The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function

as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience

Delivered on July 17, 1949, in Zurich at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis

The conception of the mirror stage I introduced at our last congress thirteen years ago, having since been more or less adopted by the French group, seems worth bringing to your attention once again—especially today, given the light it sheds on the *I* function in the experience psychoanalysis provides us of it. It should be noted that this experience sets us at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the *cogito*.

Some of you may recall the behavioral characteristic I begin with that is explained by a fact of comparative psychology: the human child, at an age when he is for a short while, but for a while nevertheless, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can already recognize his own image as such in a mirror. This recognition is indicated by the illuminative mimicry of the *Aha-Erlebnis*, which Köhler considers to express situational apperception, an essential moment in the act of intelligence.

Indeed, this act, far from exhausting itself, as in the case of a monkey, in eventually acquired control over the uselessness of the image, immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates—namely, the child's own body, and the persons and even things around him.

This event can take place, as we know from Baldwin's work, from the age of six months on; its repetition has often given me pause to reflect upon the striking spectacle of a nursling in front of a mirror who has not yet mastered

walking, or even standing, but who—though held tightly by some prop, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a *trotte-bébé* [a sort of walker])—overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt a slightly leaning-forward position and take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind.

In my view, this activity has a specific meaning up to the age of eighteen months, and reveals both a libidinal dynamism that has hitherto remained problematic and an ontological structure of the human world that fits in with my reflections on paranoiac knowledge.

It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification,* in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity's term, "imago."

The jubilant assumption [*assomption*] of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.

This form would, moreover, have to be called the "ideal-I"[1]—if we wanted to translate it into a familiar register—in the sense that it will also be the rootstock of secondary identifications, this latter term subsuming the libidinal normalization functions. But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as *I,* his discordance with his own reality.

For the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the matu-
95 ration of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it. Through these two aspects of its appearance, this gestalt—whose power [*prégnance*] should be considered linked to the species, though its motor style is as yet unrecognizable—symbolizes the *I*'s mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination. This gestalt is also replete with the correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue onto which man projects himself, the phantoms

that dominate him, and the automaton with which the world of his own making tends to achieve fruition in an ambiguous relation.

Indeed, for imagos—whose veiled faces we analysts see emerge in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic effectiveness[2]—the specular image seems to be the threshold of the visible world, if we take into account the mirrored disposition of the *imago of one's own body* in hallucinations and dreams, whether it involves one's individual features, or even one's infirmities or object projections; or if we take note of the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearance of *doubles*, in which psychical realities manifest themselves that are, moreover, heterogeneous.

The fact that a gestalt may have formative effects on an organism is attested to by a biological experiment that is so far removed from the idea of psychical causality that it cannot bring itself to formulate itself in such terms. The experiment nevertheless acknowledges that it is a necessary condition for the maturation of the female pigeon's gonad that the pigeon see another member of its species, regardless of its sex; this condition is so utterly sufficient that the same effect may be obtained by merely placing a mirror's reflective field near the individual. Similarly, in the case of the migratory locust, the shift within a family line from the solitary to the gregarious form can be brought about by exposing an individual, at a certain stage of its development, to the exclusively visual action of an image akin to its own, provided the movements of this image sufficiently resemble those characteristic of its species. Such facts fall within a realm of homeomorphic identification that is itself subsumed 96
within the question of the meaning of beauty as formative and erogenous.

But mimetic facts, understood as heteromorphic identification, are of just as much interest to us insofar as they raise the question of the signification of space for living organisms—psychological concepts hardly seeming less appropriate for shedding light here than the ridiculous attempts made to reduce these facts to the supposedly supreme law of adaptation. We need but recall how Roger Caillois (still young and fresh from his break with the sociological school at which he trained) illuminated the subject when, with the term "legendary psychasthenia," he subsumed morphological mimicry within the derealizing effect of an obsession with space.

As I myself have shown, human knowledge is more independent than animal knowledge from the force field of desire because of the social dialectic that structures human knowledge as paranoiac;[3] but what limits it is the "scant reality" surrealistic unsatisfaction denounces therein. These reflections lead me to recognize in the spatial capture manifested by the mirror stage, the effect in man, even prior to this social dialectic, of an organic inadequacy of his natural reality—assuming we can give some meaning to the word "nature."

The function of the mirror stage thus turns out, in my view, to be a particular case of the function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.

In man, however, this relationship to nature is altered by a certain dehiscence at the very heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of malaise and motor uncoordination of the neonatal months. The objective notions of the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal tracts and of certain humoral residues of the maternal organism in the newborn confirm my view that we find in man a veritable *specific prematurity of birth*.

97 Let us note in passing that this fact is recognized as such by embryologists, under the heading "fetalization," as determining the superiority of the so-called higher centers of the central nervous system, and especially of the cerebral cortex which psychosurgical operations will lead us to regard as the intra-organic mirror.

This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the individual's formation into history: the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. Thus, the shattering of the *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego's audits.

This fragmented body—another expression I have gotten accepted into the French school's system of theoretical references—is regularly manifested in dreams when the movement of an analysis reaches a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual. It then appears in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented, growing wings and taking up arms for internal persecutions that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch fixed for all time in painting, in their ascent in the fifteenth century to the imaginary zenith of modern man. But this form turns out to be tangible even at the organic level, in the lines of "fragilization" that define the hysteric's fantasmatic anatomy, which is manifested in schizoid and spasmodic symptoms.

