

# 3

---

## THE UNCONSCIOUS AND THE 'I'

Twenty years ago most people who could not cope with life were looked after in an 'asylum'—now they have been 'returned to the community', the streets, that is. An unprecedented number of disturbed individuals wander about talking to themselves or shouting at some invisible enemy. Usually their hairstyle is distinctive—long, matted, dirty, sticking up in clumps over the head.

Not looking after your hair is a sign of despair and self-hatred, looking after it shows a necessary self-respect. Tony Adams, England and Arsenal defender and reformed alcoholic, said that in his drinking days he would wake up and pull on a pair of jeans he'd peed in the night before but which had dried out (*Guardian* 5 September, 1998). This was not a sign of psychic health. People use the word 'narcissistic' to criticise someone for excessive self-concern but a degree of self-love, corresponding to the instinct for survival, accounts for much that is best in civilisation. We could not manage without it.

The ego offers positive forms of pleasure. In the dystopian future of Ray Bradbury's story *Fahrenheit 451* all books are forbidden because they make people unhappy by making them think about themselves. As they do, at least in the 1966 film of the book. At one point Oskar Werner reads the opening of Dickens' *David Copperfield*:

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life. I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve hour at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

Oskar Werner himself cannot stop crying as he reads because he realises what he's been missing. Here lie the pleasures of the ego, consciousness, the individual's inner world, bodily control, self-awareness, an effect of mastery, the ability to distinguish fact from fiction. Modern democracy, voting, opinion polls, the civil rights of the individual—all are supported by the pleasures of narcissism.

## THE EGO

'A unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed' (Freud, 'On Narcissism', 1973–86, vol 11:69). Unlike the soul of a Christian, Freud does not think that the ego is born into you once and for all but comes about in a material process. One might say that it grows. From his first work on hysteria Freud referred to the ego (in German simply *Ich*, the 'I') to mean something that was only a *part* of the psychic apparatus. After that it becomes a mobile and evolving concept. At times, especially in Freud's early writing, the ego seems like a person but in the later emphasis it is more like an agency. The trouble is that

the idea of the ego has to do a lot of different things and no job-description fits it precisely. Leaving aside some of these theoretical complexities I shall concentrate on what the ego does.

We have already seen that the ego defends itself from certain ideas, in hysteria for example; that it is closely linked with consciousness, is opposed to the unconscious, helps to carry out the process of censorship and repression. In approaching the idea of the 'I' Freud faces a problem. His topic is the unconscious and the unconscious is basically interested in pleasure rather than reality. So when Freud wants to explain why we don't walk into lampposts he can't very well start with external reality as we perceive it. His solution is elegant and plausible. The ego is developed, with an awareness of reality, so that the unconscious does not waste its time pursuing objects which are imaginary and much less pleasurable than real ones:

It was only the non-occurrence of the expected satisfaction, the disappointment experienced, that led to the abandonment of this attempt at satisfaction by means of hallucination. Instead of it, the psychical apparatus had to decide to form a conception of the real circumstances in the external world and to endeavour to make a real alteration in them.

(1973–86, vol 11:36)

Freud refers to the ego which performs this task in terms of perception and consciousness. In fact, it is here that the paths between psychology and psychoanalysis diverge, for most psychology takes the way in which individuals come to a knowledge of reality as its exclusive topic.

For the embryo in the womb there can be no distinction between itself and what's beyond it—its every need is immediately satisfied. For the newborn baby, even after the trauma of birth, most of this blissful, self-enclosed state can continue simply because babies who are not fed and cleaned by others do not survive. If you are

hungry you get the breast; if you are wet and dirty you are cleaned up. Lacan jokes that the infant is an 'hommelette' (1977b:197), spreading like egg batter on the pan, with no defined limit. At this stage the infant is neither masculine nor feminine but combines both possibilities; in French *homme* is 'man' while *-ette* is a feminine ending.

Isn't this why babies are beautiful and young children delightful? 'The charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility', says Freud hardly pausing before he adds the usual sardonic rider, that so 'does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us such as cats and large beasts of prey' (1973–86, vol 11:83).

