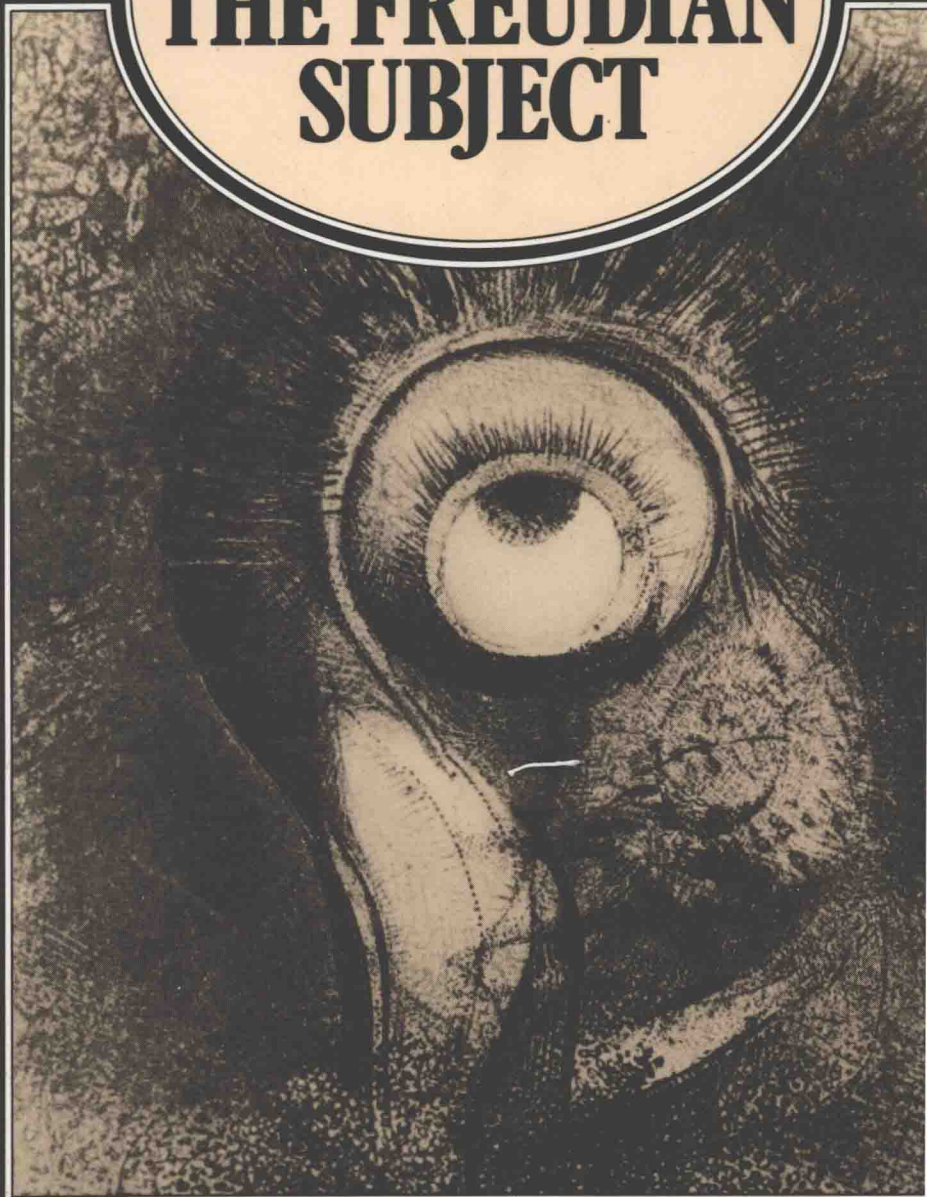


Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen

THE FREUDIAN SUBJECT



Language, Discourse, Society

General Editors: Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe and Denise Riley

THE FREUDIAN SUBJECT

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen

Professor of Philosophy

Université Louis-Pasteur, Strasbourg

Translated by Catherine Porter

Foreword by François Roustang

M
MACMILLAN

The Freudian Subject was originally published in French in 1982 under the title *Le Sujet freudien*, © 1982 by Flammarion. The foreword has been written specially for this edition by François Roustang. Translation © 1988 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University. Assistance for the translation was provided by the French Ministry of Culture.

