, il n'y aurait pas d'être du tout"
(Sem. XXI, *Les non-dupes errent*, January 15, 1974).

" . . . what we cannot speak about we must
pass over in silence", Wittgenstein, *Tractatus
Logico-Philosophicus* (Routledge & Kegan
Paul, New York, 1961, p. 151).

"Si quelque chose existe à quelque chose, c'est très
précisément de n'y être pas couplé, d'en être
"troisé", Si vous me permettez ce néologisme
(Sem. XXI, *Les non-dupes errent*, March 19, 1974).

The Buddhist logician, Nagarjuna, when talking about something close to our interests as students of psychoanalysis--nirvana (related in Freud's work to the pleasure principle and in Lacan's to jouissance)--wrote:

3. Nirvana has been said to be neither eliminated nor attained,
neither annihilated nor eternal,
Neither disappeared nor originated.
4. Nirvana is certainly not an existing thing, for then it would
be characterized by old age and death.
In consequence it would involve the error that an existing thing would not become old
and be without death.
5. And if nirvana is an existing thing, nirvana would be a
constructed product (*samskrta*),
Since never ever has an existing thing been found to be a non-constructed-product
(*asamskrta*)

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17. It is not expressed if the Glorious One [the Buddha] exists after his death,
Or does not exist, or both or neither.
18. Also, it is not expressed if the Glorious One exists while remaining [in the world],
Or does not exist, or both or neither.
24. . . . No *dharma* [element, factor, truth] anywhere has been taught by the Buddha of
anything.²

According to Nagarjuna, Buddha never said anything about nirvana. Nirvana cannot be affirmed to *exist* as *nothing can be said of nirvana*. Yet it clearly plays an important role in

Buddhism. While all worldly pursuits are discredited and all desires are to be extinguished, nirvana nevertheless has a certain moment or weight.

Now what is the relationship between the paradoxical status of nirvana in Buddhism and Lacan's claims that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship? that Woman does not exist? that the Other *jouissance* cannot be said to exist?

In Buddhist logic, it is not simply nirvana that is claimed not to exist: every thing succumbs to the same fate. Like many other philosophers of his time (c. 200 A.D.), Nagarjuna set out to show the vanity of language, the absurdity of all our categories, and the enormity of all assertions.³ A similar concern was expressed by Greek and Roman skeptics who employed sophistic argumentation to show the vanity of all theories, the indefensibility of all assertions, and thus the worthlessness of human reason. Both the Buddhists and skeptics resorted to indifference to all things and non-attachment as the answer to this conundrum. The essential point made by both schools can be translated very simply in Lacanian terms: the Other is lacking, nothing guarantees the veracity of our statements, language lies, there is no absolute knowledge, the Other is barred (§).⁴

The upshot of Buddhism and skepticism is that we can affirm neither the existence nor the non-existence of anything. Language is so untrustworthy as a tool for thought that nothing at all can be said to exist or not exist.

Priority of Reality

As radical as this perspective may seem, it nevertheless begins with some sort of supposed external reality to which our language might or might not correspond, the skeptic's view being either that it

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ultimately does not correspond, or that we can't know whether or not it corresponds. In other words, Buddhism and skepticism seem nevertheless to ascribe to the correspondence theory of truth, an epistemological view that has been near and dear to so many philosophers throughout history. Reality is out there; language and science must try to correspond to it (in French the term is *adequation*, implying that the language we use to talk about reality should be adequate, should adequately describe what is really out there). Reality is thus logically prior.

Reality —→ Language

The skeptic's view is that different languages do not divide up reality in different ways, as Saussure would have it, for we have no guarantee that language corresponds to reality at all. While truth, to the skeptic, consists by definition in such a perfect correspondence, the problem is that, in the absence of any guarantee, truth remains inaccessible.

Priority of Language

Lacan's view is that the correspondence theory of truth puts the epistemological cart before the horse. For language is what determines reality. Things only *exist* insofar as we can talk about

them, insofar as our symbolic order names them and creates a space for them. Words bring things into being. In order for something to exist, it must be speakable, articulable in words. Thus our universe of discourse--our linguistic horizon defines what exists. *La paix du soir* (the peacefulness of the evening) exists for a French speaking subject, has a kind of existential weight in the world, whereas for a non-French-speaking subject it has none.⁵

Language —————> Reality

It is through the act of naming that something comes into being. In a sense it *was not* before; it did not exist. Naming cuts into the real--a sort of unhewn, undifferentiated stuff--and makes away with part of it. Metaphorically speaking, it drains away part of the real, bringing it into language, thereby killing it in a sense, yet at the same time bringing it into being for us in the form of signifiers, words we can talk with.

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Existence and Ex-sistence

N'existe que ce qui peut se dire. N'ex-iste que ce qui peut s'écrire.

When Lacan says of the Other *jouissance* experienced by certain people that it does not exist, he means that *it does not have a place in our symbolic universe*, it cannot be spoken, it is ineffable. In Seminar XX, *Encore*, Lacan associates that Other *jouissance* with saints and their mystical rapture. Consider the following passage from St. John of the Cross:

I Entered I Know Not Where

I entered I know not where
and stayed not knowing
all science transcending.

I knew not where I entered
but when there I saw myself
without knowing where I was
I understood many things;
I will not say what I felt
for I stayed not knowing
all science transcending.

In peace and pity
the science was perfected
in profound solitude
understood directly;
it was something so secret
that I stayed stammering

all science transcending.

I was so penetrated
so absorbed, so enraptured
that my sense remained
of all feeling denuded,
and my spirit endowed

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of an understanding without understanding
all science transcending.

He who truly arrives there
fades from himself
all that he knew before
utterly vile seems it
and his science waxes as
he stays unknowing
all science transcending. . . .⁶

Saint John of the Cross' experience is beyond words, beyond articulation, beyond expression in a language communicable to others.⁷ Now Lacan, in discussing the Other jouissance, asserts that certain people experience it and that it nevertheless has no place in the world of discourse. Strictly speaking, it does not exist. For existence is directly related to articulation. (Lacan expresses this view more or less unchangingly from Seminar I on.)