This can't last. Gradually, often painfully, the new arrival learns it is not everything and everywhere but that it is surrounded by something else. A crawling baby bumps into things; like an impossible drunk, a toddler keeps bumping into things hard and falling over. Moving around, being weaned from the breast, having to control our urine and faeces, we quickly learn about inside and outside. The distinction gets mapped onto pleasure and unpleasure: 'A tendency arises to separate from the ego everything that can become a source of such unpleasure, to throw it outside and to create a pure pleasure-ego which is confronted by a strange and threatening "outside"' (1973–86, vol 12:254). As a result the ego comes to detach itself from the external world: 'originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself' (ibid: 255).

## Defence

To maintain itself the ego must not only repel real possibilities of unpleasure coming from the outside world but also defend itself against the unconscious, against drives which menace its stability by getting it too excited. As a way to cope with these threats the ego has at its disposal a wide variety of mechanisms for redirecting

libido into safer channels, including repression, projection and introjection (forms of identification that will be discussed shortly), rationalisation and sublimation.

In sublimation sexual feeling is 'desexualised' by being redirected onto non-sexual or less obviously sexual activities. Art is a very good example of sublimation. For example, instead of *actually* looking at attractive naked bodies, in most art galleries you can look at paintings of them, and even convince yourself it is educational. Sublimation is particularly important in helping people to manage in social life.

Two important mechanisms of defence are denial and disavowal. The beautiful German words for these, *Verneinung* and *Verleugnung*, fit into a series with others such as *Verdrängung* (repression) and *Verwerfung* (in Freud 'repudiation' but translated from Lacan as 'foreclosure'). These work with the German prefix, *Ver-*, suggesting removal and reversal, all activities of consciousness trying to hold itself together in the face of unconscious pressures. We have already come across denial in the story of the patient who tells Freud that whoever she is the person in his dream is 'not my mother'. Another example would be Mary in Eugene O'Neill's play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Her son, Edmund, manifestly has tuberculosis and is racked with spasms of coughing though she keeps telling herself that it is just a cold.

Denial deals with the inner world, disavowal generally is concerned with external things. Freud's account of fetishism is an example of disavowal. He treated a young man who could not make love except to a woman with a shiny nose and concluded from his analysis that the shiny nose (and looking at it) was a fetish. The process of fetishism works like this. If a very young child imagines the mother has a penis and then comes to the conclusion that it is missing, it can feel threatened by the idea of castration. A fetish is an object taken as a replacement for the mother's penis whose absence is thus disavowed. 'An inquisitive boy' might peer 'at the woman's genitals from below' ('Fetishism',

1973–86, vol 7:354), and then make a fetish of something from the vicinity which he saw *before* his discovery—Freud mentions ‘the foot’ or ‘shoe’, ‘fur and velvet’, even ‘an athletic support-belt which could also be worn as bathing drawers’ (ibid: 356). That Freud has discovered something here is testified by a certain kind of pornography which specialises in fetish gear, as well as shops which sell items such as satin basques with lace trimmings, black rubber underwear, elaborate suspender belts, certain garments made of leather. By such out-of-the-way methods as fetishism the ego protects itself.

### Identification

As he worked with patients Freud came across problems with the ego. Why did they consciously resist interpretations Freud had grounds for thinking were correct? How could the ego bring about repression if it were not intimately in touch with the unconscious? If someone in love gets a cold or slight toothache they quickly lose interest in the outside world and the loved one: how could this happen unless libido is being redirected from the world onto the ego itself? What is going on when you have a shower and enjoy caressing yourself all over with soapy hands? Would this not lead to direction of ‘the libido to the subject’s own body’ (1973–86, vol 1:465)? Recognising that the ego did not just deal with reality but was available for a variety of unconscious activities made sense of a lot of experiences people have. Identification is one such activity.

Identification is what we laugh at when a young child copies exactly and without really understanding it his mother’s habit of saying, ‘Well, there we are’. Identification, Lacan notes, means that ‘the child who sees another fall, cries’ (1977a:19). If you are sitting on the upper deck of a bus on a pouring wet day and see a cyclist wobble uncertainly in front, you find your heart in your mouth for them, as they say—you feel you are them. Identification means that individuals brought up in a group want to become like

the senior members of that group, whether that group is a nation, a clan, a football team, a family. 'The boss told me to go out and do it and I done it' the footballer who has just scored an outstanding goal says in a contented tone. The young man in the crowd at Wimbledon who (irritatingly) shouts 'Come on, Pete' to the international tennis star, Sampras, is identifying himself with someone on first name terms with the tennis star. The most far-reaching possibility of identification is that through which boys get to become like their fathers—father-figures, role-models—and girls like their mothers.

