

The *poinçon* (◇) in Lacan

Santanu Biswas

The symbol ‘◇’ is an invention of Lacan’s. He invented it by joining together two pairs of vectorially directed logical operations, with two twists along two cuts, primarily in order to be able to write with its help the formulae for fantasy— ($\$ \diamond a$) or ($a \diamond \$$)— and the formula for the drive— ($\$ \diamond D$)— on the two sides of the upper half of his graph of desire. Of the various names by which Lacan had referred to this symbol at different times— diamond, punch, stamp, square, quadrilateral, cut of, desire for, lunula, gap, rim and lozenge— the one to have been most frequently used by him is the punch (le *poinçon*).

Lacan spoke of the punch in some detail primarily in five different Seminars given between 1958 and 1966. In 1958, in his Seminar on *The Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan offered two preliminary details: First, that ‘the punch in question is the same thing as the square of a much older and much more fundamental schema’, which is an allusion to the ‘L schema’ developed by Lacan in 1955 in the Seminar on *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*— out of the inverted vase experiment taken up the year before that in the Seminar on *Freud’s Papers on Technique* (Lacan: 1953-1954, 77-79, 123-125, 139-142 & 164-166)— in order to describe the interrelationships between the subject (S), the big Other (A), the ego (a) and the small other (a’) along the imaginary and symbolic axes. (Lacan: 1954-1955, 106-110 & 243-244) As a reincarnation of the ‘L schema’, therefore, the punch characterizes all four vertices as well as both the axes of its predecessor, indicating thereby that there is no barred subject who is not sustained by a complex relation to A, a and a’ along two different axes. And second, the punch expresses and determines the relation of the subject to the object a in the formula for fantasy; as well, demand, or the articulation of need in the form of the signifier, intervene at a point in the punch in the formula for the drive. In all these formulae, therefore, the punch is the place where the signifier intervenes to

permanently alter the status of the subject. (Lacan: 1957-1958, Session 11 June 1958)

In a footnote to 'The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power' lecture given in the same year, which may well have been added to the text of the lecture at the time of writing the essay later on, Lacan specified four new terms to describe the coordinates of the punch as a quadratic formulation: 'the sign \diamond registers the relations envelopment-development-conjunction-disjunction.' These four terms moreover describe the relationship of the subject with his big Other and the object a. The pair of terms 'envelopment-development' possibly appears only once in Lacan, here, and might well be Lacan's own terms for the operations thus referred to. Lacan also states here that the formula for the drive represents 'S' fading in demand's cut, and the formula for fantasy represents 'S' fading before the object of desire, where the punch represents the place of the subject's fading in and fading before, respectively. (Lacan: 1966, 542, n17)

Lacan had already described the punch as a cut in a footnote to his essay 'On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis' (1957-1958), where he stated that, owing to its being a cut on the surface, the punch is able to detach the two heterogeneous elements in the form of the 'S' and the 'a' from the surface, following which the 'S' props up or covers the field of reality and the 'a' corresponds to the fields of the imaginary and the symbolic. (Lacan: 1966, 487, n14) Speaking on the symbol of the punch in 1962, in his Seminar on Identification, however, he was able to offer a more precise figuration of the cut. In this Seminar, Lacan focused primarily on the vertical cut in the symbol along which '>' and '<' were joined, with an aim to explain how a signifier in its most radical essence could be envisaged simply as a cut in the surface. Lacan contended that 'the simple intervention of [a] cut change[s] the omnipresent structure of all the points of the surface', and illustrated it by explaining that if one painted only one side of an uncut Mobius strip, both the sides of the strip will get painted, whereas if one painted only one side of a cut Mobius strip, the other side of the strip will remain unpainted. In a word, the signifier can be envisaged as a radical

