



## Toward a Neo-Lacanian Theory of Discourse

Work on discourse, then, is itself not neutral. The questions it poses concerning the historical and material existence of ideologies, discourses and their meanings concerning the ways in which individuals are constructed as subjects, and concerning the relations between theory and practice involved in “speaking for others,” are questions that some would prefer never to raise. For there stand, behind the work on discourse that emerged and developed at the end of the sixties and in the seventies, the ultimately political questions of how and how far the society in which we live can be changed.

—Diane Macdonell, *Theories of Discourse*

Here we can see clearly how fantasy is on the side of reality, how it sustains the subject’s “sense of reality”: when the phantasmatic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a “loss of reality” and starts to perceive reality as an “irreal” nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe is not “pure fantasy” but, on the contrary, *that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy*.

—Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*

Communication does not take place through subjects but through affects.

—Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*

**T**HE STUDY OF DISCOURSE as it has emerged in the last fifty years is strikingly diverse and interdisciplinary. It includes, according to Deborah Schiffrin’s taxonomy, speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnographies of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and variationist discourse analysis (we could also add critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis, discursive psychology, and more) and ranges from philosophy to linguistics to anthropology, and everywhere in between (6–11; cf. Jawor-

ski and Coupland 14–35). Such a wide range of approaches indicates that the notion of discourse is itself quite broad. This may also suggest why discourse has emerged as a special interest in the past few decades—the fact that diverse fields find the study of discourse useful indicates larger cultural and epistemological shifts. This is the argument Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland make in their overview of discourse theory. Looking to Foucault, they argue that the interest in discourse stems from an ongoing transformation in how knowledge is understood to be constituted. We can connect this insight to the generalized “validity crisis” concerning knowledge taken up in the work of Habermas and Lyotard, in which it is suggested that the formerly secure foundations that legitimate science and knowledge production are threatened. So while the reference to Foucault is certainly apt, Jaworski and Coupland might have just as easily addressed postmodernism itself and the debates that have sprung up concerning the imbrications of knowledge and discourse in the work of innumerable theorists. Certainly, such work has in various ways addressed Jaworski and Coupland’s definition of discourse as “language use relative to social, political, and cultural formations” and “language use reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals’ interaction with society” (3).

Jaworski and Coupland address only sparingly these various postmodern thinkers and debates, preferring to focus primarily on work in the linguistic tradition. The work they give the most weight approaches discourse primarily at the sentence level, similar to that in *Discourse Studies in Composition*, a collection edited by Ellen Barton and Gail Stygall, in which linguistics and sentence-level analysis play a major role. I should say at the outset that this is not the approach to discourse I am developing here. While the linguistic tradition has great value, especially as it is combined with poststructuralist social theory to produce critical hybrids like discourse analysis (see Fairclough), I am interested in what psychoanalytic theory can offer that is not available in linguistics-based analyses, especially in terms of developing a rhetorical understanding of discourse. Nevertheless, although my particular focus is on the conjunction of psychoanalytic theory and rhetoric, my wager is that, in general, nonlinguistic fields of study still have much to offer discourse theory; indeed, the emergence of critical discourse analysis itself attests to the fruitful conjunction of linguistics and poststructuralist social theory.

In the following, then, I use psychoanalysis to inflect and extend rhetorical theory on discourse. Psychoanalysis attends to our inner affective states, positing useful and inventive concepts for understanding how we as affective subjects are constituted and threaded through language and social systems. Concepts like desire, fantasy, and *jouissance* demonstrate that the entrance



into language and the resultant emergence of the subject are transformative events for human beings. As a consequence, a theory of discourse cannot just be an abstract account of linguistic functionings; rather, a theory of discourse already takes part in an understanding of what it means to be human and to have a life. Accordingly, it is profitable to consider how this is so by means of contrast with other theories of discourse. One point that will emerge rather soon is that a communications-based model of rhetorical transaction is woefully inadequate for understanding the intricacies of human interaction. A rhetoric that limits itself solely to the most direct, intended aspects of communicative interaction is a rhetoric impoverished. Psychoanalytic theory provides an early but quite sophisticated attempt to theorize how affective factors structure communication in ways we are only partially aware of at any given moment. Although poststructuralist thought has made great inroads on this issue, and indeed has much overlap with psychoanalysis, its engagement with the problem of the affective constitution of human being and human interaction is less acute than it could be.<sup>1</sup>

Poststructuralist thought, especially in the work of Foucault, has directly concerned itself with discourse, and it has done so in ways distinguished by attention to social, epistemological, and institutional dimensions. This point is crystallized in Diane Macdonell's mid-1980s monograph *Theories of Discourse*. Covering Foucault, Althusser, Pêcheux, and Hindess and Hirst, Macdonell argues that while it is a commonplace that discourse is social, cultural studies work on discourse has (from the time of her writing) been limited in its attention to issues such as class; the advantage of the work of the poststructuralist writers she covers, she states, is their extension of discourse to an area previously considered neutral: knowledge itself (2). Macdonell captures a primary impetus in work on discourse as it emerges in poststructuralist thought when she notes that in general it attempts to "write the history of those forces which shape our thinking and our knowledge" (2).

Expanding on Macdonell, we might say that poststructuralist thought attends to the tight connection made between discourse and our construction/perception of the world, or, better, how that world is always mediated through discourse and thereby accords us particular ways of being and acting within it. Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, for example, all give priority to the place of language in the world, especially in the formation of subjectivity and the conduct of human affairs: Lacan emphasizes the dialectic of assuming a signifier that cannot provide the satisfaction of identity or expression implied by its fulsome promise; Derrida argues that "writing," as the play of *différance*, undermines the myth of presence or any other assumption of closure and centering; and Foucault theorizes the workings of power in terms of the disciplinary and

productive effects of discourse. All three are concerned with the decentering, constitutive capacities of language that disrupt previous linguistic conceptions founded on identity, generality, representation, and homogeneity. In short, theories that move beyond our previous linguistic conceptions initiate a sea change, a shift to a concern with discourse. Thus, in *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek*, a book that picks up where Macdonell's leaves off, Jacob Torfing notes that after the break with "the conception of such a linguistic system as a closed and centred totality, it has been common to refer to it [language] as discourse" (3). We can extend the scope of this statement to include speech, writing, multimedia, and other forms of textual and image-based sign production.

The field of rhetoric and composition has also devoted attention to theories of discourse—poststructuralist, neo-Aristotelian, and others—with an eye to how such theories can inform writing and pedagogy. James Kinneavy and James Berlin offer differing theories of discourse that nevertheless have in common the idea that discourse is tightly bound up with our sense of reality. Kinneavy, whose early to midperiod work appeared prior to the influx of poststructuralist thought in America, favored a formalist approach to discourse modeled on the communications triangle, which he understood to be derived from the work of Aristotle (*Theory* 18–19). In his later works, he acknowledged and utilized poststructuralist theory without, however, deviating far from his initial neo-Aristotelian stance. Even when he delved into German hermeneutics—Heidegger and Gadamer in particular—Kinneavy retained a representationalist understanding of communication still commensurate with the communications/semiotic triangle, even though Heidegger's thoughts on language, developing out of his existential analytic, were quite at odds with representational thought and the metaphysical tradition from which it arose.<sup>2</sup> Berlin, heavily influenced by poststructuralist thought, shifts the theoretical emphasis from the discernment of an objective, formalist model of discourse to an acknowledgment of the constitutive and decentering capacities of language; in such a view, discourse is seen as always contingent and situated, which means, among other things, that there can be no universal, objective theoretical undertakings not understood as having concrete social, political, and historical motivations. This view has consequences for our understanding of history, intersubjective relations, and reality and also for theories of truth. The latter is worth highlighting because poststructuralist and cultural studies rhetorics emphasize the constructed nature of truth, often reducing it to a "story" or a "fiction." In contrast, neo-Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests another dimension to truth that avoids the fictionalizing move, while refusing to fall back into naive realism or a positivistic account of objective truth.



Lacan, for example, rejects any simple positivistic truth claims but nevertheless holds that science grants a form of access to the Real that produces truthful knowledge.

Kinneavy's model of discourse may have sufficed for awhile, but after the discursive turn and the influx of poststructuralist thought, it became clear that it needed emendation. However, even as this work proceeded, the more radical dimensions of poststructuralist and postmodern thought on discourse were deflected in many composition scholars' work, as evident when we examine how these radical dimensions were streamlined to fit a model of discourse still indebted to the communications triangle. In other words, poststructuralist thought was used to shore up rather than challenge Kinneavy's triangle. What I am attempting here, then, is the development of a third model of discourse derived from Lacanian and neo-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Using Lacan's graph of desire in a somewhat loose fashion, the differences among these three theories of discourse become clear, as does the redefinition of the four elements of the triangle (expressor, receptor, reality, and language) by poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories of discourse. Two related ideas are key here: that discourse constructs the human subject, and the subject it constructs is not just decentered but fissured; and that certain consequences of this fissuring apply to human interaction and, more specifically, to how we conceive rhetoric. That is, the disjunction of the subject in discourse, which includes the subject's nonjustification in the larger socio-symbolic field (what Lacan calls the big Other), gives rise to *jouissance*, fantasy, and other affective, nonrational (but not irrational) phenomena that suffuse and shape human affairs. Such affective phenomena preclude the possibility of simple, direct communication, which in turn impacts our understandings of truth and persuasion.