You can't identify with what you are. That is, strictly, the process of identification presupposes that subject and object—the one who does the identifying and what they identify with—remain distinct and separate. In unconscious identification they achieve resemblance through fantasy. This moves in one of two directions: either the subject goes out to the object (projection) or the subject takes the object into themselves (introjection). Identification is a form of regression because 'identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object' (1973–86, vol 12:137), like mother and baby. An adult is always liable to return to it.

On 30 June 1998 the newspapers carried the story of a woman who was suing her employer for wrongful dismissal. In reply the company said that she had been so affected by the death of Princess Diana that she couldn't work. She spent the next week crying, talking on the phone to friends about how tragic it was and covering her desk in poems she had written for the princess. This woman didn't know Princess Di personally but, like millions of others who left flowers at Kensington Palace and wept publicly, she mourned her.

There are two questions here: why the identification? how did identification lead to mourning? Why Princess Di should be the object of such wide-spread identification is not so easy to answer because there are almost as many forms of identification as there are people who do the identifying. She was the best known young

woman in the world, she was beautiful, she married a Prince, she had wealth beyond most people's wildest dreams. But she is a very open signifier. I wonder if we might explain the phenomenon along the following lines? (a) Di was very unhappy in her personal life, losing her mother at an early age, losing her husband soon after the marriage; (b) but she was in a position to compensate for this loss with a stunning exhibition of narcissism—looks, clothes, dress, style, fashionable surroundings. Is this what particularly attracts identification—that she tried specially hard to make up for rootlessness through spectacular consumption and looking good?

The Diana figure promises the pleasures not just of fantasy identification with a star ('wouldn't it be nice if I was...') but since 31 August 1997 with a *fallen* star. Freud marks off mourning for the dead, a largely conscious process which leads to renewal of normal life, from melancholia, an unconscious effect, in which the mourning cannot be completed, cannot be worked through. In 1861 Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, died; the Queen retired from public life, wrapped herself in widow's weeds, and lived in seclusion in Windsor Castle for the next 20 years. Her mourning became melancholy, as did that of Hamlet for his father (Freud's own example). It is significant that Hamlet preserves an idealised memory of his father while referring to himself with contempt and self-hatred.

In 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) Freud argues that a state of melancholy expresses itself in a diminution of self-regard, 'an impoverishment' of the ego (1973–86, vol 11:254). The ego is judged by another part of the ego, what Freud at this point calls 'the critical agency' (ibid: 256), the ego ideal, and which he later defines more precisely as the super-ego.

The lost object (Diana, Albert, old King Hamlet) can seem to be kept alive if its place is taken by the ego, if there is 'an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object' (ibid: 258). But this only happens on condition that the ego ideal becomes active in criticising and judging the ego—the widow who endlessly



reproaches herself for being responsible for her loved one's death. A similar process may explain the pleurably sad feeling of nostalgia, when you resuscitate an image of your former self by realising that it is gone for ever. Or the enjoyably depressing songs of the Manchester bands, with titles such as 'Girlfriend in a coma' and 'Love will tear us apart'.

### *THE EGO AND THE ID (1923)*

Work such as this on melancholy and the two positions of identification it involves lead Freud inexorably to the conclusion that 'much of the ego is itself unconscious' (1973–86, vol 11:290). This entails a revision in his conception of the organisation of the unconscious, usually categorised in terms of the *topographical*, the *dynamic* and the *economic*. These terms are not as formidable as they sound. Topography refers to the mapping of the system—earlier frontiers between conscious, preconscious and unconscious now give way to a division between ego, super-ego and id. The dynamic relation is that in which conscious and unconscious are actively split in the repression of the unconscious. Economy alludes to the balance and distribution of psychic energy across subjectivity.

In *The Ego and the Id* Freud recapitulates the functions of the ego:

It is to this ego that consciousness is attached; the ego controls the approaches to motility...it is the mental agency which supervises all its own processes, and which goes to sleep at night, though even then it exercises the censorship in dreams. From this ego proceed the repressions...

