

**THE
LACANIAN
SUBJECT**

Between
Language
and
Jouissance

BRUCE FINK

THE LACANIAN SUBJECT

THE LACANIAN SUBJECT

BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND JOUISSANCE

Bruce Fink

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

Copyright © 1995 by Princeton University Press
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, Chichester, West Sussex

All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fink, Bruce, 1956—

The Lacanian subject: between language and jouissance / Bruce Fink.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-691-03760-4 (cloth)

ISBN 0-691-01589-9 (paperback)

I. Lacan, Jacques, 1901— . 2. Psychoanalysis. I. Title.

BF109.L28F56 1995

150.19'5—dc20 94-49033

This book has been composed in Times Roman

Princeton University Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the
guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production
Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources

Third printing, and first paperback printing, 1997

<http://pup.princeton.edu>

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12

ISBN-13: 978-0-691-01589-7

ISBN-10: 0-691-01589-9

Pour Héloïse

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xi
PART ONE: STRUCTURE: ALIENATION AND THE OTHER	
One	
Language and Otherness	3
<i>A Slip of the Other's Tongue</i>	3
<i>The Unconscious</i>	7
<i>Foreign Bodies</i>	11
Two	
The Nature of Unconscious Thought, or How the Other Half "Thinks"	14
<i>Heads or Tails</i>	16
<i>Randomness and Memory</i>	19
<i>The Unconscious Assembles</i>	20
<i>Knowledge without a Subject</i>	22
Three	
The Creative Function of the Word: The Symbolic and the Real	24
<i>Trauma</i>	26
<i>Interpretation Hits the Cause</i>	28
<i>Incompleteness of the Symbolic Order:</i>	
<i>The (W)hole in the Other</i>	29
<i>Kinks in the Symbolic Order</i>	30
<i>Structure versus Cause</i>	31
PART TWO: THE LACANIAN SUBJECT	
Four	
The Lacanian Subject	35
<i>The Lacanian Subject Is Not the "Individual" or</i>	
<i>Conscious Subject of Anglo-American Philosophy</i>	36
<i>The Lacanian Subject Is Not the Subject of the Statement</i>	37
<i>The Lacanian Subject Appears Nowhere in What Is Said</i>	38
<i>The Fleetingness of the Subject</i>	41
<i>The Freudian Subject</i>	42

<i>The Cartesian Subject and Its Inverse</i>	42
<i>Lacan's Split Subject</i>	44
<i>Beyond the Split Subject</i>	46
Five	
The Subject and the Other's Desire	49
<i>Alienation and Separation</i>	49
The Vel of Alienation	51
Desire and Lack in Separation	53
The Introduction of a Third Term	55
Object <i>a</i> : The Other's Desire	59
<i>A Further Separation: The Traversing of Fantasy</i>	61
Subjectifying the Cause: A Temporal Conundrum	63
<i>Alienation, Separation, and the Traversing of Fantasy in the Analytic Setting</i>	66
Six	
Metaphor and the Precipitation of Subjectivity	69
<i>The Signified</i>	70
<i>Two Faces of the Psychoanalytic Subject</i>	72
The Subject as Signified	72
The Subject as Breach	77
PART THREE: THE LACANIAN OBJECT: LOVE, DESIRE, JOUISSANCE	
Seven	
Object (a): Cause of Desire	83
" <i>Object Relations</i> "	84
Imaginary Objects, Imaginary Relations	84
The Other as Object, Symbolic Relations	87
Real Objects, Encounters with the Real	90
<i>Lost Objects</i>	93
<i>The Freudian Thing</i>	95
<i>Surplus Value, Surplus Jouissance</i>	96
Eight	
There's No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship	98
<i>Castration</i>	99
<i>The Phallus and the Phallic Function</i>	101
" <i>There's No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship</i> "	104
Distinguishing between the Sexes	105
The Formulas of Sexuation	108
A Dissymmetry of Partners	113