#### KINNEAVY AND THE COMMUNICATIONS TRIANGLE

In 1971, Kinneavy published *A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse*, in which he introduced the communications triangle as a model of discourse derived from classical sources (Aristotle) and modern language theory (Karl Bühler, Roman Jakobson, and others).<sup>3</sup> Kinneavy tells us that his aim is to bring discursive order to the chaos of composition theory (*Theory 1*), a statement that dovetails with Timothy Crusius's summation of Kinneavy's essential project as "*the retrieval of the liberal arts tradition within a semiotic framework with practical intent*" ("James" 352). Crusius understands Kinneavy as bringing history, theory, and practice together under the auspices of semiotic and structuralist thinking. Nevertheless, even though Kinneavy himself is regarded as one of the preeminent figures in the consolidation of rhetoric and

composition as a unique discipline, the influence of his theory of discourse is still in dispute. In 2000, Thomas P. Miller noted that *A Theory of Discourse* is “often cited but too little used” (316). However, only in 1984, Richard P. Fulker had charted a substantial number of articles and books commenting or drawing on Kinneavy’s work, also citing a good number of critiques, many of them directly concerned with the communications triangle (“Kinneavy” 54–55 nn.1–4).<sup>4</sup> All in all, Crusius tells us, approximately fifty articles, books, and dissertations tackle Kinneavy’s work, most of them directed toward *A Theory of Discourse* (“James” 355).

Nevertheless, all dispute and criticism aside, the communications triangle remains an important model for understanding discourse, showing up in rhetoric and composition, communications, sociology, and other fields. Crusius points out that the longevity of *A Theory of Discourse* is largely attributable to the triangle. It is a “memorable, easily graspable schema . . . capable of almost endless application,” which, Crusius surmises, will outlive the theory Kinneavy based on it—“rhetorical thought has always employed the triangle,” he states, consciously or not (“James” 356). Presumably, rhetorical thought always will. Certainly, the triangle shows up regularly in first-year composition textbooks, a clear sign of populist acceptance.

Kinneavy’s goal for the triangle is to present something foundational around which the whole discipline of English can be structured. He writes: “The foundation for a structure of English study should be fairly solid. It may be stating the obvious to say that the foundations must be grounded in the very nature of the language process itself. No imported metaphysic of structure would seem as applicable as the nature of the language act. Consequently, one sound foundation for the discipline would be the so-called communications triangle, i.e., the inter-relationships of expressor, receptor, and language signs as referring to reality” (*Theory* 18). The communications triangle posits a version of reality grounded in language, which Kinneavy argues provides a

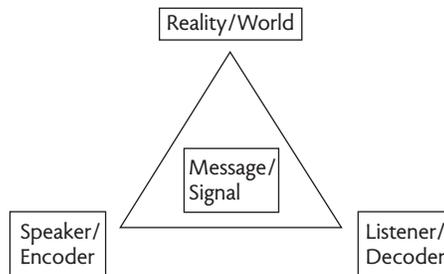


Fig. 1. The Communications Triangle

sound foundation for the discipline. By this he means, in part, that the triangle is able to account for the differing uses to which an English Department puts language. Indeed, the four elements are, in Kinneavy's view, "basic to all uses of language" (*Theory* 19). They are the compass points that serve as a "total framework" for a theory of discourse (*Theory* 17). From these four basic elements, Kinneavy spins out a complex and supple theory that encompasses the aims of discourse, stemming from the emphasis placed on each of the four elements. An emphasis on reality will produce referential discourse; on audience (receptor), persuasive discourse; on language, literary discourse; and on the author (expressor), expressive discourse. In this way, too, rhetoric and literary study find common ground, being but different expressions of the four ultimately shared aims of discourse.

#### THE TROUBLE WITH TRIANGLES

It is a commonplace criticism of the triangle that the four elements are essentialist, being reductive abstractions from the vibrant heterogeneity of discourse. Crusius is typical in this regard when he charges that the triangle is "classically structuralist in that it is composed of timeless, placeless, nearly contentless elements" (*Discourse* 20). Given that this ground is sufficiently covered by Crusius and others, I will devote little time to it. I do want to note, however, that Kinneavy anticipates this charge, defending himself with an argument for the value of scientific abstraction, claiming that the isolated object of investigation can be "reinserted into the stream of life, more intelligible for its academic isolation" (*Theory* 24). Too, Crusius grants Kinneavy this defense by acknowledging that we are all structuralists and essentialists when we name something, but with the proviso that we counter the structuralist moment with a poststructuralist one that seeks to deessentialize and rehistoricize (*Discourse* 21).

A somewhat different critique is launched by Charles Bazerman, who argues that we can move beyond the static qualities of the triangle by stretching it into a pyramid, adding a fourth vertex he calls the "intertext," or the symbolic field (108). This is a useful suggestion. However, it is interesting to compare Bazerman's ideas to Kinneavy's. In an interview with Fredric G. Gale and Michael W. Kleine, "Speaking of Rhetoric: A Conversation with James Kinneavy," Kinneavy himself discussed how the triangle could be stretched into a graphically three-dimensional pyramid to provide a place "for all kinds of approximations, and more than a continuity" (33–34).

Kinneavy's attempt to add greater nuance to the triangle seems to stem more from a concern with students than from criticism, yet a good portion of this criticism points out the triangle's unwieldiness. In "Two Propositions," Vi-

tanza contrasts Kinneavy's typology of discourse (referential, persuasive, literary, and expressivist), as derived from the triangle, with Lacan's quite different list of the four types of discourse: the Academic, the Master, the Psychoanalyst, and the Hysteric.<sup>5</sup> Vitanza notes that locating Lacan's Hysteric discourse on the communications triangle would necessarily make it a form of "*abnormal* (self-) expressive discourse" ("Two" 58). Hysteric discourse, because it moves among various positions, none of which can be decisive, opens up meaning and disrupts identity. Vitanza's point is that utilizing the triangle as a total framework for understanding discourse will necessarily exclude and/or distort nonsystematic—and in particular non-Aristotelian—forms of discourse ("Two" 58). Further, Vitanza's arguments, and his use of Lacan, Kristeva, Lyotard, and other poststructuralist theorists, suggest that poststructuralist and postmodern theories of discourse are better idioms for understanding and re-including forms of discourse that have been excluded by the triangle.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these criticisms and the alternate proposed discursive theories, the attempt to build on or away from Kinneavy's theory of discourse returns all too frequently to the same four elements, with all the attendant limitations this imposes. James Berlin's project is illustrative in this regard. Berlin attempts to incorporate poststructuralist and Marxist theory into his understanding of rhetoric, but he nevertheless remains engaged with the basic categories outlined by Kinneavy. In his early essay "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," Berlin retains the four elements of the triangle (writer, reality, audience, language) but argues that language must be made primary: "Rather than truth being prior to language, language is prior to truth and determines what shapes truth can take. Language does not correspond to the 'real world.' It creates the 'real world' by organizing it, by determining what will be perceived and not perceived, by indicating what has meaning and what is meaningless" (775). Berlin is typical of many composition and rhetoric scholars responding to the influx of poststructuralist thought. Putting the matter schematically, we can say that for Berlin and like-minded others, poststructuralist theories emphasize the social, historical, relational, antiessentialist, decentered, and constructivist aspects of discourse.<sup>7</sup> These ideas have contributed to the view that discourse is not only social but political. Thus, in his 1988 essay "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," Berlin classifies a strikingly diverse group of rhetorical theorists under the rubric of social-epistemic rhetoric because "they share a notion of rhetoric as a political act involving a dialectical interaction engaging the material, the social, and the individual writer, with language as the agency of mediation" (488).

Poststructuralist theories—and the postmodern politics that in part stems from them—are often centered on the function and play of discourse in the



social realm. These theories emphasize the preeminence of language in the construction of reality, power relations, and subjectivity. As Lester Faigley puts it in *Fragments of Rationality*, “Postmodern theory decisively rejects the primacy of consciousness and instead has consciousness originating in language, thus arguing that the subject is an effect rather than a cause of discourse” (9). Statements such as this assimilate the model of reality proffered by the communications triangle with the insights of poststructuralist theory. In each case, the various elements of the triangle are mediated and/or constructed by discourse. As a result, the static elements of the triangle are updated for an audience that understands discourse as constructed, constructing, and perpetually reconstructing.

We see here that the impact of poststructuralist and postmodern thought transforms how we conceive the communications triangle without in fact displacing its fundamental role in understanding discourse. Linda Brodkey’s useful distillation of postmodern discourse theory in *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only* is illuminating on this point. Brodkey sees herself as a theorist trying to develop “a method that assumes language, thought, and reality to be *interdependent*” (11). Insofar as poststructuralist theory can be useful for such a development, she sees that the poststructuralist project tries to “demystify the part [discourse] plays in our constructions of self, other, and reality” (13). She clarifies this properly critical aspect of poststructuralist discourse theory through her explication and use of the concept of articulation, which allows a researcher “to coordinate a writer’s representations of self, other, and reality in a text with readers’ responses to these representations” (15). For Brodkey, discourse retains its representational capacity, and even though she also emphasizes its constitutive role, that role is still anchored to the ever-present elements of the triangle—self, other, and reality.