(1973–86, vol 11:355)

Now he accepts that the perception—consciousness system is 'superficial' (ibid: 361) in the explicit sense that it constitutes the outer surface of the ego. The ego itself 'merges into' the id (ibid:

362). However, Freud reaffirms that the ego is a 'bodily ego' (ibid: 364) since it is the interface at which the sensations of skin, membrane and nerve in contact with the outside become psychically charged.

Building on his new understanding that, at a very deep level, identification is originally a form of 'emotional tie with an object', that desire and identification are at first very close to each other, Freud is in a position to argue that the ego develops a relation to the id. The ego—whose constant theme is deprivation and the limits to desire—can gain some control of the id by reminding it of its inevitable losses and offering itself as a substitute for them. Freud says the ego has a kind of sexual relation with the id: 'When the ego assumes the features of the object, it is forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id's loss by saying: "Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object"' (ibid: 369). Since the ego has no energy of its own, how otherwise can it acquire it from the id except by *seducing* it, as it were?

Identification also explains the origins of the ego ideal or superego when the boy tries to be like the father—like him except of course that he can't have the mother. So 'the super-ego retains the character of the father' (ibid: 374). When we were children we 'admired and feared' our parents, then later, Freud says simply, 'we took them into ourselves' (ibid: 376). The growing child begins to measure what they are against a happier memory of how they were. We idealise our earliest, narcissistic state and try 'to recover' that (1973–86, vol 11:95), a development which reinforces our own voice of conscience.

The super-ego, this alien we have taken inside us, turns out to have some fearful properties, just as even a loving father has for a small boy such as Little Hans. Freud writes eloquently about (and, to my ear, against) the aggressiveness of the super-ego. It is exorbitant—the more you try to satisfy it by doing what it says (getting up early, going to where you should be, doing the work

set, doing what you said you would do) the more it demands. It always leaves an excess of guilt sloshing around; in some circumstances it 'rages against the ego with merciless violence' (ibid: 394), becoming 'as cruel as only the id can' (ibid: 395) until it is 'a pure culture of the death instinct (drive)' (ibid: 394). In Samuel Beckett's novel, Malone feels inside him how 'the wild beast of earnestness padded up and down, roaring, ravening, rending' (1962:25).

Daddy has two faces. The benign and all-loving Father of the Christian narrative has a place of eternal torture reserved for the ones he doesn't like. Throughout history the worst atrocities people have committed have not been from wild acts of irresponsible blood-lust but because they thought it was something they had to do; it was a *duty* to kill witches/Jews/Arabs/Africans/ Christians. We may fancy that those in charge of the Nazi death-camps lived out terrible forbidden pleasures, like the masters in one of de Sade's fantasy castles. Far from it. The evidence seems to be that they performed obscene rites of sacrifice to the super-ego.

Between his arrest and execution in April 1947 Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz, wrote an autobiography. He is lying about some things but probably not in the following, which echoes statements made by other Nazi leaders:

As a fanatical National-Socialist I was firmly convinced that our ideals would gradually be accepted and would prevail throughout the world, after having been suitably modified in conformity with the national characteristics of the other people concerned. Jewish supremacy would thus be abolished.

(1994:55)

Höss undertakes a major role in the 'final solution to the Jewish question' as an act of supreme duty and self-discipline which he forces himself to go through with, despite feelings of horror and disgust.

Earnestness, not the lust for pleasure, is what really does the damage. In Freud's view the super-ego is the price we pay for civilisation. Sometimes it is a fearful price. He died in London in 1939, in the month the war started. If he had lived, I do not think he would have been surprised by anything that happened in the period 1939–45.

## LACAN'S EGO

Effectively, Freud offers two somewhat disjunct theories of the ego. According to one its main function is dealing with reality through perception and consciousness; according to another it is structured in relation to unconscious desire—'Look, you can love me too'. Lacan's conception of the ego and identity follows very much Freud's second line of analysis. I think it will be helpful, therefore, to cite a passage in which Lacan makes it clear that he believes nevertheless that we do indeed perceive a real world though it is always taken up in terms of fantasy and desire:

The theoretical difficulties encountered by Freud seem to me in fact to derive from the mirage of objectification, inherited from classical psychology, constituted by the idea of the *perception/consciousness* system, in which Freud seems suddenly to fail to recognise the existence of everything that the ego neglects, scotomises, misconstrues in the sensations that make it react to reality, everything that it ignores, exhausts, and binds in the significations that it receives from language...