CONTENTS	ix
Woman Does Not Exist	115
Masculine/Feminine–Signifier/Signifierness	117
Other to Herself, Other Jouissance	119
The Truth of Psychoanalysis	121
<i>Existence and Ex-sistence</i>	122
<i>A New Metaphor for Sexual Difference</i>	123
PART FOUR: THE STATUS OF PSYCHOANALYTIC DISCOURSE	
Nine	
The Four Discourses	129
<i>The Master’s Discourse</i>	130
<i>The University Discourse</i>	132
<i>The Hysteric’s Discourse</i>	133
<i>The Analyst’s Discourse</i>	135
<i>The Social Situation of Psychoanalysis</i>	136
<i>There’s No Such Thing as a Metalanguage</i>	137
Ten	
Psychoanalysis and Science	138
<i>Science as Discourse</i>	138
<i>Suturing the Subject</i>	139
<i>Science, the Hysteric’s Discourse, and Psychoanalytic Theory</i>	141
<i>The Three Registers and Differently “Polarized” Discourses</i>	142
<i>Formalization and the Transmissibility of Psychoanalysis</i>	144
<i>The Status of Psychoanalysis</i>	145
<i>The Ethics of Lacanian Psychoanalysis</i>	146
Afterword	147
Appendix 1	
The Language of the Unconscious	153
Appendix 2	
Stalking the Cause	165
<i>Glossary of Lacanian Symbols</i>	173
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	175
<i>Notes</i>	177
<i>Bibliography</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	213

Preface

LACAN presents us with a radically new theory of subjectivity. Unlike most poststructuralists, who seek to deconstruct and dispel the very notion of the human subject, Lacan the psychoanalyst finds the concept of subjectivity indispensable and explores what it means to be a subject, how one comes to be a subject, the conditions responsible for the failure to become a subject (leading to psychosis), and the tools at the analyst's disposal to induce a "precipitation of subjectivity."

It is, however, extremely difficult to piece together the wide variety of things Lacan says about the subject, his theory of the subject being so "unintuitive" to most of us (consider the "definition" Lacan so often reiterates: the subject is that which one signifier represents to another signifier) and evolving quite significantly in the course of his work. Moreover, in the late 1970s and 1980s in the United States, Lacan was probably better known as a structuralist, due to the discussion of his work on language and on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," and readers in the English-speaking world are often more familiar with a Lacan who uncovers the workings of structure at every turn—even at the very core of what we take to be our most precious, inalienable "selves"—seemingly leaving aside the problematic of subjectivity altogether.

In part 1 of this book, I retrace Lacan's extremely far-reaching examination of "otherness" as that which is alien or foreign to an as-yet-unspecified subject. That otherness runs the unlikely gamut from the unconscious (the Other as language) and the ego (the imaginary other [ideal ego] and the Other as desire [ego ideal]) to the Freudian superego (the Other as jouissance). We are alienated insofar as we are spoken by a language that functions, in certain respects, like a machine, computer, or recording/assembling device with a life of its own; insofar as our needs and pleasures are organized and channeled into socially acceptable forms by our parents' demands (the Other as demand); and insofar as our desire comes into being as the Other's desire. While Lacan incessantly invokes the subject in his seminars and written texts, the Other very often seems to steal the limelight.

Yet it is precisely the extension of the concept of structure or otherness in Lacan's work to its furthest reaches that allows us to see where structure leaves off and something else begins, something that takes exception to structure. In Lacan's work, that which takes exception is twofold: the subject and the object (object *a* as cause of desire).

In part 2 of this book, I show that, departing from his early phenomenological notions, in the 1950s Lacan defines the subject as a position adopted with respect to the Other as language or law; in other words, the subject *is* a rela-

tionship to the symbolic order. The ego is defined in terms of the imaginary register, whereas the subject as such is essentially a positioning in relation to the Other. As Lacan's notion of the Other evolves, the subject is reconceptualized as a stance adopted with respect to the Other's desire (the mother's, parent's, or parents' desire), insofar as that desire arouses the subject's desire, that is, functions as object *a*.

Ever more influenced by Freud's earliest work¹ and his own psychoanalytic practice, Lacan begins (to cast his theoretical evolution in very schematic terms) to see that something in relation to which the subject adopts a stance as a primal experience of pleasure/pain or trauma. The subject comes into being as a form of attraction toward and defense against a primordial, overwhelming experience of what the French call *jouissance*: a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination.

While in the late 1950s Lacan views "being" as something granted the human subject due only to its fantasized relation to the object which brought on that traumatic experience of *jouissance*, he eventually formulates the subject's primordial experience of *jouissance* as stemming from its *traumatic encounter with the Other's desire*. The subject—lacking in being—is thus seen to consist in a relation to, or a stance adopted with respect to, the Other's desire as fundamentally thrilling and yet unnerving, fascinating and yet overwhelming or revolting.

While a child wishes to be recognized by its parents as worthy of their desire, their desire is both mesmerizing and lethal. The subject's precarious existence is sustained by fantasies constructed to keep the subject at just the right distance from that dangerous desire, delicately balancing the attraction and the repulsion.

