Introduction: Approaching the Real

This book concerns the concept of the ‘Real’ in the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Lacan proposed an ambitious, at times highly abstract, and always philosophically suggestive, reading of Freud, intended to provide a strong theoretical basis for the creative renewal of psychoanalytic practice. In what follows, I aim to provide a sustained, synthetic reading of the broad sweep of Lacan’s work, from articles written in the 1940s on the question of primary narcissism in the formation of the ego through to his final seminars 30 years later, with a view to reconstructing perhaps the most elusive of his concepts, the ‘Real’. The Real, I argue, must be understood as the central, determining concept of Lacan’s work, early and late, without which his metapsychology would succumb to one of two fates: either the temptations of linguistic idealism, whereby psychoanalysis would risk being reduced to a form of hermeneutics; or a theoretical and clinical overinvestment in the narcissistic projections of the ego, rendered as the properly curative object of analysis.

I argue that the emerging concern for the questions of Symbolic determination and Imaginary misrecognition that motor Lacan’s theoretical production in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s are appreciable only when the Real is assumed to have emerged, from the beginning, as the conceptual horizon of psychoanalysis as reconceived by Lacan. At one and the same time, I will resist reducing the Real to a schematic definition; instead, I have allowed my inquiry to trace the multiple ways in which Lacan conceives the Real, often in a position of inextricable codefinition with other, crucial concepts in his work, and very rarely taking the form of direct, unambiguous conceptualization or nomination. The Real is situated conceptually in much the same way as it operates within the life of the subject, which is to say as a remainder, an excess, and thus

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as something appreciable only through other concepts or notions. This is not to deny the possibility of any definition of the Real, but to signal that singular or stable definitions must be held in suspicion in favour of an appreciation of the multiplicity of ways in which the Real is figured throughout Lacan’s work.

The chapters that follow approach Lacan’s theoretical work as a complex whole, while resisting the urge to paper over the inherently fragmentary and often ambiguous nature of his arguments. The Lacan that emerges is not a ‘philosopher’, at least not of the kind that he would himself criticize for an overbearing urge to systemization; nonetheless, there are, I argue, significant underlying continuities in his articles and seminars that congregate around the question of the Real as it interacts with the other crucial concepts of his metapsychology, and it is this underlying continuity – persistent if not unitary – that I argue renders problematic the schematic division of his work into artificial, teleological stages. Against the common reading that assigns the Real to a position of importance only in the final seminars of the 1970s, I argue that every stage of his theoretical development can be understood as an attempt to delineate more precisely the Real as the object particular to psychoanalytic inquiry, an object that, in its multiple instantiations, refuses any linear periodization or temporal delimitation.

Commenting on the work of Julia Kristeva, Charles Shepherdson articulates my own scepticism as to the periodization of Lacan’s work well: ‘the academic reception of many other thinkers is marked by precisely the same structural conflict, in which two incompatible images are offered to our gaze. Often, the problem is resolved by appeal to a historical narrative, which allows us to split the author into two parts by locating one interpretation at an “early stage” of the writer’s career, and the other at a “later stage”’. The question of the Real especially seems to provoke this tendency in commentators on Lacan, as in the following from Paul Verhaeghe: ‘the early Lacan will elaborate this determinism in a scientific way, by interpreting this dark unconscious as a linguistic system, governed by laws and thus predictable. The later Lacan concentrates on the drive and the real, thus making room for unpredictability and causality as such’. One of my central tasks here is to refute this interpretation, showing instead the thorough interpenetration of the questions of Symbolic law, of causation, and of the Real as they are formulated and reformulated through the entirety of Lacan’s work.

Marc de Kesel provides one of the most recent articulations of the alternative to my position, whereby the Real only comes to prominence in the later stages of Lacan’s work: ‘of course, there is a difference