(1977a:22)

(Scotomisation is when an image isn't seen because it falls on the blind spot in the retina.)

Everybody sees the same world but from the whole field of vision everybody notices different things. I am particularly good at finding things which have got lost, I suspect because I hate

losing them. In an argument between sexual partners a banal fact, such as who forgot to get the milk, can get tangled up in complicated strands of interpretation so that a whole relationship can turn on a triviality: 'it shows you don't love me'.

Reality is there, no doubt about it, but we each experience it for ourselves. Is it only reality and reason which determine the decisions we make? Why, for example, do people choose the jobs they do? Why become a surgeon, who cuts up people's bodies, rather than a computer programmer? Or a dentist, who has to hurt people's mouths (do they unconsciously want to)? Why does someone else enjoy handling and selling fruit ('all nice and juicy') while another mends sewers? The ego and its choices have a rational component but are not just rational.

### The mirror stage

Each of us arrives into human culture from the outside, though we come equipped with a genetic programme that allows us to learn any human language there is. How is it that within five or six years the newly arrived little animal you bring home with you from the hospital has become a person, who speaks your language, shares your assumptions, can go off to school and answer its own name when the teacher calls it out? Why do people born in England generally grow up to be English rather than Nepalese? And what does it mean for an individual to 'be' anything?

Lacan's answer is that identity is a form of *identification*, that the subject's ego is 'that which is reflected of his form in his objects' (1977a:194) ('subject' has to be 'he' and 'his' because it translates the French '*le sujet*'). Identity is borrowed from what Lacan names as 'the Other'. The Other consists of law, society and other people; but since I can only relate to these on the shared basis of the signifier, the Other is encountered as 'the symbolic order', the organisation of signifiers that surround me. Since my identity is not *really* me but an identity internalised from the symbolic order

and treated as me, Lacan subscribes to Arthur Rimbaud's statement that 'I is an other' (ibid: 23).

In his essay on 'The Mirror Stage' Lacan does refer to literal looking in literal mirrors but is explicit that this *exemplifies* the construction of identity because the mirror which matters to us is *other people* (see ibid: 1–7). We might think of a baby surrounded by loving adults—'Who's a gorgeous little thing, then?', and who becomes what they treat it as. Here it is worth keeping in mind that for Lacan people need language not to transmit messages, to *say* something to someone, but in the first place because they want to *be* someone for somebody. The mirror stage, however, predates language.

A toddler between the ages of six and 18 months responds to its mirror image 'with a flutter of jubilant activity' (ibid: 1) while other animals treat it with indifference or as a competitor. What the young child experiences in a mirror is a unified image of its own body, a *Gestalt* or organised pattern. This contrasts strongly with its own sense of its own body, definitely not in its control, 'sunk', says Lacan, 'in motor incapacity and nursling dependence' (ibid: 2). It must seem to a small child that its various bits—feet, knees, hands, elbows, head—have a will of their own and keep painfully running into things. In comparison with the permanence and unity of its own mirror image the child feels its body as 'fragmented' (ibid: 4). This is Lacan's famous idea of the 'body in pieces' or *corps morcelé*.

Dry-mouthed terror at the possibility of your body coming to bits is fundamental to human experience. It is Lacan's version of 'the worst thing in the world...images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body' (ibid: 11). Surely this is a dazzling insight? If as Freud argues the fear of death is only the anticipated shadow of castration, then death for each of us, we know, can only happen if the body first comes to pieces. Unless the image of dismemberment were hugely charged for us, how could you explain why we are,

alas, the only species which enjoys deliberately taking to pieces members of its own kind?

Faced with either imaginary unity in the mirror image or the body in pieces the young subject is catapulted away from fragmentation into identification with its mirror image, what Lacan calls the 'ideal I'—apparently stable, perfect and unified, in control of its parts. This is the 'I' in a primordial form before it enters language and before it becomes a speaking subject whose ego is supported by internalising signifiers from the symbolic order. Even then, just as much as in the earlier mirror stage, identity is *acquired* from the Other, a form of fantasy and misrecognition.

The mirror stage 'situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction' (ibid: 2). The bad news and the good news are the same—there's no real me and this identity I think is me is the best I'll ever have. My ego seems to be the same in space, permanent across time and unified in substance, though in all of these I misrecognise how I come about as an *effect*, thinking I'm really there, despite different spaces, times, my own actual dispersal into various selves, being split between conscious and unconscious.