The pervasiveness of the communications triangle in theories that attempt to mine poststructuralist thought for social and political transformation is even more explicit in the work of Berlin, who, in addition to politicizing discourse theory by placing language and the social at the forefront, also constructs a taxonomy of the composition and rhetoric field based on the triangle. Although he kept working on his taxonomy throughout his career, its basic categories were in place even prior to his first major article in *College English*, “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories,” which made his taxonomy more generally known.<sup>8</sup> In “Contemporary Composition,” Berlin states that he is in accord with the four fundamental categories that other compositionists had used to describe the composing process—all corresponding to the four elements of the triangle. His disagreement, which is primarily directed at Fulkerson’s “Four Philosophies of Composition,” is one of defini-

tion/conception versus degree/distribution. Rather than simply shift emphases among the four universally defined elements, Berlin claims that we must re-envision the very definition of these elements. As he puts it, “Rhetorical theories differ from each other in the way writer, reality, audience, and language are conceived—both as separate units and in the way the units relate to each other” (“Contemporary” 766). Like Brodkey, Berlin does not question the units themselves or the fourfold way they structure reality.

My purpose here is to build on and away from what Berlin initiates. Berlin argues that “to teach writing is to argue for a version of reality” and that therefore it is necessary to attend to the ways in which our composition pedagogies delineate “what can be known, how it can be known, and how it can be communicated” (“Contemporary” 766). Each composition pedagogy comprises particular and uniquely defined matrices of reality, writer, audience, and language, an arrangement that Berlin terms an “epistemic complex” (“Contemporary” 766). What we see here is a tension between his argument that a particular “epistemic complex” produces a particular notion of reality—with which I agree—and his assumption that the four elements of the communications triangle inflected by the insights of poststructuralist theory can adequately map that reality. Indeed, if we push Berlin’s thought a notch or two further, we can only conclude that his use of the four elements of the triangle produces a particular and troubling epistemological orientation. Even redefined or reconceptualized, the trace of Kinneavy’s original neo-Aristotelian categorization remains. Consider, for example, Berlin’s reliance on the triangle to divide up the various factions in the field of rhetoric and composition. It would be difficult to map the field differently than Berlin suggests—Classicalists (corresponding to audience/persuasion), Current-Traditionalists (reality), Expressionists (writer), and New Rhetoricians (language)—if one adhered to the elements of the triangle.<sup>9</sup> This point underscores the connection between a theory of discourse and the production of knowledge. Accordingly, a different theory of discourse would necessarily produce a very different map of the field.

In *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*, Bruce McComiskey essays just such a project. The exigency for his project emerged in his graduate seminar introducing students to rhetoric and composition theory and practice, in which McComiskey taught Fulkerson’s map of the field and Berlin’s revision of it. He asked his graduate students to use these maps to schematize the books and articles they read throughout the course. However, the students resisted the cartographic commonplaces. McComiskey states, “They did not want to ‘camp out’; they wanted to ‘forage’; the result tended to be hyphenated compounds: ‘I’m a rhetorical-expressivist’” (6). McComiskey notes that



Berlin himself thought that his field map had begun breaking down around 1975, and the experience McComiskey had with his students convinced him that a new map was needed. He proposes one that illuminates commonalities, unlike those of Berlin and Fulkerson, both of which create distinct, dichotomous positions, one clearly favored over all the others (e.g., Berlin was a tireless advocate of social-epistemic, then cultural studies rhetoric). McComiskey retains the basic language as derived from the triangle, but instead of divvying up the categories, he combines them into layers: the textual, rhetorical, and discursive (6). We can single out a layer, but only with the understanding that we are actually using all three simultaneously (6–7).

I would argue that the problems McComiskey and his students had with Fulkerson's and Berlin's maps emerge from the triangle itself, not just from the particular uses they made of it. Arguments that the triangle abstracts and essentializes categories are demonstrably correct, insofar as such categorizing enables and underwrites Berlin's and Fulkerson's tactics. The triangle allows one to isolate and value one position at the expense of the others—hence the “My social-epistemic pedagogy can beat up your expressivist pedagogy” battles of the 1990s. McComiskey, like his students, and like many in the field, desires a more sophisticated, complex map. But one wonders what is retained in the movement to levels, when the levels themselves still correspond to the communications triangle: the textual = language, the rhetorical = audience, and the discursive = reality/world. McComiskey's advance, ultimately, is simply to disperse the weighted value more widely throughout the triangle, not to challenge the way the triangle structures discourse and world.

The point here is not to wage map wars as much as it is to underscore the limitations of the triangle (without denying its usefulness) in its continued manifestation in rhetoric and composition, no matter how transformed and updated with the latest theoretical insights. What the triangle impedes is greater insight into the categories it upholds as natural and essential to thought and action—that is, how those categories themselves have emerged. We get precious little insight, for example, into the dynamics of inside/outside. By what processes do social and economic forces “condition our very identities as writers” (McComiskey, *Teaching* 6–7)? Can these processes be mapped in accordance with the categories of the triangle? If not—and I am arguing that they do fall short—it behooves us to develop further our understanding of what the triangle both allows and disallows in terms of a theory of discourse.

#### OUT OF THE TRIANGLE, INTO THE FISSURE

The above discussion should make clear the extent to which composition and rhetoric scholars have accommodated poststructuralist thought to the ele-

ments of the triangle without an attendant questioning of the discursive model of reality proffered through the triangle. Taking our cues from Berlin's own suggestion that the teaching of writing implicitly makes a case for a particular version of reality, we should say that our theories of discourse do the same. A comparison between the communications triangle and Lacan's theory of discourse, then, does more than simply make a case for one theory of discourse over another. It also demonstrates what notions of reality are implicit in the triangle, regardless of the particular content of the four elements or what values they privilege. One need not get caught up in arguing that one model of discourse is somehow essentially better than another, either. It is enough to demonstrate and explore limits—in this case, of the triangle—in order that other discursive models may be productively employed or that a space and need for them may be generated.

A psychoanalytically inflected theory of discourse, grounded in Lacanian or neo-Lacanian thought, provides substantially different conceptions of discourse, subjectivity, and reality. First, such a theory provides concrete explanations for relating what is language to what is not language. Similarly, and to use psychoanalysis's own terminology, it provides an articulation of the circular interrelations between the Symbolic and the Real. Indeed, it is the emphasis on linking between such disparate phenomena that makes a psychoanalytic theory so useful for theorizing discourse. Any understanding of discourse and the writing process should be able to account for the ways in which language interacts with and affects our psyches, and vice versa—what I refer to above as the dynamics of inside/outside. What must be further accounted for is the properly constitutive role that discourse plays.<sup>10</sup> A disadvantage of the triangle is its limitation for describing how language constructs us and our world and for thereby disallowing how such constructions are inherently political. Updating the triangle with poststructuralist theory, however, does constitute an advance because of its emphasis on discourse as constitutive and its acknowledgment of the roles of ideology, power, and identity.

A Lacanian theory of discourse shares with poststructuralism this challenge to the representationalist paradigm implicit in the triangle. As mentioned earlier, Lacan and neo-Lacanians like Žižek have a constitutive view of language. It is important to stress that this position is not a form of linguistic idealism, as Lacan retains throughout his oeuvre a sophisticated notion of the Real. In fact, this notion of the Real came to be a point of impasse between Lacanian and Foucauldian theories of discourse, a discussion I take up later. For now, it is enough to get a clearer sense of what it means to uphold a constitutive understanding of discourse. This will also help underscore what



psychoanalytic and poststructuralist thought have in common, not just what their differences are.

We can begin with Žižek's critical appropriation and extension of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discursive theory as explained in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. In brief, Laclau and Mouffe deny the possibility of any discursive totality or essence: discourse is to be understood as conflicted, open, and incomplete. Temporary articulations are possible, but they are always contingent and unstable, incomplete and open to new articulations.<sup>11</sup> Poststructuralist theories of discourse (especially Derrida's), on which Laclau and Mouffe rely, share this understanding of always open and incomplete totalities. Note that this conception of discourse already initiates a rupture with the totalizing discourse model of the triangle, but it also suggests why it has been so easy to accommodate the triangle to poststructuralism. Even though the triangle posits a discursive totality, the Derridean insight developed by Laclau and Mouffe that a totality is always compromised—always different and deferred—can still be captured by way of negation. One simply suggests that all the elements of the triangle are unstable and open to rearticulation. The structural relations remain. However, as Torfing explains in *New Theories of Discourse*, there is a difference between conceiving the social as a totality that always falls short of closure and conceiving it as something already fundamentally split or fissured that we try and fail to conceive as a totality (52). This is the point at which Žižek parts company with Laclau and Mouffe. While he retains notions such as chains of signifiers and a discursive field open to rearticulations, he theorizes the discursive field in terms of a fundamental fissure, not simply as something nontotalizable.

From Žižek's perspective, the social is better understood in terms of a fundamental antagonism that prevents any closure, rather than as a Derridean field of signifiers whose incompleteness stems from the signifier's free play in the absence of any organizing, totalizing center. It is thus a question of whether substitution or antagonism is primary in the operations of discourse. The advantage of the neo-Lacanian conception is not just that totality is prevented, but that the failure of the possibility of totality is its *positive* condition (in the mathematical sense of being a negation of a negation). This failure to achieve closure is the positive, constitutive moment of a discursive field, and it functions at every social level. All the elements brought together in the triangle—writer, audience, language, and reality—would be understood as particular articulations covering over their existential impossibilities and in that sense just as prey to disarticulation and rearticulation as anything else that is discursively constituted. Further, the relations assumed in the triangle can

also break down here. Lacan's notion of the big Other, for example, collapses audience and language together into an integrated (although still fissured) socio-symbolic entity.