What, then, is the status of this Other jouissance that cannot be asserted to exist? In the 1970s, Lacan claims that it "ex-ists": it plays a role through its insistence, as it were, from outside (the symbolic order). Not only is this Other jouissance experienced due to an incursion of/from the real, but it can, moreover, be written. While it cannot be articulated or described, it can be "inscribed," formulated in quasi-logical/mathematical terms: $\overline{\forall x} \Phi x$. I will discuss Lacan's "formulas" or mathemes at length further on, but the all-important distinction between existence as having a place in the symbolic order and ex-istence as issuing and insisting from some other place (the real) will serve us as a key to understanding Lacan's radical claim regarding relationships between the sexes.

"THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP"

"L'être sexué ne s'autorise que de lui-même"
(Sem. XXI, *Les non-dupes errent*, April 9, 1974).⁸

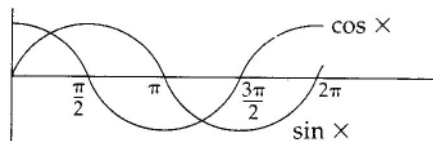
One of Lacan's main concerns for many years was to account for why things don't seem to work out between men and women; as an analyst, he listened all day long, year in and year out, to people

complaining about their relationships, their sex lives, their boyfriends, girlfriends, lovers, and spouses. He summed up his conclusion, in the mid- to late sixties, with one of those bombshell expressions for which he is so well known: "there's no such thing as a sexual relationship" (*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*).⁹

The French wording is ambiguous in that *rappports sexuels* can be used to refer simply to sexual intercourse. If a French M.D. asks you "*Avez-vous des rappports sexuels*," he's asking you whether or not you are "sleeping with" or "having sex" with anyone, both of these being well-known euphemisms in English for talking about coitus. Nevertheless, Lacan was not asserting that people aren't having sex--a ridiculous claim to say the least; his use of the word *rappport* here suggests a more "abstract" realm of ideas: relation, relationship, proportion, ratio, fraction, etc.

There is, according to Lacan, *no direct relationship* between men and women insofar as they are men and women. In other words, they do not "interact" with each other as man to woman and woman to man. Something gets in the way of their having any such relationship; something skews their interactions.

We might think that we would have something along the lines of a relationship between men and women if we could define them in terms of one another, if 2 times man were equal to woman ($2M = W$), for example, or if they could be defined in terms of a simple complementary inversion like activity/passivity (Freud's version, albeit unsatisfactory even to his mind). We might even imagine associating masculinity with a sine curve and femininity with a cosine curve, for that would allow us to formulate something we might take to be a sexual relationship as follows: $\sin^2 x + \cos^2 x = 1$.



The advantage of this particular formula is that it seems to account, in a very graphic way, for what Freud says in describing the different kinds of things men and women are looking for from each other: "one forms the impression that the love of man and the love of woman are separated by a psychological phase-difference." Here, despite the apparent heterogeneity of the masculine and

feminine curves, despite their phase-lag, we would be able to combine them in such a way as to make them equal one. But according to Lacan, no such equation is possible: nothing which would qualify as a true relationship between the sexes can be written.

There is nothing *complementary* about their relationship (as one might have reckoned from a formula like $x^2 + y^2 = 1$, where $x = \text{woman}$ and $y = \text{man}$), nor is there a simple inverse relationship or some kind of parallelism between them. Rather, *each sex is defined separately with respect to a third term*. Thus there is only a non-relationship, an absence of any conceivable direct relationship between the sexes themselves.

Lacan sets out to show (1) that the sexes are defined separately and differently, and (2) that their partners are neither symmetrical nor overlapping. Men and women are not defined in accordance with biological distinctions: the point is not to describe or formalize the characteristics of those people who would be classified by a biologist as either male or female. Lacan begins to explore a strictly psychoanalytic approach to defining men and women in Seminar XVIII, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, and continues doing so into the mid-1970s.

This is a task of truly historic proportions, for few serious attempts have been made in the past to define the sexes in anything but biomedical/genetic terms. Lacan's attempt may at first seem needlessly complex and to include a great deal of "extraneous material" of Freudian origin; one must keep in mind, however, that Lacan was inventing as he developed this new way of distinguishing between the sexes, and didn't necessarily always have a crystal clear idea of where he was going. I will attempt first to briefly explain the main outlines of his theory, only then proceeding to a discussion of the mathemes which may pose a serious obstacle to certain readers at the outset.¹⁰

Distinguishing Between the Sexes

According to Lacan, men and women are defined differently with respect to language, i.e. with respect to the symbolic order. Just as Lacan's contribution to the understanding of neurosis and psychosis suggests that the latter involves a part of the symbolic that is foreclosed and returns in the real whereas the former does not, masculinity and femininity are defined as different kinds of relations

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to the symbolic order, different ways of being split by language. His formulas of sexuation thus concern only neurotic subjects: men and women are, psychoanalytically speaking, always neurotic; they differ in the ways in which they are alienated by/within the symbolic order.

Men

Men are wholly alienated within language. Lacan puts it in a somewhat different way: men are wholly determined by the "phallic function." I will tentatively identify the phallic function here with symbolic castration, not to be confused with real castration, the loss of the male sexual organ: symbolic castration is basically tantamount to what happens to a human being upon entering the world of language, his or her alienation within language, language always saying something other than what one wants it to mean, something more than one intends, or something less than one would like. Thus castration here refers to the alienation of human desire that is due to the very fact that we are forced to express our desires in words, or rather that desire itself forms within and by means of a language we have not ourselves invented, i.e. which we have learned from others, and are obliged to use because others use it and understand little else. That is what I'll take castration to mean for the time being, and the phallic function refers to the castration brought about by our use of language, i.e. by our use of signifiers.

Lacan's major point about men can thus be expressed in a variety of ways:

- Men are wholly alienated within language.
- A man is altogether subject to symbolic castration.
- A man is completely determined by the phallic function.