Hollywood from way back has mounted a good line of impassive, rock-like heroes such as John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. Recently that idea has come to be represented by the cyborg, such as the one in *RoboCop* (1987) or the replicants of *Blade Runner* (1982). *Terminator 2* (1991) has two cyborgs, one good (Arnold Schwarzenegger), one bad. Through its unbelievable capacity to survive, the cyborg represents the permanence of the ego. In *Terminator 2* the cyborgs pass through fire, fall from a height, get thrown from a fast car, walk through walls, are gassed, pierced with iron bars, blown up, and shot endlessly. All with impunity (damaged they repair themselves). At one point the bad one walks into a cloud of liquid nitrogen until he freezes solid and his feet break off. Hit with bullets, his body then explodes into a thousand

pieces. These fall to the floor where they are melted by the heat of a nearby furnace. Drops run together and coagulate like mercury until from the silver pool a phallic figure rises, spectacularly reconstituted.

What gives away the fact that the cyborg attracts the same identification as the bodily image in the mirror stage is not its physical unity, control and mastery. The point is cyborgs have no feelings. The ego is threatened by all forms of drive but not the cyborg because it has no unconscious and no desire. Identification? Anyone who has taken a crew of eight-year-olds to *Terminator 2* for a birthday treat will know that for weeks after the order 'clean your teeth' will be answered with 'No problemo'. The adult ego, which seems so absolutely sure of itself, comes about by impersonating early models until the mask becomes a face (almost).

### The idealised I and the I idealised

Lacan marks off the ideal ego from the ego ideal (see 1988a:141), a distinction which arises from two contrasted modes of identification (and his concept of the ego ideal is not the same as Freud's). For Lacan the ideal ego is defined in the way the subject projects itself onto objects, moves out into identification with them. The ego ideal, on the other hand, develops when external objects are taken in or introjected. The subject's ideal ego appears at 'that point at which he desires to gratify himself in himself' (Lacan 1977b:257), the ego ideal at 'the point...from which the subject will see himself, as one says, *as others see him*' (ibid: 268). A person's ego ideal is being challenged when someone asks, 'Who does he think he is?' or 'Who does she think she is?'

In the story of Narcissus in Ovid the youth at first loves his own image in the water, projecting himself onto it, but later, realising that he is this image, takes it in as a version of himself. The ideal ego develops in the mirror stage, in what Lacan calls 'the imaginary';



it emerges as the ego ideal with language, in the symbolic, when the child learns to confirm its identity, for example, by answering to its name. Both transformations of the ego are idealised, me as I'd like to see myself. And both—the whole ego in fact—is for Lacan a source of delusion, leading us to believe in our own fantasies, our own importance, our imagined control of the world around us.

Everybody, to a greater or lesser extent, trusts in and lives out their own ego ideal. If we were to cast this in moralising terms, then we might think of it simply as hypocrisy or self-deception. A group of (generally) middle-aged men sit at a meeting discussing the 'mission statement' of their project, how 'empowerment' will substantiate 'individual profiles' in the search for 'excellence' and 'quality enhancement' without for one minute realising how vacuous their whole discourse is. A woman congratulates herself because she is such a dedicated teacher and spends so much time helping students—she is in fact a dull teacher and messes up the students she counsels. Each of Jane Austen's novels contains one hopelessly indulgent and adoring mother who lets her children behave appallingly. And, no doubt, people who write books about the unconscious are sure they know enough to tell other people all about it.

It is fatally easy to see how the ego ideal affects other people, but seeing it in oneself is blocked by repression. The ego ideal deceives us *especially* when we think we have got the better of it—'I know I'm absolutely objective and fair-minded' and 'I can see my own faults but don't give in to them' and 'Though I was tempted to appoint X because she's a friend, in fact she is the best person for the job'. Lacan is merciless, referring us to 'the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself, and even in the mistrust he has learned to practise against the traps of self-love' (1977a:165).

Merciless to others but not to himself: his biographer remarks that Lacan 'often described to his patients and pupils the dangers

of believing in the omnipotence of the ego, but it never occurred to him to apply this wisdom to himself (Roudinesco 1997:247–48).

