The Imaginary and the Real

We are told that man is the measure of all things. But where is his own measure? Is it to be found in himself?

(Jacques Lacan, S2, p. 68)

Introduction

In this chapter I will draw out in Lacan’s account of the Imaginary register, and in particular in his various engagements with the constitutivity of the image of the ‘other’, the beginnings of what he would come to define as the Real. As I’ve already signalled in the Introduction, I aim to take Lacan at his word, when he insists that the object of Freudian concern is the Real, as that which persists ‘beyond the pleasure principle’. While the Introduction also outlined the extent to which over-hasty periodizations of Lacan’s work reduce its essential complexity, it is necessary to begin this investigation of the Real with texts produced relatively early on in Lacan’s career so as to trace the lineage of other concepts that would come to define it, as it becomes part of the triumvirate of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real in 1953. I will focus, in particular, on a text often cited but rarely understood in the fullness of its ambiguity and implication, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I As Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’. Through a close reading, I hope to emphasize how Hegelian readings of the Mirror Stage, while correct in identifying the key influence of Kojève’s reading of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic on Lacan’s account of ego formation, nonetheless underplay the deformative aspects of the image of the Other that act as a bar to any overcoming of Imaginary antagonism, aspects
that, I will argue, later coalesce as what we might designate as the Real in the Imaginary, the presence of an irrecurable antagonism at the heart of the subject. The aim is not to deny the constitutive nature of the mirror image, but to emphasize the co-implication in Lacan's account of ego formation of that which defines the contours of the self and that which comes to threaten it, and to appreciate in turn how this double logic forms the basis for the Real as it is threaded throughout Lacan's work. The vicissitudes of primary narcissism, that is to say, persist even for those subjects who successfully negotiate Symbolic castration, and the antagonism proper to the Imaginary persists within Lacan's wider metapsychology as the Real.

My concerns in this chapter inevitably bring the psychoanalytic debate over the role of the image in subject formation into contact with a number of philosophical concerns. Lacan's account of ego formation provides, I will argue, a counter-argument to any phenomenological emphasis on conscious intentionality and symmetry in the subject/object relationship. Lacan will be shown to have transcended a purely dialectical, developmental or synthetic account of ego formation through the radical ambiguity rendered as central to his concept of the Imaginary and its object, the ego, codeveloping as it does both formative and deformative accounts of the image of the Other. In making this argument, I will insist that the Imaginary and the egoic image can only be understood in co-implication with the Symbolic; to a certain degree, the Imaginary register is only coherent if we already presuppose the mapping of proto-Symbolic, pre-Oedipal coordinates such that the subject is able to incorporate basic relations of self and other. More than this, however, the Real too, taken to be much more than simply that which is not taken up in the Imaginary or the Symbolic, must be presupposed if the aggressivity and antagonistic rivalry proper to Imaginary identification is to be fully accounted for. To this end, I will turn to lesser-known papers roughly contemporaneous with Lacan's famous paper on the Mirror Stage.

Further, one of the cornerstones of my argument in this chapter is that key concepts that Lacan begins to develop early in his career significantly prefigure later concepts that more explicitly become associated with the register of the Real. I hope that, through a reading of Lacan's particular appropriation of the Freudian notions of the 'ideal-ego' and the 'ego-ideal', one might see the tentative beginnings of what will become objet petit a, the concept Lacan claimed to consider his most important innovation. Later chapters will flesh out the centrality of this concept and its very particular relationship to the Real, but here at