

FORMALISING-TO-THE-LIMITS AND THE END OF ANALYSIS

Jason Glynos

I will tackle the issue of formalisation in psychoanalysis by making more precise the meaning and significance of Lacan's claim that 'there is no metalanguage'. My investigation will be conducted against the implicit background of another of his well-known claims: 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. I will approach this task, however, from the opposite direction. The question becomes: In what sense can we say that Lacan thinks that there *is* a metalanguage? In answering this question I will present some evidence in support of the (hypo)thesis that Lacan *does* hold onto a conception of metalanguage but that this is, paradigmatically, mathematics *qua* formalised writing. This line of inquiry generates at least two insights which I will highlight in the final part of the paper. First, I argue that it suggests a productive way of reading the upper left hand side of the graph of desire, as found in his text *The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious*.¹ More specifically, I argue that we can conceive the relation signifier<?>*jouissance* in terms of a notion that can be called *formalised delimitation*, a process of *formalisation-to-the-limits*. Secondly, and finally, I suggest that this notion of formalisation-to-the-limits carries with it implications for how we view the end of analysis, whether conceived in terms of 'crossing the fantasy', the pass, or the dissolution of transference love.

In a first approach, we could say that 'there is no metalanguage' is a remark which seems to possess the aura of a retort, especially when viewed against the backdrop of Lacan's 1956 statement, during his seminar *The Psychoses*, that "[a]ll language implies a metalanguage, it's already a metalanguage of its own register".² And why is language already a metalanguage? "It's because potentially all language is to be translated that it implies metaphor and metalanguage, language speaking of language". (SIII, 226).

Nevertheless, in Lacan's *Subversion of the Subject* of 1960, we find the following passage: "Let us set out from the conception of the Other as the locus of the signifier. Any statement of authority has no other guarantee than its very enunciation, and it is pointless for it to seek it in another signifier, which could not appear outside this locus in any way. Which is what I mean when I say that no metalanguage can be spoken, or, more aphoristically, that there is no Other of the Other. And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the Law) presents himself to fill the gap, he does so as an imposter" (E, 310-1).

Support for the claim that Lacan does not, even at the time of *The Subversion of the Subject*, give up on metalanguage begins by taking him at his word. (Of course, not giving up on metalanguage does not imply no shift in its conceptualization.) So, if we take Lacan at his word, we must say that his statement 'there is no Other of the Other' means that no metalanguage can be *spoken*. For it is clear that he is not simply saying that 'there is no metalanguage'. He says, to quote him again, that "no metalanguage can be *spoken*". The limitation placed on language (i.e., that there is no *metalanguage*) is thus cast in terms of *speech*. Does this then mean that there can be a metalanguage that is *not* spoken? A passage in his 1960-61 Seminar on *Transference* corroborates this hypothesis: "There *can* be a metalanguage on the blackboard, when I am writing little signs, *a*, *b*, *x*, *kappa*, it works, it is all right and it functions, it is mathematics. But as regards what is called the word, namely that a subject engages himself — in language one can no doubt speak about the word, and you see that I am in the process of doing so, but in doing so all the effects of the word are engaged, and this is why you are told that *at the level of the word* there is no metalanguage or, if you wish, that there is no metadiscourse. There is no *action*, to conclude, which definitively transcends the effects of the repressed. Perhaps, if there is one in the final analysis, at the very most it is the one in which the subject as such dissolves, is eclipsed, and disappears. It is an action about which nothing can be *said*. It is, if you wish, the horizon of this action which gives its structure to my notation of the fantasy. And my little notation, this is why it is algebraic, why *it can only be written* with chalk on the blackboard, that the notation of the fantasy is $\$ \diamond a$, which one can read, \diamond : desire of little *a*, the object of desire. You will see that all of this will lead us perhaps all the same to perceive in a more precise fashion the essential necessity there is for us not to forget this [unsayable] *place*³... that the algebraic notation alone can preserve in the formula that I give you of *fantasy*".⁴

Perhaps, then, this is why Lacan feels it necessary to support his enunciation of the signifier 'There is no Other of the Other' by writing on the blackboard a matheme or *pure* signifier: S(A). As he had put it as early as 1956, "[m]athematics... uses a language of pure signifier, a metalanguage *par excellence*. It reduces language to its systematic function upon which another system is built, grasping the former in its articulation" (SIII, 227).

In *Subversion of the Subject*, Lacan tells us that the formula for fantasy "is created to allow a hundred and one different readings, a multiplicity that is admissible as long as the spoken remains caught in its algebra" (E, 313), an assertion, moreover, that does not contradict what he says "about the impossibility of a metalanguage. [For its component elements] are not *transcendent* signifiers; they are the *indices* of an *absolute* signification..., a notion... appropriate... to the condition of fantasy" (E, 314). This allows us to conceive fantasy, at least in its fundamental use, not as something that can be interpreted-dialectised (as a symptom would be), but rather as something that is posited-constructed as absolute, as axiomatic; something to be *crossed* rather than interpreted. We could say that while the symptom falls on the side of *mobility*, (the fundamental) fantasy falls on the side of *inertia*. It is the crossing of the fundamental fantasy, then, that finally ushers in the *beyond* of analysis, the domain of creation proper *qua* the *well-spoken*.

Lacan's reference to mathematical formalisation, especially within the context of his theory of fantasy, brings up the issue of the relation of modern science to psychoanalysis. More specifically, it seems to aim directly at the possibility of articulating the signifier to the absolute singularity of *jouissance* in a way that could elucidate Lacan's formula for fantasy in the graph of desire. After invoking some themes specific to mathematical formalisation, I will conclude that this hinge can be conceived in terms of the process (or rather push) of formalisation. In this respect, mathematics is seen as part of the modern scientific enterprise of formalising our symbolically-structured observations up to their very limits. The Lacanian idea here is that it is only by pushing formalisation up to its limits, up to its impasses, that we hold onto the real.

