WRITING THE STRUCTURES OF THE SUBJECT

LACAN AND TOPOLOGY

WILL GREENSHIELDS

The Palgrave Lacan Series

Jacques Lacan is one of the most important and influential thinkers of the 20th century. The reach of this influence continues to grow as we settle into the 21st century, the resonance of Lacan's thought arguably only beginning now to be properly felt, both in terms of its application to clinical matters and in its application to arange of human activities and interests. The Palgrave Lacan Series is a book series for the best new writing in the Lacanian field, giving voice to the leading writers of a new generation of Lacanian thought. The series will comprise original monographs and thematic, multi-authored collections. The books in the series will explore aspects of Lacan's theory from new perspectives and with original insights. There will be books focused on particular areas of or issues in clinical work. There will be books focused on applying Lacanian theory to areas and issues beyond the clinic, to matters of society, politics, the arts and culture. Each book, whatever its particular concern, will work to expand our understanding of Lacan's theory and its value in the 21st century.

More information about this series at
http://www.springer.com/series/15116

Will Greenshields

Writing the Structures of the Subject

Lacan and Topology

palgrave
macmillan

willgreenshields88@gmail.com

Will Greenshields
University of Sussex
Bridgnorth, Shropshire, UK

The Palgrave Lacan Series
ISBN 978-3-319-47532-5 ISBN 978-3-319-47533-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-47533-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016958740

Cover image © Emmanuel LATTES / Alamy Stock Photo
Cover design by Henry Petrides

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to the University of Sussex and the AHRC who provided the generous funding that supported this project throughout its first three years. Particular thanks must go to my supervisor, Vicky Lebeau, who always seemed to get the blend of faith and scepticism just right, proving remarkably tolerant of my long periods of radio silence. Vicky's wealth of psychoanalytic knowledge beyond the Lacanian sphere and appreciation of Lacan's sense of humour were invaluable.

I thank my editors and peer reviewer, who greeted the initial proposal with a heartening enthusiasm and the right questions. Thank you to Calum for helping me to come up with a better title.

I am very grateful to Ginny Graham at Polity for kindly sending me a final proof of Adrian Price's excellent translation of Lacan's twenty-third seminar.

Finally, to my mum, dad, brother and sister—thank you for never asking why.

Contents

1 Dissolution and *Déblayage* 1
- 1.1 *Oedipus at Colonus*, Lacan at Caracas 1
- 1.2 Theory and the Real 18
- 1.3 Consistence and Ex-sistence 24
- 1.4 Notes 33

2 The Topology of the Psychoanalytic Subject 37
- 2.1 The Sphere 37
- 2.2 The Interior Eight 41
- 2.3 The Möbius Strip 46
- 2.4 The Torus 62
- 2.5 The Cross-cap 79
- 2.6 Notes 96

3 Topology and the Re-turn to Freud 103
- 3.1 *Encore* 103
- 3.2 A Möbian Method 114
- 3.3 The Lacanian Invention and the Millerian Reinvention 127
- 3.4 The Topology of Revolutions and Systems 141
- 3.5 From Myth to Structure 154
- 3.6 The Logic of Sexuation 161

3.7 The Topology of Interpretation 175
3.8 Notes 192

4 The Borromean Knot 203
4.1 From Topography to Knots 203
4.2 Writing the Real 211
4.3 *La matière* as *l'âme à tiers* 232
4.4 The Knot's Iconoclasm 240
4.5 Deconstruction and the Knot 244
4.6 Metaphor and the Knot 246
4.7 From "Thinking-the-Borromean-Knot" to "Monstrating the Cord": Writing the Lacanian (Dis)solution 249
4.8 Notes 259

5 Conclusion: A New Imaginary 265
5.1 Notes 271

Bibliography 273

Index 281

Abbreviations and Nomenclature

Lacan's published seminars are referenced by number followed by page number (e.g. SII, p. 67) and his unpublished seminars are referenced by number followed by the date of a particular session (e.g. SXXV, 9/5/78). Where an unofficial translation of any work by Lacan that is not a seminar session has been quoted, references for both the translation and the French original have been provided.

In an attempt to keep confusion to a minimum, a norm has been imposed on particular terms that appear in quotations. Where Cormac Gallagher's translations read: enjoyment, phantasy, o-object, Moebius, Ø, Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, our quotations read: *jouissance*, fantasy, object *a*, Möbius, Ⱥ, real, symbolic and imaginary.

List of Figures

The figures provided in this book are unofficial—which is to say that they are designed to support and illustrate an interpretation of Lacan's work. Accompanying each unofficial figure is an endnote providing the reader with information about where the figure and other variations on it can be found in Lacan's published and unpublished work. While some of Lacan's topological references can be illustrated by classical mathematical diagrams (for example, several of the figures reproduced in Lacan's tenth seminar originally appeared in David Hilbert's seminal *Geometry and the Imagination*), others require a more idiosyncratic presentation. This has naturally led to a proliferation of versions, not least when it comes to Lacan's knots. Some of these topologies can initially be quite difficult to wrap one's head around: the reader is therefore encouraged to take advantage of the proliferation of versions by looking at the unedited and untranslated transcripts of Lacan's seminars available at: gaogoa.free.fr and staferla.free.fr. The new perspective offered by an alternative representation can often deliver new clarity and insight. Alain Cochet's *Nodologie Lacanienne* also offers a useful compendium of Lacan's many knots.