Despite then the infinite permutations allowed by language in the constitution of desire, man can be seen as bounded or finite with respect to the symbolic register. Translated in terms of desire, the boundary is the father and his incest taboo: man's desire never goes beyond the incestuous wish, impossible to realize, as that would involve overstepping the father's boundaries, and thus uprooting the very "anchoring point" of neurosis *le nom du père*--the father's name, but also *le non du père*, the father's "No!" (*nom* and *non* being homonyms in French). This is where it appears quite clear that masculine structure is in many respects synonymous in Lacan's work with obsessive neurosis.

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Linguistically speaking, man's limit is that which institutes the symbolic order itself, that first signifier (S_1)--the father's "No!"--which is the point of origin of the signifying chain that is language and which is involved in primal repression: the institution of the unconscious and of a place for the neurotic subject.

Man's pleasure is similarly limited, its boundaries being determined by the phallic function. His pleasures are limited to those allowed by the play of the signifier itself--to what Lacan calls phallic *jouissance*, and to what might similarly be called symbolic *jouissance*. Men's fantasies are tied to that aspect of the real that underwrites, as it were, the symbolic order: object (a). Object (a) keeps the symbolic moving in the same circuitous paths, in constant *avoidance* of the real.¹¹ There is, in the male camp, a kind of symbiosis between subject and object, between symbolic and real, as long as the proper distance is maintained.

Women

While men are defined as being wholly hemmed in by the phallic function, wholly under the sway of the law of the signifier, women are defined as *not* being wholly hemmed in. A woman is not split in the same way as a man: though alienated, she is not altogether subject to the symbolic order. The phallic function, while operative in her case, does not reign absolutely. With respect to the symbolic order, a woman is not whole, bounded, or limited.

Whereas men's pleasure is altogether determined by the signifier, women's is partially determined by the signifier, but not wholly. While men are limited to what Lacan calls phallic *jouissance*, women can experience both that *and* another kind of *jouissance*, which he calls the Other *jouissance*. Not that every subject who can be situated in the women's camp experiences it --far from it, as is so often attested--but it is, according to Lacan, a structural potentiality

What is that Other *jouissance* of which those who, psychoanalytically speaking, are to be classified as women are capable? The very fact that Lacan spells "Other" with a capital O here indicates the Other *jouissance's* connection with the signifier, but it is connected with S_1 not S_2 --not with "just any" signifier, but with the "Other signifier" (to coin a phrase): the unary signifier. Whereas S_1 (the father's "No!") functions for a man as a limit to his range of motion and pleasures, S_1 is an elective "partner" for a

woman, her relationship to it allowing her to step beyond the boundaries set by language, and beyond the pittance of pleasure language allows. An endpoint for men, it serves as an open door for women. (The difficulty one encounters in attempting to characterize the Other jouissance in any more concrete way stems from the very ineffability and inaccessibility of S_1 *qua* point of origin that cannot be directly grasped in any articulable, discursive way).

Feminine structure proves that the phallic function has its limits, and that the signifier isn't everything. Feminine structure thus bears the closest affinities to hysteria as defined in the hysteric's discourse (cf. Sem. XVII, *L'Envers de la psychanalyse*, on the four discourses).

Beyond Biology

Lacan's way of defining man and woman has nothing to do with biology. We have probably all encountered male hysterics and female obsessive compulsives. A male hysteric has, if my interpretation of Lacan is correct here, a feminine structure: he may potentially experience both phallic and the Other jouissance.

From a clinical vantage point, a great many people who biologically speaking would be considered female turn out to have masculine structure, and a great many people who biologically speaking would be considered male prove to have feminine structure. Part of an analyst's training must thus consist in breaking old habits of thought whereby one immediately assumes that a female is an hysteric and thereby can be characterized as having feminine structure. Each person's relation to the signifier and mode of jouissance has to be examined more carefully; one cannot jump to conclusions on the basis of biological sex.¹²

The fact that so many people cross over the hard and fast biological distinctions perhaps explains, in part, the widespread use in America of the category "borderline." It is often precisely those patients who cross those boundaries who are diagnosed by psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and psychologists as borderline.

Lacan's distinctive way of defining masculinity and femininity shows why there is no such thing as a relationship between the sexes, but this point must await clarification until man's partner and woman's partners are articulated in more detail below

THE FORMULAS OF SEXUATION

In Seminar XX, *Encore*, Lacan provides a schema, part of which he had been working on for years, and part of which he claims to have whipped up in a flash the very morning before he first drew it on the board at his seminar.

Men	Women
$\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$	$\overline{\exists x \Phi x}$
$\forall x \Phi x$	$\overline{\forall x \Phi x}$
S Φ	$S(A)$ $L\alpha$

I'll begin my interpretation of this schema by commenting on several passages from *Encore*.

Masculine Structure

"We'll start with the four propositional formulas at the top of the table, two of which lie to the left, the other two to the right. Every speaking being situates him or herself on one side or the other. On the left, the lower line-- $\forall x \Phi x$ --indicates that it is through the phallic function that man **as whole** can be situated.¹³

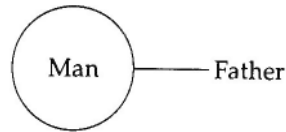
The formula $\forall x \Phi x$ thus means that *the whole of a man falls under the phallic function* (x standing for any given subject or part thereof, Φx for the phallic function as applicable to that subject or part, and $\forall x$ for the whole of x).¹⁴ To paraphrase this formula, man is altogether determined by symbolic castration, i.e. every bit of him falls under the sway of the signifier: no part escapes the law inherent therein. Returning to the quote, we see that there is an exception however:

". . . man **as whole** can be situated [as determined by the phallic function], with the proviso that this function is limited due to the existence of an x by which the function Φx is denied:

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$\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$. That is what is known as the father's function . . . The whole here is thus based on the exception--the exception posited as the term that altogether negates Φx ."