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended), or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 33-4 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7DP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published in the USA (Stanford University Press) 1988
First published in the UK (Macmillan) 1989

Published by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel
The Freudian subject.—(Language, discourse, society series).
1. Psychoanalysis. Freud, Sigmund, 1856–1939
I. Title II. Series III. *Le Sujet freudien*.
English
150. 19'52
ISBN 0–333–48986–1

Series Standing Order

If you would like to receive future titles in this series as they are published, you can make use of our standing order facility. To place a standing order please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address and the name of the series. Please state with which title you wish to begin your standing order. (If you live outside the United Kingdom we may not have the rights for your area, in which case we will forward your order to the publisher concerned.)

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG21 2XS, England.

LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, SOCIETY

General Editors: Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe and Denise Riley

published titles

Stanley Aronowitz

SCIENCE AS POWER: Discourse and Ideology in Modern Society

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen

THE FREUDIAN SUBJECT

Norman Bryson

VISION AND PAINTING: The Logic of the Gaze

Teresa de Lauretis

ALICE DOESN'T: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema

FEMINIST STUDIES/CRITICAL STUDIES (*editor*)

TECHNOLOGIES OF GENDER: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction

Mary Ann Doane

THE DESIRE TO DESIRE: The Woman's Film of the 1940s

Alan Durant

CONDITIONS OF MUSIC

Jane Gallop

FEMINISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS: The Daughter's Seduction

Peter Gidal

UNDERSTANDING BECKETT: A Study of Monologue and Gesture in the Works of Samuel Beckett

Peter Goodrich

LEGAL DISCOURSE: Studies in Linguistics, Rhetoric and Legal Analysis

Paul Hirst

ON LAW AND IDEOLOGY

Ian Hunter

CULTURE AND GOVERNMENT: The Emergence of Literary Education

Andreas Huyssen

AFTER THE GREAT DIVIDE: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism

Nigel Leask

THE POLITICS OF IMAGINATION IN COLERIDGE'S CRITICAL THOUGHT

Michael Lynn-George

EPOS: WORD, NARRATIVE AND THE *ILIAD*

Colin MacCabe

JAMES JOYCE AND THE REVOLUTION OF THE WORD

THE TALKING CURE: Essays in Psychoanalysis and Language (*editor*)

Louis Marin

PORTRAIT OF THE KING

Christian Metz

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CINEMA: The Imaginary Signifier

Jeffrey Minson

GENEALOGIES OF MORALS: Nietzsche, Foucault, Donzelot and the Eccentricity of Ethics

Laura Mulvey

VISUAL AND OTHER PLEASURES

- Douglas Oliver
POETRY AND NARRATIVE IN PERFORMANCE
- Michel Pêcheux
LANGUAGE, SEMANTICS AND IDEOLOGY
- Jean-Michel Rabaté
LANGUAGE, SEXUALITY AND IDEOLOGY IN EZRA POUND'S *CANTOS*
- Denise Riley
'AM I THAT NAME?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History
- Jacqueline Rose
THE CASE OF PETER PAN or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction
- Brian Rotman
SIGNIFYING NOTHING: The Semiotics of Zero
- Raymond Tallis
NOT SAUSSURE: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory
- David Trotter
CIRCULATION: Defoe, Dickens and the Economies of the Novel
THE MAKING OF THE READER: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry
- Peter Womack
IMPROVEMENT AND ROMANCE: Constructing the Myth of the Highlands
forthcoming titles
- Stanley Aronowitz
THE CRISIS IN HISTORICAL MATERIALISM
- John Barrell
ESSAYS
- James Donald
A SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION: Essays on Schooling and Popular Culture
- Alan Durant
SOUNDTRACK AND TALKBACK
- Piers Gray
MODERNISM AND THE MODERN
- Ian Hunter, David Saunders and Dugald Williamson
ON PORNOGRAPHY
- Rod Mengham
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETICS
- Jean-Claude Milner
FOR THE LOVE OF LANGUAGE
- Jeffrey Minson
GENESIS AND AUTHORSHIP
PERSONAL POLITICS AND ETHICAL STYLE
- Denise Riley
POETS ON POETICS
- Michael Ryan
POLITICS AND CULTURE
- James A. Snead and Cornel West
SEEING BLACK: A Semiotics of Black Culture in America