Nevertheless, that is, in my view, but one face of the Lacanian subject: the subject as fixated, as symptom, as a repetitive, symptomatic way of "getting off" or obtaining *jouissance*. The sense of being that is provided by fantasy is "false being," as Lacan refers to it in the mid-1960s, suggesting thereby that there is something more.

Predictably enough, the second face of the Lacanian subject appears in the overcoming of that fixation, the reconfiguring or traversing of fantasy, and the shifting of the way in which one gets one's kicks or obtains *jouissance*: that is, the face of *subjectivization*, a process of making "one's own" something that was formerly alien.

Through this process, a complete reversal occurs in one's position in relation to the Other's desire. One assumes responsibility for the Other's desire, that foreign power that brought one into being. One takes that causal alterity upon oneself, subjectifying what had previously been experienced as an external, extraneous cause, a foreign roll of the dice at the beginning of one's uni-

verse: destiny. Lacan suggests here a paradoxical move by the analysand, prepared by a specific approach on the analyst's part, to subjectify the cause of his or her existence—the Other's desire that brought him or her into this world—and to become the subject of his or her own fate. Not "it happened to me," but "I saw," "I heard," "I acted."

Hence the gist of Lacan's multiple translations of Freud's "*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*": where the Other pulls the strings (acting as my cause), I must come into being as my own cause.²

As for the object (discussed in detail in part 3 of this book), it evolves alongside the theory of the subject. Just as the subject is first viewed as a stance adopted with respect to the Other, and then with respect to the Other's desire, the object is first viewed as an other like oneself, and is eventually equated with the Other's desire. The parents' desire brought the child into the world, in a very material sense, serving as cause of the child's very being, and eventually as cause of its desire. Fantasy stages the position in which the child would like to see itself with respect to the object that causes, elicits, and incites its desire.

It is Lacan's theory of the object as *cause* of desire, not as something which could somehow *satisfy* desire, that allows us to understand certain of Lacan's innovations in analytic technique. Lacan reconceptualizes the analyst's position in terms of the roles the analyst must avoid (those of imaginary other and of judgmental, all-knowing Other implicit in ego psychology approaches) and the role s/he must position him or herself to play in the subject's fantasy (object *a*) in order to bring about ever greater subjectivization by the analysand of the foreign causes that brought him or her into being.

In Lacan's view of the analytic setting, the analyst is not called on to play the "good object," the "good enough mother," or the strong ego which allies with the patient's weak one. Rather, the analyst must, by maintaining a position of enigmatic desire, come to serve as object in the subject's fantasy in order to bring about a reconfiguration of fantasy, a new stance in relation to *jouissance*, a new subject position. One of the tools for doing so at the analyst's disposal is time, the variable-length session being a means by which to generate the tension necessary to separate the subject from its fantasized relation to the Other's desire.

The object is also elaborated by Lacan as the cause that upsets the smooth functioning of structures, systems, and axiomatic fields, leading to aporias, paradoxes, and conundrums of all kinds. It is the real which is encountered at the points where language and the grids we use to symbolize the world break down. It is the *letter* which insists whenever we try to use the signifier to account for everything and to say it all.

The object thus has more than one function: as the Other's desire, it elicits the subject's desire; but as the letter or signifier (*signifiance*) of the signi-

fier, it has a materiality or substance associated with another kind of pleasure. It is, in a sense, the polyvalence of object *a* that leads Lacan to distinguish sexual desire (the pleasure of desire or desiring, which he refers to as “phallic jouissance,” or more felicitously as “symbolic jouissance”) from another kind of pleasure (“the Other jouissance”).

These two faces of the object, *a* and $S(\mathbb{A})$, allow for an understanding of sexual difference that has yet to be grasped in the English-language work on Lacan, and that goes far beyond current “interpretations” suggesting that, according to Lacan, masculine means subject and feminine means object, or that Lacan falls into the old Freudian trap of equating masculinity with activity and having, femininity with passivity and not having.

Two faces of the subject and two faces of the object. Parallel binary oppositions? I think not. Rather, a form of “Gödelian structuralism,” as I call it, where every system is decompleted by the alterity or heterogeneity it contains within itself.