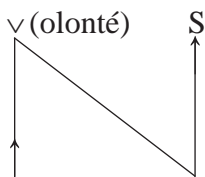
cut whose introduction changes everything about the subject. Lacan did extend the argument on the cut to the dimension of the ‘vocal incarnation’ of the signifier, too, by aligning it with discontinuity and difference as characteristics of the signifying chain, where the signifying chain comprises signifiers— that are significant for their difference from themselves, as well as from other signifiers— and a discontinuity in their articulation necessary for the introduction of punctuation. He held that discontinuity is tied to difference as the essence of the signifier— which is so because the signifier does not signify itself— and called the difference the cut, or the synchronic possibility that constitutes signifying difference. Nevertheless, Lacan did not forget to remind us that the function of the cut is of the greatest importance in what can be written. In this Seminar, therefore, the symbol of the punch is referred to primarily for the vertical cut in it as that which best represents the signifier. On the other components of the symbol as a ‘cut structure’, Lacan clarified that the resultant sign ‘>’ will mark continuity by pointing to the place following it, where something will be inscribed, as well as a vectorial direction where the continuity will always be rediscovered. The punch as the cut structure, then, at once stands for continuity and direction in inscription, discontinuity and difference in the signifying chain, and a vertical rift that represents the essence of the signifier. Following this, Lacan offered us the ‘true verbalization’ of the punch as that which unites the ‘\$’ and the ‘a’ in the formula for fantasy: ‘the subject qua marked by the signifier is properly in the fantasy, the cut of a.’ In other words, the subject in the fantasy is marked by the cut of a; and the punch in the formula for fantasy is the phrasal verb ‘cut of’ in the expression ‘the barred subject is the cut of a.’ (Lacan: 1961-1962, Session 16 May 1962)

Lacan invoked the symbol of the punch once again in the following year, as part of his Seminar on Anxiety, and in the immediate context of his elaboration on the signifying division of the subject. Lacan called the signifying division an operation comprising three moments that overlap in a precise manner. The first moment is that of the mythical or primitive subject who exists at this earliest stage of the operation prior

to the division, in the form of the subject of *jouissance*. Lacan specified that, without the division and the production of the object *a* through it, the subject of *jouissance* would know nothing of the big Other. The signifying division comes into play when the 'X' of the primitive subject moves towards his becoming the subject, where becoming the subject means the relationship of the big Other over the S in terms of a division of the S with respect to the big Other. This second moment, or the moment of division of the subject, is the moment of anxiety and of the production of the object *a*. The object *a* is related to anxiety because 'there is', says Lacan, 'no way of operating with this remainder...' The third moment that follows the moment of division, witnesses the advent of the divided subject who has lost the object *a* in the process of the division and is therefore indelibly marked by the desire for what he has lost forever. Lacan once again clarified that the barred condition of the subject is related to the irreducibility of the object *a*, by stating that the '\$' has the form of division following the operation because the 'a' as the remainder of the operation is irreducible. Thus, the operation of signifying division at once introduces the divided subject, the object *a*, anxiety, desire and fantasy, too, for Lacan stated that the divided subject marked by the desire for the lost object was also 'the subject qua implicated in the fantasy.' The subject of desire is also the subject of fantasy because it is only on the level of fantasy that the object cause of desire may be sought by the subject. Above all, the operation transforms the subject of *jouissance* into the subject of desire in terms of anxiety functioning as the median between *jouissance* and desire. In this context, the three algebraic terms in the formula for fantasy alone constitute the support of desire, where the punch formalizes the specific relation that the subject of the unconscious (\$)— who is 'divided' by his relation to the realm of signifiers— maintains with the object *a* as the 'lost' object and the 'detached' remainder of the signifying division. From this point of view, the formula for fantasy denotes a relation of radical impossibility by revealing how fantasy stages the impossible relation of the lacking, barred and divided subject, to his truly lost fantasmatic object of desire, around the punch that is no more than a hole.