Man can be considered as a whole, because there is something that delimits him ($\exists x$, there exists some x [some subject or part thereof] such that Φx , the phallic function, is foreclosed). It should be pointed out immediately that Lacan was extremely interested in set theory, and that set theory is directly concerned with problems related to the part and the whole. Man can be taken as a whole because there is a definable boundary to his set:



It must be kept in mind that Lacan's work on sexual difference is based on and coextensive with his reworking of traditional logic in terms of his own logic of the signifier. A signifier never stands alone. We would never talk about black if there were no question of white, ie. no cases in which black was not found. It is because something other than black shows up on occasion that black takes on meaning. It is in opposition to white that the word black has meaning. While Lacan uses the language of the theory of classes in the early sixties, he continues to develop the same idea in the early seventies in terms of his own unique use of classical logic's symbols: in *L'Etourdit*, for example, he says that "there is no universal statement which can but be controlled through an existence which negates it" (*Scilicet* 4, p. 7). In other words, *every universal claim is grounded in the ex-istence of an exception which proves the rule*, to paraphrase a well known French maxim.¹⁵

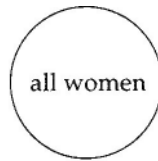
Man's essence (as wholly, universally defined by the phallic function) thus necessarily implies the existence of the father. Without the father, man would be nothing, without form (*informe*). Now the father as boundary (to pursue the simile) occupies no area: he defines a two-dimensional surface within his boundaries, but fills no space. This father who marks the limit of a man's manhood is not just any old father: Lacan associates him with the primal father presented in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*--the father of the primal horde who has not succumbed to castration and supposedly

controls every single woman in the horde. While all men are marked by symbolic castration, there nonetheless exists or persists one man to whom the phallic function does not apply, one man who was never put into his place by succumbing to symbolic castration. He is not subject to the law: *he is his own law*.

Does this primal father, seemingly asserted to exist in Lacan's upper formula for masculine structure ($\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$) exist in the usual sense? No, he ex-ists: the phallic function is not simply negated in some mild sense in his case, it is foreclosed (Lacan indicates that the bar of negation over the quantifier stands for discordance, whereas the bar of negation over the phallic function stands for foreclosure); and foreclosure implies the utter and complete exclusion of something from the symbolic register. As it is only that which is *not foreclosed* from the symbolic order that can be said to exist, existence going hand in hand with language, the primal father--implying such a foreclosure--must ex-ist, standing outside of symbolic castration. We obviously have a name for him, and thus in a sense he exists within our symbolic order; on the other hand his very definition implies a rejection of that order, and thus by definition he ex-ists. His status is problematic, and Lacan might have qualified him as extimate back in the 1950s: excluded from within. He can, however, be said to ex-ist because, like object (a), the primal father can be written: $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$.

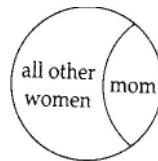
Now the mythical father of the primal horde is said not to have succumbed to castration, and what is symbolic castration but a limit or limitation? He thus knows no limits: according to

Lacan, the primal father lumps all women into the same category: accessible. The set of *all* women exists for him and for him alone.



His mother and sisters are just as much fair game as are his neighbors and second cousins. The effect of castration is to divide that mythical set into at least two categories: accessible and inaccessible. Castration brings about an exclusion: mom and sis are off-limits.

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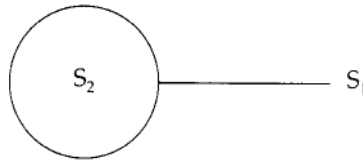
But castration also changes a man's relation to even those women who remain accessible: they become defined in a sense as simply not off-limits. In *Encore*, Lacan says that a man could only really "*jouir d'une femme*" from the position of non-castration. *Jouir d'une femme* means to get off on a woman, to really enjoy her, to take full advantage of her, the implication being that one's pleasure really comes from her, not from something one imagines her to be, wants her to be, fools oneself into believing she is or has, or what have you. Only the primal father can really get off on women themselves. Ordinary masculine mortals must resign themselves to getting off on their partner, object (a).

So only the mythical primal father can have a true sexual relationship *with* a woman. To him there is such a thing. Every other man has a "relationship" with object (a)--to wit, fantasy--not with a woman *per se*.

The fact that every single man is nevertheless defined by both formulas--one stipulating that he is altogether castrated and the other that some instance negates or refuses castration--shows that incestuous wishes live on indefinitely in the unconscious: every man, despite castration (that splitting up of the category of women into two distinct groups), continues to have incestuous dreams in which he has the privileges of the imagined pleasure-finding father who knows no bounds.¹⁶

Speaking in *quantitative* terms for a moment, Lacan can also be seen to be saying here that while there was once upon a time an exception to the rule of castration, you can be absolutely sure now, whenever you meet a man, that he is castrated. So you can safely say that all people who are men, not in biological terms, but rather in psychoanalytic terms, are castrated. But while men are wholly castrated, there is nevertheless a contradiction: that ideal of non-castration--of knowing no boundaries, no limitations--lives on somewhere, somehow in each and every man.

Masculine structure can, to modify the first graphic illustration provided above, be depicted as follows:



S_2 corresponding to $\forall x \Phi x$, and standing for the son here, and S_1 corresponding to $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ and standing for the father.

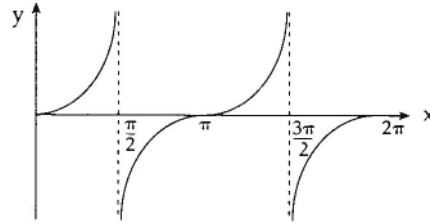
This partial presentation of the formulas of sexuation should already make it clear to what an extent Lacan's discussion of them is multilayered, involving logical, Freudian, and linguistic material. His explicit work on these formulas dates back at least as far as Sem. XVIII, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* 1970-1971), and continues almost uninterruptedly into the mid-1970s (Sem. XXI, *Les non-dupes errent*).

Feminine Structure

As for the two formulas defining femininity, we find firstly ($\overline{\forall x \Phi x}$) that *not all* of a person who, regardless of anatomy, psychoanalytically speaking falls into the women's camp is defined by the phallic function: not all of a woman falls under the law of the signifier ($\overline{\forall x}$, not the whole of x [a given subject], or not every part of x , such that Φx , the phallic function, applies to x). Lacan does not put it positively by stating, for example, that *some part of every woman* escapes the reign of the phallus; he leaves it as a possibility not a necessity, but a possibility that is nevertheless decisive in the determination of sexual structure.