Fig. 1.1 The Borromean knot 4
Fig. 1.2 The Borromean knot with two infinite straight lines 16
Fig. 2.1 The Interior Eight 43
Fig. 2.2 The Möbius strip 48
Fig. 2.3 Cutting the Möbius strip 52
Fig. 2.4 Demand and desire on the torus 66

Fig. 2.5 The tori of subject and Other 68
Fig. 2.6 Reducible and irreducible circles on the torus 70
Fig. 2.7 The cross-cap 94
Fig. 2.8 The Möbius strip and the disc 94
Fig. 3.1 The Borromean knot of demand/refuse/offer 133
Fig. 3.2 The four discourses 143
Fig. 3.3 The Klein bottle 163
Fig. 3.4 R schema on the cross-cap 167
Fig. 3.5 The interior eight on the torus 181
Fig. 3.6 Constructing a Möbius strip 181
Fig. 3.7 The three different cuts on the cross-cap 186
Fig. 4.1 Freud's second topography 207
Fig. 4.2 The completed Borromean knot 210
Fig. 4.3 Each ring ex-sists 218
Fig. 4.4 The knot's ternary logic 224
Fig. 4.5 Orienting the Borromean knot 228
Fig. 4.6 Love and the Borromean knot 230
Fig. 4.7 Braids 232
Fig. 4.8 The trefoil knot 236
Fig. 4.9 From the sphere and the cross to the Borromean knot 241
Fig. 4.10 Cartesian coordinates and the Borromean knot 243
Fig. 4.11 From the armillary sphere to the Borromean knot 244
Fig. 4.12 Nomination and the knot 251
Fig. 4.13 N*r*, N*s* and N*i* 254

1

Dissolution and *Déblayage*

1.1 Oedipus at Colonus, Lacan at Caracas

Attending an 'International Encounter of the Freudian Field' in 1982, Patrick Colm Hogan was privy to a "striking case."[1] This was not a matter of bumping into an exemplary neurotic or psychotic in the foyer, but of listening to the case presentations themselves, some of which had begun to resemble the performance of a collective delirium that would give any reasonable onlooker ample cause to assume that the lunatics were now running the asylum:

> The speaker discussed for several minutes the history of a particular case. He then cited a very abstract, very incomprehensible sentence from Lacan, dealing with knots. Following this he flashed on the overhead projector a convulsion of lines and arrows, announcing, "This was the symptom." He then concluded that, in the most recent session, and following Lacan's analysis of knots, he decided to intervene and ask a question after several days of silence. "And the result was this"—more arrows and overlapping curves flashed on the board. "Thank you," applause.

W. Greenshields, *Writing the Structures of the Subject*,
The Palgrave Lacan Series, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-47533-2_1

> It is, of course, possible that in this particular case there was, indeed, *a connection between the quote, the diagrams, and the intervention*, poorly explicated by the speaker, or poorly understood by the auditor. However, in this one conference alone there were many, many cases like this, and very few, we think, were open to *coherent reconstrual*.[2]

The very idea that the presentation of a clinical construal should itself require, let alone inhibit, a further reconstrual in order for some measure of coherence to be attained, is unlikely to persuade those critical or ambivalent toward Lacanian psychoanalysis to mark on their calendars the dates of any future International Encounters. Of course, there is a distinguished precedent for the fulfilling of just such an operation of reconstrual: Freud's case studies have proved a seemingly inexhaustible support for a vast industry of interpretation. However, it has undoubtedly been the case that the best work produced in this field has very often not been in establishing or reconfirming a synthesised coherence in Freud's work—indeed, it was a principled opposition to precisely this transformation of the Freudian text into uncritically accepted *doxa* that originally gave the Lacanian project its purpose—but in isolating pockets of incoherence, the recognition of which compels the renewal of theory and spurs further such readings.

There is a deceptive simplicity to Freud's work and an easy-going clarity that makes him both a pleasure to read and vulnerable to over-hasty comprehension. It is, therefore, tempting to straightforwardly suggest that Lacan, in seeking to dodge the fate suffered by Freud at the hands of lazy readers, is simply the stylistic reverse of Freud. We might cite as evidence the former's infamous opening gambit of his appearance on French television in 1973. A chance, one might think, to coherently present the case for psychoanalysis and charm untapped human reserves. Lacan, however, was in no mood to do any such thing:

> I always speak the truth. Not the whole [*pas toute*] truth, because there's no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real.
>
> I will confess then to having tried to respond to the present comedy and it was good only for the wastebasket.