What these elements in particular do not form is a fundamental structure (Kinneavy) or a group of variably defined elements with clearly structured relations (Berlin). However, the most important difference comes down to this: the fissure, or fundamental antagonism, suggests that some of the most important forces working in and on discourse drop out of our conscious apprehension. That is, nondiscursive elements are caught up with and suffuse discourse, even as they evade direct or easy translation into discourse. Nevertheless, we can chart their effects; describe their structural roles; and, perhaps most important, theorize how they are integral to understanding the relations of discourse to human constitution. Among the most important of these nondiscursive elements are fantasy, *jouissance*, and desire. It may be useful to think of these not simply as nondiscursive phenomena but as a human being's various affective modalities for integrating language and world.

Although I have been emphasizing the differences between neo-Lacanian and poststructuralist thought, these perspectives should not be seen in terms of mutual exclusion or either/or. Thus, one point psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories continue to hold in common is an emphasis on theorizing how language constitutes social reality. As Lacan states in *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, "what dominates society is the practice of language"; "it is on discourse that every determination of the subject depends" (qtd. in Bracher et al., *Lacanian* 107, 108). In rhetoric and composition, as in other fields of humanistic inquiry, this idea has become a commonplace. Where neo-Lacanian theory and poststructuralism begin to part company, however, is regarding the precise relation between language and reality. For Lacan and Žižek, reality is formulated as "the Real," those things that are foreclosed from the symbolic and that return as errors, gaps, and misrecognitions. In plainest terms, this means that language fails to capture the Real; the Real always exceeds what can be conveyed by means of the symbolic. The dual nature of the Real can be slippery to grasp. The Real refers in part to the real world—its fulsome materiality—which Lacan and Žižek see as always having a surplus above and beyond whatever symbol or knowledge we bring to things. Thus, the body itself is of the Real insofar as we acknowledge that aspects of the body exceed our conscious apprehension and cannot be made coterminous with its production in social systems and culture. These aspects include bodily chemistry, involuntary reactions, sensations, and so on, as well the surplus of meaning, or overdetermination, that emerges in discursive activity but is not equivalent per se to such activity. Discourse and the socius do impact and shape our un-



derstanding of these things, but the point is that our understanding cannot exhaust them. This further serves to point to the very limits of consciousness. From another perspective, the Real can also be glimpsed in language's spectacular limits (I use the word *spectacular* to emphasize the aspect of spectacle, as something "to be seen/heard/noticed"). Errors, gaps, and misrecognitions are meaning effects emerging from the ways language goes awry.

Our notion of "meaning," then, is best understood not in terms of an encoder/decoder model (Kinneavy), nor as a function of a particular socio-historical positioning (poststructuralism/Berlin), but rather as a relational effect produced retroactively by a subject entangled or enmeshed with the big Other, which is for Lacan the social/symbolic edifice. As I explained earlier, this retroactivity marks the spot of the subject, which otherwise does not exist insofar as having any positive, essential content; the subject manifests itself discursively through effects only—through its failure to achieve symbolization, through its processes of retroactive recognition and meaning production, and the like. In plainer terms, we can say that psychoanalytic theory accounts for the subject as an empty place, or X, in the symbolic order prior to the effects of subjectivization, whereas poststructuralism tends to see the subject *as* these fictionalized, shifting subject positions. Discursive production for neo-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory retains this trace of the subject in order to account for that ultimate, uncanny X that defines a particular individual. Unlike much poststructuralist theory, however, the uncanny X marking the place of the subject cannot be symbolized, which also means it cannot be positioned. In the end, the subject cannot be reduced to discourse or the mechanisms of subjectivization initiated by means of discourse.

Each of the components utilized by Žižek to outline his theory of discourse—the Real, the retroactive production of meaning, fantasy, *jouissance*, the big Other—revolves around a common theme: the fissuring of the symbolic order. Such fissuring has effects, among the most important of which is the way the symbolic introduces lack into human subjects.<sup>12</sup> Lack in this sense has very particular meanings. The radical contingency of all the signifiers in the symbolic realm precludes the possibility of any meaningful order that is not also subject to dissolution. As Žižek argues, an irreducible gap separates the Real from its modes of symbolization. This is one modality of what Žižek calls a "fundamental antagonism" that precludes the possibility of achieving any ultimate harmony or stability in subjects, societies, or discourses. I should note here, because this issue arises again later, that while *fundamental* refers to a kind of universal, essential limit, it does not have any particular, historical content; rather, the limit is expressed in endlessly different variations.

This understanding of discourse theory is substantially different from the

one implicit in the communications triangle, which still retains some vision of wholeness: the four elements model the world as being consistent and meaningful. In contradistinction to the communications triangle, Žižek explains that symbolization itself is already made possible because the radically contingent nature of the field of signifiers has been preorganized in the form of chains of signifiers tied to a few dominant terms. These dominant terms, what Lacan calls Master Signifiers, capture and organize the desires of individual subjects and society. Another way of putting this point is that discourse cannot be theorized apart from discourse's own constitutive role in the formation of worlds and subjects and nondiscursive but discursively constituted elements such as desire and fantasy, which have a dialectically corresponding role in shaping the purposes and types of language use. For Žižek, Master Signifiers are integral for understanding the role of the political in discourse, providing the link between his theory of discourse and his theory of ideology.

#### LACAN IS NOT A POSTSTRUCTURALIST

In spite of their differences, Žižek's theory of discourse and poststructuralist-informed cultural studies accounts still have much in common. In "Postmodernism, Politics, and Histories of Rhetoric," Berlin explains how language is understood differently in postmodern theory than in modernist conceptions: "Language instead is taken to be a complex system of signifying practices that constructs realities rather than simply representing them. Our conceptions of material and social conditions then are fabrications of language, the products of culturally coded linguistic acts. Language does not reflect experience, it constitutes it" (171). The priority given to language and its productive role in human affairs also serves to destabilize essentialist notions of the subject and upset foundational truths and metanarratives. The capacity for language to fold back on itself, to refer not to some reality but only to other signifiers, destabilizes all concepts that require a centering, foundational, or transcendental signifier. As Berlin summarizes, a sign "has meaning by virtue of its relation to other signs, not externally verifiable certainties" ("Postmodernism" 172). There is no metaposition or foundational signifier that will suffice to ground the symbolic order. In this way, another common point is established among Lacan, poststructuralism, and other currents of contemporary thought. Žižek notes, for instance, that the phrase "There is no metalanguage" is a "commonplace found not only in Lacan's psychoanalysis and in poststructuralism (Derrida) but also in contemporary hermeneutics (Gadamer)" (*Sublime* 153).

These poststructuralist attacks on metanarratives and the stable subject have been perceived as useful for a politics that sets itself against institutions



and practices of social injustice, but as a hindrance for the practice of actual political acts. If no stable subjects survive, agency must be reconceived; if no metanarratives survive, not only are foundational truths challenged, but so are the truths that would be deployed to unseat those foundations. Accordingly, poststructuralist and postmodern theories have been given a mixed reception by those who are politically minded. In *Fragments of Rationality*, Faigley remarks that this “power to fold language back on itself makes postmodern theory . . . an extremely powerful means for exposing the political investments of foundational concepts, but the same power prevents postmodern theorists from making claims of truth or emancipatory value for this activity. Postmodern theory can resemble a terrorist bomb that demolishes bystanders and even its maker as well as the target” (43–44). This constitutes what Faigley calls the “impasse of postmodern theory,” and he states that it has been around long enough for the self-questioning of postmodern theory to begin (20).

I think that this impasse is a false one. It depends on an idea that continues to suffuse rhetorical theory and cultural studies—the idea that agency requires critical distance and a substantive theory of the subject (see Muckelbauer). This is a common but problematic reading of poststructuralism, even showing up in proponents of psychoanalytic thought. In his essay “The Subject of Discourse: Reading Lacan through (and beyond) Poststructuralist Contexts,” Marshall Alcorn Jr. asserts that “poststructuralists and Freudians hold quite different assumptions about the ‘subject of discourse’” (19). Alcorn argues: “There is a repeated ‘identity’ pattern in poststructuralist thought that works to erase the human subject, to make ‘the subject of discourse’ an entity composed, contained, derived from, and imprisoned by language. . . . The subject thus fades back, without a residue, into its constitutive element, language. The subject of discourse becomes a subject of *discourse*” (26). The point for Alcorn is that language “contains” the subject in poststructuralist accounts; this position is often attributed to Lacan as well.<sup>13</sup> Alcorn suggests instead that the subject of discourse cannot be theorized as something constituted exclusively by language; instead, the subject exists in a dialectical relationship with language, so that neither one can be understood as containing the other. From this perspective, the subject does not entirely contain language as the modernist traditions would have it, but neither does language entirely contain the subject. As Alcorn states, relations between discourse and subjects are twosided: “The subject operates upon discourse, and discourse operates upon the subject” (27). In other words, as Biesecker contends, neo-Lacanian thought helps us understand the symbolic and its functioning without reducing all understanding to the symbolic and its positive relations (227; cf. Copjec).