Lacan also clarified in this Seminar that it was owing to the need to denote in the formula for fantasy a ‘certain relationship of opposition’ between the ‘ $\$$ ’ and the ‘ a ’ that was moreover characterized by ‘polyvalence and multiplicity’, that the ‘composite character’ of the punch, which could accommodate its own opposite with a twist, had to be created. This explains why the sign of the punch is ‘just as much disjunction, \vee , as conjunction, \wedge , which is just as much greater, $>$, and lesser, $< \dots$ ’, whereby the punch symbolizes the ‘ $\$$ ’ as at once in conjunction with (\wedge), disjunction from (\vee), greater than ($>$) and lesser than ($<$) the big Other qua object a . In terms of the various permutations of greater than, lesser than, disjunction and conjunction supported by the necessary twists along the concerned cuts, we are enabled to discern the different possible inherently oppositional attitudes that the barred subject can entertain to the object a and the big Other. In this Seminar, therefore, as a hole that connects the permanently barred subject to the permanently lost object, and as a symbol of self-opposing polyvalence and multiplicity, the punch depicts a double aporia in terms of the two sides of a radical impossibility. (Lacan: 1962-1963, Session 13 March 1963)

In the essay ‘Kant with Sade’ written in 1963 itself, Lacan used the symbol of the punch in the following schema of the Sadean fantasy:



Schema I: $d \rightarrow a \wedge \diamond \mathcal{S}$ (Ecrits, p. 774).

The first three points made by Lacan in the course of explaining the most basic aspects of this schema are reiterations of points already made by him in earlier works: 1) That ‘the lower line’ in this schema—where desire $\rightarrow (a \diamond \mathcal{S})$ is inscribed—‘accounts for the order of fantasy insofar as it props up the utopia of desire.’ 2) That this is related to the ‘appearance of object a in the place of the cause.’ And 3) That

‘the curvy line depicts the chain that allows for a calculus of the subject.’ The fourth point made by Lacan, on the contrary, was explained by him in the course of the Seminar he gave the following year: ‘The V occup[ies] the place of honor here... but its shape also evokes the union [réunion] of what it divides by holding it together with a *vel*— namely, by offering up to choice what will create the $\$$ of practical reason from S, the brute subject of pleasure....’ (Lacan: 1966, 653-54) In this context Lacan reiterated that the identity of an absolute non-reciprocity introduced by the punch is coextensive with the subject’s formations: the ‘lozenge \diamond is to be read as “desire for,” being read right to left in the same way, introducing an identity that is based on an absolute non-reciprocity. (This relation is coextensive with the subject’s formations.)’ (Ibid, 653)

In the Seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* given in 1964, Lacan regarded the punch as a ‘finished product’ and employed it with an aim to better articulate the relation between the subject and the big Other, although, paradoxically, it is in this Seminar that Lacan would speak on some of the aspects of the punch for the first time— such as, the anticlockwise movement of a pair of vectors— and, on some of the basic aspects of the punch for the only time— such as, the horizontal cut in the punch, and especially the two signs, ‘ \vee ’ and ‘ \wedge ’, that it produces, which Lacan consistently referred to as disjunction and conjunction respectively in logic. In this Seminar, Lacan took the punch for a rim, disjoined it along the horizontal cut to get the two signs ‘ \vee ’ and ‘ \wedge ’, added directions to them to indicate an anticlockwise movement along the rim, called this the ‘rim process’, and proceeded to explain the operations of alienation (\vee) and separation (\wedge) in psychoanalytic theory with its help.

Alienation is the first of the two operations that results in the appearance of the divided subject when ‘ S_1 ’ represents it to ‘ S_2 ’ in the locus of the big Other. It takes place in terms of a forced choice, as in a choice one is forced to make between two objects that one almost equally cherishes— such as, ‘your money or your life!’, or, ‘your freedom or your life!’— which the subject confronts and responds to by making a choice that involves the forced sacrifice of one of the two alternatives. As