> A failure then, but thereby, actually, a success when compared … with an aberration … [which] consists in this idea of speaking so as to be understood by idiots.[3]

For Lacan, the distinction between *the* truth and the *whole* truth is fundamental to psychoanalytic praxis. The subject always speaks the truth but it is a truth that announces itself in bits and pieces: homophonic and grammatical slips provide the material for an analysis that gradually circumscribes the subject's real—the illegible, traumatic cause of the subject's repetitious blunders. A successful analysis requires numerous such failures of intentional meaning and communication. The appeal to *coherence*—to, that is, the possibility of re-construing a *whole* truth, of re-constructing an exhaustive narrative that says it *all*—can only serve to hinder this uncomfortable process of 'working-through.' The subject's inadvertent *Witz* forms a comedy of errors—a jumbling of letters that (to cite a Joycean pun of which Lacan was particularly fond), rather than being the atomic building blocks of a totalised truth, amount to little more than litter—to which Lacan's response was not to produce a coherent theoretical *reconstrual* but to produce his own litter for "*poubellication*."[4]

Given the suspicion with which he regarded clarity and mass appeal, Lacan would doubtless have appreciated the example given by Judith Butler in defence of her own unforgiving style. Nixon, addressing television audiences across America as the Watergate scandal percolated in the years before and after Lacan's own television appearance, and taking advantage of the popular misconception that truth and clarity are equivalent, would often preface lies by stating "let me make one thing perfectly clear." "What", asks Butler, "does 'transparency' keep obscure?"[5] What is obscured when one is "understood by idiots"? It's worth noting that Lacan takes things one step further: Nixon could not have told the *whole* truth even if he had wanted to.

Nonetheless, as Malcolm Bowie points out, things are not quite as simple as an opposition between coherent Freud and incoherent Lacan would suggest:

> [W]here Freud cultivates clarity in the presentation of his ideas, Lacan cultivates obscurity. But where Freud employs an elaborate rhetoric of self-doubt in order not to seem too clear too quickly, Lacan, who runs the risk of not seeming clear at all, often contrives to suggest that a supreme obviousness is at work beneath the busy textures of his writing.[6]

It was surely this unlikely mixture of illegibility and a claim to clarity that Hogan found so repellent. An "incomprehensible sentence from Lacan" is succeeded by audaciously definitive declarations ("This was the symptom … [a]nd the result was this") while in the background the "textures of writing" form a remarkably "busy" and dense weave; a "convulsion" of arrows, curves and knots signifying nothing. They are this recounted scene's *navel*; both an unintelligible obscurity and an integral pivot to which the "quote" refers, the "diagrams" present and the "intervention" acts upon. If the connection between these three elements of the case presentation remains obscure, it is probably because the "analysis of knots" that binds them has occurred off-stage.

This is perhaps the most insistent and difficult question that arises for a reader of Lacan's later seminars: just what is the connection between the utterances about knots, the images of knots and the effective psychoanalytic act? Far from being a niche concern, the matter at stake here is nothing less than the relation between theory and practice in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Having first appeared in *Seminar XIX* (1971–1972), the Borromean knot represented the final phase of Lacan's effort to produce a psychoanalytic topology—a project that explicitly began in 1953 with his first

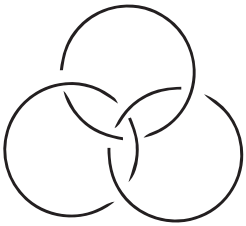

Fig. 1.1 The Borromean knot (Lacan's earliest presentations of the Borromean knot are in SXIX, 9/2/72 and SXX, p. 124)

reference to a torus or "ring" which was accompanied by the provocative contention that such a reference constituted "*more than a metaphor*—it manifests a *structure*."[7] A non-metaphorical access to structure: the appeal of topology hinged on the possibility of this being realised. It would take almost two decades for three tori or "rings of string" to be organised into a Borromean knot—the fundamental property of which is that since no two of its rings are directly linked it requires a third to hang together:

Now, while this might be a diverting *amusette* which we might derive a little pleasure from drawing or constructing for ourselves, it hardly seems sufficiently substantial to support the years of obsessive study and explication devoted to it by Lacan and a small band of mathematicians. And as for the suggestion that this figure is not metaphorical or that it has an important contribution to make to psychoanalytic praxis—well, this is surely the height of ridiculousness.

For many of Lacan's readers, his use of topology is simply a step too far. David Metzger perfectly captures the pragmatic mindset of those who "suggest that we can do without some such thing as a Lacanian topology. 'Remember the phallus?' they tell us. 'We had a difficult enough time explaining that away. Why bother talking about something that is sure to discourage people from reading (about) this important thinker?'"[8] Indeed, why bother? It is a reputation from which Lacan's topologisation of psychoanalysis has never quite managed to extricate itself: the impression of utter superfluity, an unnecessary extra layer of self-indulgent difficulty that has come to represent the worst excesses of Lacanian obscurity. And yet, there is, throughout Lacan's work, the frequently asserted declaration of topology's non-trivial and self-evident relevance to psychoanalysis which critics find as, if not more, off-putting. As Jacques-Alain Miller puts it, straying deliberately close to a Kantian term certain to raise the hackles of any good post-structuralist, "[w]e represent this topology, we manipulate it spatially; sometimes Lacan enhances its value to the point of showing an enjambment of knots and saying: '*This is the thing itself*.' For many, this seemed excessive."[9] How could it possibly be appropriate to point to a tangle of rings, as Lacan did, and say not only that this peculiar weave is the most suitable support of the psychoanalytic subject but—further scandalising those who expect a little more post-structuralism inspired hand-wringing when it comes to the stability of

representation from their continental thinkers—also straightforwardly assert that such a depiction is not a metaphor, image or model?