Foreword

This book is clear. It states its thesis at the outset. It attempts to demonstrate that thesis on the basis of texts which it follows step by step; it does not take the easy way out and select passages that would serve its own interest. After spelling out at length its point of departure and the path it has chosen to follow, it does not hesitate to draw conclusions. Because the book presents itself so well, because it holds the reader's attention without proceeding too slowly or too quickly, I am not convinced that it needs to be presented by me.

Still, the fact must be faced: this is a difficult book. Not difficult to read—I have just noted its clarity—but difficult to understand and even, I think, difficult to “take.” Difficult for psychoanalysts and others who have long since adopted the vocabulary and habits of thought bequeathed by Freud. These readers—of whom I am one—have recognized Freud's genius and have not stopped to criticize it. They have had trouble enough understanding the subtleties, the twists and turns, the changes of heart in that massive work which is still in the process of impregnating our culture. With a thinker of Freud's stature, one does not quibble over details: it is better to watch what he does and use the power of his thought in the continuing effort to understand the many obscure phenomena that he has helped us confront and that he has ultimately restored to the realm of rationality.

Now here is Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, boldly jarring the Freudian

edifice and proposing to reread it from beginning to end so as to show how it coheres in its very inconsistencies. Borch-Jacobsen presents Freud as the victim of a concept of the human subject, inherited from previous generations, that led him toward a series of brilliant solutions to false problems. According to this book, Freud failed to notice that the human subject is radically "altered," that it is never what it is except because it is other, because it is other to itself, because it is its own other, although it is never able to represent that other to itself.

It is as though Freud had always been on the right track. It was he, after all, who did all he could to dislodge the ego from its position of self-sufficiency, trying to be a new Copernicus who would stop the Sun of otherness from revolving around the egoistic Earth. But the premises available to him led him to attribute to the unconscious all that he took away from consciousness; in the process, he failed to see that the new center he was proposing suffered from the same centripetal defect he had attributed to the conscious ego. This leads to a claim of self-sufficiency, not for consciousness but for the unconscious. And this self-sufficiency brings us back to the illusion of completeness and mastery, with the unconscious as new master.

Out of this reasoning a whole series of insoluble problems arises, as Borch-Jacobsen makes clear: the problem of desire going astray in the search for its object; the problem of the social bond that is magnified in paranoia; the problem of the formation of groups, which brings us around to hypnosis. I shall not pursue these points, which are abundantly and forcefully developed in Borch-Jacobsen's book.

Are my own preexisting prejudices returning to make me ask, or reiterate, certain questions? The pleasure of seeing the Freudian machinery dismantled leaves some room for reservations. I wonder, for example, whether Borch-Jacobsen's model is not too large a garment in which to cloak Freudian psychoanalysis. To put it another way, does not the philosophical method proceed too quickly to the ultimate solution, so that questions arising in a clinical context are submerged by the exemplary truth? The response will be, rightly, that false problematics can only lead to therapeutic disasters. Hence I shall formulate my objection differently. Is the philosophical that

operates within the transcendental capable of making room, really, for the empirical? Let me take just one example.

According to the logic of Borch-Jacobsen's argument, one must declare not only that transference is finally identical with hypnosis, but also that the hypnotic state is constitutive of the human subject, and that it is therefore useless to hope that transference can be dissolved. We might just as well say that the ego can finally constitute itself independently of the other that defines it without being able to master that other, much less to put itself in the other's place.

That is uncontestable. Uncontestable, yes, but precisely at the level of philosophical principles and their transcendent generality. At the empirical level, the uncontestable is divided into several statements. There is no doubt that, at the end of treatment, the alteration of the subject turns out to be intact if the human subject is defined as altered. There is no way around that, so in this sense the transference remains. But this by no means implies that the transference to a particular analyst—the state of hypnosis, of suggestion, of dependency with respect to that analyst—remains unchanged, that is, retains the form with which it began. The altering other that the psychoanalyst was charged with representing (and it had to be represented, for a time, to emerge from the neurosis) can be dismissed to the benefit of that other who now permits the subject to function without needing to be represented. In this second sense the transference comes to an end, which in no way contradicts Borch-Jacobsen's thesis, but situates it in its proper place.