a result of the choice or '*vel*', the subject appears as the divided subject, who at once appears in his disappearance on his own side— as aphanisis— and appears as sense produced by the signifier on the side of the big Other, where a large part of it is eclipsed by the disappearance of the being due to the function of the signifier. Differently put, alienation produces the being beneath the sense, where the being comprises non-sense or the unconscious. Owing to this arrangement, if being is chosen over sense, the subject, left without the support of sense in the field of the Other, falls into non-sense; and, conversely, if sense is chosen over being, the subject is left with sense but without the non-sense or the unconscious belonging to the being. Lacan further specified that alienation is based on the sub-structure of union as in set theory. In set theory, the operation of union stands for the creation of a new set by adding together all the elements of two existing sets without counting the common elements more than once. The new set, $A \cup B$ for example, consists of elements that are members of either A or B, or members of both A and B but counted either from A or from B. Therefore, alienation, which is based on the principle of union, hinges on the '*vel*' or the 'or.' In alienation, the subject may choose only one of the two alternatives forced on him, not both; in union, an element, for it to be counted, must either be present in only one of the two sets, or, be counted only once from any one of the two sets.

To complete the circle set into motion by the operation of alienation, and with an essential twist, there is a second operation that Lacan called separation. Separation takes place when the subject superimposes his own lack evident in his fading, on the lack in the discourse of the big Other that begs the unanswered question, 'what does he want?' The superimposition of the lack of the barred subject and that of the big Other produces the object a at the place of the ' S_1 ' as the object after identification. This vital operation allows the subject to engender or to procure himself. Lacan maintained that separation is based on the substructure of intersection with the big Other, as in set theory. Intersection in set theory stands for the creation of a new set by counting the elements that two existing sets have in common. The new set, $A \cap B$ for example, consists of all the

elements that are members of both A and B. Notably, whereas in the case of union of two sets one counts the elements that are not common to both the sets, or elements that are common to both the sets only once, from one set only, giving rise to the logical 'or' in alienation, in the case of intersection of two sets, one counts precisely the opposite type of elements, in the form of elements that are strictly common to both the sets, which gives form to the logical 'and' joining the two lacks in the operation of separation. From its place at the conjunction of the two operations, the 'essential twist' indicates that in spite of completing the 'circularity' of the treatment of the subject's relationship with the Other, separation does not lead the subject back to his original point of departure. Differently put, despite completing a circularity, the two operations are not complementary owing to the essential twist at their point of conjunction. The horizontal cut in this case stands for the place of the overlap of the 'S' and the 'O' that is occupied by 'S₁' in alienation and the object a in separation.

Although Lacan does not appear to have elaborated on his consistent reference to the two signs '∨' and '∧' respectively as disjunction and conjunction in logic, it is nevertheless necessary for us to try to understand this connection, too, in order to better grasp what the two operations stand for. A logical disjunction is an operation with two logical propositions with values that has a value of false if and only if both the propositions have values of false, or, has a value of true if any one of the propositions has a value of true (or false). In other words, alienation has a value of true if and only if one or the other of the two sets involved has a value of true. Conversely, a logical conjunction is an operation with two logical propositions with values that has a value of true if and only if both the propositions have values of true, or, has a value of false if any one of the two propositions has a value of false (or true). In other words, separation has a value of true if and only if two true lacks of the two sets involved are superimposed to produce the object a. In its new context, therefore, the punch is the combination of the operations of alienation (∨) and separation (∧) with a twist at their point of conjunction along a horizontal cut, where the two psychoanalytic operations must also be

understood in terms of the operations of union (\cup) and intersection (\cap) in set theory, and the operations of disjunction (\vee) and conjunction (\wedge) in logic. (Lacan: 1964, 209)

Speaking on the drive in the same Seminar, Lacan explained that he wrote the drive in terms of the formula ($\$ > D$) in order to emphasize its grammatical nature, which means that the punch is also to be read as the verb that joins the subject and the object in a sentence. The circuit of the drive— that originates from an erogenous zone, goes round the object by missing it, and finally returns to the erogenous zone— is structured by three corresponding grammatical voices— active, reflexive and passive— around the verb, whereby only in the third moment, that of the passive voice, a new subject appears. In the formula for the drive, therefore, the punch denotes the verb as marked by the voices that structure the drive's circuit. Lacan mentioned in passing in the Seminar on the *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis* delivered the following year that, in the formula for the drive ($\$ \diamond D$) in the completed graph, the punch stands for 'conjunction, disjunction, inclusion, exclusion.' (Lacan: 1964-1965, Session 10 March 1965) This remark seems to imply that the sign of the punch stands for one and the same thing in the formulae for drive and fantasy. Does that mean that the punch in the formula for fantasy also stands for the verb in its changing voices?