It is the purpose of this book to examine why we should bother with Lacan's topology. Firstly, we must approach the question that Lacan was asking himself. In other words, to what question was topology the answer? Why was topology necessary?

If we refer to anything so apparently systematic and coherent as a Lacanian topology, a topologisation of psychoanalytic theory or a renovation of Kant's transcendental aesthetics, this is something of a construction. A general artifice of reconstrual has had to be performed since topology was not, for Lacan, a topic, theme or concept; he did not produce a seminar or *écrit* 'on' topology in the same way that he produced a seminar on ethics or an *écrit* on Gide. It is instead an ever-present support, knotting itself into the busy textures of his discourse. While we have imposed a certain measure of coherence by weaving together Lacan's scattered patches with some red threads, this coherence only goes so far: topology's primary appeal lay in its formalisation of incoherence; its presentation of logical impasses and structural paradoxes.

Indeed, if, to modify Bowie's characterisation, the "supreme obviousness" would no longer reside "*beneath* the busy textures of [Lacan's] writing" because this non-metaphorical writing of knots and rings would itself be supremely obvious (with its precision cutting through the opacity that language, no matter how concise, invariably generates), the structure itself, the structure that has been presented in this supremely obvious fashion, is, nonetheless, precisely that which is *not* obvious. As we shall see, the structure of the subject of the unconscious contravenes basic spatio-temporal distinctions and conventions that appear so supremely obvious to the ego. Lacan frequently emphasised the extent to which his topology also challenged those intuitions (such as the division between interiority and exteriority, between what is me and what is not me) that are not merely a quality of egoic thought and self-apprehension but are also constitutive of the ego, the necessary support for its persistence. It is as a writing of discomfortingly paradoxical and unfamiliar spaces and dynamics that Lacanian topology achieves its fidelity and relevance to the fundamental psychoanalytic subversion.

In *Seminar XXIV* Lacan followed a demonstration of what occurs when one turns a torus that is chained with another torus inside-out by sympathetically noting that "these things are very inconvenient, even very *inhibiting* to imagine."[10] This is not a vague reference to mental capacity; for the psychoanalyst, inhibition has a precise psychopathological sense. As the result of "the naming of the imaginary"[11] (i.e. the supposition of an immutable ontological unity that is this egoic subject's 'proper name') or, according to Lacan's Borromean diagram (see Fig. 4.2), the result of an intrusion of the imaginary into the symbolic (the latter being the dimension of differential signifiers that only produce a 'proper name' when they invade the real to create a symptom as the locus of the subject's ontological *disunity*), inhibition is a self-imposed restriction that serves to protect an illusory coherence. Inhibition is not itself a symptom (*qua* expression of psychical conflict), but is instead an avoidance of this expression. It is, in other words, an obstruction to psychoanalysis itself.

We might think that to psychopathologise the resistance to Lacan's topology is a rather sly method of absorbing objections that recalls the suggestion that anyone who questioned the existence of the Oedipus complex was unwittingly providing evidence of neurotic repression. In both cases, validity is proven by criticism. Therefore, the appeal to incoherence, to mental inconvenience, is not sufficient; it must be supplemented with rigour. Nonetheless, the writing of structure that results must remain distinct from what is supremely obvious, from what is immediately apprehended by the ego.

Importantly, the psychoanalyst's rigour is not necessarily the mathematician's rigour. Before we continue, it is important to state that this book is not (to paraphrase Lacan's aphorism on sublimation) an attempt to raise psychoanalysis to the dignity of mathematics; it does not contain lengthy disquisitions on the mathematical history and applications of the various topologies that Lacan refers to and nor does it seek to make these references what they are not—that is, a writing that effectively supplants the clinic and rivals the mathematical field of, for example, algebraic topology for sophistication, development and precision. Lacan frequently disregarded mathematical convention for the sake of psychoanalytic considerations. Indeed, when asked "[i]s it really necessary to learn topology

in order to be a psychoanalyst?" he replied that "[t]opology is not something that [the analyst] must learn as an extra … [W]hether he knows it or does not … from the moment that he does psychoanalysis, this is the stuff [*l'étoffe*] into which he cuts … [but] if his topology is constructed in a mistaken way, [it] will be at the expense of his patient."[12] Topology is not an "extra," a mathematical field imported into the psychoanalytic field; it is inherent and any mistakes made are the mistakes of a psychoanalyst not a mathematician; they are made at the expense not of a formulation or proof but a patient. It was with psychoanalytic mistakes that Lacan's topology was most concerned. Foregoing the effort to fill in what Lacan left blank and ambiguous or to give his 'mathematisation' of psychoanalysis a glossy finish, we have chosen instead to employ a symptomatic reading, in the hope that close attention to his more awkward and contorted formulations will reveal the difficulties and paradoxes that topology was called upon *to present rather than resolve*.