The status of psychoanalytic discourse, taken up in part 4 of this book, is an unavoidable issue for clinicians practicing in a scientific context like the United States. In an environment in which the director of the National Institute of Mental Health in Washington can openly declare that the medical establishment is likely to “conquer” virtually all mental illness by the year 2000;³ in which day after day the papers announce that the gene “responsible for” alcoholism, homosexuality, phobia, schizophrenia, or what have you has been found; and in which naive scientific attacks on the foundations of psychoanalysis can be taken as serious blows to its credibility, analysts and the analytically inclined must become better equipped to intelligently discuss the epistemological status of their field.

For while psychoanalysis may not constitute a science, as “science” is currently understood, it has no need to seek legitimation from the existing medical or scientific establishment. Lacan’s work provides us the wherewithal to constitute psychoanalysis as a discourse which is at once historically dependent on the birth of science and yet able to stand on its own two feet, so to speak. Psychoanalysis, as conceptualized by Lacan, is not only a discourse with its own specific grounding, but also one that is in a position to analyze the structure and workings of other “disciplines” (both academic and scientific), shedding new light on their mainsprings and blind spots.

Lacan points to the possibility of radicalizing or revolutionizing science, as it is usually understood, by introducing psychoanalytic notions therein—thus in a sense pushing back the frontiers of science in such a way as to redefine the *object* of scientific inquiry. Instead of claiming, as some do, that psychoanalysis is doomed to forever remain outside the field of science, Lacan’s point is rather that *science is not yet equal to the task of accommodating psychoanalysis*.⁴ Scientific discourse may, some day, be recast in such a way as to

encompass psychoanalysis within its ambit, but in the meantime psychoanalysis can continue to elaborate its own distinctive praxis: clinical practice and theory building.

This thumbnail sketch indicates the general trajectory of my argument and will, I hope, serve the reader as something of a road map in reading this book, to be referred back to occasionally, as needed. For while subject, object, Other, and discourse are the main concepts developed here, to discuss them in context requires an explanation of a great many more of Lacan's basic concepts and of his earlier and later attempts to formulate psychoanalytic experience using them.

Some of the concepts that Lacan shaped and reshaped in the course of his career and that I am led to take up here, include the imaginary, symbolic, and real; need, demand, desire, and *jouissance*; the subject of the statement, the subject of enunciation (or speaking subject), the subject of the unconscious, the split subject, the subject as a defense, and the subject as metaphor; the paternal metaphor, primal repression, and secondary repression; neurosis, psychosis, and perversion; the signifier (the master or unary signifier and the binary signifier), the letter, and signifierness; the phallus (as the signifier of desire), the phallic function, sexual difference, phallic *jouissance*, Other *jouissance*, masculine structure, and feminine structure; alienation, separation, the traversing of fantasy, and the "pass"; punctuation, interpretation, the variable-length session, and the role of the analyst as pure desirousness; existence and ex-sistence; the four discourses (master's, hysteric's, analyst's, and university), their mainsprings, and the sacrifices they entail; knowledge, misrecognition, and truth; discourse, metalanguage, and suture; formalization, polarization, and transmission. The road map provided in this preface will hopefully help the reader distinguish the forest from the trees in my exposition of this broad range of concepts.

The chapters in part 1 aim at simplicity, assuming little if any previous knowledge of Lacan's work. Parts 2, 3, and 4 become progressively more complex, building upon the foundations laid in the earlier parts of the book. Certain readers may wish to skip some of the denser chapters the first time through (such as chapters 5, 6, and 8), moving, for example, directly from chapter 7, on object *a*, to chapters 9 and 10, on discourse. Many of the chapters can be read independently, even though they do build on, and occasionally refer back to, material that has come before. Readers with a good deal of prior knowledge of Lacan's work will probably want to skip chapter 1 altogether and perhaps even go directly to chapter 5, merely thumbing through the earlier material.

One of my more general aims in this book is to begin to resituate discussion of Lacan's work in a context which does not leave clinical considerations by the

wayside. In America, the psychoanalytic community has resisted Lacan's thought for several decades now, whereas the more literary and linguistically minded have demonstrated the greatest and most enduring interest in his work. The historical and intellectual reasons for this situation are too well known to be reiterated here, but the result has, in my view, been a skewed or partial representation of his thought. While the present book was not written with clinicians specifically in mind,⁵ my own experience with the praxis that is psychoanalysis does, I believe, form its backdrop.

I have made no pretense in this book of presenting a "balanced" view of Lacan's work. A balanced view would have to provide a great deal of historical perspective on Lacan's development—explaining his multifarious surrealist, Freudian, phenomenological, existential, post-Freudian, Saussurian, Jakobsonian, and Lévi-Straussian influences (just for starters)—and situate Lacan's forays into psychoanalytic theory in the context of debates going on in France and elsewhere at the time.