Let me go even further. It is because Borch-Jacobsen has formulated his thesis that we shall be led, if we listen to him, to spell out just what belongs in our domain, and to understand more precisely the difficulties and, eventually, the solutions we encounter in our practice. There is no better way to mark the interest of a book than to observe that it forces us to rethink what we have been taking for granted and to find more adequate formulations for what we do.

François Roustang

Note on Abbreviations

Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts from Freud's works are quoted from James Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74). *The Standard Edition* is subsequently referred to as *SE*.

Only works that constitute an entire volume of *SE* appear in italics; all others, regardless of the form in which they were originally published, appear in quotation marks throughout.

The following frequently cited works in *SE* are abbreviated, in both in-text citations and the Notes, and the *SE* volume number omitted, since it is given here:

"Beyond Pleasure"	"Beyond the Pleasure Principle," <i>SE</i> 18
"Child"	"A Child Is Being Beaten," <i>SE</i> 17
"Creative Writers"	"Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," <i>SE</i> 9
<i>Dreams</i>	<i>The Interpretation of Dreams</i> , <i>SE</i> 4 and 5
"Ego and Id"	"The Ego and the Id," <i>SE</i> 19
"Group Psychology"	"Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," <i>SE</i> 14
"On Narcissism"	"On Narcissism: An Introduction," <i>SE</i> 14
"Psycho-Analytic Notes"	"Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," <i>SE</i> 12
"Three Essays"	"Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," <i>SE</i> 7

Also abbreviated are the following two works:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| <i>Origins</i> | <i>The Origins of Psycho-Analysis, Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887-1902</i> , ed. Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, and Ernst Kris (New York, 1954) |
| <i>Letters</i> | <i>The Freud-Jung Letters: Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung</i> , ed. William McGuire, trans. Ralph Manheim and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N.J., 1974) |

The Freudian Subject

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	vii
<i>Note on Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Dramatis Personae</i>	i
<i>"Dreams Are Completely Egoistic"</i>	10
Appropriation, 11. Dramaturgies, 16. The Point of Otherness, 26. The Desire of Psychoanalysis, 48.	
<i>Ecce Ego</i>	53
Correspondence, 56. "Self, the Gloomy Tyrant," 80. On Love, 94. The Turning Point, 113.	
<i>The Primal Band</i>	127
An-archy, 128. The Suggest, 146. Political Love, 153. Dangerous Liaisons, 164. Double Band or Triangle? 173. Undecidable Oedipus, 194. "Be Me!" "Who's That?" 203. "Dreams Are Completely Egoistic" (II), 237.	
<i>Notes</i>	243

Dramatis Personae

At the end of the fourth chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which deals with distortion in dreams, Freud returns to the formula that concluded the analysis of the dream of "Irma's injection": *After a complete interpretation, every dream turns out to be the fulfillment of a wish*. The formula is justly famous, for it sums up Freud's entire thesis on dreams and fantasies: here, in these bizarre scenes wrested from sleep, in the fantasies of daydreaming, is where desire is fulfilled and "realized," properly speaking. And so this is where the investigator must turn, plunging into the intermediary world between night and day in order to bring what is nocturnal, unconscious, out into the open. We shall follow that path here: according to another celebrated formula, dreams are the *via regia*, the royal road to the unconscious.

But we know, too, that this road is not a direct one. Dreams are obscure; in them, desire does not speak clearly. Thus Freud adds two parentheses to his initial formula, correcting his statement as follows: "A dream is a (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish" (*Dreams*, p. 160). The earlier formula dealt directly with the dream's latent thought, the unconscious dream-thought in which a wish is fulfilled (for example: "I am not responsible for Irma's illness"). The second comes at the conclusion of a chapter that attempts to explain why so many dreams, in their manifest content, appear to invalidate the thesis of the wish-dream (because no wish seems to be fulfilled

in the dream, or even because the dream runs counter to a wish, as in the case of counter-wish-dreams). This clarifies the point of view from which Freud is looking at distortion in Chapter 4. He is not yet concerned with describing the modalities of distortion in dreams, or the disturbances introduced into dream-thoughts by a dream-work that, for its part, “does not think” (he deals with these in Chap. 6); he is concerned, rather, with a preliminary question: Why is there distortion, and who benefits from it?