The second formula ($\overline{\exists x \Phi x}$) states that you cannot find even one woman for whom the phallic function is totally inoperative: every woman is *at least in part* determined by the phallic function ($\overline{\exists x}$, there doesn't exist even one x [a subject or part thereof] such that Φx , the phallic function, is inapplicable to it). This is a reminder again that whereas classical logic is primarily concerned with all and some, Lacan's logic is radically different, and adopts a good

deal of the language of set theory insofar as it refers to parts and wholes.¹⁷ Were the phallic function to be *totally* inoperative for a subject, he or she would be psychotic. The kind of image I find useful in illustrating the two formulas for feminine structure is the tangent curve



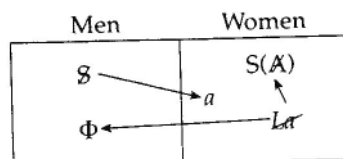
where, at $\pi/2$, the curve goes right off the map and then mysteriously reappears on the other side. We can attribute no real value to it, and are forced to resort to expressions like the value of y approaches positive infinity as x goes to $\pi/2$ from 0, approaching negative infinity as x goes from π to $\pi/2$; no one really knows how the two meet up, but we adopt a system of symbols with which to talk about it. The status of this Other jouissance, experienceable by those who fall into the feminine category, is akin to that of the value of the tangent curve at $\pi/2$. It goes right off the scale, right off the nice neat map of representation. Its status is akin to that of a logical exception, a case which throws into question the whole.

The formula $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ summarizes, in a sense, the fact that while not all of a woman is determined by the phallic function ($\forall x \Phi x$), to assert the *existence* of some part of her that rejects the phallic function (i.e. to write $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$) would amount to claiming that something that says no to the phallic function is nevertheless subject to it, situated within the symbolic order--for to exist is to have a place within the symbolic register. Which is why Lacan never claims that the feminine instance posited to go beyond the phallus *exists*: he maintains its radical alterity in relation to logos, to the symbolic order as structured by the phallus. While denying the *existence* of this "realm beyond the phallus", $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ does not, as we shall see further on, in any way deny its *existence*.¹⁸

Woman is thus not somehow less "complete" than man, for *man is whole only in relation to the phallic Junction*.¹⁹ Women are no less "whole" than men except when considered in terms of the phallic function; women are no more "undefined" or "indefinite" than men except in relation to the phallic function--that inextirpable third term.

Partners?

Consider now the symbols or mathemes, as Lacan calls them, located under the formulas of sexuation: here we see that the *La* crossed out--symbolizing, in one sense, that woman is not whole--while linked (by arrows which indicate Woman's partners) on the one hand to Φ (phi, the phallus) is linked on the other to $S(A)$, the signifier of a lack in the Other (A for *Autre*, Other).



The Phallus: One of ~~Woman's~~ Partners

What is the phallus? The phallus is a signifier that stands for that part of a mother's desire that goes beyond her child. The child notices, much to his or her dismay, that mom is not always present, and that even when she is, her child is not always the center of her attention. She is clearly interested in other things²⁰--people, objects, and activities--and that interest (in something else) is symbolized by the phallus.

The phallus is a signifier: the signifier of desire itself. And insofar as desire is by its very nature in flux, in motion, the phallus might be characterized as the signifier of *the desire for something else*, of the inexhaustibility, the transfinite resourcefulness of desire--in the sense of its permanent *striving towards*, its permanent pursuit of, its state of ever-readiness, alertness, arousal, its unflagging erection. Desire, thus, as both absolute and insatiable.

That signifier occupies a privileged position in the signifying order: when it is operationalized, a child need no longer perceive its mother simply as a demanding Other, but as a desiring Other--an Other thus who is not and cannot be *comblé* (fulfilled, rendered complete) or satisfied by the child alone, but who is instead in search of something else. The mother's desire paves the way for her child's: the one-dimensional field of demand opens up onto a new endless vista: the realm of that inexhaustible, "unpindownable," wild goose chase named desire.

That one signifier allows all of the transformations to which desire is subject to take place: the slippage from one object or

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person to another (metonymy) and the substitution of one object or person for another (metaphor).²¹ Which is tantamount to saying that that one signifier permits the full blossoming of the powers of language. Demand implies a kind of fixity or congealment (demand always being for the same thing) that can only be superseded with the help of this one signifier. Without it, a child is likely to remain caught at the stage of autism. This one signifier is thus, in a sense, the structuring principle of the signifying order itself. There are, nevertheless, *degrees of access* to this signifier; I have argued in a paper on *Hamlet* that the drama in that play turns, according to Lacan, on Hamlet's partial and problematic access to that signifier, which alone would allow for his separation from his mOther.²² The more complete a subject's "accession" to this signifier, the better the articulation of his or her desire, the fuller his or her capacity for action, and the greater his or her separation from the Other in all its avatars: language, mOther, father, state, law, religion, etc.²³

S(A): ~~Woman's~~ Other Partner

Looking back at our table, we see that women, while "coupled," on the one hand, to the phallus, are also inextricably "tripled" (*troisées*) to what points to a lack or hole in the signifying order.

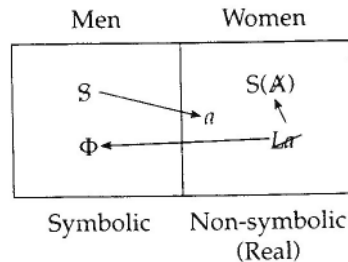
That lack is not simply the lack--directly correlated with desire--that shows that language is ridden with desire and that the Other is lacking, i.e. that one's mother or father, as avatars of the Other, is not complete and thus wants something. For the signifier of that desire-implying lack (or lack-implying-desire) would be the phallic signifier itself.

There is thus another facet of the Other as barred that is brought into play here, and a first gloss might be that of primal repression as the origin or anchoring point of the symbolic order, i.e. the necessary "disappearance" of something so that that from which it disappears can come into being: the exclusion of something from the symbolic order upon which the whole of that order is based. Primal repression consists, according to Lacan, in the abduction of S_1 , the unary signifier--different from all other signifiers--which is not "part" of the symbolic order. Now S_1 and $S(\bar{A})$ are birds of a feather, even though they are not always equated in Lacan's work.