***

Interestingly, Hogan follows his account of the "*striking* case" by observing that "[o]f course, there were many clear and illuminating presentations also, some *strikingly* so, such as that of Jacques-Alain Miller."[13] That Hogan is *doubly* struck suggests that the two presentations occupied opposite ends of a stylistic spectrum. While we will reserve a more thorough examination of Miller's contribution to the 'Freudian Field' for later, it's worth briefly noting the widely accepted assessment, proffered by Élisabeth Roudinesco, that "Miller's theoretical reduction … made it possible to show a broad public that a body of work hitherto regarded as hermetic and ambiguous was really quite *coherent and rigorous*."[14] The inferred mutuality between these last two terms warrants further attention since if, for Lacan, the cultivation of rigour in psychoanalysis was necessitated by the risk of this discipline becoming a barely credible voodoo, this same rigour did not result in interpretations that produced coherent histories belonging to newly coherent subjects. It was simply a matter of more rigorously "hold[ing] on to the real." As Lacan often reminded his audience, a Borromean knot only holds together as a whole by virtue of the fact that the rings have holes. He made no secret of the fact that his experimentation with knots would not herald a new dawn of

psychoanalytically ensured sanity: "I am psychotic simply because I have always tried to be rigorous."[15]

Roudinesco provides a fascinating account of the mania that consumed Lacan and his mathematician friends, characterising their collective effort as a "search for the absolute," in reference to Balzac's *La Recherche de l'Absolu*—the tale of a man (Balthazar Claës) who haemorrhages a substantial fortune and spurns his family during the course of an obsessive hunt for the alchemical absolute. If, however, this particularly wretched chapter in Balzac's vast *Comédie humaine* testifies to the folly of utterly committing oneself to a realisation of the desire for knowledge in the form of the whole truth, Lacan was keen to impress upon his readers and listeners—who had either reverentially, or, in the case of Derrida, critically, regarded him as the "purveyor of truth"[16]—that his "respon[se] to the present comedy" that is the human condition would not be a curative panacea that provided all the answers: "The desire to take cognizance [*connaître*] meets obstacles. I invented the knot to embody such an obstacle."[17] The function of the knot is clearly established here: far from amounting to a grand synthesisation and completion of psychoanalytic theory, it is instead deployed as the non-signifying support of that which cannot be theorised.

As one of Lacan's fellow inhabitants of what Roudinesco wryly refers to as the "planet Borromeo," the topologist Pierre Soury provides an indispensible description of what they were up to: "What was our point of departure? … [T]here was the definition of a *casse-tête* [puzzle] … A *casse-tête* is a simple and unforeseen problem with a solution that's *not easily repeatable, conscious, transmissible, or verifiable*."[18] If we take Soury's self-effacing characterisation too seriously, treating the results of fiddling about with rings of string as little more than a Sudoku-style brain-teaser (*casse-tête*), we risk badly underestimating what was at stake in such research. The passage from problem to solution was not a passage from incoherence to coherence; an effective practice that was to do justice to "the great *casse-tête*," "the riddle of the unconscious,"[19] might not necessarily be repeatable, teachable, verifiable or reducible to conscious knowledge. And yet, it cannot be a form of magic; it must be rigorous. The results of Lacan's lifelong grapple with this double-bind are among his most significant contributions to psychoanalytic thought.

In an illuminating dialogue with Alain Badiou, Roudinesco suggests an alternative literary doppelganger for Lacan: *Oedipus at Colonus*.[20] Towards the end of his life Lacan was indeed enacting an extraordinary dissolution: disbanding his school and the theoretical foundations of his thought as his physical incapacity grew increasingly pronounced and the periods of muteness became more prolonged. If the union of these two literary figures seems incongruous—Claës suffers because he does not know enough, Oedipus suffers because he knows too much—and yet oddly appropriate, this says much about the difficulty of assessing the significance of this last phase of Lacan's thought in terms of its contribution to knowledge. What does Lacan know? It is a question we ask the unconscious. As Badiou notes, in an elegant passage worth quoting at length, the "final Lacan"—his "solution" to the "great *casse-tête*" or his dissolution in response to it—has himself become something of a *casse-tête* that singularly resists reconstrual:

> [Lacan] impose[d] on whoever listen[ed] to him this terminal, final unravelling. This posture is, to be sure, in certain ways obscure, spectral. But it reveals and condenses the tragedy itself of the subject. Not giving up on your desire is also being able, and knowing how, to undo what you believe you have done and tied together in a compact way. The final Lacan is obviously difficult at first, but he takes on in this way an eminence, an exceptional stature.
>
> This is one of the reasons why his death struck me as a completely particular event. That masters will die one day, we all know. However, the death of Lacan was cloaked in a singular aura because it echoed his own work. His death is modelled after his late thought, which was placed under the sign of, precisely, Oedipus at Colonus, this figure of an old man who dies and leaves to all the world the insoluble enigma of his death. Lacan, if I may say so, succeeded in pulling this off: the muteness of his last years and his death form an integral part of his enigmatic legacy. Twenty years later, Lacan's mystery is still there. The relation to his work cannot be stabilized, even if you recognize him as a master. We will never finish interrogating this man and his thought. What was it about really, at bottom? Psychoanalysis? Obviously. Philosophy? Yes, in a certain sense. Contemporary writing, the adventure of language? Of course. The drama of subjectivity? That too. And what else? Is there some unfathomable

> remainder? Lacan was, is, and will always be an enigma, an author who is impossible to classify and to completely decipher.
>
> … Everyone knows [Wittgenstein's] famous aphorism that closes the *Tracatus logico-philosophicus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." If the real is unsymbolizable, it is ultimately that about which one cannot speak; therefore, one must be silent. But remaining silent always implies as well, and this is still Wittgenstein's perspective, the duty to indicate, to point. You must show that about which you must remain silent. I imagine the late Lacan as someone who continues to point his finger at an unsayable real. Except that, in the end, we can no longer know what this gesture indicates and truly implies. It is left to us as an enigma, like death itself.[21]

There is the real 'of' Lacan—the (for want of a better word) concept that we associate with Lacan—and then there is the real *of* Lacan, his "unfathomable remainder"; the apparent impossibility of saying what his topological presentation of the real "indicates and truly implies."

The necessity to be silent with regards to "the real" as that which "forecloses meaning" was clearly troubling Lacan as he began the eighth session of *Seminar XXIII*: "The only excuse I have for saying something to you today … is that this is going to be *sensé*, sensible. In view of which I shall not be doing what I would like to, which would be to give you *un bout de réel*, some odd or end of the real."[22] If this was Lacan's desire, which he refused to give up on, it was not an epistemological desire in the traditional sense—it was not the desire for a *possibility*; the possibility of "saying it all," of realising the "whole truth" or the clarity of unequivocal meaning—but a desire or "duty to indicate" the *impossibility* of such desire with the knot. In tune with the non-linear temporality of desire, Lacan closed the session with a critical glance behind himself and an anxious look ahead:

> Will I manage to tell you—it oughtn't to be merely a dream—what would qualify as *un bout de réel*[?] … For the time being, we may say that Freud himself produced nothing but sensibleness [*sensé*], and this takes away all my hope. This is not, however, a reason, not for me to hope to, but for me really to do so someday.[23]

Lacan had argued in *Seminar XVII* that the Oedipus complex—the product of Freud's attempt to explain the enigma of sexuality through recourse to the universal truth of mythic meaning—was "Freud's *dream*."[24] Dreams stage an encounter with the real, but it is always a missed encounter; such is the anxiety provoked in the subject by the oblique glimpse at the real of his desire that the dream affords, the subject awakens so that he might continue to dream:

> No praxis is more orientated towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the real than psychoanalysis. Where do we meet this real? For what we have in the discovery of psychoanalysis is an encounter, an essential encounter—an appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us.[25]

Freud had produced something meaningful: with the Oedipus complex, desire had been given *meaning*—a natural path of development and resolution in the sexual relationship. Freud had retreated from the real and continued to dream. This is why a large part of this study will be given up to a reading of Lacan's return to Freud—his effort to shift the foundation of psychoanalytic praxis "from myth to structure"[26] and, ultimately, to the topology of knots. While Roudinesco's effort to mythologise Lacan, to see in him the shuffling gait of an aged Oedipus or the mad ambition of a deranged alchemist, to say that we have seen his like before—to declare, as Freud did, that we can understand *Hamlet* and, indeed, every other troubled soul, because we have seen *Oedipus Rex*—is certainly a start, her reluctance to regard his late encounter with "the great *casse-tête*" as anything other than a case study in melancholic senility or a vainglorious search for the absolute, threatens to reverse the passage "from myth to structure" to which Lacan devoted himself, thus necessitating a return to the return to Freud.

Lacan was particularly keen to avoid the mortification undergone by Freudian thought at the hands of the psychoanalytic church. Hence his climactic unravelling: "The problem is revealed as such, at having a solution: which is a *dis*—a dissolution … That it be enough for one to go away for all to be free is, according to my Borromean knot, true of each, but must be so of myself in my *École*."[27] Those analysts that listened to

Lacan were given "*un bout de réel*" by being taken to the point of realising, as one does at the end of analysis, that "the Other"—the monolithic socio-symbolic network of law and language that is supposed, by subjects, to know the solution; a solution would be repeatable, conscious, transmissible and verifiable—"is missing."[28] It is apt, then, that we find, in the margins of the lines with which Lacan began his television appearance, the matheme S(Ⱥ): the signifier (S) of the barred (/) *Autre* (A). It is by failing to say the "whole truth" that one "holds onto the real" and affects a (dis)solution. The demotion of universal predicates (guarantors of a coherent Other) such as the Oedipus complex and the 'Name-of-the-Father' to the status of dreams and fragile sutures constituted important theoretical shifts that Lacan, with this unravelling, came to enact, dissolving the distinction between theory and practice. We are left with the real *of* Lacan, the enigma of his death, his (dis)solution.