The answer, in its essence, is well known. It is the ABC of psychoanalysis: “Everyone has wishes that he would prefer not to disclose to other people, and wishes that he will not admit even to himself” (p. 160). On this point, the psychology of dreams converges with the psychology of neurosis, which Freud had been exploring since his *Studies on Hysteria*. For if the dream-wish has to be distorted, if its discourse has to be purified, it is for the same reason that it is “converted” in hysterical symptoms, “transposed” in obsessive ideas, “rejected” in psychotic hallucinations: because it is inadmissible, irreconcilable, with the conscious, social, orderly ego.¹

And what is supremely irreconcilable, of course, is sexuality. The dream analyses in *The Interpretation of Dreams* do not all lead to a specifically sexual desire—far from it, and we shall return to this point. Still, the connections Freud repeatedly establishes between dream processes and neurotic processes provide clear evidence that in his mind the “etiology” of dreams is ultimately sexual, just as the etiology of neuroses is sexual. Thus a (pre)conscious wish from the previous evening may well trigger a dream and even occupy center stage in it, but such a wish, according to Freud, could never have formed the dream on its own, without the contribution of a clandestine investment or cathexis. This dream “capitalist,” to use the celebrated comparison, always turns out to be an infantile wish, which is unconscious because it is repressed, and repressed because it is sexual (pp. 552–53, 560–61, 605–7, and so on).

Wishes are rooted in the forbidden, by way of sexuality: this is supposed to account for distortion. If the wish is never clearly represented to consciousness, no inherent opacity on the part of the wish is to blame. The wish is not clearly represented because access to consciousness is *denied* it by an “agency” assigned the task of sorting

out representations at the entrance to the preconscious-conscious system; significantly, Freud compares the work of this agency to political censorship. The dream's indecipherability thus stems first of all from an elision, a subtraction of the dream-thoughts from consciousness: according to Freud, foreign newspapers with passages blacked out at the Russian border are unreadable in the same way (pp. 142–43, n. 3).² Next we have to add the efforts the wish makes to conceal its thoughts and bypass censorship:

A similar difficulty confronts the political writer who has disagreeable truths to tell to those in authority. If he presents them undisguised, the authorities will suppress his words—after they have been spoken, if his pronouncement was an oral one, but beforehand, if he had intended to make it in print. A writer must beware of the censorship, and on its account he must soften and distort the expression of his opinion. [p. 142]

What these “analogies” presuppose is obvious: the newspaper is legible before the censor's scissors make holes in it; the writer knows what he wants to say before he starts to play the game of concealment. In other words, dream-thoughts are indeed thoughts, *cogitationes*, and they are perfectly intelligible ones (Freud insists on this repeatedly). Nothing sets them apart from conscious representations except the simple fact that repression keeps them inaccessible to consciousness:

When we bear in mind that the latent dream-thoughts are not conscious before an analysis has been carried out, whereas the manifest content of the dream is consciously remembered, it seems plausible to suppose that the privilege enjoyed by the second [censoring] agency is that of permitting thoughts to enter consciousness. . . . This enables us to form a quite definite view of the “essential nature” of consciousness: we see the process of a thing becoming conscious as a specific psychical act, distinct from and independent of the process of the formation of a presentation or idea; and we regard consciousness as a sense organ which perceives data that arise elsewhere. [p. 144]