Looking once again at the mathemes in the table, it can be observed that all the elements found under men seem directly related to the symbolic order, while all of those under women,

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while in some way related to the symbolic order, are not properly within it.



Object a is that part of the real around which the symbolic runs circles in an attempt to avoid it, La stands for Woman insofar as she cannot be adequately defined using language, and $S(\bar{A})$ is excluded from the symbolic. In fact, it is not difficult to see that all of the mathemes under women are inscriptions of the real.

Allowing us to say that a woman has, in a sense, a foot in both doors: one of her partners, Φ , is nicely situated in the symbolic, while the other, $S(\bar{A})$, goes beyond the symbolic or is the beyond of the symbolic itself. Φ here can also be equated with S_2 (just any signifier), and $S(\bar{A})$ with S_1 (the Other--or "one and only", i.e. unary--signifier). Man remains confined within the field covered by Φ , his only "access" to the real being via object (a), his partner, which he is only able to find in the woman's camp²⁴; woman's access to the symbolic perhaps requires a relation to the phallus via man, but her access to the real seems more "direct" through S_1 necessitating no recourse whatsoever to man.

A Dissymmetry of Partners

As I indicated earlier, Lacan set out to show (1) that the sexes are defined separately and differently, and (2) that their partners are neither symmetrical nor overlapping. Man's partner, as seen in the above table, is object (a), not a woman as such; object (a) may take the form of a breast, glance, voice, etc. A man may thus get off on something he gets from a woman: a certain way she talks, a certain way she looks at him, etc., but it is only insofar as he has invested her with that precious object that arouses his desire. He may thus

need a (biologically defined) woman as the substratum [*support*], prop, or medium of object (a), but she will never be his partner.

Nor will he ever be hers as such: she may require a (biologically defined) man to embody the phallus for her, but it is the phallus and not the man that will be her partner.²⁵ The break or dissymmetry is even more radical when it comes to her Other partner, $S(\mathbb{A})$ or S_1 , as that partner is not situated in the male camp at all, and thus a woman need have no recourse to a man to "relate" to it. Lacan even goes so far as to say that, while phallic jouissance is sexual, this Other jouissance is asexual. Thus while a woman would have access to sexual (phallic/symbolic) jouissance via Φ , she could also potentially have access to a non-sexual type of jouissance via $S(\mathbb{A})$. Lacan relates this Other jouissance to religious ecstasy, but a discussion of this connection will have to wait for another occasion.

Had men and women's sexual partners turned out to be identical--had, say, object *a* functioned as the sole partner for both of them--at least their desire as sexed beings would be structured in some sort of parallel way, and we could try to envision a sexual relationship between them on that basis. But the dissymmetry of their partners is utter and complete, and no conceivable relationship between the sexes can thus be postulated, articulated, or written in any form whatsoever.

Differential Splitting and Discourse Theory

Men and women are alienated in and by language in radically different ways, as witnessed by their disparate relations to S_1 and S_2 . Which means that, as subjects, they are split differently and *this difference in splitting accounts for sexual difference*.²⁶ Sexual difference stems from men and women's divergent relations to the signifier. This can be stated in quite a number of ways: men and women are castrated differently, men and women are alienated differently, men and women are split differently. It all comes down to the same thing.

Now if splitting is a linguistic operation, there must be differences in the way men and women view, use, and/or embody language. The formula $\overline{\forall x} \Phi x$ (*pas-tout*) suggests that women are not wholly under the sway of language, and yet many of them *are* subject to "hysterical conversion"--psychosomatic pains and paralyses localized in accordance with common conceptions of body parts, rather than with true anatomical considerations.²⁷ What

better proof that women too are ruled by language, and that their bodies are written with signifiers?

And yet there are certain things about men and women's language use or discourse that are rather different. Their divergent discourses can be examined using some later developments in Lacan's algebra where the unary signifier, S_1 came to be identified as the "master signifier," a sort of primordial, isolated signifier that makes its stand alone, calling upon no other signifier to establish its dominance. S_2 came to be associated with knowledge, reason, a sort of stock of all knowledge, useful in rationalization.

Looking at men and women's discourses with these two concepts in mind, we can, for example, view S_1 as the truth of man's discourse: it is, as we saw earlier, a possible translation for $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ (there exists one x , one instance in which the phallic function is inoperative). Everything in man's discourse can be viewed as a desperate attempt to cover over that sore point, that impossible-to-attain ideal position of the master. $\forall x \Phi x$ (for every x , the phallic function is operative) corresponds in a sense to S_2 : man as dominated by the law of the signifier, reason, knowledge, rationality, rationalization. Stated in this way, masculine structure (and obsessive neurosis) seems to correspond to the university discourse, presented by Lacan in Seminars XVII and XX:

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \longrightarrow \frac{a}{S}$$

Father - $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ - S_1

Son - $\forall x \Phi x$ - S_2

S_1 , as it functions in the master's discourse, runs counter to the notion that there is such a thing as reason or truth; will alone prevails: "you'll do what I said because *I said so*." Men would love (unconsciously, for the most part) to find a master to obey, but they would also love to overthrow the master and occupy that position of absolute authority themselves. Hence the quandary. In both cases, however, S_1 is the key.

What about women's use of language? women's discourse? Consider the hysteric's discourse:

$$\frac{S}{a} \longrightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

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Women's discourse is not structured in the same way at all. Women are not in search of rationalizations for S_1 , the master's word. A man takes S_1 for granted. It is the *nec plus ultra*, the ultimate, the endpoint or even navel of his wildest dreams. It is in a sense what holds him together: it's that which makes him whole, as in S_1 he finds his limit or boundary. A woman does not find her limit in S_1 , it is not the be all and end all for her. Rather she sets S_1 at some distance from herself and interrogates it: "so what if you say so!--give me one good reason why I should believe much less obey you!"

Hysterics are the living proof that there is no necessary stopping point in the search for an absolute: a woman may search indefatigably without ever encountering something that can serve the same function as S_1 does for a man. Which can at times function as a source of anxiety and at others as a source of ecstasy.