Instead I have attempted to present a view of Lacan's work which many will no doubt find overly static and closed, one of the many fascinations of his work lying precisely in its constant transformations, self-corrections, and reversals of perspective. I have endeavored to provide a view of several of Lacan's major concepts, not as they evolved from the 1930s on, but rather from a 1970s perspective. On occasion, I try to guide the reader through certain of Lacan's early ways of formulating psychoanalytic experience by "translating" them into Lacan's own later terms, but in general I provide a cut of Lacanian theory that I consider to be particularly powerful and useful to the clinician and theorist alike. Oppositions such as that between "full" and "empty" speech, found in Lacan's earliest seminars, are, to my way of thinking, superseded in his later work; thus as interesting as they may be in their own right, I have preferred to let others present them.⁶

My punctuation of Lacan's thought, which emphasizes certain developments and deemphasizes others, will, I hope, allow the reader to orient him or herself better in the voluminous mass of Lacan's published and yet-to-be published work. Having taught classes for a number of years on the basis of certain of Lacan's seminars, following the step-by-step development of a particular concept (like that of psychoanalytic ethics in Seminar VII or of transference in Seminar VIII), the excitement of seeing such an active and creative mind at work is often overshadowed by the difficulty involved in isolating an identifiable thesis. Working through Lacan's seminars is an important task for all serious students of psychoanalysis, and yet it is, in my experience, helpful to have a number of landmarks in what may otherwise be perceived as a somewhat amorphous field.

The task of interpreting Lacan's work is, like that of interpreting Plato's and Freud's, endless, and I make no pretense here of having the last word. It should

be clear that what I am offering up here is an interpretation; in particular, the theory of the Lacanian subject presented in chapters 5 and 6 is my own, and my reading of Lacan's work on sexual difference in chapter 8 is likewise original.

The appendices include material too technical to maintain the general flow of the discussion here. They concern Lacan's detailed models of the structure of language, and the effects generated by the anomaly that arises within it (object *a*).

In the glossary provided at the end of this book, the reader will find short explanations of the major symbols (known as "mathemes") discussed in these pages. Lacan's mathemes condense and embody a considerable quantity of conceptualization, and while I have attempted in the glossary to summarize their most salient aspects, their proper use requires a firm overall grasp of Lacan's theoretical framework.

When quoting Lacan's work, I have, wherever possible, provided references to the English editions, but I have taken considerable liberties with the existing translations: their inadequacies are becoming ever more glaring. "*Écrits* 1966" refers to the French edition of the *Écrits* published by Seuil in Paris, while "*Écrits*" alone refers to Alan Sheridan's 1977 English selection published by Norton.⁷ Page references to Seminars I, II, VII, and XI always correspond to the English translations published by Norton. I refer to the Seminars by their numbers alone; full references are found in the bibliography. When quoting Freud's work, I have provided volume and page numbers from the Standard Edition (abbreviated SE), but I have often modified the translations on the basis of far more interesting or striking "nonstandard" translations.

April 1994

Part One _____

STRUCTURE: ALIENATION AND THE OTHER

The self is an other.

Language and Otherness

A Slip of the Other's Tongue

A patient walks into his analyst's office and sits down in the armchair. He looks the analyst right in the eye, picks up the thread where he left off at the end of his last session, and immediately makes a blunder, saying "I know that in my relationship with my father there was a lot of tension, and I think it came from the fact that he was working much too hard at a schnob he couldn't stand and took it out on me." He meant to say "job" but "schnob" came out instead.

Discourse is never one-dimensional. A slip of the tongue immediately reminds us that more than one discourse can use the same mouthpiece at the same time.

Two distinct levels can be identified here: an intentional discourse consisting of what the speaker was *trying* to say or *meant* to say and an unintentional discourse which in this case takes the form of a deformed or garbled word, a kind of conflation of "job," "snob," and perhaps other words as well. The analyst may already know, for example, that the speaker thinks of the eldest child in the family, say, his older brother or sister, as an effete snob and feels that their father doted on that older sibling excessively—to a fault, as far as the patient or analysand (i.e., the person engaged in analyzing him or herself) is concerned. The analysand may also think of the word "schnoz," and recall that as a young child he was afraid of his father's nose, which reminded him of a witch's nose; the word "schmuck" may then also pass through his mind.