Žižek also argues that Lacan is not a poststructuralist. Poststructuralist and

psychoanalytic positions differ not only in their notions of what constitutes the subject but also on the issue of metanarratives. Faigley, as noted above, points out what he sees as the impasse of postmodern theory: the fact that no meta-narrative is possible is both a useful tool of critique and a dire hindrance to effective political action that requires truth claims. Žižek reminds us, however, that “we usually lose from view how Lacan’s theory treats this proposition [that there is no metanarrative] in a way that is completely incompatible with poststructuralism, as well as hermeneutics” (*Sublime* 153). Žižek claims that the poststructuralist position is too “theoretical”; by this he means that it is “a theory which excludes the truth-dimension; that is, which does not affect the place from which we speak” (*Sublime* 155). This is another way of saying that the proposition that “no utterance can mean precisely what it intends to say and the process of enunciation will always subvert the utterance” is “*the position of metalanguage* in its purest, most radical form” (*Sublime* 155). Žižek’s argument is less a polemic than a radical extension of the poststructuralist *telos*. Not only will the process of enunciation subvert all possible enunciations, but we must extend this insight to include the proposition itself, so that the position from which the enunciation originates produces a concomitant excess of meaning signifying the impossible absurdity of occupying such a metaposition. For poststructuralists, “there is no metalanguage” means that the signifier is in some sense always rebounding from its literal meaning, its object. However, in Lacan, “there is no metalanguage” must be taken literally to mean that “all language is in a way an object-language: *there is no language without an object*. Even when the language is apparently caught in a web of self-referential movement, even when it is apparently speaking only about itself, there is an objective, non-signifying ‘reference’ to this movement” (*Sublime* 158). In this manner the value of the object, heretofore devalued in the poststructuralist spin of endless semiosis, is returned to the object, and returned to it through language. Furthermore, by returning to discourse its object status, we can avoid the impasse implicit in much poststructuralist thought of making claims denying the possibility of truth that paradoxically claim truth status. In other words, poststructuralist theories of discourse tend to operate by means of discursive positionality and thereby often conflate the specific utterance with its referential content. This understanding of how language operates is fully consonant with the understanding of discourse offered by the communications triangle. Implicit in both is a certain pragmatic directionality, even if in the case of poststructuralism that directionality is largely self-referential. What a neo-Lacanian theory of discourse offers is a way of understanding a constitutive gap in discursive operations that avoids the impasse of endless self-referentiality.



It is important to realize that the object thus reconstituted in Žižek is transformed. Žižek is not proffering the kind of object that corresponds oppositionally to the subject, wherein the status of the object is achieved through the reestablishment of the subject-object split. Instead, the object takes form as an exclusion internal to language. We can understand this through Žižek's example of the painting *Lenin in Warsaw*. The painting depicts Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, in bed with a young member of the Komsomol. Žižek explains that the typical response of a visitor viewing the picture is to ask, "Where is Lenin?" The proper response, on the other hand, is to recognize that Lenin, though absent from the field of representation, *is* the object of the picture. Žižek writes: "If we put aside Lenin's position as the absent Third, the bearer of the prohibition of the sexual relationship, we could say that 'Lenin in Warsaw' is, in a strict Lacanian sense, the object of this picture. The title names the object which is lacking in the field of what is depicted. That is to say, in this joke, the trap in which the visitor was caught could be defined precisely as the metalanguage trap. The visitor's mistake is to establish the same distance between the picture and the title as between the sign and the denoted object, as if the title is speaking *about* the picture from a kind of 'objective distance,' and then to look for its positive correspondence in the picture" (*Sublime* 159). If Lenin were not away, the sexual liaison depicted in the painting would not be possible. "The field of representation," explains Žižek, "is the field of what is positively depicted, but the problem is that everything cannot be depicted" (159). That is to say, every field of signifiers must necessarily exclude an element that would correspond to an objective, nonsignifying reference to the self-referential movement of language (158). The mistake of the typical observer of the painting is to assume that the title operates from a metalinguistic position, as if it achieves its meaning through a direct correspondence between the picture title and the pictorial content. What the painting does instead is invite the viewer in as a participant in its truth; it puts us into the eventual truth that is the condition of possibility for the liaison.

In a manner akin to a Möbius strip, the frame is thus framed by part of its content. Every discursive element that aspires to function as a transcendental signifier is nevertheless only materialized, or given positive form, as just another element within the phenomenological or discursive field. This is one of several manifestations of what Žižek calls a fundamental antagonism that can never be overcome. And while the antagonism is irreducible, its permutations are innumerable. Furthermore, the manner in which these antagonisms are articulated and negotiated by individuals and society has direct bearing on language and the formation of subjectivity. In this way, a neo-Lacanian theory

of discourse foregrounds the political dimension. A particular discourse can be considered not only according to its socio-historical position (poststructuralism) but also as a negotiation, from that socio-historical position, of a fundamental aspect of human existence that deflects any form of representation that would be adequate to it. The truth value of direct representation thereby gives way to the truth value inherent in the failure of any direct representation—in the way truth emerges as the collapsing of an observer into a participant or as a reframing of a privileged (referential) frame.

This insight must be extended to theories of discourse themselves. The truth of the theory of discourse offered by the communications triangle (as utilized by Kinneavy, Crusius, and others) or an updated triangle inflected by poststructuralist thought (Berlin, Faigley, Brodkey, McComiskey, and so on) is precisely the more or less accurate description of the purposes and categories of discourse. Inherent in all these theories, no matter how ultimately self-reflexively aware they may be, is the attempt to describe how it is that discourse really functions for us. We can see this drive at work even in those understandings of discourse that are the most self-reflexive. Brodkey and Susan Miller, for example, share a poststructuralist understanding of discourse that they convey through metaphors of fictionality. Brodkey calls the theories of Lacan and Foucault “stories,” while Miller opens *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition* by claiming that her study is “blatantly a fiction” (1). The irony of their position is well captured by the title of Miller’s final chapter, “On Seeing Things for What They Are” (177). Miller and Brodkey, like many other theorists in composition and rhetoric, find themselves in the dubious position of having to acknowledge the constructed and artificial nature of discourse and theory while simultaneously attempting to make truth claims from such fictions. I find this to be an untenable position, although I harbor no nostalgia for a return to an understanding of discourse as truthfully referential. Instead, I want to read productively the impasse that Brodkey and Miller attempt to navigate and to see in their negotiations not a failure to theorize discourse adequately but something “essential” about discourse itself.<sup>14</sup>

That said, it should be added that a neo-Lacanian theory of discourse does not escape from the will to provide an accurate description of things any more than poststructuralist theory. However, it does maintain one key difference. As Žižek’s project suggests, any theory of discourse should include an understanding of the ways in which discourse fails to represent the excess that is reality, or, to put it otherwise, how reality in all its fulsomeness exceeds the representative and expressive capacities of language. But it is not enough to stop there. Instead, we must take one further step and acknowledge how this failure is itself productive. In other words, the positive truth content of dis-

course, and especially of a theory of discourse, arises from the retroactive recognition of (1) an excess that eludes discourse, which (2) nevertheless exists in and through discourse, so that (3) this perceived lack in discourse is reunderstood and redescribed as the traumatic excess of discourse.<sup>15</sup> Integral to a neo-Lacanian theory of discourse is the notion that the success of such a theory is not predicated solely on its ability to accurately describe discourse. Instead, the goal is to understand discourse as something that can never achieve such an accurate representation of itself or anything else and to theorize how the purposes and categories of discourse are in large part determined by this incapacity. By inscribing such partiality and finitude into the workings of discourse itself, neo-Lacanian discourse theory thereby also realigns our understanding of truth.

#### THE REAL AND THE EMERGENCE OF TRUTH

In the neo-Aristotelian conception of the communications triangle, reality is theorized as something to which we can gain access through language. As Kinneavy asserts, “it is possible to consider the signals of a language as representing or referring to reality” (*Theory* 20). The question becomes, however, what is reality in this formulation? Postmodern thought has challenged any simple correspondence between signifier and referent, while also demonstrating how language mediates experience and constructs reality. In “Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom,” Berlin reminds the contemporary rhetorician that s/he must be aware that the subject (producer) of discourse “is a construction, a fabrication, established through the devices of signifying practices. . . . But if the subject, the sender, is a construct of signifying practices in social-epistemic rhetoric, so are the material conditions to which the subject responds, the prime constituents of the message of discourse” (21). Although reality is linguistically mediated, the full consequences of this position are deflected in favor of a simple view of rhetorical conflict that ignores the wider implications of how rhetorical conflict is also bifurcated between content and form. Not only is the social-discursive field structured by differential and conflictual contexts, but discourse itself, in its functioning, is already structured by conflict. Lacan refers to this fundamental conflict as one modality of the Real. (The other modality, I should add, is the world itself in its symbolic inexhaustibility, that is, as it exists beyond language.) Let us, however, consider Berlin’s statement that “signifying practices are always at the center of conflict and contention. . . . In the effort to name experience, different groups are constantly vying for supremacy, for ownership, and control of the terms and their meanings in any discourse situation” (21). For Berlin, the roles of ideology, hegemony, power, and rhetoric all become crucial in ar-

ticulating the relations between signifying practices and the realities to which they refer. Reality itself, however, remains knowable, communicable, and understandable, a Whole that invites differing interpretations and perspectives that interact and conflict within the social totality.