In the hysteric's discourse, the split subject occupies the dominant position, and addresses itself to S_1 , calling it into question. Whereas the university discourse takes its cue from the master signifier, glossing over it with some sort of trumped up system, the hysteric goes at the master and demands that he show his stuff, that he prove his mettle by producing something serious by way of knowledge. Her discourse is the exact opposite of the university discourse, all the positions being reversed. The hysteric maintains the primacy of subjective division: the contradiction

between conscious and unconscious and thus the conflictual, or self-contradictory nature of desire itself.

In the bottom right-hand corner, a position Lacan variously refers to as product, production or loss, we find knowledge (S_2). This position is also the one where Lacan situates jouissance, the pleasure resulting from a discourse, and Lacan thus suggests here that an hysteric gets off on knowledge. Knowledge is no doubt eroticized to a greater extent in the hysteric's discourse than elsewhere. In the master's discourse, knowledge is prized only insofar as it can produce something else, and yet knowledge itself remains inaccessible to the master; in the university discourse knowledge is not so much an end in itself as that which justifies the academic's very existence and activity. Hysteria thus provides a unique configuration with respect to knowledge, and this is why Lacan finally identifies the discourse of science with that of hysteria.²⁸

Ex-istence Revisited

Given Lacan's many seemingly paradoxical statements involving existence--"Woman does not exist," "The Other jouissance does not exist"--and involving *il y a* and *il n'y a pas*--"There's no such thing as a sexual relationship," "*Il y a de l'Un*," "*Il n'y a pas d'autre de l'Autre*"--I'd like to add a final word about Lacan's notion of ex-istence.

To the best of my knowledge, the word "ex-istence" was first introduced into French in translations of Heidegger (e.g. *Being and Time*²⁹) as a translation for the Greek ekstasis and the German *Ekstase*. The root meaning of the term in Greek is standing outside of or standing apart from something. In Greek, it was generally used for the "removal" or "displacement" of something, but it also came to be applied to states of mind which we would now call "ecstatic." Thus a derivative meaning of the word is "ecstasy," hence its relation to Other jouissance. Heidegger often played on the root meaning of the word, "standing outside" or "stepping outside oneself," but also on its close connection in Greek with the root of the word for "existence." Lacan uses it to talk about "an existence which stands apart from," which insists as it were from the outside. Something not included on the inside, something which rather than being intimate is "extimate."

The Other jouissance is beyond the symbolic, standing apart from symbolic castration. It ex-ists. We can discern a place for it within our symbolic order, and even name it, but it nevertheless remains ineffable, unspeakable. We can consider it to ex-ist because it can be written $\overline{\forall x} \Phi x$.

While Woman does not exist, as she cannot be adequately defined by/within language, she ex-ists as she can be written under erasure: ~~Woman~~.

Sexual relationships, however, are distinct in this respect--they cannot be written, and thus neither exist nor ex-ist. There's simply *no such thing*: isn't that what so many patients have been saying for so many years?!

Footnotes

1. The material contained in this paper served as the basis for lectures given at Cornell, Yale, UCLA, and UC Irvine and in London and Melbourne since 1987; an early version of it appeared in the Newsletter of

the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research, London, England, **10**, 1988.

2. *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*, Frederick J. Streng, Abingdon Press, New York, 1967, pps. 215-217.

3. Consider, for example, what he wrote about time (*Ibid*, p. 205):

1. If "the present" and "future" exist presupposing "the past."

"The present" and "future" will exist in the "the past."

2. If "the present" and "future" did not exist there [in "the past"],

How could "the present" and "future" exist presupposing that "past"?

3. Without presupposing "the past" the two things ["the present" and "future"]

cannot be proved to exist.

Therefore neither present nor future time exists.

6. Since time is dependent on a thing (*bhava*), how can time [exist] without a

thing?

There is not any thing which exists; how, then, will time become [something]?

4. Modern logicians have arrived at similar conclusions, but by a rather different path. They can be understood as saying that contradictions appear when our logical and mathematical systems are pushed to the limit, such that no matter how rigorously we define the terms of a philosophical system, it will have limits; it will not hold up in every case. Everything seems to work fine for the most part, but exceptions always crop up, regardless of the seeming simplicity and elegance of our axioms.

This way of stating what modern logicians (such as Russell and Gödel) have discovered allows us to associate it with that which, in Lacan's system, goes hand in hand with the incompleteness of the Other with a capital O: object (a). Object (a) can be understood as the *anomaly*: the catalogue of all catalogues which don't include themselves, whose status is indeterminate (for if it includes itself, then it shouldn't, and if it doesn't, then it should); that statement in an axiomatic system which leads to a contradiction, or which is formally undecidable. Object (a) is the limit of a formal system, the place where language as a system breaks down. Unlike Buddhists and skeptics, many modern logicians haven't disqualified the whole of a system thereby, but merely pointed out every system's radical incompleteness.

A a

5. Cf. Lacan's discussion of the expression, "*la paix du soir*" in Seminar III, *Les psychoses*, pps. 156-157.

6. My translation.

7. The paradox in his poem is much the same as that found in Lacan's discussions of the Other *jouissance*: St. John of the Cross tells us that it is unspeakable, but he says so in so many words! Lacan tells us that the Other *jouissance* is unnameable, and yet he names it in a sense (denouncing as a misnomer so-called vaginal orgasm as opposed to clitoral). A

similarly paradoxical situation arises in the case of object (a): just as Lacan puts forward object (a) as the breakdown of language itself, and as such an aspect of the real as the impossible, as that which does not work, at the same time Lacan talks about it and discusses it from every angle, explaining its avatars, its effects, etc. ad infinitum. The seeming paradox will, I hope, no longer appear paradoxical by the end of this paper.

8. This sentence, based on the better known "*l'analyste ne s'autorise que de lui-même*" (an analyst's only authorization comes from himself, an analyst is only authorized by himself, or the only authorization one has to be an analyst comes from oneself), can be rendered as "One's only authorization as a sexed being [male or female] comes from oneself."

