Introduction

Having explained how Lacan lays out the formation of the Real, conceived in its relationship to the Imaginary as an immanently produced, and irrecoverable, antagonism proper to identification, I will now outline his theory of the Symbolic in its intimate interconnection with the Real. While the importance of Saussure and Jakobson’s linguistics and Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology for the development of Lacan’s theory of language is indisputable,¹ in this chapter I will argue that Lacan pushed the logic of the structuralist analysis of language to its very limit and in so doing revealed the Real, the ‘ex-timate’ limit point inherent to, but disruptive of, all Symbolic logics.

Readings of Lacan influenced by Jacques-Alain Miller’s formalization of the so-called ‘late Lacan’ of the latter half of the 1960s and the 1970s, up to and including Slavoj Žižek’s, have tended to argue for two phases that alter the relative position of the Symbolic in Lacan’s work. The first is identified with Lacan’s teaching of the 1950s and 1960s and is said to involve a more or less faithful rendering of an orthodox structuralist account of the constitutivity of language for the subject. The second is associated with a later, ‘Real’ formalism, eclipsing the constitutivity of language in favour of an increasing focus on jouissance, the excess enjoyment that motors symptomal identification but that eludes the structure of language. I will refute this reading by showing how, from early in his seminars, language is rendered by Lacan as a multi-dimensional, dynamic structure, containing points of inconsistency and unmeaning that point to the Real. Crucial Lacanian concepts considered in such a way will be: the ‘unary trait’ as a material marker situated, at least logically, prior to the relativization of Symbolic sense; the ‘letter’ as the

¹ Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the ‘Real’* © Tom Eyers 2012
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signifier in its isolation from relations of meaning; and the Lacanian reinvention of the notion of the signifier *tout court*, predicated as it is on a displacement of any Saussurian certainty as to the signifier’s connection to the signified.

It is, above all, in the philosophical reception of Lacan, inaugurated by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s essay *The Title of the Letter*, that the notion of him as a thinker ultimately beholden, if only implicitly, to an idealist view of language, defined as delimiting all that is accessible to the subject, has taken hold. I will argue to the contrary that Lacan registered early in his teaching the importance of recognizing the constitutive interpenetration of the Symbolic and the Real, and subsequently the constitutive deficiencies of the Symbolic as it moulds the subject. And just as Freud, most notably in his 1925 paper ‘Negation’, emphasized the prior affirmation necessary for any negative judgement or logic of contradiction, so Lacan, far from being a thinker of a hypostatized linguistic lack or void, insists on the singularity and substantial persistence of those elements in the Symbolic that immanently escape any negative constitution of reference and that point to the ultimate overdetermination of the Symbolic by the Real. Overdetermination, to be clear, signifies in this instance the absolute reliance of the production of meaning on those Real elements of the Symbolic that, while inherently meaningless, nonetheless provide the ground for meaning’s emergence. If Lacan’s discussion of the Real in the Imaginary, developed through his rereading of Freud’s theory of primary narcissism, emphasizes the traumatism inherent to the process of identification, the Real that emerges from the Symbolic, while retaining its Imaginary edge of threat, will come to persist as a formal point, singular and undialectizable, within the logic of signification, both constituting it from within and threatening it from without. Here, the double logic that I argue is central to Lacan’s Real re-emerges, namely the co-implication of the constitutive and the dissolutive, the formative and the deformative, identified in the previous chapter in relation to processes of identification.

Moreover, just as Lacan’s Imaginary threatens any consistent presentation of boundaries of the inside and the outside, so the Real in the Symbolic will threaten any residue of a post-Kantian division between the phenomena of empirical reality and the noumenal outside of any representational system, while avoiding the temptations of Hegelian synthesis. Lacan’s philosophy of language will accordingly be distinguished from both the structuralist emphasis on complex totalities and the post-structuralist logic of a potentially limitless semiotic freeplay; Lacan, I will argue, manages, in part through his codevelopment of the relationality of the signifier and