Berlin unwittingly falls into the metalinguistic trap, and he does so in a manner useful for examining the concept of the Real in Lacan. We must ask, from what position can Berlin assert that all conceptions of reality are contested fabrications? Implicit in Berlin's very argument is the position of objectivity that would discern the truth about how discourse really functions for us. Can we avoid the conclusion that Berlin's argument is also a fabrication? We can do so, I suggest, not because he is involved in logical contradiction (his statement that reality is a linguistic construct purports to be the truth of the matter that is itself *not* a construct but the way things really are) but because his argument misses the truth-dimension invoked by his own statement. That is, the argument does not affect the place from which it speaks. We see here an example of the charge Žižek makes that statements taking this kind of inadvertent metalinguistic position constitute "a barely hidden acknowledgment of the fact that [the argument] is speaking from a safe position, a position not menaced by the decentered textual process" (*Sublime* 155).

The trick is to reread Berlin's statement, which is typical of global assessments that attempt to navigate the postmodern moratorium on metanarratives qua overarching truth statements, with an eye toward how it *could* invoke the truth-dimension. Thus, rather than understand Berlin's statement as either (1) a truth claim describing the really existing state of affairs or (2) a fabrication that is contradictory as regards its implicit claim to be true, we should opt for (3) a statement that invokes the Lacanian Real, a position that is paradoxically impossible to occupy. But as Žižek points out, it is also impossible to avoid: "One cannot *attain* it [metalanguage], but one also cannot *escape* it. That is why the only way to avoid the Real is to produce an utterance of pure metalanguage which, by its patent absurdity, materializes its own impossibility: that is, a paradoxical element which, in its very identity, embodies absolute otherness, the irreparable gap that makes it impossible to occupy a metalinguistic position" (*Sublime* 156). We might read Berlin's statement, then, as a truth statement that, by way of its very "error," brings us to the truth of the Real as unsymbolizable deadlock. The irreparable gap sundering the position of universality (a statement claiming that this is the way the world *is*) from the position of a particular perspective (a statement claiming that this is the way the world *is for me*) is an index for the fundamental antagonism that eludes signification. Nonetheless, this gap produces structural effects in the socio-symbolic order. In short, the epistemological break between the universal and



the particular invokes the order of the Real as an impossible deadlock that can be neither dissolved nor symbolized. Berlin's statement, then, falls too short, even though we cannot say that it is simply in error. Instead, we should again invoke the necessity of reading his claim speculatively to see in his stopping short already a kind of truth. The impossibility of not falling into a metalinguistic position that is itself necessarily false (or not all, limited, partial) indicates the extent to which the social can never be grasped as an "objective" totality. As Žižek puts it, the "traumatic Real is thus that which, precisely, prevents us from assuming a neutral-objective view of reality, a stain which blurs our clear perception of it" (*Plague* 215). Thus, we retain a notion of truth, but we lose any notion of transparent access to truth.

As a preview to upcoming arguments about ideology, I would like to point out that we can also see one reason for cultural studies' allure here. When cultural studies gets pulled into composition in the work of Berlin, Patricia Bizzell, Alan W. France, and others, it brings with it this poststructuralist understanding of reality as a decentered, resignifiable Whole. This includes the elusive metalinguistic position making possible the belief that the critical insights achieved through cultural studies are truthful enough to initiate change. The knowledge produced through cultural critique palliates its potentially corrosive self-reflexivity by acknowledging its partiality or fictionality, even while it continues to operate from a privileged metalinguistic position. We might recognize the admission that the cultural studies frame could be reframed, but the collective investment in its critical knowledge precludes any actual reframing. Indeed, this is precisely the bait and switch that will allow Berlin to reformulate social-epistemic rhetoric *as* cultural studies and to see them as somehow the same and equally productive of rhetorical truth, no matter how tempered by claims to self-critical reflexivity.

To return to where we were: this predicament about the status of truth has served to introduce us to the Lacanian order of the Real as something both preceding and resisting symbolization. Thus, no signifier suffices to convey the Real's rich fullness. Additionally, not only is the Real what precedes and resists symbolization, but it is also the leftover produced by symbolization. We are familiar with this in our everyday life. Errors, slips of the tongue, accidents, and other such phenomena whereby more is said than intended, or where the unconscious makes itself heard, constitute a form of excess or surplus signification that returns through the symbolic. Although nothing is actually lacking in the Real, the effect of symbolization is to introduce lack into all aspects of human affairs. From our perspective as symbolic beings, then, reality is characterized by lack: it does not have "it," that which would ultimately satisfy our desire or express the essential truth of our subjective being. Furthermore, the

Real is in some sense unbearable; its rich fullness also includes an accompanying terror that requires palliation. This suggests that while the Real and reality are enmeshed, they are not the same. Thus, in comparison to the Real, Žižek defines reality as “the minimum of idealization necessary for the subject to sustain the horror of the Real” (*Plague* 66).<sup>16</sup> This “minimum of idealization” is correlative with the role of fantasy in sustaining human existence in the face of the Real and providing the sense of Wholeness and Meaning necessary for maintaining social bonds. It also suggests that we do not have pure access to the world—its meaning and symbolic relations, within which we exist, are caught up with our own unconscious suppositions. Errors and slip-pages are the way the Real emerges in everyday reality to prick us, to remind us of our partiality and finitude.

#### MASTER SIGNIFIERS AND THE BIG OTHER

In the communications triangle, audience (receptor) and language are given their own categories, indicating their status as separate and distinct entities. However, for Lacan and Žižek, enough overlap exists between them to justify their inclusion under one umbrella term, the big Other. As Žižek explains in *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, the big Other is on the one hand the impersonal order of symbolization in general but on the other hand also designates the radical alterity of the other person beyond our mirroring (199). Our attempts to find a signifier or form of identification that would express who we are in our essence find their limit in the Other, from whom we are fundamentally severed. Furthermore, the communications triangle mystifies the relation between language and receptor that the Lacanian concept of the big Other clarifies. Language and Other (subjects) are united in the misperception that they are both whole, seamless entities when in fact they are not. Just like the subject, the big Other is fissured. Thus, the perception that the Other is whole and plentiful is an elementary gesture of fantasy, and such fantasy is one of the mechanisms by which the subject defines itself in its ongoing, constitutive dialectic with the big Other. Especially crucial here is the way the communications triangle presents a model of reality that would efface this constitutive dependence in favor of relations between semiautonomous entities, albeit linguistically based ones. As we will see, what is obscured is the way signifiers become the terrain of rhetoric. Signifiers, Biesecker states, have “ontic clout” (223). The big Other points not only to how we invest language but to how language equally invests us. One way to conceive of rhetoric is as the playing out of these coinvestments in socio-symbolic spaces.

Žižek, alluding to the work of Laclau and Mouffe, describes language as



a heterogeneous mass of free-floating signifiers, an understanding that is similar to poststructuralist theories of language. Unlike poststructuralist accounts, however, Žižek's Lacanian argument is that a consistent field of meaning emerges only when a Master Signifier also emerges. The formerly dispersed field of signifiers is linked and bound together, or quilted, by the Master Signifier. This action retroactively structures the field of meaning so that it appears that it had always been aligned just so. We might then ask why a Master Signifier is necessary and, if it is necessary, from whence it arises. Žižek explains that such a signifier emerges out of the contradictory nature of the symbolic order. On the one hand, the symbolic field is finite, being both contingent and limited, never able to achieve adequate representation of the impossible fullness of the Real. On the other hand, the field of representation is infinite in that there is nothing outside the text: everything can be told, there is no external viewpoint from which the limits of language can be judged (*Enjoy* 102; cf. Derrida, *Grammatology*). This inherent tension necessitates that a paradoxical element within the symbolic field stand in for what eludes symbolization. As Žižek puts it, always at least one element "functions as the signifier of the very lack of a signifier," and this element is the Master Signifier (*Enjoy* 102–3). Another way of putting this is that the inherent tension of the symbolic order develops from the limits of the signifier. The sliding of signifiers that can never quite express the Real in its impossible plentitude can only be halted by the signifier of this very impossibility, a signifier that finds itself in the very act of its enunciation.

In the neo-Lacanian view of language, then, every discursive field has an element that must drop out of the field and, in so doing, retroactively reorganize that field to create the appearance of consistency. A useful way of visualizing this is in terms of a sliding tile puzzle or Rubik's Cube. One tile or element must be absent so that a space is open to allow the movement of the other pieces, and a new order to be generated. In this sense, absence is productive, demonstrating analogically the larger Lacanian point that a given system cannot be reduced solely to its immanent, positive elements. Again, this is substantially different from poststructuralist accounts of discourse, which remain at the level of immanent, free-floating signifiers structured more or less directly by social and material practices.

This is not to say that Žižek is arguing for a transcendental conception of discourse. The Master Signifier functions in a manner akin to a transcendental signifier, except that it is strictly internal to language. For this reason, Lacan claimed that the Master (as a signifier, symbol, or person) is an imposter. Žižek explains: "The Master is somebody who, upon finding himself at the place of the constitutive lack in the structure, acts as if he holds the reins

of that surplus, of the mysterious X which eludes the grasp of the structure . . . yet the *place* occupied by him—the place of the lack in the structure—cannot be abolished, since the very finitude of every discursive field imposes its structural necessity” (*Enjoy* 103). Discourse, being paradoxically finite and infinite, is structured by this constitutive lack, which is signified by a corresponding paradoxical element that retroactively provides coherence to the field of signifiers. The confusion arises when the structural effect is conflated with the particular content or a particular Master Signifier. Discourse may structurally presuppose an authority (what in philosophy would be called a transcendent element), but that authoritative function is formal, not particular, and relational, not essential.