Thus we have come right back to the fundamental hypothesis of psychoanalysis, whose scandalous and enigmatic aspects are revived by the merest reminder: the subject is not conscious of all “its” thoughts, is not present in all “its” representations, not even virtually or potentially. In the move from *cogito* to *me cogitare*, the logic is

faulty, for “I” have thoughts (*Gedanken*), “I” make representations (*Vorstellungen*) that do not appear to *me*, are never given to *me* in any experience or perception whatsoever. The *cogitatio*—Freud’s term for it is the “psychical”—exceeds and overflows consciousness at every turn, where consciousness is understood as certainty and presence of self in representation. This thinking thinks *without me*, without ceasing to think, moreover (as we see, for example, when it calculates, or makes a joke). *It* thinks, then—and it *thinks*. The Freudian unconscious, Lacan asserts,

has nothing to do with the so-called forms of the unconscious that preceded it, not to say accompanied it. . . . To all these forms of unconscious, ever more or less linked to some obscure will regarded as primordial, to something preconscious, what Freud opposes is the revelation that at the level of the unconscious there is something at all points homologous with what occurs at the level of the subject—this thing speaks and functions in a way quite as elaborate as at the level of the conscious, which thus loses what seemed to be its privilege.⁴

The debate over the Cartesian *Cogito* and its subsequent history begins, of course, right here. (“It is here,” Lacan continues a little further on, “that the dissymmetry between Freud and Descartes is revealed. It is not in the initial method of certainty grounded on the subject. It stems from the fact that the subject is ‘at home’ in the field of the unconscious.”)⁵ But the difficulties begin here as well. For once it has been established that “it”—or the *id*—thinks without my knowing, without the ego’s knowing, anything about it, then we have to ask: Who is It? *Who* is thinking, in this instance (who, then, is thinking me)? Is this unconscious thinking therefore a thinking attributable to no subject?

Let us not pursue the argument as to whether this *cogitatio* without ego is Structure, Signifier, or Language, as it is frequently claimed to be today: it could be shown that this Structure (a signifying combinatorial, mathematical or mathetic), though it excludes all “subjectivism” and all “egoism,” is precisely *the* Subject in the modern, Cartesian sense—as Lacan himself knows perfectly well, and even argues.⁶ Let us remain instead on the properly Freudian level of the question. We want to know, then, *who* represents unconscious thoughts to him/her/itself. Indeed, if the “content” of the

unconscious is defined essentially as representation, as *Vorstellung* (and in fact, according to Freud, repression involves the ideational representative of an instinct), can we avoid asking *in front of* what, in front of what “agency,” this *Vor-stellung* is posited or presented?

What is this psyche, the “psychical” in which an instinct comes to represent itself as representation (*Vorstellung*) and affect (*Affekt*), unless it is, still and always, a subject? Unless it is, more precisely, the subject of representation apart from which the wish or instinct *is* nothing, simply does not appear.⁷ And then, if it is true, as Heidegger has conclusively shown,⁸ that the subject, for the Moderns, is the subject *of representation*, do we not have to begin to wonder about the radicalness of the displacement operated here in the name of “thinking” and unconscious “representation”? By maintaining these terms, by continuing to use them in an unqualified fashion, do we not risk dismissing the entire problematics of subject(vi)ty, by heedlessly passing it off under the name of “unconscious”?

For unconscious desire is undoubtedly not (re)presented to consciousness, but it is presented to the unconscious, (re)presented (“fulfilled,” “realized”) in the unconscious. And this alone suffices to make the unconscious substantive, to institute it as a subject: a subject positing itself in and through (re)presentation, a subject assuring itself of itself in and through thought—in short, *con-scientia*. To specify, as Freud does (“The Unconscious,” *SE* 14: 170), that the unconscious is not a second *consciousness* (a “splitting of consciousness,” a “subconsciousness,” and so on) changes nothing: *con-scientia*, rigorously speaking, designates above all the *co*-position of the subject with its representations, and this *co*-position has no need, finally, for consciousness in the psychological sense.

It changes nothing, either, when Freud adds—in another refrain as familiar as the statement that the unconscious is intelligible—that unconscious thoughts are erratic, independent of each other, and governed by laws other than those of waking thought (p. 170). Beyond the fact that insane thought, which knows neither reality “nor negation, nor doubt, nor degree of certitude,” is thought nonetheless,⁹ the fact remains that all these irreconcilable representations are indeed referred to a *single subject*, however chaotic or “id-ic” it may be, and that they coexist within a single subject, according to the