It is well known that prisons contain only people who have been wrongfully imprisoned after a miscarriage of justice—this is the work of the ego ideal, which also seems to dictate that people who have committed atrocities cannot admit it. Recently, in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has been trying to establish the facts of what went on under Apartheid, took evidence from a group of very able scientists and medical men who had worked for the previous regime in a biological warfare unit. On 14 July 1998 some of this footage was shown on British television, and reported the next day:

Neils Knobel, a former South African surgeon-general, explained without any hint of a guilty conscience, how South Africa had acquired biological warfare secrets from the UK, the USA and USSR. He admitted that he'd experimented with bacterial agents to cause infertility among the black population.

(*Guardian*, 15 July 1998)

The unit also considered ways to put cholera in the water supply of black neighbourhoods and how to breed a version of anthrax immune to penicillin. 'Without any hint of a guilty conscience': you can pull a story like that from the newspapers every month.

The ego ideal leads us to collaborate with the fantasy that people are fundamentally good-hearted and do the best they can in a world which is bright, transparent, harmonious and getting better, a utopian vision endlessly repeated to us by the media. People cling to what they like to think others think of them.

There is a broad contrast here between Freud and Lacan. While Freud takes the view that unhappiness is caused essentially by repression, Lacan believes the damage is caused by the power with which we live out the ego ideal. You have to have an identity,

of course, there's no escape from that. But for Lacan it is better if you can accept your fantasies as fantasies and not as the real thing, ways of representing yourself, not life itself. He writes of being the dummy hand at bridge, the one whose cards are all laid face up on the table—you just sit there while the others play them for you. But they're still your cards and it's still you they're being played for.

Or, to return to the example of *Hamlet*. Throughout most of the play Hamlet has been wholly embroiled in fantasy—mourning his father, hating his mother, expressing horror and contempt for Ophelia. Lacan singles out the moment after Hamlet has come back from his sea-voyage, with a new sense of irony and self-detachment and proceeds to carry out his mission. Laertes, says Lacan, is Hamlet's ego ideal, full of his certainty and self-importance, Hamlet's double whom he must kill. At the end Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel, but the fight is fixed:

Hamlet responds to this necessity only on a disinterested level, that of the tournament. He commits himself in what we might call a formal, or even a fictive way. He is, in truth, entering the most serious of games, without knowing it. In that game he will lose his life—in spite of himself. He is going out—again, without knowing it—to meet his act and his death, which, but for an interval of a few moments, will coincide.

Everything that he saw in the aggressive relationship was only a sham, a mirage. What does that mean? It means that he has entered into the game without, shall we say, his phallus...He does enter into the game, nevertheless.

(1977c:32)

Hamlet has learned to become, as Lacan says, a 'foil' to Laertes but not a sword—there but not *really* there. Sanity does not mean trying to be yourself but accepting instead that you can only be for others.

## BEING IN LOVE

The psychoanalytic account of love forms a bridge between this section, on narcissism, and the next, on sexuality. Most people would think of love, dyadic love between the sexes, or in a same-sex relationship, as sexual. Both Freud and Lacan regard being in love as an expression of narcissism, not love for the other but self-love, self-deception. Lacan said he loved his dog, Justine, because 'she never mistakes me for anyone else' (cited in Hill 1997:77).

Freud discusses being in love in relation to melancholy. In melancholy the lost object is put in the place of the ego and the ego ideal is active in judging the ego. In love, by contrast, the object becomes identified with the ego ideal. Being in love happens if a loved one, rather than being lost, simply cannot be obtained and desire satisfied. The unattainable object can seem to be possessed, however, if it is '*put in the place of the ego ideal*' (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1973–86, vol 12:144). In consequence, the ego becomes impoverished:

The impulses whose trend is towards directly sexual satisfaction may now be pushed into the background entirely, as regularly happens, for instance, with a young man's sentimental passion; the ego becomes more and more unassuming and modest, and the object more and more sublime and precious, until at last it gets possession of the entire self-love of the ego, whose self-sacrifice thus follows as a natural consequence.

(*ibid*: 143)

The lover who overvalues someone like this shows 'traits of humility', even of 'self-injury' (*ibid.*). Because it has been set up in the ego ideal 'everything the object does and asks for is right and blameless' (*ibid*: 144). In the film of *The English Patient*, set in North Africa in the early years of the Second World War, a Hungarian Count and a married woman, Catherine Clifton, fall

desperately in love. When she dies, the Count betrays all his allegiances and friends by giving some crucial maps to the German enemy in exchange for a plane to fly Catherine's body out of the desert: she is now all that matters to him.