Lacan returned to the punch in the formula for fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$) in 1966, in his Seminar on *The Logic of Fantasy*, by initially reiterating some of the details already offered in the Seminar on *Anxiety*, such as, the details of the oppositional polyvalence and multiplicity of the punch and of the foundational importance of the two cuts in it. He stated that the punch was a new sign, which, since it was formed by joining together vertically and horizontally two pairs of signs bearing logical and mathematical connotations, could easily be disjoined along those very vertical and horizontal lines of division to get back the original pairs of signs. Confining himself in this Seminar only to the 'first level of conjunction', that is, to the two signs produced by disjoining the punch vertically, Lacan explained that this pair of signs, or double relation, may be read first as lesser than and greater than, as in mathematics, and next as

inclusion and exclusion. Whether the ‘\$’ is greater or lesser than the ‘O’, or whether the ‘\$’ is included in or excluded from ‘O’, are questions whose answers hinge on the nature of the relationship between ‘\$’ and ‘O’, and the location and status of the object a. Lacan did not comment on the relations of greater than and lesser than here. Instead, he logically but hurriedly described the sign ‘>’ as ‘the relation of inclusion’ or of ‘implication’, on conditions of reversibility and articulation. The relations of inclusion and exclusion, Lacan explains, are jointly articulated in terms of the logical articulation ‘if and only if’, which is also written as ‘<->’ that happens to resemble Lacan’s symbol of the punch to an extent. In logic, ‘if and only if’ is used as a connective between two propositions to indicate that the truth of either one of the propositions requires the truth of the other. Thus, when two propositions are logically connected by the ‘if and only if’, either both of them have a value of true or both of them have a value of false. Similarly, the term ‘implication’ that is mentioned in conjunction with the term inclusion but not amplified by Lacan, and which is represented by the sign ‘=>’, denotes a logical relation between two propositions in terms of which if the antecedent proposition is true then the consequent proposition is also true: ‘P=>Q’ or ‘if P then Q’. The reverse of implication may therefore be written as ‘Q=>P’ or ‘if Q then P.’ Like the combination of inclusion and exclusion, the combination of implication and its reverse too, called the bi-conditional, is written as ‘P if and only if Q’, or P<->Q. However, the noteworthy point here is that, owing to the vertical cut dividing the pair of relations involved, the punch as the combination of either inclusion and exclusion or implication and its reverse functions as a barred if and only if connector and disconnecter in the formula for fantasy. Lacan clarified in terms of a dense sentence that, in logical articulation, the subject S is barred as well as barred from the relationship of if and only if with the object a, because the if and only if as the punch is, from the very outset, vertically split into two. In other words, the subject is barred from himself— or ‘\$’— as well as from the object a— or ‘(\$ ◇ a)’— due to the function of the barred if and only if as the connector and disconnecter between the two. (Lacan: 1966-1967, Session 16 November 1966)

Lacan's last detail on the punch in this Seminar is that the vertical cut in it also divides the subject into his 'de facto existence' and 'logical existence.' He clarified that logical existence was related to the introduction of the subject by way of doing logic with signifiers— like Lacan's own handling of the 'S' in this Seminar so as to logically inscribe the subject— while de facto existence was related to the existence of speaking beings in terms of other speaking beings whose existence as speaking beings depended on an already established logical articulation of the subject. Differently put, although the subject is barred not at the place of the 'S' but at the place of the vertical cut in the '◊' situated after the 'S', that thus offers him his de facto existence, Lacan was forced to write the barred 'S' before the '◊' while inscribing the logical existence of the subject because, in logical articulation, de facto existence must follow from logical existence. This is perfectly consistent with Lacan's old but perpetually upheld idea of logical time and anticipated certainty, and serves to justify his precise placement of the barred if and only if after the 'S' and before the 'a' in the formula for fantasy. (Lacan: 1966-1967, Session 16 November 1966)