How then to say something about the absolutely singular nature of the subject's *jouissance*? The injunction 'Formalise!', even if we accept it as necessary, is not sufficient to adequately characterize psychoanalysis as scientific. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan asks himself: Is formula-making "enough to define the conditions of a science? I don't think so. A false science, just like a true science, may be expressed in formulae".⁵ What I would like to propose, therefore, is that what must be added to formula-making before psychoanalysis can be characterized as scientific is that *it touches the real*. And in order not to lose sight of the specificity of psychoanalysis in its difference from science, we need to keep in mind the following. To say that psychoanalysis is *scientific* is not to say that it *is* a science. For while modern science pursues its task by foreclosing the divided subject, psychoanalysis brings it back into the fold; it does not shy away from the impossibly conjoined subject-object disjunction that is rendered palpable by Lacan's formula for fantasy: $\$ \diamond a$.

This, I suggest, opens up a way to approach the graph of desire, inasmuch as it dramatizes the relation signifier<?>*jouissance* or, to put it in slightly different terms, the relation universality<?>singularity. I propose the following formulation. The relation signifier<?>*jouissance* is here to be articulated not simply as: *jouissance* is what is *represented* through the formalisation (or structuration) of a set of pure signifiers, but as: *jouissance* is what is *circumscribed* through a formalisation that is pushed up to its very limits, up to the point at which it is impossible to formalise any further, up to formalisation's impasses. Thus, the lack in the Other (designated by S(A) or $\sqrt{-1}$), a place, Lacan reminds us, called *jouissance* (E, 317), can only be approached through a process of *delimitation* which one can call *formalisation-to-the-limits*. The point is that formalisation is used to *delimit* that which *cannot* be formalised-universalised, i.e., that which is *absolutely singular*. This seems to be the only legitimate way of conceiving how the truly singular object of *jouissance* can ever be related to the universal signifier; how it is possible, in other words, to achieve *absolute difference* between two elements and *still* hold onto the idea of a relation. Indeed, we can conceive this impossible link, this "conjoined disjunction", in a related way by invoking the verb 'to drop': The object of *jouissance* is what is circumscribed (or cut out) and 'dropped' through the process of formalising-to-the-limits.

We see then how we arrive at a way of thinking about the impossible relation holding between the universal signifier and the singular object of *jouissance*. They are utterly incommensurable and yet they can be related through the idea of *delimitation*, through the operation of *formalising-to-the-limits*. But is this not just another way of articulating the impossible relation evoked-concealed by fantasy? In other words, does <?> not equal \diamond ? It should come as no surprise then to find fantasy suspended between *jouissance* and signifier in the graph of desire. It simultaneously evokes and conceals the lack of the

Other, the idea that no metalanguage can be spoken. And, as Lacan suggests in the passage quoted from his *Transference* seminar, the ethical practice of psychoanalysis *requires* the support of a universal and senseless writing; it requires it insofar as it can give direction to a treatment that aims to touch the impossible relation obtaining in fantasy so that it can be *experienced* as such, so that it can give rise to the *singularity* of the paradoxical experience called ‘crossing the fantasy’.

At first glance, of course, it may seem outrageous to think that mathematical formalisation, with its cold, almost surgical, connotations, can have anything to do with the intimate experiences we often associate with analysis in general, and the end of analysis in particular. But it is precisely by taking this counterintuitive move seriously that we can account for one of the most unique features of the Lacanian orientation — a feature, it is perhaps worth stressing, which has nothing to do with being insensitive.

To clarify the link between formalisation and the end of analysis I begin by pointing out how the end of analysis coincides with the dissolution of transference. Freud discovered very quickly that the fundamental obstacle to analytic progress is transference love. At a very general level, we could say that at the start of an analysis the analyst is put in the position of someone who knows, someone who, it is hoped, will diagnose the analysand’s condition and rid her symptoms. As the sessions go by, however, it becomes progressively less clear what exactly the analyst is up to. The analyst’s interventions (which in a sense are — when taken collectively — simply a contextualised translation of the fundamental rule) rapidly lose their status as demands, as concrete requests with a clear objective. In short, the analyst’s desire rises to the fore in the form of an enigma: What does the analyst want? What am I for the analyst? This dialectical shift of subjective positioning, then, generates successive bursts of material that, during the course of analysis, is systematically formalised and progressively reduced.

In conclusion, we could say that from a Lacanian perspective the end of analysis involves the dissolution of transference love, by which is meant the radical renunciation by the analysand of the *jouissance* procured in presenting himself as an object to fill the lack in the Other. This coincides with the end of a continuous process I am calling formalisation-to-the-limits, entailing the construction of a real knowledge in a meaningless matheme or formula — a formula in which the subject’s entire being is abbreviated — that can be transmitted through the pass to the community of analysts.

1. J. Lacan, *The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious* in *Ecrits: A Selection*, transl. A. Sheridan, New York, Norton, 1977, p.292 (hereinafter E.).
2. J. Lacan, *Seminar III: The Psychoses*, transl. R. Grigg, London, Routledge, 1993 [1981], p. 226, hereinafter SIII,
3. “[Un]sayable”, Lacan points out, “precisely in as much as the subject disintegrates there”.
4. J. Lacan, *Le Seminaire, Livre VIII, Le Transfer*, unedited, Seminar 31 May 1961, English translation by C. Gallagher.
5. J. Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, transl. A. Sheridan, New York, Norton, 1977, p.10.

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