9. The translation I am proposing here for Lacan's oft-repeated "*il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*". Note that I have been unable to find a way in English to sidestep the problem of using the verb "to be" to translate the phrase. Lacan's "*il n'y a pas*" here is stronger than saying "Sexual relationships do not exist," implying as well that "Sexual relationships do not exist either"; rather, "There ain't no such thing." This point is taken up later in the article; here let me simply say that Lacan uses two different kinds of formulations for two different notions: when he says "*L'Autre n'existe pas*" we can still suppose that the Other perhaps exists, but when he says "*il n'y a pas d'Autre de l'Autre*" he does not leave us the option of speculating whether or not this Other of the Other (beyond or outside of the Other) might in fact exist: it neither exists nor exists.

10. It should be kept in mind here that Lacan's writings are notoriously open to interpretation, and that the interpretation provided here is my own; moreover the material laid out here constitutes a *punctuation* of Lacan's work in that in the present version of this paper I am leaving aside a parallel gloss Lacan gives concerning his formulas of sexual difference which seems to me (1) to distract from his most incisive and far-reaching conclusions about sexual difference, and (2) to have been superseded in the course of Lacan's own work. His parallel gloss is not without interest (and the reader is referred to my earlier paper mentioned in footnote 1 for a detailed discussion of it), but strikes me as somewhat less useful.

11. This view of object (a) is at work in Lacan's postface to "The Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"; I have discussed it at length in "The Nature of Unconscious Thought, or Why No One Ever Reads Lacan's Postface to 'The Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", a lecture given at the Lacan Seminar in English in Paris in June 1989.

12. An interesting conclusion is that one could go so far as to say that the analyst, qua analyst, is sexless. The same holds true for the master.

13. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

14. Readers familiar with the quantifiers \forall and \exists should realize right from the start that Lacan's use of them deviates quite significantly from current usage in logic; in particular, he uses $\forall x$ variously to mean all x 's and the whole of x at different times. His adoption of a different symbolism

for negation should also be understood as implying something other than the simple \sim used in symbolic logic; the different meanings of the bar of negation when placed over the quantifier and over the function are briefly outlined below

15. And thus it seems there must be an exception to the universal claim just enunciated! Lacan echoes Charles Sanders Peirce here who wrote: "a rule has no meaning without a limit."

16. It should be kept in mind that these formulas were constructed for neurosis not psychosis; if such dreams or fantasies were acted upon, we would no longer be in the realm of neurosis.

17. This is completely lost in the current English translation of the chapters of Sem. XX, *Encore*, included in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose's *Feminine Sexuality*, Norton, 1982.

18. Just as $\exists x \overline{\Phi x}$ in the case of masculine structure, does not in the end posit an existence but rather an ex-istence. It could thus be argued that in Lacan's symbolism, as opposed to classical logic's, \exists means "there ex-ists an x ," while $\overline{\exists x}$ simply denies the possibility of x 's existence without stipulating anything about its ex-istence.

19. He is certainly not whole in any other sense without his partner, object (a), and the plenitude achieved when he is united with his partner remains phantasmatic at best ($\S \diamond a$).

20. A mother whose desire is fixated solely on her child creates no *other* space, no elsewhere, and the child becomes trapped in a dual relationship that is bound to lead to psychosis.

21. I am certainly playing a bit fast and loose with Lacan's work on metaphor and metonymy in the 1950s, for at that stage of his work the phallus appears as a signified, i.e. a signification or meaning

(cf. p. 557 *Ecrits*); my presumption here is that in the later Lacan, the phallus as signifier of desire has very close ties with the Name-of-the-Father, to the point, at times, of being indistinguishable therefrom.

22. That paper, "Reading *Hamlet* with Lacan", will appear in a volume edited by Richard Feldstein and Willy Apollon in 1992. On separation, see "Alienation and Separation: Logical Moments of Lacan's Dialectic of Desire," *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, 4, 1990.

23. This notion of "access or accession" to a particular signifier does not strike me as terribly straightforward, but I cannot here account for it any further.

24. A pervert may find it elsewhere than in the woman's camp, which is why a pervert, though biologically speaking male, would probably not be characterized by masculine structure.

25. It seems clear from analytic experience that there is a tendency "in relationships for a man to become equated with a signifier and a woman with an object.

26. We know from other parts of Lacan's work that splitting is specific to neurotics: the existence of subjectivity, which is a result of splitting,

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is doubtful in the case of psychosis. Lacan throws into question the very possibility of there being such a thing as a subject when the individual in question is psychotic. And we know from Lacan's work that psychosis is a result of a failure to instate the Name-of-the-Father. The father's name, not so much in the form of a name like John or Bill, as in the form of the word "father" itself, with all it denotes and connotes in our culture, has never been assimilated by the individual. The Name-of-the-Father, in Lacanian terms, has some sort of linguistic existence--as a term in language, a word--and yet it cannot exactly be pinned down to any one given word; i.e. it has some sort of more structural function that allows it to act as an anchoring point for a subject. It is the condition for the very possibility of subjectivity.

Psychotics are not split subjects; it is not clear in what sense they can be taken as subjects at all. Neurotics, on the other hand, come in a number of different varieties, and in particular masculine and feminine. The variety seems to stem from their different ways of splitting, their different types of relationships to language. That is what Lacan seems to be saying with his formulas of sexualization.

27. Many people suffer, for example, supposed heart pains in the left side of their chests, even though the heart is in fact located right in the middle of the chest.

28. See in this connection "Science, Knowledge, and Truth," a paper I gave at UCLA.

29. Interestingly enough, Heidegger seems to introduce the notion in relation to time, and his discussion thereof could be fruitfully compared with Nagarjuna's which I quoted at the beginning of this article. Consider, for example, the following passage from Heidegger's *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982, pps. 266-267: "The essence of the future lies in *coming-toward-oneself*; that of the past [having-been-ness] lies in *going-back-to*; and that of the present in *staying-with, dwelling-with*, that is, being-with. These characters of the *toward, back-to, with* reveal the basic constitution of temporality. As determined by this toward, back-to, and with, temporality is *outside itself*. . . Temporality as unity of future, past, and present does not carry the Dasein away just at times and occasionally; instead, as *temporality*, it is itself *the original outside-itself* the ekstatikon."

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