The punch, then, is the grand combination of two sub-combinations of two operations each— where the first sub-combination joins the two operations ($>$ and $<$) that may be variously described as greater than and lesser than, or inclusion and exclusion, or envelopment and development, or implication and its reverse; and the second sub-combination joins the other two operations (\wedge and \vee) that may be variously described as conjunction and disjunction, or union and intersection, or alienation and separation— along two cuts respectively— in the form of a vertical cut that represents the essence of the signifier, and a horizontal cut that denotes the place of the 'S₁' and the 'a'— in terms of a twist that is essential. As such, the punch acts as the place of a hole characterized by the following four overlapping activities: The punch is where two cuts cut each other to generate two pairs of oppositional vectorial operations, but more importantly, to mark the difference between alienation and separation on the one hand, and the division between logical and de facto existences of the subject, the barring

of the subject, and the barring of the subject from the object a on the other. It is where the signifier intervenes as a cut in order to determine the subject who shall thereafter fade in or fade before the hole. It is a hole in a surface that at once detaches and holds together two heterogeneous elements present on the same surface in the form of the 'S' and the 'a'. And, as a hole or a cut, the punch is a verb, as well as the place where the verb changes its voice from active to passive in order to indicate the birth of a new subject.

Is it possible to read in this tiny symbol of the *poinçon* some of the broader implication of Lacanian psychoanalysis in general? Perhaps it is, insofar as the symbol depicts the bracing of a gap by a pair of oppositional operations like conjunction and disjunction, union and intersection, etc. From this point of view, it is perhaps possible to say that the symbol of the *poinçon* depicts the central principle of psychoanalysis that the real as an impossible hole can only be braced by contradictions, in the form of an 'x-hole-y', or a 'yin-median void-yang'— with reference to verse 42 of Lao-tzu's Tao te Ching that Lacan had discussed at length with Francoise Cheng. As such, the symbol of the *poinçon* is a logical as well as pictorial depiction of how, at the end of analysis, the impossible to say is contained and established— instead of being erased or masked— by each analysand with the help of contradictions. The *poinçon*, insofar as it means a hole constituted by a pair of logical opposites, is an announcement rather than suppression of a gap. Similarly, the symbol of the *poinçon* may also be viewed as a depiction of the set, 'man-the-third-woman', where man and woman are contrary positions that brace the impossible to write sexual rapport between them. Finally, the *poinçon* also seems to offer a succinct summary of The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, insofar as the break in 1963 as an ineradicable hole in it is braced by the classical and the later teachings of Lacan, respectively, that often contradict each other.

References

Lacan, Jacques (1953-1954). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique: 1953-1954*. Tr. John Forrester. New York & London: WW Norton, 1988.

- _____ (1954-1955). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: 1954-1955*. Tr. Sylvania Tomaselli. New York & London: WW Norton, 1988.
- _____ (1957-1958). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book V. The Formations of the Unconscious: 1957-1958*. Unedited French manuscripts unofficially translated by Cormac Gallagher; ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Seuil, 1999.
- _____ (1961-1962). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book IX. Identification: 1961-1962*. Unedited French manuscripts unofficially translated by Cormac Gallagher.
- _____ (1962-1963). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety: 1962-1963*. Unedited French manuscripts unofficially translated by Cormac Gallagher; ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Seuil, 1999.
- _____ (1964). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: 1964*. Tr. Alan Sheridan. London, New York, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1994.
- _____ (1964-1965). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XII. Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis: 1964-1965*. Unedited French manuscripts unofficially translated by Cormac Gallagher.
- _____ (1966). *Écrits*. Tr. Bruce Fink. New York & London: WW Norton, 2006.
- _____ (1966-1967). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XIV. The Logic of Fantasy: 1966-1967*. Unedited French manuscripts unofficially translated by Cormac Gallagher.