Žižek explains that this conception of the presuppositions of discourse is radically different from that proposed by Habermas, who conceives the goal of communication to be centered on rational discussion free of constraints (see *Communicative*). Impediments to this goal are distortions to be overcome. For Lacan, the presupposition of discourse is not free and equal discussion, but discourse as something authoritarian and agonistic. The Master Signifier emerges from the constitutive contradictions of discourse itself as an empty signifier quilting the dispersed field of signifiers, with the result that “the infinite chain of causes (‘knowledge’) is interrupted with an abyssal, nonfounded, founding act of violence” (*Enjoy* 103). Whereas for Habermas distortion blocks the achievement of free and open discourse between rational subjects, for Lacan distortion is fundamental for the discursive field. Removing the distortion would cause the field of meaning to collapse. Because of this, the logic of unmasking the Master Signifier—of demonstrating the falsity of its organization of the discursive field—necessarily fails to abolish the place it occupies. The structural effects remain implicit. This further suggests why cultural studies pedagogies that ask students to critique a discursive formation organized by a Master Signifier—political, sexual, religious, and so forth—typically induce little or no change. Critiques of TV programs or advertisements that leave unchallenged students’ comportment toward these things are typical and common examples. I am arguing that a structural component to the discourse remains operational regardless of the specific, contingent content of its dominant, organizing term. To the extent that critique does not address the structural absence and concentrates solely on the positivity of the given elements, it will be of limited effectiveness.

#### WELCOME TO FANTASY ISLAND

The standard definition of fantasy involves the hallucinatory satisfaction of a wish. Daydreams or reveries about accomplishing some deed or obtain-



ing some valuable object are characteristic of this understanding of fantasy. Psychoanalysis, however, theorizes fantasy differently, as an idealizing framework that functions in support of reality and that should accordingly be understood as constituted a priori through subjective and unconscious forces. Žižek states: “We can see clearly how fantasy is on the side of reality, how it sustains the subject’s ‘sense of reality’: when the phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a ‘loss of reality’ and starts to perceive reality as an ‘irreal’ nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe is not ‘pure fantasy’ but, on the contrary, *that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy*” (*Plague* 66). Fantasy’s endless permutations give to reality the particular consistency we require. Since one aspect of the Real is that it pertains to a fundamental antagonism or inconsistency that remains unsymbolizable yet operational in the symbolic order, we can understand fantasy as providing the necessary screen allowing us to live with this inconsistency. Žižek takes this concept even further by pointing out that fantasy structures the entire array of human experience; it is “the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful” (*Sublime* 123).

A shift in the fantasy frame structuring our experiential reality can be traumatic. For example, most of us have had the experience of being with a group of friends, laughing, talking, and socializing, when all of a sudden we have the sense that we are all alone, that our friends are far away from us, which in turn gives rise to other feelings of unease and disassociation. What has happened is that the fantasy frame undergirding the friendly intersubjective network has been wrenched, and now, without that support, our perception of “reality” has radically changed. Such events occur on the larger social level as well. A famous example may be found in Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming.” In the first stanza, the speaker laments the transformations the world is undergoing, the lack of a center, the sense that chaos is rushing in to despoil innocence: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” Of course, Yeats’s poem means more than I am suggesting here, but it is not hard to hear in the stirring notice “Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand” the sense of despair-ridden *fait accompli* that comes from dashed dreams of social harmony and justice. However, what is essential here is that the stability and order that Yeats laments were artificial from the beginning. Žižek’s locution for this idea is that “society does not exist.” The idea that society is an ordered, stable whole is only possible within the frame of fantasy. The Real of the social is that it is a radically dispersed mass of heterogeneous elements. Yeats’s poem is arguably more effective because of its evocative portrayal of the effects of the dissolu-

tion of a constitutive fantasy frame than because of any provable loss of the old, supposedly stable traditions (e.g., where is the great trauma of the Industrial Revolution?).

Fantasy also serves to cover over the lack in the Other. Žižek writes that fantasy appears “as an answer to ‘*Che vuoi?*’, to the unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other, of the lack in the Other; but it is at the same time fantasy itself which, so to speak, provides the co-ordinates of our desire—which constructs the frame enabling us to desire something” (*Sublime* 118). “*Che vuoi?*” (What do you want?) is the difficult and ambiguous question with which the big Other confronts us. Žižek explains that the “subject is always fastened, pinned, to a signifier which represents him for the other, and through this pinning he is loaded with a symbolic mandate, he is given a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations” (*Sublime* 113). However, this mandate is arbitrary with regard to the actual characteristics of the subject; there is no way to account for it by reference to some essential truth of the subject. For this reason, a fundamental discrepancy always exists between who one is for others and who one is for oneself. We may reasonably ask, why am I what you are saying that I am?, but there can be no ultimate answer or justification. This is not to say that an answer cannot be offered, but the catch is that such answers do not suffice. Something always escapes, and this excessiveness generates a sense that rationales are slippery and unsteady. One remains unjustified in the big Other. The unjustness of being pinned on a signifier is ultimately an arbitrary and purely structural effect that deflects canalization.

It is at this point that fantasy once again enters. It is not the fantasy scene itself that serves as the goal of fantasy, but the gaze that is viewing it. Of course, that gaze is in a sense impossible, as it is pure conjecture on the part of the subject—there is no way to bridge the gap between the subject and the Other’s desire. This illuminates another of Lacan’s famous locutions, that “desire is always the desire of the other.” Žižek explains how this idea functions in fantasy:

What we encounter in the very core of fantasy is the relationship to the desire of the Other, to the latter’s opacity: *the desire staged in fantasy is not mine but the desire of the Other*. Fantasy is a way for the subject to answer the question of what object he is in the eyes of the Other, in the Other’s desire—that is, what does the Other see in him, what role does he play in the Other’s desire? A child, for example, endeavors to dissolve, by means of his fantasy, the enigma of the role he plays as the medium of the interactions between his mother and his father, the enigma of how mother and father fight their battles and settle their accounts through him. In short, fantasy is the highest proof of the fact that the subject’s desire is the desire of the Other. (*Metastases* 177)



The subject is forced to extrapolate from the given situation what the desire of the Other is, and fantasy arises as the “solution” to this impossible position (impossible because a subject cannot occupy it). In this way also, the gap sundering the subject from the Other is reconceived; no longer an obstacle, this gap becomes the motor driving subjectivity and social interaction. Thus, fantasy again functions on the side of reality, bringing together disparate elements and providing the necessary framework for their interaction in intersubjective and socio-symbolic space.

Earlier, I discussed the poststructuralist tendency to explain discursive formations in terms of the contingency of their socio-historic elements. Such a theory of discourse seeks explanations in the positive relations (such as relations of power) among all elements. As Joan Copjec points out, this is the logic of Foucault’s panopticon: the subject is produced in the confluence of multiple discourses on the body. As Copjec puts it, what is produced in Foucauldian theory is “a *determinate* thing or position, but, in addition, knowledge and power are conceived as the overall effect of the relation among the various conflicting positions and discourses” (18). As is apparent, Lacanian theory proceeds differently. A subject position is not achieved solely by the direct agglomeration of positive forces. We need also to attend to incompleteness, to the fact that subjects, discourses, and the big Other are barred or fissured. Thus, rather than seeing discourses as functioning directly to construct the subject, neo-Lacanian theory adds a further wrinkle: the subject’s incompleteness is threaded through the incompleteness of the big Other. For Foucault, the gaze of the Other in the panopticon is what is internalized by the subject, and this internalization induces the proper, docile comportment. There is a direct mirroring of the gaze that allows for the emergence of the disciplined body in accord with power. For Lacan, however, the production of a disciplined subject is not this simple. Instead, the subject, rather than mirroring via internalization of and compliance with the productive gaze of power, posits a beyond to that gaze (Copjec 34). This is the opening of the space of fantasy. It is not that there actually *is* something beyond the discursive field; rather, the subject is called to *suppose* such a beyond. Thus, the subject is again caught in the fantasy scenario of the “Che vuoi?”: What is wanted from me? What is being concealed from me? Who am I supposed to be for you?

Fantasy, then, is integral to the way discourse invests and produces subjectivity, not solely as the positivity of given relations but in conjunction with the subject’s projection in and through discourse of a nonexistent beyond to discourse. As Copjec distills it, for Foucault, discourse functions as a mirror: we are produced, mirrorlike, in the play of disciplining power. In Lacan, however, discourse functions as a screen: the subject shows up as a function

of its projections of a beyond to discourse. In this way, subject and discourse coinvest in each other as two intersecting triangles—the point from which the subject looks out on the world and the point (phantasmatic, supposed) from which the world in turn looks back into us (Copjec 33). Fantasy, it seems, cannot be diagrammed on the communications triangle, except insofar as we posit a second triangle that would fissure and decomplete the first.