For Lacan, every drive is a death-drive insofar as the subject is driven to re-find the lost object that would render this very drive obsolete. However, the drive operates on a false premise; the object that would restore the subject to a prelapsarian state of wholeness never existed in the first place: it cannot be re-found because it was never actually found(ed):

> The only advantage of this *finding again* [*retrouver*] is to highlight what I'm indicating, that there cannot be any progress, that one only ever goes round in circles.
>
> Even so, there is perhaps another way of explaining that there is no progress. It is that there is no progress but bearing the stamp of death…
>
> The death drive is the real inasmuch as it can only be pondered *qua* impossible. This means that each time it rears its head it is imponderable. To approach this impossible could never constitute a hope, because this imponderable is death, whose real grounding is that it cannot be pondered.[29]

As Badiou's eulogy suggests, Lacan engineered a way out of this impasse—that is, the impasse of futility that any notion of progress conceived of in terms of a restoration of totality (i.e. death *qua* satisfaction) will invariably abut upon—with the event of dissolution. What "this gesture indicates and truly implies" we cannot say: "It is left to us as an enigma, like death itself." When Lacan states that the real "forecloses *sens* [meaning],"[30]

we might also be mindful of an alternative translation of *sens* as direction: the drive is a "*dérive* [drift],"[31] having no natural, fixed or actual object(ive) such as the realisation of the sexual relationship or the formation of a unified psychoanalytic institution that knows and transmits the whole truth. "[T]here is no progress" for Oedipus and Lacan, these weary drifters, "but bearing the stamp of death."

According to Roudinesco, this act, for all its earnest authenticity, constituted not just a dereliction of theory but also a dereliction of duty which left the future of Lacanian psychoanalysis in a perilous state:

> Unlike Freud, Lacan leaves nothing as a legacy. He undoes what he built by knitting his knots and his pieces of string. And this is why Lacan's heritage is in danger, more so than that of Freud: the psychoanalysts of the first Lacanian circle received nothing as a legacy, they received the dissolution … And what is more, he never stopped advocating "the work of dissolution," as if it were a major concept.[32]

It's worth remembering that Freud's "heritage" was endangered precisely because he had left a legacy of *sens*; his successors inherited a direction, an institution and a body of knowledge that they set about embalming. Lacan remained mindful of "the effect of a consolidated group, at the expense of the discursive effect expected from an experiment [*l'expérience*], when it is Freudian. One knows what price was paid for Freud's having permitted the psychoanalytic group to win out over discourse, becoming a Church."[33] The efficacy of psychoanalysis is dramatically diminished when the "experiment" is advanced in accordance with an inflexibly adhered to knowledge that serves as a predictive, prescriptive template for interpretation. In this state, psychoanalysis lives on but it is really more of a living death, a ghoulish preservation. Opposed to the dynamism of a "discourse," the "group" is an *All*; it unifies its individual components, putting them to the service of a uniform direction which is then universalised. Psychoanalysis, which cannot be effective unless the singularity of the patient's contingent history is considered as irreducible to any *sens*, can only "go round in circles," effecting no progress, while it remains the preserve of the group: "I am within the work of the unconscious. What it shows me is that no truth responds to malaise other than one *particular* to each of those whom I call *parlêtres* [speaking-beings]"[34]: "That is why I am dissolving."[35]

And yet…"[i]n other words, I persevere."[36] If Lacan's experimental school (the *École freudienne de Paris*) had itself ceased to serve "the discursive effect expected from an experiment"—if the effect of the *École* had become "*l'effet de colle*,"[37] *inhibiting* practice with the group's binding glue—, then a "compensatory counter-experiment"[38] was called for. As an integral part of the "counter-experiment" (i.e. the *École de la Cause freudienne*), the cartel (a provisional study group comprised of four people and a 'plus-one,' dedicated to the reading of a work or examination of a concept) would avert the glue effect of organisational uniformity provided it was disbanded within two years, keeping the work of dissolution and renewal going: "there is no progress but bearing the stamp of death…" Excepting a fidelity to the Freudian experiment, no standardisation was to be imposed on the cartels and "cartelisands": "I am not going to make a totality out of them. No whole."[39] However, this "work of dissolution" advocated as a "major concept" "is not", argues Roudinesco, "a testament."[40] Lacan, we think, would not disagree, but this is entirely the point: psychoanalysis is a dynamic activity, not a collection of scriptural commandments bequeathed by forefathers.