Correlatively, the *I* formation is symbolized in dreams by a fortified camp, or even a stadium—distributing, between the arena within its walls and its outer border of gravel-pits and marshes, two opposed fields of battle where the subject bogs down in his quest for the proud, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) strikingly symbolizes the id. Similarly, though here in the mental sphere, we find fortified structures constructed, the

metaphors for which arise spontaneously, as if deriving from the subject's very symptoms, to designate the mechanisms of obsessive neurosis: inversion, isolation, reduplication, undoing what has been done, and displacement. 98

But were I to build on these subjective data alone—were I to so much as free them from the experiential condition that makes me view them as based on a language technique—my theoretical efforts would remain exposed to the charge of lapsing into the unthinkable, that of an absolute subject. This is why I have sought, in the present hypothesis grounded in a confluence of objective data, a *method of symbolic reduction* as my guiding grid.

It establishes a genetic order in *ego defenses,* in accordance with the wish formulated by Anna Freud in the first part of her major book, and situates (as against a frequently expressed prejudice) hysterical repression and its returns at a more archaic stage than obsessive inversion and its isolating processes, situating the latter as prior to the paranoiac alienation that dates back to the time at which the specular *I* turns into the social *I*.

This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one's semblable and the drama of primordial jealousy (so well brought out by the Charlotte Bühler school in cases of transitivism in children), the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.

It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [*savoir*] into being mediated by the other's desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the *I* into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process. The very normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention, as is exemplified by the fact that sexual object choice is dependent upon the Oedipus complex.

In light of my conception, the term "primary narcissism," by which analytic doctrine designates the libidinal investment characteristic of this moment, reveals in those who invented it a profound awareness of semantic latencies. But it also sheds light on the dynamic opposition between this libido and sexual libido, an opposition they tried to define when they invoked destructive and even death instincts in order to explain the obvious relationship between narcissistic libido and the alienating *I* function, and the aggressiveness deriving therefrom in all relations with others, even in relations involving aid of the most good-Samaritan variety.

The fact is that they encountered that existential negativity whose reality is so vigorously proclaimed by the contemporary philosophy of being and nothingness. 99

Unfortunately, this philosophy grasps that negativity only within the limits of a self*-sufficiency of consciousness, which, being one of its premises, ties the illusion of autonomy in which it puts its faith to the ego's constitutive misrecognitions. While it draws considerably on borrowings from psychoanalytic experience, this intellectual exercise culminates in the pretense of grounding an existential psychoanalysis.

At the end of a society's historical enterprise to no longer recognize that it has any but a utilitarian function, and given the individual's anxiety faced with the concentration-camp form of the social link whose appearance seems to crown this effort, existentialism can be judged on the basis of the justifications it provides for the subjective impasses that do, indeed, result therefrom: a freedom that is never so authentically affirmed as when it is within the walls of a prison; a demand for commitment that expresses the inability of pure consciousness to overcome any situation; a voyeuristic-sadistic idealization of sexual relationships; a personality that achieves self-realization only in suicide; and a consciousness of the other that can only be satisfied by Hegelian murder.

These notions are opposed by the whole of analytic experience, insofar as it teaches us not to regard the ego as centered on the *perception-consciousness system* or as organized by the "reality principle"—the expression of a scientific bias most hostile to the dialectic of knowledge—but, rather, to take as our point of departure the *function of misrecognition* that characterizes the ego in all the defensive structures so forcefully articulated by Anna Freud. For, while *Verneinung* [negation] represents the blatant form of that function, its effects remain largely latent as long as they are not illuminated by some reflected light at the level of fate where the id manifests itself.

The inertia characteristic of the *I* formations can thus be understood as providing the broadest definition of neurosis, just as the subject's capture by his situation gives us the most general formulation of madness—the kind found within the asylum walls as well as the kind that deafens the world with its sound and fury.

The sufferings of neurosis and psychosis provide us schooling in the passions of the soul, just as the balance arm of the psychoanalytic scales—when we calculate the angle of its threat to entire communities—provides us with
100 an amortization rate for the passions of the city.

At this intersection of nature and culture, so obstinately scrutinized by the anthropology of our times, psychoanalysis alone recognizes the knot of imaginary servitude that love must always untie anew or sever.

For such a task we can find no promise in altruistic feeling, we who lay bare

the aggressiveness that underlies the activities of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer.

In the subject to subject recourse we preserve, psychoanalysis can accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the *"Thou art that,"* where the cipher of his mortal destiny is revealed to him, but it is not in our sole power as practitioners to bring him to the point where the true journey begins.

Notes

1. I have let stand the peculiar translation I adopted in this article for Freud's *Ideal Ich* [*je-idéal*], without further comment except to say that I have not maintained it since.

2. See Claude Lévi-Strauss' essay, entitled "L'efficacité symbolique," in *Revue de l'histoire des religions* CXXXV, 1 (1949): 5–27.

3. See, on this point, the texts that follow, pages 111 and 180 [*Écrits* 1966].