#### FANTASY AND *JOUISSANCE*

Not only does fantasy emerge as a crucial component of a subject's comportment to reality and other people, but it coordinates a subject's own enjoyment of these coping strategies. As Žižek states, fantasy is "an entity that is exceedingly traumatic: it articulates the subject's relationship towards enjoyment, towards the traumatic kernel of his being, towards something that the subject is never able to acknowledge fully, to become familiar with, to integrate into his symbolic universe" (*Metastases* 178). Enjoyment (*jouissance*) is a paradoxical form of pleasure that is derived from unpleasure, pain, and trauma. Through fantasy, one's enjoyment is centered in particular objects, habits, and actions. Žižek writes: "Someone may be happily married, with a good job and many friends, fully satisfied with his life, and yet absolutely hooked on some specific formation (sinthom) of *jouissance*, ready to put everything at risk rather than renounce *that* (drugs, tobacco, drink, a particular sexual perversion . . .). Although his symbolic universe may be nicely set up, this absolutely meaningless intrusion, this *clinamen*, upsets everything, and there is nothing to be done, since it is only in this 'sinthom' that the subject encounters the density of his being—when he is deprived of it, his universe is empty" (*Plague* 49). Fantasy operates as the frame that orients, or situates, the subject's *jouissance* in a particular symbolic ensemble. I discussed above how the symbolic is defined in relation to the subject by its inability to supply the needed signifiers that would express the essence of the subject or overcome its fundamental disharmony—which is to say that the symbolic and the subject are both characterized by a certain lack. However, it is also the case that the symbolic, in the form of Master Signifiers, laws, cultural codes, associations, and the like, organizes, regulates, proscribes, and authorizes various kinds of identifications, actions, beliefs, and affiliations. The price for this, however, is that *jouissance* is evacuated from the body. Žižek explains that this is "the great Lacanian motif of symbolization as a process which mortifies, drains off, empties, carves the fullness of the Real of the living body"; but of course the Real is doubly articulated, so that the Real is also "the product, remainder, leftover, scraps of this process of symbolization, the remnants, the excess which escapes symbolization and is as such produced by the symbolization itself" (*Sublime* 169). De-



sire is the effort to regain what was lost through the process of symbolization; hence, desire is on the side of the symbolic. Desire seeks satisfaction in the Other—through words, signs, people, objects. It is an attempt to recapture the Thing, the piece of the Real that embodies the *jouissance* that would make up for what has been lost. Fantasy is the framework through which desire operates or is given its orientation. The object of fantasy, which can be understood as the stand-in object for the lost *jouissance*, is the *objet petit a*. Mark Bracher explains that this precious object “figures in discourse as the return of the being or *jouissance* that is excluded by the master signifiers” (*Lacan* 41).

The subject is decentered not only in its being (the “I” that thinks is not the same as the “I” that is the object of perception of the thing that thinks) and in the symbolic but in relation to *jouissance* as well. “Much more radical and elementary than the decentrement of the subject with regard to the ‘big Other,’” claims Žižek, “is the decentrement with regard to the traumatic Thing-*jouissance* which the subject can never ‘subjectivize,’ assume, integrate” (*Plague* 49). The subject is caught in a process of ceaseless questioning with regard to this object, a wondering not only if the object is *it* but if, in identifying with it, s/he is also *that*? We see, then, how desire and fantasy shift and flow as Master Signifiers and the chains of signifiers they organize also shift and flow in metonymic and metaphoric flux, at the individual level and the social level. When we encounter other human beings, or when we reflect on ourselves, signifiers function as our representatives, so that in any encounter the makeup of the subject is at stake. Bracher explains further that to have an effect, “a discourse does not have to engage *directly* a master signifier, image, or fantasy; such engagement can also be indirect, for negotiations among signifiers do not take place merely among these primary representatives but also—to pursue the diplomatic analogy—among members of the staffs of representatives. Such lower-level negotiations are, in fact, where the real work gets done, for the position of a primary representative is held in place by its numerous alliances and oppositions to lesser signifiers, and without undoing ties of this sort and instituting new ties, the position of the primary representative remains unaltered” (*Lacan* 49). With regard to the communications triangle, we see the importance of recognizing the extent to which language and audience (the receptor) may be combined when we consider discursive aims. If it is through signifiers that function not so much as *representations* of the world and people but as their *representatives*, then the relations between language and audience are mystified each time we isolate the two as separate entities.

The signifiers, images, and objects that circulate in socio-symbolic space, however, are never neutral in regard to our comportment toward them. Above

and beyond the mechanism of identification, they are continuously penetrated or suffused with *jouissance*. Wherever subjects are, whatever they are doing, *jouissance* arises and permeates activity and interaction. For example, when someone renounces some pleasure—sweets, perhaps, or sexual activity—*jouissance* reemerges to provide a strange pleasure in the renunciation. Yet this *jouissance* also represents the limit of interpretation; it cannot be symbolized or grasped, and thus it is also traumatic for the subject. Žižek states that all we can say about *jouissance* as it is incarnated in a Thing is that “the Thing is ‘itself,’ ‘the real Thing,’ ‘what it is really about,’ etc.” (*Tarrying* 201). Nor is *jouissance* restricted to the subjective level. The Thing functions significantly within socio-political life, serving to organize and bind communities. Žižek suggests that “the Thing is present in that elusive entity called ‘our way of life.’ All we can do is enumerate disconnected fragments of the way our community organizes its feasts, its rituals of mating, its initiation ceremonies, in short, all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community organizes its enjoyment” (*Tarrying* 201). These features, however, exist in a manner that transcends any specific ritual or other manifestation of the “way of life.” Whether we are speaking of the organization of enjoyment on the individual or the national level, something about it is more “it” than itself. Not only can enjoyment not be reduced to any specific entity, but it also produces effects above and beyond its concrete material practice. This is also true for large-scale communities, like nations, where ineffable and immaterial effects help maintain investments in organizational stability. Žižek explains, “Nation exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices” (*Tarrying* 202). It is at this point that another problem with the discourse theory modeled by the communications triangle becomes apparent. Even if we grant that language has priority in constructing or mediating subjects and phenomena, as the communications triangle suggests, there remains no way to account within this model for the unsymbolizable kernel of *jouissance* that remains as a constitutive factor in individuals and larger groups, including nations. It is not enough to reduce them to being contingent discursive constructions. As Žižek argues, “such an emphasis overlooks the remainder of some *real*, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation qua discursive entity-effect to achieve its ontological consistency” (*Tarrying* 202).

#### REMARKS ON DISCURSIVE CONCEPTS

In the above discussion, I have presented aspects of neo-Lacanian theory that support an understanding of discourse that is substantially different from



that modeled in the communications triangle as described by Kinneavy or amended by Berlin and other rhetoricians using poststructuralist theories. I want to conclude with a brief discussion about discursive concepts that will illustrate concretely some of the points I have made. A commonsense, traditional understanding of a “concept” can be defined according to the characteristics that are claimed to adhere to it in an essentialist manner. The concept of “democracy,” then, could be given an essentialist definition listing the primary features of a democracy—perhaps that the citizenry has the right to cast votes that play a part in determining governmental policies, and so on. Such a definition has as its goal an accurate representation of what democracy or some other concept essentially is, and this understanding of the concept would more or less correspond to Kinneavy’s original, neo-Aristotelian theory of discourse, as well as to the four elements of his triangle. As amended by poststructuralist theory, however, the concept of democracy would not be granted any totalizing, essential characteristics. Instead, democracy would be defined as a concept that is always open and situated within concrete social, political, economic, and historical forces. In this sense, the definition of democracy is plural and open to contestation. Certainly, this understanding foregrounds the socio-political element, corresponding to the theories offered by scholars such as Laclau and Mouffe, Berlin, Bizzell, France, and more.

Neo-Lacanian discourse theory, however, understands concepts differently than either of these two approaches. Instead of having essentialist features, or negotiating in the social realm for control over various shifting positions, the concept of democracy would be said “not to exist.” Democracy is not to be conceived as a positive concept, even as a slippery and ultimately undefinable one. Democracy, like other concepts, is to be considered as structured by a fundamental antagonism or split that prevents it from ever showing up with any conclusively positive features. Democracy does not exist except insofar as we might apply that label to an existing system of government. In other words, it is in the process of naming itself, in the conceptual designation by a signifier and the rhetorical weight the designation comes to hold, that certain meanings accrue. But the signifier itself is empty of meaning except to the extent that it separates itself from what is not democratic. As in poststructuralist theories of discourse, this process of separation involves social and political negotiation. This underscores the fact that while in theory the term *democracy* might be applied willy-nilly, in practice this is obviously not the case. Substantive shifts are possible but seem to require as accompaniment a catalyst such as a large social realignment. To continue, rather than being conceived as the socio-political play of shifting identities, democracy would in this model be conceived as pure difference itself—which is to say, a symbolic nothing—

misrecognized as an identity with positive characteristics. This is the phantasmatic element integral to the concept. And it is precisely at the level of misrecognition that neo-Lacanian discourse theory introduces the subject for the achievement of definition and identity, along with all the psychological forces, conscious and unconscious, that go with the subject.

To take these thoughts to their logical conclusion, would we then have to say that none of the four elements of the triangle “really exists” either, except insofar as there exists a certain political hegemony that allows us to designate them by the assigned signifiers and a concomitant *jouissance* in the phantasmatic order the triangle offers us? Transformations in meaning and content, the achievement of socio-political identity, and the effect of persuasion, then, are not merely a matter of contestation and articulation in the social arena but are already inherent in what discourse is and how it functions and must be taken to include partiality and incompleteness, on the one hand, and the phantasmatic suppositions of the subject, on the other. Rhetoric is one way to describe the emergent discourse of these entwined interplays because it works to shift fantasy frames, treat with (and evoke) *jouissance*, and ply the seams of metalinguistic positionality. That these aspects of rhetorical work elude fully conscious control, go awry, impede success, or present other difficulties is no argument against them. Rather, rhetoric and its workings remain complex, which shows, quite clearly, how much more we still must learn about the field, and that we cannot rest on classical and modernist laurels.