For Lacan to love is 'essentially, to wish to be loved' (1977b: 253). It is not something you can do for yourself because it depends on another to see you as you would like to be seen—or rather, imagining such an other. The romantic love tradition claims that each sees and responds to the other in a perfectly *reciprocal* relation. In 'The Good-Morrow' John Donne writes, 'My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears', using the fact that an eye viewed close-up reflects the face of the viewer to suggest a completely mutual and requited love. But the metaphor is a deception because me seeing you can never coincide with you seeing me. As Lacan puts it, 'When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*' (ibid: 103).

This disjunction (me seeing you/you seeing me) is brought about by the Other, the symbolic order in which other subjects are situated behind or within the signifiers which relate in the first place to each other ('a signifier...represents a subject not for another subject but for another signifier'). But the Other can be *imagined* as a point from which someone looks at you: 'Love is essentially deception', says Lacan, introducing 'a perspective centred on the Ideal point, capital I, placed somewhere in the Other, from which the Other sees me, in the form I like to be seen' (1977b:268). This needs a little unpacking.

For Lacan, love involves a series of fantasy identifications in which the object is taken up into the self. First, the Other as a whole is misrecognised and appropriated as a single point. This is further misrecognised as the *eyes* of the beloved. These are treated like a mirror in the mirror stage, reflecting the lover in a more perfect form. But the eyes are imagined not as a passive mirror but as a person with an adoring gaze wholly occupied in looking at the

viewer. In this look the lover is seen not as they are but as they want to imagine themselves to be: the perfect lover, the ideal self. Being in love, says Lacan forcefully, has therefore a 'fundamentally narcissistic structure' (ibid: 186). When Humphrey Bogart says, 'Here's looking at you, kid', he really means, 'Look at me as I want to be looked at'.

### The absence of the sexual relation

There is, Lacan concludes, 'no sexual relation' (1982:143), sexual relation, that is, not as intercourse but as a mutually satisfying *rapport* such that each reflects the other, each feels 'You are everything and everything is you'. Love is impossible because love is a disguised form of self-love: 'when one is a man, one sees in one's partner what can serve, narcissistically, to act as one's own support' (ibid: 157). When one is a woman, likewise. Love is impossible because, as far as Lacan is concerned, the sexes are completely asymmetrical in their desires, something we shall discuss in more detail later.

When Tristan and Iseult are found together in the woods they have a sword laid between them; Denis de Rougemont (1956) argues that in the courtly love tradition love is imagined as an impossible transcendence which can only be maintained if sexual feeling is not fulfilled. And that tradition continues into Romantic love where the stories everyone remembers are those in which love is tragically *not* fulfilled because something prevents it (the warring families in *Romeo and Juliet*, unhappy marriage in *Anna Karenina*, age difference in *Lolita*). Lacan says this 'is an altogether refined way of making up for the absence of sexual relation by pretending that it is we who put an obstacle to it' (ibid: 141).

What is masked by the obstacle is the absence itself. Rob Lapsley and Michael Westlake have extended the analysis in a brilliant essay on contemporary cinema (1993): 'Jack Nicholson and Susan Sarandon romping together amidst pink balloons [in *The Witches*

of *Eastwick* (1987)], or Jonathan Switcher [Andrew McCarthy] in *Mannequin* (1987) kissing his “living doll” atop a mound of teddy bears, are less than utterly convincing as representations of sexual rapport’ (ibid: 193).

In fact, Hollywood has developed three narrative structures to suggest the presence of the sexual relation while masking its actual absence: it will take place after the story ends (*Pretty Woman* and hundreds of other films); it was really there before the story begins (the lost idyll in Paris in *Casablanca* (1942)); it would take place ‘if only’. ‘If only’ is a very rich strategy, which includes: if only she hadn’t died (*Love Story* (1970) and many, many more); if only there hadn’t been a Russian Revolution (*Dr Zhivago* (1965)); if only he’d had normal fingers (*Edward Scissorhands* (1990)); if only the ship hadn’t hit an iceberg (*Titanic* (1997)).

From this somewhat disabused analysis of love we can turn to what psychoanalysis actually has to say about sexuality.

Copyright of Unconscious is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.