If the knot of the EFP had been unravelled, it is apt, then, that the knot should appear again, retied, in Lacan's 'Overture to the First International Encounter of the Freudian Field.' At this first annual gathering of the ECF, which took place in Caracas, Lacan helpfully offered to "summarise" "the debate I've been keeping up with Freud":

> My three are not the same as his [id, superego and ego]. My three are the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. I came to situate them by means of a topology … The Borromean knot…
>
> I *gave* [*donné*] that to my pupils. I gave it them so that they might find their way in their practice. But do they find their way any better than with the topography Freud *passed down* [*léguée*] to his?[41]

While we will reserve a more sustained examination of the merits of topology and the deficiencies of (Freudian) topography for later, let us here take careful note of Lacan's language. Freud's knowledge (of which the static topography is a pertinent representative) is bequeathed ("*léguée*") as part of a scriptural will or legacy guaranteed by the Other. A *gift* is

something quite different; it has no legal, institutional or formal basis. Lacan was keen that cartels be made up of *readers*, not pupils: a reader can do as he wishes with a gift. Since Lacan's expressed preference for readers occurs just a few paragraphs before this query,[42] it is not stretching things to suggest that the distinction between a (bequeathed) topography and a (gifted) topology is related to the distinction between a pupil and a reader. While the former is the passive recipient of knowledge, the latter is forced to interpret. If Lacan "gave" the knot "to [his] pupils," rather than bequeathed a knowledge, if he proffered the "work of dissolution"—the making and unmaking of knots—as a "major concept," it was so that his pupils might become readers—analysts who "find *their* way in *their* practice" (note the recurrent reference to particularity) in the absence of a proscribed meaning or direction (*sens*).

Returning to the session of *Seminar XXIII* in which Lacan expressed his desire "to *give* [*donner*] you *un bout de réel*," we find him presenting his audience with a knot that "Soury and [Michel] Thomé have *given* [*donné*] me. It's a Borromean knot of my sort."[43] What makes this knot (produced by a cartel dedicated to providing solutions to *casse-têtes* that are not easily transmissible as a knowledge) so peculiar and, indeed, *Lacanian*, is that instead of being comprised of three closed rings, it has one ring and two infinite straight lines (see Fig. 1.2):

It was just such a knot that Lacan chose to *give* his audience at Caracas:

> Of course, my knot doesn't tell the whole story [*pas tout*]. Without which I wouldn't even have the opportunity of taking my bearings in what is

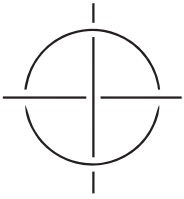

Fig. 1.2 The Borromean knot with two infinite straight lines (We have provided a generic presentation of the knot. The specific knot to which Lacan is referring can be found in SXXIII, p. 100. Lacan's earliest presentation of the knot and the infinite straight line is in SXXI, 21/5/74. See also: SXXII, 10/12/74, 18/2/75, 8/4/75, 13/5/75, SXXIII, pp. 16, 22–23, 39, 67, 90, 94–97, 99, 119)

> there, because there is, I say, *not-all* [*pas-tout*]. Not-all, quite surely, in the real that I broach in my practice.
>
> Remark if you will that in my knot the real features constantly as a straight line stretching to infinity, i.e. the unclosed circle that it presupposes. This is what upholds the fact that it can only be admitted as not-all.[44]

If Lacan's second sentence ("…taking *my* bearings…") recalls the challenge for analysts who must discover "*their* way", it also names a quality that persists in this perplexing *topos* and helps one to gain one's bearings "in what is there": "there"—where?—"is, I say, not-all." The pedantic reference to the very act of speaking ("I say") is made in order to emphasise that the not-all emerges in speech. To recall the opening lines of his television appearance, Lacan always speaks the truth but "[n]ot the whole [*pas toute*] truth." Although it is difficult to imagine—which is, of course, part of the appeal for Lacan—a knot comprised of infinite lines holds just as well as one comprised of circles since the 'rings' cannot slide off one another. Despite this consistency, however, the knot remains a work in progress; it cannot be framed or totalised. Within (or without?—this is undecidable) its organisation, there remains *un bout de réel*; a "not-all [*pas-tout*]" that constitutes *and* dissolves its suppositious "all," with regards to which analysts must "find their way in their practice." Here, the knot embodies a structural paradox that analysts repeatedly find: the consistency of a subjective structure depends upon a locus that this same structure cannot incorporate. In other words, the analyst finds his way and takes his bearings by referring to something that cannot be apprehended but which is also not straightforwardly beyond structure. As Lacan's first two sentences suggest, it is precisely because "my knot doesn't tell the whole story" that it allows him to take his bearings. Holding to the real, Lacan concluded his address in an apt fashion: "I don't tell you everything [*pas tout*]. To my credit."[45]

Evidently, when Hogan attended the 1982 iteration of this same event, the enigmatic knots had retained their position in Lacan's school and its experiments while remaining no less awkward to communicate or digest. What follows is not a "coherent reconstrual" but a reading of Lacan's attempts to rigorously give *un bout de réel* with topology.