This simple example already allows us to distinguish between two different types of discourse or, more simply stated, two different types of talk:¹

- *ego talk*: everyday talk about what we consciously think and believe about ourselves
- and *some other kind of talk*.

Lacan's Other is, at its most basic level, related to that *other kind of talk*.² For we can tentatively assume that there are not only two different kinds of talk, but that they come, roughly speaking, from two different psychological places: the ego (or self) and the Other.

Psychoanalysis begins with the presupposition that that Other kind of talk stems from *an other* which is locatable in some sense; it holds that unintentional words that are spoken, blurted out, mumbled, or garbled come from

some other place, some other agency than the ego. Freud called that Other place the unconscious, and Lacan states in no uncertain terms that “the unconscious is the Other’s discourse,”³ that is, the unconscious consists of those words which come from some other place than ego talk. At this most basic level then, the unconscious is the Other’s discourse (table 1.1).

Table 1.1

EGO/SELF DISCOURSE	OTHER DISCOURSE/ THE OTHER'S DISCOURSE
conscious intentional	unconscious unintentional

Now how did that Other discourse wind up “inside” of us? We tend to believe that we are in control, and yet at times something extraneous and foreign speaks, as it were, through *our* mouths. From the viewpoint of the self or ego, “I” runs the show: that aspect of us that we call “I” believes that it knows what it thinks and feels, and believes that it knows why it does what it does. The intruding element—that Other kind of talk—is shoved aside, considered random, and thus ultimately of no consequence. People prone to making slips of the tongue often just figure that they get tongue-tied now and then or that their brains simply work faster than their mouths and wind up trying to get two words out of that one slow-working mouth at the same time. While slips of the tongue are recognized in such cases as foreign to the ego or self, their importance is pushed aside. While in most cases a person who just made a slip would probably endorse the following statement, “I just made a random, meaningless goof,” Freud’s retort would be “The truth has spoken.”

Whereas most people attach no particular importance to that Other discourse that breaks through and interrupts ego discourse, psychoanalysts hold that there is method in the seeming madness, an altogether identifiable logic behind those interruptions, in other words, that there is nothing random about them whatsoever. Analysts seek to discover the method in that madness, for it is only by changing the logic that governs those interruptions, only by impacting that Other discourse, that change can come about.

Freud spent a great deal of time in *The Interpretation of Dreams, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* unraveling the mechanisms governing what he daringly called “unconscious thought.”⁴ In his widely read article entitled “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious” (*Écrits*), Lacan pointed out the relationship between Freud’s concepts of displacement and condensation typical of dream work and the

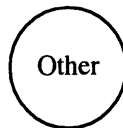
linguistic notions of metonymy and metaphor. But Lacan by no means left off there; he went on to seek models for deciphering unconscious mechanisms in the then developing field of cybernetics. In chapter 2, I examine in detail Lacan's juxtaposition of ideas contained in Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" and ideas inspired by the cybernetics of the 1950s. Lacan's work on Poe has been commented upon by myriad literary critics,⁵ but few authors have followed Lacan's own speculations on the workings of the unconscious that stemmed from it.

In this chapter my focus is not so much on how this Other discourse works, but rather on how it got there: How did it get "inside" of us? How did something which seems so extraneous or foreign wind up speaking through *our* mouths?

Lacan accounts for the foreignness as follows: we are born into a world of discourse, a discourse or language that precedes our birth and that will live on after our death. Long before a child is born, a place is prepared for it in its parents' linguistic universe: the parents speak of the child yet to be born, try to select the perfect name for it, prepare a room for it, and begin imagining what their lives will be like with an additional member of the household. The words they use to talk about the child have often been in use for decades, if not centuries, and the parents have generally neither defined nor redefined them despite many years of use. Those words are handed down to them by centuries of tradition: they constitute the Other of language, as Lacan can call it in French (*l'Autre du langage*), but which we may try to render as the linguistic Other, or the Other *as* language.

If we draw a circle and posit that it represents the set of all words in a language, then we can associate it with what Lacan calls the Other (figure 1.1). It is the Other as the collection of all the words and expressions in a language. This is a rather static view, as a language such as English is always evolving, new words being added almost every day and old ones falling into disuse, but as a first gloss it will serve our present purposes well enough.⁶

Figure 1.1



A child is thus born into a preestablished place in its parents' linguistic universe, a space often prepared many months, if not years, before the child sees the light of day. And most children are bound to learn the language spoken by their parents, which is to say that, in order to express their wishes, they are virtually obliged to go beyond the crying stage—a stage in which their